

Original Paper

Miss Laila as Narrative Absence and Political Presence: The Study of Character, Myth, and Misrepresentation

Tushara Aremanda¹ & Dr. Baiju Krishnan²

¹ Research Scholar, Department of English, Indian and Foreign Languages, School of Applied Sciences and Humanities, Vignan's Foundation for Science, Technology and Research, Vadlamudi, -522213, AP, INDIA. E-mail: at_eng@vignan.ac.in

² Assistant Professor of English, Department of English, Indian and Foreign Languages, School of Applied Sciences and Humanities, Vignan's Foundation for Science, Technology and Research, Vadlamudi, -522213, AP, INDIA. E-mail: baijuk92@gmail.com

Received: March 24, 2026

Accepted: April 7, 2026

Online Published: April 22, 2026

doi:10.22158/sll.v10n2p39

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sll.v10n2p39>

Abstract

This study examines the character of Miss Laila in the novel "Miss Laila, Armed and Dangerous" (2017). It focuses on the lack of her presence in the story, allowing others, especially the media and state authorities, to construct and control her identity. Laila has a small role in the story and says little, but she is a powerful political and symbolic figure in the novel. Just because of Laila's absence in the plot, the narrative gains space to criticise modern society, the media, and Government surveillance. Joseph argues that identity is not something we fully create for ourselves; instead, it is shaped and often controlled by how society, the government, and the media choose to represent us. This study uses postmodern theory to show the interconnection between silence, images that are said about a person, and the myths created in stories. We can understand how truth becomes unstable through the character of Laila in the postmodern society, where the fabricated images and repeated stories shown by the media can make even ordinary people appear dangerous. All these matters happen because of the lack of Laila's presence. Her habit of speaking is limited; she remains quiet, and the allegations made by the government against her; together, these circumstances emphasise how the modern government claims to protect the people while creating opposition. This paper also shows the comparison of Laila to other characters like Akhila, who is an active speaker in the novel, to highlight her active presence. Akhila has control over how she talks about herself, but for Laila, her identity is imposed upon her by outsiders. Through this, it is clearly depicted how the lack of presence makes political existence more powerful.

Keywords

identity construction, media representation, narrative silence, postmodern theory, political surveillance, state authority

Introduction

Contemporary Indian novels are deeply involved in showing the conflicts between personal feelings or independent thoughts, the experiences of the individual, and how society looks at them. These reveal how systems of power shape, limit, or even ignore personal identity. Manu Joseph openly mentions this point in his novel “Miss Laila, Armed and Dangerous” (Joseph, 2017) through the character Laila, who is the protagonist of the story. The main character, Laila, is defined more by the words and opinions that others have about her rather than by her own actions or speech. Although Laila’s voice appears very limited in the story, it is clear that she has a great deal of political and symbolic influence throughout the novel. “This tension between being there and not being there highlights how media, state surveillance, and public rumour shape identity, turning regular people into symbols of suspicion and threat” (Hall et al., 2024, p. 225). Miss Laila’s story goes against the general idea that the main character should show her inner thoughts. The story gives more importance to the opinions of government officials, journalists, and neighbours than to her words. The details and beliefs they share create an image of her. It means that an individual’s emotions are influenced more by how others talk about them than by what they actually experience. Hall says that “identity is a production, which is never complete, always in process” (Hall, 2024, p. 225). Laila’s story indicates that this perspective of her interpretation is a result of rumour and the institutional framework.

The postmodern element in the novel lies in its critique of truth and representation. Lyotard says that postmodernism is marked by “incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 37). The main meta-narrative of the Indian government in this novel is to find and eliminate dangerous people. It acts not only on confirmed information, but also through rumours, covert surveillance, and repeated claims. Laila becomes a political figure because society is used to calling her Armed and Dangerous (Joseph, 2017), even though her intentions and actions were not clear at first. Laila’s absence and her silence highlight how truth and representation are unstable, and how identity is depicted as a fiction in postmodern political narratives.

Just because of Laila’s lack of presence, Joseph shows how ordinary people get drawn into political stories without having a voice of their own. People who speak, like Akhila, gain recognition in the story as well as in society, while people like Laila are only described and judged by others. Voice and space in the story are not shared equally. Laila’s silence increases the pressure placed on her, creating a gap between her real experience and how society imagines her. This fragmentation is at the heart of the postmodern critique: identity is not fixed or clear, but rather dependent on and shaped by discourse (Hutcheon, 2003, p. 112).

