

**Paratextual Thresholds in Algerian Short Fiction:
A Semiotic and Aesthetic Inquiry into Fouzia Assasla "Amina in Evening
Conversations"**

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Abstract:

This article investigates the poetics of paratextuality in Fouzia Assasla short story “**Amina in Evening Conversations**”, drawing on Gérard Genette’s theory of paratexts as a semiotic framework for textual mediation. The study conceptualizes paratextual elements as operative thresholds that regulate the conditions of textual legibility and produce meaning prior to and alongside the narrative proper.

The analysis distinguishes between peritext and epitext as analytically productive categories. The peritext comprises the author’s name, title, dedication, and introductory material, functioning as a structured semiotic apparatus that orients interpretive activity and constructs a horizon of expectation for the reader. The epitext, manifested through the cover image and the publishing institution, is approached as an external yet functionally operative discursive layer that contributes to the framing of textual reception and the activation of interpretive protocols.

This article examines the poetics of paratextual thresholds in the short story “**Amina in Evening Conversations**,” with a particular focus on the peritext and epitext according to Gérard Genette’s theoretical framework. Both categories are approached as semantic keys that reveal the author’s vision and the underlying structure of the text.

The peritext includes the author’s name, the title, the dedication, and the introduction, which collectively form a symbolic system that guides the reading process and orients interpretive activity. The epitext, on the other hand, is represented by the accompanying image and the publishing house, functioning as an interpretive gateway that decodes the author’s implicit intentions and facilitates the reader’s comprehension of the primary text.

The study concludes that the author transforms paratextual thresholds into organic and constitutive elements of the narrative experience. These thresholds deepen the fictional experience, prepare the reader both psychologically and cognitively, shape their horizon of expectation, and enable access to latent layers of meaning.

Keywords: Paratextual thresholds; Short story; Poetics of meaning; Algerian literature; Genette.

The Algerian short story constitutes an integral component of the broader Arabic short story tradition, characterized by a complex interplay of diversity and heterogeneity. This interrelation has produced a textual corpus and a linguistic context marked by notable variation and singularity at the levels of form and content, as well as quantity and quality. Such distinctiveness emerges from an ongoing endeavor to refine narrative techniques in a way that addresses an educated readership and engages with the modalities of their reception of narrative discourse.

As a result, the Algerian short story has attracted sustained critical attention and rigorous analytical engagement aimed at evaluation and interpretation. It is within this critical horizon that the present study situates itself, seeking to examine paratextual thresholds in narrative discourse, with specific reference to Fouzia Assaslah short story **“Amina in Evening Conversations”**.

1-Definition of Paratextual Thresholds :

Paratextual thresholds within the text refer to the ensemble of adjuncts or complementary elements that complete the fabric of the signifying text. This is because they constitute a discourse in their own right, governed by its own rules and regulations, which lead the reader toward an inevitable act of reading. This inevitability arises from curiosity, fascination, desire, intellectual attraction, or a pursuit of knowledge, as well as from the attempt to satisfy the self through an intensive form of conscious reading—whether specialized or non-specialized—thereby contributing to the reader’s cultural enrichment and illuminating their cognitive and intellectual path.

Paratextual thresholds also refer to the accompanying or parallel text that surrounds and frames the original text. It is defined as **“the set of texts that surround the body of the book from all sides: footnotes, marginal notes, main and secondary titles, indexes, prefaces, conclusions, and other publication data, which together form a semiotic and epistemic system that is no less important than the main text it accompanies or frames; rather, it plays a significant role in guiding and shaping the reading process”**¹. Accordingly, paratextual thresholds include all publishing-related elements, such as footnotes, marginalia, primary and secondary titles, indexes, introductions, and conclusions.

Paratextual thresholds perform both rhetorical and aesthetic functions due to their strong connection with the context of the main text. They have no value in isolation from it, nor is there any need for them without it. Their presence is therefore complementary and essential, as they assist the reader in processes of analogy, contrast, and interpretation. They deepen the meaning of the text and extend its interpretive dimensions, strengthening its interaction with the textual object.

