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Literary Theories

From Pre-texts to the Text: A Study of Paratextual Elements in Manu Joseph's Miss Laila, Armed and Dangerous

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Abstract: This paper attempts to study how the reading of Manu Joseph's novel Miss Laila, Armed and Dangerous is profoundly influenced by paratextual elements present in its liminal space, as propounded by Gérard Genette in his theory, that drives or rather imposes the narrative to the reader much before the one essentially revealed by the story thereby proving to be a poignant precursor to interpreting the novel. The title of the novel Miss Laila, Armed and Dangerous, for instance, gives the reader an assumption that a lady named Laila possesses some kind of arms or ammunitions, is a threat to people, is probably a terrorist, and being given a Muslim name may also fuel xenophobic suppositions associated with the community, while not knowing anything at all about the character in question. These presumptions successfully maintain the tension in the reader's mind that keeps assessing any speck of detail they come across about her against the idea that has been injected prior to any kind of unfolding of the story. This results in the reader arriving at an interpretation solely by virtue of this tension which he or she would otherwise not have arrived at had it not been for the title.

Keywords: Intertextuality, Paratext, Fiction, Book cover, Reading behaviour.



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No text has a self-contained meaning. The text does not deliver a prepacked meaning but creates meaning under the aegis of intertextuality. Ferdinand de Saussure originates this discussion by lifting the burden of meaning from the very words in any given language, calling them 'signifiers' that indicate towards the things that are 'signified' outside of the word. Onomatopoeic words too could best claim only to be the closest to the signified but never the same across various languages owing to differences in each of their systems. Even within one system of language, any given word is able to signify something in particular only because it does not signify the things signified by other words thereby rendering the connection between the signifier and the signified arbitrary.

Mikhail Bakhtin takes it further by saying that the imposition of meaning to a text does not just happen because of what is within the system of language but it comes from the context which includes the addressee taking part in the conversation leading to the concept of 'addressivity'. He also takes into account the history of contexts for a particular word that has imposed meanings throughout its past usages. This gives rise to 'dialogism'.

Julia Kristeva merges both the previous concepts into one naming the idea as 'intertextuality'. She says that 'any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another'. This pushes meaning to form with the help of texts beyond the very text under consideration. What the author constructs is an assemblage of texts that already existed in different forms. She places any text in two axes: the horizontal axis deals with the connection between the author and the reader; the vertical axis maps the text concerned with all the previous texts in the history of literature inventing 'ideologeme'. In order to negate the notion of intertextuality to mean that a text simply borrows, Kristeva later seeks to rename it with 'transtextuality' to hint that a text is transformed from the previous ones.

Roland Barthes adds to the aforementioned idea stating that the author only facilitates the formation of the text like a 'woven fabric' (Barthes, 1977a: 159) in a language and therefore calls him a 'scriptor' who has something to do with writing his or her work but nothing to do with meaning of the work therefore giving rise to the concept of 'death of the author'. The derivation of meaning is done by the reader.

G rard Genette attempts to study and classify transtextuality into five types: The first one is 'intertextuality' and it simply hints at the presence of one part of a text in another like quotations or allusions; the second being 'paratextuality' talks about how the elements that occupy the threshold of the text create meaning for it as the title or the preface; 'metatextuality' is the third one that explains how one text can directly talk about another text like literary criticism; the fourth type is 'architextuality' which describes how a genre establishes the meaning or sets the rules for interpreting the text as in violence is proper only if depicted in an action movie and not otherwise; hypertextuality is the last that shows how one text is grafted on to another text

which can be of altogether a different form like an older text rewritten in a modern version for instance. (Genette)

This study takes paratextuality as the line of effort to analyse the novel *Miss Laila, Armed and Dangerous* by Manu Joseph. Paratexts include all those liminal elements that are found in the threshold of the text. These elements act as devices that steer the reader's interpretation of the text right from the mere mention of the text entering the reader's mind through to the successful completion of its reading. Genette divides all those elements into two: 'peritext' and 'epitext' saying 'peritext and epitext completely and entirely share the spatial field of the paratext.' (Genette 5). Peritexts are the paratextual elements forming part of the book itself such as the title, preface, chapter titles and notes, while epitexts are those diaries, letters to friends, colloquia and marketing materials which are outside of the book. If reviews, commentaries and the like get printed in the book, epitext also then becomes paratext.

