

MIND STYLE AND COGNITIVE FRAMING IN ABUBAKAR ADAM IBRAHIM'S *THE WHISPERING TREES*

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ABSTRACT

This study pioneers cognitive stylistic analysis in Nigerian short fiction, demonstrating how mind style and cognitive framing function in two selected short stories: "The Whispering Trees" and "Closure" from Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's collection, *The Whispering Trees*. Drawing on Fowler's theory of mind style and Gavins' text world theory, the study investigates how linguistic features such as deixis, modality, transitivity, and narrative perspective represent character consciousness and guide reader interpretation. Through a close textual analysis, the study explores Salim's cognitive transformation and spiritual awakening in "The Whispering Trees" and Sadiya's emotional stagnation and grief in "Closure." The findings reveal that the author's stylistic choices not only shape the characters' mental representations but also guide the reader's cognitive and emotional engagement with the narratives. This interdisciplinary approach highlights the value of cognitive stylistics in African literary studies, offering new insights into the mental and emotional complexities of contemporary Nigerian fiction.

KEYWORDS: Mind style, Cognitive framing, and Cognitive stylistics.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of style in literary studies has long been central to the interpretation and analysis of texts. Style refers to the distinctive linguistic choices an author makes in a literary work. These choices not only shape the aesthetic appeal of a text but also play a crucial role in the construction of meaning. Traditionally, style was often viewed from a prescriptive or rhetorical standpoint, emphasising literary elegance or authorial flair. However, modern stylistics redefines style as the systematic study of language in literature, using linguistic tools to uncover how texts achieve their effects on readers (Leech & Short, 2007).

Stylistics as a discipline emerged at the intersection of linguistics and literary criticism. It aims to provide an objective analysis of how linguistic features such as diction, syntax, cohesion, foregrounding, and narrative voice contribute to the

meaning of literary texts. According to Simpson (2004), stylistics allows scholars to investigate the interface between language and literary function, offering a means to explain not only what literary texts mean but also how they mean. Simpson outlines various approaches to stylistic analysis, including pragmatic stylistic analysis, cognitive stylistics, and discourse stylistics, each focusing on different aspects of textual meaning-making.

Cognitive stylistics, also known as cognitive poetics, is an interdisciplinary approach that merges insights from cognitive science, linguistics, and literary theory to explore how readers mentally process and engage with literary texts. Stockwell (2002) notes that, although it could be argued that the tradition of applying our latest best understanding of language and mind to literature has its origin in ancient classical rhetoric, the current manifestation of the phenomenon has its origin in Tsur's cognitive poetics of the 1970s. Tsur (1992) pioneered an account of literary meaning and effect that treats linguistic patterns as correlates of human cognition, and drew on neuropsychology, as well as stylistics and literary theory. Cognitive stylistics investigates how language cues in a text influence mental representations, emotional responses, and interpretive outcomes. Unlike traditional stylistics, which may focus primarily on form or structure, cognitive stylistics considers how textual features interact with general human cognitive capacities such as perception, memory, emotion, and categorisation (Stockwell, 2022; Culpeper, 2002). In recent years, cognitive stylistics has gained traction as a compelling approach to literary analysis. This emphasises how linguistic choices in texts reflect mental processes and influence reader interpretation. Central to this field are the concepts of "mind style" and "cognitive framing," which examine how narratives represent thought patterns and shape the reader's engagement with fictional worlds (Semino, 2007; Stockwell, 2002).

Mind style refers to the representation of human cognition through language forms. It is the characteristic way of thinking reflected in a text through consistent linguistic choices. According to Suleiman et al. (2023), mind style presents a cognitive turn or shift to complement the linguistic orientation of stylistics to reveal both the meaning and psychological effects of characters' experiences in fiction. This approach reveals not only meaning but also the cognitive and emotional effects of narrative on readers. From a cognitive stylistics' perspective, the analysis of mind style pays attention to various textual features such as vocabulary, grammar, transitivity choices, narrative structure, and point of view. These features, combined, help readers to infer the cognitive state of characters, narrators, or even the author. As such, mind style is not created in a vacuum; it is shaped and informed by broader cultural, social, political, and ideological contexts. By foregrounding these

dimensions, cognitive stylistics views style as a process that reflects and constructs mental representations which allow deeper access to the psychological realities depicted in fiction.

Cognitive framing refers to the mental structures that shape how individuals perceive, interpret, and respond to the world. These frames function as cognitive shortcuts that allow individuals to organize complex realities by filtering information through pre-existing conceptions. In discourse, framing influences both the presentation of information and the audience's interpretation and reaction to that information (Sullivan, 2023). In the context of cognitive stylistics, framing is crucial for understanding how narratives guide readers' interpretations and emotional responses. By emphasizing certain aspects of a narrative while omitting or downplaying others, authors can influence readers' perceptions and judgments. For instance, framing a character's actions as "heroic" versus "reckless" can lead to vastly different interpretations of the same behaviour (Sullivan, 2023).

