
Exploring the Threshold: Representations of Burma in the Paratext

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Abstract

Book publishers have long recognized the lure of the 'exotic' and subsequently, postcolonial literature as fertile ground to exploit for a Western readership. This study explores the influence of the paratext of books in the construction of the representation of a country to its potential readership. The function of the paratext can be seen to influence the general public as a browser or the reader to better 'receive' the text and read it more pertinently. As a case study, ten books on Burma (Myanmar) as a former British colony, are selected and the paratext of titles, iconography, blurbs and the author's position in terms of the legitimacy and authenticity are examined. The conclusion reached is that both authors and publishers employ various common paratextual elements to construct a representation of a country, in this case Burma, for a Western readership, whatever the conventional genres of the different books happen to be.

Key Words

Paratext, Genette, Burma, Myanmar, Postcolonial Literature, Iconography, Blurbs

Introduction

Book publishers have long recognized the lure of the 'exotic' and subsequently, postcolonial literature as fertile ground to exploit for a Western readership. With the expansion of global travel, the market for books on 'other' cultures, mainly from former colonies continues to flourish. Huggan refers to this phenomenon as the 'postcolonial exotic', which he defines as 'the global commodification of cultural differences as an object for consumption' (2001, vii). This literature, such as books on Burma (Myanmar), can be written by an outsider or a native of that country or culture.

When selecting books on a particular country or culture, a reader may think first of the genre of 'travel'. This genre is fairly elastic (with the exception of travel guides) and overlaps with other conventional genres such as history, autobiography, anthropology and ethnography, geography, politics and more recently, fiction. According to Fussell (1980, 203), a travel book is 'addressed to those who require the exotic or comic anomalies, wonders, and scandals of the literary form [...] which their own place or time cannot supply'. The book is often a journey, either literal or metaphorical, with a strong personal narrative. However, in order to make this selection the browser or reader can be assisted by the medium of the paratext.

The function of the paratext can be seen to influence the general public as a browser or the reader to better 'receive' the text and read it more pertinently. In his seminal work, *Paratexts*, Genette (1997 2) views the paratext of a book as a kind of 'threshold' or a possible entry point to the text for the general public/reader. Paratextual elements 'help to construct the object, situate the text, and position the book culturally, communicating greater meaning to the consumer' (Pecoskie and Desrochers 2013, 233). In other words, the paratext fulfills both an informative and interpretative role for the reader. In book publishing, the paratext can be provided by the authors, publishers, printers, booksellers, reviewers and readers. It can be divided into two areas: the peritext which is materially part of the book as an object (jackets/covers, front and end matter, paper, binding) and the epitext which is 'outside' the book but connected to it in some way such as online reviews, promotional materials and book signings.

This study will consider four major elements of the paratext that help to define a book's reception by the reader: the title and subtitle, the use of iconography or illustrations, the blurb/cover reviews, and authorial legitimacy. These will be considered in relation to ten books on Burma to ascertain how paratextual features could contribute to the representation of a country. This paper will argue that the elements of the paratext do not so much change with the genre as expected, but have commonalities which are dictated by the topic or subject matter of the books, in this case the representation of a particular

country, Burma. Ten books (eight non-fiction titles and two novels) on Burma were selected from a range of different genres that were either first published or reprinted within the period 2000 to 2012. This study is limited to the examination of the peritext for these titles.

What's in a Title?

The title identifies a book with a name. It is addressed from the author or occasionally the publisher, to a wider public than simply the reader, compared to the text that is for the direct consumption of the reader (Genette 74-75). This wider public includes booksellers, distributors, critics, and book buyers who do not read the book but perhaps give it as a gift or own it as an 'object' for its physical or material beauty.

The importance of the title in identifying the book is shown by its multiple paratextual appearances on the front cover/jacket, spine, half-title, title, title verso and hardback binding. The function of the title could be to provide a summary of the topic, act as a pull-in or hook, or to identify the subject matter. The subtitle often has a more explanatory function in terms of indicating genre or as further explanation of the subject matter.

In the analysis of books selected for this study, the importance of the title in identifying the subject matter of the book can be clearly seen with the use of the country name, Burma. This choice of name invokes a cultural significance as Burma is the old colonial name for the country, while Myanmar is the official name given by the ruling dictatorship in 1989. Of the ten titles examined, eight feature the name of the country in some form: in the title with *Burma Chronicles*, *Burma: a Nation at the Crossroads*, *Letters from Burma*; or in the subtitles, *Golden Earth: Travels in Burma*, *Secret Histories: Finding George Orwell in a Burmese Teashop*, *In the Land of the Green Ghosts: a Burmese Odyssey*, *The River of Lost Footsteps: A Personal History of Burma* and *The Trouser People: the Quest for the Victorian Footballer who Made Burma Play the Empire's Game*. With the subtitles, the decision was sometimes made to use it only on the title page. This may have been for pragmatic reasons in the case of *The Trouser People* as it is so long and would not have fitted easily on the paperback cover.

