



MARIA AJIMA'S *SOFT WINDS*: A POETRY OF BITTERSWEET IMAGERY

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Abstract:

Imagery provides a text with aesthetic depth and impresses the mind with critical judgement and the taste for artistic values. Through imagery, the motifs of a text are logically ascertained. The aim of interpreting Maria Ajima's collection of poetry, *Soft Winds*, through its web of imagery is to project its literary beauty and the critical message borne by its content and made incisive by its techniques. The paper is built on the formalist theory that believes that form and technique are part of content, and their approach provides objective reading. It applies the descriptive analytical method through which imagery in the poetry is paradoxically conceptualised as bittersweet imagery. In the poetry, the sweet imagery celebrates nature and passions of life while the bitter imagery decry bad leadership, corruption and social anomalies in Africa that are ravaging the continent. They also reveal the lamentation for the catastrophe of death and anger. The sweet imagery triggers feelings of mellowness, excitement and inspiration, while the bitter imagery elicits provocation and soberness and implores human redemption. The imagery overall provides the poetry with aesthetic beauty and impels critical thoughts on the nature of human existence.

Keywords: imagery, poetry, *Soft Winds*, Maria Ajima, formalism

1. Introduction

The art of poetry furnishes the writer with the space to weave his or her emotions and recreate his or her observations through artifice. Once the writer manifests this art, he or she shares it with an audience who in turn become part of his or her art by listening, reading and expressing thoughts about it. This then launches poetry from the personal to the public where it is consumed and responded to through various comments. In the view of William Cullen Bryant, "*poetry is that art which selects and arranges the symbols of thought in such a manner as to excite the imagination the most powerfully and delightfully.*"

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Bryant's thought here reveals the systematicity of poetic art and affect as its end product. By systematicity of poetic art, it is meant that poetry is carefully constructed through imagery of the society formed by the human mind, in this case, the poet. The effect then is the influence that the interpretation of such imagery has on the mind of the reader. "Imagery", as explained by the *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, "covers the use of language to represent objects, actions, feelings, thoughts, ideas, states of mind and any sensory or extra-sensory experience" (413). Abrams avers that "'imagery'...is used to signify all the objects and qualities of sense perception referred to in a poem or other work of literature, whether by literal description, by allusion, or in the vehicles...of its similes and metaphors" (121). He points that "its applications range all the way from the "mental pictures" which, it is sometimes claimed, are experienced by the reader of a poem, to the totality of the components which make up a poem" (121).

2. A Brief Note on The Author

Maria Ajima is a professor of African literature and creative writing with the Department of English Language and Literature at Benue State University, Makurdi. She is a poet and fiction writer and her voyage in the creative industry has produced numerous works. She has published a collection of short stories entitled *The Web* (1997) and has five collections of poetry to her name. These are *Cycles* (1996), *Speaking of Wines* (1998), *Poems of Sanity* (2000), *Thri...ll* (2007) and *Soft Winds* (2023), which is the latest. Maria Ajima won the 1996 ANA/Spectrum Prose Prize with her manuscript "The Survivors", and in the year 2000 was African Runner Up Commonwealth short story winner with her short story "Mother Mine". She is a member of Association of Nigerian Authors' Board of Trustees and was one time president of Women Writers of Nigeria (WRITA).

Maria Ajima is the first woman from northern Nigeria to publish a collection of poems - in 1996. She belongs to the third generation of Nigerian poets alongside poets as Remi Raji, Joe Ushie, Isidore Diala, Ikeogu Oke, Uche Nduka, Usman Shehu, Idzia Ahmad, Esiaba Irobi, Femi Oyebode, Afam Akeh, Maik Nwosu, Ogaga Ifowodo and several others. This generation of poets emerged in the late 1980s and bloomed in the 1990s. They are known for their simple style and direct expressions while their context and themes are derived from the socio-political milieu in post-independence Nigeria. These are injustice, ethnicity, bad leadership, environmental degradation, religious extremism, insecurity, sexism, poverty, and inequity among others. Ajima shares poetic oeuvre with Nigerian poetic giants like Niyi Osundare and Tanure Ojaide. This is for the fact that they distinctively deploy African oral materials, humour, satire and straightforward language to portray the deplorable social state of post-independence Nigeria and Africa at large and show concern for the environment and the oppressed projecting a redemptive vision.

