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STYLISTIC PATTERNS AND CULTURAL SCHEMATA IN ABUBAKAR GIMBA'S *WITNESSES TO TEARS*

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Abstract
This paper examines in qualitative terms the techniques employed by Abubakar Gimba in *Witnesses to Tears*. It employs various stylistic patterns to depict cultural schemata. It adopts schema theory as proposed by Bartlett (1932), expanded by Rumelhart (1980) and critically applied to textual study by Semino (1997). It shows in explicit terms how stylistic devices such as euphemism, hyperbole, metaphor, rhetorical questions and sarcasm prompt culturally motivated and experience-based schemata which inform the understanding and analysis of social and psychological issues in the text. The results show how the expression of independence can intensify discord between childhood and adulthood schemata. It also exposes ethical pressures and social responsibilities typical of professional duty through medical schemata. *Witnesses to Tears,* explored through the instrument of schema theory, shows that stylistic devices are more than just ornamental tools but a valid instrument for meaning-making and cultural negotiation of experience. This study contributes to existing knowledge on cognitive stylistics by highlighting the importance of schema-based analysis in Nigerian fiction.

Keywords: Cognitive Stylistics; Schema Theory; Cultural Schemata; Stylistic Devices; Nigerian Fiction

Introduction

Literature depends on language for the representation of ideas, experiences, beliefs, and social realities. Through the instrumentality of language, writers portray human behaviour, cultural practices, and the conditions under which people live. The study of stylistics is therefore concerned with how language functions in literary texts and how particular linguistic choices influence meaning. Rather than treating literary language as merely decorative, stylistics considers it a deliberate resource through which writers present themes, construct characters, and determine readers' responses to issues.In recent years, attention has increasingly shifted towards the role of the reader in the interpretation of literary texts. This means meaning is no longer viewed solely as something fixed within a text; it is also seen as something that emerges when readers interact with textual information using their prior knowledge and experiences. Readers approach literary works with assumptions, expectations, cultural knowledge, and personal experiences that influence how they interpret events and character roles. Accordingly, the process of understanding a literary text involves more than just recognising linguistic forms; it also requires access to the background knowledge that gives those forms meaning. This is where schema comes in. It provides a useful explanation of this process.

Schema Theory originates from the work of Bartlett (1932) and was later developed by Rumelhart (1980). The theory proposes that knowledge is stored in organised mental structures known as schemata. These structures help individuals to interpret new information by relating it to what they already know. This is to say, during the reading of a text, schemata assist readers in filling informational gaps by making inferences and constructing coherent interpretations. The theory has therefore become useful in explaining how readers make sense of literary texts.A particularly important aspect of Schema Theory is the notion of cultural schemata. Cultural schemata consist of shared knowledge about customs, traditions, religious beliefs, social institutions, values, and accepted patterns of behaviour within a community. Such knowledge enables readers to recognise meanings that may not be directly stated in a text. Writers often assume that readers possess at least some familiarity with the cultural environment represented in a narrative. Where this familiarity exists, interpretation becomes easier because readers can connect textual details with previously acquired cultural knowledge.

The importance of cultural schemata is especially evident in African literature. African writers frequently draw upon indigenous traditions, communal values, religious beliefs, and social practices in their representation of society. Nigerian literature, in particular, contains numerous references to local cultures, ethnic traditions, family structures, leadership practices, and religious experiences. These cultural elements often function as an important source of meaning within literary texts. Many readers, therefore, rely on their knowledge of such cultural realities when interpreting characters, actions, and events.One Nigerian writer whose works reflect these concerns is Abubakar Gimba. Throughout his literary career, Gimba devoted considerable attention to questions of morality, leadership, social responsibility, religion, and human conduct. His fiction often portrays societies confronted by corruption, injustice, greed, and ethical decline. At the same time, his works highlight the importance of integrity, communal responsibility, and moral accountability. These concerns have made his novels important contributions to discussions of social and moral issues in Nigerian literature.

