Sarojini Naidu's Poem '*The Sorrow of Love*' – A Functional Perspective

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Abstract- I have chosen to study Sarojini Naidu's poem "The Sorrow of Love" from the point of view of the functions of language. The experiential sub-component is identified in terms of the participants, circumstances and processes. For example, there are only two animate participants in the poem – the poet and her beloved (the addressee). The beloved is the actor who acts by way of turning his face away. This however is not merely a physical process for it symbolizes emotional estrangement.

As for the Interactional subcomponent, the poem has primarily interrogative clauses with just one declarative clause. The attitudinal functions are also studied as expressed in the 3 stanzas, in the process of which the summative and key words are identified. In the textual component, functional prominence with regards to 'themes' and 'news' is studied. The universe of the poem is that true love is unchangeable and admits no impediments. The thesis is woven in 3 stanzas. Stanzas 1 & 2 question the lover as to why he turned his face away, citing possible reasons. Stanza 3 is significantly in the form of a rhetorical question and asserts that even Sorrow or Death cannot free their souls 'from the passionate bondage of Memory'.

Keywords: Experiential; Interactional; attitudinal functions; themes and news.

One of the uses of Functional Linguistics is in the interpretation of literary texts. Along with unity and rhythm, **prominence** is one of the most important shaping principles of poetic arts. These aspects belong to both content and the linguistic expression of a poem because they are interrelated and the former is 'implied' in the latter and is 'dependent' on it. Prominence as used here is an extended variety of "foregrounding" of Mukarovsky (1970:43-7) and 'prominence' of Halliday. Halliday interprets prominence as "the phenomenon of linguistic highlighting, whereby some features of the language of the text stand out in some way" (1973: 112-13). The concept of prominence can be properly utilized when we look at language from the functional point of view. The following functions and sub-functions are postulated in Systemic Functional Grammar

(Halliday 1969, 1970 a : 324-7 & 1973 : 105; O'Toole 1974 : 5-6):

1.	Ideational	i.	Experiential
		ii.	Logical
2.	Interpersonal	iii.	Interactional (Rhetorical)
		iv.	Attitudinal
3.	Textual	v.	Thematic
		vi.	Informational

The concept of language function needs explication to the listener or the object of interlocution come here. Halliday explains the multiple function of language as follows: "A speech act involves selecting and putting into effect, simultaneously, a large number of multiple options… From… behavioural (but not 'behaviorist') standpoint, whence language is seen as the potential and actual exploitation, at once creative and repetitive, of sets of options … in socio-personal situations and settings, we may derive the notion of multiple function of language" (Halliday 1970).

These functions are explained below: The **Ideational function** of language combines two functions – experiential and logical. Through the **experiential** sub-function the speaker is enabled to embody in language his experience of the real world, including the internal world of his own consciousness. The **logical** sub-function refers to the structuration of experience in terms of certain relations (e.g. sequentiality, consequentiality, hypotaxis, parataxis).

Interpersonal function is the function through which social groups are delimited, and the individual is identified and reinforced; in making interaction possible, language also serves in the expression and development of the personality. The **interactional** sub-function refers to the relationship between two interlocutors that is expressed in a speech act. On the other hand the attitudes of the speaker figures under the **attitudinal** sub-function of language.

Textual function is the function whereby language serves to create texts. The **thematic** sub-function revolves round the concept of 'point of departure' for a given speech act. The **informational** sub-function revolves round the informational importance different blocks have in a given speech act.

In other words, the ideational metafunction is concerned with mapping the 'reality' of the world around us (who's doing what to whom, when, where, why, how). The interpersonal metafunction is concerned with organizing the social reality of people we interact with (by making statements, asking questions, giving commands; saying how sure we are; saying how we feel about things). The third metafunction, the textual, is concerned with organizing ideational and interpersonal meanings into texts that are coherent and relevant to their context (what we put first, what last; how we introduce characters and keep track of them with pronouns; what we leave implicit and what we spell out).

To explain in terms of grammatical organisation, **the ideational component** accounts for the expression of content, including, the persons, objects, abstractions, processes, qualities, states, and relations that constitute the phenomena of experience (the experiential sub-component) and, the abstract logical patterns related to experience though indirectly (the logical sub-component).

The interpersonal component involves the hearer as an essential participant in the speech. The interactional sub-function gets reflected in this component of grammar in the form of mood, expressing sentence function in the sense of statement, question, command etc. The attitudinal sub-function gets reflected in different options –eg. lexical items, intonation.