Despite a growing global interest in cognitive approaches to literature, African short fiction remains relatively underexplored from this perspective. Abubakar Adam Ibrahim, a prominent voice in contemporary Nigerian literature, is renowned for his evocative prose and his exploration of complex social and psychological themes. *The Whispering Trees* (2012) exemplifies his ability to portray the complexities of human experience within the context of modern Nigeria. These stories often delve into themes of identity, religion, and the impact of socio-political realities on individual lives (Abdulrahman, 2022). While existing criticism often focuses on these thematic and social concerns, few studies examine how cognitive structures are embedded in the narrative through linguistic form. This study pioneers the application of cognitive stylistics to Nigerian short fiction, specifically analysing two stories: "The Whispering Trees" and "Closure" from Ibrahim's collection. It draws on Fowler's (1996) concept of mind style and Gavins' (2007) text world theory to examine how linguistic patterns represent mental states and guide interpretive framing. This study aims to:

1. Identify the linguistic features that construct mind style in the two stories.
2. Analyse how cognitive framing influences the reader's perception of characters and events.
3. Demonstrate how these stylistic techniques contribute to narrative meaning and emotional resonance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Review

The concepts of mind style and cognitive framing form the theoretical backbone of this study. These concepts, situated within the broader fields of cognitive stylistics and narratology, offer the analytical tools for examining how mental states, psychological dispositions, and worldview representations are encoded in language. While empirical studies abound in applying these concepts to texts, a conceptual grounding is vital to understand their scope, function, and interrelationship within literary discourse, particularly in African narrative contexts like *The Whispering Trees*.

Mind Style

Mind style, a term first introduced by Roger Fowler (1977), refers to the distinctive linguistic representation of an individual's mental perception, conceptualisation, and worldview as encoded in a text. It is concerned with how language reflects the cognitive processes and psychological orientations of characters or narrators, particularly those whose worldviews are unconventional, impaired, or otherwise marked by psychological difference. As a conceptual tool in stylistics and cognitive poetics, mind style provides insight into how a text simulates the inner world of its agents, thereby engaging the reader's interpretive and empathetic faculties.

Fowler (1996) conceptualised mind style as the "cognitive habits of individuals" as these are projected through their discourse. Such habits are inferred from the choices in lexis, syntax, modality, transitivity, and narrative structure. For instance, a character's persistent use of modal expressions of uncertainty or reduced syntactic complexity may suggest cognitive limitation, emotional disorientation, or psychological trauma. Mind style analysis thus bridges the linguistic and psychological domains, emphasising how formal features of language index cognitive dispositions and ideological stances.

Subsequent developments in stylistics, notably those of Semino (2002, 2007), have broadened the scope of mind style to include not only characters but also narrators and even implied authors. Semino (2002) defines mind style as "the linguistic encoding of a mental self," foregrounding the constructed perspective in fictional narratives. The concept has proven particularly useful in analysing texts involving characters with atypical cognition, such as the mentally ill, socially

alienated, or psychologically traumatised, where deviations from expected linguistic norms mirror the disruption of rational or normative thought patterns.

Mind style intersects productively with cognitive narratology, especially in its concern with how readers construct mental models of characters' beliefs, intentions, and psychological states. This idea builds on the concept of focalization (Genette, 1980), which filters narrative information through a particular consciousness, and further explores the linguistic traces of that consciousness. Through such analysis, mind style reveals how readers gain access to character subjectivities and how narrative empathy is linguistically orchestrated.

Moreover, mind style contributes significantly to the study of ideology in narrative. Fowler (1996) and Toolan (2009) have both argued that patterns of linguistic choices do not simply reflect cognition but also encode ideological positioning. Thus, mind style allows scholars to examine how characters internalise or resist dominant social values and how these positions are subtly enacted through narrative voice.

While the concept has been applied in a wide range of contexts from canonical literature to contemporary fiction and even media texts, it remains particularly pertinent to studies of trauma, marginality, and psychological realism. It enables a nuanced reading of how mental disturbance, emotional instability, or cognitive estrangement is signalled and sustained across a narrative. In this regard, mind style is not merely a descriptive tool but an interpretive framework that foregrounds the ethical and epistemological dimensions of narrative perspective.

Cognitive framing refers to the mental structures that shape an individual's perception and interpretation of reality. The concept draws heavily from cognitive linguistics and psychology, particularly the work of scholars such as Erving Goffman (1974), who introduced frame analysis as a way of understanding how individuals organise experiences, and George Lakoff (1987), who extended the theory into the realm of linguistic and conceptual metaphors. Frames serve as cognitive shortcuts, allowing individuals to make sense of complex information by emphasising certain aspects of a situation while omitting others. These mental filters are not only culturally shaped but also context-dependent, determining how a person processes language, constructs meaning, and forms judgments.

Cognitive Framing

In cognitive linguistics, framing is often explored through the lens of conceptual metaphors and image schemas. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphors are not merely rhetorical devices but fundamental to the way humans think and reason. Metaphorical frames influence narrative interpretation by

activating background knowledge structures and schemas that guide inferencing and emotional alignment. For example, a story framed through a "journey" metaphor may lead readers to interpret character experiences as progressions or regressions, while a "war" frame may foreground conflict and survival. These underlying frames shape how narrative information is structured and understood, including characters' motivations, plot developments, and thematic concerns.

