

MATTERING THE 'STORIED MATTER': ECO MATERIALITY IN IFOWODO'S *A GOOD MOURNING*

¹Oluseye Abiodun Babatunde, ²Charles Ogbulogo

¹Mr. Covenant University, Ota, Ogun State, NIGERIA, festalbee@gmail.com

²Prof. Covenant University, Ota, Ogun State, NIGERIA,
Charles.ogbulogo@covenantuniversity.edu.ng

Abstract

Eco materiality is a new materialist paradigm arising from the concurrence of cultural discourses and natural processes. It stems from a quaint dominion theory of man and the failure of the human centred story telling buoyed and accelerated on some anthropocentric revellings and ideologies that have grossly failed to address sundry human challenges. Eco materialism provides an (other) window of viewing reality that morphs duality of human/nature, masculine/feminine and such other binary opposites into intertwine agencies of meanings. It interrogates the stories of matter (storied matter) and affirms its constitutiveness of reality and its co emergence as a worthy material - discursive nodes. In eco materialism, matter, becomes a site of meaning, a dais of creativity and a platform of expression. Eco materialism affords a disanthropocentric reading of texts since all matters - organic, inorganic, nature, gender and humans are mere agentic references interrelating in an ever unfolding meaning. As a new signifying dimension of material agencies, it abridges varied and intersecting theories in developing storied matter. It is a new addition in the growing study of Eco criticism that enjoins us to listen to the narratives of matter. Yet humans must learn to listen to other agentic bodies with which he cohabits the world. Man should learn that in these storied matters are deep ecological messages of environmental, cultural, political and social dimensions, indeed messages that could save the world. Ogaga Ifowodo is a major poetic voice whose works have won laurels in Nigeria and overseas. *A Good Mourning* (2016) is the poet's latest work in an established tradition of Eco imagination hence the choice of the work. Eco materialism shall be the lens from which Ogaga Ifowodo's *A Good Mourning* (2016) shall be distilled to exact the conjoining of matter, narrativity, and meaning. The study among other things, shall illustrate how storied matter is symptomatic of some messages that the poet tries to convey in some of the poems in the Collections. This in turn is to raise human consciousness in the materiality of matter.

Keywords : Eco materiality, cultural discourse, natural processes, anthropocentric, eco criticism, gender, agentic references, storied matter, humans, nature, material agencies, narratives and environmental dimensions.

INTRODUCTION

The world, for long has privileged the notions and ideas that promote humans as being the centre of the universe. This predilection has indulged in humans a normative behaviour that reduces nature and the environment to materialities only in human service. This mode of thinking encourages the despoliation of the

environment. Other human negative attitudes have caused the world untold disasters and catastrophes having potential of apocalyptic consequences. To change this perception, there has been a patent shift from subject-centred models to materialisms in the humanities and especially in the environmental humanities. This is to reconsider human approach to the environment and such other materialities that have agentic force to impact human lives consciously or unconsciously. This materialist thinking decentres the anthropocentric view that stresses categorical divides along human/nature, masculine/feminine, culture/nature and such other categories that have often created a myth of exceptionalism around humanity. The focus in this discussion is to reflect on how these materialities condition human lives as represented in the poetry of Ifowodo.

The turn to materiality in part is not so much the failure of understanding the world in schisms but of a failing to appropriately inscribe the material dimensions into its praxis. This mode of thinking thus denies the world the opportunity of a wholesale view which would have allowed for a broader and more critical view to look at the world more objectively and probably offer better solutions to its myriad of problems. Zizek submits that 'materialism means that the reality I see is never whole – not because a large part of it eludes me, but because it contains a stain, a blind spot, which indicates my inclusion in it' (406). The fact that the sensing is done by humans creates an incomplete whole in a discernible imposition of the human on the thing. It also fosters a subjective division between humans and matter. For instance, the continuous treatment of nature and materials as objects has failed to offer solutions to the huge environmental crisis that the world now battles. So much that materiality continues to pervade the human world, its relating with the human world beyond the object-physical, so much does its transcendence and its primacy becomes increasingly evident. Andrew Poe explains that 'matter and materiality need not be excluded from that which we regard as having agentic capacity (anymore than - pace Kant – angels should be from the categorization of rational being)' (157). Materiality becomes the human inseparable companion, covertly and sometimes overtly determining human choices, denoting the healthiness and otherwise of humans and the environment, yet still looked down on by the different sites of knowledge before the consciousness of materialism. In the words of Rigney, 'materiality often secretes more meaning than that which was consciously inscribed in them'(474).

