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Semantic-Stylistic Devices and Psychoanalytic Struggles in Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *Season of Crimson Blossoms* and *The Whispering Trees*

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Abstract
This paper examines the role of semantic-stylistic expressive means, such as paradox, pun, metonymy, and metaphor, in articulating repressed desires and psychological conflicts in selected Nigerian literary texts, specifically *Season of Crimson Blossoms* and *The Whispering Trees*. It draws on psychoanalytic theory, particularly Freudian constructs of the id, ego, and superego. The paper interprets stylistic features as manifestations of subconscious tensions experienced by characters and, by extension, the author himself. Through textual analysis of *Season of Crimson Blossoms* and *The Whispering Trees* by Abubakar Adam Ibrahim, this argues that semantic expressive devices function not merely as artistic embellishments but as vessels through which latent emotions, social defiance, and cultural anxieties are encoded and expressed. The study further contends that, within the socio-cultural context of Nigeria, where direct discourse on taboo subjects is often constrained by cultural conservatism, such devices enable writers to negotiate the boundaries of permissible expression. Through the act of embedding complex sociological states within layers of linguistic ambiguity, these expressive means reveal the ongoing struggle between individual desires and societal expectations. This paper contributes to a healthy scholarship on how Nigerian literature employs language as a tool for psychological insight and socio-cultural critique.

Introduction

In recent years, contemporary Nigerian literature has witnessed a marked embrace of stylistic innovation as a potent vehicle for psychological introspection and socio-cultural critique. Within a socio-cultural setting often characterised by conservatism and reticence towards open discussion of taboo subjects, authors have increasingly resorted to semantic expressive devices such as paradox, pun, metonymy, and metaphor to circumvent the limitations imposed on direct expression. These linguistic tools enable writers to articulate complex psychological states and social realities that might otherwise remain obscured. Particularly, they provide a means of capturing the different experiences of repression, displacement, and unresolved trauma that permeate both individual and collective consciousness.

The texture of individual meaning in literary works is largely fashioned through the author's manipulation of language, depicting how they write, contextualise, and stylistically present ideas to their audience. This communicative creativity becomes the medium through which meaning is encoded and interpreted, which in turn serves as a bridge between the author's intentions and the reader's perception. As Bradford (1997, p. 5) notes, language constitutes a vast and complicated network of signs and meanings, one far more complex and expressive than non-verbal gestures or pictorial representations. Through language, writers not only communicate ideas but also project aspects of their inner selves consciously or otherwise.

Although authors may choose to dissociate themselves from the meanings readers derive from their texts, they inevitably introduce indices that guide interpretation. The act of writing, therefore, becomes both a revelation and a concealment, which is an invitation to read between the lines. While an author's intentions may be suppressed by cultural, political, or literary canons, they cannot control the multiplicity of meanings generated by the reader. Phelan (as cited in Sorlin, 2020) articulates this relationship through the concept of double consciousness, whereby the reader assumes both the position of an immersed observer within the fictional world and that of a critical audience aware of the constructed nature of the narrative.

The connection between language and personality remains a contested domain in stylistics. Recent scholarship has revisited this debate through empirical and cognitive approaches that explore how individual traits and contextual factors shape linguistic expression. Spitzley et al. (2022) demonstrate that patterns of linguistic choice often represent personality dimensions, thereby validating the notion that stylistic features may reflect aspects of selfhood. Similarly, Hamawand (2023) argues from a cognitive-grammar perspective that distinctive linguistic patterns can reveal the conceptual and affective structures underlying an author's worldview. In line with this, Alaghbary (2024) emphasises that style is both individual and context-bound, serving as a reflection of an author's idiosyncrasy and of the socio-discursive environment in which the text is produced. These more recent insights refine the earlier theoretical positions of Milic (1965) and Robinson (1985), suggesting that while style may not be a direct reflection of personality, it remains a vital trace of psychological and cultural engagement.