In narrative studies, cognitive framing is especially critical in revealing how texts mediate reader perception and engagement. Textual framing devices such as focalization, narrative voice, modality, and perspectivisation are employed to simulate or trigger cognitive frames in the reader. As noted by Semino (2008), narrators often use evaluative language, spatial deixis, and temporal structures to manipulate narrative framing and steer reader interpretation. These textual strategies create coherence within the story world and position the reader to experience events from specific cognitive and emotional vantage points. Thus, framing is not only a matter of what is included in a narrative but also how it is cognitively packaged for comprehension.

Moreover, cognitive frames have an ideological dimension. As pointed out by Chilton (2004) in his work on political discourse, frames serve as instruments for controlling interpretation by encoding power relations and worldviews within linguistic choices. In literature, this ideological framing may reflect societal biases, cultural assumptions, or psychological orientations embedded in the narrative structure. The cognitive frame thereby becomes a site where language, cognition, and ideology intersect, shaping both the internal logic of the story and the interpretive possibilities available to readers.

Importantly, cognitive framing contributes significantly to character construction and reader empathy. When a narrative adopts the cognitive frame of a mentally disoriented, traumatised, or emotionally conflicted character, it invites the reader to enter that character's mental space. This narrative empathy is achieved by foregrounding certain cognitive features, such as disrupted temporality, fragmented syntax, or modal uncertainty elements that reflect the cognitive dissonance of the character. As Palmer (2004) observes, the representation of fictional consciousness is often filtered through such frames, enabling readers to access and emotionally respond to the inner lives of characters.

In summary, cognitive framing is a powerful conceptual tool that underpins how narratives are constructed and received. It explains how language functions as a cognitive scaffold for organising experience, shaping not only the content of a narrative but also its interpretive architecture. By engaging with framing theory, researchers gain deeper insight into the cognitive dimensions of literary discourse,

particularly how linguistic structures activate mental models, construct reality, and guide reader comprehension.

Intersection of Mind Style and Cognitive Framing

The intersection of mind style and cognitive framing provides a powerful conceptual apparatus for exploring how language constructs and communicates the internal worlds of fictional characters. While mind style focuses on the idiosyncratic cognitive patterns encoded in linguistic choices, cognitive framing addresses the mental structures that shape and constrain the interpretation of experience. Together, these concepts offer complementary insights into the psychological texture of narrative discourse, especially in contexts that foreground subjectivity, trauma, or epistemic fragmentation.

Mind style, as articulated by Fowler (1996), refers to the linguistic representation of a particular cognitive orientation; a character's or narrator's way of perceiving, interpreting, and engaging with reality. It is concerned with how lexis, syntax, modality, and transitivity patterns convey a distinctive worldview. Cognitive framing, rooted in cognitive linguistics and popularised by scholars such as Fillmore (1982), Lakoff (1987), and later expanded in narrative studies by Herman (2009) and Semino (2008), refers to the mental schemas or structures through which individuals understand events, actions, and states of being. Frames organise experience by foregrounding certain elements while backgrounding others, thus shaping the salience and coherence of narrative meaning.

The intersection between these two lies in their mutual preoccupation with how language constructs consciousness and subjectivity. While mind style captures the what of a character's thinking, what kind of mind is being presented, cognitive framing captures the how; how that mind processes, prioritises, or interprets information. For example, a character with a paranoid mind style may recurrently employ epistemic modality indicating uncertainty or suspicion (e.g., "must have," "might be," "perhaps"), while the cognitive frames activated in the narrative may consistently position the external world as hostile or threatening, thus aligning stylistic form with schematic structure. In such narratives, the frames not only guide interpretation for readers, but they also simulate the character's experiential filter.

The alignment or misalignment between mind style and cognitive frames is particularly relevant in narratives involving mental instability, trauma, or moral ambiguity. Semino (2007) shows that cognitive stylistic analysis becomes especially revealing when character or narrator worldviews diverge from expected norms, thus requiring readers to engage with unfamiliar cognitive configurations. Similarly, Stockwell (2009) argues that framing effects are crucial in establishing empathy or

distance between readers and characters, as they govern what is cognitively foregrounded and morally evaluated in the story world. In this way, cognitive framing and mind style jointly contribute to the reader's construction of character intentionality, credibility, and emotional plausibility.

Moreover, both concepts are situated within a broader cognitive stylistic paradigm that recognises literary discourse as a simulation of mental processes. As Palmer (2004) and Herman (2013) contend, fictional narratives do not merely describe events; they project minds in action. Thus, the interface between mind style and cognitive frames becomes the narrative terrain where characters' internal realities are negotiated, contested, or affirmed. This interface also mediates reader engagement by creating text-worlds (Gavins, 2007) that reflect not just what is known, but how it is known, what narrative perspective is privileged, what cognitive paths are followed, and what frames are activated or resisted.

