

Paratextual Negotiation in Northern Nigerian Fiction: A Reading of Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *When We Were Fireflies*

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *When We Were Fireflies* (2023), focusing on how the author deploys paratexts in shaping the readers' interpretation of the novel's central concern with reincarnation and contemporary Nigerian realities. Drawing on Genette's theory of paratexts, Weber and Stein's paratextual negotiation, and Nöth's visual semiotics, the study combines close reading with visual and textual analysis of its paratextual elements. The study contends that the novel's paratextual apparatus functions as a threshold co-narrative rather than a mere supplement to the main text. The study reveals how Ibrahim's paratextual apparatus serves as a structural principle, orchestrating the narrative's engagement with suspended states: between past and present, life and death, local and global, doctrinal and experiential. Rather than asserting a direct parallel between paratextual mediation and reincarnation, the article demonstrates that both operate as non-linear, contested and culturally situated thresholds; zones of transition, negotiation and resistance where meaning is continually shaped and redirected. The findings demonstrate that the cover, the title's temporal grammar, the rainbow chapter sequence, the authority of the epigraphs and the gendered framing of endorsements collectively construct interpretive frameworks that guide the reader's understanding before, during and after engaging with the narrative. The findings suggest that Nigerian fiction, as exemplified by this novel, not only utilises paratexts but transforms them into a site of artistic negotiation with temporality, identity and meaning. By foregrounding paratexts as dynamic, mediating interfaces, this article contributes to the ongoing debates within postcolonial African literary studies by modelling a culturally situated, multimodal paratextual analysis that treats paratexts as dynamic, mediating interfaces, demonstrating that Nigerian fiction transforms paratexts into a site of artistic negotiation with temporality, identity, trauma and meaning.

Keywords: *Abubakar Adam Ibrahim, Nigerian fiction, Paratexts, Reincarnation, When We Were Fireflies*

INTRODUCTION

The interpretation of textual meaning has long preoccupied literary scholars. While a 'text' is a multifaceted concept, extending from structured words to any meaningful arrangement of signs, literary analysis often privileges narrative voice, characterisation and theme. However, paratextual elements also play a vital role, mediating how meaning is generated and apprehended. This article examines paratextual elements in Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *When We Were Fireflies* (2023). The central objective of this paper is to interrogate how paratexts articulate the novel's thematic engagement with reincarnation and contemporary Nigerian realities. This analysis explores how paratexts in the novel function as non-linear thresholds, constituting sites for cultural and theological negotiation and forming integral components of a multimodal signifying system. Rather than sticking to a linear progression or serving solely as preliminary material to the main text, these paratexts are characterised by their capacity for recurrence, resonance and continual reactivation throughout the process of reading. Such a dynamic is analogous to the novel's own thematisation of reincarnation, which is articulated through the deployment of narrative fragments, the evocation of nightmares and the reiteration of temporal markers.

In this novel, the paratexts collectively constitute a multimodal signifying system wherein visual, verbal and material elements are brought into productive convergence. The imagery of the train on the cover is imbued with signifiers of postcolonial violence and liminality; the chromatic organisation of chapter titles imposes a semblance of coherence upon narrative fragmentation; the epigraphs serve to frame the motifs of rebirth and love; and the endorsements foreground the articulation of women's voices and the thematisation of gender-based violence.

Although the novel has received attention from reviewers, especially for its exploration of reincarnation, a motif seldom addressed in its Northern Nigerian cultural setting, most commentary is journalistic and thematic. Scholarly engagement with its formal and material dimensions remains limited. Notably, Abdulkarim and Yusuf (2026) provide an early

academic intervention, focusing on the interplay of love, loss and reincarnation in shaping narrative and character development. While their contribution is valuable, it does not address the formal and material apparatus of the novel or its significance in the production of meaning. This article addresses this lacuna by articulating paratexts as central to both the construction of narrative meaning and the reader's interpretive engagement with *When Were Fireflies*.

