

# A Cognitive Stylistic Analysis of Selected Poems of Abba Gana Shettima

Dr Muhammad Aliyu SAJO<sup>1\*</sup>, Dr Armiya'u Malami Yabo<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of English and Literary Studies, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, Nigeria

<sup>2</sup>Department of Academic Services, National Teachers' Institute, Kaduna, Nigeria

\*Corresponding Author

**Abstract:** Interpretation of poetry has been very challenging to its readers especially students of language (Regis, 2013, p.1). Cognitive stylistics is an approach to the study of texts which entails the application of theories and concepts in cognitive linguistics to enhance the understanding of poetry which compresses information in few words. Therefore, cognitive stylistics “focuses on hypothesising how the reading process facilitates the interpretation of texts” (Jeffries & McIntyre, 2010, p.126). The aim of this paper is to conduct a cognitive stylistic analysis of two selected Nigerian poems in order to highlight how cognitive stylistic features are calibrated in the texts to construct meaning. The objectives are to: (i) identify the types of cognitive stylistic features in the poems; and (ii) determine how cognitive stylistic concepts enhance the understanding of the poems. Among the findings of the study were that 22 cognitive stylistic features were identified in the two texts studied. The study employed descriptive and analytical methods through identification, description and interpretation of the data from the selected texts. The study concluded that cognitive stylistics is effective in the study and interpretation of poetry hence, it could be used in the study and teaching of poetry to enhance better understanding and appreciation of poetic texts.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Interpretation of literary texts especially poetry requires an understanding of various theories and concepts to help a reader to fully understand writers' messages and intentions in the texts. Cognitive stylistics appears to be an aspect of cognitive linguistics which employs various concepts in human discourse processing. Jeffries and McIntyre (2010, p.126) argue that cognitive stylistics focuses on hypothesising about what happens during the reading process and how this influences the interpretation that readers generate about the texts they are reading. Stockwell (2002a) states that cognitive stylistics is all about reading literature. It is based on the assumption that readers also engage in creative reconstruction and imaginative construction of meaning from reading literary texts. Therefore, cognitive stylistics as a discipline which this study employs, explores literary creativity in most of its aspects (see Stockwell, 2015). This work is an approach to the assumption that reading is an active process and that readers consequently play an active role in constructing the meaning of texts which is one of the tenets of cognitive stylistics. The study is being conducted to ease readers' difficulties in the decoding of literary texts specifically poetry. It is being carried out to add to available scholarly works in the study and teaching of poetry by using cognitive stylistic concepts. It is expected that the findings from this study would lead to

additional strategies in the understanding, as well as teaching and learning of poetry. It will also lead to improvement in the performance of students in the study and interpretation of poetic texts. The result of the study could also be of use to curriculum designers, teachers of language, linguistics and literature as well as textbooks writers.

The work only focuses on the two poems of Abba Gana Shettima's *Nightfall* and *Kangale Kori*. Therefore, the study is delimited to only the data derivable from the two texts which seek to serve as representatives of similar texts. The decision to use the two texts is due to limited timeframe and space for using many text samples for the research. Lack of many previous works conducted on the topic is another challenge in the study. Perusal of the two texts portrays writer's display of various linguistic devices creatively used to encode his messages which call for scholarly attention. The study employed descriptive and analytical methods in the analysis of 22 data from the texts through identification, description and interpretation of the data by using three theoretical concepts of cognitive stylistics – schema theory, contextual frame theory, and cognitive metaphor theory.

The aim of this paper is to carry out a cognitive stylistic analysis of two selected poems for Abba Gana Shettima's *Nightfall* and *Kangale Kori*. The objectives of the study can be summed as follows:

- i. to identify cognitive stylistic features in the texts through the application of cognitive stylistic concepts;
- ii. to investigate how cognitive stylistic concepts enhance understanding of the writers' messages and intentions in the texts.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The following is a discussion of some works on cognitive stylistics as well as a review of three theoretical concepts under cognitive stylistics. They are the schema theory, contextual frame theory and cognitive metaphor theory.