Argument:

“In *Miss Laila, Armed and Dangerous*, the concept of narrative absence as a political presence is shown through Laila, whose absence is constructed by Manu Joseph as central to her narrative and political significance”. Though she occupies less narrative space, her presence dominates the text through the expectations and fears of those around her. This paradox, the more silent she is, the more politically powerful she becomes, forms the novel’s central argument: that identity is produced externally rather than internally in contemporary socio-political contexts. Laila’s silence and limited freedom show how modern politics and media shape heroes and oppressors, revealing how vulnerable an individual’s subjectiveness becomes powerful social structures.

From the beginning, Laila’s identity is shaped by external discourse rather than self-expression. She is introduced as “armed and dangerous” (Joseph, 2017, p. 12), a label that spreads through police reports, media coverage, and community gossip. This repeated version makes people see Laila as a threat before they understand what she is actually doing. Her presence in the novel connects with Baudrillard’s idea of hyperreality, where society becomes a place that projects its anxieties, and the simulation of a threat becomes more significant than reality itself (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 66). Laila’s absence in the story is not just an empty space but a site where political and social meanings are constructed around her. The reader never truly knows her thoughts; still, the characters in the story create a fully imagined political image of her.

Joseph expands this effect through multiple perspectives. Journalists, neighbours, and authorities repeatedly describe Laila’s behaviour with uncertainty. For example, one passage states: “Even her footsteps seemed suspicious, as if the path feared her comings and goings” (Joseph, 2017, p. 47). These hyperboles highlight the danger that arises from perception, not from reality. Through Laila’s absence, Joseph pushes readers to examine how rumours and institutionalised interpretations construct someone’s identity. A postmodern perspective is clear here: the text challenges ideas of objective truth, showing that identity is fragmented and shaped by society (Hutcheon, 2003, p. 115; Lyotard, 1984, p. 37). The political side of Laila’s absence becomes clear when we look at how various institutions depict her. Laila was under constant surveillance by security agencies, who watched her every step and movement. Even her normal, everyday actions were portrayed as signs of threat. Joseph writes, “Every glance she gives is read as intentional; every silence is read as conspiratorial” (Garg, 2017, p. 103). These observations reflect what Foucault argues: power works through constant looking, and through the ways people talk about others, producing ideas about what counts as normal or abnormal behaviour (Foucault, 1977, p. 140). Because Laila is not given a direct voice in the story, she cannot control or challenge these interpretations, leaving her as someone acted upon by power rather than someone who can respond. However, this absence further strengthens her political presence. Laila becomes the central figure for all stories of threat, proving that someone doesn’t need to be seen to have influence or symbolic power.

Moreover, Laila's silence is associated with the media discussions that help create a mythical identity around her. News reports describe her as "armed and dangerous", with journalists repeatedly portraying her as "a ghost wandering the streets with weapons and unknown intentions" (Joseph, 2017, p. 85). This kind of framing shows how mass media can shape political enemies through selective storytelling and constant repetition. Laila's character reflects the postmodern ideas: she exists more in public talk than in action, and her identity is formed not by her own voice but by society's imagination (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 66; Hall et al., 2024, p. 225).

The difference becomes clearer when we look at characters like Akhila, who take an active role in the story. Akhila knows how visible she is and takes charge of her own story. "She knows her performance is being recorded" (Joseph, 2017, p. 58). In contrast, Laila's identity is imposed externally, with her absence magnifying the anxieties projected onto her. This differential emphasises that political presence is not correlated with narrative agency; it can emerge entirely through external interpretation. So, Laila's silence works as a way to call things out and show what's really going on. It points out how identities are turned into security risks, made into legends, and used as weapons in today's political talk.

The novel also highlights the social impact of these ideas. Neighbors spread rumors, children quietly warn each other, and the community lives with increased fear. Joseph writes, "The stories of her deeds grew taller in the telling, each neighbour's suspicion feeding the next" (Joseph, 2017, p. 92). Here, the text demonstrates the cumulative effect of rumour and fear in shaping political identity. Laila becomes a symbol of threat even though she doesn't take any open, destructive actions. Ironically, her absence from the story makes her symbolic presence even stronger.

From a postmodern point of view, Laila's identity shows how identity is flexible and shaped by society. Her story reflects Hall's idea that identity is "always in process" (Hall, 2024, p. 225) and is influenced more by public discussion than by inner truth. Joseph uses a technique that is similar to Hutcheon's historical metafiction (Hutcheon, 2003, p. 115), mixing outside perspectives and breaking up the narrative to reveal how political myths are created. Joseph critiques institutions, the media, and social fears, showing how ordinary people can become powerful political symbols through the way their story is told.

