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Discourse Peculiarities of Anita Desai in Her Selected Novels

R. C. Vasuki, Ph.D. English

Abstract

Identifying an author's peculiarity on a judgment scale of analytical study of her works is an attempt at recognising and justifying the individual writer's creative originality. This paper focuses on this issue by taking into consideration the works of Anita Desai Cry, the Peacock and Fasting, Feasting.

Introduction

Discourse analysis develops an insight into how structure of words or words as speech utterances collectively communicate thought. It is the study of language used by members of the

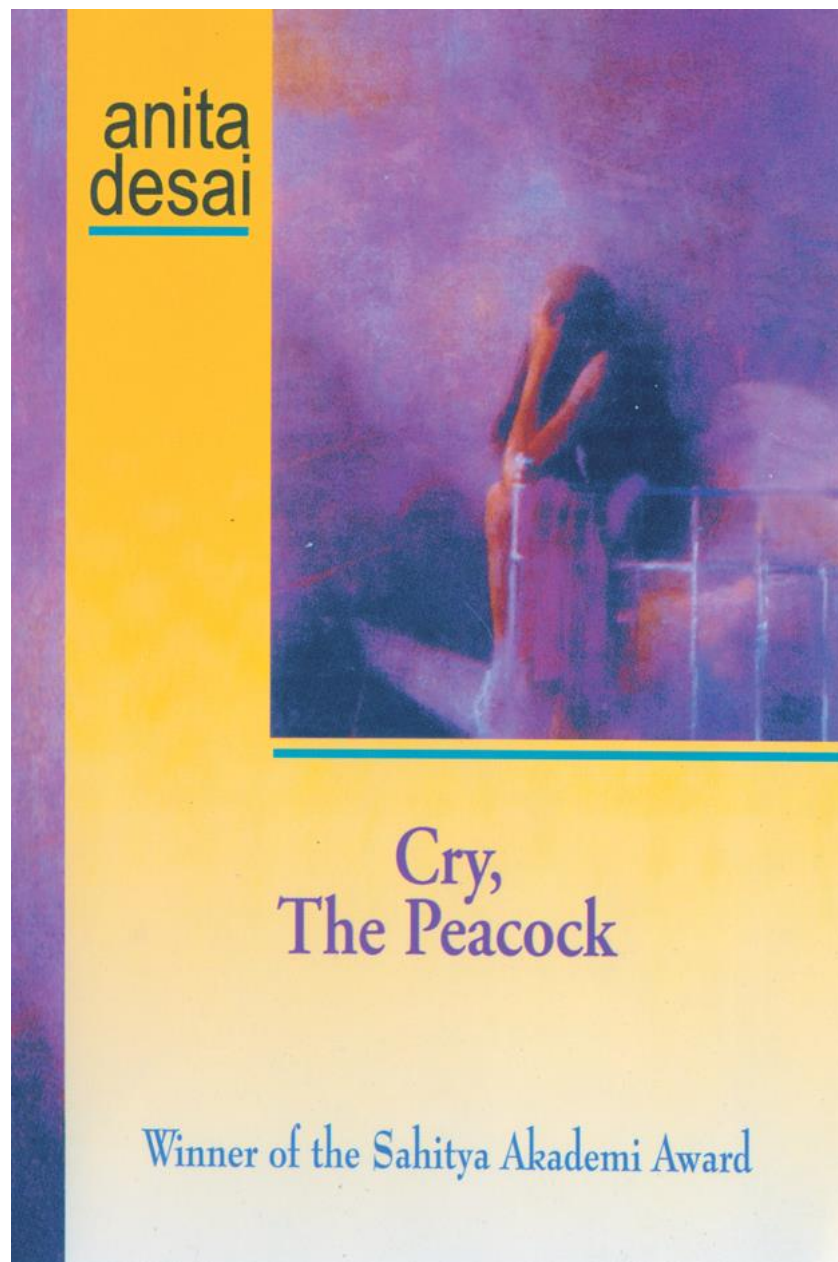
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speech community. It looks at both language form and language functions. It identifies linguistic features that characterize different genres as well as social and cultural factors that aid in our interpretation and understanding of different texts and types of talk. An analysis of written text might include a study of topic development and cohesion across the sentences, while an analysis of spoken language focus on these aspects plus turn taking practices, opening and closing sequences of social encounters or narrative structure.