The Study of poetry has been a very difficult task in view of the nature of poetic texts whose language seems difficult to decode (see Regis (2013, p.1). It is against this background, Regis (2013) posits that the interpretation of poetry has been very challenging to its readers especially students of language, literature and linguistics. Cognitive stylistics approach to the study of poetry is therefore salient as it focuses on

hypothesising how the reading process facilitates the interpretation of texts (Jeffries & McIntyre, 2010, p.126). It is also noted that works on pedagogical skills in teaching poetry using cognitive stylistics concepts are scarce as the available ones explored vary significantly with the present work in approach and context. Works perused which are related to cognitive linguistics include Ichu (1989), Onwudinjo (2003), Giovanelli (2010), Xerri (2012), Fakeye and Temitayo (2013), and Woldemariam (2014). The studies conducted by Giovanelli (2010), Xerri (2012), and Woldemariam (2014) for example, dwelt mostly on the pedagogy for teaching literature at the tertiary education level and not at the lower level (i.e. secondary school). Besides that, their works focused mostly on western/European settings not African. Ichu's (1989) work was not on cognitive stylistics; the work investigated the problems encountered in the teaching and learning of literature in English and not the application of cognitive stylistics theories in teaching poetry. The work by Fakeye and Temitayo (2013) was on enhancing poetic literature instruction through stylistic and thematic approaches, and not on how the tools of cognitive stylistics can enhance the understanding of poetry or teaching it hence, the need to embark on the current study on cognitive stylistics on the selected African poems.

Semino and Culpeper (2002) argue that one of the developments of stylistics in recent years has been the rise of what is often known as cognitive stylistics. They explain that cognitive stylistics draws considerable influence from works in areas such as cognitive science, generally psychology, computing and artificial intelligence. Jeffries and McIntyre (2010) posit that cognitive stylistics is the interface between linguistics, literary studies and cognitive science. It extends the boundaries of linguistic analysis of literature by articulating different theories such as schema, cognitive metaphor, conceptual metaphor, text-world, blendings, and mental space theories. Stockwell (2015) submits that cognitive stylistic analysis entails that the ability to foreground a textual element and background the others is a matter of patterning of the text, but it happens in the mind of a reader only. This suggests that the interpretation of a text is beyond the actual contents of the text because, human sense of perception is paramount in the decoding of textual messages.

Next is the discussion of the three theories of cognitive stylistics – schema, cognitive metaphor and conceptual frame which form the framework for this work.

#### *Schema Theory*

Jeffries and McIntyre (2010, p.127) argue that schema theory is a theoretical consideration of how we package world knowledge and use it in the interpretation of texts. They explain that cognitive stylistics is predicated on the notion that readers are actively involved in the process of meaning-making. This suggests that meaning is not located solely in the formal structures of the text but is, in a sense, negotiated as a result of readers utilising aspects of their pre-existing background knowledge of the real world as they read. Also

explaining how readers primarily generate images of fictional worlds, Semino (1997, p.125) makes a useful distinction between what she terms projection and construction. By projection, she means *texts* project meaning while readers construct it. Jeffries and McIntyre (2010, p.128) explain that “texts contain triggers which activate aspects of readers’ background knowledge”. This then allows readers to construct mental representations of the worlds of the text. Still under schema theory, Jeffries and McIntyre (2010) assert that another useful notion is the psychological distinction between “bottom-up processing” and “top-down processing”. They state that “bottom-up processing”, used in relation to text comprehension refers to the practice of inferring meaning from textual cues while “top-down processing” describes the practice of utilising background knowledge to aid understanding.

#### *Cognitive Metaphor Theory*

Jeffries and McIntyre (2010, p.138) believe that one of the most influential aspects of cognitive stylistics has been cognitive metaphor theory, developed initially by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Turner (1987) and Lakoff and Turner (1989). According to Jeffries and McIntyre (2010), the theory was subsequently developed by, amongst others, Semino et al. (2004), Crisp (2002), Steen (2007) and Semino (2008). Jeffries and McIntyre (2010) posit that cognitive metaphor theory proceeds on the basis that metaphor is not limited to literary texts but is a pervasive phenomenon in all text types. They assert that metaphor is not merely a feature of language but a matter of thought which is central to our conceptual system and the way in which we make sense of ourselves and the world we live in.