The textual component is concerned with the distribution of information in the clause, various forms of emphasis etc. This component is also relevant to the speaker-hearer relation, since it is his control over this part of the language system that enables the speaker to interact appropriately with his interlocutor, and to structurate what he is saying, through the various thematic and other options, in such a way as to construct dialogue (Prakasam 1982 : 12).

For a full analysis of a poem, we need to identify the thesis and universe of the poem. As against the **universe** of the poem, the **thesis** of a poem can be arrived at when we interpret it from all angles. The concept of **markedness** brings a particular feature into prominence. This prominence is semantic and structural.

Further, **Cohesion** refers to relations of meaning that exist within a text (Halliday and Hasan 1976 : 4). It performs two functions : marking prominence and forging unity. When we refer to a particular semantic item by repeating a given word or by using pronouns or synonyms co-referential with it, we bring that semantic item into prominence. If we can, in a short poem, isolate a particular semantic item (sememe) by referring to the lexical items and other features, we get at the 'universe' of the poem. Hymes' 'summative' word and 'key' word are special cases of cohesion (1960 :118). Cohesion is achieved phonologically, lexically and syntactically (cf. Leech 1970 : 120-3).

I am analysing Sarojini Naidu's poem "The Sorrow of Love" from the viewpoint of the functions of language. This is one of the sequence of 24 poems in the 2nd section "The Path of Tears" in her The Temple: A Pilgrimage of Love.

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THE SORROW OF LOVE
Sarojini Naidu

Why did you turn your face away?
Was it for grief or fear
Your strength would fail or your pride grow weak,
If you touched my hand, if you heard me speak,
After a life-long year?

Why did you turn your face away?
Was it for love or hate?
Or the spell of that wild miraculous hour
That hurled our souls with relentless power
In the eddying fires of fate?

Turn not your face from me, O Love!
Shall Sorrow or Death conspire
To set our suffering spirits free
From the passionate bondage of Memory
Or the thrall of the old desire?

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The experiential component identifies participants, circumstances and processes. There are only two animate participants in the poem – the poet and her beloved. The rest of the participants are inanimate. We can recognize the following **participant roles** and **circumstantials** for our analysis.

(i)   causer/actor, affected (receiver/sufferer), goal (something or someone to be achieved/acted upon), object (a 'factual' phenomenon), attribute (qualifier), vocative (addressee/something uttered);

(ii)   temporal, locative, manner;

(iii) processes are mainly of four types: State (x is in y); event (x fell into y); action (z threw x into y); causation (z pushed x into y).

In the first stanza the following are the details of the experiential component in terms of participant roles, circumstantials and processes:

Actor : You (3 times)
Causer/Actor ?
      Or
Objects as actors : grief, fear
Affected : strength, pride, (poet implied)
Processes : turn (away), (strength) fail ,
          grow (weak), touched, heard,
          speak
Temporal : life-long year (metaphor)

There are only two animate participants in the poem (the poet and the beloved). We can see in the first stanza that the beloved is the actor in turning his face away, which action, though, is only indirectly conveyed to the reader through the question. "*Why did you turn your face away?*" That the poet is the 'affected' by the action is implicit. '*Turning. . . away*' however, is not a simple process (physical apparently) but has a symbolic significance indicating emotional estrangement. The other processes "*(strength) fail*" and "*(pride) grow weak*", are abstract happenings, while 'heard', 'speak' & 'touched' refer to sensory processes.

The first line of the stanza questions the beloved as to why he had turned his face away, raising the reader's curiosity. Logically the rest of the lines voice the poet's guessing the possible reasons for this strange behaviour of the beloved: was it for 'grief or fear' that his pride would weaken, or his strength would fail? There is an interesting complexity here – the actor (the beloved) can in turn be seen to be the affected, or rather, potentially affected. We get the feeling that the poet's pointed questions are uncannily perceptive of the hidden motives for his behaviour. This also gives us the implication that it was a self-imposed distance that the beloved wants to maintain. The last line informs us that there was a separation of a '*life-long year*' which the beloved does not want to end obviously. That is why he tries to restrain himself from either touching her or hearing her voice.

