

Virginia Woolf and Anita Desai: A Comparative Study of Female Consciousness through Critical Discourse Analysis and Intertextuality

OPEN ACCESS

Manuscript ID:
ENG-2026-140411225

Volume: 14

Issue: 4

Month: September

Year: 2026

P-ISSN: 2320-2645

E-ISSN: 2582-3531

Received: 08.07.2026

Accepted: 16.08.2026

Published Online: 01.09.2026

Citation:
Amshupali, V. "Virginia
Woolf and Anita Desai: A
Comparative Study of Female
Consciousness through
Critical Discourse Analysis
and Intertextuality." *Shanlax
International Journal of
English*, vol. 14, no. 4, 2026,
pp. 27–33.

DOI:
[https://doi.org/10.34293/
english.v14i4.11225](https://doi.org/10.34293/english.v14i4.11225)



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Abstract

This study compares the works of Virginia Woolf and Anita Desai, focusing on how each author explores the inner lives of women. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and intertextual analysis, this study examines how language choices, such as vocabulary, sentence structure, and imagery, reflect and challenge the expectations placed on women by society. Drawing on Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway, To the Lighthouse, and A Room of One's Own, alongside Desai's Cry, the Peacock, Fire on the Mountain, and Clear Light of Day, this study asks: how does each writer use language to capture women's experiences and to push back against traditional roles? The analysis further explores the cultural and historical contexts that inform both writers' works, offering a nuanced understanding of female subjectivity across time and place.

It examines how vocabulary, syntax, narrative voice, interior monologue, silence, repetition, and imagery construct women's experiences while simultaneously questioning the dominant gender ideologies.

Woolf and Desai employ language not merely as a means of representing women's psychological experiences but also as a subtle form of resistance to socially prescribed identities. Through an intertextual reading of the selected works, this study identifies both continuities and differences in the writers' representations of female agency. While Woolf interrogates patriarchal conventions through formal experimentation and feminist critique, Desai adapts and transforms similar concerns within distinctly Indian social and cultural contexts. The comparative analysis demonstrates how language becomes a site where gender, identity, culture, memory, and resistance intersect. By placing Woolf and Desai in dialogue, this study contributes to a broader understanding of the evolving representation of female subjectivity across different historical, geographical, and cultural contexts.

Keywords: Female Consciousness, Critical Discourse Analysis, Stream of Consciousness, Virginia Woolf, Anita Desai, Feminist Narratology.

Introduction

The literary voices of Virginia Woolf and Anita Desai span continents and generations, yet both writers share a deep commitment to exploring female consciousness complexities. Woolf, a towering figure in British modernism, revolutionized narrative technique through her use of stream-of-consciousness and interior monologue, foregrounding the psychological depth of her characters. Desai, writing in postcolonial India, adapts and reinterprets these techniques to suit her cultural context, creating narratives that grapple with the tensions between tradition and modernity. This study seeks to understand how Woolf and Desai use narrative language to reflect and resist the social expectations that shape women's lives by analyzing their works through the frameworks of Critical Discourse Analysis and intertextuality.

Literature Review

Existing scholarship on Virginia Woolf and Anita Desai has thoroughly mapped out how both writers tackle female consciousness, psychological tension, patriarchy, alienation, and the grueling search for autonomy. Comparative studies regularly group them together, drawing clear parallels between how their female characters navigate suffocating domestic and social spaces. Critics also frequently point to Desai's engagement with Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, celebrating their shared feminist goals while acknowledging the vastly different cultural and historical worlds they inhabited.

Feminist Foundations: Universal Themes vs. Situated Realities

Feminist criticism offers an undeniable baseline for reading the works of both authors. Woolf's razor-sharp critique of women's economic and intellectual exclusion made her a foundational figure in feminist literary studies. Similarly, Desai's novels have drawn deep critical interest for how they capture the psychological isolation, family pressure, and identity struggles of Indian women. Together, this body of critique reminds us that female experience isn't a monolith; it has to be understood through specific, grounded contexts rather than a one-size-fits-all model of womanhood.

