

# Language of the Opening Lines of Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*

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## Abstract

The beginning of a novel is generally said to express the whole gamut of emotions. Particular point of attention of almost all fiction writings is the beginning of novel since this is what makes the readers decide to read the whole of it or to stop reading in the very beginning. At this point, the novelist has to make the reader's imagination go with the writer's, and has to make a smooth transaction of the reader's emotions towards the thematic flow of the novel. This is all done by choices: which words to select, where, when and in what order and so on to transcend the reader from the real world to the intended imaginary world. Hence, lexical and structural analysis of the beginning of a novel may certainly help a researcher open the gateway of better interpretation and relate the meaning with the general impressionist observations and comments about the novel. This paper, with the help of Leech and Short's (2007: 61-67) model of stylistic analysis, examines the language and style of the opening lines of Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), and tries to establish the connection between the language use in the analysed texts and the theme-rheme of the novels

## Keywords

Style, Stylistic Analysis, Textual Analysis, Language of Novel, Theme-rheme, Anita Desai, *Cry, the Peacock*

## 1 Introduction

Stylistic analysis (textual criticism) of a full-scale novel, because of its narrative length, is too strenuous to carry out. Textual analysis of each and every line of a novel will produce a huge amount of statistical data. Though, it is not impossible, but to organize and manage such a large amount of statistical data is not an easy task. For such kind of analysis, it seems feasible to take some sample passages, which are important from the point of view of theme and rheme of the novel. This may work well if only one or two novels of an author are to be studied. In case of a comparative study of the style of two or more authors, again there is the same difficulty of managing huge amount of data. The assumption that one passage from each novel will serve the purpose is not serviceable enough as there might be many representative passages in the novel, hence the analysis may be good for nothing. Then what? In such a condition, as Leech and Short

(2007: 143) suggest, the beginning passages of approximately of the same length from each novel under study seem the most suitable because, in most of the cases, they function as independent units. Most of the novels begin with the description of nature connecting it with the theme of the novel. The other reason for the selection of the beginning of a novel is that it is preceded by nothing so there is a little possibility of the texture being affected from any kind of reference gone in the earlier part of the novel. It is with this hypothesis that this paper tries to establish that stylistic analysis of the opening lines of a novel may help a researcher/critic make remarks on idea of style and theme-rheme of a novel, with ready proofs in hand.

## 2 Methodology

The analysis is based on the prose analysis methodology check-sheet, '*Checklist of Linguistic and Stylistic Categories*', given in Leech and Short's (2007: 61-64) *Style in Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose*. In the methodology check-sheet, there is a series of questions likely to be asked about the different elements of text(s). Answering the questions helps in specifying the nature of each element, and consequently substantiates the claims one makes while doing the textual criticism. The categories in the checklist are placed under the four general headings: 'Lexis', 'Grammar', 'Foregrounded Features' and 'Cohesion and Context'. Under each rubric, smaller-scaled categories are placed to give a range of data which may be examined in relation to the literary effect of the text.

This paper applies the above discussed method to the three opening passages, one each from Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), *Where Shall We Go this Summer?* (1975) and *Fire on the Mountain* (1977). The passages are comparable in length, in terms of number of sentences. Each excerpt is the opening passage of the novel. The procedure in each case will be to begin with the context and general observation of the passage, and then to make selective use of the checklist so as to analyse the most significant style-markers of each of the passages. An attempt is made to relate the observed style-markers with the literary importance of the context of the passages. All the sentences are numbered for ease of reference and against each sentence number is given the number of words in the sentence.

## 3 Analysis of the passage from *Cry, the Peacock*

### 3.1 *The Passage*

All day the body lay rotting in the sun (1-9). It could not be moved onto the verandah for, in that April heat, the reek of dead flesh was overpowering and would soon have penetrated the rooms (2-27). So, she moved the little string bed on which it lay under the lime trees, where there was a cool, aqueous shade, saw its eyes open and staring still, screamed and rushed to the garden tap to wash the vision from her eyes, continued to cry and ran, defeated, into the house (3-52). The gardener came and drew its eyelids down with two horny thumbs, reflectively sad as when he laid a dead branch that he had to cut off, on the compost heap (4-31). But he would not bury it, as she begged him to do (5-12). Often in the course of that day he said to her, patiently, 'The sweeper will do it (6-17). He has gone to visit his brother, but when he returns he will do it (7-15).' It was afternoon now, and the sweeper had not returned (8-10). Crows sat in a circle around the corpse, and crows will eat anything –entrails, eyes, anything (9-16). Files began to hum

