

CONSTRUCTING THE WITCH: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF IDENTITY AND SPIRITUALITY IN *THE WITCH OF PORTOBELLO* USING JAMES PAUL GEE'S SEVEN BUILDING TASKS OF LANGUAGE

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Abstract

This paper examines Paulo Coelho's *The Witch of Portobello* through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), using James Paul Gee's Seven Building Tasks of Language as the central analytical framework. Through the narrative of Athena, a woman whose spiritual journey defies societal conventions, the novel offers a rich ground for exploring how language constructs identity, power, and belief systems. By integrating Gee's model with Norman Fairclough's socio-cultural approach and Teun A. van Dijk's socio-cognitive perspective, this study demonstrates how language functions as a tool for ideological subversion and identity formation in literary texts. This analysis finds that Coelho utilizes language not only to tell a story but also to contest dominant narratives of gender, spirituality, and authority.

Keywords: CDA, James Paul Gee, identity construction, spirituality, Paulo Coelho, *The Witch of Portobello*

Introduction

In contemporary literature, female spiritual identity is often entangled with discourses of marginality, power, and resistance. *The Witch of Portobello* (Coelho, 2006) explores these tensions through the life of Athena, a mystical woman whose journey traverses social, religious, and cultural boundaries. Through Athena's spiritual awakening and rejection by society, Coelho constructs a discourse that challenges conventional norms of gender, religion, and authority.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a powerful lens to explore these issues. Previous studies, such as those by (Fairclough,

2001) and (Van Dijk, 1998), have emphasized the role of language in shaping ideology, identity, and social power. James Paul Gee's (2011) approach to discourse, particularly his Seven Building Tasks of Language, offers a focused framework to analyze how language enacts social functions in texts.

Prior research on Coelho has explored spiritual themes (Costa, 2013), the construction of the feminine divine (Nascimento, 2019), and narrative identity (Ferreira, 2015), but few studies have combined CDA with literary analysis in this specific way. By applying Gee's model and integrating it with Fairclough's sociocultural perspective and van Dijk's socio-cognitive theory, this paper seeks to fill that gap and explore how *The Witch of Portobello* constructs meaning, identity, and resistance through language.

This research is situated at the intersection of literary studies, discourse analysis, and gender studies. While much of the existing scholarship on *The Witch of Portobello* tends to focus on its spiritual or feminist themes in isolation, this study positions itself uniquely by applying a critical linguistic approach to the novel. By integrating Gee's micro-level language analysis with broader socio-cultural models by Fairclough and van Dijk, this paper not only explores how identity and spirituality are constructed through discourse but also challenges dominant ideologies embedded in literary narratives. Thus, the research contributes to an emerging body of interdisciplinary work that uses CDA to interrogate power, gender, and identity within fictional texts

Literary Review

The intersection of literature, language, and ideology has long been a fertile ground for scholarly exploration. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), pioneered by Fairclough (2001), Van Dijk (1998), and Wodak (2001), offers a methodological approach to uncovering how language shapes and is shaped by power relations. Within literary studies, CDA has been increasingly employed to interrogate how narratives construct and contest social realities, especially in relation to gender, spirituality, and identity.

James Paul Gee's framework, particularly his Seven Building Tasks of Language (2011), has been instrumental in analyzing how discourse constructs meaning within specific contexts. Gee's model has

been applied in various domains—from education and media to politics and fiction—but its use in the analysis of spiritual and feminist discourses in contemporary literature remains relatively underexplored. His approach foregrounds how language enacts identities, values, and power structures, making it particularly useful for examining character construction and ideological tensions in novels like *The Witch of Portobello*.

Several studies have addressed Paulo Coelho's thematic focus on mysticism, personal transformation, and the divine feminine. Costa (2013) explores how Coelho's fiction engages with spiritual archetypes, while Nascimento (2019) focuses on the construction of the feminine divine across his works, emphasizing Coelho's subversion of patriarchal spirituality. Ferreira (2015) examines how narrative structure and voice contribute to identity formation in Coelho's novels. These works, however, tend to rely on thematic and symbolic interpretation without a detailed linguistic or discursive analysis.

Meanwhile, feminist scholars such as Lazar (2005), Sunderland (2004), and Butler (1990) have emphasized the discursive construction of gender, arguing that language is a central site of ideological struggle. Their insights are particularly relevant in examining how Athena, as a character, both embodies and disrupts traditional gendered expectations. Similarly, Kristeva (1984) and Irigaray (1985) offer critical insights into how feminine subjectivity and embodied knowledge challenge phallogocentric systems of meaning—a theme echoed in Athena's intuitive, non-linear spirituality.