The decision to use the name 'Burma' in the titles rather than 'Myanmar' could be the decision of the author or the publisher for possibly either familiarity or political reasons. Rogers (2012 xiii) in his book, *Burma: a Nation at the Crossroads*, comments in his Author's Note that Burma is the name used by the movement for democracy and ethnic resistance groups and they have encouraged the international community to do likewise. Hence, Rogers says 'in this book, therefore, I will use Burma and not Myanmar'. Delisle in *Burma Chronicles* has offered an alternative with the heading on his maps. He uses 'Myanmar, official name since 1989, adopted by the UN' and also 'Burma, former name, still used by countries that do not accept the legitimacy of the government that took power in 1989'. From a Western reader's perspective perhaps the choice of the former colonial name of Burma in the title provides easier recognition of the subject matter and thereby access to the text, or indeed could be viewed as a political statement.

Interestingly, travel guides tend to use the country nomenclature of Myanmar (Burma), from publishers such as Lonely Planet, Rough Guides and DK Eyewitness Travel. This could be due to these books being regarded as informative guides for readers who are tourists actually visiting the country now rather than seeking a more cultural engagement.

In two of the books the titles were changed or adapted for different editions. Larkin's book *Secret Histories: Finding George Orwell in a Burmese Teashop* was truncated for the paperback edition to *Finding George Orwell in Burma*. This is certainly a more manageable title length for a paperback format but more significantly it gives readers a more direct reference or association to possibly the most famous book in English on Burma, Orwell's *Burmese Days*. This view is supported by Genette (1997, 3) who states 'the ways and means of the paratext change continually depending on period, culture, genre author, work and edition'. Therefore, publishers can adapt titles and also covers for different markets and readerships.

The two works of fiction in the selection did not use the country name in their titles. However, they employed another device of the subtitle giving an indication to the reader of the genre. For example, Mason's book, *The Piano Tuner* was subtitled on the front cover as

'A Novel' while Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* on the US edition is also subtitled 'A Novel' although this does not appear as part of the title on the UK edition. The genre is also indicated on the subtitle *The River of Lost Footsteps* with 'A Personal History of Burma' in the UK edition and 'Histories of Burma' in the US Edition.

Thus the use of the old colonial name 'Burma' in the title here is significant. As Ali (2018, 92) points out the paratext can help the read to decode a book's cultural significance and 'otherness'. It can contribute both 'culturally and historically' to contextualize the text.

Iconography and the Postcolonial 'Exotic'

Illustrations, as part of the paratext, can either be used as photographs or images within the text, and in the design of book covers and jackets wrapping the text. The front covers of books are widely used in promotional materials and as thumbnails for marketing in online bookstores such as Amazon. Thus, particularly covers, play a central role in the marketing function. While Genette is considered the major exponent of paratext, he commented that illustrations, covers and frontispieces 'exceed [...] the means of a plain literary person' (1997, 406). However, the importance of illustrations as paratextual elements cannot be ignored. Covers, in particular, with their prominent use of imagery 'help readers make sense of the kind of book they are about to read, giving the impression of its genre, its tone and the kind of audience it seeks'. They also signify the book's cultural value (Matthews 2007, xi).

The iconography used on the covers of the books in this study portrays the 'exotic' image of Burma and its cultural heritage. An analysis of the covers reveals a high incidence of the use of 'place', in the form of iconic tourist landmarks or buildings. The temples of Bagan, the Shwedagon in Yangon which is the most revered Buddhist temple in Burma, the famous U Bein bridge and peaceful Inle Lake with its leg rowers. These images are used repeated on covers in different genres of books. *The Glass Palace* and *The River of Lost Footprints* both share the U Bein bridge image. Temples are portrayed on seven of the titles of various editions, strongly signifying the religious cultural heritage of Burma. This Buddhist

connection is strengthened with stereotypical images of monks in their ubiquitous red robes. According to Huggan (2001 ix), these iconic images form part of ‘an aestheticizing process through which the cultural other is translated, [and] relayed back through the familiar’. Thus the stereotype provides ‘access’ to the culture for the reader.

In contrast to the images of a peaceful exotic land are the illustrations alluding to the military regime in power in Burma during the period these titles were published (2000-2010), once again showing how paratext adapts to specific periods. On the covers of the books with the more political content, there are images of soldiers holding guns including *Burmese Chronicles* which is printed in two colours of army green and black. Ironically, the image is more of a cartoon style drawn by the author with two soldiers guarding a house, possibly that of Aung San Suu Kyi. On the cover of *Letters from Burma*, an image of barbed wire runs over the title lettering indicating imprisonment or repression. Aung San Suu Kyi’s portrait, as the iconic Burmese political leader, features not only on the front cover of her own book, but also on Rogers’ political analysis of Burma. Whether she would have such a dominant position currently is debatable after her controversial response to the Rohingya refugee crisis in 2017.

