



Thresholds: Liminality and the In-Between Self in Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *When We Were Fireflies*

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Abstract

This article analyses how Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *When We Were Fireflies* deploys liminality as a core narrative strategy. The purpose is to shed light on the performative enactment of liminality in the novel by addressing a gap in current scholarship. The study integrates anthropological and postcolonial frameworks, drawing on the work of Turner, Mbembe and Bhabha. It applies close textual analysis to examine how characterisation, setting and symbolism construct and sustain liminal states. The findings reveal that Ibrahim's characters are consistently positioned in states of in-betweenness that mirror the complexities and traumas of postcolonial Nigeria. The article further demonstrates that liminality functions in the novel at multiple levels; temporally, spatially, psychologically and metaphysically, especially in how the novel frames death as a passage rather than an endpoint. The analysis demonstrates that Ibrahim transforms liminality from a marginal phenomenon to a generative force, shaping identity, mediating social relationships, and offering new possibilities for healing and reconciliation in a society marked by recurring violence and historical trauma. The novel, *When We Were Fireflies*, therefore, contributes to the broader tradition of African literature that interrogates borders, margins and thresholds, advancing a narrative of ongoing negotiation and renewal.

Keywords: Abubakar Adam Ibrahim, Liminality, Nigerian Fiction, Reincarnation, *When We Were Fireflies*

Introduction

The concept of liminality is at the heart of characterisation in Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's book *When We Were Fireflies* (2023). Many characters in the novel are depicted as liminal beings, living at the threshold of existence, an in-betweenness, which extends beyond personal experience and serves as a shared condition within the Nigerian postcolonial society. The characters in the novel exist between the present-day realities and the continued influence of their previous lives. This article undertakes an in-depth analysis

of liminality as a structuring principle in Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *When We Were Fireflies*, with particular attention to its function in mediating the narrative's engagement with reincarnation and the complexities of contemporary Nigerian experience. The analysis focuses on the narrative strategies through which Ibrahim mobilises liminal states, especially the deployment of doubled temporality and the elaborate transmission of memory across the borders of life and death.

Critical engagements with Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *When We Were Fireflies* have largely emphasised its engagement with reincarnation, love and revenge as isolated themes. However, the novel's potential as an allegory for the Nigerian postcolony has not received sufficient scholarly attention. While the motif of reincarnation is rarely discussed within the context of Northern Nigerian culture, most engagements remain journalistic and thematic rather than analytical. The scholarly analysis of the novel's allegorical aspects is still in its early stages. For example, Abdulkarim and Yusuf (2026) examines the way in which love, loss and reincarnation influence the narrative and the development of the characters. Yet their useful contribution fails to take into account the novel's involvement with current Nigerian realities as well as its broader importance in the process of meaning-making. The article fills that important gap by examining the novel's use of liminality and showing how the text involves the reader via doubled temporality and the apparently impossible transfer of memory beyond death. It argues that in *When We Were Fireflies* Abubakar Adam Ibrahim presents his characters as essentially liminal beings, kept in a continuous state of in-betweenness. By interpreting the novel through a lens that focuses on liminality, Ibrahim turns in-betweenness from a peripheral condition into a creative principle, one that shapes identity and organises relationships.

The concept of "Liminality" denotes a transitional space between an old state and a new beginning, a "betwixt and between" phase tied to major life changes or rites of passage (Gibbons et al., 2014, p. 6). The term originates from the Latin *limen*, meaning "threshold", and describes a disorienting state defined by ambiguity and possibility, where the previous identity has dissolved, but a new one has yet to form (Piccione et al., 2025). Contemporary usage emphasises liminality as a condition of indeterminacy and in-betweenness rather than a strict separation. Liminality is, in essence, evasive, existing neither completely here nor there and is almost impossible to describe. People who are going through a liminal phase have not yet been fully absorbed into the previous situation, nor have they fully moved on to the new one.

In *When We Were Fireflies*, Ibrahim constructs a narrative that remains deeply involved in thresholds. These are liminal spaces between life and death, past and present, and memory and forgetting. Set in Abuja, Nigeria's capital and five other Northern Nigerian cities, Ibrahim skillfully interweaves the motif of reincarnation with the historical realities of socio-religious violence and pervasive insecurity. The protagonist, Yarima Lalo, is perpetually suspended in in between worlds. The one who has lived before is called

Kurwa/Dan Kurwa by the Hausa, *Tuput* by the Angas, *Ngu Taa Nwong* by the Mwaghavul and *Akudayaa* by the Yoruba. Yarima Lalo, the protagonist of the novel, had lived twice, each time murdered for love (once on a train, once on a farm), and now inhabits a third life as a brooding artist haunted by the pressure of his past deaths. His mnemonic dreams recur with disturbing precision at 2:14 a.m., the hour of his previous death and his paintings are attempts to recapture fragmentary memories of former lives.