Abubakar Adam Ibrahim occupies a significant position within contemporary Nigerian literature, particularly in relation to the evolving landscape of Northern Nigerian fiction. His oeuvre is distinguished by a sustained repudiation of dominant narrative paradigms, notably the reductive 'single story' frequently ascribed to the region. Ibrahim's literary practices privilege controversial subjects and lived experiences of characters whose perspectives are often marginalised within mainstream discourses. His recognition by the Nigeria Prize for Literature in 2016 for *Season of Crimson Blossoms* (2015), alongside his residencies at the Goethe and Sylt Institutes, attests to his critical and institutional prominence. In addition to his acclaimed novel, Ibrahim's contributions to the short fiction genre, as exemplified by *Whispering Trees* (2012), *Daughters of Bappa Avenue* (2015) and *Dreams and Assorted Nightmares* (2020), further consolidate his role in shaping the contours of Nigerian literary production.

Synopsis of The Novel

Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *When We Were Fireflies* engages the motif of reincarnation as a structuring device through which questions of memory, identity and trauma are interrogated. The narrative unfolds through a chance encounter between two characters at a train terminal: Yarima Lalo, the protagonist and a brooding artist haunted by memories of two previous lives and Aziza, a single mother, whose probing questions become the catalyst for his self-confrontation. Yarima Lalo channels his fragmented memories into his art, concealing them from others for fear of being deemed unstable. In contrast, Aziza urges him to confront his experiences and the trauma that shadows his repeated deaths.

Driven by the fear of a third death and longing for redemption, Yarima Lalo and Aziza embarked on a journey across major cities in Northern Nigeria in search of answers about

Yarima Lalo's existence and the mysterious forces binding him to the cycle of life and death. The narrative skilfully interlaces Aziza's family struggles, the wisdom of Yarima Lalo's mother, Kande and the stories of Lalo's two past loves (Indo and Turai). This development sets the stage for the novel's central conflict, which is the struggle between fate and agency, vengeance and forgiveness.

Situated within the context of Nigeria's enduring socio-religious volatility, marked by insurgency, banditry and widespread abductions, the novel offers a critical meditation on the lived realities of postcolonial Nigeria. Yarima Lalo's embodied encounters with displacement, psychic trauma and the search for existential meaning are emblematic of the broader collective experience of Nigerians negotiating precarity and marginalisation.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs an interdisciplinary methodology that integrates close reading with visual semiotic analysis in the examination of *When We Were Fireflies*. The analytical framework is informed by Genette's (1997) theory of paratexts, Weber and Stein's (2023) articulation of paratextual negotiation, and Nöth's (2020) approach to visual semiotics. The methodological process is structured around the identification and description of paratexts, the close reading of their verbal, symbolic, and narrative dimensions, and the semiotic decoding of visual elements. These findings are then situated within both the main narrative and the broader Nigerian cultural context. The analysis draws on both primary and secondary qualitative data, thereby ensuring a rigorous and contextually situated interpretation.

While Genette's model offers a foundational framework for the analysis of paratexts, its formalist and Western orientation limits its capacity to address the colonial and postcolonial dynamics, as well as the cultural specificities, that shape African texts such as *When We Were Fireflies*. Moreover, Genette's framework does not sufficiently account for the narrative function of paratexts within the text. In response, this study adapts Genette's model by integrating the more dynamic concept of 'paratextualnegotiation'. Drawing on Weber and Stein (2023), paratexts are conceptualised as mediators between authorial intention, reader expectation and cultural context. Likewise, Watts's (2005) perspective foregrounds their

function as sites of negotiation that reflect shifts in authority from colonial to postcolonial agents. The methodology synthesises Genette's framework with visual semiotics and postcolonial studies to construct a culturally situated model attentive to Northern Nigerian conservatism, theological resistance to reincarnation and censorship. Within this framework, paratexts are shown to frame reincarnation as a structural condition rather than a doctrinal assertion. The analysis is organised around five paratexts: cover art, title, chromatic chapters, epigraphs and endorsements, with a focus on elements materially attached to the book and the exclusion of external epitexts such as interviews and marketing. Verbal paratexts are subjected to close reading, visual paratexts are decoded through visual semiotics, and both are analysed for their convergence on the novel's thematic and structural concerns. This semiotic-paratextual approach positions paratexts as a central narrative strategy that structures the novel's engagement with liminality.