Other images of people either as photographs or drawings draw on traditional cultural themes. Some illustrations portray what would be regarded as exotic curiosities such as ‘giraffe-necked’ women from a tribal group or as locals in traditional dress walking or with bicycles, and elephants with their mahouts. These all contribute to an atmosphere of nostalgia that symbolize a bygone era. The style of the many photographs also contributes to this nostalgic air with the use of blurred images, silhouettes, shadows and sepia tones. The image on *The Piano Tuner* in sepia evokes the late nineteenth century in which the story is set. A later edition changed the image to that of the U Bein bridge with Bagan temples, almost in shadowy silhouette. The use of silhouettes and shadows is interesting as they connote mood, drama and mystery. According to Forgione (1999), the metaphorical uses of shadows are linked to the less apparent darker side of people or places. Perhaps these images then are intended to illustrate the mystery of an ‘other’ culture or setting.

Inside the books, illustrations form part of the peritext. To inform the reader and to give the reader idea of 'place', all of these titles have a map of Burma, including surprisingly, the two novels. This map positions the narrative for the reader, again making it more accessible. Some of the maps contain the old colonial names for the major cities including the capital, Rangoon rather than Yangon as it is now widely known. This point is reflected in Webby's study (2007) in which she points out that more information or background is required for readers from outside the cultures portrayed in books of a historical nature.

Three of the titles, *In the Land of the Green Ghosts*, *The Trouser People* and *Golden Earth* have black and white photographs within the text. This visual imagery shows historical settings, photographs of the characters within the book and provide a pictorial context for the readers. However, one of these titles, *Burmese Chronicles* uses hand drawn illustrations throughout the text. The genre on the back cover is given as 'graphic novel' though the blurb describes it as 'Guy Delisles's newest travelogue'. As the illustrations with the written text are an integral part of the narrative, they have not been considered here as part of the peritext. In other words, the text does not stand alone in meaning without the drawings.

It is clear then that illustrations in the paratext carry significant cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1993). Shaughnessy (2004) states that 'books are culturally sensitive things; imagery that may have a subtle resonance in one country can appear meaningless gunk in another'. Thus the selection of images by authors and publishers need to be carefully considered for their intended readership in order to strike the intended chord.

Blurbing and Reviewing – Textual Connotations

Blurbs traditionally appear on the back covers of paperbacks or the front jacket flap of hardbacks. They provide a synopsis of the book to inform and stimulate the reader's interest to buy it. Recently blurbs also appear as part of the epitext in online bookstores or part of curated lists online. They form, with the short cover reviews, a valuable promotion for the book.

From a textual analysis of the blurbs, it is possible to see how the representation of a postcolonial country such as Burma is described. The main themes to emerge from the blurbs and cover reviews are of Burma as a land of paradoxes. The dichotomy of a peaceful exotic paradise versus a land of terror is illustrated by the blurb from the *Golden Earth* as ‘a land of breathtaking beauty peopled by the gentle Burmese’ but later it is described as a ‘war-torn land’. Rogers’ book describes Burma as a ‘beautiful, secretive and potentially prosperous country.’ There are other negative references to brutality and a repressive regime, cruelty, military dictatorship, and a turbulent past. Other blurbs refer the juxtaposition of the tragedy and comedy of the books’ portrayals of this country. The paperback edition of *Finding George Orwell* in Burma refers to ‘Burma’s exotic tragi-comedy’. Rory Maclean advocates in his review of *Burmese Chronicles* that people should not go to Burma as a tourist due to its ruling military dictatorship but instead ‘visit it instead through the pages of this heartbreaking, educational and insightful comic masterpiece’. This text echoes the images that the covers portray, as discussed earlier.

There are constant references to remoteness and isolation in the blurbs adding to the exotic connotations. In *The Trouser People*, Burma is described as ‘a hermit nation living under a repressive regime’. A review from *The Sunday Times* on the same title promises that the book will take ‘the reader into one of the most unvisited countries on earth’. Blanton (2002, xi) supports this view by remarking that one of the main purposes of travel books is to take the reader ‘to the other’ and there to engage with this culture.