3. Critical Reception of Maria Ajima's Works

Ajima's corpus of imaginative works have been well received in the academic and scholarly sphere. Ode Ogede in his book, *Nigeria's Third-Generation Literature: Content and Form*, studies Ajima's collection of short stories, *The Web*, alongside Okey Ndibe's *Foreign God's Inc.*, Tejul Cole's *Open City*, Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*, Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*. Reading *The Web* as "Parable, Metaphor, the Pictorial Frame, Emblem of Moral Decadence: Fiction in Revolt, Washing Dirty Linen in Public", Ogede reveals that the web is a metaphor with a double entendre; that is, the web can be dangerous as a preying trap and a securing haven for its builder, the carnivorous spider. This web then represents the Nigerian society with abundant resources and opportunities that should enrich her people yet, they are hijacked and siphoned by the few opportunists leaving the masses with nothing reasonable to make a good living out of (48). Stella Ashibi Yairus examines Ajima's *The Thri...ll* as "A Socio-political Portrait of Nigeria" while Priscilla Ojochide Ajodo looks at "Social Realities in Maria Ajima's *Poems of Sanity*". Yairus and Ajodo separately reveal that Ajima begs for social and political transformation of Nigeria and Africa in general. In "Beyond a Single Category: Intersections of Oppressions in Northern Nigerian Women Poetry", Dikko Muhammad explores Ajima's *Cycles* with other northern Nigerian women poets like Nana Aishatu Ahmad (*Voice from the Kitchen and Other Poems*) and Angela Miri (*Running Waters and Other Poems*). Muhammad sees Ajima's poetry as a call for intersectional unity which will better the lot of Nigerians (207). This is against the discriminating tactics deployed by unscrupulous politicians to divide the Nigerian people along ethnic, gender and religious lines in order to maintain political power. However, when the politicians gain power they quickly forget about the masses totally. The masses then suffer and get oppressed sparing no ethnic, gender or religious section. Muhammad maintains that Ajima however believes and encourages Nigerians that it is only through unity and love for one another that the oppressed would overcome their oppressors, the political elites.

Bartholomew Chizoba Akpah in "Satire, Humour, and Parody in 21st Century Nigerian Women's Poetry" discusses Ajima's *The Thri...ll* as a poetry that uses humour, satire and parody to promote feminist visions and values. Evaluating the poem "Sadiku's Song", Akpah informs that the poem is a parody of Wole Soyinka's play, *The Lion and the Jewel*, in which the old and deceitful patriarch, Baroka, tricks and deflowers a young girl, Sidi, and end up marrying her against her preference for a young husband. In the poem, Akpah observes that Ajima reverses the role and it is the women that turn Baroka, the old man, into a plaything. Akpah ends that through the literary techniques of humour, satire and parody, Ajima condemns vices against womanhood (143). Carmel Igba-Luga and Terlumun Kerekaa's essay, "The Philosophical Perspective of the Poems of Maria Ajima: The Instance of *Cycles*", analyses Ajima's collection of poems, *Cycles*. The critics see the poetry collection, *Cycles*, as a philosophical vision built on logical reasoning while reflecting the existential nature of life (416). In "Gender Issues and Social Crossings in Maria Ajima's *Cycles* and *The Thri...ll*", Kayode Niyi Afolayan reveals that "Without

prejudice, her (Ajima's) critical self-appraisals of issues on gender and politics, put the blames where they belong, the burden remains on those that ought to do the needful" (149). These studies have established critical perspectives on Maria Ajima and her works also giving insight into the nature of Nigerian and African society. However, on the latest collection of poems, *Soft Winds*, this essay is about the first to critically engage with it, especially from the formalist angle.

4. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that this paper is built on is Formalism. Formalism is a literary theory that emerged in Russia in the early 20th century. It was pioneered by such theorists as Roman Jakobson, Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Eichenbaum, Boris Tomashevsky, Yuri Tynyanov and Osip Brik. These theorists belonged to two different intellectual groups known as; The Moscow Linguistic Circle, with members such as Roman Jakobson, Boris Tomashevsky and Osip Brik; and The Society for the Study of Poetic Language, known in Russian as Opojaz, with members as Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Eichenbaum and Yuri Tynyanov. These theorists developed methods of evaluating the literariness of a text. To them, the most significant thing about the text is form. This includes the linguistic and literary devices that make the text artistic. Therefore, the artfulness of a text supersedes the socio-cultural directions of it because it is only in its artfulness that the truth lies. For this reason, the text is to be studied in itself as an entity devoid of its author and the society it represents. It advocates for the close reading of the formal elements of the text such as imagery, symbolism, metaphor, meter et cetera. The ethical bearing of a text does not matter because it is an extrinsic material. It is at the periphery of the text. The intrinsic elements of the text are to be considered because they are the basics. They inform the internal structures of the text which makes it objective.

The Russian formalists desired to create a science of criticism and a systematic method of literary analysis. Boris Eichenbaum's essay entitled "The Theory of the 'Formal Method'" reveals the focus of the Russian formalists as: (a) the desire for a science or "poetics" of literature (b) the linguistic basis of literature and especially of poetry (c) the distinctive attributes of literature, its "literariness" and its autonomous history (d) the stress on literary devices (e) the view of literary history as an evolutionary accretion of innovative devices (f) the concept of the "dominant" (the focusing element of each literary structure, to which other elements are subordinate) (g) the insistence on form and technique as part of content (h) the nature of narrative (notably the key distinction between "story" or *fabula*, the raw chronological events of a narrative, and "plot" or *syuzhet*, the artistic arrangement of events, frequently out of chronological order) (*Norton Anthology...* 1060).

5. Synopsis of the Poetry

Soft Winds, in view here, is a collection of one hundred and thirty-three poems contrived in imagery that enchant and provoke the mind into mellowedness and agitation.

However, this paper has selected thirty-eight poems from the collection and analyses them. Most of the poems in the collection are fashionably short, intense and uncompounded with a language that suits all classes of readers. These give the poetry a flair that prompts its reading in a single-sitting. The poetry provides readers with bittersweet imagery that expose them to the passions of life, the complexities of African societies and the larger world. These project cycles and movements of nature, football passion, death and mourning, social anomalies, bad leadership, cravings for love and satiation in coition. Hence, the thematic thrust of the poetry is ascertained. The poetry opens with a gracious appeal from the poet's persona to have her mind released from the intoxication of the muse of creative letters. This comes in a short poem entitled "Words", which reads "*The egg of words, / Yolk at the centre, / Berth me or I die*" (13).

6. Sweet Imagery in the Poetry

The pleasant and exciting imagery in the poetry are derived from the representations of nature, cravings for love and satiation in coition, football passion and celebration of life.

6.1. Imagery of Nature

The imagery of nature are significantly featured in the poetry. They reveal the poet's persona's acclaim of the gloriousness of nature in its various cycles, movements and features which awe-inspire humans and facilitate life on earth. This can be seen in the titular poem, "*Soft Winds*", which is a single stanza poem made up of three lines. It reads "*Soft winds waft through shafts, / Gently bite my ears / From platforms of blue heavens*" (14). The imagery felt here is that of the cool flow of breeze and its tender feel by the human body, in this circumstance, that of the poet's persona, inducing relaxation. The poem is also an extollation of nature. The statement "*Gently bite my ears*" (14) is a metaphor of human romantic act that stimulates the feelings of love which are soothing. Thus, it can be perceived that cool breezes are soothing. The next poem, "*Glorious*", is a one-stanza poem that also bear the imagery of cool wind. It expresses the poet's persona's compassionate sensation derived from the cool nourishment of the body and mind by the winds. This then gives the poet's persona the impetus to exalt the wind as a glorious natural element. The poem reflects, "*Glorious/ Glorious/ Oh, glorious./ Oh wind, how glorious!! How glorious I feel/ Oh wind!! As you zip from west to east/ Your breeze is glorious/ On my being/ This glorious evening*" (15).