Theoretical Framework

G rard Genette (1997) describes paratexts as liminal zones, "thresholds" between the text and its context that mediate and shape how readers encounter and interpret literary works (p.2). According to Genette, paratexts, such as titles, prefaces, epigraphs, illustrations, and other textual or material elements, frame the main narrative and influence meaning through social conventions and literary traditions. Genette also distinguishes between peritexts (elements within the book itself, such as the cover and preface) and epitexts, which exist outside the book, like reviews and interviews. Together, these form the spatial field of the paratexts. Together, the peritext and epitext comprise "exclusively (...) the spatial field of the paratexts" (Genette and Maclean, 1991, p.263).

The concept of "paratextual negotiation" builds on Genette by viewing paratexts as active sites where meaning is shaped, contested, and redirected to meet the expectations and norms of different audiences (Galey, 2023). Watts (2005) shows how, in early African literature, paratexts often served colonial validation, while contemporary African writers use them to negotiate and assert their own literary identities.

A growing body of scholarship has examined paratexts in African fiction (Diallo 2012; Mahdu 2017; Masemola 2021; Sandwith 2018; Watts 2005), yet little attention has been paid

to their role in Abubakar Ibrahim's *When We Were Fireflies*. Bäckman's (2026) recent study also highlights how paratexts produced by African women writers negotiate authorial identity amid the tensions of global literary markets.

Sandwith (2018) examines how shifting paratexts in multiple editions of Mofolo's *Chaka* reveal changing interpretive frames in African literature. Kapi (2006) and others show that African writing negotiates tensions between tradition, colonial legacy, and identity, with authors like Mariama Bâ and Ama Ata Aidoo using narrative as a tool for cultural negotiation and the construction of new subjectivities.

In *When We Were Fireflies*, paratextual negotiation encompasses the ways threshold elements engage with sensitive themes like reincarnation, particularly within the Northern Nigerian Muslim community, where such beliefs are highly controversial. Northern Nigeria is generally a conservative environment characterised by a strong adherence to orthodox Islamic teachings. As Adam Ibrahim notes in an interview, "conservatism plays a huge role in the way people live, the kind of conversations they have and the kind of literature they produce. We had rabid attempts to censor creative works from certain parts of the north when creatives were beginning to explore certain themes" (<https://thisisafrica.me/lifestyle/fiction-is-a-vehicle-for-introspection-interview-with-abubakar-adam-ibrahim/>).

Consequently, any literary engagement with reincarnation in Northern Nigeria is likely to be met with theological resistance and cultural unease, as it challenges deeply held convictions about the afterlife, spiritual accountability and the boundaries of religious orthodoxy (Babangida & Ali, 2025). Nevertheless, as Ibrahim notes, "the possibilities of fiction remain endless and for an artist, a writer, such abundance of possibilities is an irresistible draw. Fiction is the one thing that can be used for anything, for entertainment, artistry or to convey ideas and thoughts without seeming to do so" (<https://thisisafrica.me/lifestyle/fiction-is-a-vehicle-for-introspection-interview-with-abubakar-adam-ibrahim/>). Thus, Ibrahim's use of paratexts can be read as a strategic engagement with this religious context, framing the novel's themes in ways that both acknowledge and navigate the sensitivities of the Northern Nigerian Muslim audience. This

negotiation is further illuminated by Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's own reflections in an interview with the Nigerian *Daily Trust* newspaper, where he says:

A lot of deep emotions and situations we often encounter in life are explored in this book. However, the book gives room for one to understand that people deal with situations differently and always have a reason for their actions, even when it may seem out of place or character. (<https://dailytrust.com/nothing-is-as-it-seems-in-abubakar-adams-when-we-were-fireflies/>)

Ibrahim's comments underscore the deliberate, thoughtful approach he takes to engaging with sensitive theological themes, using paratextual strategies and narrative ambiguity to invite reflection rather than confrontation.