THE AGENCY OF MATTER

Most subject-centred models have always emphasised rationality as core criterion for agency. Yet not all humans are capable of rational thinking. Does that mean that humans who are not rational are not agents? Jane Bennett describes agency as 'thing power' which 'is a force exercised by that which is not specifically human (or even organic) upon humans' (351). Iovino and Oppermann opine that 'the true dimension of matter is not that of a static and passive substance or being, but of a generative becoming' (77). This view obviously agrees with Karen Barad's theory of 'agential realism', an epistemological and ontological theory standing on Bohr's insight which postulates that 'matter is not just a passive material that is shaped by agents, it undergoes a process as it stabilises over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity and surface' (90).

Bennett also asserts that 'objects appear more vividly as things, that is, as entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by semiotics.' As humans acting under the subjectivist realm and model, we ascribe reducible significance to materials and matters that are of far greater significance to human lives than we are ready to acknowledge. In the words of Andrew Poe 'things may be more important than we have given them credit' (139). Also, Barad says 'matter does not refer to an inherent, fixed property of independently existing objects' rather it is 'a congealing of agency... a stabilizing and destabilizing process of iterative intra-activity' (151). As humans we pretend or ignore the existential significance of matters and deliberately kill their narratives, thus denying ourselves of the essential storied matter of materiality.

New materialism therefore entertains the agency of matter which according to Jane Bennett quoted in Iovino and Oppermann is to 'absolve matter from its long history of attachment to automatism or mechanism' (77). Indeed, humans live, in the words of the German Sociologist Ulrich Beck, a 'risk society' amidst a web of matters impacting and co existing with the human bodies in same but shared environment. Little wonder then that Linda Nash says that 'the human body has become an 'ecological body characterized by its 'permeability' 'a constant' exchange between the inside and the outside, by fluxes and flows, and by its close dependence on the surrounding environment (89). Modernity has come to entangle humans in a network of matters that daily influences humans and their environment. Bennett quoted in Andrew Poe writes that 'this webbed network is not empowered by our noticing it, but rather empowers those within its frame...matter has an inclination to make connections and forms networks of relations with varying degrees of stability' (155).

Material ecocriticism therefore in the words of Sarah Jaquette quoted in Oppermann ‘spotlights a pervasive materiality as active phenomena that are “constitutive of reality” (52). This is in relation to the place of matter to environmental, cultural, political and social processes. Material ecocriticism contends that there should be no division among categories such as nature, culture, human, non-human, matter and meaning as they are all ‘intra-acting agencies’ (Barad 33) in a continuous ever evolving meaning. In material ecocriticism is the conjoining of matter and meaning in a sequence that culture and nature interpret each other in a continual flow. This blend of portrayal of the storied matter and the narrative agency where the ‘relationship between the material and the discursive is one of mutual entailment’ (152) is what Haraway (2003) calls ‘naturecultures’. The storied matter is important to both human and the non-human elements. When matter speaks, it does communicate. But do humans listen? Do humans even know how to listen to nature? Yet nature and matter speak to humans in a continuous never ending discourse. Oppermann lists some of the ways matter speaks as follows:

Squids for example, tell tragic stories of their diminished ability to survive amid increasing ocean acidity. Retreating glaciers transmit stories about the earth’s changing climate, blending global warming with political anxieties and social changes. Another distress story comes from the soil and concerns its excess amounts of nitrous oxides dripping into underground aquifers and reaching up to the clouds, accelerating the erosion of the ozone layer. These are storied matters just as much as the telluric stories volcanoes tell of the earth’s violent past or the stories fossils tell about biological evolution. (95)

These are ‘storied matters’ spoken by nature in ecological narratives but only meant for the discerning minds. These stories reveal the interconnected relationship that exists between human and the non-human elements of nature, yet humans prefer to play oblivious of this nexus. Nevertheless, in the words of Bennett quoted in Oppermann, ‘everything in a sense is alive’ (95). Also Oppermann says ‘storied matter abides in every living element and multiplicity of associations, often emerging at unusual moments when our objectifying attitude toward the world changes and becomes attentive to its voices’(96). Storied matter according to Lovino and Oppermann quoted in Oppermann ‘is a material ‘mesh’ of meanings, properties and processes, in which human and non-human players are interlocked in networks that produce undeniable signifying forces’(96). The impulse here is that the earth is not just a place but ‘a story in which we belong and out of which we arose’ (Oppermann 96). Material ecocriticism perceives human, nature, culture and the storied matter in terms of convergence and co-emergence all locked in an interactive web of communication. It speaks in a complex narrative laced with diverse metaphors for the discerning to unravel.

Material ecocriticism though new on the plane, offers a comforting alternative in the unending battle of alternate reality that incorporates the ‘other’. It embraces all views in a non-dualist sense; yet it sends a powerful message to the heart of humanity to tender nature and matter for its good. It tries to instill the desired discipline and obligation in humans towards fostering in them, the need to care for nature. In the subsequent section of this essay we examine the illustration of material ecocriticism in Ogaga Ifowodo’s *A Good Mourning*.