The next kind of the imagery of nature captured in the poetry is that of the sun and its display that impacts the earth. The poem, "*Rays of Sunlight*" presents with the imagery of the early sun rays that light the earth. The poet's persona then reveals how the sun rays bring plants to life and the earth into activity from the slumber of the night. It reads "*The first rays of sunlight,/ Light the golden sheaves of corn,/ Breaking the dark hymen of night*" (16). This is a celebration of the vital relationship between the sunlight and the earth. In the poem, "*Orange Golden Sun*" the power of the sun to provide the earth with the required energy for survival is captured. This is done so in a cheering manner as the sun's energy influences the abundant production of food which enriches humanity. This

is revealed through such lines, *"Orange golden yolk,/ Like a large goose egg,/ Rising from ocean sky,/ The sun..."* *"From the east of heaven/ Rays dissipating,/ Giant flat manna,/ From a full baked sun,/ The gift, our food,/ The sun"* (17). The line *"Like a large goose egg"* is a simile that draws home the image of the sun and makes the poem sublime.

The poem, "Sun" belauds the strength of the sun to undo nights and introduce days. This act is praised for bringing joy to life and eliminating anxiety. It reads, *"Worthy is the sun,/ The strength of days,/ The sword of battles,/ That pierce thro' gloomy nights,/ And gives bloom to days"* (18). In the poem, "You will" the sun is glorified for its early morning rays that warm the body making it active. The poet's persona expresses love for the sun for performing such ingenious duties. The lines run thus, *"You'll just like the sun,/ When she comes out,/ First thing in the morning,/ Sprightly bright like a gay breeze,/ Whose touch is light and easy, / Smooth on your arms"* (20).

In the poem, "Daybreak" the poet's persona gives hope to a loved one in allusion to the light and pomp the sun offers in the form of day while the night recedes. The day symbolises breakthrough while the night symbolises bleakness. Thus, the day light supplied by the sun is expected to light the heart of the loved one and birth hope that will cheer one up. This can be seen in these lines, *"Daybreak;/ The silver rays of the sun,/ Gleaning their way with smiles,/ Forcing away the folding robes of night,/ Making way for the gathering swords of sunlight,/ Shall make way for you in daylight,/ My sweet"* (21). The poem, "Sun Swords" reveals the alertness to the heat produced by the sun which causes bodies to sweat and life to slumber. However, the tone and mood of the poet's persona indicate that such offering from the sun is welcome. It is an experience that releases the body from its wastes, making it refreshed. The poem reads, *"Sun swords glitter,/ From pocket scabbard draw,/ Sun swords;/ Heat rays swimming around,/ Like angry fumes of smoke,/ Loll red tongues,/ Lap vigorously on skin/ Sweltering bodies,/ Sun swords cut on hot days"* (22). The repeated phrase in the poem, *"sun swords"*, is a metaphor that reveals the sharpness of the sun rays and its ability to bite the skin and cause uneasiness.

Imagery of thunder is found in the poetry where the awe of thunder over the universe is portrayed. In the poem, "Thunder" the imagery of the tension in the sky that trigger thunder is captured. The tension is revealed to be the result of the movement of clouds in a bid to release rain. It goes *"children of rain knock knuckles,/ on clouds taut skin,/ cooking thunder rumbles"* (25). In the following poem, "Glass" the horror created by thunder rumbles is captured. The thunder rumbles cause the earth to vibrate leading to quakes in physical structures and nervousness in humans. The poem reports *"Glass, S-H-A-T-T-E-R IN THE SKY!! SCATTER!! THUD! THUD! THUD!! Thunder knocks at taut sky doors"* (26). The expression *"THUD! THUD! THUD!"* is an onomatopoeia that indicates thunder and the fierceness of thunder blasts. The poem, *"Who ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho"* portrays how thunder blasts introduce rain to the earth and cause trembles. It reads, *"Who ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho/ Thunder blares its horns,/ Rains patter down,/ Entrance announced,/ Who ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho/ Kpala kpala kpala/ Vuvuvuvuvuvu vom!! Lions growl in the sky"* (28). Such expressions as *"who ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho"*, *"kpala kpala kpala"* and *"vuvuvuvuvuvu vom!"* are onomatopoeias. *"Who ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho ho"* connotes thunder, *"kpala kpala"* indicates the first few drops of rain while *"vuvuvuvuvuvu vom!"* portends rainfall with full force.

