

LINGUISTIC PARALLELISM IN MARIAMA BA'S *SO LONG A LETTER*

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So Long a Letter as the title implies is a letter written by Ramatoulaye to a bosom friend, Aissatou. In the novel, Ramatoulaye recounts the sad details of her unsuccessful marriage to Modou Fall and her subsequent attempt to survive as a single parent. It is a story laden with pain and bitterness.

In an attempt to capture this effectively, Mariama Ba does not depend solely on the conventional language code. She goes a step further to weave her language into unique patterns which adequately convey this sad mood to her readers.

The linguistic technique Ba employs to achieve this purpose is known as linguistic parallelism.

Kofi Yankson provides a definition of this vital subject.

By linguistic parallelism is meant the use of pattern repetition in a literary text for a particular stylistic effect. Parallelism operates at the three levels of linguistic organisation. At the phonological level, pattern congruity may take the form of alliteration; internal or end rhyme; or stress isochrony in two or more structures. At the semantic level, lexical items that occur in the same grammatical slot may be either related synonymously or antonymously (14).

Let us now see how Linguistic Parallelism is harnessed for stylistic effect in *So Long a Letter*.

The entire novel is a self-stripping exercise undertaken by Ramatoulaye. In the first passage for analysis, Mariama Ba establishes a basis for this self-disclosure. Aissatou and Ramatoulaye are not only childhood friends but are women who are forced to bring up their children alone because of their separation from their husbands. Mariama Ba uses form and language to capture this affinity in destiny. Hear her:

Yesterday you were divorced
Today I am widowed (Ba 1).

When these parallel structures are represented linguistically, they become:

Adverb + Pronoun + Verb + Participle
Adverb + Pronoun + Verb + Participle

The two adverbs *yesterday* and *today* are in paradigmatic relationship with each other. They are synonymously related under the general feature/ + time/.

/ + Time /. Similarly the two past participles *divorced* and *widowed* are related synonymously under the general feature / - husband.

The literary significance of this pattern of language on the text is that form and language have been used to reinforce the message of the text. The correspondence inherent in the two lines above is a reflection of the similarity in the plight of both women.

Another use of linguistic parallelism is exemplified when Ramatoulaye tries to avert her mind from her immediate sorrow by thinking of other people faced with graver misfortunes. Here, Mariama Ba makes use of structural parallelism for communicative effect:

My efforts cannot long take my mind off my disappointment.
I think of the suckling baby, no sooner born than orphaned.
I think of the blind man who will never see his child's smile.
I think of the cross the one-armed man has to bear.
I think... But my despair persists, but my rancour remains, but the
waves of an immense sadness break in me.
Madness or weakness? Heartlessness or irresistible love?
What inner torment led Modou Fall to marry Binetou?
And to think that I loved this man passionately.
To think that I gave him thirty years of my life,
To think that twelve times over I carried his child. (12)

Performed by a good actor, these lines would leave a powerful effect on an audience. But what Ba cannot achieve by dramatization, she gains from pattern repetition. The first set of parallel structures in the text above are:

I think of the suckling baby...
 I think of the blind man...
 I think of the... one-armed man...

The patterns of language can be represented symbolically as:

NP + VP + Prep. + Art + Adj. + NP₂
 NP + VP + Prep. + Art + Adj. + NP₂
 NP + VP + Prep. + Art + Adj. + NP₂

The three adjectives:

Suckling
 Blind
 One-armed

are in paradigmatic relationship with each other just as the three noun phrases.

baby
 man
 man

belong to the same paradigm. The use of parallel structures invests the three adjectives and nouns with the same value. That is, *Suckling*, *blind*, and *one-armed* are related synonymously under the general semantic feature. / + vulnerable/. Similarly the three nouns *baby*, *man* and *man* share the same semantic feature / + humanity/.

In the normal language code, the use of one noun phrase "I think of the suckling baby, no sooner born than orphaned" would have been sufficient to express the idea of suffering. The writer's use of three noun phrases to express the same idea emphasises the effort that the Persona makes in order to drown the weighty effect of her predicament. This is one stylistic effect of this elaborate pattern of language.

