



STYLISTIC TECHNIQUES IN ANITA NAIR'S *IDRIS*

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ABSTRACT

In this paper an attempt is made to throw light on how the well-known Indian woman novelist Anita Nair exploits the choices of the English language effectively in her recent historical novel Idris (2014). For this purpose concepts drawn from modern or literary stylistics are employed. It may be noted that the stylistics is a branch of modern linguistics. That is, in literary stylistics, the focus will be on how language is used by a creative writer or a poet.

INTRODUCTION

The term 'style' has been used with difference in emphasis. Phrases like 'Style of Dickens', 'Style of Proust': 'Epistolary Style', 'The Style of Victorian novel' illustrate this point. Thus style turns out to be relational in nature. Traditional scholars attempted to examine the connection between style and authorial personality. Some scholars have also defined style in different ways: 'Style is man'; 'Style is the dress of thought' etc. which is evasive notions. To capture style in a systematic way, one has to employ linguistic tools to clearly identify the language choices made by an author to create the literary effect. As Leech and Short point out:

Literary stylistic is typically ... concerned with explaining the relation between style and literary or aesthetic function. (Leech and Short, 1981: 39).

Note: Even though Discourse and Text are different in the current literature in stylistics, they are considered interchangeable for the purpose of this paper. Discourse is like 'le langue', while text is like 'parole', after Ferdinand de Saussure (1960).

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1P a g e

In the present discussion some of the concepts proposed by established linguistics like Halliday and Hasan (1976), Roger Fowler (1976), Leech and Short (1981), Widdowson (1992) will be used. They include Cohesion, Coherence, Foregrounding and Mindstyle. That is the present analysis touches upon two at is, the present stylistic analysis touches upon two important levels of written discourse, viz. sentence level and discourse level.

1. Sentence Level

Foregrounding

As long ago as in 1932, J. Mukarovsky, a prominent Russian Linguist who joined the Prague School Linguistic Circle, proposed the notion of Foregrounding on the basis of the concepts like Defamiliarization or Deautomatization employed by the Russian Formalists. (P.L. Garvin: 1958)

According to Katie Wales, Foregrounding is ... the ‘throwing into relief of the ‘linguistic SIGN against the BACKGROUND of the NORMS of ordinary language. In poetry the regularized patterns of METER ... are foregrounded against the natural RHYTHMS of speech. (Katie Wales 1991:182) Foregrounding is achieved by a variety of means like Repetition, Parallelism, Deviation, Figures of Speech, Cohesion and Coherence. Consider the following examples from *Idris*.

Repetition

The poem grew A poem of forty-six words. A poem woven from words for a camel that Ali Sheik among camel trainers, had sung to him: (97)
(Emphasis supplied)

In the above passage, repetition creates an impact of the poem on the boy (young Idris), which is like the touch of the black pebble that resembled the satany skin of his surrogate mother, Fathima Naaya, and her lullaby.

There is a wind that blows over the desert. It starts as spring dies. A hot, dry wind laden with suffering. The wind blows for three or four days without respite. And so it goes on intermittently for a period of fifty days. That why we call it Khamsin. (10) (Emphasis supplied)

This instance of repetition of the phrase ‘wind’ creates the effect of the intensity and fatality of the stormy wind called ‘Khamsin’ in the desert.

... my name is Idris.

I am Idris Maymoon Samataar Guleed. Previously of Dikhil. Now an eternal traveler seeing the measure of earth and man. (19- 21, 35, 45-46 ... 374)

This sentence is repeated several times in the course of the narration by Idris himself while the final instance of repetition is by his son Kandavar. This example of repetition strongly confirms the aesthetic effect of the protagonist's predicament to sustain his saintly qualities against all odds.