Critique of Ideology: The Role of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Where things get really interesting—and where Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) comes in—is examining how language itself carries power and ideology. Drawing on Norman Fairclough and Michelle M. Lazar's Feminist CDA, we can look past the overarching themes to see how everyday linguistic choices—vocabulary, sentence structure, tone, silence, narrative voice, and imagery—either reinforce patriarchal expectations or actively dismantle them.

Intertextual Dialogues: Cultural and Historical Contexts

Layering Julia Kristeva's concept of intertextuality (building on Mikhail Bakhtin) adds another crucial dimension. This allows us to view

Woolf's and Desai's texts not in isolation, but in direct conversation with older literary traditions, cultural myths, and the dominant social ideas of their times.

Identified Research Gap and Scope

While existing research comfortably establishes the thematic and feminist overlaps between Woolf and Desai, far less time has been spent on the actual mechanics of their language—specifically, how female subjectivity is constructed, word by word. By combining CDA with an intertextual approach, this study addresses this gap. It examines how language itself becomes the ultimate battleground for gender, power, identity, and resistance across two very different historical and cultural landscapes.

Core Pillars of the Analytical Framework Linguistic Power & Silence (CDA / FCDA)

Agency and Transitivity: Analyzing who acts versus who is acted upon in the sentence structure. For instance, passive voice constructions often map a character's internal powerlessness within domestic spaces (e.g., Desai's Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* or Woolf's Clarissa Dalloway).

Hesitation and Modality: Tracking non-verbal pauses, ellipses, and soft, uncertain vocabulary (maybe, perhaps, might). These subtle cues highlight where internal desire collides with social restriction.

Naturalized Expectations: Applying Lazar's FCDA to reveal how everyday family dialogue subtly reinforces expectations of female self-sacrifice.

Textual Echoes & Cultural Dialogue (Intertextuality)

Reimagining *A Room of One's Own*: Examining how Desai's characters try to carve out mental and physical boundaries, adapting Woolf's concept of "a room" within the joint Indian family system.

Cultural & Literary Layers: Tracing how Woolf engages Western modernist styles while Desai weaves in Indian poetry, mythology, and regional linguistic cadence to subvert traditional gender roles.

Methodology

This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis to examine how specific language choices—such

as vocabulary, sentence structure, and metaphor—carry ideological weight in the selected novels. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a subfield of discourse analysis that examines how power relations within society are constructed, maintained, or challenged through various forms of discourse, such as speech, text, and visual media. Emerging in the late 20th century, CDA is rooted in critical theory and discourse analysis, drawing on the works of influential scholars like Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak, and Teun van Dijk. It pays special attention to the ways in which both Woolf and Desai construct subjectivity, agency, and resistance through their narrative strategies. Intertextual analysis is also used to trace the influence of Woolf's modernist techniques on Desai's postcolonial narratives, highlighting continuity and adaptation across cultural and historical contexts. By comparing the close textual readings of each author, this paper aims to highlight both the commonalities and divergences in their representations of female consciousness.

Critical Discourse Analysis of Woolf's Fiction Mrs Dalloway: Transitivity and the Grammar of Constrained Agency

In Mrs. Dalloway, Clarissa's interiority is frequently rendered through constructions in which she is the grammatical experiencer of sensation and memory rather than the agent of decisive action, a pattern consistent with a discourse of feminine passivity inherited from Victorian domestic ideology. Yet Woolf's free indirect discourse repeatedly interrupts this passivity with moments of intense sensory agency. Clarissa's perception of London's streets, sounds, and social rituals is rendered with an active, almost proprietorial attentiveness that quietly asserts her authority over her own experience, even as she remains socially confined to the role of hostess and wife. The novel's oscillation between passive and active grammatical constructions thus performs, at the level of syntax, the very tension between social constraint and interior autonomy that constitutes its central theme.