With regard to the Interpersonal component, the hearer is an essential participant in speech. Interactionally, in terms of speech functions, there are 2 interrogative clauses. Attitudinally, the stanza expresses resentment, and in actual fact, 'grief' on the part of the lover. The meaning of the third and fourth lines,

Your strength would fail or your pride grow weak,
If you touched my hand, if you heard me speak,
climaxing in the last line "*After a life-long year*" confirms this semantic item. Though this last line is part of the long second interrogative clause, it seems to follow the first interrogative clause . "*Why did you turn your face away?*" logically and semantically. On the whole, the themes in this stanza are:

Why, was it, your strength, your pride, If you (2 times).

The new elements are:
Turn your face away, grief or fear, fail, grow weak, touched my hand, heard me speak, after a life-long year.

Line 2 gives two contrary emotions as possible reasons for the estrangement, and is an instance of ambiguity: "*Was it for grief or fear*". Why are 'grief' and 'fear' juxtaposed? A deeper look indicates that 'fear' is naturally connected to the following two lines, as there seems to be an ellipsis of the relative conjunction 'that':

Your strength would fail or your pride grow weak,
If you touched my hand, if you heard me speak,

The second stanza is on similar lines as the argument in the first stanza. It repeats the question "*Why did you turn your face away?*" and also suggests other possible reasons. The experiential roles here are:

Actor : you
Objects as actors : love, hate, (abstract)
Affected : our souls
Qualifier (attribute): wild, miraculous,
              relentless, eddying
Manner : with relentless power
Locative : in . . . fires of fate
Temporal : hour
Processes : turn away, hurled

As in the first stanza, the beloved is the actor and the affected (implied) is again the lover (poet), though in addition, "our souls" as affected reveals progression of the argument.

The lover is persistent in asking why the beloved had turned his face away in the first line. She insightfully asks if 'love or hate' were the reasons. Interestingly, a third reason is also raised ⸺ "*Or the spell of that wild miraculous hour*" (3rd line), followed by the fourth and fifth lines forming an embedded clause introduced by 'That':

That hurled our souls with relentless power
In the eddying fires of fate?

The spell of their miraculous union had hurled their souls with relentless power in the eddying fires of fate. So how is it possible for him to escape from such a fate? ─ seems to be the ironic implication.

Interactionally, the stanza has 3 interrrogative clauses. The first line is the same as in the first stanza "*Why did you turn your face away*?" Attitudinally also the stanza reiterates the same earlier resentment though there is an increase in the force and tenor with which the questions are flung at the beloved. The choice of the lexical items confirms this intensity ─ hate, spell, hurled, relentless power, eddying fires, fate. The cumulative effect of these words indicates that the semantic item is 'fate' which binds their souls together.

Interestingly, there seems to be a greater number of 'news' in this stanza:

Themes: why, was it

News: turn - - - away, love or hate, the spell of that wild miraculous hour / That hurled our souls with relentless power / In the eddying fires of fate.

This is because the third interrogative clause does not have the theme (ellipsis) "*Was it for love or hate?*", and instead starts with "Or": "*Or the spell of*" with the next 2 lines forming an embedded relative clause "*That hurled . . . fires of fate?*"

As in the first stanza, line 2 suggests two polarities of emotion – "*was it for love or hate?*' that the beloved had turned his face away. One interpretation for coordinating them with 'or' is that it is not love, but rather 'hate', hate of the fact that they are caught in the powerful spell of the miraculous hour. This line and the next are classic cases of ambiguity which the poet builds by using 'or' twice. Does it mean that the beloved resents the power of love and its hold on him?

The third stanza forms the climax of the logical argument constructed in the earlier stanzas. It answers unequivocally the questions posed to the beloved in those stanzas and reiterates the implied affirmation belying the earlier questions. Experientially we have the following categories:

Actors   -   you, (implied)
          -    Sorrow, Death (Personification)
Objects   -   face, spirits, thrall, desire,
          -    bondage, memory (abstract)
Affected -   our spirits
Vocative -   O Love
Qualifier -   suffering (spirits), passionate, old

Processes -   turn not, conspire, to set (free)

As in the second stanza, apart from the lover being the implied 'affected', "*our spirits*" is also the 'affected'. The poet tells the recalcitrant beloved in a firm tone not to turn his face away from her. For even Sorrow or Death cannot conspire to set their spirits free from the bondage of Memory (of their love) 'or' the thrall of their old desire. The message is that true love cannot be affected by either sorrow or death. Hence it is futile for the lover to adamantly persist with his resentment.

