

The Stylistic Functions of Abstract and Concrete Nouns in Tamsula Ao's Selected Poems

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Abstract

This study examines the stylistic functions of abstract and concrete nouns in selected poems by Tamsula Ao within the framework of linguistic stylistics. As an essential lexical category, nouns contribute significantly to poetic expression by shaping imagery, representing experience, and reinforcing thematic concerns. Tamsula Ao's poetry demonstrates a deliberate use of both abstract and concrete nouns to explore memory, identity, cultural heritage, nature, ageing, love, loss, and resilience. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study employs close textual analysis to investigate how these lexical choices operate within their poetic contexts. The analysis reveals that concrete nouns create vivid images rooted in everyday life and the natural environment, while abstract nouns communicate emotional, psychological, and philosophical dimensions of experience. Rather than functioning independently, these two categories complement one another, enabling ordinary objects and natural elements to acquire symbolic significance. Their interaction strengthens the expressive quality of the poems and deepens their thematic complexity. The study argues that Tamsula Ao's careful selection of nouns constitutes a distinctive feature of her poetic style, illustrating how lexical choices contribute to both aesthetic effect and literary meaning. By foregrounding the stylistic potential of noun selection, this research also highlights the value of lexical stylistics in the interpretation of contemporary Indian English poetry.

Keywords: Linguistic Stylistics, abstract nouns, concrete nouns, symbolic significance, Indian English poetry.

1.0 Introduction

Poetry achieves its artistic effect through the careful selection and arrangement of words. Among the different lexical categories, nouns play a particularly significant role because they identify people, places, objects, emotions, and ideas, thereby shaping imagery, symbolism, and thematic meaning. The choice between concrete and abstract nouns is not merely grammatical but stylistic, influencing how readers perceive and interpret a poem.

From the perspective of linguistic stylistics, lexical choices contribute to the aesthetic and communicative functions of literary texts. Concrete nouns represent tangible entities perceived through the senses, whereas abstract nouns express emotions, qualities, ideas, and mental states. In poetry, these two categories often work together to transform physical experiences into symbolic meanings and emotional expressions.

Tamsula Ao is one of the leading voices in Indian English poetry, recognised for her sensitive portrayal of Naga history, culture, memory, and everyday life. Although her language appears simple and direct, it reflects a carefully structured lexical pattern that enhances the emotional and symbolic depth of her poems.

Most existing studies on Temsula Ao have examined themes such as identity, cultural memory, violence, gender, and ecology. However, limited attention has been given to the stylistic functions of abstract and concrete nouns in shaping her poetic expression. This aspect of her language therefore remains underexplored.

The present study addresses this gap by analysing the stylistic functions of abstract and concrete nouns in selected poems by Temsula Ao. It investigates how these lexical categories contribute to imagery, symbolism, emotional expression, and thematic development. In doing so, the study aims to demonstrate that noun selection is a significant feature of Temsula Ao's poetic style and contributes to the broader field of lexical stylistics in Indian English poetry.

2.0 Objectives of the Research

The present study aims to examine the stylistic functions of abstract and concrete nouns in selected poems by Temsula Ao. The specific objectives are:

1. To identify the abstract and concrete nouns used in the selected poems.
2. To examine the stylistic functions performed by these nouns in the poems.
3. To analyse how noun selection contributes to imagery, symbolism, emotional expression, and thematic development.
4. To explore how the interaction of abstract and concrete nouns represents memory, identity, culture, nature, and human experience in Temsula Ao's poetry.

3.0 Theoretical Framework

The present study is grounded in the framework of linguistic stylistics, which examines how linguistic features contribute to literary meaning and artistic expression. It focuses on the lexical level of language, particularly the use of abstract and concrete nouns, to understand their stylistic significance in poetry. Rather than treating nouns as mere grammatical categories, the study analyses how their selection and contextual use contribute to imagery, symbolism, emotional expression, and thematic development. This framework provides the basis for interpreting how Temsula Ao's lexical choices shape the meaning and artistic quality of her selected poems.