The present study brings together these strands by using CDA not just as a methodological tool, but as a theoretical framework to investigate how Coelho's narrative contests dominant ideologies. By applying Gee's micro-level discourse analysis alongside Fairclough's sociocultural model and Van Dijk's socio-cognitive perspective, this research contributes to an interdisciplinary understanding of how language in literature can serve as a site for ideological resistance and identity construction

Methods

This qualitative study employs a Critical Discourse Analysis approach to examine selected excerpts from *The Witch of Portobello*.

James Paul Gee's Seven Building Tasks of Language—Significance, Practices, Identities, Relationships, Politics (distribution of social goods), Connections, and Sign Systems and Knowledge—serve as the primary analytical framework. These tasks reveal how language performs social functions in texts.

To deepen the analysis, Gee's model is triangulated with:

1. Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Framework, which analyzes language on textual, discursive, and sociocultural levels (Fairclough, 2015).
2. Van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Model, which examines how discourse constructs mental models and ideologies, particularly related to social structures and power (van Dijk, 2008).

Combining these perspectives allows for a layered reading of how language constructs the spiritual, cultural, and political dimensions of identity in Coelho's novel.

Findings and Discussions

The analysis of the novel reveals several recurring patterns in how "The Witch" is constructed in the novel. The findings are presented along Gee's Seven Building Tasks:

1. Significance

These quotes illustrate how Athena, through her language, reconfigures what counts as important in the spiritual and social realms. Her statements elevate intuition, ritual, and personal transformation over institutional doctrines. Gee argues that language makes things significant by the way we stress, repeat, or elaborate on them. Athena's choice of words and her repetition of spiritual autonomy highlight the significance she places on individual experience, making it central to the reader's understanding of truth, femininity, and the divine.

Script 1. She wasn't doing anything unusual; she was dancing in the middle of the street, as I've seen many people do before. But there was something in her that radiated light.

This script suggests that although Athena's action (dancing) is not inherently remarkable, the language used ("radiated light") marks it as significant. Gee emphasizes that significance can be built by the way we

represent actions and events. Here, the narrator's choice of metaphor attributes spiritual or divine power to Athena's otherwise ordinary behavior. This linguistic emphasis transforms the mundane into the mystical, elevating Athena's presence. It reflects Fairclough's idea of how discourse adds symbolic capital to social practices.

Script 2. "The moment I laid eyes on her, I knew I was in the presence of someone extraordinary."

The use of absolutes ("knew," "extraordinary") functions to create certainty and elevate Athena's status in the social order of the text. This quote builds significance by eliminating ambiguity, reinforcing the spiritual and almost mythical aura around her identity. From van Dijk's perspective, the narrator's cognitive model (schema of 'extraordinary people') is triggered and affirmed through discourse, which contributes to social cognition about spiritual figures.

Script 3. "She taught me that every gesture, no matter how small, has power."

This statement reflects Athena's ideology, and the use of the word "power" linked with "gesture" constructs a new value system. In Gee's terms, she's using discourse to elevate the minor (gesture) into something ideologically loaded. This also reflects how alternative forms of power (non-verbal, feminine, symbolic) are made socially visible through discourse.

2. Practices

Gee's task of Practices helps us examine how Athena's spiritual behaviors—ritual dancing, chanting, invoking the "Mother"—are not just described but legitimized through language. The community around her perceives her rituals as transformative, suggesting that language not only reflects practices but also shapes how they are socially received. This aligns with Fairclough's idea that discourse is a form of social practice. Athena's non-traditional rituals become normalized through repeated linguistic affirmation, asserting alternative ways of being spiritual.

Script 4. “She danced in a trance, lost in the music, her hands tracing ancient symbols in the air.”

The act of dancing, often marginalized in traditional religious practices, becomes a ritualized spiritual practice through language. Gee’s notion of practices is reflected here as discursive construction of embodied knowledge. The term “ancient symbols” implies cultural continuity and legitimacy, while “trance” signals altered consciousness. This reflects Fairclough’s view that discourse constructs new social practices through semiotic resources.

Script 5. “People came to watch, not out of curiosity, but reverence.”

This quote reveals a shift in social perception, linguistically constructed. Instead of the expected term “curiosity,” the use of “reverence” redefines the act of watching as a form of participatory spirituality. The practice of observation itself becomes ritualized through discourse.

