Abstract
This study explores the elegiac disposition of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, Tony Afejuku and Hope Eghagha towards the glorious exit of their mothers from the earth. The poems for analyses are selected from each of their collections of Poems namely: Dancing Masks (2013), An Orchard of Wishes (1999) and Mama Dances into the Night and Other Poems (2007). The method of analysis is mainly textual, with the concept of elegy serving as its theoretical anchor. What is most revealing in this study is that the poets are not just elegists in the general sense of the word; rather it is interesting to note that they dedicate so much poetic energy in the expression of grief as a result of the death of their mothers. This insight strikes our attention in the exploration of Modern Nigerian Poetry and therefore forms the core of this paper.

Keywords: Elegy, Mama, Elegiac dispositions, Afejuku, Eghagha.
Introduction
This essay focuses on the elegies of Adimora-Ezeigbo, Afejuku and Eghagha towards the death of their mothers. The poems are selected from each of their collections of poems namely: Dancing Masks (2013), An Orchard of Wishes (1999) and Mama Dances into the Night and Other Poems (2007) respectively. A close reading of these collections of poems, henceforth, DM, OW and MD reveals that each poet demonstrates a unique strand of elegiac disposition towards the glorious exit of Mama from the earth.

This paper is anchored on the concept of elegy. According to M.H. Abrams, elegy refers to “a formal and sustained lament in verse for the death of a particular person, usually ending in a consolation” (92). The idea of the critic above gives us a true picture of the literary genre. What is not in contest about the elegiac verse here is that it is a specially crafted poem suitable for official or important occasion. Besides, one is not unaware of the quality of “sustained lament” that characterises the poem’s atmosphere. In this connection, its chief attribute is the evocation of sombre lamentation and agonies “for the death of a particular person”. Moreover, it is instructive to note that apart from the versification of grief, the elegiac verse is not without the element of “consolation”. To Abrams, the feature of “consolation” usually terminates the grievous disposition of the mourner.

Similarly, another critic David Kennedy asserts as follows: [The word elegy] is an elaborately worked formal and lyrical poem lamenting the death of a friend or public figure, offering serious reflections on a solemn subject... the term has usually been used to describe a lament for the departed in diverse perspectives whether public or private (147, emphasis added).

A good look at the thoughts of Kennedy above reveals that the elegiac verse could not only be “formal” but “lyrical” as well. At the same time, the fact that the genre has become synonymous with mourning for the dead is not in doubt. By extension, the unique perspective in Kennedy’s idea is that he extends the sombre reflections to “the death of a friend or public figure”. Moreover, it is striking to note that the critic’s insight reveals the “serious reflections” that more than often pervade the art form. In this sense, an elegy is by nature the expression of a “solemn subject”. If the perspective in which the mourner offers his/her solemn reflection is anything to go by, then the evocation of a sombre atmosphere could entail both the public or private perspective.

Another illuminating thought on elegiac poetry is the idea of Ruth Finnegan. One of the striking qualities in her thoughts is the infusion of the African perspective. To her “elegiac poetry are those poems or songs performed at funeral or memorial sites” (146). Again, the common thread that connects the ideas of these critics thus far is lamentation for the dead. It is no
wonder then it is referred to as “funeral songs” (147). Moreover, the insight that is granted by Finnegan here reveals the lyrical quality of elegiac poetry from Africa. This thought illuminates the oral quality of the art form in Africa before it attained the written medium. In this sense, the critic asserts that “we hear of it [elegiac poetry] from all areas and in many different forms.”

Now, a close reading of the poems of Adimora-Ezeigbo, Afejuku, and Eghagha reveals their distinct but “sustained lament” as a result of the death of their mothers. It is the distinctive and creative manner in which these poets express their agonies that is most interesting.

Adimora-Ezeigbo’s foray into poetry has generated not much critical attention in comparison with her narratives. Chukwueloka Chukwuloo and Asika Emmanuel consider her “poetry as a veritable tool for social criticism and reformation” (354). Besides, Niyi Akingbe’s criticism is focused on the poet’s lamentation of “shifting norms” in the society (24). In another light, Godwin Emezue’s critical thought reveals the poet’s innate “commitment to (Hu-) woman rights activism” (49).