There are links mentioned in the blurbs between Burma and its previous colonial power, Britain. There is often a nostalgic evocation of the imperial past in the words used. These links are often directly associated with recent authors who have walked in the footsteps of previous English visitors to Burma. The author of *The Trouser People* was ‘inspired by the forgotten diaries of Victorian adventurer, Sir George Scott’. The back cover of *Secret Histories* mentions ‘Emma Larkin journeys into the Orwellian land’. The novel, *The Piano Tuner* is about an eccentric British officer living in the jungles of Burma and a piano tuner from London. As Bert Lintner, the respected journalist on Burma, wryly comments in an

interview 'Both Andrew Marshall and Emma Larkin seized on an interesting concept – if you want to make Burma interesting to the rest of the world you have to find a westerner who is part of the story' (Five Reads).

However, the blurb can sometimes cause some discordance with the text for some readers and researchers. Tridgell (2005) claims in her study of *In the Land of the Green Ghosts*, that Pascal Khoo Thwe's book is a work of 'political protest' against the Burmese military dictatorship, similar to Aung San Suu Kyi's works. However, its reception by reviewers and its blurb relies on its appeal as a cultural curiosity that has been commodified to the detriment of its political message. For example, the rather patronising blurb states his meeting with a Cambridge don eventually takes him from 'the brutal hardships of guerilla warfare to the hallowed world of Cambridge University'. Again, a reference here to the 'civilizing' influences of the imperial culture, identified by Said (1994, xi) in his analysis of discourses of the 'mysterious East'.

The Authorial position – Authenticity and Legitimacy

The legitimacy of an author to write about their topic is important to the reader and is signified in the paratext. Bourdieu (1993, 117) postulates that cultural capital is accrued through a process of legitimation to writers in the literary field of cultural production. The 'agents' of legitimation could be publishers, reviewers or other authors. For example, well-known and respected authors often validate the work of other authors. A review from William Dalrymple, a bestselling travel writer, appears on the cover of *The River of Lost Footsteps*. Rory Maclean, a writer on Burma, and Bert Lintner have both curated online lists of books on Burma (The Guardian, 2013; Five Books n.d). Norman Lewis on the back cover of *Golden Earth* is reviewed by Thomson of *The Sunday Telegraph* as 'a truly great travel writer, perhaps the greatest we have'. All these reviews add to the symbolic capital of the author that attracts readers.

Another factor that could be regarded to add legitimacy and authenticity to an author is their birthright or cultural heritage. Postcolonial literature in English is emerging from

writers born in the former colonies. Of the books on Burma that were analysed, four of the writers could be viewed as postcolonial authors. Aung San Suu Kyi, Khoo Thwe and Thant Myint U are Burmese and Ghosh is Indian. A review by Ahdaf Soueif (of *The Guardian*) on the back cover of *The Glass Palace* states ‘Ghosh is one of the most sympathetic post-colonial voices to be heard today [...] He examines the question of Empire and responsibility, of tradition and modernity.’ This endorsement adds to the author’s legitimacy to provide an insightful view of the subject matter they are dealing with.

Another example of an author’s legitimacy is in relation to the iconic figure of Aung San Sue Kyi, daughter of the Burmese Independence leader, political prisoner and Nobel Prize Winner. Watts (2005, 140) looks at gender in relation to the paratext and it is interesting to note this in relation to Aung San Suu Kyi and her book, *Letters from Burma*. Watts argues that the author’s gender influences the paratext. He states that with women writers, the paratext affirms ‘the reliability of the woman writer and of her appropriateness as witness’ The back cover of Aung San Su Kyi’s book seem to support this point. There are two reviews that are endorsements of her personal qualities. *The Guardian* describes her as “a global symbol of peaceful resistance, courage and apparently endless endurance’. Bono in *Time* magazine quotes her as a ‘real hero in an age of phoney celebrity’. Perhaps this could be construed as a somewhat ironic statement of self-legitimacy from rock superstar, Bono.

A postcolonial writer may provide an insider’s view of their ‘exotic’ culture thereby making it more authentic and re-interpreting for the Western reader. Khoo Thwe was described on the back cover of his book as ‘a member of a tiny remote Burmese tribe famous for their giraffe-necked women’. These types of texts are sometimes categorized as ‘ethnic autobiography’. However, these three Burmese authors also have strong ties to Britain through educational or familial connections. All three were educated at either Oxford or Cambridge and Aung San Suu Kyi was married to an Oxford don. These credentials, mentioned in the authors’ biographies, add legitimacy to their role as purveyors of an ‘othered’ cultural product to a metropolitan readership.

Conclusion

In conclusion, from this study, it appears that both authors and publishers employ various common paratextual elements to construct a representation of a country for a Western readership, whatever the conventional genres of the book happens to be. The main thread that links the paratext of these books on Burma, published in the first decade of the 21st century, was the postcolonial exotic against a backdrop of military repression. Perhaps this paratext can be seen to link a small 'canon' of books on Burma. However, these paratextual elements can be adapted and changed according to the historical and cultural developments in the future to represent a different vision of a country. It would be interesting to revisit these titles at a later date to see how their paratext changes with the times.

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