ECO MATERIALITIES IN A GOOD MOURNING

Ogaga Ifowodo is a major voice in Nigerian poetry of the third generation. He has written many collections some of which include *Homeland and Other Poems* (1998), *Madiba* (2001), *The Oil Lamp* (2005) and *A Good Mourning* (2016). He is a poet, lawyer, a columnist and activist.

The collection, *A Good Mourning* is the latest work by Ifowodo. The title, though taken from one of the poems in the collection, is ironical. For how can something be good yet mournful? The good may be suggestive of the vitality and the goodness of the African landscape which serves as the locale for some of the poems while the mourning is symbolic of the awfulness and the despair that characterise the land. The collection ramifies issues around memory, mourning and most of the poems though deal with varied experiences and themes, seem connected by these materialities and more. Some of the poems, characteristic of the Niger Delta Eco poetry, are like autobiographies, cataloguing and articulating in a cumulative manner some of the poet’s exposures at different stops in his voyage through life and in a way also capture the history of a people and a land enveloped in a battle of survival as a result of the commodification of their land. According to Egya, (2015) a major preoccupation of the Niger Delta poetry is that they act as ‘an advocacy for human and environment justice (2). The entire collection is suggestive of the title and chronicles how the different eco materialities of the inclement African environment shape and mould the African minds and people.

The collection also uses memory and mourning as mega materialities that configure and reconfigure the African continent. While history becomes the material vehicle for animating the experience, mourning is the inescapable material feeling that the mind interrogates from the experience. It is therefore not surprising that one gets a feeling of depression orchestrated by a pervasive melancholic tone, symbols and images that run through the whole gamut of the poems. Most of the poems are presented in gripping metaphors foregrounded in despondency, death, misery and hopelessness. Though many of the poems, with the exception of one or two, share affinities in grief, despair, shock, trauma and gloom, one is able to enjoy the rich assemblage of metaphors and images packaged in a most profound language. This is an indication of the evolution of Ifowodo into the enviable league of strong poets. It is therefore not surprising that the collection was shortlisted for the 2018 NLNG Literature Prize. Ifowodo displays a great mastery for words that is underscored by the lucidity of expression that he attains in stringing the different experiences captured in some of the poems. Indeed his choice of multiple voices to depict the different themes and experiences is marked by grace and elegance. Also evident, is the sense of humour that pervades the collection which enables the reader to go through the grim pictures that most of the poems paint without being too overwhelmed by despondency.

The interlacing of memory, history and mournful experiences those courses through most of the poems in the collection further reveals the eco materiality of some of the matters with which the African minds and landscape are entangled. For instance, in 'History Lesson', history becomes the counterpoint materiality for the persona to view reality and for him to encounter the world. The teenagers are fascinated by a historical figure like Selasie whose defeat of Mussolini is a source of inspiration to the persona and his mates in the history class. For the persona, history becomes the unseen but the intimately felt materiality that conditions his world view. This accounts for the linking of River Ethiope to Ethiopia. He says:

And now I wished the car would cough and stop
Catch the mechanical flu or migraine
So I could merge hills and river in one course (3)

Geographically, Ethiopia is located in the Horn of Africa, suggesting its hilly nature from which river Ethiope must have drawn its source. The similarity in name too must have gone beyond mere coincidence, hence the foregrounding of this linkage in the lore as captured in the last part of the poem thus:

... And oblivious
To what local lore had to say
traced my river source to Ethiopia's high ground (4)

History through "the History Lesson" has made such a great impact on the persona that it has become a vehicle for him to situate his root and assert his identity through his link to the Great Ethiopian State. To the persona, therefore, River Ethiope is not just a river, or another of nature's variant but an eco-materiality with its own essence, being storied matter that is closely knit and connected to people in the community beyond drinking and washing purposes. Indeed, it has acquired a historical and spiritual essence without which the history of the people is incomplete. The river therefore as a material being and having been with the people since creation, is a potent historical witness from which the stories of the different generations of people can be told.

