

A Cognitive Stylistic Analysis of Kofi Awoonor's *The Weaver Bird*

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ABSTRACT

Colonial trauma has left a lasting imprint on postcolonial literature, shaping narratives of displacement, resistance, and cultural transformation. This study examines Kofi Awoonor's *The Weaver Bird* using a cognitive stylistic approach to uncover the mental processes influencing readers' perceptions of colonialism. African poetry remains underexplored in cognitive stylistics, making this study significant in broadening the scope of literary analysis. By integrating Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Conceptual Blending Theory, this research explores how Awoonor's language constructs an embodied experience of loss and perseverance. Employing a qualitative method, the study conducts a close textual analysis to identify cognitive mechanisms shaping meaning in the poem. Findings reveal that metaphorical structures trigger cognitive processes that reinforce postcolonial awareness and collective identity. This study contributes to both literary and psychological research by demonstrating how poetry functions as a cognitive tool in processing historical realities. Its implications suggest that literature is not merely a reflection of history but an active force in shaping thought, memory, and resistance.

Keywords: Colonialism; Conceptual Metaphor; Mental Spaces; Poetry; Postcolonial Identity.

INTRODUCTION

The suppression of indigenous cultures is a common theme in African literature. Through their works, African writers reveal the deep-seated injustices and cultural disruptions caused by colonial rule Tandon, (2018). Their fiction challenges Eurocentric distortions that depict Africa as primitive and uncivilized, by offering a more authentic representation of its cultures and histories Pandurang, (1997). Even after independence, this struggle remains a central theme in literary works and continues to be widely examined in academic research H. Khan et al., (2020); Montle, (2024); Nyongesa, (2017). One example is Kofi Awoonor's poem *The Weaver Bird*, which captures the colonial experience and its lasting effects. First published in 1964 in *Rediscovery* and

Other Poems, it was later included in *The Promise of Hope: New and Selected Poems, 1964-2013*.

Kofi Awoonor was a Ghanaian poet and academic whose works stand out for his deep engagement with the colonial and postcolonial experiences of Africa. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Awoonor uniquely blends traditional Ewe dirge poetry with modern literary techniques to mourn the loss of cultural identity and critique the lingering effects of colonialism Agbozo, (2019). His poems, particularly *The Weaver Bird* and *The Cathedral*, illustrate how literature becomes a powerful tool to resist Western influence while also promoting the preservation of African traditions Glover-Meni & Akakpo, (2020). A study has revealed that some African poets, including Kofi Awoonor, incorporate environmental metaphors to express their thematic concerns Traoré, (2019). In this context, metaphor functions as more than a stylistic device. It serves as a cognitive tool that structures meaning, making abstract themes like colonialism more vivid and impactful Yang, (2015).

While most existing analyses approach *The Weaver Bird* thematically, this study fills the gap by examining its linguistic and conceptual structures. Specifically, researchers will explore how Awoonor's use of metaphor shapes cognitive perceptions of colonialism. This intersection of style and cognition forms the basis of cognitive stylistics, a field that integrates science, psychology, linguistics, and literary studies. It deals not only with the internal linguistic features of a given discourse, but also considers the contextual elements that shape interpretation Bretones Callejas et al., (2021). As Abed & Ahmed (2024) suggest, literary texts contain linguistic and conceptual cues that activate readers' prior knowledge, allowing them to mentally construct the world of the text. However, due to differences in individual experiences, emotions, and cultural backgrounds, their interpretations can vary significantly M. A. Khan & Shahid, (2022); Li et al., (2024); Lyytikainen, (2022).

Cognitive stylistics has become widely recognized as an influential framework for analyzing grammar and metaphor. It extends its reach beyond poetry to include song lyrics, short stories, and novels El-Sayed, (2023); Qadus, (2023); Simanjuntak et al., (2023). A key theory within this field is the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980). This theory asserts our way of thinking is fundamentally shaped by metaphor, meaning that we comprehend and organize abstract or complex ideas through more tangible or embodied experience Lakoff & Johnson, (1980). Writers like William Blake frequently use metaphors to express their ideas in a manner that makes their subjects more relevant and relatable to the audience Sinthya et al., (2022). Even in educational settings, textbooks use metaphors to help students grasp abstract concepts by linking them to more concrete ones Viyani et al., (2023).