Imagery of rain is prominently featured in the poetry as well. It signifies the excitement, calmness and harmony that the rain causes on earth. The poem, "At Okpoga" is a reflection of the imagery that is figured through the incidence of rainfall and its aftermath in a human community. The community here is Okpoga. Thus, the poet's persona informs of the occurrence of downpour in Okpoga and its attendant consequences on the flora and fauna. The first stanza of the poem runs, "*At Okpoga the rains come down/ In splashes,/ Running down vales and valleys,/ Like happy lovers tears./ Green grasses, Green trees,/ The wind is cool like a gazelle*" (33). It can be seen from those lines that the downpour is heavy producing massive running water that irrigates the landscape of Okpoga. The downpour chills the atmosphere and makes the community refreshed. The simile "*Like happy lovers tears*" connotes the intensity of the downpour and the delight it offers while "*The wind is cool like a gazelle*" is a simile that shows the serenity and innocence created by the rain. The second stanza of the poem reveals the interplay between the flora and fauna in Okpoga catalysed by the offerings of the rain. These then bring harmony, contentment and excitement as needs are supplied. It reads, "*The cock majestically utters its crows:/ Ushering in sharp orange slant/ Of sun rays from eastern shores,/ That bath the land in golden shimmer./ The mother hen coo coos its chicks/ From their mud pens/ Dewy mists alight on land,/ Okpoga, beautiful Okpoga*" (33).

The poem, "A Rainy Day" presents with the imagery that manifest in days of long hours of rainfall that shade the sunshine with thick clouds. The absence of the sunshine then deny the earth the necessary energy to activate life into motion. Rather, the day becomes cold and blunt while life weaken and becomes less productive. The day winds out unnoticed giving way to night. The poem reveals, "*It's a rainy day,/ The rain has sent day to sleep,/ Everything, everybody slumbers dronning;/ The day is cool, the day is dull,/ Clouds gather in somnolence/ The sky dims its silent eyes in espionage,/ All in solemn, time delays;/ The day long slumbers on-/ Sun rays attempt a break out:/ The dusk its west foot forward,/ Keeps the jewelled sun at bay,/ To let its dark knight in*" (35). The expression "*The sky dims its silent eyes in espionage*" is a personification of the sky showing its dormancy that betrays the earth. The poem, "Heavy slap" is an announcement of rain. It portrays how rain falls onto the earth with force running on the vegetation. The poem reads "*The rain down hard came,/ like heavy slaps it descends,/ on the velvet green carpet of grass*" (36). The statement "*like heavy slaps it descends*" is a simile that signify the aggression with which the rain pours down on earth.

The imagery of nature discoursed under this section dwell on such elements of nature as wind, sun, thunder and rain. Their interplay with humans and supply of the earth with energy are extolled. This is because their offerings are awe-inspiring to humans and regenerative of the earth.