Similarly, the Mazda car, though a product of technology, has agency and could relate with humans in ways beyond the ordinary. Most technological devices have agentic powers. For instance, mobile devices have become inseparable parts of modern humans as we play and fondle with them inseparably. These so-called technological devices do things beyond even the reach of fellow humans. People cry and express great disappointment when they lose phones. They spend money they can never spend on themselves or on their wives and children on cars and electrical appliances. The agency of this car is further confirmed by the personification of the technological materiality when the poet wishes that the car could behave like a human being:

And now I wished the car would cough and stop
Catch the mechanical flu or migraine.(3)

This desire of the car, a technological contraption developing human frailties is to afford the persona quality time to commune with nature that is River Ethiope, another material being. His disappointment in the car not

behaving like a human being is captured by Ifowodo when he says:

But cars bow only to their will. The Mazda scorned
My prayer, offering only to break speed
Forced by the Don't overtake bridge sign (pp 4)

The little break of the car affords the persona opportunity to get engrossed in his communion with nature, enjoying the cross relations and reflections of hilly Ethiopia and River Ethiope:

But the pause was enough for me, I confirmed
The Ethiope's majesty by the absence
Of boats and fishermen, its sacra silence
Mysteriously black ... (4)

The agentic power of materiality is further reinforced by the refusal of the Mazda car to stop to allow the persona ample time to enjoy his communion with nature. On another plane, this experience is symbolic of how technology has degraded and taken humans away from nature and how it is creating a gulf between them. Technology has eroded the culture of humans to care for nature. It has become a potent tool of degrading nature and has made human environment riskier and vulnerable. Technology has turned nature into plastic, a thing, a mere material; yet as humans, we tend to forget that we are as good as our environment and that as humans we cannot live divested of our environment.

The poet through the materiality of historicity becomes proud of the feat attained by the ancient Ethiopian state, the historical figure of Selasie and would therefore not only trace his origin to this historical giant but would also want to be proud of the black race. He uses River Ethiope as a metaphor to salute and praise Ethiopia:

Its waters were the darkest I had seen
And seemed to me the inkwell of the world (4)

The writer here may also be suggesting that civilization started from Africa or that Africa or the black race is the precursor or vehicle of civilization and enlightenment. Boon and Eyong in the *Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems* say 'Africa is the origin of human civilization and therefore has a rich history. Archeological evidence points to the fact that present day Egypt was the origin of ancient civilization. (7). Also Falola and Flemming in the same *Encyclopedia* assert that 'Africa is widely believed to be the birthplace of modern human beings and is where some of the world's greatest civilizations, such the Egyptian and Nubian, emerged.

Similarly, 'Perfect Vision' is another personal poem like 'History lesson'. It is the persona's experience at almost being blind. The poem relates the poet's encounter with nature, specifically the sun, when he stared directly at the sun and almost became blind. Coincidentally, the poet returns to the classroom only to be greeted by the Professor with Moses' encounter with God in Exodus 3. God has shone like a flame of fire to Moses and Moses had to hide his face the same way the poet did but was prevented from going blind by eye glasses. Ogaga writes that:

The white-flame brightness of the June afternoon
Was to blame: I had stared accusingly at the Sun
Before fleeing into the cooled classroom,
The dulled light from the glazed - glass window
Softening vision but giving shadows, furry tails,
Strange serifs, to the Professor's words on the blackboard. (5)

This poem warns of the limits of taking nature for granted. True that nature can be friendly, kind and benevolent, it can also be cruel and fiendish. As human beings, we must know the limits of our contact with nature lest we harm ourselves. The eye glasses therefore become an inseparable materiality to the poet assisting him see even far beyond the ordinary. It provides the persona a double vision with which he could see details and probably see beyond the natural limits of the eyes. Extensively, the poem shows how the

blend of nature and technology, can be beneficial to human's progress and advancement. Technology just like the eyes glasses helps the poet persona regain his vision in the words of Roston 'involves artefacts' (3). The eyes glasses ensemble from materials which otherwise humans will regard as common acquires an agentic force strong enough to provide vision for the poet persona. Indeed humans live in as inescapable world of materialities.

'One Plus One' is a poem in which the poet as a boy serving as an altar boy, his unholy wish for the altar wine and bread fetches him suspension from the church. He however returns to the altar later with a woman for marriage. This poem thrives so much on humour, a device that Ogaga has perfected in his art. The Church becomes the materiality for the consummation of marriage. The church is a different abode, a different world where communion with God is possible and above all the church is that place where different and strange kinds of dynamics operate. For instance, one plus one in the church, as far as marriage is concerned, is one.

'In wintered out', Ogaga relates the environment as human's inescapable materiality. The persona in the poem shows his love and concern for nature and the environment. Winter is a period where trees shed leaves and they therefore become skeletal. It is a period of dormancy for plants. The poet shows his concern for these trees, plants and animals, referring to the trees as wounded woods. The poet reflects on the forest that is perforated owing to the winter:

A cold fire has burnt the forest dark
And sere branches stretch
Alas – seeking arms into the ashed void. (20)

This is the skeletal image of the forest that the poet paints. It is the picture of a dying environment that needs revivification. The poet persona feels the storied matter of a dying forest. The poet is drawn to pity and concern:

... then the wounded woods look
Like the open air
Hospital of a battalion vanquished
By fire as it
Stiffened to attention for battle orders. (20)