As stated: **“the novelty of approach, treatment, conceptual depth, and teleological scope are all elements that benefit from the achievements of modern linguistics, semiotics,**

1 -**Abderrazak Belal**; Introduction to Paratextual Thresholds: A Study in Ancient Arabic Critical Introductions. Casablanca/Beirut: Afrique Orient, 2000, P16.

discourse analysis, poetics, narratology, visual arts, and advertising studies”¹. For this reason, authors pay close attention to these elements and meticulously consider their structuring and presentation.

2-Genette’s Division of the Paratext :

Genette divides the paratext (the accompanying or parallel text) into two distinct components: the **peritext (peritexte)** and the **epitext (épitexte)**.

1- The Peritext :

The peritext constitutes one of the fundamental pillars of paratextual theory. It includes **“everything that circulates within the orbit of the text as accompanying elements: the author’s name, the title, the subtitle, the dedication, the introduction... that is, everything related to the external appearance of the book, such as the author’s name, the title, and the publisher’s statement”**². In other words, it refers to the totality of data surrounding the textual body.

Genette defines this spatial and material zone of the peritext as **“the spatial and material region of the peritext that is produced under the direct and primary responsibility of the publisher, or, more abstractly and more precisely, of publication itself”**³

Thus, the peritext comprises everything related to the external presentation of the book: the author’s name, the title, the subtitle, the dedication, the introduction, and other similar elements.

This brief theoretical entry leads us to examine the paratextual thresholds in Fouzia Assasla short story **“Amina in Evening Conversations”** We begin with the peritextual elements, as follows:

A. The Threshold of the Author’s Name :

The author’s name is one of the essential constitutive elements of the peritext. No literary work can exist without the name of its author. Moreover, the arrangement and placement of the creative subject acquire an evocative and aesthetic dimension. As has been noted: **“the position of the name at the top of the page does not produce the same impression as its placement at the bottom; therefore, the upper positioning of names has become dominant in most contemporary publications”**⁴.

This is precisely the position adopted by Fouzia Assasla in her short story “Amina in Evening Conversations” By placing her name at the top of the page, she asserts her presence and authority over the narrative text, affirming herself as an autonomous subject with independent referential and intellectual sovereignty.

The appearance of the author’s name, “Fouzia Assasla” at the top of the story’s page thus constitutes a declaration of literary and legal ownership over the written lines contained

1 -Ibid, P16.

2 - **Belabed, Abdelhak:**Thresholds (Gérard Genette: From Text to Paratext), introduction by Said Yaktine, Ikhtilaf Publications, Algeria / Arab Institute for Studies and Publishing, Beirut, 1st ed., 2008, P 49.

3 - **Gerard.Genette:** Seuil, coll poetique, ed seuil, 1ed, Paris, 1987, P 2.

4 - **Hammad, Hassan Mohamed:** Intertextuality in the Arabic Novel: A Study of Selected Models, Egyptian General Book Organization, Egypt, 1997, P 64.

between the covers of the book. Moreover, its presence on the title page also performs a promotional and advertising function, since its position at the top of the page visually addresses the reader and encourages book acquisition.

B. The Title :

The title is a linguistic event that occupies a position of prominence on the cover of the literary work. It is situated at the thresholds or gateway of the text, constituting the first element that attracts the reader. It is **“a dense accumulation of the text’s significations”**¹, since it appears in a reduced form **“to condense a large text through compression, evocation, symbolization, and summarization”**². Thus, the title is a condensed text that relies on evocation, symbolism, and summarization in order to reduce meaning.

The title is also another text, endowed with implicit signification within narrative discourse. As stated, **“its meaning derives from its function; for the title of a thing is its guide, and its placement at the beginning of a work is intended to help us uncover the author’s purpose”**³.

The title of the story is placed on the cover page in pink, a color that often symbolizes happiness and joy. It may also suggest that its bearer is troubled, searching for a path toward happiness without surrendering to problems. The title also appears on the first page following the cover, both on the front and back sections.