Reincarnation is the belief that a soul survives death and that humans can be repeatedly reborn in endless cycles of births and rebirths. According to Yendell (1998), in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, “the doctrine of reincarnation teaches that each human being has been born and died, and again been born and died, over and over again in a beginningless process that will never end unless they become enlightened” (<https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/reincarnation/v-1>). While the core idea is simple, its plausibility as a survival theory is contested. There is a growing body of literature in Africa that recognises belief in reincarnation as broad and complex (Oyekunle and Mkhwanazi, 2024; Onyewuenyi, 1996; Eneh, 1987). For example, Onyewuenyi (1996) observes that among the Igbo in Southeastern Nigeria, the recognition of reincarnated individuals entails complex social markers. Onyewuenyi also notes that Africans do not hold reincarnation as a doctrinal certainty in the classical sense; instead, the term is often used by outsiders to describe a range of indigenous beliefs.

In Northern Nigeria, reincarnation is a sensitive and controversial topic that is often viewed as un-Islamic (*shirk*) by the predominantly Muslim community. The strong conservatism and dedication to orthodox teaching in the area are responsible for the opposition to literary treatments of such subjects. As Abubakar Adam Ibrahim points out in an interview, “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/>).

Despite the resistance, fiction offers writers an opportunity to probe complex and even contentious themes. As Ibrahim observes further:

“The idea of reincarnation is not just a narrative device for me—it is a way to probe questions about memory, longing, and the boundaries of belief. I am fully aware that in my community, the very notion of reincarnation is controversial and often dismissed, but fiction allows us to explore such taboos with empathy and complexity” (<https://thenationonlineng.net/ibrahim-i-wrote-when-we-were-fireflies-under-ayear/>).

The thoughtful manner in which Ibrahim handles sensitive theological issues is shown in his comments in the interview referred to above, for he makes use of paratextual

strategies and narrative ambiguity in order to encourage reflection rather than argument. Moreover, his bold literary treatment of the idea of reincarnation contradicts the notion that Northern Nigerian identity is exclusively Muslim. Instead, he seeks to recover and acknowledge indigenous spiritualities marginalised by colonial and postcolonial religious reforms. This creative freedom allows for the reimagining of ancestral beliefs, such as those in pre-Islamic Hausa society, in which souls of deceased relatives were believed to return within the same family lineage (<https://www.tota.world/article/1141/>). For example, traditional groups like the Garubawa in Northern Nigeria believed that virtuous souls would return to the family, while malevolent souls would wander. Human transmigration occurred mainly within families, not into animals (Tremearne 1913). Through this lens, Ibrahim's writing navigates and negotiates religious sensibilities in Northern Nigeria, as he further illustrates in a Nigerian *Daily Trust*, newspaper interview:

“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 out of character.” (<https://dailytrust.com/nothing-is-as-it-seems-in-abubakar-adams-when-we-were-fireflies/>)

Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's integration of indigenous belief systems into modern stories echoes Garuba's (2003) idea of ‘animist materialism’, which contends that modernisation does not erase traditional beliefs; rather, spiritual dimensions remain woven into contemporary African life. Such approaches recognise that metaphysical truths rooted in indigenous belief systems are basic to the African literary imagination. While reincarnation is not the author's personal belief, it operates as a productive subject for exploring the tensions and intersections of Nigerian cultural practices. In a 2023 interview with the Nigerian *The Nation* Newspaper, Ibrahim elaborates:

“What has always been important to me is how our cultures, especially here in Nigeria, have dealt 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://thenationonlineng.net/ibrahim-i-wrote-when-we-were-fireflies-under-a-year/>).

Abubakar Adam Ibrahim is a leading personality in contemporary Nigerian literature, especially within Northern Nigerian fiction. His story challenges dominant narratives, particularly the reductive ‘single story’ often associated with the region. Ibrahim addresses taboo subjects and engages lived experiences of characters whose voices are

generally marginalised. His critical and institutional recognition includes the Nigeria Prize for Literature in 2016 for *Season of Crimson Blossoms* (2015) and residencies at the Goethe and Sylt Institutes. Beyond his acclaimed novel, Ibrahim has equally made important contributions to short fiction with works such as *Whispering Trees* (2012), *Daughters of Bappa Avenue* (2015), and *Dreams and Assorted Nightmares* (2020), further reinforcing his influence on Nigerian literature.