Thus, the intersection of mind style and cognitive framing reveals how linguistic and schematic features of narrative discourse come together to shape the representation of consciousness. Their combined utility lies in illuminating the connection between language, thought, and emotion in fiction, particularly in narratives marked by psychological intensity, trauma, or deviation from normative cognition. By attending to both the stylistic encoding of cognition and the framing structures that scaffold narrative understanding, scholars can more fully appreciate the intricacies of how fictional minds are constructed and experienced.

Cognitive Stylistics

Cognitive stylistics, also referred to as cognitive poetics, represents an interdisciplinary approach that bridges insights from cognitive science with stylistic and literary analysis. It concerns itself with how linguistic structures evoke mental representations and simulate experiential, perceptual, and emotional processes in the minds of readers. At its core, cognitive stylistics is concerned with the interpretative mechanisms that underlie literary comprehension, placing emphasis on how readers cognitively process stylistic choices in texts. As Stockwell (2002) aptly notes, cognitive stylistics "deals with how the language of literature is processed in the mind and how literary effects are produced through the interaction between text and reader cognition."

Cognitive stylistics assumes that meaning is not located solely in the text but emerges from a dynamic interplay between the linguistic structure of the text and the mental schemas, scripts, and frames of the reader. Semino and Culpeper (2002) emphasise that this approach shifts analytical attention from merely describing textual features to understanding how such features trigger cognitive responses, such

as mental simulation, perspective-taking, and emotional resonance. This orientation is underpinned by the notion of embodiment and grounded cognition, which posits that our cognitive operations are rooted in sensory, motor, and affective experiences.

Central to cognitive stylistics is the idea that stylistic devices such as metaphor, deixis, narrative viewpoint, and foregrounding are not simply ornamental but serve as cognitive tools through which literary meaning is constructed. For instance, cognitive stylistics explores how metaphors, beyond their decorative function, serve as conceptual mappings that enable readers to understand abstract ideas in terms of more concrete experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Semino, 2008). Similarly, perspective-taking in narrative, whether through internal focalisation, unreliable narration, or free indirect discourse, becomes a site of cognitive engagement, allowing readers to simulate the beliefs, intentions, and emotional states of characters.

Within this theoretical framework, concepts such as mind style and cognitive framing are recognised as cognitively grounded stylistic phenomena. Mind style refers to the representation of a character's distinctive cognitive orientation as manifested in linguistic patterns (Fowler, 1977; Semino, 2007), while cognitive framing concerns how narratives activate certain mental frames and suppress others to shape interpretation (Fillmore, 1982; Emmott, 1997). Both are analytically compatible within cognitive stylistics, as they exemplify how textual features reflect and invoke mental structures.

Moreover, cognitive stylistics enables a reader-oriented analysis of literature that accounts for variability in interpretation based on readers' world knowledge, cultural background, and cognitive dispositions. This makes it particularly useful for analysing African literature, such as Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *The Whispering Trees*, where culturally embedded metaphors, localised schema, and socio-political framings are central to narrative understanding. A cognitive stylistic analysis thus facilitates a deeper appreciation of how readers interact with texts not just as linguistic artefacts, but as vehicles for mental simulation and conceptual engagement.

Narratology

Narratology, a term popularised by Tzvetan Todorov in 1969, refers to the theoretical and systematic study of narrative and its structures. As a multidisciplinary field, narratology draws from literary theory, linguistics, semiotics, and psychology to examine how narratives are constructed, organised, and interpreted. At its core, narratology is concerned with the "how" of narrative representation; how stories are told, rather than simply what they tell. This approach foregrounds key narrative

components such as plot structure, temporality, voice, focalization, and the representation of consciousness, offering a set of tools for analysing the form and function of narrative texts.

Classical narratology, as developed by scholars such as Gérard Genette (1980), Roland Barthes (1977), and Seymour Chatman (1978), focuses on the formal elements of narrative, particularly the distinction between story (the chronological sequence of events) and discourse (the way those events are presented in a text). Genette's influential typology, including narrative voice, mood (focalisation), and time (order, duration, and frequency), provides a framework for identifying how narratives are mediated. Genette's concept of focalisation is central to any study involving perspective, as it delineates who sees and who speaks in a narrative, thereby shaping the reader's access to characters' inner worlds.

Postclassical narratology, which emerged in the late twentieth century, has expanded the boundaries of the field by integrating cognitive, rhetorical, feminist, and postcolonial approaches. Scholars such as Monika Fludernik (1996) and David Herman (2002) have redirected the focus toward how narratives are processed by human minds. Fludernik, in *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*, emphasises experientiality and cognitive scripts in narrative comprehension, arguing that narratives are constructed in ways that align with human perception and experiential frameworks. Herman, on the other hand, introduces a cognitive-narratological model in which narrative is seen as a means of world-building that relies on mental representations and interpretive schemas.

