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An Examination of the Literary Stylistic Effectiveness of Barrack Obama's *Dreams from my Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*.

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the literary features of style that Barrack Obama has employed in his autobiography, *Dreams from my Father*, and how they effectively help shape his search for his identity and develop other concerns in the text. The literary features in

this autobiography include dialogue, suspense, narration, symbolism, flashback, and language variation, use of songs, description, the dream and journey motifs, irony among others.

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Background

This paper looks at Barack Obama's *Dreams from my Father's* popularity as arising from the way it is written rather than as arising from Obama's political popularity. It is our argument that the mainstay of Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father* is the way he manipulates language to communicate his search for identity. This is informed by various responses the text and the author have received especially since its reprint in 2004.

As Mahat notes in his M.A thesis 'Style in Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*' (2010), many critics have hailed his oratorical skills and in the event overlooked his literary skills. This prompted Mahat to focus on stylistics in the general sense, including the organization of the text, autobiographical style and the literary features. In his M.A thesis, Mbui, J (2009) focused on the themes in *Dreams*. Other studies have looked at whether Obama was being truthful in his memoirs and the reflections of the black experience in America. In *Critical Essays on Barack Obama*, Tsaaio, J.(2012), deals with the literary trajectory of Obama's literature. He avers:

Moreover, his global influence aside, the imaginative tone of these introductory comments is justified, even anticipated, in the poetics of his autobiographical work, *Dreams from my Father*, through which Obama is ever conscious of the role of his imagination in the construction of his history and identity- in his coloring and cohering of details of his domestic and ancestral circumstance. Indeed in this work Obama seems to intuit that one of the most salient tests of an autobiography's worth is its ability to reveal the role of the imagination in the organic recreation of a personal, recognizable and demonstrable history, the pact made between memory and necessity in the revelation of an ever inchoate subjectivity. (xix)

And according to Simpson (2004), stylistics deals with interpretation of texts where language is given primacy. Since stylisticians are interested in language not for its own sake, they look at forms, patterns and levels which constitute linguistic structure important in interpretation of meanings in a text. The preferred object of stylistics is literature because of its techniques of creativity and invention in language. (Simpson, 2004, p2)

The Literary Effectiveness of Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*

This paper focuses on the literary features of style that Barack Obama has employed and how they effectively help shape his search for his identity and develop other concerns in the text. The literary features in this autobiography include dialogue, suspense, narration, symbolism, flashback, and language variation, use of songs, description, the dream and journey motifs, irony among others.

In *Dreams from My Father*, what keeps the reader turning the pages is their desire to discover what the author would do after getting news of his father's death. Obama has used suspense effectively to interest his reader in making a journey with him to discover who the stranger that calls to give him the news is and of ultimately explaining who he (Obama) himself is. This is beautiful in itself since it hints at the message of the text-his search for identity. For instance, a reader would question: why does he refer to the caller as a stranger? Suspense constitutes a writer withholding certain information from the reader until an appropriate time in the plot or withholding it completely, all these for a certain effect. This is done deliberately, which constitutes the writer's skillfulness. This paper notes

that as soon as the caller cuts the call, the author does not tell us what action he intends to take now that he has been informed of his father's death. As readers, we read on to find out why the father dies so far away from his son. As Mahat points out, it takes almost seven years before the author gets to the father's grave yet the reader is entertainingly lead to read through all the pages.

Another instance of suspense is when the caller, Jane, tells Barack she will call again.

"Barry? Barry is this you?"

"Yes...who's this?"

"Yes, Barry...this is your aunt Jane. In Nairobi. Can you hear me?"

"I'm sorry-who did you say you were?"

"Aunt Jane. Listen, Barry, your father is dead. He is killed n a car accident. Hello? Can you hear me? I say, your father is dead. Barry, please call your uncle in Boston and tell him. I can't talk now, okay Barry. I will try to call you again..."