Peritext of *Miss Laila, Armed and Dangerous* include the dimensions of the book, number of pages, type and graphic design of the cover, reputation of the publisher, author's name, title of the novel, blurb on the cover page, praise for this novel and the author's earlier novels, note about the author and chapter titles, while the epitext include interviews given by the author, lectures and colloquia. Novel reading is an exercise which induces the reader to picturize the events in his or her mind and the paratextual elements mentioned above have a significant impact in altering or rather creating in the first place the contours of that visualization.

As the study includes dealing with the physicality of the book, it is necessary to assess the elements present in each of the versions. The book has been published in two places: India and the UK. It was originally published in India in the year 2017 by Fourth Estate, a literary imprint of HarperCollins Publishers India, a publisher which is well acclaimed for its quality of books. It has earned seven Publisher of the Year Awards including accolades from various organisations. As of 2010, it has been listed as the third largest publishing house by Nielsen BookScan, a data provider for the book publishing industry. A book getting accepted by a renowned publishing company gives the reader a readymade impression of grandiose even before starting to read it. It was first published in the UK in the year 2018 by Myriad Editions, an imprint of New Internationalist Publications. This publishing house has a reputation of launching promising authors, and its history of those authors winning awards thereafter is testimony to their gauged choices. A book from such a publishing house gives the readers a sense of conviction that the book will not be disappointing to them as 'the publisher's aegis is certainly an indirect form of authorial backing.' (Genette 348)

Once it is published, the book then comes to the reader's hands. Its dimensions or size is one of the prime factors in instantly positioning the book as typical of something among a myriad of them. The book runs to about 200-odd pages measuring 20.3 x 25.4 x 4.7 cm and 12.7 x 2.54 x 19.69 cm respectively. These dimensions belong to well-recognized industry standards, and holding a book that adheres to those standards gives little reason to consider it any less than a conventional one if not great, thereby setting a bar of deference beforehand. 'This way of assigning a work to a size is certainly not applied universally (the first edition of the Fables of La Fontaine, in 1668, is quarto), but it definitely predominates.' (Genette 18)

Beholding the book, according to visual psychology, the reader will first observe the background picture before he reads the text on the cover page (Chana, 2025). Three different cover pages could be found to have been printed. They are given below for reference and following which is their analyses:



The first one has a fashionable girl wearing red shoes with high heels, showing her back to the beholder of the book. She is facing a crowd with fluttering flags, all are either with the same hairstyle or wearing a similar kind of a cap. There is a microphone stand between the girl and the crowd as if she is addressing them. The reader would assume that the girl is Miss Laila and get into the course of the novel waiting to find a girl described as depicted on the cover page. There does come a girl in the novel who wears those kinds of red shoes with high heels but it is not Laila but Akhila Iyer. This makes the story even more gripping until they are introduced to Laila who comes later in the novel. This curiosity about the girl in the picture and then about Laila emerges not from the text of the novel but from the depictions in the cover page. The microphone suggests that she is probably a speaker which she is but not on stage. She conducts guileful interviews with intellectual people to create prank videos and uploads them on her website. This subtle twist seems so because of the precursor set by the picture; otherwise, it would have been like just another detail in the course of the

novel. The crowd in the picture implying the people of Sangh in the novel might seem straight at once but the satire wrapped around them would feel reverberating. The second cover page has pictures of elements of fashion, ammunition and mobility strewn across the page in a disorderly manner to let the reader sew those ideas together as one reads the novel. The ideas are emphatically injected into the reader in a haphazard manner, preceding the story which is yet to be read. The third one also follows suit.

The text on the cover page is then noticed. Marketing elements are strikingly displayed that try to draw recognition from varied interests or as the trending language would call it 'FOMO'. One can find that one cover page has 'Soon to be a TV series' printed on it. This move tries to establish a cross-media influence by bringing to the knowledge of the reader the novel's acceptance in a mass domain beyond print.