Reincarnation in *When We Were Fireflies* is not a doctrine the novel endorses; it is a structural condition that characters in the novel experience, often without fully understanding it. The phenomenon of reincarnation, while not the author's personal conviction, presents a compelling subject for analysis, particularly in the context of Nigerian cultural practices. In a 2023 interview with *The Nation* Newspaper, Abubakar Adam Ibrahim explains further:

What has always been important to me is how our cultures, especially here in Nigeria, have grappled with the concept of how newborns are given the names of deceased relatives because they are thought of as returning souls of deceased loved ones. For me as a writer, this is a fertile field of imagination to be explored, and that is what I did in this story (<https://thenationonline.ng/ibrahim-i-wrote-when-we-were-fireflies-under-a-year/>).

The novel's protagonist, Yarima Lalo, is living his "third life." He does not remember his past lives in a linear, sequential way; instead, they emerge as fragments of nightmares, paintings, inexplicable knowledge, and recurring timestamps. Paratextual negotiation thus describes how these elements anticipate and address potential objections or misunderstandings from readers, especially those with strong religious or cultural reservations. This process reframes contentious themes to make them more accessible, acceptable, or open to interpretation.

By undertaking a close analysis of the interplay between textual and paratextual strategies, this article highlights the situatedness of African narrative forms and their

material presentation. In this respect, the study contributes to ongoing critical debates regarding the agency of paratexts in shaping both the reception and the interpretive possibilities of contemporary African fiction.

DATA ANALYSIS

Visual Analysis of The Cover

Nöth's (2020) theory of visual semiotics underpins the following analysis of the cover of Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *When We Were Fireflies*. The cover encapsulates a coherent narrative structure. The cover's composition, chromatic choices, and iconography function as multimodal resources that activate interpretive frameworks for the reader prior to textual engagement. Semiotic evidence from the cover (see Figure 1) indicates that the dominant train image, centrally placed, serves as a salient vector for the novel's recurring themes of violence and liminality.

Genette's (1997) conceptualisation of the book cover as a 'primary directional sign' is operationalised here: the train motif is positioned as a motivated signifier that guides the reader's horizon of expectations. This is triangulated through intertextual evidence from the narrative, where repeated references to trains and alignment between visual and linguistic motifs (memory, trauma) reinforce the semiotic affordances of the cover.

The compositional arrangement of the cover foregrounds the locomotive in a stark frontal silhouette set against a dark green background, thereby activating both visual and cultural modalities of meaning-making. This orientation, when read semiotically, positions the train as a confrontational signifier, compelling the viewer to occupy an interpretive stance that oscillates between that of witness and potential victim. The symmetrical, industrial form of the train and its singular headlight are not reducible to aesthetic choices; rather, they function as salient visual resources that construct a rhetoric of threat and inevitability. The central spatial arrangement, together with the calculated deployment of negative space, constitutes multimodal affordances that intensify the affective resonance of impending impact and existential isolation, as evidenced by the anticipated reader response and the narrative's thematic preoccupations.



Figure 1: Cover, *When We Were Fireflies*

The chromatic palette of the cover, comprising deep green, red, white, and gold, functions as a constellation of semiotic resources that mediate the relationship between visual and narrative meaning. The use of green, in particular, tempers the vibrancy of gold and alludes to the natural luminosity of fireflies, thereby visually encoding the text's central metaphor of ephemeral illumination. This chromatic interplay is substantiated by the narrative's recurring motif of fireflies and darkness. The juxtaposition of green and black, which references the Kafanchan cornfield (p.148), is anchored in textual evidence: black signifies soil, green denotes corn, and gold represents the firefly and its emergence from blood. The chromatic scheme thus operates as a multimodal bridge, facilitating the convergence of visual symbolism and narrative content.