Parallelism:

The boy wandered between sleep and dream, quiet and noise, hope and utter desperation till finally a voice rang through: Idris. (9)

In the above passage parallelism brings out the emotional intensity of the boy, Idris who was caught in the skeleton of a dead camel in the desert and who started struggling to release himself without any help from his people who were away and who had not noticed that the boy was missing.

Through his left eye, he saw his world again. Through his right eye, nothing. (11)

In his effort to escape from the prison of a camel's Skelton, the boy, young Idris, gets struck in his left eye by the splinter of a bone. Thus he loses right eye. The functional contrast between the two eyes is effectively described by the parallelism in this passage.

To the Portuguese, it was the Trapobana, to the Arabic Tenerism, and for the yellow people it was the Pa-out Chow or the isle of gems. So many names for the little island. He would seek his own Serendippo, Idris decided. (142)

In this passage, parallelism is used as a stylistic device, to emphasize the worldly knowledge of Idris, with particular reference to languages.

Sometimes it is only a meal that he needs to propel him into the next day... a meal that to him is representative of home and comfort. (229)

The passage through the device of parallelism highlights the internal dilemma of Idris on the purpose of food, whether it is just for survival or for satisfying one's hunger as a luxury. He

vacillates between leading the life of a mendicant saint or an ordinary person enjoying the needs of life in a comfortable manner.

Deviation

Deviation is mostly employed by the author in this novel in the form of ellipsis, which is realized, which is realized in fragmentary sentences, as illustrated below:

*The silence. The boy knew then that the shaitan wind had died itself out.
Again that cry: Idris. Inan. (9)*

This example foregrounds the dreadful effect of the silence in the vast desert where Idris as a boy was caught in the skeleton of a camel's carrion.

*As her fingers reached through the darkness, she touched skin. Warm skin.
Fine silk.*

Skin against skin... ... Mistress of the house. (32)

The hardness of this body, the gentleness of tone, the softness of touch. (33)

In the second, the third, and the fifth passages, the amazement of Kuttimalu on touching the tall body of Idris in darkness, who she thinks to be a celestial figure, is described to show her emotional intensity. The fourth passage indicates the passion of Idris for Kuttimalu, as we know that when an emotion overplays, sentences will be fragmentary. These passages emphatically portray the emotional bewilderment on the part of Kuttimalu and Idris in their first meeting and love-making.

'A dark-as-the-night boy on a white-as-the-day bullock' (375)

This fragmentary sentence presents the picturesque scene of Kandavar, the black boy riding Vajra, the white bullock, through ellipses by contrast to highlight the mobile picture on a static landscape.

Figures of Speech:

a. Personification:

A pearl falls down from the Yemini's hand and is about to fall into the sea, Idris catches it and tries to return it to the Yemini, then the latter observes:



'She was only seeking to return to where she came from, but you saved her. And now she's yours.' (24)

b. Metaphor:

Kandavar's description of Neelakantan Namboodiri, his mother's new consort:

A fair, soft worm who doesn't know one end of a spear from the other. (37)

Idris's love for Kuttimalu:

Kuttimalu had been a fire in his blood and would still be if she would let him. (110)

When Kandavar parts with Idris finally, the latter's fatherly feelings are described:

Idris's head drooped. He felt a cold fist grab his heart and squeeze it. (373)

A. Simile:

Kandavar trapped in the skeleton of a camel, remembers his father's technique of sucking the marrow from a bone while eating and thinks that the wind also sucked him into the trap of the bones of a camel's skeleton:

The wind like his father, knew the techniques, the boy thought. To suck and suck and not choke. (5)

On the ship, the Hercules, Idris looks at the silvery fish leaping above the waves and compares the shining of the fish to love:

Just then a shoal of silvery fish leapt above the waves. A gleam of silver. Love was like that. A leaping of the heart, above the mundane and banal. But oh, so fleeting! (207)

The ship's surgeon becomes nostalgic and thinks of his native place, Delft in South Holland, the Netherlands:

'The ship's surgeon had tasted the salt of the sea in so many waters, but the Delft Sea was his own. It was unique, like the powdery crustiness of the beard brought by the baker's boy to their home everyday. (216)



After reaching Petapolee (near Masulipatnam) and during his meeting with Karanam Krishnappa, Idris ponders over the wandering quality of his life:

Idris Maymoon Samataar Al Guleed was being tossed this way and that, like a catamaran at sea. Or was it a toni or a masoola? He thought wryly. (223-224)

Cohesion:

The concept of cohesion was proposed by Halliday and Hassan (1976) to explain the semantic connection within a sentence, across sentences in a paragraph and paragraphs and sections in a book. They identify two types of cohesion: Grammatical cohesion and Lexical cohesion as follows.

Grammatical cohesion is in terms of Reference, Conjunction, Substitutions and Ellipses; and Lexical cohesion is in the form of Reiteration and Collocation Devices of cohesion are found both in literary and non-literary language. However in literature creative writers opt for certain cohesive choices as proved by Gutwinsky, in his work 'Cohesion in Literature' (1976), Gutwinsky formulates that Henry James frequently used grammatical cohesion while Earnest Hemingway employed Lexical cohesion more often, in their (fictional) selected works. Therefore in the present study cohesion is also considered to a stylistic phenomenon that marks the linguistic predilections of an author. In this perspective it had been found that Anita Nair employs grammatical cohesive devices like Reference, Conjunction and Ellipses under grammatical cohesion and Reiteration in lexical cohesion.

Reference:

Anita Nair uses the articles, pronouns, and adverbs in an appropriate manner which is a normal feature in connected writing (or speech). But her use of conjunctions seems to be special.

Conjunction:

Of the coordinating conjunctions Anita Nair has a preference to use *and* more frequently than the others. For example in the Prologue and Epilogue she has employed *and* ninety-nine times as a cohesive device while she has used *but* fifty times, *or* six times, *so* five times and *for* three times. In the case of subordinate conjunctions she has a predilection to use *when* and *that* more frequently than the others. In the same chapters, she has used *when* fourteen times, *that* eleven times, *if* nine times and *what* six times. These statistical details clearly establish that Anita Nair uses the coordinating conjunction *and* repeatedly because *and* in addition to expressing Additive, Causal and Sequential meanings can also be used to indicate



Contrastive, Conditional and Consequential meaning relations. In other words *and* is semantically more inclusive than the other coordinating conjunctions. Thus Anita Nair exploits the cohesive devices of conjunctions with her deft cohesive use of *and*. In a similar fashion, she uses *when* followed by *that*, more frequently than the other subordinating conjunctions, because *when* indicates temporal relations of meaning appropriately, *Idris* being a historical novel occupying a period from 1625-1661, duration of thirty-six years in the seventeenth century. Likewise she uses the grammatical cohesive device of ellipsis, as already discussed above under Foregrounding.

Another important distinction in sentence formation identified by literary critics and stylisticians is that of periodic and non-periodic (loose) sentence structures.

As Katie Wales points out, a periodic sentence is supposedly harder for our minds to process as it is LEFT-Branching ... structures rather than RIGHT-Branching. (1991: 345) According to Leech and Short (1991), in a periodic sentence, we must hold all the constituents in memory until we reach the end where we can fit the subordinate constituents fit to the point in the main constituents. A complex sentence in which the main clause is delayed until the end is a periodic sentence which can be contrasted with a loose sentence in which the main clause comes first. Leech and Short further point out that in a periodic sentence, the principle of end focus and climax are employed while in a loose sentence there is no such end focus and such a sentence is easy to understand.

*Note: for the constraints of space, only a few examples are provided here under sentence and discourse levels.

Normally a formal style of English is marked by periodic sentences while an informal style marked by loose sentences indicates natural style in real communication. In this respect Anita Nair's style at the sentence level is non-periodic or loose and such a style gives an illusion of reality to her narration.