The poet uses the opportunity to compare his native environment with his sojourn. The poet writes:

... it was time
To end the walk, remembering
Now the metereologist's prediction
Of a storm -- thinking
Of my native forests, green - black in leafy
Luxuriance... (21)

The poet persona obviously must be living in an advanced society where science and technology have advanced to predict nature and its occurrences. This accounts for why the poet persona feels he must hearken to the prediction of storm and return home. Returning home here is akin to homecoming which is often brought about by nostalgia. Nostalgia according to Hofer quoted in Feldbrugge (2010) is a disease of the imagination, an obsession with the native land and with one's home. Hofer is further quoted as saying that it is 'the continuous vibration of animal spirits through those fibres of the middle brain in which impressed traces ideas of the Fatherland still cling', (19). Tough the prediction of the storm is a phenomenon made possible by science and technology, this portrayal reflects a mix of science and nature. While it could be said that science and technology are nature's major enemies, they sometimes create a blend and assist to save humans from catastrophes or sometimes they assist humans to control nature.

Though the poem 'Sixty lines by the Lagoon' is written as a garland in celebration of Odia Ofeimun at sixty, Ifowodo uses the opportunity to reflect on the dystopian condition of the Nigerian society, a cause to which Ofeimun has committed himself in his poetry. The poem therefore celebrates the love and the commitment of

Ofeimun to his land and the people especially in fighting for a better life for the people. Ofeimun has always identified with the oppressed and their struggle and has always asked for a change in the morbid landscape of the country. This theme is largely displayed in Ofeimun's 'How can I Sing?'. Taking a cue from this and as it is characteristic of the third generation Nigerian poets at exposing the decadence in their society, Ifowodo laments the harsh environment under which the people live and which has affected the trade of the poet. Egya says that 'the poets of this generation attempt to chronicle the dehumanizing activities of the military regimes and chart a new rhetoric of nationhood' (47). Ifowodo adopts a style typical of Ofeimun when he writes that:

Ah, dear land! For a young country
your people have grown so old
gnarled and wrinkled under the red sun
Of their suffering – same people whose skin
fifty years ago glistened in the dawn!
under your sky arched with grief (23)

The Nigerian environment has been harsh and cruel to the people. There is indescribable hunger and starvation in the land. People still battle for the basic necessities of life. Sule Egya says:

Whether it is spiritual displacement or physical displacement, the impoverishment of the lands, of the waters, of the airs, indeed of the environment generally, is also the impoverishment of the humans who inhabit it. This is especially the case when the people are so economically and politically weakened and powerless that they are unable to stand up to oppression. The forces against the people and their environment are total. (7)

The pressure of survival has turned the country into a big hospital where every soul battles for survival amidst varying sicknesses orchestrated by harsh and inclement environmental realities borne out of economic hardship, unemployment, lack of infrastructure, among others. Since independence Nigeria has been bedeviled with political and economic problems and for as long as these persist, living in such environment shall be at great costs and difficulties. Little wonder then that many young Nigerians often look for ways of exiting the country. Some of such worries highlighted in the poem are captured when the poet says:

Our wounded land requires of us a song true
to its torments, but how can we sing
with battered tongues? Under a sky once blue
grown charcoal-dark – fearful clue
to the last thunder gathering strength –
the grass bows to the wind, begs a song true
to the anguish of farmished crops. You
can stand at the door or on the curb
and cry your heart out under our once blue
sky (24)

Ifowodo's reference to the sky that was once blue is an indication that things are not well with the land, the Nigerian environment. And when the land is sick, the people cannot be well. But the Nigerian land and environment have become sick, thus the Nigerian people and plants are affected. The Nigerian land and consequently the environment has become a dangerous materiality that the Nigerian people must relate with. Insecurity as an 'actant' according to Lantour quoted in Cajetan Iheka (2017) is a major part of this materiality that the people have to contend with. Iheka indeed warns that for such agencies, humans must "recognize their participation and effects even in those instances of intentional human agency" (4). He further opines that 'intent or purposive action, distributed or diffuse agency is concerned with the actions or the effects produced in the environment by a network of actors, human and nonhuman.