However, the abstract-concrete mappings described in CMT often overlook the dynamic, creative process involved in meaning-making. To address this limitation, Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner developed Conceptual Blending Theory or Integration Theory (CIT), which introduces additional mental spaces, such as generic space and blended space, to better capture these processes Fauconnier, (1998); Fauconnier & Turner,

(2002). Barczewska (2017) highlights a similar concern, noting that Blending Theory alone cannot fully account for the diverse meanings emerging from blends. Therefore, it is suggested that combining CMT and CIT in the cognitive analysis of figurative language may offer a more comprehensive framework Kovalyuk, (2019).

Furthermore, several recent studies that have solely applied either CMT or CIT reveal certain gaps. For instance, an analysis of *Dear Evan Hansen: The Novel* effectively identified metaphors types using CMT but did not account for their dynamic interplay within the narrative Anone et al., (2023). Similarly, a study analyzing Donald Trump's recognition of Jerusalem in Al Jazeera's news articles also applied CMT to identify dominant conceptual metaphors shaping media representation Sari et al., (2021). While these studies differ in their focus, both share the limitation of treating metaphors as static categories. Neither explores how these metaphors interact, shift, or blend to construct nuanced meanings over time.

In contrast, a study on the metaphorization of the concept BOOK applied CIT to explore how metaphors emerge through blending Berezhnykh et al., (2018). The findings revealed key mappings such as 'A BOOK IS A WORLD', 'A BOOK IS FOOD', and 'A BOOK IS A PERSON'. Likewise, an analysis of the 2016 pre-election campaign used CIT to examine Trump and Clinton's metaphorical strategies Minikeeva et al., (2019). The study found that Trump often employed 'we vs. they' metaphors to reinforce in-group and out-group distinctions, while Clinton used 'divided nation' metaphors to emphasize societal fractures. While both studies focused on blending, the absence of CMT limited deeper insights into the cognitive and cultural structures shaping the discourse. Additionally, neither applied Fauconnier and Turner's four-space conceptual blending network (2002), which makes it harder to fully grasp the underlying metaphorical process based on explanation alone.

These gaps highlight the need for a more integrated approach when analyzing metaphorical meaning in literary texts. Given this, *The Weaver Bird* serves as an ideal subject for cognitive stylistic analysis, particularly with its use of the weaver bird as a powerful symbol of colonial domination. Unlike previous studies that focus on its thematic concerns, this research examines how Awoonor's metaphorical structures shape cognitive perceptions of colonialism. By integrating CMT and CIT, this study addresses the gap in existing analyses, which have yet to explore the interaction between fixed conceptual metaphors and dynamic blending in the poem. This approach offers a more precise understanding of how metaphor constructs meaning, providing new insights into the cognitive mechanisms that reinforce postcolonial resistance in African poetry.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research method, combining a hermeneutic approach and cognitive discourse analysis to examine the metaphorical structures in *The Weaver Bird* by Kofi Awoonor. The hermeneutic approach is used to interpret the poem's meaning by situating it within its historical and cultural context, particularly in relation to colonialism and postcolonial resistance. Meanwhile, cognitive discourse analysis

focuses on how metaphors function within the poem's discourse, shaping readers' cognitive perceptions of colonial experience.

The poem, consisting of 16 lines, was sourced from the Poetry Foundation website (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57146/the-weaver-bird>). The analysis is conducted using Conceptual Metaphor Theory Lakoff & Johnson, (1980) and Blending Theory Fauconnier, (1998); Fauconnier & Turner, (2002) to uncover how metaphor and conceptual blending construct meaning. To ensure a structured analysis, the poem is examined in two-line segments, with source and target domains identified and presented in a table for clarity. Furthermore, Blending Theory is applied through Fauconnier & Turner's Four-Space Conceptual Blending Network (2002), allowing for a deeper exploration of how multiple conceptual inputs merge to create complex meanings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of *The Weaver Bird* begins by identifying its underlying conceptual metaphor, followed by an exploration of how these metaphors are structured through mental space blending.

*The weaver bird built in our house
And laid its eggs on our only tree.*

The first two lines portray weaver birds arriving and settling in a communal space. Rather than simply passing through, they build a nest and make it their home. By choosing the only tree as their nesting site, they subtly claim an essential part of the environment. In Ghanaian tradition, tree symbolizes growth, prosperity, and a spiritual connection to ancestors. They even consider some specific trees as sacred Ofei, (2023).

Considering the theme of colonialism, the presence of weaver birds reflects the arrival of colonizers in Africa. Just as the birds claim space and establish dominance, colonizers did not simply pass through but settled, seized control, and reshaped indigenous societies. They imposed foreign systems that gradually eroded not just physical space but also cultural and spiritual traditions. The eggs metaphorically represents the spread of Christianity, European governance, and colonial economic structures brought by colonial rule. As a result, there's not much room left for indigenous customs to survive. This conceptualization aligns with the COLONIZATION IS INVASION metaphor.