Barring the elements of text discussed above, the first being the name of the author. It comes with a baggage of his or her history that includes acclaim for their past works and their style of writing, series of professions they have been into, personality traits that are known to the public, and other details that entail the name. Even if the reader does not know the author, it is printed right in the book, at the back cover, insides of the back cover, or in the initial or the last pages of the book. 'MANU JOSEPH is the author of two previous widely acclaimed and bestselling novels, *Serious Men* (winner of the Hindu Literary Prize and the PEN/Open Book Award) and *The Illicit Happiness of Other People* (shortlisted for the Encore Award and the Hindu Literature Prize). A former columnist for the International New York Times, he lives in Delhi and writes for Mint Lounge.' (Joseph) If they are renowned writers, the impact of their name is instantaneous. It starts right when the reader comes to know about the author much before reading the name printed on the book. In-person and virtual appearances that happen as on-stage or off-stage events with the author, including live as well as recorded dialogues of theirs, write-ups by them and those about them both in print media and online, all add up to the data that can possibly reach the reader of their book. The opinion about the author inevitably colours the reader's notion about the book and creates an assumption that keeps them sailing across their reading venture. Some of these notions or prejudices when confronted by ideas that contest it, get defeated and are neutralised while those that are not challenged remain in the purview and keep affecting the interpretations the reader arrives at. Manu Joseph is a journalist-cum-writer, a detail that would make readers expect reality-infused fiction from such a personality. This surmise rings true when readers read the novel to find it inspired by reality making fiction relatable to the reality of its time. The readers being taken aback with the relatability to the novel stems from their knowledge of events, their conjecture upon the author and their ability to postulate reality and fiction which are absolutely outside of the book. Manu Joseph answers this to a question from a journalist in a literature festival.

Of all the author's past achievements, those of his in his previous writings, specifically novels, as this is one, praise for his earlier novels would garner a greater regard for the present one.

Praise for Serious Men

'The finest comic novelists know that a small world can illuminate a culture and an age. With this funny-sad debut, Joseph does just that for surging, fractious India... The absurdity and humiliation of social exclusion drives the comedy of one of the year's most auspicious debuts...'

Boyd Tonkin, *The Independent*

'Manu Joseph's satirical tale of an ostensibly new India still in thrall to its caste-ridden and sexist traditions is so much more than a mere comic caper.'

Catherine Taylor, *The Guardian*

'Manu Joseph, a leading journalist in India, has written a debut novel that skewers a society where new ambitions and older class divisions co-exist. From the contrasts of contemporary India, he extracts pointed, often bitter comedy.'

The Sunday Times

'This is arguably the best of the recent crop of novels by Indian writers ... it does for India in the age of globalization what Salman Rushdie and Rohinton Mistry did for earlier eras ... If there is one novel you must buy this year, make it this one...'

Anis Shivani, *Huffington Post*

'*Serious Men* could well be the most exciting debut in Indian writing in English since Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*.'

Usha K.R., *Deccan Herald*

'I've been meaning to read one of Manu Joseph's novels since I heard him speak at a literary festival a couple of years ago. His comments had a witty arrogance and a weirdness that I thought augured well for his prose. And I was right! *Serious Men*, published in 2010, is the funniest, most stylish book I've read this year.'

Zoe Heller, Best Books of 2014, *New York Times*

'Joseph is an acute, sensitive observer and his writing accumulates the myriad circumstantial details of everyday life which makes it real... It's been a very good year for South Asian English novels and *Serious Men* could be the pick of the crop.'

Pratik Kanjilal, *Hindustan Times*

‘Manu Joseph’s triumph is ... in creating characters whom it’s impossible not to care about, in a plot which it’s impossible not to enjoy.’

Anita Roy, *Outlook*

‘Manu Joseph’s debut *Serious Men* merits a one-word review: Hurrah! For here at last is a novel that keeps its wits, is nimble on its feet and speaks its informed mind in stylish prose ... It is replete with wit and barbed with anger that unerringly finds its mark.’

Kalpish Ratna, *Tehelka (Weekly)*

Praise for The Illicit Happiness of Other People

‘Joseph writes with extraordinary wit, cunning and sympathy about both family relationships and ultimate mysteries.’

