



The Function of Paratextual Elements in the Fictional Works of Leila Sadeghi

Gholamhosein Gholamhoseinzadeh¹, Elham Vatankhahan Esfahani²

Recived: 19/2/2024

Accepted: 20/8/2024

Abstract

In contemporary literature, paratextual elements have emerged as a powerful tool for enhancing reader engagement and shaping the reception of literary works. Traditionally viewed as peripheral and secondary, these elements are now increasingly employed by modern authors as active agents in the construction and transmission of meaning. Leila Sadeghi is among those writers who consistently integrate paratextual features—such as cover design, dedications, and tables of contents—into the fabric of their narratives, to the extent that any reading which disregards them is rendered incomplete.

This study investigates the role of paratextual elements in meaning-making within Sadeghi's fictional works, drawing upon Gérard Genette's theory of intertextuality and paratextuality. Building upon Genette's framework, Birk and Christ propose three core functions for paratextuality in digital literature: interpretive, commercial, and directive. These three functions are also considered in addressing the

1 - Professor, Department of Persian Language and Literature, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran. gholamho@modares.ac.ir

ORCID ID: [0000-0002-8826-016X](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8826-016X)

2- M.A. Persian language and literature in literary theory and criticism at Tarbiat Modares University of Tehran, Iran. elham.vatankhahan@gmail.com



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central research question. Employing a qualitative and analytical methodology, the study involves careful data collection, classification, and pattern recognition based on the selected theoretical models. The subsequent analysis reveals that paratextual elements in Sadeghi's narratives perform what may be termed a *complementary function* that is, they act as integral parts of the main text, essential for both narrative and non-narrative meaning-making. This article argues that the *complementary function* of paratext should be recognized as a defining stylistic feature of Leila Sadeghi's literary approach.

Keywords: *Leila Sadeghi, Gerard Genette, Paratextuality, PostModern Fictions.*

1. Introduction

In the journey from authorial conception to readerly reception, a literary work undergoes numerous stages of transformation. One critical phase in this trajectory is the process through which a text becomes a book—an object that not only contains the narrative but also envelops it in layers of supplementary elements such as the cover, title page, colophon, introduction, dedication, table of contents, epilogue, and index. These components, referred to collectively as “paratexts,” frame the central text and shape its reception, interpretation, and meaning. While early literary theorists tended to overlook such peripheral features, Gérard Genette's paratextual theory marked a pivotal shift by foregrounding these elements as integral to the production and consumption of literary meaning.

Genette posits that paratexts function as thresholds of interpretation, simultaneously guiding, persuading, and framing the reader's engagement with the main text. He categorizes paratexts into two broad groups: peritexts—those spatially attached to the book itself—and epitexts—those that exist outside the book (such as interviews or promotional materials). Moreover, Genette attributes several key functions to these elements, including interpretive, commercial, and directive roles. Recent scholarship has expanded upon Genette's framework, especially in light of the digitalization of literature, suggesting additional functions that paratexts may serve in shaping literary and readerly experience.

This study investigates the paratextual strategies employed in the fictional works of the Iranian postmodern writer Leila Sadeghi. Focusing on select works such as *Goriz az Markaz* (“Escape from the Center”), *Zamir-e Chaharom-shakhs-e Mofrad* (“The Fourth-Person Singular Pronoun”), *Az Ghalat-hā-ye Nahvi Ma’zooram* (“Pardon My Syntactic Errors”), and *A*, the article examines how elements like the book cover, title, preface, dedication, and even typography contribute not only to the aesthetic presentation of the book but also to the construction and completion of its semantic field.

The analysis seeks to demonstrate that in Sadeghi’s oeuvre, paratexts often transcend their conventional roles and become semi-autonomous sites of meaning production—what might be termed “supplementary functions.” Through a synthesis of Genette’s foundational concepts and close textual analysis, this article aims to illuminate the complex, often subversive, ways in which paratexts operate in Sadeghi’s fiction to mediate narrative, authorial intent, and reader interpretation.

Research Question(s)

1. How do peritextual elements shape the narrative structure in Leila Sadeghi’s fiction?
2. What are the predominant paratextual functions in these works beyond Genette’s classification?
3. To what extent do Sadeghi’s works challenge conventional distinctions between text and paratext?

2. Literature Review

This section reviews the relevant theoretical foundations and key scholarly contributions to the study of paratexts, focusing particularly on the framework developed by Gérard Genette and extended by Birke and Christ (2013). The aim is to situate the current study within existing academic discourse and to establish a foundation for analyzing the paratextual strategies employed by Leila Sadeghi.

2.1. Genette’s Theory of Paratexts

Gérard Genette’s groundbreaking contribution to literary theory, particularly through his book *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1997), has defined the modern scholarly understanding of the term “paratext.” According to Genette, paratexts are the various textual and material elements that accompany the main body of a text—such as titles, prefaces, forewords, dedications, illustrations, and even the publisher’s layout—and help frame the reader’s reception of the work. He categorizes paratexts into two broad types: peritexts, which are

found within the book (e.g., the title page, preface), and epitexts, which exist outside it (e.g., interviews, letters, reviews).

“The paratext is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public” (Genette, 1997, p. 1).

This emphasis on the threshold function of paratexts—the way they serve as a liminal space between the text and the world—has led many scholars to reconsider the boundaries of textual meaning and authorship.