4.0 Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research design based on close textual analysis within the framework of linguistic stylistics. For the present study, the researcher has selected five poems by Temsula Ao: "Songs That Do Not Die," "My Hundredth Birthday," "October," "Ashes," and "Farewell". The selected poems constitute the primary source of data and are chosen through purposive sampling because they represent recurring themes such as memory, identity, nature, ageing, mortality, and resilience. The analysis involves identifying abstract and concrete nouns and examining their stylistic functions within their poetic contexts. Rather than measuring their frequency, the study focuses on how noun selection contributes to imagery, symbolism, thematic development, and the overall interpretation of the poems.

5.0 Textual Analysis: Stylistic Functions of Abstract and Concrete Nouns in the Selected Poems

The selected poems demonstrate Temsula Ao's deliberate use of abstract and concrete nouns as important stylistic resources. Rather than functioning as isolated lexical categories, these nouns work together to construct imagery, express emotions, and develop the central themes of the poems. Concrete nouns

establish the physical world by presenting landscapes, domestic objects, and everyday experiences, while abstract nouns convey emotions, memories, beliefs, and philosophical reflections. Their interaction enables ordinary objects to acquire symbolic meanings and allows intangible experiences to become more vivid and accessible.

Although each poem explores a different aspect of human experience, a consistent pattern emerges in Ao's lexical style. The selection and arrangement of nouns not only strengthen the aesthetic quality of the poems but also deepen their thematic significance. The following analysis examines how abstract and concrete nouns function stylistically in each selected poem and contribute to the overall expressive power of Temsula Ao's poetry.

5.1 Analysis of Abstract and Concrete Nouns in “Songs That Do Not Die”

I've known
A haunting breed of songs
Which endure
Beyond the heard melody.
These are songs
Which reverberate
With soul-sparking scintillation
To revitalise
Limping hearts,
And rejuvenate
Ageing souls.
These are songs
Which rekindle
Joy
Out of sorrow's embers.
These are songs
Which celebrate
The undying spirit
Of mortal man.
And these are songs
Which sing
Of life
That never dies.
That is why
These are songs
That do not die.
(Ao 116)

Songs That Do Not Die explores themes of hope, resilience, and cultural continuity through the effective use of abstract and concrete nouns. The poem is dominated by abstract nouns, which express emotional and philosophical ideas, while a few concrete nouns provide symbolic images that strengthen these themes.

The repeated noun “songs” is the central lexical element of the poem. Although it literally denotes musical compositions, its meaning extends to represent collective memory, cultural heritage, and the enduring human spirit. The recurring phrase “These are songs” creates lexical cohesion and gradually develops the symbolic significance of the noun.

Abstract nouns such as melody, soul, joy, sorrow, spirit, and life shape the reflective tone of the poem. They convey emotions, values, and inner experiences that cannot be perceived physically. The contrast between joy and sorrow suggests that hope often emerges through suffering, while soul, spirit, and life reinforce the poem’s affirmation of resilience and continuity.

The poem contains relatively few concrete nouns, including embers and hearts, but these are rich in symbolic meaning. Embers suggest both destruction and renewal, whereas hearts symbolise emotional strength and endurance. These images make the poem’s abstract ideas more vivid and relatable.

Overall, the interplay of abstract and concrete nouns enables Temsula Ao to transform ordinary words into powerful symbols of hope, memory, and cultural continuity. Her careful noun selection enriches both the emotional impact and the stylistic texture of the poem.

5.2 Analysis of Abstract and Concrete Nouns in “My Hundredth Birthday”

If I live

Long enough to see the day

When they bring in the cake

With a hundred candles,

All of them flickering

And baiting my breath,

How will I perform in the wake?

Will I still be breathing

After the tenth blow?

And even if I do

How will the other ninety go?

Supposing the candles

Are done away with

And we proceed

With the knife,

Will my knuckles bend

And my fingers unite

For this solemn rite?

And if somehow I break

The sacrificial cake:

Will there be crumbs

Enough for all’?

Because you see

My grandchildren

Will attend on me

With all their children

Some Out of good-will

And some for the will. (Ao 119)

In *My Hundredth Birthday*, Tamsula Ao examines ageing, mortality, and family relationships through a balanced use of abstract and concrete nouns. Unlike *Songs That Do Not Die*, this poem is rooted in a familiar domestic setting, where everyday objects gradually acquire symbolic significance.

