

# Language and the Literary Construction of Religious Conflict and Survival in E. E. Sule's *Sterile Sky*

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## ***Abstract***

This study investigates the ways language is employed in the construction of religious conflict and survival in E. E. Sule's *Sterile Sky*. The research explores how lexical choices, figurative expressions, descriptive patterns, and narrative discourse contribute to the portrayal of violence, fear, hunger, trauma, and resilience within the settings of the text. Data are collected through close reading of the novel. Passages containing lexical items, expressions, and stylistic devices that depict religious conflict, killings, fear, hunger, depression, and survival are purposively selected. The selected extracts constitute the data for analysis. The novel presents a vivid depiction of communal and religious crises in Northern Nigeria, exposing the devastating consequences of intolerance, poverty, and social instability on individuals and communities. Adopting a qualitative textual analysis approach, the study examines selected extracts from the novel through the lens of literary linguistics and discourse analysis. Findings reveal that the author's strategic use of language re-creates powerful images of suffering and survival, enabling readers to appreciate the psychological and physical realities of conflict. Lexical items associated with death, destruction, insecurity, deprivation, and emotional distress contribute significantly to the thematic development of the narrative. The study concludes that language serves not merely as a medium of storytelling but also as a critical tool for constructing the themes of religious conflict and human survival in the novel.

**Keywords:** language, religious conflict, survival, discourse, literary linguistics, *Sterile Sky*

## **Introduction**

The relationship between language and literature has continued to attract scholarly attention because literary meaning is inseparable from linguistic expression. Literature depends upon language to communicate experiences, construct identities, and represent social realities. Consequently, themes in literary texts do not merely exist as abstract ideas; they emerge through patterns of language deliberately

organized by authors. In African literature, language often extends beyond artistic expression to become a medium through which political instability, cultural identity, social conflict, and resistance are negotiated. Writers frequently transform lived realities into literary experiences through vocabulary selection, narrative voice, imagery, and discourse patterns. Such linguistic choices influence readers' understanding of social issues represented in texts.

Contemporary Nigerian literature increasingly engages with insecurity and religious violence, reflecting tensions affecting communities across the country. Literary responses to these experiences commonly examine displacement, trauma, fractured identities, and resilience. Among such works is *Sterile Sky* by E. E. Sule, a novel portraying how instability shapes ordinary lives.

The novel presents experiences of fear, disrupted aspirations, poverty, and endurance within environments affected by communal violence. However, the significance of *Sterile Sky* lies not only in thematic content but also in how language constructs these experiences. Descriptive passages, emotionally charged vocabulary, symbolic representations, and dialogue patterns collectively shape meanings associated with conflict and survival.

Previous discussions of conflict narratives often privilege thematic interpretation while giving less attention to linguistic mechanisms underlying those themes. Yet language functions actively in producing emotional intensity, representing social relations, and organizing ideological perspectives. Examining thematic construction therefore requires attention to how linguistic resources operate within texts. This article argues that themes of religious conflict and survival in *Sterile Sky* are substantially produced through language choices. By adopting Systemic Functional Linguistics as an analytical framework, the study explores how language constructs experiences of violence, fear, resilience, and endurance.

Language occupies a central position in literary creation because it functions as the medium through which writers' express ideas, emotions, experiences, and social realities. Literary texts rely on language to construct themes, develop characters, and communicate ideological positions. Consequently, the study of language in literature provides valuable insights into how meaning is produced and interpreted within a text.

Religious conflict remains one of the most persistent social challenges confronting many multicultural societies. In Nigeria, tensions arising from religious differences have frequently resulted in violence, displacement, insecurity, and loss of lives. Nigerian writers have responded to these realities by producing literary works that reflect the experiences of individuals and communities affected by such crises. Among these writers is E. E. Sule, whose novel *Sterile Sky* presents a compelling narrative of religious violence and the struggle for survival in a conflict-ridden environment. The novel portrays the devastating effects of religious extremism, communal hostility, poverty, fear, and psychological trauma. Through carefully selected linguistic forms and narrative strategies, the author depicts the experiences of characters who confront violence, hunger, insecurity, and emotional suffering.

Language therefore becomes an important instrument through which these realities are represented and interpreted.