#### *Contextual Frame Theory*

Contextual frame theory is also called relational frame theory. Devised by Hayes, Bames-Holmes and Roche (2001), relational frame theory is an explicitly psychological account of human language and cognition because it views verbal events as activities not products. Stockwell (2002b) emphasises that contextual frame theory focuses on how readers track reference to characters and events in a text through the reading process. It stipulates that a reader must perform series of revisions such as adding to or amending representations for characters and locations as new information is received in the text under study. This theoretical concept suggests that a reader uses their cognitive instinct to construct mental images or “contextual frames”, containing objects and characters which are bound by that frame in the text.

Based on the review of the three cognitive stylistic theories, it is evident that the three appear closely related and draw on episodic attention to arrive at an account of how readers negotiate their way through the literary world of the text under study (see Harrison & Stockwell, 2014). This suggests that the tools appear mutually related in approach as a reader may use one theoretical concept to establish another one in the world of a particular literary text to express an idea or a

phenomenon. This study therefore seeks to employ the three theoretical concepts in the analysis of the selected poems.

The only observed weakness of the cognitive stylistic theoretical concepts is that, a reader with low sense of cognition whose knowledge of the world of the text they are reading is low, will give a limited interpretation of the text under analysis. However, the advantage of the theories is that, a reader will be encouraged to read various works widely and extensively so as to expand their readership and cognitive instinct to enable them meet the challenges of using their diverse world views for better interpretation of texts.

#### *Synopsis of the Selected Texts and the Author*

Abba Gana Shettima is a poet, a sociologist and an academic at the University of Maiduguri, Borno state. He has published earlier versions of his poems in *Citizen Magazine's Poets' Nest*. In the first poem under study, *Nightfall*, Shettima (2000) highlights the attributes of the night as a universal phenomenon and a period for rest by the people and animals of good conduct; it is also a period for committing crimes by the robbers, hoodlums and related criminals who take advantage of the nightfall to perpetrate evil acts. In the text, he casts the picture of what happens in his immediate community which may require the action of the authorities concerned to arrest the situation of insecurity at night. In the second poem, Shettima (2000) narrates the period of the disastrous drought and famine of 1913-1914 in Borno State. He exemplifies how the people and animals were ravaged by the period of hunger and starvation, hence the name *Kangale Kori*, a Kanuri name for short stalks.

### III. DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

This section presents the data, analysis of the data and discussion of results. The analysis starts with *Nightfall*, followed by *Kangale Kori*.

The first poem under analysis, *Nightfall* contains 17 lines in a narrative verse form. The analysis contains 10 extracts which are analysed as follows:

#### Extract 1

The magnificent torch travelled west (Line 1)

In the extract above, the subject of the expression "magnificent torch" can be interpreted as "the sun". This is due to a notional similarity between "magnificent torch" and the "the sun" in the context of usage. Therefore, torch is used as a metaphor for sun. Using the contextual frame and the cognitive metaphor concepts, the whole expression can be interpreted as sunset because there is a notional perception that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. The two concepts support this interpretation because, a reader's world knowledge can be used in the interpretation of texts. Also, under the cognitive metaphor theoretical concept, one kind of experience or activity can be structured in terms of another kind of experience or activity.

#### Extract 2

And everybody tarried home (Line 2)

The second expression above supports the earlier interpretation as it indicates that, after sunset, people go home. "Everybody" as used in the expression could however not only refer to people alone but other living bodies such as insects, birds and animals. The verbal element "tarried" as used in the expression means "went" as opposed to its actual dictionary meanings.