6.2. Imagery of Passions of Life

Moving away from nature, other poems capture the imagery of passions of life. The poem, "Moments of Glory" bears a positive mood and a pleasant tone. It reveals the joy derived from successes and the honour that accompanies the celebration of achievements. It reads, "*These moments of glory,/ When the ice cream is oh so sweet,/ When the*

chicken casserole wafts its saucy scent,/ The salad is tasty and Italian,/ The black Russian caviar has specially been ordered for you,/ The champagne bottles pop for you,/ The waitresses are at your beck and call;/ The good life is at its heights,/ Oh, savour them, savour them!" (57). These lines reveal that success calls for feasts which exalt the achiever. In such moments, the ground is filled with splendour, food and drinks and music that make the event lively. The achievement commands the attention and service of all. This honours and enlivens the celebrant and his audience. Therefore, it is an excellent thing to make achievements and be celebrated. The poem ends by encouraging achievers to cherish moments of honour and lively events that follow. This is because such moments are rare. "*Savour the moment of glory,/ it may never come again for you*" (57).

The poem, "I was just Thinking" reflects the imagery of feeling for sexual passion and satiation derived from coition between two lovers. The poem is a celebration of sexuality and the sweetness and relief it offers to love partners. It charmingly leads readers into the build up for the magnetic passion. This begins from the paroxysm of hormonal urges stimulating the body into the mood. Then the foreplay - touching, kissing and caressing compassionately. This leads into the union of the two lovers engaging their genitals by thrusts and wriggles. The act creates excitement and honey feelings that rise to climax by explosive discharges of reproductive fluids. Then the withdrawal and experience of respite and satiation. The poem reads, "*I was just thinking,/ One hot saucy night,/ That what I wanted,/ Was to seize into you,/ Getting one saucy kiss,/ Full of slippery saliva,/ And that musky scent,/ That streams from your nostrils;/ Give me your succulent lips,/ I will nib at them like my favourite cucumber./ Quickly dip your honey coated cone into my liquid ink,/ I've become a slippery octopus,/ My core pleasantly engulfed,/ The hot lava of your stem,/ Relentlessly pounding at me,/ My tentacles enclose breathlessly sucking,/ I swim in the ocean of your love,/ I smile and I sweat*" (129).

The imagery of football passion is reflected in the poetry in poems such as "Fans", "Footwork Loose" and "Soccer Wars". They reveal the frenzy of football fans in arenas of football games chanting, drumming, dancing, cheering their teams and jeering their opponents. The moves of players on the field with the football, their tackles and counter tackles and the zealous coaches on the sidelines shouting instructions are captured. The poem, "Fans" reads, "*Voices cascading,/ As those of a thousand cocks,/ Harsh hawks, clacking beaks,/ Rough lions, really raw,/ The stadia's a war zone!*" (46). These lines reveal the imagery of football fans celebrating and displaying their passion for the game of football. The expression "*voices cascading,/ as those of a thousand cocks*" is a simile that points to the harmony of individual utterances that emerge from the stadium in thunderous manner vibrating the air.

In the poem, "Footwork Loose" the football skills players display, the intensity of their movements and the aggression with which they make contact with opponents on the field are captured. These lines show, "*As ants busy on the trail,/ Heaving to and fro like turgid waves,/ Soaring like eagles on green mounts,/ Hitting shins like shindings... / Elbow wars, shoulder wars, feet wars,/ Head wars: battering rams,/ Diagonal moves, hexagonal moves, octagonal moves,/ War, war, war, bloodless war on the move,/ Footwork loose*" (47). This projects the wild and ecstatic nature of competitive footballing activities. Such activities tend to

appear as if they are battles but without arms. The poem also shows the fanaticism of the fans whose cravings for glory and passion for the game grow into bizarreness. This can be seen in these lines, *"Thousand voices in the stadia,/ Rise like thunderous waves of waters,/ Folds of ocean waters roar,/ The ball! The ball! The round leather ball!! War, war, war, war chants"* (47). The poem, "Soccer Wars" reflects the imagery of the bustles and hassles involved in football practices. It reads, *"See them shifting foot to foot,/ Seeming natty school boys in the wings,/ Red eyed, tough hided crocs, face grim,/ Mouth opened sideways as in throes -/ Of anginic grips,/ Mouthing shouting, flying battle plans, arms flying/ There a coach before you stands."* (48)

Celebration of sexuality and achievement in life and football passion are the main imagery perceived here. These imageries invoke excitement as the human mind is tickled through their encounter.