Methodology

This study draws its theoretical framework from anthropology and postcolonial studies with insights from the works of Victor Turner (1977), Achille Mbembe (2001) and Homi Bhabha (1994). Their ideas collectively inform the novel's exploration of in-betweenness, identity and transition. The method draws on both primary and secondary qualitative data and is anchored in established scholarship. Through close reading, the study examines how the novel's textual elements evoke and sustain liminal states. This study contributes to current research in African fiction by showing how Ibrahim addresses the deep spiritual, philosophical and sociopolitical trends that are affecting the African experience, thereby positioning the liminal subject as a resonant metaphor for the postcolonial condition.

Theoretical Framework

Arnold van Gennep's foundational study of rites of passage establishes liminality as a universal phenomenon structured around separation, transition and incorporation. His tripartite model foregrounds the ambiguity and uncertainty of the liminal stage, describing it as an "intermediate, ambivalent social reality" in which individuals exist amid prior and future social identities (MacKay & Hadromi-Allouche, 2023). Building on van Gennep, Victor Turner (1977) extends the concept of liminality by showing the creative and transformational possibilities inherent in liminal states. Within this threshold condition, people encounter paradox and ambiguity, becoming receptive to new meanings and forms of being. Turner (1977) characterises liminality as a phase that "evades ordinary cognitive classification, too, for their neither-this-nor that, here-nor-there, one-thing-not-the-other. [...] They are in a sense 'dead' to the world, and liminality has many symbols of death" (p. 37).

Liminal personae inhabit a space "betwixt and between," neither wholly connected to their former identities nor fully assimilated into new ones. Whereas liminality is traditionally conceived as a passing ritual phase, Ibrahim's novel reimagines it as a continuing existential state as the characters remain in perpetual suspension between lives, memories and ways of being. Turner's concept of *communitas*, which suggests the

egalitarian ties created in liminal states, further clarifies how Ibrahim's threshold communities function; characters like Aziza, the child, Indo, Kande and Yarima Lalo are bound because of their shared experience of in-betweenness.

Drawing from this anthropological foundation, the framework locates liminality within the wider context of postcolonial Africa. Mbembe's (2001) concept of the postcolony is especially relevant, since it describes the postcolonial African nation-state as an area characterised by unstable boundaries, shifting authority and continuous uncertainty. State power manifests itself through ritual, spectacle and the complicated relationships between rulers and subjects, thereby producing what Mbembe refers to as "the commandement", a form of control that is both intimate and absurd. In this kind of setting, people remain in a state of continuous liminality, constantly negotiating the gap between the ideals of modernity and the realities of authoritarianism, as well as between colonial heritage and uncertain futures. Mbembe's contribution finally shows that liminality is a structural feature of postcolonial life.

Homi Bhabha's (1994) idea of the Third Space goes further with this kind of analysis by describing cultural identity as something that is fluid, negotiated and always changing. The Third Space is a kind of in-between area in which hybrid identities and new meanings are created, and thus provides a valuable way of understanding how identity is negotiated in postcolonial literature. Ibrahim's novel, with its characters who exist in a liminal position and its setting at the point where various spiritual, historical and cultural influences meet, illustrates this process. The essay shows that Ibrahim's depiction of liminality functions as an existential state for the characters, as a structural feature of the postcolonial nation and as a guiding principle in the novel's form and reception. In this way, the central significance of liminality in African literature is made clear and Ibrahim's novel is presented as a major contribution to current discussions concerning identity, transition and cultural negotiation in the postcolony.

Literature Review

Despite the fact that Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *When We Were Fireflies* has attracted attention of journalists and bloggers, there is much less attention within scholarly discourse. Abdulkarim and Yusuf (2026) regard love, loss and reincarnation as the key themes that shape the novel's narrative structure and the development of its characters. Yet their analysis fails to sufficiently examine the novel's interaction with the current sociopolitical situation in Nigeria or its place among postcolonial theoretical approaches. Moreover, the idea of liminality as an essential principle for addressing questions of identity and belonging in this case is not considered.