Iconographic analysis supported by linguistic evidence demonstrates the train motif's multivalency: it operates as a semiotic anchor for trauma, fate, and historical inevitability. Textual data from the novel describes train scenes marked by relentless forward motion and threat, reinforcing the paratextual function of the train as a signifier of violence. The contrast between the white headlight and green locomotive materialises a semiotic opposition, organic versus mechanised, which is thematically indexed throughout the narrative. The circular headlight, visually analogous to the clock face shown at 2:14 (a recurrent temporal marker in the text), evidences the cover's encoding of cycles of trauma and liminality, triangulated with narrative references.

The red stripe on the train constitutes an intentional iconographic resource, its significance substantiated by recurrent linguistic references to bloodshed within the narrative. Instances such as “the smell of my blood mingling with the dirt” (p.149), “blood leaking from his body” (p.133), and protesters “bleeding, and dying” (p.113) serve as textual

data that are visually echoed on the cover. This multimodal correlation between visual design and narrative language functions to prime the reader for the affective and thematic landscape of violence and mortality that permeates the text.

The spatial organisation of the cover, in which the train advances toward the viewer without the mediation of visible tracks, operates as a visual metaphor for inevitability and inescapability, a reading substantiated by the narrative's thematic concerns. The layout of the cover positions the reader as a witness, a stance that is mirrored linguistically in the text's insistence on the direct confrontation of trauma. The gold typography situated above the train functions as a semiotic resource that signifies memory and survival, a reading supported by the novel's elegiac language and reflective passages. In this way, the cover operates as a multimodal summons, inviting the reader to engage with cycles of violence and the fragile persistence of hope.

The train motif on the cover of *When We Were Fireflies* operates as evidence of the novel's structuring logic of liminality. This echoes Wendling's (2023, p.1) 'liminal pathway,' and Genette's (1997) notion of the paratextual 'threshold.' The train's perpetual movement between locations signals not mere travel, but a continuous state of transition—a visual and narrative anchor for the "betwixt and between" (Gibbons et al., 2014, p. 6) that permeates the text. This claim is substantiated by the novel's treatment of reincarnation and characterisation, particularly in Yarima Lalo. His suspended state, caught between past and present, life and death, is linguistically foregrounded in his struggle with lost virility and reluctance to seek medical help. The narrative reveals this liminality in the exchange with his mother:

"I am curious," she said, "now that you have found this woman, does that mean that the medicine have worked?"... Have you seen a doctor?"... Lalo stared into the distance and wished he were somewhere else; that the question of his sexual dysfunction, what had been taken from him from his previous life, when he had been a firefly, was not the subject of this conversation with his mother (Ibrahim, 2023, p.121).

The language of distance and avoidance in this exchange evidences the emotional and psychological liminality that characterises Lalo's experience. His shame and vulnerability, catalysed by his mother's probing, result in a state of paralysis that is emblematic of the

novel's broader preoccupation with suspended states. This dynamic is not confined to Lalo alone; Kande, his mother, is similarly suspended by illness. Her recurring sleeping sickness positions her between consciousness and unconsciousness, life and death, thereby mirroring the instability that permeates the novel's environment.

"I'm afraid too, Yarima," she said. "I've been for such a long time. Now I have a different kind of fear. That I would go to sleep one day and never wake up" (Ibrahim, 2023, p. 120).

Kande's fear transforms sleep into a metaphor for death, and her illness destabilises the boundaries between rest and mortality. The linguistic framing of both Lalo's and Kande's conditions evidences the novel's sustained preoccupation with liminality, a condition that is imposed not only on the characters themselves but also on their caregivers, who are caught in a perpetual oscillation between hope and mourning.