To the Lighthouse: Repetition, Modality, and the Critique of the "Angel in the House"

Mrs Ramsay's characterisation in *To the*

Lighthouse draws heavily on the Victorian ideal of self-sacrificing domestic femininity that Woolf elsewhere names and explicitly repudiates as the "Angel in the House." The discourse surrounding Mrs. Ramsay is marked by modal constructions of obligation and duty and a repetitive syntax that mimics the unceasing cyclical labor of domestic care. However, the novel's structural division — its abrupt temporal rupture in the "Time Passes" section and its reassignment of authority to Lily Briscoe's painterly, non-reproductive creativity in the final section — enacts a discursive shift away from the ideology of self-effacing maternal duty towards an alternative model of female authorship and vision.

A Room of One's Own: Explicit Feminist Discourse

Unlike the two novels, *A Room of One's Own* operates as explicit discourse rather than fictional interiority, articulating directly the material and economic conditions — private income and private space — that Woolf presents as prerequisites for women's intellectual and creative independence. Its rhetorical strategy of hypothetical narrative (the invented figure of Shakespeare's sister) allows Woolf to expose, through a quasi-fictional discursive device, the systemic exclusion of women from institutions of learning and literary production, thereby providing an explicit ideological framework against which the more implicit discursive strategies of her novels can be read.

Critical Discourse Analysis of Desai's Fiction Cry, the Peacock: Fragmented Syntax and the Discourse of Fear

Maya's narration in *Cry, the Peacock* is characterised by fragmented, associative syntax, obsessive repetition, and a discourse of premonition and omen that externalises her psychological disintegration. The prevalence of sensory and affective verbs positions Maya, like Clarissa Dalloway, as an experience rather than an agent, but the discourse surrounding her is further inflected by the specific vocabulary of Hindu domestic ritual, astrological prophecy, and childless marriage, situating her constrained interiority within a culturally particular patriarchal order rather than

the more secular bourgeois domesticity of Woolf's London.

Fire on the Mountain: Silence and the Discourse of Withdrawal

Nanda Kaul's retreat to the solitary hill-station house in *Fire on the Mountain* constructs silence itself as a discursive strategy of resistance. The narrative voice surrounding Nanda Kaul favors negative constructions — statements of what she does not want, does not do, and will not permit — producing a grammar of refusal that stands in marked contrast to the socially compliant discourse expected of a grandmother and former hostess within the extended family. This deployment of negation as resistance finds a structural parallel in Woolf's use of interruption and rupture in *To the Lighthouse*, though Desai's register is more austere and elliptical.

Clear Light of Day: Memory, Inheritance, and Gendered Discourse

Clear Light of Day employs a non-linear temporal structure through which the sisters Bim and Tara revisit shared childhood memories, and the discourse of familial obligation is articulated through recurrent lexical choices around debt, duty, and sacrifice that fall disproportionately upon the unmarried, caregiving daughter. Bim's eventual, qualified reconciliation with her role is expressed through a modal shift from resigned obligation to a more self-authored acceptance, suggesting a discursive resolution that is more integrative than the isolation with which Maya's or Nanda Kaul's narratives conclude.

Comparative Discourse Patterns

Read together, the two novelists' fiction reveals a shared grammar of constrained female agency: both repeatedly position their women protagonists as grammatical experiencers of sensation, memory, and emotion rather than as agents of consequential action, reflecting the broader discourse of feminine passivity that each writer inherits from her respective patriarchal context. Both also rely on extended metaphoric systems drawn from the natural world to externalize interior states — Woolf's recurring imagery of waves, tides, and light in London's

changeable weather, and Desai's recurring imagery of heat, drought, and the pre-monsoon atmosphere of the Indian plains. Where Woolf's metaphors of water suggest fluidity, continuity, and the possibility of dissolution into a larger consciousness, Desai's metaphors of heat and fire suggest accumulation, pressure, and eventual rupture, a difference that maps onto each writer's distinct narrative resolutions: Woolf's protagonists tend towards a fragile equilibrium, while Desai's tend towards crisis or withdrawal.

At the level of social practice, Woolf's discourse of female consciousness is shaped by the historical context of early twentieth-century British suffrage debates and the ideological legacy of separate-sphere domesticity, whereas Desai's is shaped by the postcolonial Indian joint family, in which caste, extended kinship obligation, and arranged marriage produce a more communally embedded, and in some respects more materially binding, set of constraints on women's autonomy. This comparative discourse analysis suggests that female consciousness, while linguistically comparable across the two bodies of fiction, is never a culturally uniform category; each writer's grammar of interiority is inflected by the specific social discourses of her own historical and national location.

