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Text and 'Paratexts': A Reading of Monica Ali's Untold Story

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Abstract: In an era where almost everything beyond the printed pages is also read as 'text', a life story becomes an inevitable text to be deciphered and decoded, more so, if it is the story of a dramatic life which has interested people over years and across generations. Also, a 'life- story' that is fictional but is imagined to have been lived, forms a 'text'. Monica Ali unleashes something very different in her novel *Untold Story* (2011). It is a fictional continuation of a life-story of Lady Diana that is set on the imaginary pretext that the global icon never died at all in the infamous car crash but she survived it, changed her physical identity and began to live an almost anonymous existence in the US. This paper proposes to contextualize and read the text through the theoretical framework of 'Paratexts' as propounded by Gerard Genette. It shall interrogate some aspects of the interaction / 'transaction' between the text and the paratext. It attempts to question, through the analysis of a few textual and paratextual aspects, if the paratextual material contradicts and overturns the textual suggestions that the author makes as she narrates the fictional tale. This, in turn, makes the authorial position often dicey.

Keywords: Text, Paratexts, Monica Ali's Untold Story.

Paratexts: The concept/theoretical framework of 'Paratext', as primarily propounded by the French literary theorist Gerard Genette in his book *Seuils* (1987) which is translated as 'Paratexts'. The



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book *Gerard Genette Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* translated by Jane E. Lewin is what the paper resorts to for its theoretical foundation. The book begins with explaining the ideas of ‘Text’ and **‘Paratexts’**:

Paratexts are those liminal devices and conventions, both within and outside the book, that form part of the complex mediation between book, author, publisher and reader: titles, forewords, epigraphs, and publisher’s jacket copy are part of a book’s private and public history (n.p.) . . . a literary work consists . . . essentially, of a text, defined . . . as a more or less long sequence of verbal statements . . . that are more or less endowed with significance. But this text is rarely presented in an unadorned state, unreinforced and unaccompanied by a certain number of verbal or other productions, such as an author’s name, a title, a preface, illustrations (1).

It further explains that more than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is rather a ‘threshold,’ a “vestibule” that offers the world the possibility or option of either stepping in or turning back. It is a kind of ‘fringe’ (to use Philippe Lejeune) that conveys a commentary somewhat legitimated by the author, constitutes a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but of ‘transaction’ (1-2). It is this transaction between the text and the paratext that forms an interesting ground for inquiry which is dealt with in this paper.

Monica Ali retells a story based on reality and recreates another world of fiction and fantasy. Ali makes it clear that the story is ‘inspired by’ Princess Diana. Undeniably Diana has always been the ‘cash crow’ of the Paparazzi and remains a subject of public interest and “tabloid fodder”. Ali derives from Diana’s life and constructs the backdrop of her novel’s fictional world. It must be argued that this fictional



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world that she constructs emerges as Ali's critique of the Paparazzi culture, of the harassment that a female celebrity (especially of the magnitude of Diana) faces due to the notoriety and intrusion of the paps. Her fiction emerges as a counterpoint, a counter narrative to the fantasies regarding celebrity life of glitz and glamour. Ali's narrative is a feminist critique too, a critique of the thoughtless and frenzied sale of celebritydom in the globalised space which can have very serious consequences with regard to the celebs. Ali "took cue from Diana's escape fantasy" and gave birth to her fictional character Lydia who was the Princess of Wales in her former life but stages her own death, not in the car-crash but by drowning. She escapes by waterway with the help of her Private Secretary whom Ali names Lawrence Standing and undergoes physical transformation by plastic surgery. Lydia settles in a small unrecognized American town which is significantly named Kensington by Ali. It is remarkable that Ali posits the small, low-profile "sleepy little town" (251) Kensington in America against the much happening and popular Kensington Palace in London where Princess Diana or Ali's fictional Princess of Wales lived, which was constantly under media glare. This contrast keeps the past life full of glitz, glamour, noise and people looming large against the protagonist's search for a quiet, calm, and noiseless private life away from the constantly stalking paparazzi. Constant references and minor similarities to her past keep highlighting the very idea of a non-celebrity life as a counter narrative. This reflects how a celebrity may be compelled to take extreme steps when her celebrity status grows so huge as to overshadow her private life and thereby ruin it. She becomes a treasure for the media business, sold day in and day out at the global market with all the media constructions, the salacious gossips, scandals and sensationalisation of news. Lydia after ten years of her escape from her former life has created her own small world, her private space with few close friends, her



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dog Rufus, her job at the dog shelter and the man she begins to fall for, Carson. Monica Ali in an interview to ET says that Lydia has "...established a fragile kind of peace...".