#### Extract 3

To take an obligatory pause (Line 3)

Until tomorrow morning (Line 4)

From the perspective of the schema theory, obligatory pause can be projected to mean "to rest", thus, "pause" is used in the text as "rest". The following line, (line 4) supports the claim as it emphasises the period for the expiration of the "obligatory pause".

#### Extract 4

Even as the faithful purified (Line 5)

For a session of prayers (Line 6)

In the above extract, "faithful" is used as a metaphor for "devotees" who devote their night to pray for protection against evils and for successes of their social and spiritual wellbeing.

#### Extract 5

So do the robbers fortify (Line 7)

To reap and rape (Line 8)

Under the shield of darkness (Line 9)

Lines 7, 8 and 9 mean that the robbers intensify their evil acts, to rob and maim (or even kill) their victims, under the cover of darkness. The verbal element "fortify" as used in the text, purportedly means using force in order to cause harm. The verbal element "reap" is a metaphor for robbery while "rape" is to maim, or even kill. It is based on cognitive metaphor which provides grounds for covert comparison in contrast to overt comparison because of notional relationship among entities in the text. The contextual frame concept also provides similar interpretation because there is relationship among the structural properties which make the reader/analyst to perform series of revisions by way of adding to or amending representations in the text. Besides, the phrase "under the shield of darkness" means that the robbers take the nightfall as a cover to perpetrate evils, and "shield" as used in the expression means "a cover"

#### Extract 6

Insects searched for an inlet (Line 10)

For night rest (Line 11)

In lines 10 and 11, the expression means insects look for a burrow (an enclosure) for night rest, “inlet” means a burrow which is a narrow passage (a cavity) for insects’ habitation.

Extract 7

And the nightgale (sic) flew to her nest (Line 12)

In an attempt to show the significance of nightfall, in line 12, the poet, indicates that even the night singing bird (the nightingale) takes cover by flying to its nest for protection.

Extract 8

Mosquitoes poised like mig jets (Line 13)

To mop up any mammal found (Line 14)

In line 13, the word “mosquitoes” is used to mean hoodlums or robbers. Under the idea of “projection and construction” provided by the schema theory, meaning of the word “mosquitoes” is projected to mean hoodlums because “texts project meaning while readers construct it”. This therefore suggests that “mosquitoes” is a metaphor for hoodlums who poised like mig jets. “Mig jets” can be interpreted as fighter jets. The expression in Line 13 therefore describes the violent nature of hoodlums who are prone to committing crimes. The expression in line 14 means the hoodlums are to get rid of or destroy any human found. “Mammal” as used in the expression means human (male or female).

Extract 9

Crickets crawled out of their crypt (Line 15)

And sent a tinkling cymbal of shrill (Line 16)

In line 15, “crickets”, singular “cricket”, a leaping insect with biting mouth parts is used as hoodlums or robbers similar to the use of mosquitoes to indicate evil acts at night as in line 13. To crawl of their crypt means that the hoodlums/robbers come out of their dwellings at night to perpetrate evil acts. To “send a tinkling cymbal of shrill” means the hoodlums or criminals come out at night to cause uneasiness to the people.

Extract 10

Fajarra (Line 17)

Line 17 marks the end of the poem which is a Kanuri word for good night or till dawn.

*Text 2 Kangale Kori*

Twelve extracts of the second text, *Kangale Kori* are analysed.

Extract 1

Cute Kanuris coined *Kangale Kori* (Line 1)

The word “coined” as used in the expression can be projected to mean created. The term *Kangale Kori* refers to a period of famine. Under the schema theory framework, the expression simply means “creative Kanuris created the term *Kangale Kori*”.

Extract 2

For millet stalks were stunted (Line 2)

And millet stalks were stunted (Line 3)

Dressing their faces in penury (Line 4)

The three expressions (above) which follow line 1 further describe the features of farm produce in the era of *Kangale Kori* as a period of intense famine. Line 2 therefore, indicates that due to the famine, millet stalks were in a bad shape, sagging from the dryness of the weather due to lack of rainfall.

Extract 3

Farmers stakes stalled (Line 3)

Line 3 means that farmers’ efforts were hindered by the lack of rainfall.