Analysis

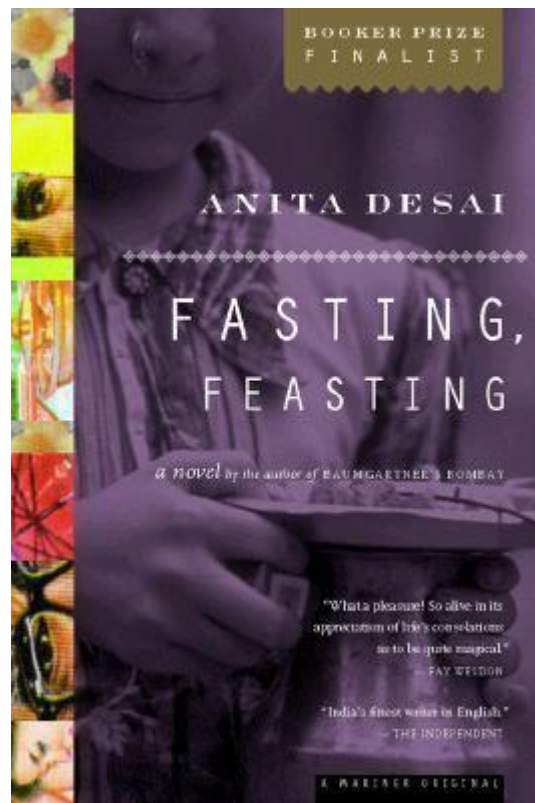


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The works of Anita Desai – *Cry, the Peacock* and *Fasting, Feasting* are taken into consideration for the analytical study. Theme-wise these two novels are conventional stories centering on feminist interests. But form-wise they are the product of the intellect. The technical aspects such as the story, plot, action and character together in these texts are apparently achieved by maneuvering language application.



Maya and Uma

The characters Maya and Uma are representatives of the feminist world, and like them their language also represents realities. Maya's sentimental alterations and Uma's humility provide the direction educated, intelligent women must take if they are to attain equality and dignity in marital life.

Discourse Text – A Combination of American and British Literary Traditions

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Examination of the discourse text in Anita Desai's fiction reveals the truth that the author combines both the American and British literary traditions in her writing technique. As a result, her fiction takes its form and tone from polarities, opposites and irreconcilables. We encounter oddity, distortion of personality, disruption of normal life, recklessness of human conduct, cruelties of nature, morbidity of temperament, and malignancy of motives along with the profound poetry of disorder, radical forms of alienation, maladjustments and contradictions. All these have been captured and observed in the synthetic culture projected in her creative writing technique.

Interior Monologues

The appealing use of conscious flashbacks and interior monologues in her novels enable the writer to capture the prismatic quality of life and an intensified impressionism. A title, as an intrinsic source, is an emphatic indicator of the peculiar craftsmanship of the women novelist. It is evinced in her title of her words.

***Cry, the Peacock* - The Significance and Message of the Title**

In *Cry, the Peacock* Anita Desai has embedded a sentimental theme of feminist interest through word manipulation. The normal peacock's cry has gained significance in the inverted title *Cry, the Peacock*. It is not the cry of the bird alone that is symbolic but also the bird itself. The title is thus made of a combination of two symbols spelt out in three words comprising a verb followed by a noun indexed with the definite article. The otherwise erotic cry of the peacock with a conventional romantic significance is deciphered and the message is reversed.

Significance of the Names of Characters

Anita's title suggests an abnormality in the slice of a woman's life – Maya having been mismatched in her marriage to Gautama. Like the Buddha he is totally detached from physical and carnal pleasures while Maya longs for the satisfaction of physical needs. More than the title, the naming of the two main characters is thoughtful and appropriate to the story; Gautama a synonym of renunciation and Maya is shrouded by earthly illusions.

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Tracing deep into the meaning contained in the title words and name-words, the reader-critic accepts them as a play with words which exhibits originality. There is an incongruity in the man–wife relationship that indirectly suggests the many other conflicts in Maya’s life situations.