In this exploration of *Season of Crimson Blossoms* and *The Whispering Trees*, Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's style is analysed as a means for both thematic expression and psychological depth. *Season of Crimson Blossoms*, set in northern Nigeria and partly in Abuja, revolves around Hajiya Binta Zubairu, a devout widow in her mid-fifties who has endured the murder of her son and the loneliness of widowhood. Her unexpected relationship with Hassan 'Reza', a young gang leader and drug dealer, defies social and religious conventions, becoming a symbolic site where desire, grief, and repression intersect. Through their forbidden relationship, Ibrahim interrogates themes of sexuality, generational conflict, loss, and the politics of morality within a conservative Islamic society. The novel, therefore, not only unveils the hidden emotional yearnings of a woman constrained by culture but also dramatises the paradox of faith and transgression in a community governed by moral surveillance.

Complementing this narrative of forbidden desire and psychological awakening is *The Whispering Trees*, a collection of short stories that extends Ibrahim's fascination with the human psyche into broader terrains of mortality, spirituality, and transformation. The stories weave together elements of realism and mysticism, exploring the boundaries between life and death, myth and reality, sanity and madness. In the title story, Salim, who becomes blind after an accident, experiences a metaphysical rebirth that alters his perception of existence and the meaning of suffering. Other tales in the collection traverse the supernatural, political, and emotional atmosphere of northern Nigerian life by featuring medicine men battling unseen plagues, women negotiating loss, and wanderers seeking redemption. Here, Ibrahim's narrative voice remains reflective and lyrical, using metaphor, symbolism, and irony to expose the fragility of human existence and the quiet suppleness of the soul.

Together, these two texts demonstrate Ibrahim's consistent preoccupation with the tensions between repression and expression, tradition and modernity, sin and redemption. His language, unsettled between the poetic and the colloquial, functions as a psychological mirror through which the anxieties of his characters and the contradictions of their society are projected. This intersection of stylistic choice and psychological representation offers a rich field for analysis. Ibrahim's characters, caught in the cracks of tradition and modernity, self-expression and societal repression, are rendered with a linguistic precision that makes his narratives both emotionally arresting and sociologically insightful. The psycho-stylistic approach here aims to uncover how Ibrahim's syntax, vocabulary, and figurative language depict not only the psyche of his characters but also his broader commentary on contemporary Nigerian society.

Recent stylistic scholarship (Zyngier & Watson, 2022) reinforces this self-motivated view by emphasising that style operates as a communicative strategy through which meaning, identity, and ideology are negotiated. Postmodernist thought further argues that individual identity is socially constructed and moulded by external discourses internalised through repeated expression. Thus, the language of a narrative is not merely a neutral medium but a performative space where selfhood, repression, and resistance are enacted. As Alaghbary (2024) observes, an author's stylistic decisions, through narrative structure, characterisation, and commentary constitute a conscious projection of identity and worldview. Accordingly, this study considers Ibrahim's stylistic choices as reflective of a deliberate engagement with the psychological and cultural textures of his immediate environment.

This paper adopts a psychoanalytic perspective to stylistic analysis. It principally draws on Freudian theory to interrogate how these thematic devices function as conduits for the articulation of repressed desires and psychological conflicts. Through the exploration of *Season of Crimson Blossoms* and *The Whispering Trees*, the study seeks to uncover how those stylistic features reveal the complicated tensions between societal expectations and personal yearnings. Through this perspective, semantic expressive means are not merely aesthetic devices, but they serve as coded language that encodes latent emotions, social defiance, and cultural anxieties.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on Freudian psychoanalysis, with particular emphasis on the concepts of repression, displacement, and the structural model of the psyche, which includes the id, ego, and superego. Freud's theory posits that the human psyche is a dynamic arena wherein instinctual desires (id) frequently come into conflict with internalised moral standards and societal expectations (superego), and the ego functions as the mediator, striving to maintain psyche balance by negotiating these opposing forces. When direct expression of instinctual drives is inhibited, often due to cultural or moral constraints, defence mechanisms such as repression and displacement are employed to manage the resultant psychological tension.