Among his works, *Witnesses to Tears* offers a vivid portrayal of the challenges facing individuals and communities in a changing society. The novel addresses issues such as corruption, materialism, abuse of authority, poverty, and moral compromise. It also presents the influence of religion, family expectations, and communal values on human behaviour. Many of the events and relationships depicted in the novel are rooted in cultural practices and beliefs associated with Northern Nigerian society. Readers' understanding of these elements depends largely on their ability to draw upon relevant cultural knowledge.Although *Witnesses to Tears* has attracted scholarly attention, much of the existing work has concentrated on its moral, religious, and social concerns. Less attention has been given to the ways linguistic and stylistic choices interact with cultural knowledge in the production of meaning. As a result, there remains limited discussion of how the novel's stylistic features encourage readers to activate cultural schemata when interpreting its characters, events, and themes. This gap makes it necessary to examine the relationship between stylistic patterns and cultural schemata in the text under study.

This paper investigates the stylistic features employed in *Witnesses to Tears* and how they activate cultural schemata. It seeks to show how linguistic choices in the novel depend on shared cultural knowledge and how such knowledge influences the interpretation of morality, religion, social responsibility, and communal life. In doing so, the paper offers a perspective on the connection between language, culture, and meaning in Abubakar Gimba's fiction.

Literature Review

The study of style has undergone considerable development over the years. Earlier approaches often treated style as a matter of ornamentation or rhetorical embellishment intended to beautify expressions. Contemporary stylistics, however, regards style as central to the production and interpretation of meaning. Linguistic choices are now understood as important resources through which writers organise experience, construct social realities, and influence readers' responses to texts. This understanding has expanded stylistic inquiry beyond formal description to include the relationship between language, cognition, and culture.

Recent developments in stylistics have strengthened the connection between literary interpretation and cognitive processes. Cognitive stylistics argues that meaning emerges through the interaction between textual structures and readers' mental activities rather than from linguistic forms alone. Giovanelli and Harrison (2022) observe that contemporary stylistics increasingly attends to the cognitive operations involved in literary interpretation, particularly the role of background knowledge, inference, and conceptual organisation in the reading process. Similarly, Hamawand (2023) maintains that stylistic patterns reflect underlying cognitive operations and that

linguistic structures frequently reveal the conceptual mechanisms through which meaning is constructed. Such perspectives have strengthened the importance of cognition in stylistic investigation and encouraged greater attention to readers' mental participation in literary interpretation.

One of the most influential cognitive approaches to literary interpretation is Schema Theory. It originated in Bartlett's (1932) work on memory. Itwas developed by Rumelhart (1980) and applied to literary stylistics by Semino (1997). The theory proposes that comprehension depends on organised mental structures known as schemata. These structures consist of accumulated experiences, cultural knowledge, and expectations that guide interpretation. Readers draw upon these mental frameworks to process information, resolve ambiguity, and establish coherence within texts. In literary discourse, schema activation enables readers to connect textual information with familiar cultural patterns and social experiences.

Schema Theory has continued to attract considerable attention within cognitive stylistics because of its usefulness in explaining literary interpretation. Semino (1997) reveals that metaphor and poetic language frequently rely on conceptual structures that readers activate during interpretation. Stockwell (2019) similarly argues that literary understanding depends heavily on cognitive processes involving expectations, narrative frames, and conceptual structures. More recently, Emmott et al. (2023) revisit schema theory and reaffirm its continuing relevance in explaining how readers draw upon prior knowledge during literary interpretation. Jaafar (2020) further validates the usefulness of schema theory in accounting for the interaction between textual structures and readers' cognitive worlds, while Whitt (2024) applies and extends the theory to explain processes of estrangement and defamiliarisation in literary interpretation. Likewise, Mureșanu and Grunwald (2024) identify schema theory as one of the principal frameworks determining contemporary cognitive stylistics. These studies collectively confirm that schema theory remains an active and productive approach to literary analysis and establish its continuing relevance to contemporary stylistic research.

Within African literary scholarship, stylistic studies have increasingly moved towards cognitive explanations of literary meaning. Earlier studies on Nigerian literature were largely preoccupied with thematic concerns such as corruption, governance, religion, and social decline. Adegbija (2004) and Oha (2007), for example, examine the ideological and social dimensions of Nigerian literary texts, paying particular attention to issues of morality and political responsibility. While such studies enriched understanding of thematic concerns, they devoted comparatively little attention to the cognitive processes through which literary meaning is generated and interpreted.