'The Frightened Tree' is a poem written for Chief Bola Ige who was killed by assassins as a sitting Attorney – General of the Federation of Nigeria in 2001. Till date probes into his death remain inconclusive and the mystery of his death is unresolved. This makes death, insecurity and an endangered political space the eco-materiality that the poet interrogates. The killing of the foremost law officer of a country is a strong indication of the treacherous nature of security in such a country. Chief Bola Ige's security details in a compromising manner left him for a make shift restaurant and before their return their principal was murdered in cold blood. The poet writes:

Death strolled into your bedroom like a bosom friend
For whose coming and going you had kept the doors ajar
Death borne by the steady hands of paid hoodlums
Felt well enough at home to need just one bullet.
And the careful killer in them saved the unfired
Guns for the next bidder for their kill.
They left as they came, trailed only by the kindness
That saw the guard to question their mission (25)

Insecurity is a major challenge to the Nigerian environment and this has been exacerbated by reckless killing of people, just as it has also led to break down of law and order most times. The country now witnesses a swell in the level of insurgency, cult clashes and herdsmen attacks across the length and breadth of the country. For instance, Ofuoku and Isife quoted in Oli, Ibekwe and Nwakwo (2018) noted that 'in Densina, Adamawa State, 28 people were killed; while about 2,500 farmers were displaced and rendered homeless in a clash between them'(31). They also quoted Idowu to show that the violence has displaced more than 100,000 people in Benue and Enugu States and left them under the care of relatives or in makeshift Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) camps while many are still struggling to rebuild their lives. Also are political killings that often have remained a permanent feature during elections. All these culminated in the general insecurity as the eco – materiality that pervades the Nigerian landscape. The police that are meant to secure the people have often compromised and demonstrated lack of commitment and responsibility. It is the height of irresponsibility for policemen detailed to protect a principal to so leave him to be killed. The spate of insecurity in the country is so high that many have had to flee to saner climes:

Cocks are berserk crowing repeatedly
The hour of the murder, but for whom
Do they shriek, their combs aglow
With the rage of the season?
Why do the trees at the gate seem frightened,
Leaden leaves on bowed branches –
because birds have fled to kinder climes? (27)

It is instructive to note that sometimes when things are about to go wrong or when they have gone wrong in the human society, nature and some other materialities have their own narratives otherwise storied matter. Abram quoted in Serpil Oppermann (2013) asserts that ecocriticism consists of 'a community of expressive presences where all beings have the ability to communicate something of themselves to other beings. If the human mind is patient enough, these materialities through their narratives have a way of giving signs of dangers and impending dangers or hint at solutions to problems. Only the discerning and the gifted can pick and interpret such messages.

Insecurity in the country can be traced to military adventurism into politics and has enveloped everywhere in the country. The poem 'The Heavenly Gun Club' depicts military oppression and killing which left in its wake widows, orphans and numerous bereaved souls on the Nigerian landscape battling with the grief and the demise of their loved ones. Okunoye (2011) opines that 'Starting with the Gowon regime, through the Muritala-Obasanjo, Buhari-Idiagbon administrations (1984–86), the Babangida "presidency" (1986–93), to Sanni Abacha's junta (1993–98), Nigerians endured various forms of repression. But the misadventure acquired its worst character under the late Sanni Abacha' (66).

The title Poem 'A Good Mourning' forms the second part of the collection that is sub-divided into four parts. The title, an obvious paradox, chronicles the events around June 12, 1993 a day that Nigerians overwhelmingly elected Bashorun M. K. O. Abiola as the President of the country but which the military audaciously annulled. The poem is about an oppressive government, a truncation of the people's will, a struggle for the actualization of an annulled free and fair election resulting in massive continual street protests which grinded a nation to a devastating halt and more are some of the eco materiality that the title poem 'A Good Mourning' interrogates. The poet in the poem contrasts a good morning that is Abiola's June 12 and a good mourning, the death of General Abacha. The poem depicts a social and a political environment that is stifling, one that really asphyxiated a number of people, muffled societal growth and dislocated many individuals and indeed caused a regime change According to Olowojolu (2015) "the post June 12 crisis led military ruler General Babangida to abdicate his exalted position as Head of State on August 27, 1993). The poem describes the annulment of June 12, 1993 Presidential elections in Nigeria in which M. K. O. Abiola was acclaimed to have won only for the result to be withdrawn *in media res*. This led to total convulsion of the Nigerian state. Many people died in the struggle to actualize the mandate. Notable among them were Chief M. K. O. Abiola, the acclaimed winner himself, his wife, Alhaja Kudirat Abiola, Pa Alfred Rewane and a host of other activists. In fact, many activists had to flee the country to save their lives. Despite the repression of this struggle by successive regimes in the country, it is in the year 2018 that President Buhari conferred the highest honour only reserved for past and serving Presidents in Nigeria on Chief Moshood Kashimawo Olawale Abiola on the 29th of June 2018. It is instructive to note that this award is only reserved for Presidents or former Presidents in the country, hence the move has been interpreted as a somewhat recognition and a validation by the Buhari-led administration that Abiola won the election.