amidst the limes, driving away the gentle bees and the unthinking butterflies (10-16). She thought she saw the evil glint of a bluebottle, and grew hysterical (11-13). The gardener sent his wife to take her into the house and keep her there (12-15). She sat there, sobbing, and waiting for her husband to come home (13-12). Now and then she went out onto the verandah, and looked to see if he were coming up the drive which lay shrivelling, melting and then shrivelling again, like molten in a groove cut into the earth, and, out of the corner of her eye, could not help glancing, as one cannot help a tic, at the small white corpse laying at one end of the lawn, under a sheer, under the limes (14-73).

Later in the evening, when the sun hung pendent from the topmost branches of the trees, swelling visibly like she thought a purulent boil, until it was ripe to drop, her husband came home (15-34). He was very late (16-4). But as soon as he came, he did all that was to be done, quickly and quietly like a surgeon's knife at work (17-23). He telephoned the Public Works Department, he had them send their scavenging truck to take the corpse away, and saw it to himself that they lifted it in with care (18-30). 'Yes, yes, the bed too,' he said (19-7). 'By all means, burn it too (20-6).' When the truck had left, he came to her, wiping his fingers on a handkerchief much used and soiled during the day, yet still in neat folds (21- 27). 'It is all over,' he said (22-6). 'Come and drink your tea, and stop crying (23-8). You mustn't cry (24-3).'

But she would not lift her face from a cushion, for fear the stench of decaying flesh still hung in the bougainvillaea coloured evening air (25-25).

### ***3.2 About the passage***

The story begins with a woman's lament over the death of a pet. Open and staring eyes of the dead body of the pet and hovering of crows and flies over there make the scene ghastly. The woman asks the gardener to bury the corpse but he asks her to wait for the sweeper. She is not assured that the sweeper would come on time. Therefore, she waits for her husband to return from work. The husband returns late but, like a professional, he disposes the dead body. He consoles and tries to make her understand not to cry over trivial matters. Nevertheless, the woman is still in a shock and the stench of the rotting flesh still hovers her mind.

### ***3.2 General Observation***

The style of the passage is rather enunciative. It reveals how the morbid scene of the death influences the two, the husband and the wife. It also reveals their differing point of views. The passage is both descriptive and evaluative. The vocabulary is simple and formal.

The writer takes the help of emotive connotations of the words to make the theme of the novel clearer. The passage has its strong semantic association with the lexis related to health, life, causalities, nature and wildlife. These word groupings govern the behaviours and feelings of the husband and the wife, the two important characters introduced in the passage.

### ***3.4 Lexical Features***

#### *Nouns*

As the passage is a physical description of the morbid and ghastly scene, the physical and concrete nouns, in comparison to the abstract nouns, are likely to be in large number. In fact, more than two-third of the total nouns are concrete in nature but what is striking is that most of

these nouns are subordinated to abstraction by an adjective or are matched by the nouns which give an idea of abstraction in one way or the other: *the reek of dead flesh, the vision from her eyes, a circle around the corpse and crows, evil glint of a bluebottle, the stench of decaying flesh*, etc. These noun phrases become more significant as the heads of these noun phrases are those which, in some way or the other, refer to abstraction.

In addition to this, there are noun phrases as *decaying flesh still hung in the bougainvillea coloured evening air* where the post-modification makes the noun abstract. The adjectives applied to the bees and butterflies in *gentle bees* and *unthinking butterflies* call our sixth sense (imagination) into play. There are the other concrete nouns, which have been abstracted with the help of simile: *the topmost branches of the trees, swelling visibly like she thought a purulent boil*.

Absence of proper nouns from the passage further supports the idea of the abstract theme of the passage. The nouns and the noun-phrases form the basis for the synopsis of the whole novel.

### *Adjectives*

It is interesting to note that there are three characters in the passage. The adjectives and adverbs used in the passage show clearly how the three are different in their approaches.