Recent erudition has shown greater interest in the interaction between stylistic patterns and cognitive processes in Nigerian fiction. Ibrahim (2023) establishes how culturally motivated schemata influence narrative consciousness and reader interpretation in contemporary Nigerian writing. The present study agrees with Ibrahim's position that cultural knowledge plays a significant role in literary understanding. However, it differs from his study by concentrating specifically on the stylistic mechanisms through which schemata are activated in *Witnesses to Tears*. Similarly, Abiodun (2020) argues that contemporary Nigerian novelists frequently employ conceptual metaphors and culturally grounded expressions to represent psychological experiences and social realities. Although the present study shares this concern with the relationship between language and culture, it departs from Abiodun's emphasis on conceptual metaphor by focusing instead on schema activation and cultural cognition.

Muhammed and Okpala (2023) further observe that conceptual blending and cultural symbolism have become important resources for depicting internal conflict and communal tension in contemporary African narratives. Their study converges with the present research in recognising the importance of readers' cultural knowledge in literary interpretation. However, it differs from the present study in both orientation and analytical focus. Whereas Muhammed and Okpala (2023) emphasise conceptual blending and symbolic representation as the primary cognitive processes involved in meaning construction, the present study is primarily concerned with schema activation and the role of stylistic choices in determining readers' interpretations of cultural and moral experiences. The point of departure therefore lies not in the recognition of cognition itself but in the particular cognitive mechanism through which meaning is understood.

Scholarship on Abubakar Gimba's *Witnesses to Tears* has concentrated largely on questions of religion, morality, corruption, leadership, and social responsibility within Northern Nigerian society. One of the earliest studies on the novel is Isma'ila's (2008), which investigates the relationship between occultic ritual practices and Islamic dogma in *Witnesses to Tears* and *Sacred Apples*. He argues that Gimba presents ritual practices as evidence of a crisis of faith and a departure from Islamic principles. According to the study, characters who embrace ritualism symbolise the conflict between spiritual values and material ambitions, thereby exposing moral contradictions within society. Although the present study shares Ismala's concern with the religious and moral dimensions of the novel, it departs from his thematic orientation by examining the stylistic and cognitive processes through which such meanings are constructed and interpreted.

Similarly, Okeugo and Obioha (2020) investigate corruption, religion, and moral responsibility in *Witnesses to Tears* and *Sacred Apples* from a Neo-Humanist perspective. The authors argue that Gimba employs Islamic ethics, religious discourse, and moral instruction to criticise corruption, greed, and social disintegration in Nigerian society. The present study agrees with their view that religion functions as an important source of meaning within the novels. However, whereas Okeugo and Obioha approach these concerns primarily from ideological and thematic perspectives, the present study focuses on the stylistic and cognitive processes through which such meanings are produced and interpreted.

Adamu and Gongse (2015) apply Halliday's transitivity framework to analyse grammatical processes and characterisation in *Witnesses to Tears*. The study contributes to the understanding of the relationship between grammatical choices and character construction by showing how transitivity patterns help determine the representation of characters, their actions, and their experiences. However, the emphasis of the study remains on grammatical structure rather than on the cognitive processes through which readers interpret stylistic meaning and cultural knowledge. The study focuses primarily on process types and participant roles rather than on readers' cognitive engagement with the text. The present study, therefore, shares Adamu and Gongse's interest in linguistic patterning, while the difference between the two studies remains the emphasis on schema activation and culturally shared knowledge structures.

Umar (2016) investigates characterisation and narrative creativity in *Witnesses to Tears* using insights from stylistics and narratology. The study argues that earlier criticism of Gimba's fiction concentrated predominantly on thematic concerns while paying insufficient attention to the novelist's artistic manipulation of language and narrative technique. Umar establishes that Gimba's creativity is evident in his construction of characters through dialogue, narration, and evaluative language. The present study agrees with Umar's emphasis on the importance of linguistic analysis in understanding Gimba's fiction. However, whereas Umar's concern lies primarily with

characterisation and narrative creativity, the present study focuses on the activation of cultural schemata and the role of stylistic choices in determining readers' interpretation of social and moral experience.

