

Of Style and Stylistics: An Exploration of Linguistic and Literary Interplay in Anita Desai's *Cry, The Peacock* and *Voices In The City*

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ABSTRACT

The study of style and stylistics has evolved significantly, transitioning from a focus on individual writer characteristics to a linguistic and structural approach. Traditionally, style was linked to metaphors, imagery, and symbols, but modern stylistics incorporates all linguistic elements, such as syntax, semantics, and narrative voice. Instead, style shapes meaning and defines an author's individuality.

Stylistics bridges linguistics, pragmatics, and aesthetics, exploring how language forms a literary work's expressive essence. Modern approaches analyse language use across phonemes, sentences, and entire texts, focusing on elements like repetition, tone, and point of view. However, challenges persist, including subjectivity and the difficulty of correlating statistical norms with literary significance.

Anita Desai exemplifies the psychological depth stylistics can uncover. Her novels, such as *Cry, the Peacock* and *Voices in the City*, eschew traditional linear progression, instead employing surrealistic imagery and fragmented narrative structures to convey the protagonist's psyche. While embracing modern techniques, Desai retains traditional stylistic elements like metaphors and symbols, blending them seamlessly with innovative approaches. Ultimately, stylistics reveals the intricate interplay between language and literature, offering insights into a writer's intent and the thematic resonance of their works.

Key Words: Syntax, Semantics, Imagery, Symbol, Metaphor, Narrative voice, Psychological depth

The foundation of stylistic evaluation is laid upon clearly expressed model of analysis. Stylistics is a tool which enables us to get a precise impression of the literary work, through close analysis of the language used. It means to excavate language. It is to discover creativity in the language which is used by the artist. It enriches the thinking of the reader about the language and understanding of the literary text. The method of inquiry sheds light on the evolution of language system through the texts given.

Desai's deviant use of lexis foregrounds some expression or the other very frequently, in fact some critics consider them too frequent. She breaks away from the traditional art of plot construction. In fact, the use of past in memories, fantasy, nostalgia, the ceaseless fight of the characters for their existence and the stream of consciousness device make her plots lively and appealing. The individual vs. society is at the core of her plots. She is less concerned with the external events of human life.

Anita Desai, like George Eliot and Virginia Woolf, spins a veil of finest fabric in tracing the hidden pathways of feeling and thought. She adopted a varied technique of applying different grammatical categories and devices according to the requirement of context, which makes her language natural and striking. The overall product is a pleasant combination of conceptual and non-conceptual

devices (Nirode and Calcutta). So, her language is easily chewed rather a hard nut. Anita Desai's greatest asset is the language and novelty of approach. Meenakshi Mukherjee has aptly remarked, "Anita Desai is a rare example of an Indo-Anglian writer who achieves the difficult task of bending English Language to her purpose without either a self-conscious attempt at sounding Indian or seeking the anonymous elegance of public school English". (190-191)

She flees from existing norms of writing novels. As a novelist, her distinguishing qualities are many, the chief among them being the subordination of the background to the characters and deft handling of language, imagery and syntax in order to convey an intimate expression of the inner world of her characters. Her poetic vision is manifested in every word and phrase that she selects. The anatomical study of the fourteen lines of her two novels in the chapter *A Close Study* confirms the truth of the statement. Every line is representative of her profound vision, justifying her claim as a lyrical novelist. "A prose poem", Ralph Freedman says, "is an ideal novel, because it can contract the novel's substance into one or two pages, it manages to contain in its small volume in a state of 'meat' the power of the novel which suppresses all the analytical passages and descriptive involvements." (Freedman 37) It is noteworthy that the novels of

Anita Desai are short and therefore Prof. Maini considers them ‘novellas’ rather than novels.(120)

It may be said that Anita Desai’s plots are not deliberately designed but are the natural and unavoidable outgrowth of the theme and perspective. As the story advances she seems to be quietly sliding in her scenes, settings and characters, without much of prior preparation. As her strong point is the psychic presentation of individual human beings, the narrative is not enveloped by the patterns artificially thrown from outside. But it does not mean that there is no beauty or control in plot structure. The plot is always simple and neat enough so as not to occlude the psychological revelation and it is always well defined enough to acquaint her vision clearly. Her plot structure, therefore, shows a splendid fusion of form and expression.

Cry, the Peacock reveals the multifarious aspects of Anita Desai’s narrative skill. Anita Desai reveals the horrors and inner pangs of Maya’s unmatched marriage with a father-like man, Gautama, through the stream-of-consciousness device. Gautama has been shown as a mere protege to her father. He used to come to her father as his assistant in legal practice. There is a long gap of age between Maya and Gautama. His physical frailty makes him a failure in fulfilling the “quickenning passion” (40). In this novel the first part deals with the death of

Maya's dog, Toto. In second part, it reveals the psychic depth of Maya's mind and finally it narrates the tragic death of Maya's husband, Gautama. The third part becomes symbolic of Maya's loneliness and isolation after the death of her husband which heightens the gloomy atmosphere in the structure of the novel.