Ali, through her story, subtly critiques and mocks the sham of the media construction of mourning. The paparazzi and tabloid agencies are the best sellers of such 'events' where emotions are exploited to their best for selling in tabloids. Ali's fictional narrative completely subverts the sentimentalising game of the media which sensationalises sorrow for greater TRPs.

The perpetual controversies regarding the unethical and traumatising ways of the paparazzi are posited against the considerations of personal morality and guilt in Lydia's escape and search for a secluded private life. This issue becomes more serious in case of a female celebrity, especially one who is a royal on one hand and a 'global celebrity' on the other. The celebrity's completely personal space becomes a necessity which when curbed by both family codes, royal protocols and the glare of paparazzi/celebrity life, she is bound to be rebellious and seem erratic. This erratic behaviour again is portrayed in a negative light by the media who scandalize her and this in turn damages her family life further. Ali's story becomes a feminist critique of the extremely problematic female celebrity space. Lydia thinks that a mother who leaves her children can't be forgiven but the horrors of her past perhaps make her silently justify her act.

Underlying Grabowski's 'paparazzi dream' is Ali's critique of the global market policies that encourage the agents to go to any extent for money. Lydia finally carves a private space for herself by escaping further from Kensington. Thus Ali empowers her protagonist and celebrates a non-celebrity life as a critique of the celebrity hazards and trauma due to the paparazzi or media culture of the globalisation era.



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Situating within the corpus of the Paratext, Ali's textual critique takes a completely different turn. The paratextual elements, I argue, ultimately question the textual critique of celebrity craze, paparazzi/media culture and the global image-marketing strategies whereby the text itself becomes part of a larger marketing project aided by the paratext. While the text critiques the media and marketing culture, celebrates a non-celebrity life, the paratext proves the exploitation of Diana's celebritydom by the author and publisher; it emerges as a celebration of the global media and marketing culture. Gerard Genette introduces the concept of 'paratexts' in his book *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. The paratext assures a text's presence in the world, its reception and consumption in the form of a book (Genette and Maclean 261).

Being a site of pragmatics and strategy, a 'threshold' (261-262) the paratext constitutes the packaging and marketing strategies of a text. In view of this, the paratext of Monica Ali's *Untold Story* presents the book in such a way that it emerges more and more as a saleable product. The very choice of Diana as a subject makes the textual critique questionable. In 'A Conversation with Monica Ali' placed at the end of the text, on being questioned about the choice of subject or why Diana as an inspiration, Ali admits that she ardently followed Diana's transformation into a global superstar and even after so many years of Diana's death, the media and public interest in her has not died. Ali confesses her own addiction to Diana whose appeal, she says, was extraordinarily wide. Thus Ali clearly exploits Diana's perpetual popularity and stardom that gives her book the global platform and prospect of massive consumption. Ali says she chose America for her fictional setting because Diana felt America could 'absorb' a celebrity of her size. Ali thus reminds America of Diana's popularity there subtly addressing her book to a larger readership, especially



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that of America, to capture a larger market. The catchline or the storyline is placed at the bottom of the cover, literally a threshold point if the cover is to act as a door. It says --The most famous woman in the world / Her death mourned by millions / What if she hadn't died after all...?-- This could be taken as an authorial statement indirectly recommending the book to find the answer to the mystery. It could be the publisher's idea to highlight the essence of the story with a sensational catchline that hints at telling the story of the most famous woman for it is evident that Diana's fame can grab endless consumers. Is it not an attempt to tell another sensational Diana story? A culture that the text critiques. This strategy controls the reading and builds the readers' interest for making business. The back cover contains some more paratextual elements that ironically are a sharp contradiction to the idea of Ali's textual counter-narrative. Three promotional statements or blurbs are printed in bold and one of them is a major tabloid excerpt like Joanne Harris' quote, "A terrific, clever, multi-layered and subtle book (and let's not forget – hugely entertaining!)". Henry Sutton from *Daily Mirror* calls it a "perceptive and entertaining piece of fiction". These are carefully chosen to adorn the back cover as they highlight the entertainment value of the book and clearly convey it to the readers before they read the text. This kind of packaging prepares the book as a lucrative product in the global market and is highly contrary to its textual message that speaks against the arbitrary sale of entertainment by concocting celeb stories. Such blurbs undeniably highlight the entertainment value Diana still carries and cleverly invite readers to have a taste of it. It is highly ironical that promotional excerpts from British tabloids like *Daily Mirror* or *Observer* are included in the paratext while Ali's textual narrative critiques the tabloidization culture and business in Britain and on the international forum. It's the same *Daily Mirror* Ali now uses to publicise her Diana story that her text