In the realm of literature, these unconscious processes frequently manifest through the use of semantic expressive devices. Paradox, pun, metonymy and metaphor serve not mainly as stylistic flourishes but as symbolic vehicles through which repressed emotions and latent conflicts are encoded. These devices operate analogously to the mechanisms of dream-work described by Freud, wherein condensation, displacement, and symbolic representation

obscure and simultaneously reveal unconscious content. The linguistic ambiguity inherent in these devices allows for the coexistence of multiple, often contradictory meanings, thereby depicting the composite relationship that exists between conscious and unconscious realms. In literature, these mechanisms may surface indirectly through stylistic choices, including semantic expressive means that encode truth within layers of contradiction, irony, and symbolism.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis approach, combining stylistic criticism with psychoanalytic literary theory to explore how semantic expressive means reveal psychological states and repressed desires in selected Nigerian prose narratives. The methodology is interpretative in nature and draws on selected excerpts from the two primary texts: *Season of Crimson Blossoms* (2015) and *The Whispering Trees* (2012) by Abubakar Adam Ibrahim. The analysis follows two interlinked trajectories: Stylistic Trajectory: This involves the identification and close reading of instances of paradox, pun, metonymy, and metaphor. The analysis focuses on how these devices function semantically and stylistically within the narrative context, paying particular attention to their symbolic, ironic, and layered meanings. Psychoanalytic Trajectory: Informed by Freudian concepts of repression, displacement, projection, and acting out, the analysis examines how these stylistic devices reflect psychological conflicts within characters. These include conflicts between instinctual desires (id), moral restraint (superego), and reality management (ego), particularly within a cultural context where taboos and repression are socially enforced. Excerpts were purposefully sampled based on their relevance to the study's central aim: to uncover how language encodes latent psychological experiences. The analysis is interpretative but grounded in the narrative context and cultural setting of Northern Nigerian society, where the selected texts are largely set. The study also draws on relevant secondary literature in literary stylistics and psychoanalytic criticism to support interpretations. Through this integrated method, the paper seeks to contribute to scholarship that intersects language, literature, psychology, and African cultural studies.

Semantic Expressive Means

These are expressive means concerned with the construction and negotiation of meaning. In stylistics, this relates to the semantic potential of structures on how they transcend their literal interpretations to generate deeper, often implied meaning within a specific context. This type of meaning-making occurs when the literal or surface form of an expression yields to contextual interpretation by allowing readers to infer meanings that are not overtly stated but are suggested through linguistic and stylistic cues. As Simpson (2004) observes, stylistics explores "how meanings are made through language in context," and this includes the figurative and pragmatic dimensions that expressions can activate in a particular speech situation.

Paradox as Semantic Expressive Means

Paradox, a device that presents apparent contradictions that reveal deeper truths, serves as a conduit for expressing repressed desires. In *Season of Crimson Blossoms*, the narrator remarks: *Hajiya Binta Zubairu was finally born at fifty-five*… (Ibrahim 2015, p. 3) At a literal level, the idea of being "born" at fifty-five appears logically untenable. Yet, from a psychoanalytic perspective, it signals a profound psychic rebirth, an eruption of the repressed self-long suppressed under the weight of social conformity, religious propriety, and patriarchal structures. Binta's metaphorical "birth" marks the beginning of a personal

renaissance, catalysed by her encounter with Reza, a much younger man whose transgressive intrusion breaches both her physical and emotional defences. In Freudian terms, this moment may be interpreted as the return of the repressed: an instance where latent desires, long buried in the unconscious, find sudden and potent expression. Binta's prior life with her late husband, Zubairu, though respectable and dutiful, was devoid of genuine emotional or sexual intimacy. Her compliance with the roles of wife and mother had effectively silenced her libidinal self, aligning with Freud's notion that social norms often sublimate or suppress instinctual drives.