Her another novel *Voices in the City* is divided into four parts of its narrative pattern: *Nirode*, *Monisha*, *Amla* and *Mother*. In fact, this fascinating novel brings forth the corrosive effects of Calcutta on the one hand and the persistent mother's influence in the entire narrative of the novel, on the other. The city of Calcutta dominates the entire structure of the novel. Nirode settles in Calcutta and becomes absorbed in its bohemian life. The coagulated blaze of light and sound of Calcutta make Nirode nervous. His elder sister Monisha after her marriage also comes to Calcutta. She leads a servile existence within the rigid confines of a traditional Hindu family and ultimately dies an unnatural death. His younger sister Amla too arrives in Calcutta and gets involved with an artist but the tragic death of her elder sister Monisha, the ghost-like figure of Nirode and coldness of her mother compel her to yield to pragmatic life. The arrival of the mother was needed for nerve-easing effect on the family, but her coldness and indifference proved the opposite. As an egoist, she finds herself a self-loving woman. Thus, the two egoists, as in the beginning of the novel, meet again. In

order to provide organic unity to the plot, the remaining members of the family unite in the last part of the novel.

The characters in both the novels are neurotic females; highly sensitive but secluded in a world of dream, imagination and alienated from the outside world of reality. They fail to relate themselves to reality. They enter on a long journey to find meaning of their existence. These characters are unable to relate with the outside world that leads them to the path of suffering like Maya and Monisha.

The point of view of the author is taken into consideration, for this is the organizing principle which knits up every thread of the novel. The novelist does not always treat his character, or narrate his story from a particular point of view throughout. But there is shifting of point of view according to demand. In fact a novelist, in his narrative scheme, is omniscient and ignorant, direct and oblique, a dramatist and the teller of the tales.

The range of images is one of the special features of these two novels, *Cry*, *the Peacock* and *Voices in the City* based on 'subjective objectivity' i.e. the subjective experiences of the protagonists are objectified through concrete images. In *Cry*, *the Peacock* the symbol of the peacock's cry fits into the negative aspects of albino's prophecy. Peacock not only represents an emotional and ideal love, but it is symbolic of life- in-death and death-in-life. The images and symbols in

this novel are traditional but they are functional. They are the tools which make the reader aware of the inner struggle of the character. Maya compares the dance of the peacock with “Shiva’s dance”, a symbol of creation and destruction. Like the peacock’s staring at the rain cloud for its deliverance, Maya too experiences the agony of her passion. The traditional image of the peacock brings into focus Maya’s latent ideas through flashback technique. Maya fails to possess both the physical and emotional love of her husband, she screams “in mute horror.” The metaphor of the “mute horror” becomes symbolic of the novelists inability to compress the altitude of human emotions into language. The oft-repeated images of “window” and “lizards” suggest the sullenness of her mind and her yearning for a release from all bondages. The gaze of lizard symbolically warns her against the threat of the astrologer about her life. The image of window symbolizes the concept of freedom. The images of “white horse” and “wild horse”, “foaming cease”, “Horrid arms” and “blood-flowing eyes” reveal the fury of temperament with spontaneous combustion.

In *Voices in the City*, Anita Desai uses a number of images which are related to birds, animals, colors and plants. The images of birds are used in positive and adorable terms and animal imagery for defining the negative bestial equivalents in character. The urge for freedom of Arun is compared to “a bird

on the roof's edge poised for flight, each feather alert and trained for it." (7)

Nirode, Monisha and Amla are considered to be king kites flying so far in vast sky but Dharma and David are described as marsh birds who hop along the ground. Nirode perceives his mother using animal imagery, saying that "her voice was like the thick fur of a winter beast." Amla also refers to her father as "overfed house cat, always lying back indolently." The mother's letter seemed to him like "a caterpillar's entrails." The use of color images conveys various aspects of inner turmoil of the characters. Calcutta is considered "this dark pandemonium". The room of Monisha, her wardrobe is painted as a prison through the use of color imagery. The desire of Amla's love is illumined by the use of color images. Plant imagery is used when David is compared to a sensitive plant and Nirode is likened to a weed. The decadence of Bengal aristocracy is conveyed through the image of the old Mahogany tree that is struck by lightning. The sense of imprisonment as escape is the keynote of the novel. The river is the only external setting that makes Nirode feel peaceful. He looks like "a tiger in a cage" in a kind of subdued uproar as he identifies himself with it.