The foregoing studies have enriched scholarship on *Witnesses to Tears* by illuminating its ideological, religious, thematic, and linguistic dimensions. Nevertheless, little attention has been paid to the relationship between stylistic choices and schema activation in the construction of meaning within the novel. *Witnesses to Tears* provides fertile ground for schema-oriented stylistic analysis because many of its meanings depend on culturally shared knowledge structures relating to grief, ritual practice, honour, spiritual obligation, family hierarchy, and communal responsibility. Such meanings come to the limelight through metaphor, understatement, silence, and carefully managed dialogue, all of which require readers to activate relevant cultural schemata in order to interpret actions and evaluate moral choices within the narrative. This paper addresses that gap by examining how stylistic features in the novel activate culturally shared knowledge structures and how these structures form the basis for readers' understanding of morality, religion, social responsibility, and communal life.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts schema theory as its theoretical basis. The theory explains how individuals make sense of experiences through cognitive structures that organise knowledge and guide perception and response. Bartlett (1932) introduced the concept into cognitive psychology and described schemata as organised bodies of previous experiences stored in memory and used in understanding new experiences, while Rumelhart (1980) later described schema as a cognitive structure through which individuals understand texts and situations by drawing on existing knowledge. Within literary studies, schema theory helps to explain how readers and characters assign meaning to events and experiences within narrative worlds. Cook (1994) argues that literary texts often challenge familiar patterns of thought and encourage readers to modify their existing knowledge structures through what he calls discourse deviation. Similarly, Emmott, Alexander, and Marsalek (2014) show that readers draw upon cultural and social knowledge in forming their understanding of characters and fictional settings. For the present study, schema theory is particularly relevant because it explains how characters' perceptions, decisions, and reactions are shaped by prior experiences and established thought patterns, while also accounting for how narrative events confirm, challenge, or alter these cognitive structures over the course of the text.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive method informed by schema theory to examine the relationship between language and cultural cognition in *Witnesses to Tears*. Attention is given to stylistic choices that depend on shared cultural knowledge for their interpretation and that contribute to the expression of emotional, moral, and social meanings within the narrative. Through close textual reading, relevant stylistic features are identified and interpreted in relation to the cultural assumptions and cognitive patterns that support them. The analysis considers the extent to which these linguistic choices buttress, modify, or challenge culturally established ways of understanding experience and social behaviour. The study seeks to show how meaning in the novel arises from the interaction between language, cultural experience, and reader knowledge by relating textual features to the cultural knowledge structures they suggest.

Style as Cultural Dissonance

"Suicide? Oh c'mon! That's unfair on Serah. She wouldn't do a thing like that . . . Or did they tell you they found her in a noose?" (p. 8)

The excerpt depicts a moment of disbelief and emotional confrontation as Remi reacts to the shocking news of Serah's death. Remi's response reveals a schema clashto a submission that opposes her existing schema of Serah's moral and emotional character. Her tone of disbelief, expressed through rhetorical and exclamatory markers, "Oh c'mon!" and "She wouldn't do a thing like that," reveals a conflict between new information and pre-existing cognitive representations (schemata) which she has gathered over the years about her now deceased friend, Serah. In other words, what Remi remembers of Serah is an image of a woman of virtue, strength, and moral uprightness. These traitswere expressed through her interpersonal encounters and cultural expectations. When the nurse on duty before her suggests that Serah might have committed suicide, this new input conflicts with the established schema she has of Serah and creates a cognitive clash that manifests linguistically as a covert denial, given her choice of words. The initial interjection "Suicide?" signals a momentary suspension of comprehension because that does not in any way suit the personality of Serah according to Remi's schema. Remi's mind struggles to assimilate the information because it does not fit her existing interpretive frame.