The paradox of being "born" late in life, then, reflects a delayed psychological individuation, an emergence of the self from the ashes of repression. Through this rebirth, Binta becomes emotionally sentient for the first time, even if the relationship that facilitates this awakening stands at odds with religious codes and communal mores. Her union with Reza, though morally contentious, serves as a site of catharsis, opening up repressed psychic territories that she had been conditioned to disown.

Thus, the paradox captures the complexity of desire, memory, and trauma. It foregrounds the tension between societal expectations and individual longing, drawing attention to the irony that true emotional and sexual aliveness often emerges not in youth but in the shadow of supposed moral decay. In this sense, Ibrahim uses paradox not only as a stylistic flourish but as a psychoanalytic mirror, reflecting the unconscious negotiations that shape female subjectivity in conservative societies.
Similarly, when Binta expresses simultaneous joy and sadness in response to her daughter's progressive stance:
Her daughter's response both pleased and saddened her. (Ibrahim 2015, p. 57)
This reveals the conflicted dynamics of maternal identity. The pleasure stems from witnessing her daughter's courage to defy cultural shackles, which passes for a liberty Binta never afforded herself. Yet, the sadness she felt arises from recognising her lifelong weakness to those same norms. The paradox summarises a turning point in her internal conflict between tradition and modernity, courage and resignation. In *The Whispering Trees*, the paradoxical response: *I don't know how... I just know, I guess.* (Ibrahim 2012, p. 17).

The quoted response, "I don't know how… I just know, I guess", offered by Ozioma, who claims to be the reincarnated mother of Ohikwo, functions as a subtle rhetorical device that veils the depth of her knowledge under the guise of uncertainty. This utterance constructs an illusion of intuitive recollection while simultaneously denying conscious access to the origin of her memories. The paradox of professing such detailed familiarity with Ohikwo's childhood while disclaiming awareness of how the information was acquired undermines the plausibility of her claim to reincarnation. Her hesitancy suggests an internal conflict; she appears to be deliberately downplaying the emotional intensity of her recollection to secure Ohikwo's affirmation and validate her identity through external endorsement. Through framing her knowledge as inexplicable, she casts the situation in a mystical light, thereby suppressing her fears while subtly seeking confirmation. Meanwhile, Ohikwo himself remains suspended in a state of anticipatory uncertainty, seemingly awaiting an unequivocal declaration from her that she is, indeed, his deceased mother reincarnated. This semantic expressive device hints at the suppression of uncomfortable truths. The ambiguous admission points to an internalised struggle between belief and scepticism, where memory recall is shrouded in mystery to escape societal derision.
Another instance from *The Whispering Trees*:

Silence answered me. (Ibrahim 2012, p. 46)

Salim's inquiry, "And what about Ummi?" is met not with a verbal response, but with a profound and deliberate silence. Ummi, his mother, had died in the fatal accident that led to his hospitalisation and subsequent period of unconsciousness. Upon regaining consciousness, Salim's first concern is for her well-being. However, given the severity of his physical and emotional condition, those around him find themselves unable to disclose the tragic news. Subsequently, silence becomes the medium through which the truth is inadvertently conveyed. Although it may initially appear illogical to suggest that silence could communicate such a grave reality, the communicative weight of the silence proves more powerful than words. The collective inability or unwillingness of those present to respond to Salim's question signals a tacit confirmation of his fears. Within this context, silence functions as both a protective mechanism and a semiotic gesture: it suppresses the immediate dissemination of trauma to prevent emotional destabilisation, yet simultaneously reveals the very truth it seeks to withhold. Thus, silence in this instance is not merely the absence of speech, but a strategic communicative act laden with meaning and consequence. The silence functions as a collective act of suppression, a protective mechanism against emotional breakdown, both for Salim and his caretakers.