Nirode sees that his mother is a Kali persona, who had given them life but who is now the destroyer. This is proved by Monisha's death when Nirode sees in the mother a sense of triumph, a strange brightness on her face which Nirode links

to her reaction at the 'sacrifice' of Monisha. It is the goddess who is, in a way, operating through her. Nirode sees himself as the next pharmakos. The city of Calcutta has been presented as a mother-monster in a subtle and indirect manner unlike Nirode's mother who has explicitly been presented as mother-monster. Calcutta, in a mother-like manner, provides sustenance and succor to the millions of people who live in it. But the city life is so hectic that the people feel nerve-wrecked. It is this city which kills Monisha and infects Nirode and Amla with negativity. Anita Desai is imbued with modern sensibility; she takes up an exploration of the psyche of individual characters. She moves out of the historical romances and themes of social and political realism. She cultivated artistic devices like images and symbol to work upon the mind of characters, which are conveyed in an effective manner. Anita Desai adopted this pathway relying upon these devices and got success.

Apart from using remarkable images, metaphors and symbols. Anita Desai has adopted a poetic style. The analysis of the pages in the beginning of *Cry, the Peacock* and *Voices in the City* confirms the truth of the statement. Style or technique of delivering the thematic thrust is the main component through which the theme becomes a harmonious pattern. It is the proper use of language that is more important to bring out ideas. Anita Desai has tried to work her themes

keeping them in balance in with style and thought. Sometimes the emotions dominate the structure of the novel. In such situations the novelist uses the poetic language in her novels. When Maya perceives the gradual thrust of madness because of her loneliness and isolation, the words she utters are an instance of the poetic language:

“I feel my heart throbbing madly Why? Wild horse, white horse, galloping up paths of stone, flying away into the distance, the wild hills. The heights, the dizzying heights of my mountains, towering, tapering, edged with cliff edges, founded on rock. Fall, fall, gloriously fall to the bed of racing rivers, foaming seas. Horrid arms, legs, tentacles thrashing, blood flowing, eyes glazing. Storm –storm at sea, at end! Fury. Whip. Lash. Fly furiously. Danger! The warning rings and echoes, from far, far, far. Run and hide, run and hide –if you can, miserable fool! Ha, ha. Fool, fool, fool.”(150)

G. N Leech is of the view that every means by the author should be adopted for avoiding “the repetition along with the linguistic devices of inversion and deletion in this novel”. The repetition of the words like “storm”, “danger”, “far”, “run”, “hide” and “fool” has a linguistic concern to reflect the repressed and latent desires of Maya through the behaviour of Maya using the medical terminology: “I am in a fever. ... I am in a fever, God, in a fever”. (Goel 113)

Sometimes, the inanimate objects in *Voices in the City* are so worked out that they create a peculiar sound system which determines its language. Below is an example which creates the sound of different phonemes in order to generate a horrible city-sensibility:

“On all sides the city pressed down, alight, alight, aglow
and stirring with its own marsh-bred, monster life that,
like an ogre, kept one eye open through sleep and waking.
Calcutta, Calcutta –like the rattle of the reckless train,
Calcutta, Calcutta- the very pulsebeat in its people’s veined
wrists. The streets were slaughtered sheep hung beside
bright tinsel tassels to adorn oiled black braids, and a syphilitic
beggar and his entire syphilitic family came rolling down on
barrows, like the survivors of an atomic blast.”(42)

The obtrusive preponderance of the phonemes /b/, /k/, /s/, /t/, suggests the harshness of the sound which justifies the cruelty of the city as an organic entity. In addition to the harshness of the sound, the passage links Calcutta with the rattling of “the reckless train”. Again, the monster-like power of Calcutta creates the “pulsebeat in its people’s veined wrists”. This shows the demoniac power of this city. The streets littered with “slaughtered sheep” and “a syphilitic beggar and

his entire family” bring forth the fear-psychosis of its inhabitants. The syphilitic family is again linked with the adjective-noun phrase “an atomic blast”, which shows Desai’s linguistic competence for communicating the inner chain of protagonist’s ideas to the reader.

On the level of language, Desai has freely used both compound words and Indian lexical items in *Voices in the City*. The words like “office-gossip”, “Bengali politics”, “sugar-sprinkled”, “coffee stained-woodwork”, (30-31). The words like “alap”, “sari”, “alta”, “ghazal”, “tabalchi” and “chapatis” show her linguistic competence for switching from one code to another along with her inclination to use Indian lexicons in her narration.

In this sense Anita Desai has dug out the inner mystery of life through the sort of language which she has employed in her novels. It is the style that brings out the balance between language and theme. She discards the petty routine of life and emphasizes the inner psyche of the characters. She shows to her readers the human psyche by using more concrete nouns than abstract ones. The physical and psychological states are visible through adjectives. The images progress with the balanced use of transitive and intransitive verbs. These are created in order to dramatize an inner conflict which symbolizes it objectively through a situation or object. In order to get intimacy with the readers, parentheses are used.

A brief analysis of *Cry, the Peacock* and *Voices in the City* sheds light on the fact that she marks a departure from the earlier generation of novelists like R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and Bhawani Bhattacharya. She has an appreciable hold of weaving language and thoughts in a majestic way.

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