The poetry of Afejuku is fast gaining critical attention. Kola Eke’s critical insight focuses on the general qualities of death in his poetry (451-464). Moreover, Sunny Awhefeada’s thought is on the ‘romanticism and alienation” features in Afejuku’s poetry (31-50); while Clement Odia is obsessed with the eco-critical issues that pervade his Poetry (253-260).

On the other hand, Christopher Anyokwu investigates the “Bloomian anxieties” in the poetry of Eghagha (115-125); while Macaulay Mowarin’s linguistic concern is centred on his stylistic patterns (66-76). Besides, Sunny Awhefeada’s critical focus is on the poet’s expression of “motherhood and sundry preoccupations” (81).

Undoubtedly, the above critics have made valid comments on the poetry of these three Modern Nigerian Poets. Yet, one is not unaware that there could hardly be a study that is specifically dedicated to the “sustained lament” of Nigerian poets on the glorious exit of their mothers to eternity. In this connection, this paper seeks to espouse the elegiac disposition of Adimora-Ezeigbo, Afejuku and Eghagha with specific focus on their mothers.

The sad atmosphere generated by the death of Adimora-Ezeigbo’s mother is graphically painted in one of her elegies entitled “A Matriarch Departs.” The poem is written in memory of Madam Gladys Adimora. It reads this way:

It came in the airwaves,  
Clash of emotions in motion:  
The sailing wind  
The air quivered, tremulous, burdened,  
Heavy with news, weighty news,  
Reunion signalled life in time warp,  
Do you see whither the gulls fly?  
To the far side whither souls go,  
There awaits the Bull himself
Looking out forever so long,
waiting (DM 113).

The painful news of “Madam Gladys” departure to glory infuses a note of elegiac suspense at the beginning of the poem. Moreover, there is a skilful injection of grief demonstrated through emotional fluctuations. With the clever use of imaginative brilliance, the shock “news” of losing a loved one is suggested with travelling and seismic images. The whole atmosphere of the poem is loaded with emotional tremors as “Madam Gladys” metaphorically sails into eternity. Besides, to be conversant with the speaker’s use of repetition in the fourth line is to understand the horrific impact of Mama’s death on her consciousness.

As the poem continues in the successive lines, the speaker arrests our attention with the consolatory picture of a “reunion” crafted with euphemistic language. However, she is quick to stress the pain that such a “reunion” has on her perception of life. It is no wonder therefore that she intersperses bird imagery with rhetorical question to emphasise the idea of death in the poem. Besides, the elegiac atmosphere is further charged with pictures of celestial bodies moving to the “far side”. By now, the intelligent reader of the poem must appreciate the speaker’s use of apt diction to evoke a solemn atmosphere. There is no doubt that the insight of Adimora-Ezeigbo stresses her belief in the African concept of a departed “soul”. To quote John Mbiti “many African people... do not visualise any geographical separation between the two worlds –the world of the living and the dead” (160 emphasis added). In this regard, one is not surprised that the “matriarch” is being awaited keenly by the “Bull himself.”

In another stanza of the poem, the speaker uses apostrophe to heighten the sombre emotions that trail the mother’s departure:

Mother, remember the hour of rest
Unimpeded by night’s grasping hands
Behind your abandoned torture chamber
Where you lay waiting for respite
Trapped by irredeemable years of pain
We watched a hill mowed down
The anthill dissolved at sunset
Bereaved termites like wind-driven leaves
Scatter each pursuing its forced course
And masks re-enter abandoned ant-holes

The solemn atmosphere here is gripping. What is significant here is the use of metaphorical language to elucidate the glorious exit of “mama”. To the speaker, “the hour of rest” illuminates her perception of death. Moreover, to imagine that the sombre situation is sustained through a clever injection of personification is quite impressive. In this case, the pain “mama” went through before her demise is captured with imaginative proficiency. In addition, one
cannot beg to imagine the speaker’s use of language that underscores the painful experience of “mama” as triggered by her prolonged ailment. The evocation of this grievous scene is stressed with apt diction. To Adimora-Ezeigbo, the mother’s brutal medical condition is comparable to one inflicted on a suspected criminal in a “torture chamber”. From the insight in the fourth line of the poem, there is evidence that the speaker’s mother is “waiting for respite” from the “irredeemable years of pains.”