*We did not want to sent it away.
We watched the building of the nest*

Lines 3-4 describe the local's passive response to the arrival of the weaver birds. While they did not wish to drive them away, they also made no effort to stop them. This mirrors how many African communities reacted to colonization, not always with open resistance but often with silent observation. Some may have been curious, others unaware about the possible threat, while many simply lacked the power to act. Over time, this hesitation allowed foreign influence to take root, aligning with the metaphor SUBMISSION IS ACCEPTANCE.

And supervised the egg-laying.

And the weaver returned in the guise of the owner.

The next two lines illustrate the gradual shift in power dynamics. As time went on, the weaver birds return, no longer as outsiders but as if they rightfully own the space. The locals, who initially observed and tolerate their presence, may have believed they were still in control. However, by allowing the birds to settle and reproduce in the first place, they unconsciously enabled their dominance. This reflects how some indigenous leaders, whether out of diplomacy, necessity, or perceived benefit, cooperated with colonial powers, only to later realize they had ceded authority. The takeover is not immediate or forceful but happens subtly, disguised as something harmless or even beneficial. This conceptualization reveals the metaphors COLONIZATION AS GRADUAL USURPATION and COOPERATION IS SURRENDER, where control is lost not through outright conquest but through a slow erosion of power and autonomy.

Preaching salvation to us that owned the house.

They say it came from the west

These lines depict outsiders introducing a new belief system to the original inhabitants, presenting it as a path to enlightenment. The message is framed as guidance, yet it originates from a distant place rather than the community itself. This reflects how missionaries and colonial authorities imposed their religious and ideological values, particularly Christianity, under the guise of moral or spiritual upliftment. The irony is striking: those who originally owned the house are now being taught how to live in it by the intruder. This conceptualization reveals the metaphor of RELIGION AS A TOOL OF CONTROL, where faith is not merely a spiritual offering but a means of reshaping and governing a people's way of life.

Where the storm at sea had felled the gulls

And the fishers dried their nets by lantern light.

Lines 9-10 describe a storm raging over the sea, bringing down the seagulls that typically soar above the waves. Once the storm passes, fishermen dry their nets in preparation for the next day. Normally, they rely on sunlight to prevent mold and damage, but now they work under the dim glow of lanterns, suggesting they must continue late into the night. Though this method is slower and less effective, they have no choice but to endure it for the sake of survival.

Building on the previous lines, this explains why the colonizers came in the first place. The 9th line symbolizes the turmoil and instability in Europe that drove colonizers to Africa. Just as storms force birds from their habitat; wars, economic crises, and political struggles in Europe displaced people, pushing them to seek new territories for resources and power.

After the storms displaced the gulls, the fishers drying their nets suggests a pause after hardship, where the colonizers regroup and ready themselves to "fish" in new waters, which is Africa. The lantern light could symbolize their perceived enlightenment, mission, or guidance, often used to justify their presence in Africa through religion or civilization efforts. Therefore researchers can conclude that the conceptual metaphors lying behind these lines reflect the cause-effect relationship between European struggles

and colonial expansion, that is COLONIZATION AS A CYCLE OF DESTRUCTION AND PREDATORY EXPLOITATION.

*Its sermon is the divination of ourselves
And our new horizon limits at its nest.*

Lines 11-12 introduce the idea of a sermon, a religious speech offering moral or spiritual guidance. This metaphor highlights how the colonizers have shaped African identities, redefining them according to their own values and beliefs. At this point, the locals' identities are no longer self-determined but are defined by what the colonizers tell them they are. The horizon, which usually represents limitlessness, is now restricted by the nest. This metaphor symbolizes how the colonial system force them to live within boundaries and disabling their ability to define their own future. This conceptual metaphor reflects COLONIZATION AS A DISABLING FORCE.

*But we cannot join the prayers and answers of the communicants.
We look for new homes every day,*

Line 13 conveys a sense of exclusion, where the individuals cannot fully participate in the beliefs or practices of other. This reflects a disconnect between their own values and the ones being imposed on them. Much like how African societies remained outsiders, either being resisted or denied full participation despite the colonizers' claims of salvation. As a result, they constantly search for a place to belong in line 14. They have lost their home, their peace, and their identity. This conceptualization reveals the metaphor of IDENTITY LOSS AND SEARCH FOR BELONGING, where the sense of self is fragmented by the external ideologies forced on them.