From a cultural schema perspective, Remi's reaction is not merely personal but socially conditioned too. In Nigerian sociocultural contexts, suicide, in any guise, is often stigmatised and considered as both a moral and spiritual transgression. The suggestion that Serah, a woman associated with moral propriety and full of life, might have taken her own life activates a cultural taboo schema. Within this context, suicide is equated with shame, weakness, or a curse upon one's family. Consequently, Remi's rejection of the claim functions as a linguistic defence mechanism that upholds social morality while protecting Serah's dignity even in death. The exclamation "That's unfair on Serah" subtly implies that attributing suicide to her friend is not only factually questionable but morally offensive by any standard. This moral stance is in line with collective schemas of respect for the dead and the preservation of honour in the face of tragedy.

The rhetorical question, "Or did they tell you they found her in a noose?", proves how people seek justification for inconsistent information. This statement exemplifies what cognitive psychologists refer to as "schema adjustment". Remi's mind momentarily attempts to reconcile the new claim by searching for concrete evidence that aligns with her mental view of reality. The reference to a "noose" induces a culturally familiar image of suicide. Butit is used here to emphasise its implausibility. The irony in her tone suggests that even if such evidence were available, she would still doubt its credibility. Therefore, the rhetorical device functions as a linguistic expression of schema filtering. In other words, only information that fits the speaker's moral and experiential framework is accepted as true, and nothing else.

Stylistically, Gimba's use of short, abrupt sentences and emotion-stimulating punctuation shows the deliberate disruption of thought and the collision of schemata in real time. The fragmented structure of Remi's utterance depicts the mental fragmentation that occurs when familiar patterns of understanding are disrupted. Her language wavers between disbelief, assertion, and sarcastic inquiry, which creates a rhythm that captures the internal struggle between established beliefs and emerging reality. The emotional intimacy of the discourse draws the reader into the speaker's mental space, which enables an empathetic understanding of her denial.The passage also servesas a wider social schema concerning gender-based perception and moral integrity. Serah, as a woman of notable character, symbolises a moral archetype that Remi and society at large hold as ideal. The

notion that such a woman could succumb to despair enough to commit suicide violates the gender-based schema of resilience and virtue often ascribed to women in Gimba's moral universe. Remi's denial thus extends beyond friendship; it emphasises a shared cultural script that upholds the idea of women as moral anchors within a decaying society. In this sense, the utterance functions both as a personal defence of Serah and as an unconscious reaffirmation of social ideals about womanhood and endurance in dire moments.

Style as Metaphoric Idealism and Cultural Framing

"I See Life as a Cool, Sunny, Bright Morning" (p. 15)

This statement appears as a subtle yet profound reflection of Hussaina's personality, worldview, and psychological resilience, especially when compared to Serah's troubled disposition. It serves as a stylistic and cognitive window into her inner schema: an organised mental structure that shapes how she perceives life and interprets experience. The utterance illustrates how language activates shared cognitive and cultural frameworks, revealing that Hussaina's optimism is both personally formed and culturally informed.

At the linguistic level, the line's simplicity conceals its conceptual depth. The metaphor "life as a cool, sunny, bright morning" operates through an image schema derived from familiar fleshly and environmental experience. The morning schema suggests renewal, clarity, and balance, qualities commonly associated with the start of a new day. Hussaina reveals a cognitive inclination to view existence through the view of harmony and hope by projecting freshness, calmness, and illumination onto the abstract concept of life. The adjectives "cool", "sunny", and "bright" suggest a balance between gentleness and vibrancy. Unlike Serah, whose emotional struggles colour her outlook, Hussaina's schema is tranquil yet radiant, grounded in a sense of divine order and emotional steadiness.Gimba's diction further constructs Hussaina's character through precise and deliberate metaphor. The visual and tactile imagery in "cool, sunny, bright" creates a rhythmic progression from physical comfort to illumination and then to clarity. This movement symbolises a shift from external sensation to inner understanding. The straightforward syntax, free from hesitation or density, reflects her psychological stability and moral integrity. Thus, Hussaina's speech style showcases her cognitive background: orderly, optimistic, and well-balanced.This schematic interpretation also shows how the metaphor resonates with the reader's cultural background. In Nigerian society, morning commonly symbolises awakening, blessing, and new beginnings. African oral narratives frequently present morning light as a metaphor for spiritual purity and divine favour. When Hussaina likens life to a bright morning, she draws on a cultural idea that associates light with moral goodness and hope. Her optimism is therefore not only personal but also culturally recognisable. She symbolises the figure of a morally aware and emotionally composed Nigerian woman who faces challenges without losing faith in life's natural rhythm.