As the poem progresses in the succeeding line, the death of “Madam Gladys Adimora” is illuminated with euphemistic language laced with visual imagery. In this sense, the reader’s sense of sight is stimulated to visualise how “a hill” is cut down as well as the dissolution of “ant hill at sunset”. The amazing thing about this poetic use of language is that it infuses freshness in the evocation of an elegiac atmosphere. The diction is not only innovative, but it shows the speaker’s astute management and mastery of imaginative resources. Moreover, the meticulous reader of the poem should be impressed with the metaphorical description of insect as mourners. There is added force in the elegiac disposition of the speaker as she weaves together simile with climatic and agricultural images to evoke the grievous and sombre atmosphere of mourning. The image that strikes the reader’s visual sense here is of a colony of termites scattered abroad after the dissolution of the “anthill”. To sustain the “bereaved” atmosphere in the poem “each termite is seen “pursuing its forced course” into “abandoned ant holes.” If anything, the apt depiction of a bereaved scene here reflects the poet’s craftsmanship as an elegist.

The grievous atmosphere is sustained in the closing stanza of the poem: We missed your looming presence, Mama, For two decades we watched you decline, Eyes filled with pain, hands too heavy to lift Now we miss your physical presence, But our hearts rejoice for the life you lived, You pampered us with love and special dishes, Like the eagle for her nestlings. Beloved mama, make new nests in living trees Growing in the heavenly places My wonderful godmother, laanudo (DM 114).

The devastation of the painful loss is aptly demonstrated in the opening line of the quoted passage. In a way, the repetition of the plural pronoun “we” underscores the role of the speaker as the mouth piece of the deceased children. The exit of “mama” brings back enduring memories of her “looming presence”. It is instructive to note that the mourner further grasps our attention with the precarious medical condition of the mother before her passage to eternity in line two. In the word “decline” the speaker’s mastery of euphemistic language is recognised. Besides, one is
amazed at the length of time mama’s health depreciated. At the same time, there is a skilful appeal to the reader’s visual senses to capture the brutal “pain” in the “eyes” of “mama” as well as the weak state of her body. From all indications, it seems “mama” suffered from paralysis.

However, with a shrewd use of contrast, there is an infusion of consolatory atmosphere in the poem. In this case, the legacies of “mama” on the earth become the consolation of her family members. The speaker grasps our attention with her mother’s rare display of affection towards her children. By so doing, one is not unaware of the creative use of the eagle image. The brilliance in this poetic analogy reflects the true picture of motherly “love”. To be properly acquainted with this image the reader would need to have a good knowledge of how the female “eagle” protects and provides for her “nestlings”. Consequently, the poem assumes a higher elegiac dimension as the use of apostrophe is sensed. In this instance, the suggestive use of language is elevated with a graphic injection of bird, agricultural and celestial images. Interestingly, it is the speaker’s resort to code-switching in the poem’s last line that strengthens the sombre atmosphere further.

In the case of Afejuku, the pain of losing a loving mother is graphically painted in one of his elegies entitled “Sweet Grief”. The language of the mourner underscores his heart-felt lamentation. Hear him:

The times rolled by
The prolonged season of departure
Came... rather suddenly
And nothing happened
To halt the ripe fall (OW, 2).