The Mode of Narration – Stream of Consciousness

The mode of narration in *Cry, the Peacock* follows the stream of consciousness technique. The first person narrative by the protagonist Maya is effective, interrupted by the speaker’s asides, comments and long and short self–addressed loud thoughts. The narrative manner is impressive as Maya’s story is dramatized by Maya herself.

The length of the text presents many melodramatic scenes that provoke the reader-critic to call this novel not only as fictional drama but also as a comedy of errors.

Structure and Language

The novel has three parts; the first part just gives a background about the death of Toto. In the second part, which consists of 17 chapters, we see the bewildering story of Maya. In the final part, the novelist’s authorial comment is given. The language is poetic, full of images and fascination. So it is a 'well–made' novel.

***Fasting, Feasting* – Significance of the Title**

Likewise, the title of Anita Desai’s second novel *Fasting, Feasting* challenges the reader-critic’s interpretation. Apart from the alliteration offered by the two titular words when vocalized, there is also a suggestion of the alternation of joys denied and happiness satiating.

The surface meaning of the words Fasting and Feasting is too simple and connected with eating. But at a deeper level the titular –‘ing’ verbs convey an intellectual, meaning. Separated by a comma, the two verbs in the present progressive tense contribute to a higher level of

meaning and interpretation. They represent two different cultures precipitated in the human societies of the East and the West in eating habits.

Searching for significance the title sounds strange and highly original and even misleading. A casual reader may expect a series of episodes related to the two activities fasting and feasting. However the discourse reader cannot miss the implications behind the word usage in this title. The title takes the reader-critic beyond the surface to think of the East–West encounter. The implicit theme is an incompatibility among characters in a domestic drama.

Narrative Techniques

The narrative technique is commendable. Third–person universal observer technique of narration is employed. In most of the cases the novelist seems to identify herself with every character and gives expression to everyone’s view point all though she always keeps herself in the background. She does not employ the traditional stream of consciousness technique here; in most of the descriptions the character’s view-points prevail. Thus, there is unity of tone and structure and yet at the same time an impression of variety within unity. The narrative is straight and simple although there is running back to past in the present without complications.

Structure and Language of *Fasting, Feasting*

The book is divided into two parts, with Part I mostly describing the Indian theme and Part II dealing with the story of Arun in America. In a nutshell the novel is an uneventful story of two families, one Indian and the other American. The entire narrative structure is built in concrete words which are mostly monosyllabic with simple diction and precise description. Brief and brisk dialogues move the story forward and provide a dynamic flow to the plot.

Peculiarities in Discourse

Peculiarities in discourse writing are certain significant and identifiable technical specialties of the writer. It is not literary aspects alone that decide the merit of the work but the

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language parts too. The use of various components of language is mandatory for text scripting and the selection and application of the different phonic and graphic elements.

Non-speech part of the dialogues as meaningful communication which is beyond words are actually concerned with direct feeling of characters. A deliberate interplay of speech and silence, speech and pause evidences craftsmanship. Such combinations are not a simple contrast of sound and stillness in dialogue but of articulated speech and unarticulated speech. In *Cry, the Peacock* there are several poetical and prosaic parts of discourse text which contains silence and pause as speech intercepts.

Craftsmanship

Craftsmanship is identifiable even in the use of punctuation marks particularly dash. Anita Desai's pause is alarming and abounds in meaning. Maya, the protagonist in *Cry, the Peacock*, is herself shrouded in a melodramatic emptiness. A climate of void is suggested whenever she talks to herself, appears to be thinking loud or lapsing into a monologue. These monologues are a kind of dialogue - Pauses which act like a bridge between the speaker and the readers. In some places these pauses in the form of monologues are self-addressed speech patterns that help to maintain a kind of suspense, suspended by the author in the melancholic climate of the narrator's life.

The monologues considered as pause in dialogue between Maya and Gautama are significant gaps in the dialogues that retrospectively get fitted in by the readers themselves. To the intellectual reader-audience, a pause is not an abrupt stop. Likewise the elliptical marks and dashes in speech flow with their own functions. To them these symbols and speech signs gain interpretative meaning and appear more eloquent and more revealing projecting the speaker character's anxieties and needs in the situation. They are emphatic in conveying certain meanings related to the psychological condition of the speaker. Where words failed, these technicalities are introduced by these women writers in the dynamic pattern in the several dialogues in the text.