Generally, in African literary studies, the concept of liminality has been carefully developed into a major method of analysing the complexities of identity, belonging and

transformation, particularly in postcolonial contexts (Ezema, 2021; Iwunze, 2022; Kalua, 2007; Oumar, 2024; Pletner, 2000; Taylor, 2007; Yerima-Avazi and Odoh, 2026). Based on this theoretical foundation, Yerima-Avazi and Odoh (2026) carry out a thorough examination of three Nigerian novels, *Yellow Yellow*, *Sterile Sky* and *Born on a Tuesday*, in which they point out age, class and gender as the main factors via which the protagonists cope with and express their experiences of marginality. The analysis demonstrates the close link between the characters' paths of development and the broader patterns of socioeconomic inequality and sociopolitical upheaval which underlie and shape these narratives.

Oumar (2024) and Iwunze (2022) also contribute to the academic discussion by examining the way mental health is portrayed in modern African novels. Oumar, for instance, sees diasporic individuals as being in a constant state of liminality, whereas Iwunze stresses the role that liminality plays in bringing about the psychological effects of historical violence. In a similar way, Ezema (2021) looks at the cultural effects of globalisation as shown in eight African novels and notes that the main characters often find themselves in a state of cultural liminality. This condition involves a position that is not completely part of either African or Western frameworks. Ezema describes this kind of liminality as a 'third space', resulting from the convergence of various sociocultural paths. The various contributions made by these scholars provide a thorough basis for understanding the nature of liminality in African literature. Yet they do not fully take into account the unique way in which *When We Were Fireflies* presents liminality, a presentation that combines personal memory, communal identity and the blurred boundaries between reality and imagination.

Analysis and Discussion **Characters as Liminal Figures**

The narrative unfolds through a chance encounter between two characters at a train terminal: Yarima Lalo, the protagonist and a brooding artist, who is haunted by vivid dreams and memories of two previous lives and Aziza, a woman whose probing questions trigger Yarima's process of self-confrontation. Yarima Lalo channels his fragmented memories into his art, concealing them from others for fear of being deemed unstable. On the other hand, Aziza urges him to confront both the strangeness of his experiences and the trauma that accompanies his repeated deaths.

Yarima Lalo's existential situation represents the most salient manifestation of liminality that Turner articulates as 'betwixt and between' existing conditions. His assertion that 'I have been dead before' (p.42) places him at the threshold between life and death, as well as between multiple identities. The story presents his memories from past lives as evidence of the instability and fragmentation of his sense of self, thereby making

Lalo a case of the liminal subject, one who carries the psychological effects of previous existences and occupies a position that is neither fully part of life nor fully part of death. The fragmented character of his memories, as indicated by the phrase 'Fragments here and there' (p.35), also reinforces his status as a liminal figure since these incomplete and unstable recollections tend to blur the boundary between past and present, thus supporting the novel's idea that subjectivity is fundamentally indeterminate.

The text offers further evidence of liminality through Lalo's memories, which present an incoherent narrative rather than a coherent one—that is, 'Memories, yes' (35). The fact that Lalo experiences temporal confusion, since he believes he was killed in the 1970s whereas Aziza says it was in 1967, acts as further proof of his liminal state (p.43). The contradiction between these two accounts of the historical event corresponds to Homi Bhabha's concept of the 'third space', in which meaning and identity are created in the spaces between the dominant narratives and personal memory. Since Lalo's memories contradict the official history, he occupies a position between the collective national memory and his own individual subjective experience. This inconsistency regarding the time shows that he lives in a liminal historical space and has a hybrid status that does not fully align with either the official narratives or his personal recollections.

Lalo's corporeal experience also functions as a site of liminality, particularly evident in his response to the painting depicting Babayo's attack on the train:

Lalo pulled out his basic phone and Aziza slapped her forehead. She pulled hers out instead and quickly scrolled through the gallery. When she found what she was looking for, she crossed over and sat next to the old woman, holding up the phone to her. Lalo watched the smile on the woman's face melt away, replaced by anxiety, then affection. She ran her thumb over the screen. (p. 197)

This response is a physical expression of the threshold state he is in, a state in which the distinctions between memory, identity and embodiment disappear. The painting functions as a liminal object. By showing the moment when Babayo is attacked, it embodies the transition from life to death and from memory to representation. The fact that when Aziza shows the image to the old woman her emotions change and she says, "Babayo... with a different face" (p.197), shows that the painting has the ability to blur the boundaries between different identities, past and present. The artwork therefore serves as tangible proof of liminality, holding an intermediate position between event and memory, between painter and subject, and between the living and the dead. To use Bhabha's term, the painting acts as a 'third space', a place where identities can be negotiated and meanings contested. Lalo's act of creating the painting is in itself a liminal one, as it reconstructs an experience that is at the same time his and not his and thus produces new, hybrid forms of subjectivity.