*For new altars we strive to rebuild
The old shrines defiled by the weaver's excrement.*

The last two lines describe the effort to rebuild something sacred that has been desecrated. The word "altar" is often used in spiritual context, representing a place of offering or reverence. For the African, their altar is their identity, spirituality, and societal structure. Just as excrement is seen as impure or contaminating, the colonizer's influence is portrayed as an unwanted and damaging intrusion on their way of life. Hence, the metaphor lying behind these lines would be CULTURAL DESECRATION AND RECONSTRUCTION.

Based on the analysis, THE WEAVER BIRDS symbolize COLONIZERS and HOUSE represent AFRICAN LAND AND SOCIETY, illustrating how Western values that were introduced into indigenous societies gradually eroding their cultural identity. Colonization is depicted as an act of desecration, corrupting indigenous spirituality, identity, and social structures. Following Lakoff and Turner's framework (1989), specific metaphors are rooted in deeper, more fundamental conceptual structures. In this case, these metaphorical mappings reflect broader frameworks that define the colonial experience: COLONIZATION AS INVASION, IMPOSITION OF IDEOLOGY AS INFILTRATION, and LOSS OF IDENTITY AS DESTRUCTION.

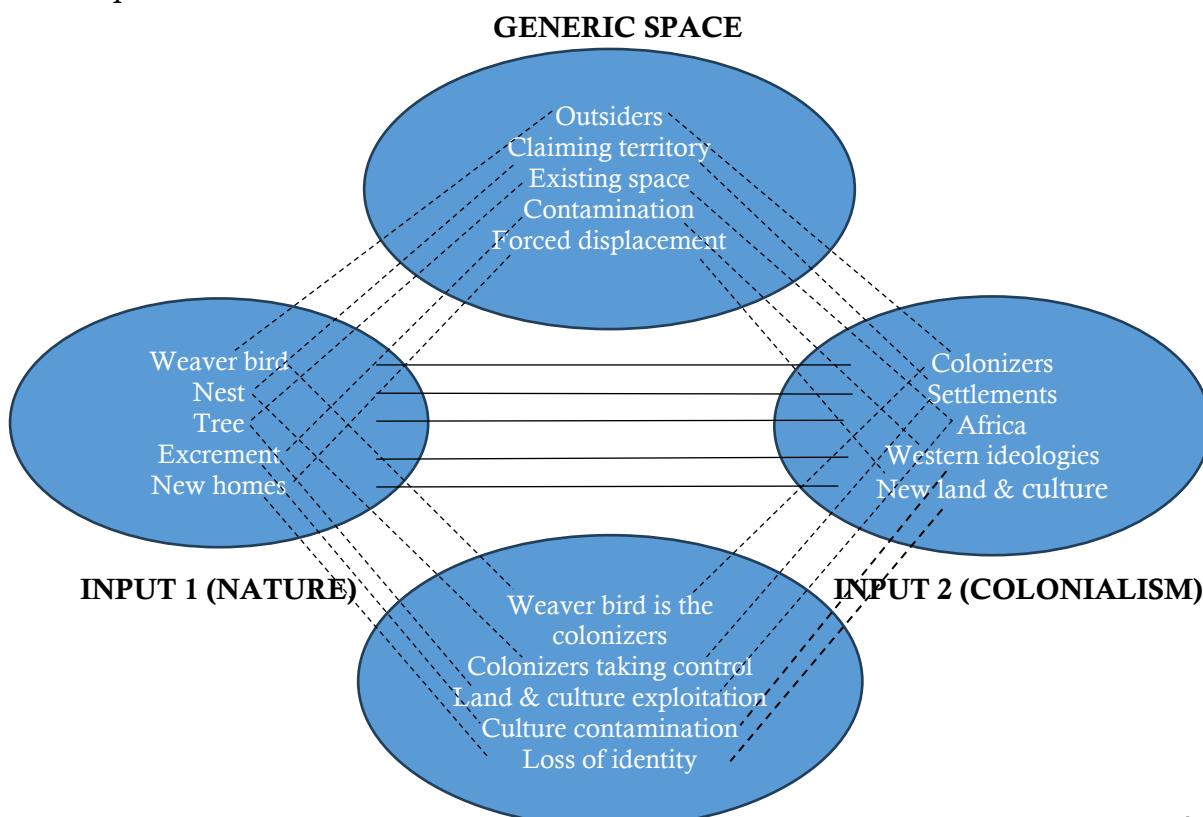
Table 1. Source and Target Domain Mappings in *The Weaver Bird*