Previous studies on *Sterile Sky* have focused largely on themes such as violence, identity, social inequality, and economic hardship. However, limited attention has been given to the specific linguistic resources through which these themes are constructed. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining how language contributes to the representation of religious conflict and survival in the novel. The study is significant because it contributes to the growing body of research on language and literature by demonstrating how linguistic choices shape readers' understanding of conflict and survival in contemporary Nigerian fiction. According to Halliday (1978), language functions as a social semiotic system through which individuals create meaning in context. This perspective later developed into Systemic Functional Linguistics, which proposes three metafunction, Ideational function, Interpersonal function, Textual function. These functions explain how language represents experiences, social relations, and coherence respectively (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

Stylistic scholars argue that thematic meaning emerges through linguistic patterns including diction, syntax, and imagery (Leech & Short, 2007). Similarly, discourse theorists maintain that language reflects social power and ideology (Fairclough, 1995).

Within African literature, language frequently becomes a medium for expressing identity and resistance. Achebe (1975) contends that African writers reshape English to accommodate indigenous realities. This adaptation contributes to authenticity and thematic complexity. Studies on Nigerian conflict literature often emphasize violence and instability, Adichie (2006), Saro-Wiwa (1985), Obioma, (2024), Ike (1976), Okpewho, (1976) but rarely investigate linguistic mechanisms underlying thematic development. This creates a need for research connecting language, religious conflict, and survival in literary texts such as *Sterile Sky*. Linguistic structures that emphasize perseverance, hope, and determination. Despite the growing number of studies on conflict narratives, few investigations have specifically explored the linguistic construction of religious conflict and survival in *Sterile Sky*. The present study addresses this gap by examining how language functions as a thematic resource within the novel.

## Literature Review

### Language and Literary Representation

Language constitutes the foundation of literary expression. Literary writers manipulate linguistic resources to create meaning, portray experiences, and communicate social realities. According to Halliday (1978), language functions as a social semiotic system through which individuals construct and interpret their experiences of the world. In literary discourse, language performs aesthetic and communicative functions simultaneously, enabling authors to represent social issues and human experiences in creative ways. Literary texts are not merely collections of words; rather, they are carefully structured linguistic artefacts designed to evoke specific responses from readers. Through lexical choices, figurative language,

symbolism, imagery, and narrative techniques, writers construct themes and shape readers' perceptions of events and characters. Consequently, the study of language in literature provides an avenue for understanding how literary meanings are produced and communicated.

### **Language and the Construction of Conflict**

Conflict is a recurring theme in literature and is often represented through specific linguistic patterns. Language contributes significantly to the portrayal of violence, hostility, tension, and social division. Lexical items associated with war, death, destruction, fear, and suffering often serve as indicators of conflict within literary texts. Many scholars have observed that literary representations of conflict rely heavily on descriptive vocabulary and emotionally charged expressions to communicate the devastating consequences of violence. Such linguistic choices help readers visualize traumatic experiences and understand the psychological and social impacts of conflict. Through discourse, authors can expose the causes of violence, criticize social injustice, and advocate peaceful coexistence.

### **Religious Conflict in Nigerian Literature**

Religious conflict has attracted considerable attention in Nigerian literary studies because of its relevance to the country's socio-political realities. Several Nigerian writers have explored the consequences of religious intolerance, extremism, and communal violence, Abani (2007), Akpan (2008), Ibrahim (2015). Literary works dealing with religious conflict often depict displacement, loss of lives, destruction of property, and psychological trauma Oguine (1998). Studies have shown that language plays an important role in constructing these themes. Through the use of loaded expressions, metaphors, and symbolic representations, writers communicate the experiences of victims and survivors of religious crises. The language of conflict frequently reflects fear, insecurity, hatred, grief, and resistance, thereby enabling readers to appreciate the human dimensions of violence.

### **Survival as a Literary Theme**

Survival is a significant theme in contemporary African literature. It often emerges in narratives that depict war, poverty, displacement, disease, and social instability. Literary representations of survival focus on the capacity of individuals and communities to endure hardship and overcome adversity. Language contributes to the construction of survival through expressions of resilience, hope, determination, and perseverance. Characters who survive traumatic experiences are frequently portrayed through linguistic patterns that emphasize courage, endurance, and adaptation. Such representations highlight the human ability to confront difficult circumstances and maintain a sense of purpose despite overwhelming challenges.