The old woman's (Indo) question, "But why would you paint your face into a picture like that?" (p.198), shows how unstable identity is. The fact that she both recognises

him and at the same time, is confused provides further textual evidence of the protagonist's liminality, as she navigates the space between the man she once loved and the man before her. Lalo's physical reaction, as shown by his heart skipping, his clutching his head and then collapsing to his knees, acts as tangible evidence of his liminality. He is in a state lying between standing and falling, between the past and the present, and between composure and collapse. The way the murder scene is recalled through bodily memory highlights the fact that he exists between identities and lifetimes, thus strengthening the view of him as a liminal figure.

With each reincarnation Lalo experiences, he feels a clear sense of loss. His struggle with diminished virility and his reluctance to seek medical intervention can be interpreted as attempts to negotiate his liminal condition (p. 121). His mother's inquiries regarding his relationships provide further proof of unresolved psychological injuries:

"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 (p.121).

The fact that Lalo responds to his mother's question 'Have you seen a doctor?', by wishing to avoid talking about his sexual dysfunction, serves as clear evidence of the connection between metaphysical loss and physical impairment. The shame and retreat which Lalo feels because of his dysfunction are directly related to his experience of reincarnation, thus offering proof that a physical impairment can be transformed into a state of existential liminality. Moreover, the employment of metaphor and the use of direct quotation—such as 'He was not going to live long enough for love, or whatever else...because the cudgel was coming again for him' (p.119)—further shows that the protagonist is suspended between lives and supports the novel's evidence-based examination of liminality.

Another liminal figure in the novel is Indo, who is Yarima Lalo's second love when Yarima is living as Babayo in his second life. Indo exemplifies liminality by inhabiting spaces between binaries: past and present, youth and age, dancer and wife, memory and act of forgetting, as well as life and death. Her identity is always in a state of transition, as aptly described by Turner as 'betwixt and between.' The fact that Indo has so many different roles means that her identity remains unresolved and fluid. Since she maintains simultaneous ties with both Babayo and her present husband, she is unable to develop a stable sense of self. Indo's subjectivity is constantly negotiated, which fits with Turner's idea of liminality and Bhabha's concept of the 'third space' for the formation of a hybrid identity. The fact that Indo is referred to by various names, for example 'Kaka',

'Hajiya', and 'Nana', shows her moving between different identities and social positions and thus underlines the fluidity and multiplicity which are part of her subjectivity.

The exchange between Indo and Lalo reveals her in a position that is at once playful and serious, as she links the past with the present. The love story that she always describes in the present tense shows a sort of temporal third space in which the past and the present are blended together, thereby strengthening her feeling of liminality (pp.199-206). Indo's consciousness may be regarded as a kind of threshold at which the past and the present come together. Because she has a habit of forgetting and then retelling the stories, as well as constantly asking Lalo questions, the distinction between memory and recognition fades away. Although she is old, Indo still retains aspects of her younger self; her body, having been shaped by her experiences of love and memory, becomes a point where different identities and histories converge.

Indo's emotional life is also characterised by liminality, since her continued love for Babayo exists in a state that is at the same time filled with grief and vitality, neither completely extinguished nor entirely alive. Indo admits, "My husband knows that I would never love him the way I loved Babayo" (p.199). She lives between two loves—fidelity to her husband and her lasting memory of Babayo. "The impression of his love on my heart will never disappear and Babayo's will remain" (p.199). The moment at which Indo realises that Lalo is Babayo is marked by a complicated mixture of emotional states: she is caught between grief and joy, recognition and denial, emotional vulnerability and defensiveness, as well as acceptance and a desire for self-protection. Indo's memory acts as a threshold on which the act of remembering Babayo's words is set against the forgetting of her own repeated accounts. Her questions addressed to Lalo therefore lie in an uncertain space between memory and forgetting, making the past at the same time present and absent.

The most striking example of liminality in Indo's experience is her identification of Babayo in the painting, a situation which represents a boundary between seeing and believing, between image and reality. When she touches the image, Indo is caught between the idea of considering the painting as a manifestation of Babayo and dismissing it since it looks like Lalo, so that she remains suspended between believing in reincarnation and acknowledging that it is impossible. She is still unable to cross the threshold that separates Babayo from Lalo and is thus continually caught between the man she once loved and the reality of the present day.