The linguistic structure of the title invites analysis on three levels: **the syntactic level, the lexical level, and the semantic level.**

1- The Syntactic Level :

This level involves identifying the grammatical function (i’rāb) of each lexical item in the title, which appears as a nominal sentence composed of three fundamental units:

- Amina (Amīna)**: a nominative subject (mubtada’), marked by an explicit ḍamma on its final letter.
- Fi (in)**: a preposition (ḥarf jarr).
- Ahadith (discourses)**: a noun in the genitive case (ism majrūr), marked by a visible kasra on its final letter, functioning as the first term of an annexation (muḍāf).
- Al-Masaa (the evening)**: a genitive noun (muḍāf ilayh), marked by a visible kasra on its final letter. The prepositional phrase “Ahadith al-Masaa” functions syntactically as the predicate (khabar) of the subject.

2- The Lexical Level :

This level consists in the study of lexical items as recorded in dictionaries and lexicons. According to *Lisan al-‘Arab*, under the entry “A-M-N”: **“Amn (security) and amanah (trustworthiness) share the same meaning. ‘Aminta’ means I became safe. A man described as amin is a protector. It is said that he is a person of religion and virtue. Al-Amin refers to the one who is trusted; the person to whom people entrust themselves**

1 -**Mengour, Abdeljalil**: The Semiotic Approach to the Literary Text: Forms and Models, lectures of the First National Conference – Semiotics and the Literary Text, University of Mohamed Khider, Biskra, 2001, P61.

2 - **Hamdaoui, Jamil**. “Why the Paratext?”, Al-Karmel Journal, No. 88, Al-Karmel Cultural Foundation, Palestine / Paris, 2006, P 220.

3 - **Belal, Abdelrazak**. Introduction to Paratextual Thresholds, P 30.

and whom they consider a reliable guardian. Amin and amman also denote faith. It is also said: how good is your amnah and inn, meaning your religion and character...¹.

As for the concept of “hadith,” under the entry “H-D-TH,” Ibn Manzur defines it as follows: “...Al-hadith: that which is new among things. Al-hadith also refers to news or reports, whether few or many. Its plural is ahadith, like qati‘ and aqati‘...²

As for the concept of “al-masaa” (evening), under the entry “M-S-Y,” it is stated: “Masa, amsa, and massa all mean that someone promises you something and then delays it. Al-masaa is the opposite of morning. Al-imsaa is the opposite of al-isbah. Sibawayh said: they say morning and evening just as they say whiteness and blackness. Al-musy and al-misy are like al-masaa; al-musy is derived from evening just as ‘morning’ is derived from ‘morning time’...³.

It appears from these lexical definitions in *Lisan al-‘Arab* that the author has carefully selected the title of her short story. By “Amina,” she intended the meanings of preservation, trust, and reliability, that is, a person who keeps secrets. As for “Evening Discourses,” it may also suggest the meaning of old or past news, while the word “evening” itself may evoke connotations of darkness and injustice, implying the presence of a painful wound.

Thus, we may conclude that the literal underlying title is “**Secrets of an Old Wound**,” in contrast to the metaphorical title “Amina in Evening Discourses.”

3-The Semantic Level :

This level allows for a preliminary understanding of the narrative, as the title explicitly signals the presence of “discourses,” that is, multiple transmitted narratives or reports. In addition, the combination of the word “discourses” (*Ahadith*) with the word “evening” (*al-masaa*) generates a dense semantic field charged with several connotations, including calmness, stability, nostalgia, fatigue, injustice, and suffering. However, some of these connotations are attenuated or reconfigured after a careful and complete reading of the short story, once the intended meaning becomes clear.

Furthermore, the two terms “discourses” and “evening” are both anchored in the first element of the title, namely “Amina,” since all narratives are ultimately related to her. This proper name plays a decisive role in determining the nature of the discourse, as it connotes truthfulness, trust, and preservation, suggesting that the narrated events correspond to lived experiences of a woman who recorded them in her personal notebook or diary.

Thus, the title “**Amina in Evening Conversations**” appears as a highly intelligent and densely charged construct, carrying a concentrated semantic load that reflects the author’s awareness of her creative universe—an awareness that is itself rooted in her perception of the surrounding world.

1 - See Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-Arab*, Dar Sader, Beirut, Lebanon, 1st/2nd/3rd eds., 1991, Vol. 13, PP21–23.

2 - *Ibid*, P131.

3 - *Ibid*, P280.