Starred Review, *Kirkus Reviews*

‘Joseph’s smart new novel is laced with black humour and keen observations on human nature ... Joseph’s rich characters intersect in moments of tenderness, yet each continues along a path that gracefully highlights the titular Other and the emotional divides that separate individuals. Lucky for us, Joseph’s empathic prose deftly bridges those gaps.’

Publishers Weekly

‘Manu Joseph’s prose is clear, wry, dry and witty – reminiscent of the work of Haruki Murakami.’

Ariel Balter, *New York Journal of Books*

‘*The Illicit Happiness of Other People* is ambitious ... It is a plot-driven yarn with themes of morality, sexuality, psychiatry and yet more science and philosophy ... but it does not feel overburdened ... quite an achievement.’

The Economist

‘Both wittily funny and darkly serious.’

Harry Ritchie, *Daily Mail*

‘Joseph twists what I feared would be a book for people wanting a second *White Tiger* into a cocktail of character, culture and religion ... Joseph’s prose is exquisitely phrased without an excess of sentimentality ... the confident, immersing voice promises readers this is not the last we’ve heard of Manu Joseph.’

Christine Edwall, *The Telegraph*

‘A stylishly written book, which starts out as being darkly comical, and then grows progressively darker

and more disturbing.’

Anvar Alikhan, *India Today*

The reader is easily impelled to read another work of a celebrated writer anticipating to discover another reason to like the writer. The readiness to like the writer or the writing more even before reading the text is what this study tries to put forth. Manu Joseph’s reputation as an author being founded through the success of both his previous novels sets the ground ready for getting the next one commended even before the first ever review by a reader. Manu Joseph acknowledges this phenomenon while answering a journalist’s question in one of his interviews. Though the earlier novels and their acclaim is in a realm before the book and outside of it, an account of the same might be printed in the book as the last precedent of influence to reading.

The blurb given by the editor

‘On the day that Hindu nationalists and their controversial leader win a spectacular election victory, a large apartment building collapses in Mumbai. The rescue operation finds a single survivor trapped under a beam.

The only person able to reach him is Akhila Iyer, a medical student who is also a notorious social media prankster. Crawling through the rubble to administer first aid, she finds him mumbling in delirium that a young Muslim couple are on their way to carry out a terror attack.

Elsewhere, an intelligence agent, Mukundan, is assigned to shadow two terror suspects, one of whom is the teenage Laila, sweetheart of her street. Time is running out and the chase is on...

Bold, stylish and deceptively witty, *Miss Laila, Armed and Dangerous* is a thrilling novel that poses searching questions about the workings of power and its effects on the ordinary people—the watchers and the followers, and those who are trapped when buildings fall.’ (blurb)

gives an insight about the story by such a slice of it that intrigues the reader even more. Starting from the book release, book fair, press meet, to on-stage chat with the author in literature festivals control the reader’s way of receiving the book which implies their interpretation of the story as well. Manu Joseph has made appearances in literature festivals and studio interviews with journalists where he speaks about the novel. Any question about the novel posed to the writer is to get something more than what is revealed in the blurb to entice the readers to read it. Manu Joseph does reply but retains the surprise element by decisively ending his answer with a smile at one point while the interviewer still waits for him to continue.

Adding to all this, praise for the present novel would be more direct and prove to affect the interpretation of the novel the most. The following reviews by print and online media are inserted in the book:

Praise for *Miss Laila, Armed and Dangerous*

'*Miss Laila, Armed and Dangerous*' is, undoubtedly, one of the most scathing social and political satires of our times. It's funny even when it makes you reel in horror, and it makes you hope even in the throes of despair. It is a book that will make you think. It is a book to slowly savour and turn in your mind long after it's over.'

The Quint

'The plot of *Miss Laila* reads much like a thriller but with the mocking voice of political satire ... Joseph is brazen in depicting the politics of both sides as equally absurd. Bold and genuinely funny.'

Open

'Joseph has a talent for puncturing the smug assumptions of the well-intentioned, while directing the gaze to deep injustices with a lightness of touch you wouldn't suspect... The most memorable moments are the ones between Laila and her younger sister Aisha...a throwaway moment of quiet love in an otherwise frenetic, wisecracking book, bristling with opinions and politics.'