Lalo's mother, Kande, is also a liminal figure, her experience marked by repeated episodes of sleeping sickness (human African trypanosomiasis) which keep her in prolonged states of unconsciousness: "Five years ago, his mother went to sleep and did not wake up for seventeen days" (p. 29). The disease serves as a metaphor for the general instability and uncertainty that characterises the setting of the novel. Since "human African trypanosomiasis is transmitted by tsetse flies," (World Health Organization), it makes rural communities more susceptible and brings to light the concerns about health and safety.

Kande's condition is similar to that of the novel's setting, which exists in a state of balance between uncertainty and danger. This situation causes her to remain in a continuous state of threshold between consciousness and unconsciousness, presence and absence, life and death; she is in a liminal state, neither fully awake nor entirely absent. She shows her fear of the unknown in this exchange:

"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." (p. 120).

This exchange represents a change from a feeling of existential dread to a concrete fear of not existing; when Kande says, "I've been afraid for such a long time", suggesting she is moving from a general anxiety to a specific kind of fear in which sleep itself becomes a metaphor for death. Additionally, her condition puts her caregivers in a liminal position, causing them to be caught between hope and mourning, on the one hand and routine and crisis, on the other.

The children who push carts make up another category of liminal figures; they are depicted as spirit beings who carry the souls of the dying from the world of the living to the afterlife, 'straddling the boundary between the living and the afterlife' (p. 96). The fact that they are always on the move is a strong metaphor for the real experiences of Nigerian street children, who, because of their situation, are forced into a state of vulnerability and displacement. For instance, the children's remarks, "Children are often caught in the crossfire of adult conflicts", (p. 136) and "You just wake up and find yourself in the in-between" (p. 136) — capture not only the spiritual liminality of these figures but also the social and psychological sense of being in between that children suffer when they have been deprived of home, education and safety. In reality, these children are invisible to most people and are seen only by the 'unblind', particularly Lalo and Libya. Socially, they have no fixed roots and are excluded from both family and shelter. Yet, they move along the edges of the city. They are not completely children since they work like adults, and they are not fully adults because they lack autonomy and protection.

The way the novel depicts children pushing carts in order to collect souls corresponds with the real-life experiences of the Almajiri system, a traditional method of Quranic education that has, in modern-day Nigeria, turned into a crisis involving the exploitation of children. UNICEF (2022) states that 'more than 10 million Nigerian children are not in school,' and many of the Almajiri are made to engage in street begging under abusive teachers. The spirit children in Ibrahim's story, who work tirelessly at the edges of visibility, reflect these overlooked children who, although always around, remain socially invisible. The carts they push, which is not for goods but for souls, turn ordinary poverty into a disturbing metaphor for the spiritual and physical vulnerability of childhood in Northern Nigeria.

Another liminal figure in the novel is Libya, the man who sells golden fries opposite the protagonist's art studio; his monotonous routine blurs the boundary between

the ordinary and the extraordinary, and through Libya the novel shows a life which is always situated on the threshold—a state of suspension as the following excerpt illustrates: Now he has set up his business, frying yams and chickens and eggs, all morning, all night. Come rain or shine. He never leaves. Not even to go to the market (p.99).

The passage shows Libya as existing in a state between time and place, working hard and ignoring the usual boundaries of everyday life. By saying "all morning, all night" the difference between day and night is removed, and "come rain or shine" suggests a lifestyle that goes beyond regular patterns. Although Libya is always there, he is never to be found in the normal sequences of leaving, resting, or taking part in the wider world. His being reflects the novel's main idea of occupying the in-between space: he is present in the community but never completely a part of it.

Another character that is closely connected to Libya is the memory of Sakaci, the "limping madman", which adds another aspect of liminality. He lives in a tree (thus lying between nature and shelter), is mad (thus lying between sanity and insanity) and is homeless (thus lying between belonging and exclusion). The children regard him with "curiosity, scorn and pity" (p.41). This is a liminal kind of gaze which is neither entirely cruel nor entirely kind. Lalo too took part in this liminal form of violence by throwing things at Sakaci "in order to provoke him into raging so that they could laugh at him" (p.41). However, as Lalo got older, the scorn disappeared and was replaced by empathy. He left pocket money in the 'nooks of the exposed roots' (p. 41), making a kind of offering at a threshold. The roots lie between the earth and the air, so they represent a liminal area. Then Sakaci disappears. He is 'not there the day after and for many days afterwards'. His disappearance is a liminal one, a moment at a threshold between being present and being absent. Lalo fears that Aziza will see him the way the children had seen Sakaci, as a madman or a delusional person. He is caught between the wish to be believed and the fear of being ignored. His story occupies the liminal space between truth and madness, between revelation and delusion.