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lashes for having been a cause of nuisance to Diana in reality and to Ali's fictional princess in *Untold Story* as well. Ali has critiqued the manipulation of celebrity image by the media. But what happens in the three paratextual pages full of tabloid blurbs is a careful construction of a magnificent image of Ali as an author that can create a stronger market for all her novels. It may be seen as an effort of discursive opinion construction or what Genette calls, "an action on the public" in a "'media dominated' period" (Genette and Maclean 261-262).

The cover illustration is an important paratextual element and the cover of the paperback edition of this novel is very significantly designed. At one glance it creates the atmosphere of mystery and intrigue. It features a woman in waist-deep water in mid sea but one can only see her back. She apparently wears a fashionable red gown and her brown hair is tied up. It is hard to determine whether she is a British or an American which sets the tone of the novel and incites a thriller element. Right at the centre, running across the figure of the woman appears the embossed title of the book in white and in big font size. Genette refers to the paratextual element 'title' as an "artefact of reception or of commentary" (trans. Lewin 54). The title "Untold Story" has much to convey; it adds to the dramatic element and the intrigue in order to interest and attract more readers. Expectedly the readers, connecting the title with the enigmatic woman of the cover will be driven to explore whose story it is and what is untold about it. The name of the author features at the top in bright red and is much larger in font than the one on the cover of Ali's first novel *Brick Lane*. This definitely is targeted at captivating those readers who are aware of Ali's name in the literary field and of the huge success of her first novel. This is in line with Genette's idea that "the better known the author, the more space his name takes up" (Genette 39). This is of course a strategy to market



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goodwill and fame. The age of Internet has made promotions more intense and strategic; therefore the website addresses of the publishing house and of the author are also mentioned. People visiting these pages for more information on the book, perhaps before reading, will enter into a domain where the praise and promotion of the book are entirely in the hands of the publisher and author. This is manipulated to create a favourable impression on the buyers who shall be tempted to buy the book.

The very first page mentions Ali's appearance on Granta's list of Best Young British Novelists and her former three novels. It's another strategy to sell the author's name, fame and recognition. A line about her family and a recommendation to visit her web site is strategically planned to increase the readers' interest in Ali's personal life. This goes completely against the textual prohibitions of excessive media and public intrusion into a female celebrity's private life. It may be argued that the difference lies in the celebrity's consent factor in the intrusion and publicity; but once the gates are open for temporary publicity, a celebrity/public figure's life can hardly remain private. The extent to which publicity is desired by the celebrity can hardly be decided by him/her after a point; it may be exceeded by the media for their own benefits from the celebrity as a saleable subject.

Quite unusual though, the book features a section called 'Topics and Questions for Discussion' which lists many questions from the text that could be a part of academic study. This may be a hint at the book's potential to be included in any academic syllabi. This strategy perhaps aims at a permanent market by exploiting Diana's craze as a youth icon. The final section 'If you've loved *Untold Story*, why not try...' contains the synopsis and extensive media praises of Ali's former novels, so the packaging of this novel becomes a platform for publicising and promoting the author and her work by exploiting her fame. Thus



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the paratextual reading questions the textual critique of making a product of a celebrity by the media whereby the book itself sells Diana's stardom and is made to become a saleable product with the publicity and tabloid promotions. There appears a contradiction between preaching and practice.

This paper has attempted to analyse few of the textual and paratextual aspects to conclude that they seem to be posited against one another. Right from exploiting the undying interest of the people in a glamorous and controversial celebrity like Diana, weaving the most unlikely yet sensational fiction that kicks off from true events to titillate the public imagination to producing a book that parallels the tabloid culture she seems to critique in the narrative; a book with its packaging so consciously constructed, the book cover with the mysterious glamorous woman and her water shadow symbolising the shady, mysterious nature of the life of the central character, the various newspapers and tabloids that virtually hunted Diana to death, now praising Ali's work—all suggest a conflicting relation between the text and the paratexts and these tendencies have been critiqued in this paper.

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