Script 6. “She said she wasn’t performing; she was channeling the Mother.”

Here, Athena distinguishes between performance (an external, perhaps ego-driven act) and channeling (a sacred act of divine mediation). Through this language, the practice is not theatrical but spiritual. The discursive shift from performance to ritual reflects Gee’s idea of how words frame our actions and practices, assigning them different cultural meanings.

3. Identities

Athena’s identity is constructed through contradictory narratives—she is both revered and reviled. Gee’s concept of building identity shows how language enacts who we are or who we are perceived to be. The fragmented voices describing Athena mirror her multiple discourses: the mother, the mystic, the rebel. Her language, and that of

those around her, constructs an identity that is fluid, performative, and empowered, echoing Judith Butler's theory of identity as constructed through discourse. Her refusal to settle into one role becomes a radical act of resistance.

Script 7. "She wasn't afraid to say she had no fixed identity."

This is a direct expression of fluid identity, and the rejection of fixity is in itself an identity stance. Gee argues that identity is built in how we use language to present ourselves. By declaring she has no "fixed identity," Athena positions herself as postmodern, plural, and resistant. This echoes Judith Butler's theory of performativity—identity is something one "does," not something one "is."

Script 8. "To one, she was a saint; to another, a fraud."

This contrastive structure shows how discourse constructs multiple identities depending on who is speaking. Gee notes that identity is enacted through situated meanings. Athena's identity exists in a discursive field of contradiction, and this multivocality destabilizes dominant narratives about what a woman or spiritual leader should be.

Script 9. "She reinvented herself each time, depending on who she was speaking to."

This reflects the relational and interactional nature of identity. Athena adapts, and her identity is co-constructed in discourse. The word "reinvented" implies active agency in identity construction, aligning with Gee's view that language doesn't just describe identity—it enacts it. It also resonates with Fairclough's view that identities are negotiated within discourse and social interaction.

4. Relationships

Gee's fourth building task reveals how Athena's discourse challenges hierarchical relationships. She uses egalitarian language, referring to her followers as companions rather than disciples. This subverts traditional religious hierarchies. Her assertion of independence

from religious intermediaries (“I don’t need a priest to talk to God”) reframes spiritual authority as internal rather than external, aligning with van Dijk’s theory of ideological control through discourse. Relationships are redefined not as top-down but as shared journeys toward truth.

Script 10. “She reinvented herself each time, depending on who she was speaking to.”

This quote deconstructs hierarchy linguistically. The phrase “equal in her presence” rejects spiritual elitism. Gee argues that relationships are shaped by the roles and positions enacted in discourse. Athena repositions her followers not as subordinates but as peers, an act of discursive rebalancing of power.

Script 11. “She called the old beggar ‘Master’ and bowed before him.”

Here, Athena reverses traditional power dynamics through language and gesture. Calling a marginalized figure “Master” elevates him. In Gee’s framework, this shows how language inverts social positioning. Van Dijk would see this as a discursive strategy that reconfigures ideologically embedded roles.

Script 12. “She didn’t give sermons, she asked questions.”

By framing spiritual dialogue through inquiry rather than proclamation, Athena establishes a dialogic relationship rather than an authoritative one. In Gee’s terms, this positions her within a relationship of mutual discovery, not top-down instruction.

5. Politics (Distribution of Social Goods)

Here, Gee’s focus on the distribution of “social goods” is central. Athena’s language reassigns spiritual legitimacy from formal institutions to personal experience, undermining the monopoly of organized religion. By presenting access to the divine as universal rather than exclusive, her discourse redistributes religious capital. This subversion resonates with

Fairclough's view of discourse as a site of ideological struggle, where power can be contested and reallocated. Athena empowers the marginalized to see themselves as spiritually authoritative.

Script 13. "You don't need a church to find God."

This statement directly challenges institutional control over spiritual legitimacy. "Church" stands for institutional authority, and by negating its necessity, Athena reallocates spiritual access to the individual. Gee's social goods are clearly seen here—access to divine knowledge is made democratic.

Script 14. "God is within each of us."

This internalization of divinity promotes a non-hierarchical distribution of sacredness. It reflects both Fairclough and van Dijk's theories on how discourse can reproduce or resist dominant ideologies. Athena's speech works against the monopoly held by patriarchal institutions on defining God.

Script 15. "She told the rich and the poor the same thing: Listen to your heart."