Extract 4

Dressing their faces in penury (Line 4)

The expression above means that farmers are in agony of the situation of extreme famine which will result in hunger and starvation.

Extract 5

From the kraals of Kukawa (Line 5)

Came the tidings of dying cows (Line 6)

Lines 5 and 6 when interpreted together mean that from the cattle pen of Kukawa (a town in the area popular in cattle ranching), many cows are dying from hunger due to the famine.

Extract 6

Even as mothers in Monguno mourned (Line 7)

Over lost fruits of motherhood (Line 8)

Line 7 gives an account on how mothers mourn the death of their children from the famine. The phrase “fruits of motherhood” in line 8 is used as a metaphor for children who are lost from hunger due to the food scarcity as a result of the famine.

Extract 7

And visited the anthills for survival (Line 9)

Here, the expression indicates that mothers go to the anthills in search of grains to feed in order to survive from the devastation of the hunger caused by the famine.

Extract 8

The peacocks of Magumeri (Line 10)

Grieved over empty granaries (Line 11)

Sapping away their maiden gallantry (line 12)

In extract 8, lines 10 and 11 mean that the peacocks of Magumeri (a town known in the area, for beautiful birds), were crying over the miserable plight from famine; taking away their beautiful appearance (line 12).

Extract 9

With tears along nine tributaries (Line 13)

The peacocks were crying with tears due to the dryness of nine large streams of water. This means that the birds were not only hungry but thirsty.

Extract 10

And from Bade came stories (Line 14)

Of babies diseased of empty barns (Line 15)

Lines 14 and 15 mean that from Bade village there were stories about babies suffering from diseases due to hunger and starvation as a result of the famine in the land hence, resulted to empty grain stores.

Extract 11

And the dead buried in bundles (Line 16)

Over tears flowing in haematic vales (Line 17)

Lines 16 and 17 mean that many people were dying from the extreme food scarcity; and that the extent of people's agony was as if they were crying with tears flowing like a valley of blood due to the pains and devastations of the period. In line 17, the poet is seen to use exaggeration in the description of the extent of damage the famine *Kangale Kori* did to the people of the area at that period.

Extract 12

Come not again, *kangale kori!* (Line 18)

In this expression, the writer appears highly emotional to denounce the ugly period of *Kangale Kori* through the use of exclamatory mark in the concluding line of the poem. He wishes that the period of *Kangale Kori* should not recur. The use of such exclamatory mark appears very significant as it is the only punctuation mark used in the whole text to show the level of hatred of the period over its devastating nature.

#### IV. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Based on the analysis, the findings show that, in Abba Gana Shetima's *Nightfall* and *Kangale Kori*, some lexical items are extended to mean more than their dictionary interpretations. For instance, in *Nightfall*, "pause" means "rest", and "fortify" means "intensify" both under the schema theory. Under the cognitive metaphor, "faithful" means "devotees", "reap" is to "seize", "rape" is to "maim" or to "harm", "mammal" refers to "human", "crickets" means "hoodlums/robbers". Under the contextual frame concept, the word "tarried" is extended to mean "went". Also, the analysis of the text reveals that the writer appears highly emotional in the manner he expresses agony of the period of famine (*Kangale Kori*) at the end of the poem through the use of the exclamation mark as the only

punctuation mark in the whole text. The analysis also shows that cognitive metaphorical concepts appear to be more prominent in the interpretation of the text.

The analysis of the second text, *Kangale Kori* in the background of the theories of cognitive stylistics indicate that the phrase "cute Kanuris" implies "creative Kanuri people", the phrase "coined *Kangale Kori*" as used in the text implies "created the term *Kangale Kori*". The word "stake" implies "effort", while "stalled" signifies "to hinder" both under the contextual frame theory. The phrase "fruits of motherhood" means "children" or "offsprings" under the cognitive metaphor theory as used in the text. It was observed from the analysis that cognitive metaphor is rarely used in the text as only one instance is noticed in the analysis unlike the other two theoretical concepts of schema and contextual frame. It was also found that the three theoretical concepts, schema, cognitive metaphor and contextual frame theoretical concepts complement each other, i.e., they are closely related in the analysis of the poems.