2. Discourse Level

To analyze the stylistic choices of Anita Nair in *Idris* at the discourse or textual level, the concept of Mindstyle proposed by Roger Fowler 1977 is employed in this paper. As Fowler observed:

Cumulatively, consistent structural options, agreeing in cutting the presented world to one pattern or another, give rise to an impression of a world view, what I shall call a 'Mindstyle.' (1977: 76)

Mindstyle in a fictional work can, according to Leech and Short (1981: 288-351), be analyzed in terms of Speech Presentation and Thought Presentation as under:

The Cline of Speech Presentation

FDS (Free Direct Speech)

(e.g. 'I will come back here to see you tomorrow.')

DS (Direct Speech)

(e.g. He said, "I will come back here to see you again tomorrow.")

FIS (Free Indirect Speech)

(e.g. He would return there to see her again the following day.)

IS (Indirect Speech)

(e.g. He said that, he would return there to see her the following day.)

NRSA (Narrative Report of Speech Acts)

(e.g. He promised her to visit her again.)

NRA (Narrative Report of Actions)

(e.g. The lone ranger saddled horse mounted and rode off into the sunset.)

The Cline of Thought Presentation

FDT (Free Direct Thought)

(e.g. Does she still love me?)

DT (Direct Thought)

(e.g. He wondered, 'Does she still love me?')

FIT (Free Indirect Thought)

(e.g. Did she still love him?)

IT (Indirect Thought)

(e.g. He wondered if she still loves him.)

NRTA (narrative report of Thought Acts)

(e.g. He wondered about her love for him.)

Anita Nair adopts these techniques of speech presentation and thought presentation as illustrated by the following examples.

Speech Presentation

FDS: 'I do not like it. Al-Mareekh is a sign of evil and bloodshed' (Ali, the camel trainer's words). (4)

DS: 'What is buub?' the boy had demanded. (p. 6)

IS: Idris said firmly to suggest he was unwilling to disclose the whys and wherefores. (72)

FIS: Ali is as vulgar as his camels, Aabo said but Ali is a good man. (8)

NRSA: Nanny told herself that the girl and she would not starve. (191)

NRA: Idris slipped out into the street and walked briskly away from the line of house towards the harbour. (190)



Thought Presentation

FDT: She laughed. Madness. What madness was this? She had called for a celestial lover. She had yearned for one. And here he was, in flesh and blood. (32)

DT: Not once did he say, 'Go with me' If he had, she would have. (35)

FIT: He didn't know what to do, or what to say. What could he say? He knew it was dangerous, but he didn't want to stop the onslaught on his senses. (33)

IT: What pleasure gates had she opened for him? What was this winged chariot they rode through the clouds? (34)

NRTA: So this is my son. Idris thought, looking at the boy who sat still as a rock. (36)

Leech and Short (1981: 345) pointed out that DS in speech presentation is the norm but creative writers, generally novelists, do not follow that norm as they experiment with greater possibilities. They conclude that historically DS lent place to FIS in Speech presentation and DT to FIT in thought presentation. Hence they conclude.

"... we can think of FIT historically as a natural development, keeping much of the vividness of FT without the artificiality of the 'speaking to oneself' convention. Since FIT gets best of both worlds, it is understandable that it has become as common as it has in twentieth century novel" (345)

From this perspective we can say that Anita Nair has successfully employed all such greater possibilities in her style in *Idris*, as illustrated above by the limited examples cited, which represent a host of such rich varieties of speech and thought presentation techniques.