Courtship, Cultural Expectation, and the Schema of Marital Stability

And many a marriage that hits the rocks in our society today might have had a long life span with a few more months of courtship. (p. 51)

Anas's statement activates a set of pre-existing cognitive and cultural structures that shape how marriage, preparation, and responsibility are understood. His phrasing assumes that the reader already shares an implicit schema in which marriage is not simply a private emotional contract but a social institution governed by norms, expectations, and stages. The idea of "courtship" is framed as a preparatory phase determinedby many traditional marriage schemata, functioning as a period for emotional assessment, character scrutiny, and compatibility testing. Anas'sinsistence that Hussaina, his daughter, should court Lahab appeals to a widely

shared sociocultural script: that marriages basedon familiarity and gradual relational development are more likely to endure.The expression "many a marriage that hit the rocks" uses a conventional idiom rooted in the narrative schema of crisis. The metaphor of a ship striking rocks draws from experiential knowledge of navigation, danger, and loss. This metaphor activates a mental schema in which marriage is a vessel navigating uncertain waters, vulnerable to destruction when proper structures, such as courtship, are absent. It thus supports the cultural expectation that relationships require deliberate steering and prudent preparation.Anas's remark that marriages might have "had a long life span with a few more months of courtship" introduces the idea of temporal investment. In many Nigerian cultural settings, longevity in marriage is seen not only as a result of affection but also as a consequence of discipline, patience, and understanding developed over time. The father's emphasis positions courtship as both a diagnostic and a preventative phase. Time is metaphorically depicted as a healing force, an investment capable of fostering endurance. This reflects a value system in which emotional stability is not seen as spontaneous but as the outcome of socialised processes.

Stylistically, the sentence is reflective, cautionary, and steeped in the rhythm of proverbial wisdom. The phrase "many a marriage" echoes a traditional cadence that aligns with communal storytelling modes. It comes from the cultural schema of *collective experience*, which implies that the failures of marriages are not isolated but part of a broader societal pattern observable across generations. This rhetorical strategy strengthens Anas's authority and situates his counsel within a recognised moral framework typical of a father figure who protects his ward.The contrast between Hussaina's dismissal of courtship and her father's insistence shows a clash of schemata, her contemporary, efficiency-driven schema versus his traditional, process-oriented one. While Hussaina views prolonged relational stages as unnecessary, Anas functions within a culturally inherited schema in which skipping such stages is risky. His statement, therefore, symbolises the intergenerational negotiation of meaning and values. In essence, Anas's utterance uses metaphor, communal reasoning, and culturally rooted assumptions to explain a worldview where courtship is not a mere cultural ornament but a necessary stabilising mechanism within the societal schema of marriage.

Euphemistic Framing and the Cultural Schema of Death

Suppose the lady in comatose simply kicked the bucket… (p. 6)

The idiom "kicked the bucket" operates as a significant stylistic device in *Witnesses to Tears* because it introduces a conversational lightness into a context where seriousness and sensitivity are expected. When this thought crosses Remi's mind, the stylistic effect becomes immediately compelling because the euphemism "kicked the bucket" does not arise from casual conversation but from an internal moment of anxiety shaped by her professional environment. The idiom, widely understood in English as a light-hearted substitute for "die", activates a familiar death schema that usually softens the emotional force of mortality. Yet, in Remi's context as a nurse who has just taken over a shift involving an unidentified woman brought in by policemen on patrol, the expression becomes a site of tension rather than comfort. The euphemism inserts a colloquial frame into a situation marked by fear, uncertainty, and institutional responsibility. This tension invites the reader to explore how linguistic habits and cultural expectations collide within the consciousness of a character whose duty is to preserve life.Because Remi did not receive the patient directly but inherited the responsibility from Serah, her fear is not merely abstract; it is shaped by the cultural schema surrounding professional accountability, reputation, and the institutional burden placed on medical staff. In many Nigerian contexts, health workers are acutely aware that unexplained deaths can lead to accusations, bureaucratic investigations, and strained interactions with the police. Thus, Remi's thought is not simply a careless or amusing mental slip; it reflects the pressure of a system where a nurse must constantly negotiate between empathy for the patient and anxiety about

possible blame. The euphemism, therefore, becomes a window into Remi's psychological state, revealing how social realities infiltrate even her private reflections.