Examples are cited below from *Cry, the Peacock* and *Fasting, Feasting*.

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They say it attracts snakes – this sweet, intoxicating fragrance. Snakes, summer, scent, flower, white, white, white... In the dark, in the dry, scented April dark, the sky was dimly lit by April stars. I lay back in my chair and breathed deeply, lay there waiting – for summer? for snakes? for the moon? I did not know. (CP 12).

In this prose passage, the punctuation marks three dots and dash and question marks are found justified by their contribution to mood, tone, meaning, and style of the speaker. Dashes are also used in *Cry, The Peacock* for parenthetical inclusions of information. For instance there is a sentence which reads

'Death – a early one - by un nature causes,' (CP 30).

The speaker here is allowed to avail of two breaks indicated by the two dashes to include an adjectival phrase which acts a subject compliment and also makes the utterance more emphatic, suitable to the talk. The dashes help the reader-critic to gain a further meaning under a plain text.

Another notable aspect of the writer's language style is refrain that contributes to poetical prose. One comes across such illustrations in passages where the protagonist Maya breaks into hysterical rhetoric. To quote but one example,

Or is it madness? Am I gone insane? Father! Brother! Husband! Who is my saviour? I am in need of one. I am dying, and I am in love with living. I am in love, and I am dying. God, let me sleep, forget, rest. But no, I'll never sleep again. There is no rest any more- only death and waiting. (CP 98).

The introspective tone of the speaker Maya and the self-pitying mode and helplessness of her situation are well brought-out in this sequential string of utterances made of questions, exclamations, doubts and unending suffering.

Exclamatory and Question Marks

Yet another feature of the style of Anita Desai is an abundant use of exclamatory and question marks while building up a rhetorical passage that is lengthy. In some places, passages are constructed by a gradual acceleration of tempo and mounting the tension in the speaker. One example invites attention.

'No, no, Maya, they have no lichees there, child. Figs, blue figs...'(CP 147).

'What? What?' and he jumps up, jumps up and down, while I sail higher and higher, farther and farther, crying, 'Higher, Arjuna, higher! Oh, see it sail, see me sail!' (CP148).

Repetitions

Word and phrase repetitions are also another technical aspect of the text. A common speech pattern like 'Uma, don't! Don't you dare, Uma-'(FF 111).

The utterance contributes to the creation of a natural situation.

In many places Desai's techniques include very short utterances with piled-up imperatives. For example utterances like,

Uma cried to Dinesh, ' Shoot it, quick! Kill it, please!' (FF 106)

Effect of Transliterated Words

Apart from the use of dashes, dots for mute communication in terms of pause and silence, the text of the discourse contain free and large scale use of transliterated words from the Indian vernacular establishing the Indian identity of the women writers. To quote but a few examples from Anita Desai's discourse texts the reader-critic comes across words like Ayah (32, CP), Chameli, Champa, Bela (CP 130), Gul-Mohurs (CP 159), The Gita (CP 111), Sunnyasis (CP 120), Pan (CP 134), Solatopees (CP 160) in Cry, The Peacock and in Fasting Feasting - Pilaos, Kebabs, Koftas (FF 14), Ayah (FF 35), Puris (FF 47), Samosas (FF 64), Mali (FF 148).

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The transliterated words do not disturb the equilibrium of the regular English prose style. Instead it is justifiable as it contributes to a readable and an effective prose style acceptable from an Indian creative genius.

Thrill through Plain Indian Style

The reader-critic is thus taken through simple discourse text written in a plain Indian style and made to gain the thrill of a spectator watching a show of slices from Indian family lifestyle. Further the reader-critic also gains a new experience with language as dialogues used in the texts. The language texture is made of all the available elements namely phonic, graphic, lexic and grammar of English. The story is uncovered through the amalgam of sound and sense. The fervor of the story is intact even as the writers concentrate on the flair of language.

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Dr. R. C. Vasuki
Head, Department of English
A. P. C. Mahalaxmi College for Women
Tuticorin
Tamilnadu
India
rcvasuki@gmail.com

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