The grievous atmosphere of the poem starts off effectively with its oxymoronic title. Besides, the lament of the speaker is accompanied with sombre reflection. In a way Afejuku elegiac cry is full of reminiscences. He skilfully uses imaginative language to evoke gloomy memories of enduring grief. Moreover, the deft use of personification illuminates the devastating emotional presence of death. To the speaker, the enduring image of sadness generated by the imaginative expression in line two is accentuated by the sudden impact of death. The freshness in Afejuku’s elegiac expression is further underscored by a fantastic injection of euphemistic expression laced with agricultural imagery. Interestingly, it is the presence of death that is most illuminating in the penultimate line. There is a clever evocation of its overwhelming power through the picture of a “ripe’ fruit detaching itself from its stem.

At this juncture, it is very important that one comments on the significance of the expression “the ripe fall”. In the first place, its euphemistic value to the issue of death in the poem is quite impressive. Secondly, the fact that the speaker acknowledges the good old age of the deceased in a poetic manner is most insightful. Although not clearly stated at this point, one is also impressed with
Afejuku’s brilliant depiction of sombre atmosphere that foregrounds the glorious exit of the mother.

As the poem progresses, the speaker’s lament for his mother assumes a higher dimension:

Hopes, dreams, plans of old melt like left-overs of lumps of sugar soaked in spittles of flies and ants who never give up weaving nests.
Like birds, (vultures?) where Over-ripe fruits (or carrions?) are.

What a dirge
For you my heart
What a dirge
For you my beauty!

Remarkably, it is the apt injection of animal as well as agriculture images that illuminate Afejuku’s intelligent depiction of his mother’s passage to eternal glory. To be specific, the graphic image of “flies and ants” devouring “over-ripe fruits” is metaphorically juxtaposed with “vultures” gorging on “carrions”. Any gifted reader of the poem would be able to see through the speaker’s language that the mother died at a good old age.

In the second stanza, there is an exclamatory cry by the speaker that stresses his strong feelings for the departed soul of his mother. Undoubtedly, he seems impressed by his “dirge” for his beloved “beauty”. Little wonder then that the use of repetition is noticed. Besides, one is amazed by the speaker’s metaphorical use of language to stress a son’s unimaginable love and appreciation for his mother. One striking thought that is noticeable in this elegy is Afejuku’s resort to apostrophe. The manner in which he directly addresses the dead reminds one again of John Mbiti’s statement that “the next world is in fact geographically ‘here’[and] that the living dead is near to [us] and can be approached through prayer, libation and offering” (161).

Paradoxically, it is the successive stanzas of the poem that espouse the mourner’s consolatory tone vividly:

My grief is sweet,
like an over-sweetened cake,
To present happy guests-
Mourners, sympathisers, all, in line and queue
To eat the funeral dish...
What a way to mourn the dead
What a song of death
For you my heart
What a song of lament
For you my mother!

The elegiac quality of this poem is creatively enhanced through brilliant injection of paradox interwoven with simile. The implication of these expressions reflects the speaker’s consolation that the mother attained the “ripe” age before her death. Closely connected to this is the “happy” disposition of the “guests” at the “funeral.” The “queue” of “mourners” seems impressive and encouraging to the speaker. From all indications, he wants to use the “funeral” as an avenue to celebrate the mother’s memorable stay in the earth by entertaining the “guests” with sumptuous “funeral dish.”

In the succeeding stanza, the consolatory tone of the speaker is further suggested with the unique manner in which the mother is mourned. If anything, the elegiac rendition also appeals to his sense of emotional appreciation. By so doing, the mournful atmosphere takes on a celebratory form as the deceased rare qualities are celebrated with grievous delight. Hear him:

My mother,
You who celebrated with celebrants
And mourned with mourners,
You whose smiles and sighs always
Were sincere-
My mother,
You the petal and flower of delight
That blossomed in the heart of the wounded,
You the rose that celebrants put to their nostrils...
What a way to mourn you
My heart, my beauty, my mother!

In the above quoted passage, the speaker’s consolation is expressed with apostrophe once again. To the mourner, the “mother” represents a rare breed of human sophistication. Besides, the pain of losing such a person is further underscored by her sense of communal responsibility towards “celebrants” and “mourners.” To Afejuku, this unique quality makes the “mother” distinct and special.