Concrete nouns such as cake, candles, knife, fingers, crumbs, children, and grandchildren create a vivid picture of a centenary birthday celebration. These lexical items establish a realistic setting while also reflecting the speaker's physical frailty. However, they extend beyond their literal meanings. The candles symbolise the passage of time, the cake represents the celebration of a long life, and the crumbs suggest the gradual decline of life and the remnants of one's legacy.

Alongside these images, abstract nouns including life, wake, rite, goodwill, and will introduce the poem's emotional and philosophical concerns. Life reflects the speaker's awareness of old age, while wake unexpectedly associates the birthday celebration with death, creating a sense of irony. The contrast between goodwill and will exposes the complexity of family relationships by suggesting that affection may coexist with expectations of inheritance.

The interaction of these abstract and concrete nouns transforms an ordinary birthday into a reflection on ageing, mortality, and human relationships. Through simple yet carefully chosen vocabulary, Ao demonstrates how familiar objects can express profound emotional and existential experiences, making noun selection an important feature of the poem's stylistic design.

5.3 Analysis of Abstract and Concrete Nouns in "October"

October is the month
Which has a way
With my heart
And turns it nostalgic
With its magic.
October is the month
When the winter
Is not yet
A threat,
And the summer still
A warm and lovely
Just-past happening.
October is the month,
When the golden ray
Of the autumn sun
Luxuriates
Upon the abundance
And ripeness
All around.
October is the month
Where I always
Want to be.
Daring winter
And not letting
Summer go.

And when the time
Is ripe for me,
I wish to depart
With October in my heart. (Ao 121)

In *October*, Tamsula Ao employs both abstract and concrete nouns to explore the relationship between nature, memory, and human experience. The poem presents the changing seasons as temporal concepts that evoke emotional reflection rather than merely describing the natural world.

The poem contains several abstract nouns, including October, summer, winter, autumn, time, magic, abundance, and ripeness. Although October, summer, winter, and autumn are associated with the natural world, they denote seasons and periods of time rather than tangible objects. In the poem, these nouns function symbolically. October represents fulfilment, balance, and emotional maturity, while summer and winter suggest the transition between vitality and decline. Likewise, time emphasises the inevitability of change and the speaker's acceptance of life's natural progression.

The poem also includes concrete nouns such as heart, ray, and sun, which create vivid sensory imagery. While heart is a physical object, it also carries symbolic significance by representing memory, affection, and personal identity. Similarly, sun and ray reinforce the visual beauty of the autumn landscape and support the poem's reflective atmosphere.

By combining abstract temporal concepts with concrete natural imagery, Ao transforms the changing season into a metaphor for emotional fulfilment, memory, and peaceful acceptance. Her careful lexical choices connect the physical world with the speaker's inner experience, revealing the stylistic richness of the poem.

5.4 Analysis of Abstract and Concrete Nouns in "Ashes"

I watched the flames devour
Your words of love in curls
Of blackening glee
As the crisp pages danced
In dying throes and crumpled
Into ashen heaps.
The embers crackled for more
As though they enjoyed
Watching the living words
Reduced to ashes. (Ao 126)

In *Ashes*, Tamsula Ao explores the themes of love, loss, and memory through a striking use of abstract and concrete nouns. The poem is dominated by concrete nouns, which create vivid images of destruction, while a few abstract nouns reveal the emotional significance behind these physical scenes.

Concrete nouns such as flames, words, pages, embers, and ashes construct the central imagery of the poem. These lexical items depict the gradual destruction of written words, but they also function symbolically. Pages represent memories and relationships, whereas ashes signify the irreversible loss of both. The progression from words to ashes reflects the gradual disappearance of emotional bonds.

The poem contains relatively few abstract nouns, most notably love and glee. Despite their limited occurrence, they shape the emotional tone of the poem. Love highlights the value of what is being destroyed, while glee introduces irony by associating pleasure with destruction, thereby intensifying the emotional impact.