Several studies have examined *Sterile Sky* from different perspectives. Umar(2023) focuses on identity, religion, and conflict. Adebisi-Adelabu(2023) focuses on violence and psychological/ mental consequences. Onanuga (2023) focuses on women, conflict and resilience. Ango (2027) area of concern is religion, society, intolerance and violence. Some scholars like Ugwanyi et al(2025) have investigated

the novel's portrayal of violence, poverty, and social inequality, while others have focused on identity formation and economic hardship. Existing research generally agrees that the novel provides a realistic depiction of the challenges confronting individuals living in conflict-ridden communities.

For instance, studies on the novel indicate that the narrative employs vivid descriptions of killings, destruction, and displacement to expose the destructive consequences of religious violence. Research has also shown that poverty and economic deprivation function as important factors influencing the actions and experiences of the characters. Furthermore, scholars have identified trauma, fear, and insecurity as recurring motifs within the text. Despite these valuable contributions, relatively little attention has been devoted to the linguistic mechanisms through which these themes are constructed. Most previous studies emphasize thematic concerns without adequately examining the lexical and stylistic resources that enable the themes to emerge. The present study focuses on the language through which violence, fear, insecurity, depression and survival are constructed. This study therefore addresses this gap by focusing on language and its contribution to the construction of religious conflict and survival in *Sterile Sky*.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) theory developed by Halliday (1978). SFL views language as a social semiotic resource through which individuals create and exchange meanings within specific contexts. The theory emphasizes the relationship between language and society and explains how linguistic choices contribute to meaning construction.

According to SFL, language performs three metafunctions: the ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions. The ideational function enables language users to represent experiences and events; the interpersonal function facilitates social interaction and the expression of attitudes; while the textual function organizes linguistic elements into coherent messages. The relevance of SFL to this study lies in its ability to explain how linguistic choices contribute to the representation of religious conflict and survival in *Sterile Sky*. Through lexical selection, descriptive expressions, and narrative structures, the novelist constructs experiences of violence, fear, hunger, depression, and resilience. The theory therefore provides an appropriate framework for examining the relationship between language and thematic development in the novel.

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Design**

This study adopts a qualitative research design because the investigation seeks to understand how language functions in constructing thematic meanings rather than measuring variables statistically. Qualitative textual analysis is suitable for literary studies because it permits close examination of linguistic patterns, symbolic expressions, and discourse structures within texts. Through this approach, meaning is interpreted within its social and cultural context, allowing deeper understanding of

how themes emerge through language use (Creswell, 2014). The study specifically employs descriptive textual analysis. The objective is to explore relationships between linguistic choices and themes of religious conflict and survival in *Sterile Sky*. Since literary language often contains implicit meanings, symbolism, and culturally embedded expressions, an interpretive approach provides flexibility for examining multiple layers of meaning.

The principal source of data for this study is *Sterile Sky* by E. E. Sule. The novel was selected because it presents rich linguistic materials appropriate for examining how language contributes to thematic construction from a functional perspective. The text contains representations of religious conflict, emotional reactions to violence, family disruption, educational challenges, and strategies of survival within unstable social conditions. These experiences are conveyed through dialogue, narrative descriptions, and symbolic expressions that reveal deeper social and psychological meanings. In addition, the novel portrays how insecurity and communal unrest influence personal aspirations, relationships, and identity formation. Such linguistic features make *Sterile Sky* suitable for investigating how language functions in constructing themes of religious conflict and resilience in literary discourse. Secondary sources consist of scholarly books and journal articles related to Systemic Functional Linguistics, discourse analysis, stylistics, literary criticism, and African literature.

### **Method of Data Collection**

Data for this study were collected through purposive textual selection from *Sterile Sky* by E. E. Sule. Relevant passages were deliberately chosen based on their ability to illustrate the relationship between language use and the construction of themes of religious conflict and survival. Rather than examining the entire text uniformly, attention was directed toward extracts containing depictions of violence, emotional responses, family instability, educational challenges, and resilience under difficult circumstances. Particular emphasis was placed on dialogue, narrative descriptions, symbolic expressions, and other stylistic features because these elements frequently carry thematic significance. Dialogue was examined for its role in revealing social relations, attitudes, and ideological positions, while descriptive passages were selected for their contribution to representing experiences of fear, insecurity, and endurance. Figurative expressions such as imagery and symbolism were also considered due to their ability to communicate deeper meanings beyond literal interpretation (Leech & Short, 2007). The selected passages were organized according to recurring thematic patterns to facilitate systematic analysis. This procedure ensured that the collected data remained relevant to the study's objective of exploring how language functions in constructing themes within literary discourse (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