Elle

'Joseph's subversion of the conventions of fiction is in the same vein as Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, in which readers get an extensive insight into the author's musings on where our culture is headed.'

The Hindu

'Joseph's *Miss Laila Armed and Dangerous* further establishes him as one of most engaging storytellers and insightful interpreters of our times. With the rigour of lean and unsentimental prose, the novel weaves a gripping tale set in contemporary India and echoes all the key whispers and screams that mark country's conversations with itself... [When] VS Naipaul said that novels had outlived their utility and were likely to be replaced by cinema as a powerful form of storytelling, he perhaps didn't anticipate writers like Manu Joseph, who can illuminate both worlds.'

News Laundry

'A compulsive read, Joseph's often clever, sometimes wise and always entertaining new novel combines elements of satire and the political thriller.'

India Today

'Wicked, sarcastic and garnished with wit. Some readers will laugh, raise eyebrows and even disagree with portions of this novel, but this is certainly not a book to be missed.'

The Book Satchel

Also, a promotional quote on the cover page "A daring, page-turning thriller, filled with anger and wit and some of the loveliest sentences you will read this year" — Zoë Heller gives the reader a social proof of acclaim.

The focus next shifts to the title of the novel. The title *Miss Laila, Armed and Dangerous* gives the reader an assumption that a lady named Laila possesses some kind of arms or ammunitions, is a threat to people, is probably a terrorist, and being given a Muslim name may also fuel xenophobic suppositions associated with the community, while not knowing anything at all about the character in question. These presumptions successfully maintain the tension in the reader's mind that keeps assessing any speck of detail they come across about her against the idea that has been injected prior to any kind of unfolding of the story. This results in the reader arriving at an interpretation solely by virtue of this tension which he or she would otherwise not have arrived at had it not been for the title.

The chapter titles have a notable peculiarity. They are short and repetitive, and tend to describe a timeline in the course of events in the novel.

- 1 Around 7:30 a.m.
- 2 A Patriarch's Review
- 3 Around 8:00 a.m.
- 4 A Patriarch's Review
- 5 Around 11 a.m.
- 6 A Patriarch's Review
- 7 Around 1:30 p.m.
- 8 A Telephone Conversation
- 9 Miss Laila, Armed and Dangerous
- 10 Laila
- 11 Around 2 p.m.
- 12 A Telephone Conversation
- 13 Miss Laila, Armed and Dangerous
- 14 Laila
- 15 Damodarbai
- 16 A Telephone Conversation
- 17 Miss Laila, Armed and Dangerous
- 18 Laila
- 19 Damodarbai

- 20 A Patriarch's Review
- 21 Miss Laila, Armed and Dangerous
- 22 Laila
- 23 Miss Laila, Armed and Dangerous
- 24 Damodarbai
- 25 A Telephone Conversation
- 26 Miss Laila, Armed and Dangerous
- 27 Laila
- 28 Damodarbai
- 29 Miss Laila, Armed and Dangerous
- 30 A Patriarch's Review
- 31 Around 8 p.m.

The chapters titled with time indicate one main course event where one unknown man is trapped under the debris of a collapsed building and Akhila Iyer is helping the government forces to get him out. The chapters that are named as Patriarch's Review makes the reader assume that it will provide a commentary on the governance. And those which contain 'Laila' have one line of events which the reader presumes is happening in parallel. The readers pin these speculations to track the happenings in the novel. The unraveling of plots in connection to the titles lurking in the minds of the readers make the readers interpret differently. A layer of macro-level concept of patriotism underlines all the conversations between the professors while the word patriotism is not mentioned in the text. The chapter title Miss Laila, Armed and Dangerous pushes the reader to wait for Laila to pick up ammunitions of some kind with a maybe-now kind of desperation throughout the reading with no hint of that sort given inside the text.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the paratexts of any work has a great influence over how the reader perceives the text. In one of the ideas propounded by Zizek, the feel about anything is built upon the mystery that precedes the thing itself. The thing is welcomed with a particular definitive ideal with what is built around the thing and not because of the very thing.

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