Within this layered context, schema theory helps explain the merging of two powerful cognitive frameworks. The first is the linguistic schema of death euphemisms, which encourages speakers to distance themselves emotionally from the finality of death. The second is the institutional andcultural schema of medical vulnerability, which foregrounds fears of accusation, negligence, and institutional scrutiny. As these schemata interact in Remi's mind, the phrase "kicked the bucket" acquires a dual resonance. It trivialises death through its familiar idiomatic form, yet it also intensifies Remi's apprehension by highlighting the possibility that the woman might indeed die during her shift, leaving her to face the consequences.

Gimba's placement of this euphemism within Remi's internal thoughts thus becomes stylistically significant not because of the idiom itself, but because of the cultural and emotional landscape it exposes. The narrative does not portray Remi as insensitive; rather, it portrays a nurse negotiating conflicting schemata, her human concern for the unconscious woman, her fear of being held responsible for circumstances beyond her control, and her attempt to mentally relieve the pressure through a familiar linguistic shortcut. The euphemism becomes a coping mechanism, a momentary psychological cushion that eventually fails to mask the genuine fear underlying her thoughts.In this sense, Gimba uses language to show a broader cultural commentary: the strain placed on medical workers in under-resourced settings, the ambiguous relationship between hospitals and law enforcement, and the emotional burden borne by individuals crossing these structures. The idiom functions as a stylistic bridge between personal anxiety and societal shortcomings, which illustrates how deeply cultural schemata can shape the interpretation of even the most ordinary expressions. Throughinserting this euphemism in Remi's internal monologue, Gimba demonstrates how thoughts framed in familiar language can reveal the pressures of duty, the fragility of human life, and the unsettling reality of institutional uncertainty.

Rhetorical Questions, Hyperbole, and Metaphor as Projections of Emerging Independence

"But tell me – what do you make of me? A little girl with a feeding bottle in her mouth? I am nineteen! If I can't make independent decisions at this age, when do I start?" (p. 37)

Hussaina's outburst marks one of the defining moments in the narrative where language becomes a tool of self-assertion. Her utterance blends metaphor, hyperbole, and rhetorical questioning to challenge the cultural expectations that attempt to confine her. From a schema-theoretic perspective, the metaphor of the "feeding bottle" immediately evokes the infancy schema, a cognitive and cultural framework associated with helplessness, parental control, and total dependence. Through summoning this image, she draws attention to the absurdity of being treated as though she lacks agency. The metaphor works as a deliberate exaggeration, a hyperbolic critique of Lahab's implicit assumption that she requires guidance or supervision to make her own emotional and social choices. The rhetorical force of her questions shifts the discourse from passive complaint to active confrontation. Rhetorical questions are inherently dialogic; they address another character but eventually place interpretive responsibility on the audience. Through this strategy, Hussaina compels Lahab, and by extension, the reader, to interrogate the cultural scripts that equate youthfulness, especially in women, with incapacity. Her questions are not merely emotional reactions but carefully shaped linguistic moves that destabilise fixed assumptions. In this regard, the utterance activates the adulthoodschema, which includes autonomy, responsibility, judgement, and social participation. Through stressing her age, "I am nineteen,"she situates herself firmly within this schema and calls upon the reader's stored cultural knowledge about what constitutes maturity.