That was all. The line cut off, and I sat down on the couch, smelling eggs burn in the kitchen, staring at cracks in the plaster, trying to measure my loss(Obama,1995,p 5)

The author, throughout the text does not inform us whether Aunt Jane called again or not. Even then, by promising Barack that she would try to call again- she heightens the anxiety in the reader to know what else she would explain if she called-for instance: what funeral arrangements were in place? Would they wait for Barack? Had they organized for him to attend the funeral? All these aspects keep the reader glued to the text in the hope of filling in the missing links as the text progresses. That these details are not given helps propel the idea that Obama feels, he does not belong.

Aunt Jane also asks Barry to call his uncle in Boston. The author does not tell us whether he knew the uncle or not. Did he ever visit him at Boston? Was the uncle in touch? Why would Aunt Jane not call the uncle herself? What kind of uncle was he anyway? Paternal or maternal? It is this skillful withholding of such information that helps steer the reader's interest in reading the text. Even when the author makes that journey to Kenya, he does not mention the uncle in Boston, Aunt Jane does not inform him whether she had ever tried calling him again. All these details, or lack of them, are important to the author as they help ground his desire to understand himself better.

What we are also not informed about is the reaction of the other characters on the death of the author's father. Though Mahat regards this as loud silences, we can treat it as suspense since we would have liked to know how the mother- Ann Dunham would have reacted to the former husband's death. It is interesting to note that the mother informed the author of the father's love but the author misses to inform us how she reacted on her former husband's death. This missing information helps explain Obama's other concern in his search for identity, family relations.

The journeys that the author makes to various places in the world also heighten the drama surrounding his life. For before he settled at one place comfortably, he finds himself asked to move- especially when he is young. The reader is also made apprehensive, just like the author, about what to expect in the new place especially given that the places are not just different within the same country, but are different countries, with different races, social and economic backgrounds and political organizations. The author travels from mainland America, to the island of Hawaii, to Indonesia, back to the mainland America, and finally to Kenya. Even within the mainland USA, the places differ as Altgeld Gardens to the White House and the Mathare slums he visits are different from the home of Ruth- his

stepmother in Westlands in Kenya. The reader therefore reads on to satisfy their curiosity of how the author would react to these different situations. When the author and his grandparents travel to Hawaii for instance, the locals received them with mixed feelings. The grandfather and the author try to settle by reacting differently:

In such surroundings my racial stock caused my grandparents few problems, and they quickly adopted the scornful attitude local residents took toward visitors who expressed such hang-ups. Sometimes when Gramps saw tourists watching me play in the sand, he would come up beside them and whisper, with appropriate reverence, that I was the great-grandson of King Kamehameha, Hawaii's first monarch. "I'm sure that your picture's in a thousand scrapbooks, Bar", he liked to tell me with a grin. "from Idaho to Maine." That particular story is ambiguous, I think; I see in it a strategy to avoid hard issues..."swimming must just come naturally to these Hawaiians." To which he responded that that would be hard to figure, since "that boy happens to be my grandson, his mother is from Kansas, his father is from the interior of Kenya, and there isn't an ocean for miles in either damn place...(Obama, 1995, p 25)

In this excerpt one clearly sees how the people of Hawaii react to foreigners, they treat them with scorn. Would Barack be treated the same way? How would the grandfather react? We can see the fear of not belonging haunting the grandfather when he invents a lie that Obama is a great grandson of King Kamehameha, Hawaii's first monarch, but we see in it also the desire to belong, the search for identity in the fact that he wants his grandson to be identified with native Hawaiians, and which better way than to be identified with the monarch?(with hindsight, this could be said to foreshadow Obama's rise to power as Gramps suggests that Bar's picture must be in most scrapbooks. As the president, he is in more albums than the grand father would have imagined). The idea that Barack settles quickly is also communicated in the fact that he learns to swim so fast that he is taken for a native Hawaiian to whom swimming comes naturally but as Gramps explains, he is of Kenyan and Kansas descent. So where does he truly belong?