C- The Dedication:

The dedication is an expression of appreciation and gratitude conveyed by the writer to others, whether individuals or groups¹. It reveals an intimate discourse proposed by the author as an additional bridge linking the writer to the reader, directed toward a specific person or collective, thereby expressing a real or symbolic relationship that extends beyond the thresholds of the text².

The discourse of the dedication discloses latent dimensions related to the author's subjectivity, including courtesy, reproach, remembrance, and other emotional states that may range in intensity but remain predominantly intimate in nature. This intimacy functions as a kind of contract binding the author to another entity positioned beyond the limits of the narrative address, namely the dedication itself, which is described as **“a legitimacy between the producer (the writer) and the receiver (the reader); without it, the self remains confined within its own existence, in a closed world without windows”**³.

The dedication threshold is based on a movement from the “I” toward the “Other,” whereby creative writing becomes a passage and mediating space between self and other, as an expression grounded in affection. This is precisely the case in the dedication of the short story “Amina in Evening Conversations,” which is addressed to family members and a friend, as shown in the following table:

Story	Dedicator	Dedication (Structural Form)	Dedicated to	Page
Amina in Evening Conversations	The short story write	To the father, mother, and son Mohamed	The family	03
		To my colleagues (male and female) at the university. To Al-Ma'arif Printing House	Friends / acquaintances (unknown persons) Publishing house	03

The attentive reader of this dedication will notice that it is written in a descriptive, expository prose style and addressed to figures who are unknown on the general level but known on the private level of the short story writer, with the exception of the dedication addressed to “Maktabat Al-Ma'arif” (Al-Ma'arif Publishing House) as a well-known publishing institution.

(Whereas the remaining dedications are grounded in friendship or familial relationships, and they fall—according to Gérard “Genette”—**“within the category of the private dedication addressed to a person who is more or less known. In this case, the relationship between**

1 - Belabed, Abdelhak. Thresholds (Gérard Genette: From Text to Paratext), P93.

2 -Boussis, Wassila. Between the Visible and the Written in the Poetics of the Novel: A Study, Publications of the Union of Algerian Writers, Algeria, 1st ed., 2009, P 107.

3-Ghanemi, Saeed. Being, Time, and Narrative: The Hermeneutical Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, introduction, Arab Cultural Center, Casablanca / Beirut, 1st ed., 1999, P 27.

sender and receiver takes on a general and symbolic character, and may also be cultural, artistic, political, or based on other forms of public relations”¹.

Ultimately, whether private or public, the dedication remains a paratextual threshold whose signification is inseparable from the overall context of the literary work with its suggestive and referential dimensions. All the dedications were related to the content of the story, as the reader may infer that the narrative does not go beyond recounting events connected to family, work, and printing. In Amina’s notebook, we find events involving family problems between Amina and her mother, father, and her brother’s wife Rabha, as shown in the following excerpt: **“...Rabha did not stop following Amina’s movements and actions, expressing her deep resentment by telling her brother and father: Amina does whatever she wants and sleeps wherever she wants... the hearts of Amina’s family were filled... so her father decided to stop her from working... Amina’s mother joined in and supported her father’s decision... Amina tries to avoid falling into problems with her parents because they do not believe anything she says...”**²

After that, she finds herself in other problems between her and her husband “Talas”, his sister, and his mother-in-law: **“...the mother-in-law is now happy, because she enjoys seeing Talas mistreat his wife... Ratteba does not neglect the matter; she remains silent, perhaps the mother-in-law did not tell her about her plan, otherwise she would have had a role in completing the play...”**³

Thus, we observe the presence of the family theme within the narrative text. As for work, we find that Amina managed to obtain a job after long patience and perseverance, as shown in the following excerpt: **“ But God does not forget Amina because she did not abandon His path; rather, she persevered until she succeeded. After three years, Amina obtained a job position”**⁴

Amina also had a connection with printing, as she studied in her childhood typing on the typewriter. This is shown in the following excerpt: **“...she went to training centers and found herself close to the typewriter, so she enrolled in the technical school of typing, and soon she became attached to it and practiced her training with passion...”**⁵

She did not stop at learning typing skills only, but practiced her profession with passion and worked as a computer typist in a lawyer’s office, as shown in the following excerpt: **“...when Amina was informed of this, she immediately headed to the office to take her new position as a secretary in a law office accredited before the Supreme Court...”**⁶

She also worked with university students using her computer after losing her job with the lawyer: **“...Amina was very saddened, but God did not abandon her; she continued working with her computer, and God granted her abundant income, and all university**

1- Gerard.Genette, Seuil , P123.