Setting as a Liminal Space

The setting of the novel also shows a further example of liminality. Although the novel is set in Abuja, it involves six cities in northern Nigeria—that is, Abuja, Kaduna, Kafanchan, Kano, Jos and Maiduguri. Each of them has a particular historical significance. For instance, Jos has been at the heart of numerous ethno-religious conflicts since 2001, leading to the deaths of thousands of people and the forced relocation of whole communities. The novel's connection with reality transforms its fantastical elements into a disturbing allegory about Nigeria's failure to safeguard its most vulnerable individuals; in this case, each city acts as a threshold, a place where the distinction between the physical and the spiritual, as well as that between the historical and the present, is constantly blurred

and redefined.

The train scene that stirs up Lalo's memories first shows up at Idu Station in Abuja. Even though Abuja is the capital city of Nigeria, its train station is an important location at which the ordinary comes into contact with the mystical. As a capital city built with a particular aim in mind, Abuja embodies order and modernity, but its infrastructure also has concealed doors that lead to the supernatural. Ibrahim reinterprets roundabouts and intersections, which are symbols of urban order as prisms enabling interaction between the living and the dead. For example, the Berger Roundabout is transformed into a meeting place for 'fireflies' collectors, whose duty is to set free the souls of the dead, and as a result the city's landscape of glass and concrete becomes a setting for the uncanny (p.176). At the Berger Roundabout, Lalo is called by a child who gathers 'fireflies'. The roundabout's normal function as a place where paths converge and diverge supports its symbolism as a point of contact between the two worlds. In accordance with the logic of the novel, such places of transit and movement function as portals to other realities, blending the everyday with the otherworldly.

The violent history of Nigeria is deeply rooted in the cities of Kafanchan and Jos, which have experienced ethnoreligious conflict and now act as stores of collective trauma. In Kafanchan, one of the most disturbing events from Lalo's past occurs, an incident drawn from the real religious riots of 1987 which led to many deaths and the destruction of places of worship. The novel includes this event in its story by placing a transformative murder from Lalo's earlier life in Kafanchan, thereby combining both historical and personal trauma. The narrator's murder is incorporated into the official account of the violence, his body being 'added to the numbers' of those killed, 'dozens who were murdered by faith militants' (p.149). This demonstrates how individual suffering is generally forgotten in the light of a greater communal tragedy.

Jos, the place where the author was born, is also a site of great tragedy, since one of Lalo's former selves, Babayo, dies in a violent manner on a train when he is running away with his lover during the Nigerian Civil War. It is referred to as the "chilly city" and acts as a contrast to the heat of Abuja, showing how private tragedies have been woven into the nation's difficult history and thus making Jos a meeting point of the author's origins and fictional violence.

The novel's geographical scope is extended by Kaduna and Maiduguri, linking Lalo's personal memories with the ongoing crises that affect Northern Nigeria. Since Kaduna has been repeatedly affected by ethnoreligious violence, including the spread of the 1987 Kafanchan riots and the subsequent unrest in the 1990s and 2000s, it has become a palimpsest of conflict. Each new wave of disorder writes over the previous wounds and thus reflects Lalo's own process of coming to an understanding of what has happened on the physical terrain of lasting injuries. As for Maiduguri, it is the centre of the Boko Haram insurgency and represents the novel's most direct confrontation with current Nigerian

trauma. In Maiduguri, the combination of magical realism with the harsh realities of everyday life is most evident; it is a threshold at which the immediacy of today's violence becomes inseparable from the novel's metaphysical issues.

In Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *When We Were Fireflies*, the geographical setting of Northern Nigeria is of great importance for the way the story is structured. The journey from the modernity of Abuja via the historical wrongs of Kafanchan and Jos to the present-day problems in Kaduna and Maiduguri mirrors Lalo's own journey through memory and reincarnation. The various cities act as portals which allow the living to communicate with the dead and cause the present to be influenced by the past. Since Ibrahim incorporates his magical realism and views on reincarnation into this specific landscape, characterised by suffering, he creates a strong metaphor. Northern Nigeria therefore becomes a traumatised entity, going through and re-experiencing cycles of violence, loss and the continuing presence of its dead.