When he makes the journey to Kenya, the author is full of hope; hope that he will finally be identified with his people; hope that people will not wonder of the sound of his name; hope of walking the same path his father had walked before; and hope of fulfilling his dream. The reader's expectations are also carried with the author's, but they equally fall with the disappointment he meets at the airport, the Mathare slums which resemble Altgeld Gardens in Chicago, the state of his family, the jealousy of his stepmother, and rise again with the warmth of being around his family. The point is that it is the author's use of suspense that makes the reader discover in bits, his true feelings. When he finally arrives at Alego, the suspense is heightened from the fact that the author had spent a number of days in Kenya before he had travelled to Alego. Why did he do that? How will the people react? Who are the people? When he finally arrives, he does not even go to the graveside immediately, the reader can take this for his lack of awareness of where at Home Squared, as they called home, the Old Man had been buried. So what would happen to a postponed re-union with an absent and departed father? This is how the author explains it:

For a long time I sat between the two graves and wept. When my tears were finally spent, I felt a calmness wash over me. I felt the circle finally close. I realized that who I

was, what I care about, was no longer, just a matter of intellect or obligation, no longer a construct of words. I saw that my life in America-the black life, the white life, the sense of abandonment I'd felt as a boy, the frustration and hope I'd witnessed in Chicago- all of it was connected with this small plot of earth an ocean away, connected by more than the accident of a name or the color of my skin. The pain I felt was my father's pain. My questions were my brothers' questions, their struggle, my birthright (Obama, 1995, p429-30)

He manages to reconcile his feelings. Instead of being angry at the father, he comes to understand him. He realizes what could have driven his father into the kind of life he led, the grandfather he had. This he gets through the story of their lives given to him by Granny. Though he had hoped for an ideal home as evidenced at Punahou where he talks about his father as a prince, this realization emboldens his resolve to fight for humanity. He realizes, the father's suffering was as a result of fighting against corruption and sees in this, humanity's commonness, from Indonesia to Hawaii, Altgeld to Mathare slums and this as his birthright: "their struggle my birthright." Indeed, there are other instances of suspense but the ones illustrated here serve the point that Obama consciously uses this style for aesthetic effect as well as to convey his message. Mahat sums up this neatly when he states that suspense is "...the invisible string that ties together the narrative of the autobiography."

The theme of the text- search for an identity presupposes one's lack of it, or uncertainty about it. Barrack Obama does not lack an identity, but he seems to have several identities because of his birth, where he stays and how he speaks. In the text, he brings out the difficult backgrounds through the use of variation in language, code mixing or deviation.

He is a black person who is raised by white, fairly well-off grandparents but who constantly interacts with blacks, who are mostly disadvantaged. Every group that he interacts with demands a certain use of language and Obama adequately responds to it. To begin with, we look at the dialect he uses with the black people he interacts with. This is mostly slang and carries in it the anger the black people harbor against the whites. At other times it carries with it the warmth to each other; it is informal and friendly as opposed to the formal language used while interacting with whites or officialdom. Frank, a black man in Hawaii, provides a father figure to Obama in the absence of his father. This is how one of their conversations goes:

"How's your grandpa?"

"He is all right."

"So what are you doing here?"

I wasn't sure. I told Frank some of what had happened. He nodded and poured us each a shot "Funny cat, your grandfather" he said.

"You know we grew up maybe fifty miles apart?"

I shook my head.

"We sure did. Both of us lived near Wichita. We did not know each other, of course. I was long gone by the time he was old enough to remember anything. I might have seen some of his people, though. Might've passed on the street. If I did, I would've had to step off the sidewalk to give 'em room. Your grandpa ever tell you about things like that?"

I threw the whiskey down my throat, shaking my head again.

“Naw”. Frank said, “ I don’t suppose he would have. Stan doesn’t like to talk about that of Kansas much. Makes him uncomfortable. Told me how she became a regular part of the family...look after somebody else’s children, her coming to do somebody else’s laundry. A regular part of the family? (Obama , 1995,p89-90)

Frank deviates from the norm of the English language, especially the formal language. His words are mostly contracted- this reveals the informality level and the friendly touch he has with Obama. His sentences are also grammatically incomplete. He drops the subject e.g. ‘told me...’. The conversation here is between two black people and we expect it to be different if a white person is present. This clearly illuminates the author’s issues with race. The conversation here also points at Gramps’ discomfort with the question as he also feels guilty having previously employed black people to work for his family in Kansas.