Finally, even Laila's few spoken words, like "I will not scream" (Joseph, 2017, p. 72), show that silence can be a way of resisting. She refuses to conform to expectations of performative threat or guilt. In doing so, she destabilises the very mechanisms that attempt to define her. Postmodern theory emphasises that absence, fragmentation, and multiplicity of perspectives can function as critiques of authority (Lyotard, 1984, p. 37). Laila's narrative absence, therefore, is not a weakness but a deliberate, postmodern tool for examining identity, myth, and political power

Character Analysis of Miss Laila

Laila, in the story, isn't introduced as someone who speaks for herself. Instead, other people talk about her into existence. Right from the start, intelligence officers chat about her, guessing things instead of knowing facts (Joseph, 2017, p. 11). They boil her down to a girl who may be carrying dangerous information. This rumour kicks off the whole state's chase, proving that a story can start with fear, not truth. Laila's, who she is before we even meet her, and the writer keeps it that way on purpose. He keeps us from knowing what she's thinking, so we can't see how the government makes stuff up when they don't have the facts. This reflects Foucault's idea that institutions produce "truth" through observation and speculation rather than actual knowledge (Foucault, 1977, p. 140). When Laila appears in the story, it feels as if the author intentionally kept her silence—as if she was silently standing up for herself. Her first words, "I don't scream" (Joseph, 2017, p. 42), seem like nothing, but they mess with what people expect her to do. Even while officers are asking her questions in the falling building, she won't act scared or like she's innocent. Her quietness becomes active, not just her doing nothing. The writer keeps calling her things like "small, quiet, and inconveniently clear-eyed" (Joseph, 2017, p. 38). These things don't seem like much, but the people watching her turn them into political stuff. They think her size and calmness mean she might be a threat, which shows how the system sees normal stuff as suspicious. This ties directly to postmodern thought, where meaning is imposed rather than inherent (Lyotard, 1984, p. 37). The writer also shows how what people say about her is louder than anything she could say herself. We learn a lot from Akhila's younger sister, who says, "Laila worked too hard for a life that never kept its promises" (Joseph, 2017, p. 57). The sister's voice makes Laila seem real, but it also reminds us that we're hearing about her through someone else. Even this close info is changed and not complete. The book wants us to notice that we only know Laila through others, colored by their memories or opinions. This reflects the postmodern idea that identity is constructed through discourse, not self-expression (Hall, 2024, p. 225).

What people say in public makes things worse. Neighbours whisper that "there was always something off about that girl" (Joseph, 2017, p. 63), while reporters treat her like a symbol, not a real person. Their stories are overdone, broken up, and trying to get people excited. None of them knows her, but together they make up a big lie. The writer uses these lines to show how rumours start, with repeating stuff, not with proof. This echoes Baudrillard's notion that repeated stories create a hyperreal version of a person, more powerful than the truth (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 66).

Even the team investigating her sees Laila as what they want to see, not who she really is. Mukundan, the CBI officer who likes poetry, says she's "the eye of a storm that did not know it was a storm" (Joseph, 2017, p. 88). Prof. Vaid, whose thoughts fill the story, thinks she's dangerous, calling her "the kind of girl who appears harmless right until she is not" (Joseph, 2017, p. 74). These words show how the people in charge cover over Laila's real self with their own ideas. They wipe her out by telling her who she is. Foucault explains this as a form of discursive domination, where power defines subjects instead of

listening to them (Foucault, 1977, p. 142).

On the other hand, the writer makes Akhila loud and wild. She says who she is, tells us what she does, and makes fun of the system a lot. Akhila says, “If they want a story, I’ll give them one” (Joseph, 2017, p. 51). Laila never gets that chance. This shows that being able to tell your own story means you have power in this book. Akhila telling us about herself shows the difference between Laila’s identity, which is forced on her, and how being silent becomes political. Hutcheon notes that silence in postmodern texts often functions as a form of critique (Hutcheon, 2003, p. 115).

In the end, Laila’s less of a person and more of a made-up story. As people stand outside the building, yelling and guessing, the writer says that “they were cheering for a story they did not understand” (Joseph 2017, p. 102). This line gets to the heart of the book: Laila’s political importance comes from people misunderstanding her. Her character is built on not being there, being silent, and other people hurting her with their opinions. The words in the book show a pattern: everyone who talks about her, whether it’s about her body, feelings, or politics, is someone else. The writer uses all this to show how the government, the media, and what people think can make an identity that’s stronger than the real person. This framework reflects core postmodern concerns, fragmented identity, truth instability, and the dominance of constructed narratives (Bauman, 1993, p. 95; Lyotard, 1984, p. 38).