2- Fouzia Assasla, Amina in Evening Conversations, Al-Ma’arif Printing, no country, no edition, no date, PP 41–43.

3- Ibid, P74.

4- Ibid, P126.

5- Ibid, P14.

6- Ibid, P17.

students came to her because of her good treatment and low service fees.. ”From here,¹ we find that the act of printing has a strong presence within the narrative text.

Thus, the paratext of the dedication establishes a direct relationship with the text of the story, and the link between the dedication and the work is constructed through interconnected semantic contexts, including suggestion and implication.

D-The Preface / Introduction:

The discourse of the preface/introduction belongs to the category of paratextual texts. It appears either before or after the dedicatory discourse in the form of a statement that is related to the text and circulates within its semantic orbit. Genette states: **“we call a preface, in its general and common French sense, any type of introductory or preliminary text, whether produced by the author or by another person, materialized as a discourse related to the text: it either precedes it and is called (preface), or concludes it and is called (afterword)”**². The term **“introduction”** overlaps with a number of other designations such as preamble, preface, opening, and foreword. Nevertheless, these terms do not present substantial conceptual differences, except in certain usages that appear to be specialized within specific epistemological fields.

The discourse of the **preface/introduction** may be described as a **“meta-discourse or second-degree discourse in Barthes’ terminology”**³.

since it performs a form of explanatory reading of the text, resembling a view from above. As Tahar Rouaynia notes: **“it seems that the discourse of the preface does not occupy a ‘hot’ textual position within the textual space, and does not go beyond the function of accompaniment, which may take on an explanatory pedagogical tone, or an advertising tone, or may even constitute an autonomous aesthetic practice functioning as a discourse about discourse, or a reading that attempts to free itself from the constraints of normative criticism”**⁴.

Since the **introduction/preface** primarily aims at revealing the writing strategy and fulfilling the **implicit contract established with the reader—and being an explanatory paratextual threshold through which the author seeks to define and defend the identity of the text**⁵—

Fouzia Assasla has employed it precisely for this purpose. She uses her creative work as a means to express her views, inviting the reader to share them and to express their impressions toward them.

In this perspective, she positions the short story as a reflective mirror, stating: **“because we cannot discover our truth unless we look into the mirror, and since the short story is one of the most important means through which the author expresses her opinions, and the**

1- Ibid, P35.

2- Gerard.Genette, Seuil , P164.

3- Wassila Boussis, Between the Narrative and the Prose in the Poetics of the Novel – A Study, P117.

4- Al-Taher Raouaynia, “Reading and Interpretation: Textual Framing and the Strategy of Approaching Possible Worlds in the novel Al-Tabyan fi Waqi’at al-Ghurba wal-Ashjan by Faraj al-Hawar”, Al-Tabyeen Journal, published by the Al-Jahiziyya Cultural Association, Algeria, issue 17, 2001, P126

5- Abderrazak Belal; Introduction to Paratextual Thresholds: P52.

reader expresses their impressions toward it”¹ Thus, the author conceives the short story as a mirror reflecting truth, thereby constructing a communicative bridge between herself and the reader, based on the exchange of sincere perspectives.

2-The Epitext :

The epitext (*epitexte*) belongs to the category of paratextual devices that frame the literary text from outside its material and physical boundaries. It includes all external texts that circulate beyond the space of the book while remaining conceptually and thematically linked to it, insofar as they engage in its study, critique, and interpretation.

As Genette states: **“the distinguishing feature of epitext in comparison with peritext within the paratextual space lies in its exteriority; we call epitext any paratextual element that does not exist physically or materially around the text but circulates freely away from it in an infinite space of a social and physical nature”**² Thus, the epitext encompasses all discursive formations situated outside the book, such as correspondence, diaries, media interviews, and critical discussions. It may also include advertising traces related to cover imagery and publishing houses, which will be addressed in this section.