The militancy in language is expressed more by Ray, Obama’s friend at Punahou. In his frustrations for the lack of a dancing partner during parties in Hawaii, he quickly attributes it to racism, which Obama does not quite agree with:

“I mean it this time,” he was saying to me now. “these girls are A-1, USDA-Certified racists. All of ‘em. White girls. Asian girls- shoot, these Asians were than the whites. Think we got a disease or something.”

“Maybe they are looking at that big butt of yours. Man, I thought you were in training.”

“Get your hands out of my fries. You ain’t my bitch. Nigger...buy your own damn fries. Now what was I talking about?”

“Just ‘cause a girl don’t go out with you doesn’t make her a racist?”

“Don’t be thick, all right? I’m not just talking about one time. Look I ask Monica out, she says no. I say Ok...your shirt’s not so hot anyway.” Ray stopped to check my reaction, then smiled. “All right, maybe I actually don’t say all that. I just tell her Okay, Monica, you know we still tight. Next thing I know, she’s hooked up with Steve ‘No neck’ Yamaguchi, the two of ‘em all holding hands and shit, like a couple of lovebirds. So fine- I figure there is more fish in the sea. I go ask Pamela out, she tells me she ain’t going to dance. I say cool. Get to the dance, guess who’s standing there, got her arms around Rick Cook. ‘Hi, Ray” she says, like she don’t know what’s going down. Rick Cook! Now you know that guy ain’t shit. Sorry-assed motherfucker got nothing on me, right? Nothing? (My emphasis)(Obama, 1995, p 73)

This clearly reveals that though blacks accuse others of racism, they are not purged of it themselves. Ray is angry at Steve and has labeled him ‘no neck’ because he is Japanese. He finds no other reason for Monica preferring Steve to him. He is stereotypical and a bigot- issues that concern Obama in his search for identity. Ray also looks at himself so much at the expense of others “...you know that guy...got nothing on me.”

We note that the language the author uses in narration is different from the language of the dialogues with different groups of people which reveals his relationship to them, their attitudes to him and towards life, their racial as well as academic backgrounds and their levels of education. The author’s dialogue with his parents is devoid of the abuse and violence that is presented in the dialogue with his peers. For instance, the dialogue with Marty is different from the ones described above as he (Marty) is white and they are relating on a professional level.

“So what makes you think they can work together now?”

“They don’t have any choice. Not if they want their jobs back.”

As we reentered the highway, Marty began to tell me more about...” (Obama, 1995, p 149)

Contrast this with the language used by most black people as evidenced on a poster of a black boy that read “ God don’t make No junk” at Dr. Collier’s office in Chicago, and you discover that blacks use English differently from the whites in the U.S.

When Obama visits Kenya, he uses his English and adds in a few Kiswahili and Dholuo words, to reclaim his ancestry, to feel one with the people. When he describes the transport situation in the city “cars meandered across lanes and roundabouts, dodging potholes, bicycles and pedestrians, while rickety jitneys- called matatus, I was told...(Obama, 1995, p 307). This makes the reader believe the author actually travelled. He also expresses his experience at the curios market in Nairobi while with Auma when he explains that she frowned and said something in Swahili, in reference to the price, ‘the Whiteman’s price.’

This brings to light the author’s search for identity, for even in Kenya, he is given a Mzungu price- a tourist’s price, so where does he belong? When he travels to Alego, he strikes rapport with the grandmother by uttering a Luo word:

She hugged Auma and Roy as if she were going to wrestle them to the ground, then turned to me and grabbed my hand in a hearty handshake.

“Halo!” she said, attempting English.

“Musawa!” I said in Luo. (Obama, 1995, p 374)

There are a few other words such as panga, shamba, and kanga that all apart from adding credibility to the author’s story, also make it authentic, identifying the particular setting.

The author has used symbolism to concretize his ideas. While travelling from Mombasa, he observes baobab trees and is mesmerized by their ability to endure the tough environment that they grow in:

“Eventually, the rain stopped, and we found ourselves looking on a barren landscape of gravel and shrub and the occasional baobab tree, its naked, *searching branches decorated...* go for years without flowering, surviving on the sparsest of rainfall...possessed a special power... “*They look like each one can tell a story,*” Auma said. (Obama, 1995, p436-37)(Emphasis added.)

