

## Rhetorical Devices in Barack Obama's of Thee I Sing: A Letter to My Daughters

A. Sathiyavathi<sup>1\*</sup>, Dr. V. K. Saravanan<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>\*Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University, Email: sathyaavc2498@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English, Annamalai University, Email: vksarav@gmail.com

**\*Corresponding Author:** A. Sathiyavathi

\*Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University, Email: sathyaavc2498@gmail.com

### Abstract

Rhetorical analysis refers to the study and use of written, spoken, and visual language. The intention of applying rhetorical devices is to compare things to give them more detail. It helps the reader better understand what is described in the text. The speaker's style is determined by word choices, intonations, gestures, and sentence arrangements. The language used by Barack Obama always makes him special as he was the first Afro-American President. *Of Thee I Sing: A Letter to My Daughters* authored by Barack Obama was published in 2010 with illustrations by Loren Long. It is a tribute to thirteen groundbreaking Americans and the ideals that have shaped the United States of America. The important historical figures mentioned here are Helen Keller who was deaf and blind and overcame the struggles, Jane Addams who comforted the poor, Maya Lin who was a designer who created memorials to honor heroic people, Albert Einstein who was an inventor, Georgia O'Keefe who was a painter, Jackie Robinson the first African American baseball player, Sitting Bull who was a Sioux medicine man, Billie Holliday who was an African American Jazz Singer, Cesar Chavez who was inspired farm workers to fight for their rights, Neil Armstrong who was the first man on the moon, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who was a determined to unify America, Abraham Lincoln who taught what it was like to be part of an American family, and George Washington who was notably proud to be the first President of the United States of America. Barack Obama employs rhetorical devices such as simile, metaphor, personification, metonymy, paradox, hyperbole, and synecdoche in this book.

**Keywords:** Style, Language, Diversity, American Heroes, Individuality.

Rhetorical analysis refers to the study and use of written, spoken, and visual language. It investigates how language organizes and maintains social groups, constructs meanings and identities, coordinates behavior, mediates power, produces change, and creates knowledge. To understand the impact of Barack Obama's works, one has to find the fundamentals of meaning and techniques in it. It helps to reveal the speaker's style of language used to persuade the audience. The speaker's style is determined by word choices, intonations, gestures, and sentence arrangements. The language used by Barack Obama always makes him special as he was the first Afro-American President. *Of Thee I Sing: A Letter to My Daughters* authored by Barack Obama was published in 2010 with illustrations by Loren Long.

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The central message of the letter celebrates the characteristics that unite all Americans from the nation's founders to today's generation. *Of Thee I Sing* is a phrase from the American patriotic song *My Country*, 'Tis of Thee which is also known as America, and *Of Thee I Sing* here refers to *It's you*. It may also refer to, *Of Thee I Sing*, a musical by George and Ira Gershwin, *Of Thee I Sing*, a song from the musical, *Of Thee I Sing*, a book of poems by Timothy Liu, and Barack Obama's book *Of Thee I Sing: A Letter to My Daughters*.

Here, Barack Obama deals with the ideals that have shaped the nation and characteristics that unite all Americans. It is about the potential within each of them to pursue their dreams and forge their paths and everyone has good qualities and has the potential to pursue individual dreams. This is a letter from Barack Obama to his daughters, where he poses reflective questions regarding the character of his daughter and gives an example of historical significance to illustrate each character. It ends with an explanation that all American generations are made up of different religions, backgrounds, beliefs, and races, and that Obama's daughters are part of the future.

Stylistics can be defined as the study of style. According to P.H. Mathew's *Oxford Linguistic Dictionary*, ordinary sense of a style appropriate to a specific genre of writing, or one characteristic of an individual. Thus, in general, whatever is studied under stylistics. He said, "The study of style in language: traditionally, of variations in usage among literary and other texts; now, more generally, of any systematic variation, in either writing or speech, which relates to the type of discourse or its context" (384). Hence, there is a style to public lectures different from a conversation among friends even the church prayers include the intonations and style with which they are recited. The literary stylistics used by individual writers to influence their readers.

The intention of applying rhetorical devices is to compare things to give them more detail. The rhetorical devices help the reader better understand what is described in the text. It makes ideas and concepts easier to visualize. It also helps to avoid a monotonous way of describing a text.

The following rhetorical devices can be witnessed in *Of Thee I Sing: A Letter to My Daughters* authored by Barack Obama.

### Simile

A simile is a figure of speech that compares the two objects directly. Barack Obama does not compare objects directly or indirectly in the description of incidents and characters.

### Metaphor

According to P.H. Matthews's *Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics*, metaphor is a figure of speech that is normally used concerning one domain extended to another in a figure such as chiasmus; words are placed in a deliberately striking order. In this book, the comparison of two things indirectly using metaphoric language can be witnessed.