### **Method of Data Analysis**

The data for this study were analysed using a qualitative interpretive approach guided by principles of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). The selected passages from *Sterile Sky* were examined to determine how linguistic features contribute to the

construction of themes of religious conflict and survival. Analysis focused on identifying patterns in lexical choices, narrative descriptions, dialogue, symbolism, and discourse organization, as these elements influence thematic interpretation within literary texts. The analytical process was informed by Halliday's metafunctions of language: the ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions. The ideational function was applied to explore how experiences of violence, fear, displacement, and resilience are represented in the novel. The interpersonal function helped explain how relationships, attitudes, emotions, and power structures are expressed through character interactions. The textual function was used to examine coherence, organization, and the arrangement of meanings within the narrative (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

## Discussion

The analysis demonstrates that language in *Sterile Sky* functions beyond narration. Linguistic choices actively shape experiences of conflict, fear, trauma, resilience, and survival Egya,(2012, pp.1-5,25-26) for example”, kill,” maim”, butchered,” violence”, burning” “dead” are all lexical construction of killings and violence. Religious violence acquires emotional and social significance through lexical patterns, dialogue structures, symbolic expressions, and descriptive strategies. Themes in the novel do not emerge independently from plot; instead, they develop through carefully organized language. This observation supports functional linguistic assumptions that meaning results from communicative choices operating within social contexts (Halliday, 1978).

The findings also suggest that literary representations of conflict become more nuanced when examined linguistically. Attention to thematic content alone may overlook mechanisms through which emotional intensity and ideological positioning are produced. The article therefore argues for closer integration between literary criticism and functional linguistic analysis, particularly in studies of African conflict narratives.

## Lexical Construction of Killings and Violence

One of the dominant themes in *Sterile Sky* is religious violence. The novelist employs lexical items associated with death, destruction, and brutality to portray the devastating effects of communal conflict. Expressions such as *kill*, *slaughter*, *blood*, *corpse*, *death*, *burning flesh*, and *violence* create graphic images of suffering and human loss, (Egya,2012, p.1), for example, “They are burning houses!” “They are killing people!”. The descriptions of riot scenes at the beginning of the novel reveal the intensity of religious hostility. The language used in these passages is emotionally charged and highly descriptive. Through such lexical choices, the author constructs an atmosphere of terror and chaos. The repeated references to death and destruction emphasize the human cost of religious extremism.

The use of violent vocabulary also serves an ideological function. It condemns intolerance and exposes the destructive consequences of fanaticism. Readers are encouraged to sympathize with victims while questioning the social conditions that produce such violence.

### **Language of Fear and Insecurity**

Fear is another significant thematic concern in the novel. The author employs words and expressions associated with danger, uncertainty, panic, and anxiety to depict the psychological experiences of individuals living in conflict-ridden communities. Egya, (2012, PP1-5) riot, scenes, violence, fear, panic, insecurity and killings. Descriptions of fleeing residents, deserted streets, burning houses, and threats of attack contribute to an atmosphere of insecurity. Lexical items such as *fear*, *panic*, *terror*, *danger*, *escape*, *hide*, and *threat* reinforce the emotional tension that characterizes the narrative. The language of fear extends beyond physical insecurity to psychological instability. Characters constantly anticipate danger, resulting in a state of emotional distress. These linguistic patterns enable readers to understand the traumatic impact of conflict on everyday life.

### **Linguistic Representation of Hunger and Deprivation**

Apart from violence, the novel portrays the harsh realities of poverty and economic hardship. Hunger is represented through lexical items associated with deprivation, scarcity, unemployment, and suffering. There were expressions that sprang frequently from Baba lips such as “Umhum”, “Ehmhem,” “Nawa for dis SAP” Egya, (2012, p.45). These lexical words depict hunger and deprivation. The experiences of economically disadvantaged characters' reveal how conflict aggravates poverty. Expressions relating to lack of food, financial difficulties, and poor living conditions emphasize the connection between violence and socioeconomic hardship. For hunger and deprivation, the theme tends to be developed across sections dealing protagonist Murtala family circumstances, poverty, unemployment, and economic hardship. This is discussed throughout the novel. The author's lexical choices demonstrate that survival is not limited to escaping physical violence; it also involves overcoming hunger and economic insecurity for example Millicent told that they often ate garri and kulikuli, Egya, (2012p100). Through these linguistic representations, the novel highlights the broader consequences of conflict on human well-being.