As Mahat notes, the baobab is a representation of the author himself. Its sense of secrecy and timelessness strikes a chord with him. But more than that, the author survives in an environment that is very difficult but he manages to be calm amidst all of it. As Auma suggests, each baobab tree seemed able to tell a story, Obama tells his story in this compelling *Dreams from My Father*.

When he works as a community organizer in Chicago, Obama is surprised by the poor housing structures in Altgeld Gardens. Although the housing is referred to as the gardens, Obama finds this ironic because of the term’s “ evocation of something fresh and well-

tended- a sanctified earth.” This takes on a symbolic meaning for him as it represents the authorities’ disinterest in caring for the poor. It does not just represent the Federal government’s lack of concern – for Federal government is headed by the white people- but also the local authorities desire to benefit themselves at the expense of others. This he finds true since Chicago has a black mayor. When he travels to Kenya and visits his relatives at Mathare slums, it reminds him of the Altgeld Gardens back in Chicago:

Eventually we came to one edge of Mathare, where a series of...and yet curiously unfinished, the wood beams and rough cement exposed to the elements, like they’d suffered an aerial bombardment... (Obama, 1995, p332)

Obama finds in Mathare, Kariokor and Jakarta, the same poor conditions as he finds in Altgeld Gardens- this helps him come to terms with himself, that human experiences are similar irrespective of skin colour, religion or other considerations. So even though Altgeld Gardens exists in itself, it is symbolic of a lack of care in government for those in need not just in Chicago and the places mentioned, but to such similar ones as well.

The title of the autobiography is symbolic. Though Obama actually dreams on many occasions while asleep as seen in the text, his use of the word dream goes beyond the visions one gets while asleep. The dream represents his desire to find out his true identity. This is what makes him restless till he makes the journey in Kenya to Home Squared. The desire makes him visit the library to read about his origins. It is the desire that makes him think about the portrait of Shaka Zulu, about his ideas of his father as a prince, this desire makes him identify with students in college to bring attention about apartheid in South Africa.

The dream is deeply symbolic of Obama’s desire to know where he fits in – he is drawn to figures like Malcolm X, Martin Luther, Nat Turner and the like. For this, he finally settles in Chicago, where he felt drawn to.

The dream is symbolic of Obama’s hope for a better world, a better society where individuals tolerate each other irrespective of gender, race, nationality or status. Obama does well to use as a symbol as well as an allusion Martin Luther King Jr’s ‘I Have a Dream’ speech. In this speech, Martin Luther King Jr. expressed his hope of a society where his ‘four daughters will be judged by the content of their character and not the colour of their skin.’ This resonates so well with what Obama sets out to achieve in his book. Because he interacts with different people who react to him differently, he hopes that society will change.

The dream is symbolic of Obama himself. Martin Luther King Jr. dreamt, but Barack Obama became the realization of Luther’s dream when he is elected the first black president of Harvard Law Review, later on (this after the publication of *Dreams*), he became the state senator in Illinois, a US senator, and the first black president of the USA. He also fulfills his dream of the Punahou school days where he had seen himself through his father as a prince, and his grandfather’s dream of him as a future king, being the great grandson of King Kamehameha.

Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that Obama's skill with words, evident in the autobiography as well as his message, is what propels him to such great achievement. There are many other aspects of style that this paper is limited to discuss because of its length. A work of such magnitude would be boring had the author not used humour. For instance, in the way he describes the security officer at the airport in Nairobi, Auma's car that he suggests they get out to push, Altgeld Gardens in relation to how it looks like. He also uses poems and songs as well as irony and sarcasm to make the story as interesting as possible even though he talks of serious issues like the search for identity, racism, and corruption.

In conclusion, even though Barack Obama has been hailed as the master orator and the first continental president, it is his literary style, evident in his autobiography that first makes him known. Through the discussion of suspense, language varieties, symbolism and humour, the we have shown that the text has a rich literary style.

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