The poem confronts some of the most inclement environments as materialities that many had to contend with at the time. This perilous external environment was orchestrated by a most oppressive military junta that oppressed and tyrannised the people for years. The oppression peaked in the annulment of an election regarded as the freest and the fairest in the land. It was an election that unified the country without recourse to religion, ethnicity, creed, culture and such other primordial underpinnings. The poet writes:

A good morning it was they queued
Under the sun burning with the heat
Of their resolve. ballots counted,
The streets sang the winner's name
And they thought the curse was broken...

The military, having seized power, have tormented the political landscape of the country and many in the country have become disoriented by the tyranny and the oppression by which military rule is characterized. Therefore, when the opportunity presented itself for people to send the military out of power, people trooped out in large numbers. It was a good morning. Humans have a way of reacting to their environment: when it is pleasant, they embrace it and they recede when it becomes hostile. A convivial environment therefore attracts people and makes them healthy. The poet in 'A Good Mourning' creates different environments and this produces a rich background in which the poem is situated. In one of the environments, the poet captures the pristine environment which reflects the humble background of the Chief Moshood Abiola which the poet feels if he had kept to probably would not have cut his live short:

Had he kept to gathering
Firewood, scouring the forests
Of Abeokuta for dead branches
To keep the pot boiling
In an old woman's kitchen
He might be alive today. (37)

This is a reminder that different environments attract different statuses and risks and as humans we must realise this as we move to different environments in our diverse pursuits in life. It is also a pointer to the combustible nature of power and affluence. These two can be attractive yet they can create a dangerous environment around their characters. Another is the boardroom environment to which the poet also alludes:

Had he kept to boardrooms
once a star led him out of the haunted
bush, content to measure his power
by the banks that begged for his millions
by his vast estates across continents,
he may be alive today

The poet feels that probably if Chief Abiola had kept to the business world in which he became an instant and huge success, he would not have died. But William Shakespeare in *Julius Caesar* says death 'will come when it will'. Yet another environment is his home 'revelling with women bewitched by his magical purse'. This is a reminder of the polygamous nature of the acclaimed winner of June 12 as he was married to many women.

Other environments that provided a rich inspiration for the poem include the imprisonment of Abiola, the killing of his wife and the struggle for the actualization of June 12 election victory that created a general asphyxiating environment that led to the violent convulsion of the Nigerian state through wild protests, paralyzing strikes and violent turbulence. In the process many people were maimed, killed and many were dislocated from their homes. The attendant turmoil was such that the head of the then military junta General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida had to step down only for another dictator to come into the saddle. The acclaimed winner of the election was taken into incarceration where he died, the wife Kudirat Abiola was gruesomely killed. Indeed the storied matter of June 12, 1993 has become a huge reference point in the annals of Nigerian history and it has continued to influence Nigerian politics till date. It has also become the height of undesirable military adventurism in politics anywhere in Africa. The poem 'From Goma to Gwoza' shares a similar temper with 'A Good Mourning' but extends the frontiers of the characters to other African countries. It is a political documentary on some African societies where politicians purloin the resources of their various countries and stark their booties in foreign banks in Swiss and Dubai, among others. The poem documents the current spate of violence blowing across Africa where suicide bombers kill at will, where statesmen give speeches different from their intentions, where buying of votes has become a way of conducting elections:

Dead now but still king, his magic tutu
Conjures new wonders too many to count:
Pious speeches, suicide bombers, Swiss accounts
(but Dubai has been favoured lately!)
Holy wars, the mass graves of democracy –
You should stop me else I will read a book!

Corruption has become the bane of most of the socio-political challenges confronting African countries today. Mobutu used to be the greatest culprit in this but since his demise, there have been many Mobutus in Africa. According to Greg Mills 'Africa's poverty is not because of lack of capital, access to world markets, technical experts, or the unfair global economic system, it is rather because African leaders have made poor choices and decided to keep the continent in abject poverty.(2010). The reckless sleaze perpetrated by these African politicians has often been responsible for the avalanche of socio-economic woes confronting the African continent and has become a hurtful eco-materiality that the people must contend with.

The collection ends with a commemorative eco poem written for the Solar Text project in, a green energy initiative at Kunstlerdorf choppingen in Germany. According to the note on the poem, the project is a renewable energy initiative. It is a good development when governments begin to take initiatives that are environment friendly. It is a step in the right direction to save the human world by reducing the hurtful materialities that humans have to contend. The poem emphasizes the primacy of the elements of nature such as light, water and dust. The poet pays homage to those who worshipped the sun, suggesting that they probably have more knowledge than the present day generation: The poet writes:

Perhaps those ancients who worshipped the sun
Knew far more than all the knowledge

In a library or ether, flashed to fingertips
At a click or touch of a key, can teach us.

'The Sun Speaks to Earth' argues for a world with an eco-consciousness. It prides the Sun as an inseparable human companion that provides the much needed warmth without which humans cannot survive. It also emphasizes the importance of the sun in agriculture.