That the gardener considers the dead body of the pet ‘*a dead branch*’, which serves the purpose of making compost in the long run, shows his positivity: he takes life and death as an important part of the immortal cycle of nature. The epithets, *surgeon’s knife* and *scavenging truck*, used for the husband’s way of doing things points out his practical approach to life. To him no work is mean. Though he comes late from work, he does everything required in a professional manner. The third category of the adjectives used in the passage is that which, in some way or the other, applies to the woman: *hysterical, gentle bees, unthinking butterflies, evil glint, purulent boil, decaying*, etc. These adjectives suggest that, for the woman, the basis of life is feeling, sensation and reaction; reaction, not in terms of action but in terms of brooding and reflection.

### *Verbs*

More than half of the verbs in the passage are intransitive. “Since intransitive verbs”, say Leech and Short, “do not specify, as transitive verbs usually do, a cause-effect relationship, the impression we get is that movement is divorced from purpose” (2007: 74). This is true for this passage also. The morbid scene of the passage seems to be self-generating and is not controlled till the husband comes: *lay rotting, overpowering, cry, ran, came, defeated into the house*.

### *Adverbs*

There are five adverbs of manner in –ly: *reflectively, patiently, visibly, quickly* and *quietly*. Four out of these five adverbs have been used for the two characters: the gardener and the husband. These adverbs show how the two look at the world. The adverbs *reflectively* and *patiently* which have been used for the gardener, show the universal truth about life and death. The gardener is ‘*reflectively sad*’ and he takes the death of the pet very natural: just like the dead branch of a tree becomes a part of the compost, he reflects the dead body of the pet will also play its part in the life cycle of nature. The adverbs *quickly* and *quietly* which have been used for the husband, show his practical approach to life. That the gardener does not want to bury the dead body himself and tells the woman *patiently* about the nature of his job and asks her to wait for the sweeper, is contrasted with the husband’s doing the job of a sweeper *quickly* and *quietly*, along with the other duties he does.

The other groupings of adverbs are those of time, *still, soon, later, again, then, now, often*, and those of place, especially of direction: *away, up, out, there, down*, etc. Most of the adverbs of place are combined with verbs to emphasise movement and activity: *driving away, went out, take the corpse away*. Other adverbs, especially *still* colour the passage with despondency.

### 3.5 Grammatical Features

The passage contains twenty-five sentences with an average sentence length of 19.64. Most of the sentences are below the average line. The short sentences indicate the limited communication between the narrator and the reader as well as between the husband and the wife. The longest sentence (14), the second longest sentence (3) and the third longest sentence (15), all say the story of the woman. It suggests that the complexity of the passage lies in the reactions and in the complex thinking of the woman.

The first paragraph of the passage begins with a sentence having less than half of the average sentence length. With a sudden change, the third sentence reaches up to a length of fifty-two words. Then the sentence length slopes down and from sentence (5) to (13), the length of the sentences is again below the average. Then it reaches to the height of complexity in (14) having seventy-three words. This kind of progression suggests that the thematic advancement is moving from simplicity to complexity.

As against to this, the second paragraph begins with a sentence highest in length, then it moves to a sentence having the sentence length of only four words. Overall, the paragraph advances in a rhythmic pattern. At the end of the second paragraph, the sudden brevity of the last sentence '*You mustn't cry*' adds to the thematic and dramatic effect of the novel. The sentence gives an idea of the type of communication likely to take place in the following pages of the novel. It interprets the setting, which the readers were, more or less, detached of. In addition to it, the '*you*' in the sentence invites the readers to involve themselves humanly with the characters of the novel and to see themselves as insiders or as a part of the story.

The passage has nine simple sentences and sixteen complex sentences. Most of the complex sentences narrate the reactions of the woman. Much of the complexity in complex sentences comes from adverbials, heavily pre-modified nouns and by present participles functioning as adjectives. One notices almost an obligatory use of adjectives in: "Flies began to hum amidst the limes, driving away the gentle bees and the unthinking butterflies" (10). To this, we may add the free indirect speeches, which, in one way or the other, make it a little difficult to conceptualize and visualize the ideas and actions put forward in such sentences:

She thought she saw the evil glint of a bluebottle, and grew hysterical (11).

Later in the evening, when the sun hung pendent from the topmost branches of the trees, swelling visibly like she thought a purulent boil, until it was ripe to drop, her husband came home (15).