The studio that Yarima Lalo has is an example of spatial liminality, acting as a kind of intermediary between imagination and material reality, as well as between the private and the public. It is stated that Aziza is "outside his studio, looking in through the glass" (p. 38), which means that she is at a physical threshold. The silver bells on the door show this boundary, and the fact that Aziza enters without being invited proves the difficulty in distinguishing between that of a visitor and that of someone who is on a close basis with the owner. The liminal character of the objects in the studio is also shown by some of the details given in the text: the painted scenes which are covered are described as neither entirely visible nor entirely hidden, and their uncertain status as commodities is emphasised. Lalo is troubled by these objects since their suspended state reflects the conflict between disclosure and concealment. Furthermore, the way in which the easel is moved and the decision to use a blank canvas (p. 38) are further evidence of the story's focus on spatial and creative thresholds.

The painting of the horse, named Dan Filling, represents another liminal object, with textual evidence indicating it suggests a mythic entity for which 'no known photograph' exists (p.207). The fact that Lalo depends on Babayo's memory adds a layer of subjectivity to the question of representation. Moreover, Indo's recognition – 'I know this horse' – acts as clear proof that art is able to connect the past with the present and myth with reality. This instance highlights the way in which the narrative presents art as a liminal medium for the transmission of memory.

Symbolism of the Train

The train is a classic example of a liminal space, serving as a means of transition and existing in a state that is neither here nor there as it moves from one place to another. It is the place where Lalo was killed in his first past life and it was there that he had intended

to elope with Nana to Lagos. The train represents a boundary between the known and the unknown, a divide between the life he was leaving and the one he had hoped to create. Lagos itself is a liminal destination too: "the place we could have been free to live and love". It is a promised land which is never attained and a threshold which is never crossed. The train platform also functions as a threshold, separating the area of departure from that of arrival and distinguishing the enclosed space of the train from the wider social environment; it is at this point that Lalo's disappearance into darkness after his death takes place. Moreover, the image of the child with the cart, which is illuminated in the painting, also illustrates the state of liminality by occupying an ambiguous position between representation and reality.

The fact that the train acts as a liminal space is also shown in the story of Indo and Babayo, for their attempt to elope involves a shift from one state of existence to another. Although the train also becomes the place where Babayo is murdered, this highlights the inherent insecurity present in such transitional areas. The incident at Kafanchan station, which is itself a kind of threshold, is interrupted by Alhaji Basiru boarding the train as it is leaving. The fact that the aisles are crowded, with both suitcases and passengers present, shows the breakdown of normal boundaries and the emergence of disorder and violence in this transitional area.

In *When We Were Fireflies* the train stands as a symbol of liminality and embodies both the long-term effects of colonial infrastructure and the uncertainties confronting the postcolonial Nigerian state. It is a setting that appears repeatedly in the novel and in it the distinctions between movement and stillness, progress and violence, and transition and trauma all become unclear. The way in which violence is depicted in the book is connected with present-day situations. For example, with the recent attacks and kidnappings which have taken place on Nigeria's railways, the novel highlights the continued vulnerability linked to the narratives of national development. The temporary disruption of the usual social order in the train environment allows different, often violent, forms of interaction to emerge. The train thus functions as a sort of threshold on which the characters are left suspended between opposing temporal and existential states; the past and future, security and danger, life and death.

Conclusion

The study examines the way in which liminality affects narrative, identity and memory in Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's novel *When We Were Fireflies*. It shows that Ibrahim's approach to characterisation by making the characters liminal beings, and their continual state of being in between, mirrors the general situation of the Nigerian postcolonial society. It also contributes to the present understanding of liminality in this context. The results indicate that Ibrahim reinterprets liminality as a lasting existential

condition which forms the basis of identity at both the individual and societal levels. By using an integrated theoretical framework that draws on both anthropology and postcolonial studies, the work is given a scientific basis and provides new insights into the ways in which meaning is formed. The analysis proves that the characters in *When We Were Fireflies* are presented as essentially liminal—neither completely rooted in one life nor entirely freed from another, and instead hanging between contemporary Nigeria and the continuing influence of the past. The novel's liminal imagination, as this study traces it, is evident in a number of narrative and thematic areas. This research broadens the field by showing the importance of liminality for the organisation of a narrative and calls for further investigation into its use in literary criticism and other related areas.

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