Pun as Semantic Expressive Means

Puns, with their reliance on double meanings, serve a unique function in conveying repressed tensions in humorous or ironic ways. Consider the dialogue: *Well, it isn't adulterated, if that's what you mean* (Ibrahim 2015, p. 295). Here, the term "adulterated" refers not only to the purity of honey but alludes to Binta's adulterous relationship. The double entendre exposes societal hypocrisy, where discussions of morality and purity are often veiled but keenly understood. The pun triggers discomfort among listeners, revealing the communal tendency to police female sexuality while avoiding confrontation.

Similarly, the exclamation: *Hajiya Binta shagali!* (Ibrahim 2015, p. 275). Ostensibly, a compliment carries a punning reference to "Shagali Hotel," the illicit venue of Binta and Reza's meetings. The pun functions as an act of social shaming disguised as praise. This layered use of language reflects the tension between appearance and reality, virtue and vice, in a society where moral codes are selectively applied.

Metonymy as Semantic Expressive Means

Metonymy is frequently employed in Nigerian fiction to circumvent cultural taboos and relay veiled truths. In *Season of Crimson Blossoms*, a stepmother describes Reza's mother as:

Even Talatu, one of his two stepmothers, had said his mother was ***a Kano to Jeddah***. (Ibrahim 2015, p. 40)

On the surface, this geographic shorthand implies international prostitution; however, covertly, it critiques a practice wherein some Nigerian women travel for pilgrimage but remain in Saudi Arabia for sex work. "Kano" and "Jeddah" function metonymically for Nigeria and Saudi Arabia. The metonymy encapsulates layers of societal critique: the commodification of religion, gendered marginalisation, and the psychological toll of parental absence. Reza's deviant path is indirectly tied to maternal abandonment, shaped by cultural complicity and economic desperation. Stylistically, the excerpt captures complex social realities through minimal language, allowing for layered interpretation. Reza's abandonment at six months deprives him of maternal affection during critical stages of psychosexual development. His stepmothers, instead of providing emotional support, nurture resentment

against his mother. This contributes to Reza's descent into addiction and criminality, a clear case of psychological displacement. Reza inherits the trauma of coerced marriage.

In *The Whispering Trees*: *When they had first called me the cat-eyed English witch, I had thought it was kind of... I don't know, amusing, perhaps.* (Ibrahim 2012, p. 35). The so-called description employs metonymy to signify foreignness and otherness. The woman's cat-like eyes, linked to African superstitions about witchcraft, become the metonymic basis for her ostracism. The projection of societal fears onto her physical traits reveals a mechanism of cultural xenophobia. The community's rejection of her is less about her behaviour and more about her perceived difference. Psychologically, the family's behaviour reflects an act of projection: they assume the foreign woman harbours disdain for them, exposing their own discomfort and latent hostility toward her difference.

Metaphor as Semantic Expressive Means

Metaphor serves as a powerful device to summarise psychological states and subconscious drives. In *Season of Crimson Blossoms*, the author writes:

He took her things and left, having sown in her the seed of awakening that would eventually sprout into a corpse flower… (Ibrahim 2015, p. 9)

This metaphor captures the transformation of Binta's life through the language of botany and decay. The "corpse flower," notorious for its odour, symbolises not only her sexual awakening but also the social rot it uncovers. Her relationship with Reza awakens long-dormant desires, but it also exposes her to societal condemnation, transforming her into a cautionary figure of moral decline.