The tension between these two schemata, infancy and adulthood, represents the wide-ranging cultural conflict surrounding female independence in traditional societies. Within many Northern Nigerian contexts, adolescence for women is often marked by restricted mobility, protective oversight, and expectations of deference. Hussaina's statement exposes this cultural contradiction: although she meets the societal markers of adulthood, she is still evaluated through the eyes of dependency. Through asserting her right to make decisions, she resists the patriarchal schema that frames young women as in need of continuous supervision by fathers or prospective husbands. Her language, therefore, becomes a battleground on which competing cultural narratives clash.This moment is stylistically significant because Gimba invites the reader to witness not just the content of Hussaina's protest but the cognitive processes that shape her self-understanding. Her use of hyperbole, imagining herself as a child with a feeding bottle, unveils awareness of the cultural assumptions she is confronting. Her rhetorical questions expose the illogic of those assumptions and reposition her as an agent rather than a passive object of guidance. In this way, Hussaina uses language to redraw her identity and reconfigure the relationship between age, gender, and authority. The utterance becomes more than a personal expression of frustration. It becomes a reorganisation of cultural knowledge, a deliberate attempt to shift the interpretive frames through which young women are understood. By challenging the dominance of the dependency schema and asserting the adulthood schema, she re-educates both Lahab and the reader about what it means to be nineteen in a society negotiating the boundaries of tradition and modernity.

Sarcasm, Euphemism, and the Cultural Schema of Violence

"We just simply eliminated him. We have not touched his name. He still has mourners." (p. 112)

Saahir's remark to Lahab is striking for its combination of sarcasm, euphemism, and the darkly ironic metaphor of "elimination". On the surface, the statement functions as a clinical report of violent action. Yet, the linguistic choices deliberately diminish the severity of the event, which in turn creates a tension between literal and figurative meaning in the expression. The euphemism "eliminated him" softens the act of killing by transforming murder into an abstract, almost administrative task. This expression, from a schematic understanding, triggers a violence schema, one that incorporates cultural knowledge about revenge, survival, and the moral codes governing conflict in the novel's setting. Readers who are familiar with social narratives of vengeance immediately perceive both the danger inherent in Saahir's world and the ethical transgression implied in the expression.The ironic emphasis on the survival of the victim's "name" and the continued presence of "mourners" introduces a covert cultural and cognitive impression. While the physical body ofthe victim has been destroyed, the social memory persists. This stresses a schema of social legacy and communal mourning that cannot be erased by physical violence. Saahir's sarcastic tone, marked by the casual phrasing "we just simply eliminated him", shows both bravado and an awareness of the symbolic dimension of life and death. Linguistically, this sarcasm serves as a mechanism for controlling fear and asserting power, which signals to Lahab that violence can be both executed and rationalised without compromising one's security and psychological composure. Culturally, the statement depicts a societal understanding in which honour, reputation, and memory operate alongside physical action. The tension between deleting the individual from the surface of the earth and leaving their name intact suggests a cultural schema of communal respect and memory, where death is never wholly absolute as long as the social recognition of the deceased's nomenclature survives. Through the act of appealing to the mention of mourners, Saahir emphasises the continuity of social and cultural structures even amid acts of lethal violence.The structure's stylistic use of sarcasm and euphemistic metaphor to achieve multiple effects creates dramatic irony by revealing Saahir's calculated detachment while simultaneously alerting readers to the potential consequences of unchecked violence. It also allows Gimba to

explore moral ambiguity in the text by showing that language itself can mediate perceptions of life, death, and responsibility.

Conclusion

Abubakar Gimba's *Witnesses to Tears* exemplifies the inseparability of style and cultural cognition in literary meaning-making. Through the strategic use of metaphor, euphemism, hyperbole, and rhetorical questions, the novel constructs and activates schemata that guide readers' engagement with the narrative's moral, social, and emotional dimensions. Hussaina's assertive language challenges patriarchal assumptions, asserting her agency within culturally prescribed frameworks of dependence and adulthood. Similarly, Remi's reflections on patient mortality illustrate how linguistic choices convey ethical anxiety and institutional pressure. Even idiomatic expressions such as "kicked the bucket" operate on multiple levels, softening the perception of death while simultaneously foregrounding social and institutional shortcomings. Gimba assists readers in exploring the conflicts among personal freedom, social norms, and moral duties by incorporating these stylistic devices into culturally based schemata. This study reveals that in *Witnesses to Tears*, literary style is not merely ornamental; it functions as a cognitive and cultural lens through which readers interpret and critically engage with the complexities of human experience in Northern Nigerian society.

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