This exemplifies equality in the distribution of guidance and empowerment. No class privilege or educational background is required to access Athena's teachings—her discourse removes barriers to spiritual "goods."

6. Connections

Through metaphors and analogies, Athena connects diverse domains—light and darkness, science and intuition, sacred and profane. Gee notes that connections in language reveal how we make sense of the world. Athena's discourse integrates seemingly contradictory domains, which deconstructs binary thinking and promotes a holistic spiritual worldview. These connections are not accidental; they are strategic acts of meaning-making that resist dominant Western rationalism. Her

language bridges opposing concepts, advocating for a more integrative consciousness.

Script 16. "Light needs darkness. One cannot exist without the other."

This philosophical dichotomy is used to promote a holistic worldview. Gee's task of Connections focuses on how discourse brings domains together. Athena links spiritual growth with embracing contradictions—this is a discursive bridge between binary concepts.

Script 17. "I learned as much from failure as from joy."

Athena's language connects emotional opposites as equally valuable learning experiences. In doing so, she rejects the dominant Western success/failure binary. It's a shift from linear to integrative meaning-making.

Script 18. "Science cannot explain love, and yet it governs our lives."

This quote juxtaposes rational knowledge systems (science) with emotional-spiritual realities (love). Athena draws a connection between domains often seen in opposition, promoting an alternative epistemology that values both.

7. Sign Systems and Knowledge

Athena challenges dominant knowledge systems, especially those rooted in patriarchal and religious traditions. Gee's final task addresses how different sign systems (like books, rituals, or intuition) are valued. Athena's preference for experiential knowledge over scriptural authority reconfigures epistemological hierarchies. Her language authorizes alternative ways of knowing, thus democratizing access to spiritual truth and undermining hegemonic discourses on what counts as valid knowledge. In doing so, she reclaims marginalized ways of understanding—particularly those linked to feminine intuition.

Script 19. "Books can teach us only so much."

Here, Athena critiques textual authority, a dominant Western sign system. Gee's last task deals with how different ways of knowing are authorized or dismissed. Athena positions lived experience as a more valuable source of knowledge, deconstructing academic and religious hierarchies.

Script 20. "The dance speaks louder than words."

This elevates non-verbal knowledge systems—movement, emotion, rhythm—as valid and even superior to verbal language. It also critiques the dominance of logos in patriarchal traditions. In Fairclough's terms, this is a form of semiotic resistance.

Script 21. "I closed my eyes, and I understood more than ever before."

Athena's discourse places intuition and silence above rational explanation. The act of closing her eyes symbolizes disengaging from dominant visual/logical systems, embracing inner knowing instead. This further legitimizes marginalized epistemologies through spiritual discourse.

Conclusion

The Witch of Portobello is a powerful case study in the discursive construction of spiritual identity, resistance, and transformation. Through the lens of James Paul Gee's Seven Building Tasks of Language, this study has illustrated how Paulo Coelho uses language not merely as a storytelling device but as a mechanism of ideological intervention. Athena, the central character, does not passively exist within the boundaries of dominant discourse; rather, she actively reshapes the landscape of meaning around her. Each of her actions—whether through speech, silence, dance, or ritual—is a challenge to institutional definitions of spirituality, gender, and knowledge.

The novel's multi-narrative structure allows for a multiplicity of voices, each contributing to the layered construction of Athena's identity.

This polyphonic discourse underscores Gee's principle that identity is not fixed but enacted and contested in situated moments. Furthermore, the tension between Athena's intuitive, body-based spirituality and the rational, institutional authority of the Church and patriarchal tradition echoes Fairclough's view of discourse as a site of social struggle. It also aligns with van Dijk's perspective on how discourse can manipulate or dismantle social cognition, especially in contexts of power and ideology.

Athena's language choices—and the language used about her—function to reallocate social goods such as authority, knowledge, and spiritual legitimacy. Her refusal to conform to traditional spiritual hierarchies positions her as a radical figure who uses discourse to democratize access to the sacred. In doing so, Coelho's narrative affirms feminine, intuitive, and embodied forms of knowing as not only valid but vital.

Ultimately, *The Witch of Portobello* exemplifies how literature can serve as a critical discourse space where power, identity, and belief systems are deconstructed and reimaged. This study reveals how Gee's discourse framework, when integrated with the insights of Fairclough and van Dijk, offers a robust lens for understanding how language is used to construct new realities. Through Athena's journey, the novel invites readers to question inherited truths and recognize the transformative potential of language in both personal and collective dimensions.

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