This cognitive turn in narratology is particularly relevant for studies dealing with mind style and cognitive framing, as it situates narrative as both a linguistic and mental construct. The representation of consciousness as a key concern in cognitive narratology provides the link between narrative techniques and the reader's mental modelling of character minds, intentions, and emotions. Techniques such as free indirect discourse, internal focalisation, and narrative empathy serve not just aesthetic purposes but also cognitive functions, guiding the reader through the inferential and emotional landscape of the text.

In the context of *The Whispering Trees*, narratology provides indispensable tools for examining how Abubakar Adam Ibrahim crafts narrative perspectives, manipulates time, and reveals the inner workings of psychologically complex characters. His use of focalisation and narrative distance, for instance, becomes a site for interrogating how characters' subjective experiences of trauma, memory, and dislocation are stylistically encoded and cognitively framed. Therefore, narratology not only intersects with but also underpins the conceptual apparatus of this study, anchoring mind style and cognitive framing within a broader narrative structure.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Aluya and Uduma (2024), in their cognitive stylistic study of Dul Johnson's *Shadows and Ashes*, apply mind style and text world theory to reveal how trauma and emotional disorientation are represented in war narratives. Drawing on Fowler's (1996) theory of mind style and Gavins' (2007) text world theory, they analyse four short stories to show how linguistic elements such as epistemic modality, narrative perspective, and temporal disruption construct the psychological states of characters affected by violence and loss. Their analysis illustrates how war trauma is encoded not just in content but also in the narrative's stylistic form, simulating characters' fragmented cognition. However, in some instances, their analysis conflates the narrator's evaluative stance with the characters' internal viewpoints. For example, when describing a character's possible feelings, they use modal phrasing like "he must have felt terrified" or "she couldn't bear to look," which arguably reflects the narrator's inference rather than direct narration of a character's mental state. This occasional ambiguity blurs the boundary between narrator and character perspectives and could have benefited from a clearer narrative distinction. Nonetheless, the study makes a valuable contribution to African stylistics and trauma studies by emphasising reader cognition and emotional alignment through language.

Nuttall (2018), in her monograph *Mind Style and Cognitive Grammar*, integrates Langacker's cognitive grammar framework with stylistic analysis to explore how speculative fiction constructs deviant worldviews. By examining texts from Atwood, Ishiguro, Matheson, and Ballard, she demonstrates how features like fictive motion, perspective, and prominence influence the reader's experience of narrative voice and worldview. Importantly, Nuttall supplements her analysis with data from reader responses on Goodreads, thereby bridging theory and lived reader experience. While her theoretical depth may be demanding for non-specialists, the work offers significant methodological innovation by expanding cognitive stylistics into reader response territory.

Sirinarang and Wijitsopon (2021) explore how Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* presents a distinctive mind style through the combined use of Text World Theory and Schema Theory, offering a cognitive stylistic reading of a non-fictional narrator. They analysed four excerpts to show how Frankl's representation of suffering and resilience activates and reconfigures readers' mental schemas, particularly through unexpected associations between concepts like "prisoner" and "love." Their use of world-building elements and process types highlights how language shapes philosophical reflection and spiritual endurance, drawing attention

to the cognitive depth of Frankl's memoir. Despite a limited data set and an underdeveloped discussion of logo therapy, the article successfully demonstrates that cognitive stylistic tools can reveal how autobiographical texts foster complex emotional and intellectual engagement.

Scherling (2018), in his chapter *Frames, Cognition, Ideology and Chomsky* proposes a synthesis of cognitive frame theories by Fillmore, Lakoff, and Chomsky. He argued that despite their methodological differences, these approaches collectively enhance our understanding of the ideological dimensions of language use. His analysis is particularly relevant for cognitive literary studies that seek to bridge linguistic theory and social meaning. Scherling suggests that discourse analysis informed by these cognitive frameworks can reveal how public texts encode ideological stances. While the work focuses more on the political discourse, it offers an important conceptual framework for the cognitive framing mechanisms that operate in narrative discourse.

Suleiman et al. (2023) investigate Mind Style in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, focusing on how the protagonist, Kambili's mental state is encoded through linguistic patterns. Their analysis highlights syntactic strategies such as ellipsis, passivation, and predilection for bodily agency, as well as figurative language that reveals fear, muteness, and psychological repression. The study effectively demonstrates how stylistic features map onto cognitive and emotional states to provide a model for how trauma can be stylistically and psychologically foregrounded. Although the study offers a detailed analysis of linguistic features, it could be further strengthened by incorporating insights into how readers interpret these stylistic choices, as well as by situating the findings within a broader theoretical context.

Collectively, these studies pave the way for meaningful advancements in future research. They demonstrate the analytical power of cognitive stylistics and mind style theory in uncovering the mental and emotional dimensions of narrative characters. While most of the works focus on Western or global literatures, their frameworks are transferable to African fiction, where internal psychological experiences are increasingly becoming central themes. This review affirms that a cognitive stylistic approach is both timely and productive for analysing Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *The Whispering Trees*.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in an interdisciplinary cognitive-linguistic approach, drawing primarily from cognitive stylistics, particularly the concepts of mind style and cognitive framing, to explore the

psychological and narrative representation of consciousness in Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *The Whispering Trees*. These theories provide tools for examining how language encodes mental perspectives and how readers engage cognitively with characters' internal experiences. By focusing on the linguistic construction of thought, emotion, and perception, the research investigates how narrative technique simulates mental life and guides reader empathy.