Interactionally the first line is an imperative clause yet shown as an exclamation, which is intriguing. This indicates the growing confidence and absolute conviction of the lover that the beloved is only being stubborn. This comes as a contrast to the series of interrogative clauses in the earlier stanzas. The next four lines make up an interrogative clause, expressed as a rhetorical question. Thus the clause comes as a finale to the puzzling questions posed to the beloved, where she denies the very possibility of the state of separateness believed in by the beloved. Attitudinally, the whole stanza expresses the futility of maintaining separation and communicates the absoluteness of their 'union'. The choice of lexical items exemplifies this ─ 'bondage', 'thrall'. We can think of 'union' as the semantic item in this stanza, with the summative word being 'bondage' (of Memory). This last rhetorical question is replete with irony.

Textually, this stanza offers us instances of functional prominence. The first line has "*Turn not your face from me*," as news while "*O Love*" at the end forms the theme. The other themes are: *Sorrow or Death*, *suffering spirits*; and the other news are: *conspire, (set) free, the passionate bondage of Memory, the thrall of the old desire*. The lover who was an 'affected', but only implied in the earlier stanzas, is now made explicit as 'me' in the first line.

Looking at the poem from the point of view of cohesion and the consequent effect of prominence and unity, in this short poem there are in all 102 words. If we exclude the repeated occurrences of some of the items we have only 69 words used in this poem. The repetition of the lines "*Why did you turn your face away?*" and "*Was it for . . .*" in the first and second stanzas respectively add to the unity of the poem.

Of these the grammatical items which enter into closed (finite) systems are 48. These items add to the thesis of the poem by modifying the meaning of the main lexical items or by stating

their interrelationships. There are 3 classes of lexical (open) sets used in the poem: nouns, adjectives and verbs. Of the total of 54 lexical items, a majority of them are nouns, followed by verbs and adjectives. Most of the nouns refer to emotions and phenomena of human nature and love. The adjectives in particular are suggestive of the contradictions inherent in love. The preponderance of nouns and the very few verbs give us the total effect of lack of action in the poem. This common semantic content of the words gives the poem its unity.

Semantically the poem shows cohesion among the 3 stanzas. The 'resentment' identified in the first stanza is taken up in stanza 2 also. By extension, this is resentment of the 'separation' between the lovers. The first line of these two stanzas naturally is "*Why did you turn your face away?*" In both the stanzas, the lover attempts to probe the motives for this behaviour of the beloved: '*grief or fear*' (stanza 1); '*love or hate/ Or the spell . . . hour*' (stanza 2). So the second line in both the stanzas starts with "*Was it for . . .?*" The repetition of "or" adds immensely to this attempt of finding out the hidden prejudices and feelings of the beloved as the lover fires a series of questions. In contrast, the last stanza is prominent in that there is no sense of resentment expressed; by extension, it is not 'separation' of earlier stanzas, but the irreversibility of their 'union' which is stressed.

As for the other aspects of cohesion, coupling is of importance, and of different types of equivalences – lexical, semantic, syntactic, phonological, positional etc. Rhyme, by definition is coupling, because it has the positional equivalence converging with phonological equivalence: '*fear – year*'; '*weak – speak*'; '*hate – fate*'; '*hour – power*'; '*conspire – desire*'.

To sum up, the universe of the poem is that love is not changeable and that it admits no impediments; it asserts the absoluteness of union. The thesis is woven by the poet with complex artistry in three stanzas. The first stanza has the lover asking the beloved why he had turned his face away. She also suggests grief or fear as possible reasons for his behaviour. The second stanza asks the same question suggesting other puzzling motives. The line "*Was it for love or hate?*" is an insight into the paradoxes and contradictions inherent in love. The lover seems to understand that love, by its very nature, contains traces of hate. The beloved seems to resent the spell of love that has hurled their souls into the eddying fires of fate. By implication, the futility of resistance against the reign of love is suggested. This suggestion takes the firm shape and tone of an

affirmation in the last stanza – even Sorrow or Death shall fail to keep the lovers apart, for their spirits are caught up irrevocably and absolutely in the passionate bondage of Memory.

This connects once again to the first stanza – even after the year's separation (seeming a lifetime to her), there is no escape from the Memory of their love, for it is a spell and a thrall. The lover seems to have great insight into the nature of true love, which is denied to the beloved, making him act in a strange manner. The lover indulges in raillery and remonstrance, though it is the voice of sorrow in which she speaks. The poem gives us insight into the psychology of separation.

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