Have I told you lately how wonderful you are?  
How the sound of your feet  
running from afar  
bring **dancing rhythms** to my day?  
How you laugh  
and **sunshine spills** into the room? (5)

The above example explains that Obama addresses his daughters and how they make him a happier person:

She helped us see big beauty in what is small:  
**the hardness of stone and the softness of feather.** (7)

Georgia O'Keefe makes big paintings out of small objects. For instance, she paints a small flower on a large canvas. She helped to see the beauty through her paintings:

Changing the world  
with **energy and light.** (9)

Albert Einstein changed the world through science by turning his ideas into scientific concepts. He used the word braid to create a visual image in the mind of the reader:

**"For Peace, it is not necessary for eagles to be crows."** (13)

Obama relates his daughters to people who have made an impact on America. The book sums up the fact that America is made up of all different people, each adding something great to the country:

When violence erupted in our nation  
a man named Martin Luther King Jr.  
taught us **unyielding compassion.** (23)

It means that no matter what happened to Martin Luther King Jr.; he always showed caring and concern for the people of America.

## Personification

As M.H. Abrams states in his *Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics*, “personification, or in the Greek term *prosopoeia*, in which either an inanimate object or an abstract concept is spoken of as though it were endowed with life or with human attributes or feelings” (65).

Personification is one of the rhetorical devices that can be witnessed in this book:

### He swung his bat with the grace and strength of a lion

and gave brave dreams to other dreamers. (11)

Jackie Robinson showed how to turn fear into respect, and respect into love, and gave brave dreams to other dreamers:

Though he was put in prison,

**his spirit soared free on the plains, and his wisdom**

**touched the generations.** (13)

Being a healer and keeping the peace, Sitting Bull healed the broken hearts and broken promises by urging peace:

He marched and he prayed and, one at a time,

opened hearts and **saw the birth of his dream in us.** (23)

Martin Luther King Jr. is known for his determination and perseverance. He gave a dream that all different kinds of people would walk hand in hand.

## Metonymy

M.H. Abrams says, “metonymy, the term for one thing is applied to another with which it has become closely associated in experience” (65). Metonymy is used as a change of name in Greek. The metonymy found in this text is given below:

A woman named Maya Lin designed the **Vietnam Veteran Memorial**

to remember those who gave their lives in the war,

and the **Civil Rights Memorial.** (19)

Maya Lin designed the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Civil Rights Memorial and she used art to inspire people to reflect on the past and to fix the future:

The people were poor but worked hard and loved **the land.** (27)

Cesar Chavez showed farmworkers their powers when they felt that they did not possess anything. Even though they were poor, they worked hard for their land, the United States of America.

## Paradox

According to M.H. Abrams, a paradox is a statement that seems on its face to be self-contradictory or absurd, yet turns out to have a valid meaning. Paradox is a central concern of many new critics, who extend the application of the term from the rhetorical figure to encompass all surprising deviations from or qualifications of common perceptions or commonplace opinions. It is only in this greatly expanded sense of the term that Cleanth Brooks can claim with some plausibility that “the language of poetry is the language of paradox” (124). The following is an example of the paradox found in the text:

Her voice, full of **sadness and joy,**

made people feel deeply and add their melodies to the chorus. (15)

Being influential, charismatic, compassionate, and an individual Billie Holiday made people feel deeply through her beautiful songs.

## Hyperbole

It is an outrageous exaggeration of an object’s attribute used to magnify a fact or emotion to make an emphasis of its importance. The following examples of hyperbole are found in the text:

Sitting Bull was a Sioux medicine man  
who healed **broken hearts and broken promises**. (13)

He healed the broken hearts and broken promises by urging peace.

**Never waiting for life to get easier,**  
She gave others courage to face their challenges. (17)

Though Helen Keller was blind and deaf, she made people to be strong and courageous and she did not use her disability as an excuse:

A woman named Jane Addams fed the poor  
and helped them find jobs.  
**She opened doors and gave people hope**. (21)

Jane Addams is known for her kindness. She fed the poor and helped them to find jobs:

The people listened to their hearts and marched for their rights.  
**“Si se puede!”** Cesar said. **“Yes, you can!”** (27)

*Si se puede* is a word derived from Spanish which means *Yes, you can!* and it is the motto of the United Farm Workers of America. Cesar demonstrated inspiration by showing farmworkers their power when they felt they had none. He encouraged farmworkers to march for their rights:

**People of all races, religions, and beliefs.**  
**People from the coastlines and the mountains.**  
**People who have made bright lights shine**. (33)

America is made up of people of every kind accepting of unique people, all are different, but one is because of living in the United States.

### Synecdoche

It is a part of something used to signify the whole or the whole used to signify a part. In Greek, it is called “taking together.” For example, **“ten hands”** refers to the ten workmen. The following examples of synecdoche can be witnessed in this book:

This man of the people, simple and plain,  
Asked more of our country - **that we behave as kin**. (29)

Abraham Lincoln taught about teamwork, and wanted that all Americans should work together as a family:

He helped make an idea into a new country, **strong and true,**  
**a country of principles, a country of citizens**. (31)

George Washington is known to be a proud American as he was the first President of the United States of America. He turned an idea into a new country.

The most frequently used rhetorical devices in *Of Thee I Sing: A Letter to My Daughters* of Barack Obama are simile, metaphor, personification, metonymy, paradox, hyperbole, and synecdoche which help to comprehend the style of the speaker and how he creates an effect in the book to influence a vast majority of readers. It focuses on thirteen people who have helped turn America into what it is today. The author presents rhetorical questions that he does not want the reader to answer but to gain knowledge from it. Hence, Barack Obama speaks to his daughters and children of America by giving them information about the historical figures who shaped America.

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