Theoretical Framework: Postmodernism, Identity, and Narrative Absence

So, postmodern theory helps us understand why Laila’s story focuses on what’s missing, what’s not said, and how others tell it. Postmodernism says identity isn’t set in stone or made by ourselves. It’s always broken up, put together, and shaped by how we talk about it. Laila’s identity never comes from within. It is not a psychological core but a product of what others say, think, and assume about her. Her absence becomes the main tool through which the novel shows that identity is formed by forces outside the self-institutions, society, media, and political systems (Lyotard, 1984, p. 37; Hall, 2024, p. 225). So, Laila doesn’t really control who she is. Instead, she’s defined by the stories people tell about her. This idea is explained well by Hutcheon’s historiographic metafiction. Joseph doesn’t give Laila her own voice; instead, we see her through bits and pieces of other people’s views. He uses this approach to show how political identities and myths get made up and shared (Hutcheon, 2003, p. 115). The shifting viewpoints, the disordered way the story is told, and the fact that there’s no single, true version all point to postmodernism’s dislike of set meanings. Joseph makes it clear that Laila’s story comes from her own experiences, not just gossip or opinions. Her being a blank slate turns into a spot where political stories can grow, showing us more about what society is scared of than about Laila herself.

Baudrillard’s hyperreality idea helps explain why Laila becomes a political symbol, not just a regular person. The label “armed and dangerous” gets repeated over and over, even without any evidence, creating a Laila that feels way bigger and scarier than the real deal (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 66). The constant repetition makes this fake identity seem real to society. Basically, Laila turns into a symbol

shaped by the media and the government. This shows how societies these days often treat made-up images as the truth.

Foucault's ideas about how watching and control work also fit in here. He says that power comes not so much from forcing people, but from watching, labelling, and talking about them (Foucault, 1977, p. 140). Laila is always being watched, figured out, and put into categories, and that's how the government sees her. She is not dangerous because of her actions, but because institutions frame her as dangerous. Her silence becomes a subtle form of resistance because it refuses to feed the system with more material to classify. When Laila stays out of the story, the institutions try even harder to fill in the blanks with stuff they just make up.

Together, these theorists help us see that Laila's identity is far from self-determined. It emerges from outside stories, circulating labels, repeated rumours, institutional surveillance, and the political need to create threats. Her silence, her absence, and the fragmented narrative around her become postmodern tools that expose how identity is manipulated, exaggerated, and even invented. In this sense, Laila becomes a postmodern figure whose existence highlights how unstable truth is, how easily representation can turn into misrepresentation, and how political power operates through storytelling rather than fact.

Conclusion

Laila's silence transforms her from an ordinary character into a political symbol. Joseph hides her inner thoughts, and the media and authorities determine her identity. This illustrates how society shapes people. Her silence is more than just being quiet; it shows the tension between staying silent and facing the stories told by powerful forces. In the novel, Laila's silence is truly powerful. Since she doesn't talk much, she becomes a symbol in political stories and legends. Other people, like Akhila, say who they are and take charge of their image. Showing how being present doesn't always mean you have power, and being absent can allow other people's ideas to grow in political meaning.

Joseph looks at how Laila is seen, how rumours spread about her, and how her life is shown to everyone. Talking, gossiping, and watching with big groups makes her look scary, even if it's not who she really is. Joseph shows how normal folks can become political problems just by talking about them, and how easily a person's sense of self can break when they're always watched. Laila not talking makes us think about how people are shown these days and how fake stories are made up.

Miss Laila, Armed and Dangerous really makes you think about how silence, being gone, and power all tie together. Laila's story shows how politics can mess with who you are, and how sometimes, keeping quiet is a way to fight back. Joseph looks at Laila to prove that groups in politics and society usually mould how people see things. They turn people into symbols to push their own goals. Her being missing matters because it points out how other people's views can shape our stories. It shows that sometimes, saying nothing speaks louder than saying something.

References

- Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and simulation*. University of Michigan press.
- Bauman, Z. (1993). *Postmodern ethics* Blackwell.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The Birth of the prison* (Alan Sheridan, trans., p. 227). New York: Vintage, 1979.
- Garg, S. (2019). Review of the book *Miss Laila, armed and dangerous*, by M. Joseph. *Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature*, 13(1), 223-226.
- Hall, S., Evans, J., & Nixon, S. (2024). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*.
- Hutcheon, L. (2003). *A poetics of postmodernism: History, theory, fiction*. routledge.
- Joseph, M. (2017). *Miss Laila, armed and dangerous*. HarperCollins India.
- Krishnan, N. (2017). The protagonist of *Miss Laila* is not, in fact, *Miss Laila*. *Nandini Krishnan Reviews*. Retrieved from <http://www.nandinikrishnan.com/reviews/miss-laila>
- Liotard, J. F. (1984). *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge* (Vol. 10). U of Minnesota Press.
- Nayar, P. K. (2009). *Contemporary literary and cultural theory: From structuralism to ecocriticism*. Pearson Education India.