At the core of this metaphor lies the notion of sexual awakening, a central concern in Freudian theory. The phrase "sown in her the seed of awakening" immediately invokes the imagery of penetration and fertilisation, alluding to the reactivation of dormant sexual desire. In Freudian terms, such a moment reflects the eruption of the libido, the psychic energy of the id, long repressed by social, religious, and psychological constraints. Binta, a widowed and deeply conservative woman, has hitherto suppressed her desires under the weight of her superego, a function of internalised societal morality and religious expectations. This encounter becomes the point at which the return of the repressed begins to manifest, disrupting the psychological equilibrium she has maintained for years since her husband's demise. However, this awakening is not framed as liberating or joyful; rather, it is tinged with decay and morbidity. The simile of the "corpse flower", a rare botanical specimen known for its pungent odour of rot, conjures Freud's notion of Thanatos, the death drive. While Eros, the life drive, animates desire and sexuality, Thanatos drives the individual towards dissolution, self-destruction, or a return to inertia. The corpse flower, therefore, becomes an emblem of the paradox of desire: a blooming of erotic energy that carries within it the stench of guilt, loss, and eventual decay. Binta's libidinal stirrings are thus neither regenerative nor purely pleasurable; instead, they initiate a psychic conflict that threatens to unravel the stability of her identity.

Moreover, the act of the man (Reza) "taking her things and leaving" suggests a sudden withdrawal that triggers deeper psychic dislocation. Freud's concept of melancholia, an internalised response to object loss, offers further insight here. In contrast, mourning, which is directed outward, melancholia involves an inward collapse, whereby the lost object is incorporated into the ego and becomes a source of self-reproach. Reza's departure leaves Binta with not only an absence but a haunting psychic residue. The "seed" that has been

sown is not merely sexual; it is also the seed of internal conflict and potential self-fragmentation. Therefore, the metaphor of the "corpse flower" in *Season of Crimson Blossoms* reveals more than a moment of illicit intimacy; it reflects a Freudian drama in which desire, repression, guilt, and mortality are inextricably entwined. Binta's awakening is not a straightforward emancipation but the beginning of a tragic psychic flowering, one that captures the darkly ambivalent nature of human sexuality as Freud conceived it.

In *The Whispering Trees*, another metaphor arises: *My heart sank further in the ocean of guilt.* (Ibrahim 2012, p. 52). This oceanic metaphor conveys the overwhelming depth of Salim's remorse, vividly externalising his intense emotional collapse following his traumatic accident and loss. Stylistically, the image of an "ocean" conveys the vastness, depth, and suffocating nature of his guilt, while the verb "sank" signifies a loss of control and emotional descent. Within the context of Freudian Psychoanalysis, this metaphor reflects the dominance of the superego, which punishes the ego with guilt for having hurt Faulata, the one person who remains emotionally and physically present and supportive. His earlier aggressive behaviour, including his verbal abuse and threat of physical violence toward Faulata, is not only a sign of psychological distress but a classic case of displacement: his repressed anger towards fate and God is redirected to a safer target. Moreover, his outburst reflects acting out, a Freudian defence mechanism wherein repressed conflict is enacted rather than consciously acknowledged. Salim, unable to accept his blindness and the loss of his mother, projects his psychic pain onto others. However, Faulata's tears, described as being like rain, dissolve his defensive anger, exposing the vulnerable core of his conscience. His heart, now consumed by guilt, is described as sinking into an ocean, a metaphor that signifies both the overwhelming magnitude of remorse and the return of repressed emotion. In this moment, the metaphor becomes not only stylistically expressive but psychodynamically significant. It symbolises the ego's confrontation with its own moral failure and a submerged recognition of love and loss.

Conclusion

Semantic expressive means in Nigerian fiction offer a rich field for psychoanalytic exploration. Stylistic devices such as paradox, pun, metonymy, and metaphor do more than embellish narrative; they serve as psychological outlets and cultural commentaries. Through these devices, writers like Abubakar Adam Ibrahim subtly explore themes of repression, identity, trauma, and cultural conflict. These expressions demonstrate that what is left unsaid in literature often speaks the loudest, revealing the workings of human emotion constrained by societal norms. This paper advocates for continued interdisciplinary engagement with African literature, where linguistic creativity is a gateway to understanding the psychological and cultural backgrounds of its people.

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