Title as Textual Gateways

A book's title, according to Genette (1997), is its "name" and grants it a unique identity, shaping how readers interpret the text. Also, Nord (2019) describes the title as an active textual element, shaping both the reception and aesthetic experience. The title, *When We Were Fireflies*, is imbued with temporal and symbolic significance. The temporal marker 'When' invokes nostalgia for an idealised yet indeterminate past, while the pronoun 'We' remains deliberately ambiguous, thereby problematising the boundaries of communal identity. The metaphor of "fireflies" symbolises fleeting agency and collective brilliance, its luminosity inherently transient (Flint, 2023). These elements construct a narrative of lost communal vitality and the impermanence of identity, with the title withholding definitive meaning until further elaboration within the text. The narrative seamlessly weaves together past, present, and future, centring on Yarima Lalo's artistic and existential journey.

Epigraphs as Functional Signposts

In *When We Were Fireflies*, each of the seven chapters opens with a unique epigraph that guides the reader's engagement with the narrative's intricacies. Epigraphs are brief quotations or phrases typically drawn from external literary sources (Green, 2024, p.1). These epigraphs are carefully selected from a wide range of authors, including Ally Condie,

Mark Twain, Nimisha Toshniwal, Pablo Picasso, Ram Charan, Rumi and Wassily Kandinsky (pp. 1, 79, 155, 187, 233, 309, 361). These epigraphs act as thematic micro-stories, their diverse origins spanning visual arts, contemporary fiction, classic literature, religion, and philosophy. This breadth enriches the novel's thematic complexity and situates its narrative in a broader artistic and philosophical context. By drawing from these voices, the novel bridges cultural and temporal divides, inviting readers to interpret its story through multiple perspectives. This approach signals a universal resonance in its exploration of memory, identity, and transformation.

Far from being mere ornamental additions, these epigraphs establish interpretive frameworks and create succinct narrative trajectories, orienting the reader to the emotional and philosophical dimensions of each chapter. For instance, the first chapter, titled 'Red,' is introduced by the following epigraph:

"Red is the first colour of spring. It's the real colour of rebirth. Of beginning"
—Ally Condie (Ibrahim, 2023, p.1).

Ally Condie's epigraph, taken from *Matched* (2013), uses short declarative sentences and relational processes. The superlatives "first" and "real" and the fragment "Of beginning" give the statement categorical force. Linguistically, the phrase "red is the colour of spring" foregrounds the nominal "red" as subject, assigning it an unconventional semantic value: not danger or violence, but "rebirth" and "beginning." This lexical shift is reinforced by the subsequent predicative structure linking red to "rebirth" and "beginning," subverting dominant cultural associations. Empirically, the novel's engagement with reincarnation and cyclical renewal aligns with this reconceptualisation, as narrative events repeatedly associate transformation with both pain and possibility. The epigraph's grammatical use of present tense universalises the claim, positioning renewal as a continual process. Thus, the linguistic choices and narrative evidence together show that the text frames renewal as both promise and challenge, with "red" operating as a marker of regeneration even amid trauma.

Another example of an epigraph for this analysis appears in chapter four of the novel, titled "Green.":

The garden of love is green without limits and yields many fruits other than sorrow or joy
— Rumi. (Ibrahim, 2023, p.188)

The above epigraph is attributed to Rumi, who was a poet, scholar, and Sufi mystic (Harmless, 2007). He occupied a central position in the tradition of Persian mystical literature (Schimmel, 1993). The phrase "garden of love is green without limits" is best understood through the lens of conceptual metaphor theory, as articulated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), which posits that abstract domains are frequently structured by more concrete experiential domains. In this instance, the domain of horticulture is mapped onto the domain of love, enabling a reconceptualisation of love as a site of cultivation and growth. The lexical selection of "green without limits" foregrounds the semantic properties of boundlessness and perpetual renewal, a reading further substantiated by the subsequent phrase "yields many fruits other than sorrow or joy." This enumeration of outcomes that transcend the binary of sorrow and joy signals a deliberate resistance to affective polarity, a phenomenon that has been documented in corpus-based studies of metaphor and emotion (Stefanowitsch, 2006).