A- The Accompanying Image :

Images and visual representations belong to the visual paratextual space employed by authors or poets in the design of the book cover. **“The accompanying image may perform a mnemonic function, or it may be endowed with a code capable of representing, with varying degrees of precision, verbal elements and their syntactic relations. However, images are structured and organized through complex configurations that render them arguably more intricate than systems of writing”**³

In this sense, the visual form of the cover is no longer an isolated or self-contained element with an internalized meaning; rather, it becomes open to the text, functioning as a rich signifier that orients the reader. It does not constitute an **“independent empire, that is, a closed world with no communication with its surroundings; images, like words and like other objects, cannot escape being immersed in the game of meaning”**⁴ Therefore, the image operates as one of the semiotic codes that transmit signification.

Thus, the accompanying image operates within the story to construct its semantic edifice; the author has paired the title with an image of blooming flowers due to the various connotations this plant carries. It signifies optimism, happiness, and hope, and may also suggest patience combined with the strength of challenge, as it lives firmly rooted in the earth while raising its head toward the sky, defying all natural conditions such as rain and storms, until it eventually blossoms, smiling at life.

1- Fouzia Assasla, Amina in Evening Conversations. P04.

2- Gererd Genette. *Seuil*, *ibid*, P346.

3- Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, translated by Hassan Al-Banna Izz al-Din, reviewed by Muhammad Asfour, World of Knowledge Series No. 184, National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters, Kuwait, 1994, P 169.

4- Muhammad Gharafi, “A Reading in Visual Semiotics”,²(*Alam al-Fikr Journal*, Vol. 31, No. 1, National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters, Kuwait, 2002, P 222.

This symbolic choice corresponds to Amina, the protagonist of the story. Assaslah intended this flower to function as a “objective correlative” for Amina: initially, she was deprived of continuing her education like her peers due to harsh living conditions that forced her to work in order to pursue her studies. Later, she moved into her marital home, where she once again suffered under the oppression of her mother-in-law, her sister-in-law, and her husband, who prevented her from continuing her studies and work, and who beat her whenever he wished. Despite this, she eventually managed to overcome them and leave that house, which had become a living hell for her, allowing her to resume her studies and obtain a job befitting her academic qualifications, thus smiling at life once again. Assasla also chose the orange color for the flower, symbolizing sadness, fear, anxiety, and suffering—reflecting what Amina endured—while the purple center symbolizes faith and piety, the spiritual strength that Amina relied on to face her harsh circumstances.

Thus, the image becomes a window opening onto the text, as it **“creates a realistic composition that directly refers to the events of the story, or at least to a scene from them. The painter usually selects a key moment in the narrative characterized by dramatic tension, and the reader needs little effort to connect the text with the visual representation.”**¹

B. The Publishing House :

One of the significant outcomes of printing technology is the emergence of new techniques in book production, design, distribution, and dissemination to readers. Among these techniques is the prominent inclusion of cover design and the necessity of displaying the publisher’s name on the back cover.

The publisher as a paratextual threshold represents the economic authority of the literary work; it is the financial power that governs the circulation of the creative product and its access to the reading public. Fouzia Assasla entrusted the publication of her short story to the publishing house “Al-Ma‘arif” for printing and distribution.

The story was printed only once, which may be attributed to its relatively recent publication status among readers. However, this raises a critical question: will the story be reprinted in the future? Such a possibility is likely to depend on readership reception and the quality of the literary production.

In general, this paratextual threshold carries both promotional and commercial dimensions, not only for the work itself but also for other publications issued by the same publishing house.

Paratextual elements may thus be understood as semiotic codes strategically mobilized by the author to encode meaning while simultaneously allowing the reader to engage in interpretive decoding processes in order to uncover intended significations. This is precisely what emerges from our reading of the paratextual thresholds in Fouzia Assasla short story, where paratexts reveal a writing strategy and enable access to the deep structures of the narrative and its underlying semantic configurations.

1- **Hamid Lahmidhani**, *The Structure of Narrative Text from the Perspective of Literary Criticism*, Arab Cultural Center, Beirut–Casablanca, 2nd ed., 1993, P 59

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