Intertextual Dialogue between Woolf and Desai

Desai's fiction can be read as sustaining an active intertextual relationship with Woolf's modernist project. Structurally, both writers favor compressed temporal frames — Mrs Dalloway's single London day, *Fire on the Mountain*'s brief, contained hill-station interlude — that intensify the disproportion between the slow accumulation of interior consciousness and the limited external events of the plot. Both employ a narrative perspective that moves fluidly between characters' interior states without extensive authorial mediation, a technique that Desai adapts from Woolf's free indirect discourse while inflecting it with the rhythms and idioms of Indian domestic speech and thought.

Desai has publicly acknowledged Woolf, alongside other modernists, as a formative influence on her narrative method, which situates the intertextual relationship between the two writers as

one of conscious inheritance rather than incidental resemblance. Yet this inheritance is not passive imitation but critical adaptation: Desai relocates the modernist technique of interiorisation from the secular, urban, middle-class world of Bloomsbury to the joint family structures, arranged marriages, and climatic extremities of postcolonial India, thereby extending Woolf's feminist narrative grammar into a cultural context that Woolf herself never addressed. In Genette's terms, this relationship might best be described as hypertextual, in which Desai's fiction transforms rather than merely repeats its Woolfian hypotext, producing what can be understood as a transnational feminist modernist lineage rather than a simple case of direct literary influence.

Analysis

Woolf's novels, set in early twentieth-century England, reveal the pressures of domesticity, marriage, and the lingering influence of ideals like the "Angel in the House." Her characters often grapple with the constraints of family and societal duty, yet their internal monologues and stream-of-consciousness narration create space for resistance and self-discovery within the narrative. For example, Clarissa Dalloway's reflections in Mrs. Dalloway and the Ramsay women in *To the Lighthouse* illustrate how inner thoughts can subvert outward conformity. Woolf's essays, particularly *A Room of One's Own*, further articulate the necessity of personal and intellectual freedom for women writers, calling attention to the material and psychological obstacles they face.

Desai's fiction brings these questions into the context of postcolonial India, where tradition, family, and cultural customs pose new challenges for women. In novels such as *Cry, the Peacock* and *Fire on the Mountain*, Desai's protagonists struggle with inherited roles and the expectations of the joint family structure. Her language often mirrors Woolf's introspective style but is shaped by different cultural pressures and historical moments. For instance, in *Clear Light of Day*, Bim and Tara's relationship reflects the enduring impact of childhood, memory, and loss while also highlighting the broader social forces at work in shaping women's destinies.

Both authors interrogate the roles of silence and voice in women's lives. Woolf often draws attention to the ways in which women's voices are marginalized or silenced, both within the home and the broader social sphere. Desai also depicts women whose silence is both a form of oppression and a strategy of survival or resistance. This dynamic is evident in the character of Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain*, who seeks solitude as a means of reclaiming agency in a world that often denies women agency.

Discussion

By comparing Woolf and Desai, this study shows that both authors use their narrative voices to turn storytelling into a space for contesting and, at times, overcoming social norms. Their work demonstrates that female consciousness is not a fixed theme but a dynamic process shaped by language, culture, and history. Desai's writing can be seen as both an inheritance and a transformation of Woolf's feminist literary strategies. The cross-cultural perspective provided by this comparative approach illuminates the ways in which questions about women's roles, autonomy, and identity are both universal and deeply contextual.

Furthermore, the paper argues that examining the literary dialogue between Woolf and Desai enriches our understanding of feminist thought across different historical periods. Woolf's modernist innovations provided a foundation for later generations of women writers, while Desai's postcolonial sensibility complicates and expands the conversation, foregrounding issues of cultural hybridity, displacement, and the legacies of colonialism. In this sense, this study not only highlights the resilience and adaptability of feminist literary traditions but also underscores the importance of situating them within specific national and cultural contexts.