2.1.1. Paratexts and Interpretation

One of the core insights of Genette’s theory is that paratexts are not peripheral or decorative but play a decisive role in shaping the interpretive possibilities of a text. The title of a book, for example, can prime the reader’s expectations and direct their interpretive path. Likewise, a foreword may offer contextual cues or ideological framing that fundamentally alter the reader’s understanding. Genette argues that these paratextual elements are part of what makes a text intelligible, meaningful, and communicable.

2.2. Extension of Paratext Theory: Birke and Christ

While Genette’s framework remains foundational, subsequent scholars have extended and refined it, particularly in light of developments in digital and experimental literature. In their 2013 article “Paratext and Digitized Narrative: Mapping the Field,” Birke and Christ examine how the traditional boundaries between text and paratext have become increasingly porous in digital contexts. They propose that paratextual elements in contemporary literature not only serve interpretive and framing functions but also engage in commercial and navigational roles. According to their classification, paratexts can be understood as having three principal functions:

Interpretive Function: Guiding the reader’s understanding of the content.

Commercial Function: Serving marketing and branding purposes.

Navigational/Guiding Function: Directing the reader’s path through complex or non-linear texts.

“In digital and experimental narrative, the paratext is not merely the entrance to the text—it can become part of the text’s structure and meaning-making process itself.” (Birke & Christ, 2013, p. 78).

This expanded model is particularly relevant when analyzing works like those of Leila Sadeghi, where paratextual components are often foregrounded or integrated into the narrative itself.

2.2.1. Emerging Functions of Paratexts in Contemporary Literature

The works of Leila Sadeghi exemplify how contemporary authors can stretch the boundaries of paratextual usage. In many of her books, elements such as the title, dedication, cover design, and even the publication metadata play an active role in meaning production. These components often do more than orient the reader; they become integrated into the aesthetic and semantic structure of the text. In this context, a new paratextual function—supplementary function—can be proposed, wherein the paratext completes or extends the narrative content, rather than merely framing it.

2.3. Paratext in Persian Literary Discourse

In Persian literary criticism, the concept of paratexts has only recently begun to receive substantial scholarly attention. Some scholars, such as Ghaffari (2015), Namvar Motlaq (2016), and Ghobadi & Shakeryan (2010), have investigated the role of paratextual elements in shaping meaning, often focusing on translation studies and comparative literature. These contributions highlight the relevance of Genette's and Birke and Christ's models to Persian literary texts but rarely consider experimental or postmodern authors like Sadeghi, whose works push the boundaries of genre and narrative structure.

2.4. The Gap in the Literature

While the foundational and expanded theories of paratext have been well-established in Western academic discourse, there is a noticeable gap in applying these concepts to contemporary Persian literature—particularly in the context of authors like Leila Sadeghi. Her innovative use of paratextual strategies calls for an updated and localized application of these theories. This study addresses that gap by proposing the “complementary function” of paratexts as a meaningful addition to the interpretive tools offered by Genette and Birke & Christ, thus contributing to both global and regional discussions on narrative structure and literary form.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and analytical approach to examine the works of Leila Sadeghi. The researchers systematically analyzed all the paratextual elements found in Sadeghi's published books, including titles, prefaces, copyright pages, cover designs, and introductions. These elements were carefully recorded and interpreted to uncover their narrative roles and how they interact with the core texts.

To establish a coherent theoretical framework, the foundational theory of Gérard Genette on paratexts was selected due to its comprehensive categorization and long-standing influence in literary theory. Genette's typology provided the baseline for identifying and classifying paratextual components. Subsequently, the framework proposed by Birke and Christ (2013) was integrated into the study to define the broader narrative, commercial, and interpretive functions of paratexts in contemporary literary practices.

After collecting and analyzing the data from Sadeghi's paratexts, the findings were re-examined in light of these theoretical models. During this process, a new function—referred to as the “complementary function”—emerged. This additional narrative role was not accounted for in the Genettean or Birke and Christ frameworks and was deduced inductively from the consistent and meaningful use of paratexts in Sadeghi's writing. The discovery of this fourth function represents an extension of the existing literature and contributes to a deeper understanding of how paratextual strategies can actively participate in meaning-making within literary works.

4. Results

As discussed throughout this article, the theories surrounding paratexts reveal their significant role in the interpretation and construction of meaning within literary works. Although paratextual elements have evolved historically, they now serve specific functions in relation to the main text and are often intentionally designed to align with its objectives. The stronger and more cohesive the paratextual framework of a book, the more effectively it reflects the intellectual world of the work.

According to Birke and Christ (2013), the primary functions of paratexts can be categorized as interpretive, commercial, and guiding. Additionally, depending on their origin—whether from the author, publisher, or a third party such as a preface writer or editor—paratextual elements fulfill distinct responsibilities in shaping reader engagement. What stands out in Leila Sadeghi's work is her comprehensive and strategic use of paratexts. In many cases, these elements do more than guide or frame the main narrative; they also carry complementary meaning, adding a fourth functional category not explicitly addressed in the existing literature. At times, paratexts reinforce the meaning of the text; at other times, they function autonomously, offering meaning that the main text alone cannot fully convey.

Sadeghi's consistent and meaningful application of paratextual strategies suggests that this practice constitutes a key stylistic feature of her writing. Indeed, it becomes difficult—if not impossible—to grasp the narrative universe of her fiction without considering the paratexts that surround it. Ultimately, it can be argued that what connects Sadeghi's diverse body of work is her unique approach to storytelling: one that employs paratexts not as peripheral elements, but as integral components of the narrative itself—guiding, completing, and even challenging the reader's interpretation. This innovative use of paratextual functions has garnered increasing recognition in contemporary literary circles.

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