### **Language of Depression and Psychological Trauma**

The emotional consequences of violence are reflected in the language of depression, grief, and despair. The novelist employs expressions that convey sadness, hopelessness, loneliness, frustration, and emotional suffering (Egya, 2012, 41-42), for example, “Millicent, do you know that Stella was killed? Jesus Christ she exclaimed and leant toward me. Her expression became sober. Oh, dear Stella star Did they kill people in your place? I asked. They killed many people. Where is your place?” they are symbolic sterile sky imagery associated with despair, uncertainty, and psychological distress. Characters affected by violence frequently experience psychological distress resulting from loss, displacement, and uncertainty. The symbolic image of the “sterile sky” itself suggests emptiness, hopelessness, and emotional barrenness. The metaphor reinforces the mental and emotional struggles faced by individuals living under conditions of persistent conflict. Words and phrases associated with grief and despair contribute to the portrayal of trauma. The linguistic

construction of depression enables readers to appreciate the invisible wounds left by violence and social instability.

### **Language of Survival and Resilience in E.E. Sule's *Sterile's Sterile Sky***

The language of survival and resilience is a significant aspect of E. E. Sule's *Sterile Sky*. The novel presents Kano as a space characterised by religious conflict, poverty, insecurity and violence, but Sule simultaneously uses the experiences and language of his characters to demonstrate their determination to survive. Murtala's experiences are particularly important because his development from childhood to adolescence takes place within an environment of religious extremism and economic hardship. The language of the novel therefore moves between expressions of fear and expressions of hope, thereby creating a contrast between the destructive forces surrounding the characters and their determination to continue living.

The novel opens with a violent religious crisis. The description of Muslim extremists attacking people regarded as *kafiri* immediately establishes survival as a central concern. The opening violence includes the killing and mutilation of civilians and the destruction of the security of ordinary families. Ugwanyi et al. (2025) note that the novel begins with a religious riot and that the opening chapters contain graphic representations of violence (pp. 1–3). This violent opening is significant linguistically because Sule employs words associated with killing, destruction, bodily injury and fire to create a semantic field of violence.

The effect is to make survival appear uncertain. Characters are not simply living in a difficult society; they are living in circumstances where an ordinary day can suddenly become a struggle for life. Thus, the vocabulary of violence establishes the background against which the language of resilience becomes meaningful. One of the most significant expressions in the novel is the metaphor of the “sterile sky” (Egya, 2012, p. 41). The expression becomes particularly meaningful when Murtala's mother, Isagua, looks towards the sky while facing the danger created by the violent crisis (Egya, 2012, p. 42). The adjective “sterile” normally suggests something incapable of producing life. When applied to the sky, it therefore creates a metaphor of silence, helplessness and the apparent absence of divine intervention. Isagua looks towards the sky for an answer, but the sky provides no immediate solution to the violence around her. The metaphor consequently communicates both despair and endurance: although the characters experience a world that appears indifferent to their suffering, they continue to struggle for survival.

The phrase can therefore be interpreted as a symbolic representation of the characters' psychological condition. Their environment is hostile, but their continued existence represents a form of resilience. Murtala's desire for education is another important manifestation of resilience. Although he grows up surrounded by poverty and religious extremism, he is represented as an intelligent and ambitious young person who wants a different future. The publisher's description of the novel similarly identifies Murtala as a gifted student who seeks to escape poverty and religious extremism. The language surrounding education and the future therefore contrasts with the vocabulary of violence. While violence attempts to restrict Murtala's

possibilities, education provides him with a linguistic and psychological vocabulary of aspiration. His desire to learn becomes a form of resistance to the circumstances into which he has been born. In this sense, survival is not represented merely as remaining alive. It also means maintaining the capacity to dream, learn and imagine a different future.

Family relationships constitute another important resource for survival. During periods of crisis, characters attempt to protect one another and maintain familial bonds. The language of family responsibility, concern and protection consequently contrasts with the language of violence surrounding them. Onanuga (2023) particularly observes that women in *Sterile Sky* should not be understood only as passive victims of ethno-religious conflict. The women are also represented as people who support and assist their families during periods of crisis. This representation makes family care a form of resilience and agency. Thus, expressions and actions associated with motherhood, family responsibility and protection contribute to the construction of survival.