The foundation of this framework lies in mind style theory, initially proposed by Roger Fowler (1996), who defined mind style as the distinctive cognitive orientation revealed through linguistic patterns in a text. This concept is particularly useful for analysing how Ibrahim's characters experience trauma, transformation, or disorientation, and how these experiences are communicated through features such as transitivity, deixis, and modality. Mind style allows for the examination of how characters' worldviews are not merely expressed but constructed through language.

To complement this, the study also employs the text world theory, developed by Paul Werth (1999) and later extended by Joanna Gavins (2007), which explains how readers build mental representations (text worlds) based on discourse cues. This model helps to analyse how readers are cognitively situated within the narrative, how they track shifting perspectives, and how they interpret characters' motivations, emotions, and moral positions. Cognitive framing, rooted in Lakoff's (2004) conceptualisation of mental frames, further supports this approach by accounting for how narratives foreground or background certain values, ideologies, or emotional responses through subtle linguistic cues.

These theories enable a comprehensive understanding of how Ibrahim's stories simulate lived experience and how readers co-construct meaning. The framework also draws on insights from cognitive linguistics that emphasise embodiment, emotion, and cultural context as part of the interpretive process, thus providing a comprehensive model for examining the interplay between narrative form, psychological depth, and reader engagement.

METHODOLOGY

The research adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology, employing close textual analysis of two selected short stories from Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *The Whispering Trees* as its primary data. The focus is on two stories: "The Whispering Trees" and "Closure," both of which present distinct yet complementary representations of psychological trauma, emotional disruption, and internal transformation. These stories were purposefully selected out of the eleven short stories from Ibrahim's collection because of their rich linguistic detail and narrative

complexity, which offer fertile ground for exploring how language encodes mental states and shapes reader perception.

“The Whispering Trees” presents a protagonist who undergoes a radical cognitive shift from bitterness to spiritual clarity, while “Closure” portrays a grieving widow whose unresolved sorrow culminates in self-destructive action. Together, these narratives exemplify the range of mind styles and framing strategies used by Ibrahim to depict the inner lives of his characters. Their contrasting trajectories, one redemptive and the other tragic, allow for comparative insights into how language and cognition interact in Nigerian short fiction.

Data collection involved multiple close readings of the selected texts, with particular attention to stylistic features such as transitivity patterns, modality, deixis, focalisation, and lexical choices that signal the characters’ mind styles. The analysis also examined narrative structure, shifts in narrative perspective, and patterns of linguistic foregrounding that contribute to cognitive framing. This interpretive framework is grounded in cognitive stylistics, particularly Roger Fowler’s (1996) theory of mind style and Joanna Gavins’ (2007) text world theory, which provide the conceptual tools for analysing how linguistic forms shape mental representations and guide reader engagement.

To contextualise and support the analysis, supplementary data were drawn from critical scholarship on cognitive stylistics, narrative theory, and African literary studies. This combination of text-based and theory-driven analysis enables a deeper understanding of how language functions cognitively and affectively in storytelling. The study thus moves beyond surface-level description to investigate the psychological depths of narrative and how they are rendered through stylistic and discursive choices.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section applies the theoretical frameworks of mind style and cognitive framing to the analysis of two selected short stories: “The Whispering Trees” and “Closure” from Abubakar Adam Ibrahim’s collection, *The Whispering Trees* (2012). These stories offer fertile ground for examining how language functions not merely as a medium of storytelling but as a cognitive tool for representing consciousness, emotional dissonance, and psychological transformation.

“The Whispering Trees”: Linguistic Markers of Cognitive Transformation

In “The Whispering Trees,” Abubakar Adam Ibrahim tells a story of Salim, a medical student whose life is transformed after a tragic accident leaves him blind.

The narrative tracks his psychological journey from denial and despair to spiritual awakening and renewed insight. This transformation is encoded linguistically through changes in narrative perspective and cognitive framing that reflect Salim's evolving mind style. At the heart of the story is the shift in how Salim perceives himself and the world, and it is through stylistic features, particularly modality, transitivity, and deictic cues, that his altered consciousness is communicated.

Salim's emerging awareness of his former arrogant self is signalled through reflective mental processes and evaluative language. In the line "It was in those days, when I was reminiscing about my childhood, that I started to realise how I have taken everything for granted" (p. 74), the use of mental verbs like "reminiscing" and "realise" positions Salim as cognitively introspective. His reference to health as something "that had come so naturally" suggests an earlier mind style characterised by unawareness and entitlement. The shift in verb tense from "had" to "have" also marks the blending of past and present perception, aligning with Fowler's claim that mind style is traceable through tense structure and evaluative stance.