Brought down to earth, the sun warns still:
All that you need –
To pump your heart
To light or warm your rooms
To make a seed sprout
To keep the waters swirling or bound in ice
(and save the archipelagos
Where you pitch your tents
At the seas' sufferance) --- (77)

These lines explain some of the functions of the sun and this is instructive of the importance of the sun or warmth to human lives. Without the sun's warmth the earth will not function, as the whole of earth may just be like a rocky ball of ice. The sun warms the oceans and the seas. It provides energy for plants and offers the food and oxygen for life regeneration on earth. The sun therefore is of immense value to plants and animals. The sun and other natural elements that are *sine qua non* to living should therefore be adequately protected, especially from science and technology which are two major threats to nature. The poet records some of the harm already done to nature:

that and more to the right degree I have given you
to the envy of Mercury and Mars, and all your sister stars.
And if the fate of Mastodons, or the cracked lips
of deserts creeping seaward for a drop of water
or the lessening count of insects, trees and beasts,
or the ulcer you've cut in the sky to bleed
on you fires and plagues I knew well enough
to keep behind the celestial fence – (78)

This is a major warning of the affectations of human activities distressing nature and the environment. Nature already is being depleted in terms of lessening counts of insects, trees and beasts and all of these have their natural roles to play in the creation of an eco-equilibrium on earth. The eco-system is a complex web of biological community of interacting organisms and their physical environment. These biotic and abiotic organisms interact through nutrient cycles and energy flows. These organisms need humans just as much as humans need them. Humans must therefore preserve these organisms especially the forest which is their natural habitat to sustain humanity.

Through the several poems in the collection, Ifowodo has been able to establish that human interactions with different materialities have ways of conditioning the human environment. And that these materialities determine the behaviours of humans at a given time. Indeed, the environment in which humans live is replete with many objects and substances which affect the environment; hence they are eco-materialities that humans must relate with. These eco-materialities therefore must not be such that can be harmful to humans lest humans would resist such environment, if they can. Humans therefore have a major role in nurturing their environment to be able to live a healthy life and indeed sustain themselves. This seems the reason for the swell in the 'new materialisms' to create an ecological dialogue with the hope and a projection to create a discourse about the 'beingness' of agents. This is to help raise the possibility of an eco-ethics that binds humans to the material entities upon which human livelihoods depend and to be able to relate better with 'agential beings' around. It is also a worthy path in the human quest for ecological justice as a way of

salvaging humanity through nature as privileged arbiters of the future.

REFERENCE LIST

- Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Enlargement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2007
- Beck Ulrich, *Critical Theory of World Risk Society: A Cosmopolitan Vision*. MA: Cambridge, 2004. Print
- Bateson, Gregory. *Steps to an Ecology of the Mind*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1972.
- Bennett, Andrew and Royle Nicholas. *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*. Fifth ed. United Kingdom: Pearson Longman, 2010. Print
- Bennett, Jane. *Thoreau's Nature: Ethics, Politics and Wild*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002.
- Egya, Sule. Nature and Environmentalism of the Poor: Eco- Poetry from the Niger Delta Region. *Journal of African Cultural Studies* Routledge 28 (1) 1-12. 2015. Print.
- Haraway, Donna. "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 80s". *The Haraway Reader*. New York: Routledge. 2004. Print
- Haraway, Donna 'Otherworldly Conversations: Terrain Topics, Local Terms' in *The Haraway Reader*. New York, Routledge 2004. Print
- Iheka, Cajetan. *Naturalising Africa: Ecological Violence, Agency, and Postcolonial Resistance African Literature*. Cambridge University Press. 2018. Print.
- Ifowodo, Ogaga. *A Good Mourning*. Lagos: Parresia Publishers Ltd. 2016. Print
- Olowojolu, O. (2015), Ethnicity and Religion: Key Indicators in Nigeria's Electoral System, International Conference on Social Sciences, Istanbul, Turkey.
- Opperman, Serpil. 'A Lateral Continuum: Ecocriticism and Postmodern Materialism.' ISLESpecial Cluster on Dirt, Waste, Bodies, Food; and Other Matter. Eds. Heather Sullivan and Dana Philips. Forthcoming 2012.
- Material Ecocriticism and then Creativity of Storied Matter. *Frame* 26 : 2 2016. 55-69. Print.
- Poe, Andrew. Review Essays: *Things-Beyond –Objects. New Materialisms: Ontology, and Politics* eds. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost. (Durham: Duke University Press. 2010.
- Rigney, Ann. Materiality and Memory: Objects to Ecologies. A Response to Maria Zirra. *Parallax*. Vol. 23. Issue 4. 474 – 487. 2017.
- Zizek, Slavoj. *In Defense of lost Causes*. London: Verso. 2008. Print