Furthermore, the repetition of the expression “mother” emphasises the speaker’s emotional as well as grievous reminiscence of a special relationship. The cord of unbreakable union between “mother” and child is epitomised with delightful poetic sophistication. By so doing, the beautiful infusion of metaphorical language is intertwined with floral imagery to illuminate the delicate as well as pleasurable qualities of this rare “beauty.” In a similar fashion, one is fascinated with Afejuku’s use of the “rose” and olfactory images to demonstrate the sweet and attractive love of his mother’s “heart” towards people.
By now, the observant reader of this poem should be familiar with the speaker’s exclamatory tone that climaxes the consolatory language in the closing couplet.

The grief of Eghagha is demonstrated in one of his elegies for his mother entitled “Mama Answers the Night Call.” The poem’s opening stanza is cast with haunting images:

She was just an inch from the infinite fringe and she soberly spoke to me from the depth of her fast fading and failing eyes white sheets and white poles colourless catheter and silvery pans dangling period pipes and life hoses to bring slim hope to the slipping one (MD 11).

In the opening line of the poem, the speaker’s use of euphemistic language interspersed with metrical imagery underscore the fatal condition of “mama.” In this connection, the sombre atmosphere generated by the auditory image in the second line is noted. What is not arguable about the speaker’s use of language in line three is that the Mother is steadily “slipping” into a lifeless state. In this instance, the musical quality generated by the apt use of alliteration evokes a picture of mama’s gradual walk into glory. If there is anything that strikes the reader’s imagination in this poem then it is the evocation of clinical imagery. One is moved into a hospital scene to see the falling health of “Mama.” By so doing, the imagination could picture the “white sheets” of the hospital bed that “mama” is lying on. Besides, the “dangling period pipes and life hoses” could also be seen hanging on “white poles”. Similarly, the “colourless catheter and silvery pans” further illuminate the agonising and pathetic medical condition of “Mama.” The implication of this is to demonstrate the medical will to save “mama” from succumbing to the heavy hands of death.

In the successive stanzas of the poem, the sombre atmosphere of the poem assumes a plangent dimension as the speaker’s lamentation continues:

She silently slide into my anxious arms from the serene softness of the bile-laden bed into the cheerless chair with wily wheels the chair agile ones dread with agility faithful companion to weak limbs Can you carry me?

The aching echoes came from the far rear chilling images of childhood flogged me as this role reversal came flooding me yet a smile plastered my face.

By now, the discerning reader of the poem should know that Mama’s urine has escaped the “catheter” infused in her body. By implication, one is not surprised that she has become uncomfortable with “the bile-laden bed.” Therefore, she is said to have ‘silently slid into the anxious arms” of the speaker. At this juncture, it is
very important that one recognises the idea being communicated here. Besides, it has been asserted that “in a good poem every word has a definite role to play” (Egudu 85). In this case, what is recognisable from the speaker’s choice of words is that “mama” suffered from medical paralysis before her death. By extension, the personification in line three of the first stanza above illuminates the depressing and gloomy condition of “mama.” The critical condition is further reflected through a skilful comparison of the “agile ones” loathsome attitude towards the wheel chair. Remarkably, it is the apt injection of metaphorical language that shows how mama’s weak limbs have become attached to the ‘faithful companion.” Closely connected with this is the tearful cry by “mama” for her son to “carry” her. The line is loaded with emotional grief.

In the succeeding stanza, the speaker intimates us with the painful “echoes” of mama’s cry on his auditory senses. The manner in which he perceives the mother’s call for assistance strikes him with shock. By so doing, his imaginative senses are said to become frozen with flashes of “childhood” memories. It is these “chilling images” that underscores the speaker’s sorrows. Moreover, the depressing thought of “role reversal” between mother and child is evoked with the image of a devastating flood. Little wonder then that one cannot ignore the tone of consolation that is evident in Eghagha’s elegiac cry. Kola Eke has maintained that “part of the beauty of an African elegy lies in its unrelenting consolatory tone” (92).