The story opens with Salim's disorientation in the afterlife, which is conveyed through epistemic uncertainty and metaphor. He says, "It's strange how things are on the other side of death... I do not know what words to use" (p. 63). The mention of "I do not know" reflects his cognitive dislocation, and the metaphor of death as an "enigma best experienced to be understood" frames death not as an end but as a cognitive and metaphysical threshold. The absence of a concrete description reinforces the ineffability of his experience, drawing the reader into a suspended, almost transcendent state of perception. This exemplifies Gavin's (2007) view that narrative deixis can fragment readers' mental models to mirror the character's disrupted reality.

The turning point in Salim's transformation occurs with a spiritual intervention: "From somewhere beyond my realm... I thought I heard a voice, my mother's voice... rise now my son" (p. 80). The spatial deixis "beyond my realm" and the embedding of the mother's speech within Salim's narration create a layered text world where external guidance intersects with internal resolve. The modal structure ("may be full of tribulations," "might fall once or twice") softens absolutes and opens the cognitive frame to hope, resilience, and self-redefinition. The mother's metaphor, "your life... is not a tragedy unless you make it one," further reframes suffering as a moral and existential choice, guiding the reader toward a redemptive interpretation of Salim's ordeal.

This reframing is echoed in the philosophical insight provided by Hamza: "If you had been a doctor, you would only have been able to treat the ailments of the body. But now you can treat ailments of the soul" (p. 87). This statement contrasts

external skill with internal wisdom and aligns Salim's new identity with spiritual vision. The framing here shifts from physical blindness to metaphysical clarity; a perspective also reflected in his own words: "I saw things from a unique perspective... I would just look at their souls. What I saw troubled me" (p. 84). The foregrounding of "souls" over appearances activates a moral frame that invites readers to view perception not as sensory, but as ethical and empathetic. His mind style here is meditative, emotionally receptive, and morally attuned.

Finally, his reconciliation with nature and spirit is described with deep sensory calm: "The spirit of the Whispering Trees pacified my soul, and, at last, I found such peace as I had never known" (p. 85). The metaphorical personification of nature as "spirit" and the internal process "pacified my soul," completing the cognitive and emotional arc. This closing image constructs a frame of healing and stillness, a text world where the external world aligns with inner harmony. In summary, Ibrahim's linguistic choices in "The Whispering Trees" mark a profound shift in Salim's mind style, from egocentric materialism to reflective spiritualism. Through modality, deixis, metaphor, and mental process structures, the story cognitively frames blindness, suffering, and healing in ways that foster reader immersion, introspection, and empathy.

"Closure": Fragmentation, Grief, and Stylistic Encoding of Loss

"Closure" opens with brutal irony. Sabo Dada dies unexpectedly just thirty-six hours after his wedding, leaving behind a young bride, Sadiya, who must navigate the rituals of grief and the trauma of unfinished love. The story is a subtle and devastating portrayal of sudden loss, unfulfilled intimacy, and psychological unravelling. Ibrahim uses language to build a mind style of internal disorientation, silence, and emotional detachment while activating cognitive frames around mourning, social pressure, and despair.

Sadiya's psychological disorientation is captured through delayed emotional processing and fragmented perception. In the early aftermath of Sabo Dada's death, she is described as "yet to grasp the bitter reality of losing a husband she had been married to for hours" (p. 98). The clause reflects an internal disconnect between experience and comprehension. Her mind style is defined by confusion and numbness, which is linguistically emphasised by sensory imagery: "tear-fogged eyes" and "confusion." Such language reflects a disrupted cognitive world, consistent with trauma literature (Semino, 2007), where emotional reality transcends physical events.

The social performance of grief is also carefully constructed. In one passage, "sympathisers held the hands of his grieving family members and friends and bowed

their heads,” and Ibrahim writes, “There are times when silence is more eloquent than poetry” (pp. 102-103). Here, cognitive framing constructs mourning as a communal and ritualised frame of silence, restraint, and gesture. Yet Sadiya remains emotionally isolated. She prays quietly, “leaning against the wall,” with “pale face” and “lips moving silently” (p. 104), an image of physical stillness and internal turbulence. Her hijab is described in detail: “mustard-coloured... covering her entire body” to suggest erasure, containment, or even self-effacement, reinforcing a mind style of withdrawal and resignation.

As the story unfolds, Ibrahim uses repetition and regret to mark emotional fixation. Sadiya’s thoughts replay missed moments of intimacy: “She wished she had let him. She wished he was not dead. She wished he were lying on her bosom now...” (p. 105). The anaphoric repetition of “she wished” encodes a looping mental pattern that signals obsession and unreleased grief. This linguistic construction reinforces a mind style trapped in emotional speculation and unresolved yearning, what Lakoff (2004) describes as a frame conflict between reality and desire.

Barira, Sabo Dada’s sister, introduces a contrasting voice, one of entitlement and manipulation. Her dialogue: “Did he sleep with you?” (p. 98) is abrupt, jarring, and invasive, revealing a utilitarian frame where grief is entangled with inheritance. Later, we learn her frustration is not over her brother’s death, but over financial exclusion: “She had learnt that the widow’s percentage of Sabo Dada’s fortune would not be affected...” (p. 106). This economic framing of grief places Sadiya in a conflicting emotional and social landscape, torn between genuine mourning and an exploitative environment.