The interaction of abstract and concrete nouns enables Ao to express profound emotional experiences through simple yet powerful imagery. By transforming ordinary objects into symbols of memory and loss, the poem demonstrates how carefully chosen nouns contribute to its emotional depth and stylistic effectiveness.

5.5 Analysis of Abstract and Concrete Nouns in “Farewell”

Farewell

Is not a word

That ever existed

In our permanent vocabulary.

It always remained

In the outer spheres

Of our momentary angers

Hurled loosely around

Only to be relegated

To dim corners

When the angers melted.

But to-day

Time has erected it

Between us

As though in retaliation

For our past misdemeanour

Towards it.

So I concede

And say ‘Farewell’

Only to affirm

That in your passing away

You have re-affirmed

Your permanence in my life. (Ao 136)

In *Farewell*, Temsula Ao explores separation, death, and enduring remembrance through the predominance of abstract nouns. The poem adopts a reflective and philosophical tone, focusing on emotional experience rather than physical reality.

Abstract nouns such as farewell, time, permanence, passing, life, vocabulary, retaliation, misdemeanour, and angers shape the thematic structure of the poem. The repeated noun farewell functions as the central lexical item, gradually evolving from a simple expression of parting into a symbol of irreversible loss and lasting remembrance. Likewise, time is personified as a powerful force that separates individuals, reinforcing the inevitability of mortality. The contrast between passing and permanence suggests that although physical existence ends, emotional connections continue to endure. Similarly, life signifies human existence and the lasting influence of the departed on the speaker’s memory.

The poem contains relatively few concrete nouns, including “corners,” which create a subtle visual image within an otherwise abstract lexical framework. The phrase “dim corners” metaphorically represents the hidden spaces of memory where past conflicts and anger gradually fade. This limited use of concrete imagery strengthens the poem’s emphasis on inner reflection rather than external description.

By combining a small number of concrete images with a predominance of abstract nouns, Ao transforms a personal farewell into a universal meditation on memory, loss, and permanence. Her careful lexical choices demonstrate how nouns can convey profound emotional and philosophical meanings while enhancing the stylistic depth of the poem.

6.0 Findings

A comparative analysis of the selected poems reveals that Temsula Ao employs abstract and concrete nouns as complementary stylistic resources. Although each poem addresses different themes, noun selection consistently contributes to the construction of imagery, symbolism, and thematic meaning. The analysis further indicates that the distribution of these noun categories varies according to the thematic focus of each poem. *Songs That Do Not Die*, *October*, and *Farewell* rely more heavily on abstract nouns to express resilience, memory, and emotional continuity, whereas *My Hundredth Birthday* and *Ashes* make greater use of concrete nouns to anchor emotional experiences in vivid physical imagery.

Overall, Temsula Ao's careful selection of nouns demonstrates that lexical choices play a vital role in shaping her poetic style. Through the interaction of abstract and concrete nouns, she transforms ordinary objects and abstract ideas into powerful expressions of memory, identity, love, ageing, and cultural continuity, thereby enriching both the artistic expression and thematic depth of her poetry.

7.0 Conclusion

The present study has demonstrated that abstract and concrete nouns play a significant stylistic role in Temsula Ao's selected poems. Rather than functioning merely as grammatical categories, these nouns contribute to the construction of imagery, symbolism, emotional expression, and thematic meaning. Concrete nouns establish the physical world of the poems through references to nature, domestic objects, and everyday experiences, while abstract nouns communicate emotions, values, memories, and philosophical reflections. Their interaction enables ordinary objects to acquire symbolic significance and allows complex human experiences to be expressed with clarity and depth.

The analysis further reveals that Temsula Ao's careful noun selection reflects the thematic diversity of her poetry. Through the interplay of abstract and concrete nouns, she explores recurring concerns such as memory, identity, love, ageing, mortality, resilience, and cultural continuity. Although the balance between these noun categories varies across the selected poems, their stylistic function remains central to the creation of poetic meaning.

This study therefore concludes that the deliberate use of abstract and concrete nouns is a distinctive feature of Temsula Ao's lexical style. By highlighting the stylistic significance of noun selection, the study contributes to the understanding of her poetic language and demonstrates the usefulness of linguistic stylistics as an approach to the analysis of Indian English poetry.

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