Religion in *Sterile Sky* has a complex linguistic function. Religious language can be associated with both conflict and survival. On the one hand, religious extremism contributes to violence; on the other hand, religious reflection provides characters with a way of trying to understand suffering. The novel consequently distinguishes between religion as a source of identity and religion as an instrument of violence. Umar (2023) argues that religious identity is one of the major sources of conflict represented in the novel. However, the characters' continued search for meaning demonstrates that faith and religious reflection can also become part of their attempts to cope with insecurity. Survival is also constructed through relationships between individuals and members of the community. In an environment in which religious and ethnic identities create divisions, acts of assistance and concern challenge the assumption that conflict completely destroys social relationships.

The language of solidarity can therefore be interpreted as counter-discourse to the language of extremism. Whereas extremist discourse divides people into opposing categories, the discourse of solidarity emphasises shared humanity, family, friendship and mutual assistance. This is important because *Sterile Sky* is not simply a narrative about violence. It also asks how people continue to live together in a society fractured by religious and ethnic identities. Scholarship on the novel similarly emphasises its representation of intolerance, conflict and violence in multicultural Northern Nigerian society. Poverty is closely connected with survival in the novel. The characters' struggles are not caused by religious violence alone; socioeconomic deprivation also places pressure on their lives. Ugwanyi et al. (2025) describe *Sterile Sky* as a representation of poverty, alienation, ethno-religious strife, violence and economic instability, and specifically discuss the characters' "battle for survival."

Consequently, the language of survival includes expressions connected with hunger, poverty, work, deprivation and the desire for a better life. Economic hardship forces characters to make difficult choices, but their attempts to improve their circumstances demonstrate endurance.

Sule also constructs resilience through the psychological response to violence. Adebisi-Adelabu (2023) argues that the physical violence represented in the novel produces psychological violence and mental-health consequences. The characters' fear, anxiety and memories of violence therefore constitute another dimension of the language of survival. Their continued attempts to function despite traumatic experiences show that survival involves psychological as well as physical endurance. For example, Murtala's encounter with images of war in the newspaper becomes part of his consciousness. He cuts out and keeps an image captioned "Child victim of war in Liberia" (Egya, 2012, p. 35). Later, his discussion with Ola about the representation of Africa as a "hopeless continent" occurs around pages 188–190). These episodes are important because they show Murtala thinking critically about violence beyond his immediate environment. His intellectual response to violence becomes part of his resilience.

### Findings

The analysis indicates that language performs a central role in constructing themes of religious conflict and survival in *Sterile Sky*. The study reveals that thematic meanings in the novel emerge not only through events and characterization but also through deliberate linguistic choices embedded in narrative discourse. Lexical selections associated with fear, uncertainty, violence, and instability contribute significantly to representing religious conflict as an enduring social reality rather than an isolated occurrence. Such linguistic patterns intensify readers' perception of insecurity and emotional suffering. The findings further show that narrative descriptions are important in portraying trauma. Rather than presenting psychological distress directly, the novel often communicates emotional experiences through environmental descriptions and symbolic representations. This indirect portrayal deepens thematic complexity and strengthens readers' engagement with the experiences of affected characters.

Additionally, dialogue serves as a means of revealing social relationships, ideological tensions, and unequal power structures. Variations in speech patterns among characters reflect vulnerability, authority, resistance, and adaptation, thereby reinforcing themes of conflict and survival. Symbolic language, including imagery associated with emptiness and uncertainty, also broadens interpretation by linking individual experiences to wider social conditions. Finally, the study demonstrates that survival in *Sterile Sky* is constructed through recurring linguistic references to endurance, persistence, and aspiration. Resilience is represented as a continuous process rather than a final achievement. These findings support the argument that language actively shapes thematic meaning and social interpretation within literary texts.

### Conclusion

This study examined language and the construction of religious conflict and survival in *Sterile Sky*. The analysis demonstrates that language functions as a powerful literary resource through which the novelist represents violence, fear, hunger, depression, and resilience. Sule employs a range of lexical and figurative

expressions to construct the experiences of violence, fear, hunger and psychological suffering in *Sterile Sky*. Violence is represented through graphic lexical choices such as “kill,” “maim,” “set ... ablaze,” “butchered” and “mangled” (Egya, 2012, pp. 1–3). These transitive verbs foreground the deliberate actions of the perpetrators and portray the victims as objects of violent actions. Similarly, the expression “the air outside was heavy with the odour of burning flesh” (p. 25) uses sensory language to make violence perceptible through smell, while “the stale odour of death” (p. 26) constructs death as an almost ordinary feature of the characters' environment.