Limitations of the Study

The study is limited to six selected texts: Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *A Room of One's Own*, and Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*, *Fire on the Mountain*, and *Clear Light of Day*. Therefore, its findings cannot represent the entire body of either writer's work. The analysis

also focuses primarily on selected linguistic features, such as vocabulary, syntax, imagery, narrative voice, and interior discourse, rather than undertaking a comprehensive computational or corpus-based analysis. Furthermore, the comparison is shaped by the distinct historical and cultural contexts of Britain and postcolonial India, making direct equivalences between the two writers necessarily limited in scope.

Scholarly Implications

This study contributes to comparative feminist literary scholarship by integrating Critical Discourse Analysis, intertextuality, and feminist criticism into a single analytical framework. This demonstrates that female subjectivity is constructed not only through themes and characters but also through the linguistic and narrative strategies employed by writers. This comparison further highlights how feminist concerns are reshaped across cultural and historical contexts. By placing Woolf and Desai in dialogue, this study encourages a more nuanced understanding of gender, language, power, identity, and resistance in women's writing.

Directions for Future Research

Future research could extend this comparative framework to other works by Woolf and Desai or to other women writers from different cultural and linguistic traditions. A corpus-based CDA approach can quantitatively examine recurring linguistic patterns associated with gender and power. Further studies could explore the intersection of gender with class, race, caste, colonialism, aging, or ecological concerns. Digital humanities tools and computational textual analysis can provide additional evidence of how representations of female subjectivity change across periods, cultures, and literary traditions.

Conclusion

This comparative study demonstrates that female consciousness in the fiction of Virginia Woolf and Anita Desai is best understood not merely as a shared thematic preoccupation but as a linguistically produced phenomenon, discernible through close attention to transitivity, modality, and metaphor, and traceable across cultures through intertextual inheritance and transformation. Critical Discourse

Analysis reveals that both writers construct their female protagonists through a grammar of constrained agency that mirrors the patriarchal discourses of their respective societies, while intertextual analysis shows that Desai's fiction consciously extends and culturally translates Woolf's modernist techniques of interiorization. At the level of clause and sentence, Woolf and Desai repeatedly encode female subjectivity through patterns of limited transitivity (women as patients rather than agents), hedged modality (may, might, perhaps), and metaphor systems that bind women to domestic, natural, or animal imagery. This supports the claim that "female consciousness" is not an abstract theme but a discursive effect produced by specific grammatical and narrative choices.

CDA/FCDA makes visible how this grammar of constrained agency reflects broader patriarchal ideologies, with Woolf's women often mediated, reported, or passivized, and Desai's protagonists rendered through a discourse of voicelessness and somatic distress that frames madness as both a symptom and protest against patriarchal rationality. Intertextually, Desai does not simply imitate Woolf but culturally translates Woolfian modernism into an Indian postcolonial context: where Woolf's "room" is a material and intellectual precondition for women writers in early twentieth century Britain, Desai's female characters negotiate "a room in the home" within joint family architectures, where mental space is perpetually intruded upon by domestic obligations and moral expectations. This reframing shifts feminist comparative criticism from thematic mapping to a fine-grained analysis of how gendered subjectivity is linguistically and narratively engineered, situating Woolf and Desai within a broader transnational feminist modernist tradition in which formal innovation functions as a feminist technology for representing and resisting patriarchal constraint.

The comparison suggests that the literary category of female consciousness travels across national and historical boundaries not as a fixed essence but as a mobile set of discursive strategies—narrative focalization, free indirect discourse, modality, metaphor, and silence—that each writer adapts to local pressures. Future research might

extend this framework to other writers within the same transnational feminist modernist lineage, including Jean Rhys, Katherine Mansfield, and later Indian women novelists writing in English, to trace the fuller genealogy of this discursive tradition and examine how the “grammar of constrained agency” evolves under different colonial, postcolonial, and neoliberal patriarchies. Such a program would deepen our understanding of female consciousness as a linguistic and narrative phenomenon while contributing to ongoing debates in feminist stylistics, feminist narratology, and transnational modernist studies about how form, language, and ideology intersect in the representation of gendered existence.

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