#### V. CONCLUSION

This study conducted a cognitive stylistic analysis of two poems *Nightfall* and *Kangale Kori* by Abba Gana Shetima. The cognitive stylistic tools schema, cognitive metaphor and contextual frame theories have been used in the analysis to elicit the writer's messages in the texts. From the study, the three tools have helped to uncover the manifestations of various linguistic codes employed by the playwright in the texts. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the cognitive stylistic tools used in the study are capable of enhancing the interpretation of poetic texts for better understanding of their genre.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Amali, I. (Ed.) (2000). Let the dawn come. Maiduguri: Kamal Prints.
- [2] Culpeper, J. (2009). Reflections on a cognitive stylistics approach to characterization. In G. Brone and J. Vandaele (Eds.), Applications of cognitive linguistics: Cognitive poetics, goals, gains and gaps. Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter GmbH.
- [3] Fakeye, D. O. & Temitayo, A. A. (2013). Enhancing Poetic Literature Instruction through Stylistics and Thematic Approaches. Studies in Literature and Language, 6 (2), 50-55.
- [4] Gavins, J. and Steen, G. (Eds.) (2003). Cognitive poetics in practice. London: Routledge.
- [5] Giovanelli, M. (2010). Pedagogical Stylistics: A Text world Theory Approach to the Teaching of Poetry. Research Journal of the National Association for the Teaching of English. 44(3), 214-231.
- [6] Harrison, C. and Stockwell, P. (2014). "Cognitive Poetics". In J. Littlemore and J. R. Taylor (Eds), The Bloomsbury companion to cognitive linguistics. London: Bloomsbury, pp.218-33.
- [7] Hayes et al. (2001). Relational frame theory: A post-Skinnerian account of human language and cognition. New York: Springer Science and Business Media.
- [8] Ichu, J. E. (1989). An Investigation into the Problems Encountered in the Teaching and Learning of Literature in English. Unpublished M. A. dissertation, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.
- [9] Jeffries, L. and McIntyre, D. (2010). Stylistics: Cambridge text books in linguistics. London: C.U.P.
- [10] Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. (1980). Metaphors we live by. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

- [11] Lakoff, G. and Turner, M. (1989). *More than cool reason: A field guide to poetic metaphor*. Chicago:University of Chicago Press.
- [12] Leech, G.N. (1969). *A linguistic guide to English poetry*. London: Longman.
- [13] Onwudinjo, P. (2003). Pragmatic Approaches to the Selection and Teaching of Poetry in Schools. *Global Journal of Humanities*, 2 (1).
- [14] Regis, A. (2013). Why do Students Fear Poetry and How can they Access it Better? *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education>. 17/1/2020.
- [15] Semino, E. (1997). *Language and world creation in poems and other texts*. London: Longman.
- [16] Semino, E. and Culpeper, J. (Eds.) (2002). *Cognitive stylistic: Language and cognition in text analysis*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- [17] Shettima, A. G. (2000). Ode to the Nomads. In I. O. O Amali (Ed.) *Let the dawn come*, pp.81-82. Maiduguri: Kamel Prints.
- [18] Stockwell, P. (2002a). *Cognitive poetics: An introduction*. London: Routledge.
- [19] Stockwell, P. (2002b). *Cognitive poetics*. London: Routledge.
- [20] Stockwell, P. (2015). *Cognitive Stylistics*. In R. Jones (Ed.) (2015) *The Routledge handbook of language and creativity*. London: Routledge.
- [21] Woldermariam, H. (2014). *The Teaching and Learning of Poetry at Postgraduate Level: A Cognitive Stylistics Approach*. Retrieved from <https://www.academia.edu/36351774/6>.
- [22] Xerri, D. (2012). *Poetry and Multimodality: Theory into Practice*. Unpublished paper, University of Malta. Retrieved from <https://www.researchgate.net>.