Apart from the recognition of the speaker’s use of code-switching here, one is not unaware of the euphemistic value of the pidginised expression to emphasise mama’s steady journey to glory. To the speaker, the faint voice of “mama” in these critical times lends credence to her gradual exit from life. Moreover, the grievous atmosphere is heightened through the use of personification. In this case, the reader could capture how the death-laden visual senses of “mama” transfer sad messages of sudden and great pain to the “heart.” Interestingly, it is the recourse of the speaker to euphemism that strengthens his consolation. He wants mama’s passage to eternity to be “graceful.” One cannot fail to spot what the mother’s death could mean to him. In fact the depth of his sorrows is captured

The elegiac atmosphere is sustained as the poem moves from stanza to stanza:

*Mama dey go*

They came from the small of her throat her pained eyes wrote a pensive letter searing the heat in half the exit had to be graceful

do not go mama
silence split the air silence spat into the air

can we pass this place to ovwia
those trees resemble the trees at ovwia
take me home to ovwia.
by his euphemistic cry to “do not go mama”.

Furthermore, the evocation of a mourning atmosphere in the poem’s fourth stanza is most striking. The sheer strength of the speaker’s use of repetition is shocking. One is touched by the mourner’s use of language to demonstrate the impact of mama’s death in the poem’s atmosphere. The gripping effect of words such as “silence” and “air” accentuate the sustained gloom in the poem.

In addition, to appreciate the closing stanza of the poem is to grasp the speaker’s imaginative brilliance. Here, the discerning reader should be able to picture mama’s deep cry to be taken “home.” She wants to use her death as a medium to return to “Ovwia”. In a way, the picture that is painted here illuminates the celestial image of “mama” making the journey to rest in peace in her home town of “Ovwia”. This is not to mention the fact that she could already spot “the trees” at “Ovwia” in her solemn journey to eternity. In fact, the closing triplet of the poem demonstrates the speaker’s elegiac skills.

**Conclusion**
The elegiac commitment of Adimora-Ezeigbo, Afejuku and Eghagha has been the main focus of this essay. Specifically, we have examined how these poets respond to the sad exit of their mother from the earth. Undoubtedly, what is not arguable in this study is that these poets demonstrate with different elegiac perspectives the haunting images of the sad losses.

Adimora-Ezeigbo’s elegy for her mother is characterised by graphic depictions of emotional pain. The devastation of the painful loss assumes a shocking height as soon as the “news” of the mother’s departure to glory is received. A close reading of her poem reveals that there is a clever evocation of sustained solemn atmosphere that triggers the sombre and painful suggestion of losing a loved one. More importantly, the freshness of the elegist language illuminates the consolatory atmosphere of the poem.

Afejuku’s lamentation over the death of his mother is skilfully crafted with enduring images of grief and sadness. The amazing thing about the mourner’s expression is that he considers his mother’s departure as a “sweet-grief”. In this way, one is impressed with the manner in which he uses the fall of a ripe fruit to justify the mother’s death at a good old age. Moreover, it is instructive that the reader of Afejuku’s poems recognises his reflection of a tragic event with creative and appealing images. One is delighted that the mourner intersperses his grievous cry with the consolation that the mother lived a long and exemplary life.

In reading the elegiac poems of Eghagha, one is not unaware of his delightful use of imaginative expressions to evoke the plangent images of death. Apart from his apt demonstration of mama’s painful experience in the hospital, what strikes the meticulous reader of his poems is the manner in which he mourns his mother’s sad exit. Besides, the poems are
interwoven with consolatory suggestions to accentuate the motherly qualities of "mama".

Finally, it must be stated here that one element that seems to re-occur again and again in this study is the brilliant use of language by these poets. One cannot feign ignorance of figurative expression such as personification, euphemism, simile, metaphor, as well as striking images such as celestial, clinical, agricultural and aquatic in the poems. The sophistication of these images gives freshness to the poems and elevates the elegiac mastery of these poets. In the end, it is our opinion that these special elegies for mothers will continue to reverberate and continue to motivate future poets to experiment with the elegiac genre.

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