The linguistic construction of the metaphor permits a multiplicity of interpretive possibilities, each of which is pertinent to the narrative context. In the depiction of the relationship between Yarima Lalo and Aziza, the narrative foregrounds the resilience and adaptability inherent in the concept of love, thereby aligning with the epigraph's semantic field of productivity and transformation. The deployment of generative metaphors enables the narrative to conceptualise love as an ongoing process of becoming. Through their rhetorical and linguistic properties, the epigraphs in the novel serve as interpretive signposts, guiding the reader through the complex emotional and philosophical landscape articulated within the narrative.

Colours as Chapter Titles

When We Were Fireflies uses colour-themed chapter titles to bring coherence to the novel's fragmented timeline. Each chapter title is a single-word colour adjective that is nominalised, exemplifying grammatical metaphor where adjectival qualities are reified as

entities. These titles form a closed lexical set corresponding to the spectrum of the rainbow: Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Indigo and Violet. This chromatic sequence acts as a narrative framework and gives the novel a self-referential structure. The initial chapters, associated with red, orange and yellow, are indicative of heightened affective states such as intensity, passion, danger and transformation. The intermediary chapters, green and blue, are aligned with themes of calmness, affection and introspection. The final chapter, violet, is suggestive of mystery, spirituality and resolution. The chapter entitled 'Yellow' exemplifies this dynamic, as it ostensibly prepares the reader for motifs of warmth and hope, yet the narrative foregrounds experiences of trauma, loss and transient transcendence. Consequently, the interplay between chapter title and narrative content produces a micro-arc characterised by the dialectic of promise, crisis and transcendence.

Moreover, the chromatic schema confers both emotional and symbolic density upon the narrative. For example, in the chapter designated 'Yellow' (Ibrahim, 2023, p.156), the reader is primed to anticipate motifs of warmth, hope, or transformation. However, the chapter centres on Yarima's panic attack, hospitalisation, and shared trauma with Aziza. His injuries come from rescuing Eniola from domestic violence, and the chapter grows darker with his mother's death and Aziza's painful divorce story (Ibrahim, 2023, pp.181-184). The spirit child's appearance as Yarima says goodbye to his mother offers a moment of transcendence within suffering. 'Yellow' thus captures the tension between hope and hardship.

Endorsements

The novel features endorsements from three acclaimed African female writers, Maaza Mengiste, Ukonwa Wanner, and Bisi Adjapon, which are strategically placed on the covers of the novel to highlight the authority of women's voices. The endorsements included on the cover function as an additional framing device. The presence of contributions from three prominent African female writers foregrounds the novel's engagement with themes of female agency, domestic violence and resilience. This paratextual framing directs the reader's attention to the gender dynamics embodied by characters such as Aziza, Indo, Turai and Kande. In this way, the endorsement apparatus constructs a preliminary narrative of

gendered literary authority and women's experience, which precedes and informs the reception of the primary text.

DISCUSSION

This study highlights the crucial role of paratexts, including cover art, chapter titles, epigraphs and endorsements, in shaping meaning in Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *When We Were Fireflies*. The research shows how they construct interpretive frameworks, shape reader engagement, and draw attention to key narrative motifs. The findings show that Ibrahim's use of visual and textual thresholds is central to the novel's narrative structure and emotional impact. The analysis demonstrates correspondence and recurrence between paratext and text.

In Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *When We Were Fireflies*, the peritextual apparatus functions as a threshold co-narrative rather than a mere supplement to the main text. The cover operates as the most explicitly narrative paratext, encoding a visual story of liminality, cyclical violence, and suspended transition through the approaching train, its colour symbolism, and the recurring 2:14 motif. The cover's train, blood-red stripe, green cornfield imagery and circular 2:14 motif reappear in the narrative; for example, the Kafanchan cornfield and the narrator's death (p. 148), blood filling the mouth (p. 149), Lalo's bleeding body (p. 133), Shiite protesters shot and bleeding (p. 113), and the "elephant long grass" along the road to Kano (p. 182).

The title's firefly metaphor is linked to fleeting agency, collective brilliance and impermanence, which resonate with the novel's treatment of lives that briefly illuminate and then end. The colour-coded chapters impose coherence on a fragmented timeline and map the protagonist's psychological and artistic journey. Likewise, the epigraphs form a symbolic and structural pre-narrative that anticipates and reinforces the novel's themes of reincarnation, memory, love and postcolonial precarity. The female endorsements function as framing paratexts that shape gendered reception and authorial legitimacy, not as autonomous narratives. Epitextual interviews and authorial commentary inform the negotiation of these paratexts but remain outside the formal claim. Thus, the paratexts do

not constitute a single self-contained story; they form a negotiated, multi-layered threshold system that mediates meaning alongside the main narrative.

The visual analysis provides evidence for reader shaping in two ways. First, it shows that the cover prepares a set of expectations: threat, inevitability, liminality, cyclical violence, national trauma and fragile illumination. The reader approaches the novel already primed to read reincarnation not as abstract doctrine but as a lived, painful, repetitive condition embedded in Nigerian history. Second, it shows that the paratexts negotiate a sensitive theme. In Northern Nigeria, reincarnation is theologically controversial. By framing it through images of trains, fireflies, blood, cornfields and national colours—rather than through doctrinal assertion—the paratexts make the theme accessible, ambiguous and open to reflection. This is precisely what the study means by “paratextual negotiation”: paratexts mediate among authorial intention, reader expectation and cultural context.

These findings offer a model for understanding how paratexts function in contemporary African literature. This analysis treats paratexts as central to meaning-making and emotional impact, showing how meaning is generated and shaped at different textual levels through visual semiotics and threshold theory. The study shows how paratexts in *When We Were Fireflies* reflect local histories, traumas, and cultural identities, expanding our understanding of paratextuality in postcolonial literature.

However, there are notable differences. Ibrahim's use of endorsements and colour-coded chapter titles highlights gendered experiences and emotions, areas less covered in previous studies. The prominence of women's voices and symbolic use of colour reveal new ways to understand narrative authority and emotion in African fiction. In summary, paratexts in *When We Were Fireflies* are foundational, shaping the novel's structure, themes and reader experience. This approach strengthens the research and suggests applications for studying paratextuality, reader response and literary mediation in African and global contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study has analysed how Abubakar Adam Ibrahim deploys paratexts as constitutive elements for articulating the production of meaning in *When We Were Fireflies*. The research demonstrates that Ibrahim's strategic use of textual and visual motifs is not

only central to the novel's narrative structure and emotional impact, but also advances the current understanding of paratextuality in contemporary African literature. By treating paratextual devices as thresholds, the study shows how they mediate the reader's approach and foreground key motifs, thus shaping interpretive possibilities before the narrative unfolds. The integrated theoretical approach, combining visual semiotics and paratextual analysis, provides a scientific justification for the work and offers new insights into the dynamic processes through which meaning is constructed.

This research extends the field by highlighting the significance of paratexts for narrative organisation and invites further exploration into their applications in literary criticism and related disciplines.

Future research may extend this semiotic-paratextual framework by undertaking comparative analyses across diverse African literary traditions, with particular attention to the ways in which visual and textual paratexts mediate processes of cross-cultural reception and the construction of meaning. Such investigations would contribute to a more perceptive understanding of how paratextual strategies continue to renegotiate the parameters of literary production, interpretation and reception.

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