The story culminates in a radical assertion of agency. “Sadiya got up and locked all the doors and windows. She drenched the furniture and curtains with fuel... Then solemnly struck a match” (p. 108). This final act is loaded with symbolic meaning. The verbs: “locked,” “drenched,” and “struck” are material, decisive, and emotionally cold. The language is devoid of hesitation or explanation, signalling a complete transformation in mind style. The shift from passive confusion to active destruction mirrors a cognitive reorientation, from internalised grief to outward resolution, albeit through annihilation.

Thematically, the story’s title “Closure” functions ironically. There is no peaceful acceptance or healing in the conventional sense. Instead, closure is reframed as obliteration, as Sadiya rewrites the end of her story through flames. The cognitive frame activated here is not reconciliation but rupture. Her act of burning the house is both literal and symbolic: it severs her from the emotional and social structures that have failed her. In summary, Ibrahim uses understated but powerful language to render a broken consciousness navigating grief, memory, and erasure.

Through Sadiya's mind style, which is shaped by silent prayers, mental repletion, and final action, through framing devices that contrast emotional longing with social pragmatism, the story constructs a text world marked by resolved trauma. "Closure," then, becomes not the end of mourning, but a final, desperate means of expression in a world where no other outlet remains.

Synthesis and Implications

Both "The Whispering Trees" and "Closure" exemplify Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's complex use of language to construct psychologically immersive narratives. While each story centres on trauma: Salim's bodily affliction and spiritual transformation, and Sadiya's emotional devastation and eventual rupture, their mind style differs in orientation and resolution. In "The Whispering Trees," Salim's narrative moves from disorientation to spiritual clarity, with linguistic features such as shifting transitivity, sensory deixis, and metaphor guiding the reader through a reframed understanding of blindness and healing. In contrast, Sadiya's mind style in "Closure" is marked by fragmentation, suppressed emotion, and cognitive looping, reinforced by repetitive modality, temporal dislocation, and symbolic material actions. The cognitive frames in each story also contrast: Salim's journey is framed through redemption and insight, while Sadiya's is enclosed in longing, regret, and final defiance. Ibrahim's ability to linguistically encode inner worlds and subtly guide reader interpretation through stylistic choices affirms the value of cognitive stylistics in African narrative analysis. Together, these stories demonstrate how trauma, identity, and emotional transformation can be powerfully rendered through the interplay of language, thought, and narrative form.

CONCLUSION

Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *The Whispering Trees* offers a profound lens to explore characters' inner struggles with trauma, transformation, and existential crisis. Through his compelling storytelling, Ibrahim not only captures the events that shape his characters' lives but also the subtle shift in perception, thought, and emotional depth that define their psychological realities. His work transcends mere narrative, emerging as a multidimensional study of human consciousness, rendered with stylistic precision and cognitive insight. The stories examined in this study, "The Whispering Trees" and "Closure", reveal how language functions as a powerful tool for mapping the fragmented and evolving mental states of characters struggling with loss, disability, and unfulfilled longing.

Drawing on cognitive stylistics, particularly mind style and text world theories, this study has shown how linguistic patterns such as modality, deixis,

transitivity, and temporal framing construct immersive mental worlds that invite deep reader engagement. Salim's journey from physical blindness to spiritual awakening and Sadiya's descent into emotional isolation after sudden bereavement both highlight the capacity of fiction to capture cognitive complexities. These characters are not merely vessels for plot development but serve as cognitive and emotional centres through which Ibrahim explores broader themes of resilience, alienation, and meaning-making. Their psychological depth emerges through their language, which subtly guides the reader to experience their realities from within.

This research affirms the significance of narrative form in understanding the psychological cost of lived experience by centring these stories through the lens of cognitive stylistics. Just as Ibrahim's characters endure and evolve within their struggles, the readers, too, are drawn into a process of reflection and reframing. The study contributes to African literary scholarship by demonstrating the value of stylistic and cognitive approaches in unpacking the formal and emotional strategies at play in contemporary fiction.

That said, the scope of this study is limited to two stories within a single collection. Future research could apply cognitive stylistic tools to other African authors such as Helon Habila, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Akwaaka Emezi, Arinze Ifeakandu, or Yaa Gyasi to explore how narrative language encodes psychological depth across broader sociopolitical and cultural contexts. Incorporating empirical reader-response studies may also yield valuable insights into how readers mentally and emotionally engage with African fiction. Such approaches will deepen our understanding of the intersection between language, cognition, and literary representation on the continent.

Ultimately, Ibrahim's work underscores the vital role of literature in capturing the interior dimensions of human experience. By translating psychological states into narrative form, he reveals the truth that statistics and generalizations often overlook. His characters, shaped by silence, prayer, memory, or flames, become conduits of insight and empathy. This study concludes that exploring the language of thought in literature is not simply a linguistic exercise. It is an invitation to reckon with unspoken, unresolved, and deeply human stories hidden between the lines.

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