The grammatical parallelism as in "under a sheer, under the limes" (14) is a device that makes the passage rhythmic.

#### *Verb phrases*

The passage has a high incidence of complex verb phrases. It makes substantial number of modal auxiliaries in such phrases as *could not be moved, would soon have penetrated, would not bury, will do, will eat, can not help, would not lift, could not help glancing, will do, mustn't cry*. Such

verb phrases, according to Leech and Short, “involve awareness not only of a narrative point of time, but of circumstances which, in relation to that point, are past, future or hypothetical” (2007: 83). They are indicators of ramifications of consciousness or unconsciousness. They talk of memories, expectations and suppositions. They give an idea of the would-be predicaments.

### *Negatives*

Another thing of interest is that six out of ten verb phrases discussed above have a negative adverb (in the last phrase in its suffixed form *n't*). A negative adverb, according to Leech and Short, “is used, generally speaking, when there is a need to deny some expectation (in the mind of author, reader, character) that the positive is true. In other words, a negative cancels the expectation of its positive” (2007: 83). The negatives partly imply that the story of the novel may be a tragedy of disappointed expectations.

### **3.6 Figures of Speech etc.**

To make the passage rhythmic, Desai makes a full use of metaphors and similes. Similes in the passage make the ideas and actions simpler to understand:

like molten in a groove cut into the earth (14)

swelling visibly like she thought a purulent boil (15)

like a surgeon's knife at work (17)

Besides, the passage consists of the kind of constructions that force the imaginative mind to explore and understand the unimaginative and non-existent. In (10) the writer calls the bees ‘gentle’ and the butterflies ‘unthinking’. The writer draws an analogy between the mental faculty of humans and the mind of the bees and the butterflies. The humanoid adjectives used for bees and butterflies suggest an explanation, which we know, is not true.

The implied metaphors, for example *the evil glint of a bluebottle*, *purulent boil*, etc. used in the passage also reveal the analogizing faculty.

### **3.7 Context and Cohesion**

Cohesion, according to Halliday and Hasan (1976:14), ‘... is simply the presupposition of something that has gone before, whether in the preceding sentence or not.’ The passage is about the actions and reactions of the three persons in a particular situation. The gardener seems to be realistic, believes the natural cycle of life and death but lacks independent action. The woman is desolate, hysterical and seems to be very unrealistic. The husband believes in practicality. He not only takes the decisions but executes them also. The relationship among the three different personalities is strongly tied with the help of cohesive devices. The continuity of the ideas is being maintained by the cumulative conjunction ‘and’, which has occurred twenty times in the passage.

The definite article, an alternative device for cross-referencing, has forty occurrences in the passage. Special is the use of ‘the’ with the inanimate objects and concepts: *the reek*, *the vision*, *the gentle bees*, *the unthinking butterflies*, *the evil glint*. This use of ‘the’ establishes an amicable relationship between the humans, especially the woman, and the non-humans.

The complete absence of proper nouns takes us to the conclusion that the author, in this passage, is analysing the personality traits and types, which sets forth the setting and the theme of the novel.

Another important feature of the passage is that it has words in groupings which collocate with one another, for example the word *body* collocates with a number of words in the passage: *body flesh, eyes, eyelids, thumbs, entrails, fingers*. The word *day* collocates with *afternoon, evening* and *April*.

## 4 Conclusion

Through cross-connections of different observed linguistic categories, it has come to notice that the meaning relation and interpretation based on observed linguistic features in the select passage are coherent with the common literary focus established regarding the author. Time to time, in the process of analysis, where it seemed to be of importance, linguistic observation and literary focus has been related and commented. Some key findings are listed below:

- Most of the lexical items in the analysed passages are semantically associated with 'Behaviours and Feelings': this is what novels of Anita Desai are all about.
- The noun phrases are loaded with pre-modifiers almost in the form of obligatory use of adjectives. This shows her predilection for adjectives. Through a series of adjectives, the author, in the very beginning of her novel, makes the readers know personality traits and types of her characters.
- The stylistic demonstration of linguistic choices made by author provides empirical evidence of her rather poetic prose style.

### Note:

For the sake of emphasis, many words, phrases and sentences quoted from the analysed passages have been underlined and italicized by me.

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