In the second set of parallel structures we have

But my despair persists
 But my rancour remains
 But the waves of an immense
 Sadness break in me.

This linguistic pattern can be represented as:

Conj. + Pro + N + V
 Conj. + Pro + N + V
 Conj. + Avt + N + Prep + Art + Adj. + NP
 VP + Prep + Pro.

The nouns

despair
 rancour
 sadness

are positionally equivalent. The phonological bond between the three lexical items is their disyllabic nature. Semantically, the lexical items are related synonymously under the general feature / + anguish /. Similarly, the three verbs *persists*, *remains* and *breaks* occupy the same grammatical slot. Semantically, only the lexical items *persists* and *remains* are synonymously related to *breaks*. Despite this antonymosity, the writer places them in the same paradigm in order to highlight the different turns that Ramatoulaye's grief takes. What these verbs represent are, in fact, different aspects of some non-existent concept for which the language code provides no lexical item.

In the third pattern

Madness
 Heartlessness

madness and *heartlessness* are contextual twins. Apart from this syntactic link, there exists phonological and semantic bonds. The nouns *madness* and *heartlessness* share a similar end rhyme /nis/. The repetition of the sibilants adds no meaning to the text, but it definitely lends a musical quality to the text and this is enough reason for its presence.

Intratextually, the lexical items *madness* and *heartlessness* are semantically related synonymously under the general feature /- human /.

In addition to pattern repetition, a coupling can be established between the nouns *madness* and *heartlessness*. Samuel R. Levin has defined coupling as 'the structure wherein natural equivalent forms occur in equivalent positions' (6)

A structure is said to be naturally equivalent when the lexical items share common semantic and phonological features.

As semantic and phonological bonds exist between *madness* and *heartlessness* one condition for establishing a coupling has been satisfied. The second criterion - that naturally equivalent forms occur in equivalent positions - has also been met as the lexical items occur in equivalent positions.

Another pattern of language which bears the creative artist's stamp is:

To think that I loved this man passionately
To think that I gave him thirty years of my life
To think that twelve times over, I carried his child

Symbolically, these patterns become

Inf. vt + Rel. Pro. + P. Pro + V + Dem. (Pro) + N + Adj.
Inf. tv + Rel. Pro. + P. Pro + V + Pro + Adj. + N, + Prep + Pro + N²
Inf. tv + Rel. Pro + Adj. + N, + Prep + Prep = v + pre + N²

The three structures

loved this man passionately
gave him thirty years of my life
carried his child

are syntagmatically related to the personal pronoun *I*. By the same token, they are paradigmatically related to one another. As pattern repetition suggests sameness of meaning, the structures express the same proposition / + loved him /. That is, Ramatoulaye, not content with simply saying 'I loved this man passionately' goes on to explore various manifestations of her love for Modou for rhetorical emphasis. The repetition of these structures is equally an example of foregrounding. Together the structure "loved this man passionately", "gave him thirty years of my life" and "carried his child" form a semantic image which is magnified in the mind of the reader. What the writer achieves by this device is that Ramatoulaye's ordeal and,

indeed, the gravity of Modou's crime are brought to the forecourt of the reader's mind.

Lexical repetition can also be found in:

I think of

I think of

I think of

I think of

just as in

To think that

To think that

To think that

According to Leech, the stylistic effect of repetition lies in the fact that:

... by underlying rather than elaborating the message, it [repetition] presents a simple emotion with force.

It may further suggest a suppressed intensity of feeling - an imprisoned feeling, as it were, for which there is no outlet but a repeated hammering at the confining walls of language. (69)

No lines better describe Ramatoulaye's state as Leech's. The overall stylistic effect of these parallel structures is that they reflect not only Ba's urgent search for a way of expressing what is beyond the limits of the normal language use, but represent, in all their immediacy, Ramatoulaye's emotional turmoil, her mental struggle to get at Modou's reason for deserting his wife and twelve children.