Fear is constructed through both lexical choices and bodily reactions. The expression “fear sprang in its place, gripping us” (p. 2) personifies fear as a force that physically seizes the characters. Baba's statement, “It's started again” (p. 2), is also significant because the adverb “again” presupposes that the characters have experienced violence before. The expression therefore constructs insecurity as recurrent and predictable. Similarly, the sequence “Rioting, fleeing, jumping and sustaining injuries” (p. 115) represents the continuous cycle of violence, escape and physical injury. Hunger is represented in connection with poverty and insecurity. The episode involving Umar and his mother, who are prepared to give up a meal rather than miss the struggle against the perceived enemy (pp. 6–7), demonstrates how violent conflict interferes with basic human needs. Food deprivation consequently becomes part of the wider struggle for survival. The language therefore presents hunger not simply as an individual problem but as one of the socioeconomic consequences of insecurity.

Psychological suffering is particularly evident in the characterisation of Odula. His condition is described through the lexical sequence “poor, hopeless and helpless” (p. 54), which constructs emotional and socioeconomic deterioration. His experiences of violence, unemployment, family separation and substance abuse contribute to his psychological decline. The expression “We're all casualties” (p. 102) extends this suffering from individuals to the wider society. The noun “casualties” suggests that the effects of violence include not only physical death and injury but also psychological and social damage. Sule's language constructs violence as a destructive force that produces interconnected experiences of fear, hunger, insecurity and psychological suffering. The lexical choices reveal that the consequences of religious conflict extend beyond the immediate act of killing: violence affects the characters' emotions, economic conditions, family relationships and capacity to maintain psychological stability.

The study further reveals that linguistic choices are central to thematic development in the novel. The language of violence exposes the destructive effects of religious intolerance, while the language of survival underscores human resilience in the face of adversity. Consequently, the novel not only documents social realities but also encourages reflection on the need for peaceful coexistence and social justice. The research concludes that language is indispensable to the literary construction of meaning in *Sterile Sky*. By examining the interaction between linguistic form and thematic content, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between language and literature in contemporary Nigerian fiction. The analysis

demonstrates that language in the novel functions beyond communication. Through lexical choices, narrative descriptions, dialogue, symbolism, and discourse patterns, the text constructs complex portrayals of insecurity, trauma, displacement, and resilience.

The application of Systemic Functional Linguistics provided insight into how ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings interact to produce thematic depth. Findings indicate that religious conflict in the novel is represented not simply as communal violence but as a condition affecting identity, family relationships, aspirations, and emotional well-being. Likewise, survival emerges through linguistic expressions of persistence, adaptation, and hope amid instability. The study therefore argues that thematic interpretation in literature benefits from attention to linguistic structures and social context. Examining language as an active component of meaning-making enables deeper understanding of how literary texts represent conflict and human endurance. Future studies may extend similar analysis to other Nigerian literary works addressing violence, displacement, or social instability, thereby expanding discussions on language and thematic construction in African literature.

This article examined the role of language in constructing themes of religious conflict and survival in *Sterile Sky* using a functional linguistic perspective. The analysis demonstrates that language in the novel functions beyond communication; it operates as a resource for representing experiences, expressing emotional realities, and organizing thematic meanings. Through lexical choices, narrative descriptions, dialogue, symbolism, and discourse patterns, the text constructs complex portrayals of insecurity, trauma, displacement, and resilience. The application of Systemic Functional Linguistics provided insight into how ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings interact to produce thematic depth. Findings indicate that religious conflict in the novel is represented not simply as communal violence but as a condition affecting identity, family relationships, aspirations, and emotional well-being. Likewise, survival emerges through linguistic expressions of persistence, adaptation, and hope amid instability. The study therefore argues that thematic interpretation in literature benefits from attention to linguistic structures and social context. Examining language as an active component of meaning-making enables deeper understanding of how literary texts represent conflict and human endurance. Future studies may extend similar analysis to other Nigerian literary works addressing violence, displacement, or social instability, thereby expanding discussions on language and thematic construction in African literature.

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