Other Stylistic Achievements of Anita Nair

Furthermore, Anita Nair's creative stylistic abilities are further reflected in her descriptive passages of portraying seasons, places, persons, animals etc. as the following samples attested to:

The month of Magharam:

In the month of Magharam, the seasons cusp. Half the month is cold, with a vicious bite in every breeze. Dawn is sheathed in mist and dusk is early and abrupt. The stars shine brighter than ever and the night skies are enough to make every man believe in the power of the unknown. The wind winnows



through the paddy fields, making the heads of burgeoning paddy shiver in anticipation. Fruit trees unfurl tiny blossoms. And then slowly the month moves into summer. Longer days, warmer hours, beads of sweat. The sun ascends the skies as its brightest star. (16)

Kandavar's reaction to changing seasons is described in this passage.

Mamangam Festival:

All of Thirunavaya town was prettied up to celebrate the Mamangam that took place once every twelve years on the banks of the Nila river. Everyone knew that the Mamangam festival was held so that the Zamorin could proclaim his might and all his allies and vassals could make a public display of their allegiance to him. But people also came from all over to see the sights, and to buy and sell goods that traders from different parts of the world brought there. (17)

Description of Maccanto; Idris's dog:

'It's a dog. Why do you call it eeye?' the boy asked, watching the dog place its snout on the man's knee. He had never seen a dog like this. A black and white dog that merged with light and shadow. A dog with a small, long, narrow head with a long, tapering muzzle and an elegant neck descending into a well-muscled body, and long legs. But it was the eyes the boy noticed. Set within black patches on a white face, the deep brown eyes gazed at the boy as if it could read every thought that coursed through his head. (19)

Idris's fond memory of Fatima Naaya's culinary skill:

Fatima Naaya would make the subag herself, by clarifying butter, and even though it was a luxury, she would dip into the jar of sugar candy and take out a few lumps and pound it into a powder. For her prince, her Idris, nothing was good enough unless she had cooked it herself. She would feed him the triangular crustiness of sambusa stuffed with hot green chilies and ground beef. To ease the fire on the tongue, she would then offer him xalwo, sweet halva dripping with subag. (228)

Description of Vajra, Kandavar's bullock:

Kandavar's eyes flashed. He was a beauty of a beast, with a chest that was so wide and deep that the space between his ribs and hips appeared small. The belly was tight, but his lions were wide, his flanks rounded and well-proportioned and his legs strong. At two-and-a-half years, he had reached his full size, and his hide gleamed with health and vigour. (267)

Physical description of Thilothamma:

She was tall and high-breasted with skin the colour of baked clay. She wore a knee-high cloth draped around her hips, with one end pulled over her shoulder, but even from where he stood, Idris could see that the cotton was superior to what the other women wore. There was a tilt to her chin that suggested hauteur. Her heavy-lidded eyes and high cheekbones were emphasized by her hair, which was pulled back tightly into a knot. In her ears were heavy gold discs. A big irregular stone gleamed against the burnished skin of her throat, and around her ankles were ornate silver chains. Idris thought he had never seen anyone as magnificent as this woman. (304)

Short Sentences

Similarly Anita Nair has an equal ability to use very short sentences to describe a situation of relief as shown below:

Idris waiting for the completion of digging work in his mine of diamonds gets two days rest.

It is a relief for him. He goes to the mango orchard cottage of Thilothamma for resting:

As in the early hours of the day, the door was shut but not latched. Idris walked in. A little grass mat was laid out and there were a few covered dishes, but the house was unoccupied. He felt a quick sense of relief. (352)

A diamond was found for the first time in the Idris's mine indicating a relief after a few days of hard work:

A shout rent the air. One of the men leapt up, his teeth gleaming, his eyes sparkling with excitement in his dust-covered face. He jumped up and down, shouting, 'I found it! I found it!' (357-358)



CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it may be stated that *Idris* (2014), a recent historical novel by Anita Nair bears a proof for her stylistic accomplishments as discussed and illustrated in the foregoing sections.

The present analysis has clearly established that Anita Nair is an expert in experimenting with language and in profitably exploiting the linguistic and structural choices of the English language at the structural levels of syntax and discourse. Her narrative style ensures her a secure place in the company of modern female novelists of fiction in Indian English.

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