Apart from expressing the inexpressible, the linguistic patterns in themselves enact the message of anxiety that they carry. Reading through the distinctive designs of Ba's language, one cannot help but visualize the frenzy into which the Persona works herself as she replaces one thought with another:

I think of... I think of...

I think of ... But my ...

But my

It can be argued, therefore, that Ba's language justifies H.G. Widdowson's claim that:

at the heart of literary creation is the struggle to devise patterns of language which will bestow upon the linguistic items concerned just those values which will convey the individual writer's personal vision.(42)

There is yet another extract in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* which lends itself to the kind of stylistic analysis we are undertaking. In it we see Mariama Ba celebrate the sacrificial role of motherhood:

One is a mother... to understand the inexplicable
 One is a mother to lighten the darkness
 One is a mother to shield when lightening streaks the night
 When thunder shakes the earth, when mud bogs one down
 One is a mother to love without beginning or end (82-83)

Put symbolically, these patterns are represented as:

Pro + V + art = N, + Inf. + V + art + NP₂
 Pro + V + art + N, + Inf. + Vt + art + NP₂
 Pro + V + art + N, + Inf. + Vt adv + N + V + Avt + N
 Adv + N + V + Act + N + Adv + N + ²V + ²Pro + Adv.³
 Pro + V + art + N, + Inf² + V + ²Prep² + N² + Conj. + N₃

Again the same passage can be graphically represented thus:

	Understand the inexplicable
	lighten the darkness
	shield
	(Lightening streaks the night
One is a mother to when a	(thunder shakes the earth
	(mud bogs one down
	(love from + (beginning
	(end)

In this pattern the verbs

understand
 lighten
 shield
 love

are in syntagmatic relationship with the infinitive 'to' just as

lightening
thunder
mud

are related to the time adverbial 'when'

By the same token, the VPs *understand*, *lighten* and *shield* and *love* are syntactic equivalents just as the NPs *lightning thunder* and *mud* occupy the same grammatical slot. A consequence of this parallelism is that the NPs and VPs express the same proposition + / + care / + problem / respectively.

What the lines in the above text describe and express is the writer's "trying to learn the use of words" (Eliot 59), trying to manipulate the language code in order to convey notions for which the language code has no terms. As there is no single lexical item in the language code which completely embraces Ba's concept of motherhood, she resorts to the use of four different verb phrases from which we get a number of its features.

In Ba's view, therefore, motherhood is a configuration of *understanding*, *lightening*, *shielding* and *loving*. All of these and yet none of them. The essential characteristics of motherhood is beyond exact description.

Finally in the last pattern from the text under analysis, we have

without + (beginning)
 (end)

The lexical items *beginning* and *end* are initiated by the same preposition *without*. Thus they are contextual twins. Extra-textually, the lexical items *beginning* and *end* are antonymously related. But intratextually, this semantic opposition has been neutralized by parallelism in the context of the text therefore, *beginning* and *end* have been levelled to the same meaning.

They share the same semantic feature / + time /

By the extensive use of pattern repetition, Mariama Ba hammers home her concept of motherhood.

The question now remains: why do creative artists work their language into the kind of unique patterns under analysis? H. G. Widdowson

has this to say:

... Since a literary work does not link up with other discourse. It has to be designed so as to be self-contained and the very design, the creation of unique patterns of language, inevitably reflects a reality other than that which is communicated by the conventional language code.(54)

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the three selected passages from Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* reveals how patterns of language in the form of linguistic parallelism are functional to the understanding of Ba's view of betrayal in marriage and family institutions.

While the normal code of language performs the primary function of telling, the manipulated parallel structures assist the reader to get at the very pulse of the main character and indeed the novel.

In the three extracts discussed in this paper, parallelism serves three main purposes. Firstly phonological parallelism chiming - lends a musical quality to the text. Secondly, syntactic and lexical parallelism serves the purpose of driving home the theme by placing it at the forefront of the reader's consciousness. And finally linguistic parallelism represents the creative artist's search within the confining walls of the language code for an appropriate term to express the inexpressible. These, in sum, are the literary significance of the use of linguistic parallelism in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*.

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