Source domain	Target domain
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Weaver birds	Colonizers/Western intruders
House	African society and culture
Tree	Sacred african traditions
Nest-building & egg-laying	Colonization and cultural imposition
Weaver returned in the guise of the owner	Colonizers claiming authority over African lands
Preaching salvation	Imposition of Western religion and values
Storms at sea	Colonial struggles in Europe leading to expansion
Gulls felled by storms	Forced migration caused by conflicts in Europe
Weaver's excrement	Western Ideologies contaminating African way of life
Defiled shrines	Loss of indigenous spirituality and cultural identity
Searching for new homes and altars	African striving to reclaim their identity

While conceptual metaphors reveal connections between different domains, they do not fully explain how multiple ideas combine to create deeper meaning. Blending Theory provides a more detailed approach by showing how distinct mental spaces interact to form new interpretations (Fauconnier, 1998; Fauconnier & Turner, 2002). In *The Weaver Bird*, this framework helps us better understand the metaphor of colonialism as an invasive force.

The poem draws from two mental spaces that contribute to this blended meaning. The **first input space**, based on nature, portrays the weaver bird as an outsider that builds its nest and forces the original inhabitants to relocate. The **second input space**, rooted in colonial history, reflects how foreign settlers arrived in Africa and disrupted indigenous cultures. These two spaces are then linked through a **generic space** that shares the same structure. As these ideas merge, the **blended space** frames the arrival of the weaver bird as a metaphor for colonialism. Through this blending process, the poem presents colonialism not just as an event in history but as an ongoing force with lasting consequences.



BLENDED SPACE

Figure 1. Four-Space Conceptual Blending Network (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002)

Colonialism has been a central theme in African poetry, often depicted through metaphors that reveal its lasting impact on indigenous culture. Kofi Awoonor's *The Weaver Bird* is a compelling example, using natural imagery to critique the colonial experience. The poem constructs its critique through a four-space conceptual blending network, where nature and colonialism intersect within a generic space, forming a blending space that reinterprets colonialism through the metaphor of the weaver bird. At its core, the poem relies on the conceptual metaphor COLONIALISM IS AN INVASIVE SPECIES, portraying colonial rule as a force that disrupts, contaminates, and permanently alters the cultural landscape.

For centuries, birds have been powerful symbols in art, literature, and culture, carrying different meanings across various traditions. In Persian mysticism poetry, for example, they represent the soul's journey toward enlightenment, reflecting a deep spiritual connection (Johan, 2019). In English Romantic poetry, birds take on a different role, symbolizing youth, innocence, purity, and artistic inspiration Abdallah et al., (2024). Unlike these positive associations, Kofi Awoonor's poem uses the bird as a symbol of destruction and colonial rule. Written after Ghana's independence from Britain in 1957, the poem shifts the focus from nature's beauty to the lasting scars of colonial oppression. Through this contrast, Awoonor celebrates freedom while condemning the colonial past that shaped his country and continent.

Therefore, the findings suggest that metaphors are dynamic. They evolve with cultural perspectives, communal experiences, and historical contexts. A single image, like a bird, can hold vastly different meanings depending on the realities that shape a society's collective consciousness. This flexibility shows how metaphor is more than just an artistic device. It is a reflection of lived experiences, shaping and reshaping meaning across different communities and time periods.

At the end of discussion, despite its insightful analysis, researchers acknowledge a key limitation of this study. Since interpretations can vary depending on an individual's cultural background and knowledge, subjectivity is inescapable. To address this, future research could incorporate multiple perspectives to enhance reliability. A comparative analysis involving readers from different cultural backgrounds or a mixed-method approach, such as surveys or focus group discussions, could provide a broader and more balanced interpretation. Additionally, integrating insights from interdisciplinary fields like psychology or semiotics may help reduce bias and offer a more comprehensive understanding.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights how cognitive stylistics reveals the mental processes shaping the reader's perception of colonial trauma in Kofi Awoonor's *The Weaver Bird*. Through

conceptual metaphors and mental simulations, the poem constructs an embodied experience of alienation and resistance. This contribution enriches both literary studies and psychology by emphasizing the cognitive processes behind meaning-making in poetry. The findings suggest that poetry can function as a cognitive tool that reinforces or challenges socio-historical narratives, underscoring its broader implications in shaping collective memory and postcolonial consciousness.

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