7. Bitter Imagery in the Poetry

Suffering, poverty, war, bad leadership, corruption, injustice, inequity, anger, death and mourning are the constituents of bitter imagery in the poetry. Such imagery are mind disturbing and stimulate critical thoughts and actions for redeeming humanity.

7.1. Imagery of Corruption and Bad Leadership

The following group of poems reflect the imagery of social anomalies, bad leadership and corruption found in Africa. They foreground the imagery of corruption, poor social amenities, insecurity, despotism, nepotism and diseases. In the poem, "Baby" the poet's persona laments the descent of the society from merit and fairness to nepotism and cheating. She then encourages her ward who is experiencing difficulties in the socio-economic sphere as a consequence of unfairness to never give up and keep working hard and searching. Through this process, the poet's persona believes her ward will one day make a breakthrough and have a comfortable life. This is reflected in these lines, *"Baby,/ There's no fair as in the word fair;/ Out there, the values are skimmed,/ It's not what you're worth anymore,/ That matters,/ Sometimes it's who you know,/ Or where you come from that it is,/ Baby don't run.../ Baby,/ My Baby,/ Don't fear no more,/ Baby don't fear/ 'Twill be alright as surely as the centuries roll by;/ Baby, go out there,/ My Baby"* (43-45). The imagery mirrored in this poem, "Baby", are corruption and nepotism and they relate to what has become the general trend in the current Nigerian society. The Nigerian polity has been over saturated by people with low integrity in leadership who have introduced corruption that has marred the growth and development of people. There is high unemployment and poverty in the country. Jobs and contracts and so many other socio-economic benefits are offered based on nepotism, bribery reception, tribalism and political party affiliations to the people with low or no capability to handle and maintain them. These then have caused serious discontent and social insecurity in the country especially among the masses.

In the poem, "I've Given up on Dictators" the poet's persona decries the emergence of despots in the African polities who loot the resources of their countries for their selfish interests and cause severe hardship for the masses. These despots suppress the masses

and shut them from expressing their displeasure. They intimidate the masses with their expensive convoy of cars and security forces. This can currently be seen in the leadership style of president Yoweri Museveni of Uganda and Paul Biya of Cameroon. In Nigeria too, the masses have never had it better. Each political administration brings in political dictators in leadership who cater only for their self aggrandisement and those of their friends leaving the masses in penury. They violate human rights by setting the security forces against the masses to harass them if they attempt to criticise the government. Thus, these unending rise of tyrants into leadership has dashed the hope of people for a credible leadership ever in the country. This is the reason the poet's persona has voiced her apathy for such leaderships. The poem reveals, *"I've given up on dictators,/ Who spring up over the face of the earth,/ Who think they have life and death in their punny hands.... / Who always corner the commonwealth,/ And dare any to protest..../ Who drive fellow sapiens off the road,/ With their sirens and motorcades,/ For they really believe,/ They're the only ones with right of way..../ That after one goes, another goes"* (59).

In the poem, "Why the Stagger?", the imagery felt is that of rust. The poet's persona questions and lampoons the shamelessness and greed of the older generation of Nigerian leaders to continue to hold onto power and share it among themselves in an exclusive circle. They do so by keeping off the young, vibrant and energetic generation, who could inject freshness and dynamism in the polity for effective governance, from getting leadership opportunities. The poet's persona then advocates that the elderly generation who are becoming weak and tired should allow the youths some opportunities into leadership positions so that they too can make their contributions and grow in the society. This is revealed in the poem thus, *"Why the stagger to the power house?/ The nectar of the nest of the bees,/ Is so sweet and beguiling that,/ Those who have tasted of the food of the gods,/ Keep elbowing out./ This generation is held in the thralls of geriatric worship,/ The world's a stage, where the elderly gentlemen and women,/ Need to leave a space for the younger gentlemen and women,/ To also contribute their brains and brawn,/ To the general polity;/ So why swagger and stagger,/ To the grand thrones to wield the horse tails?"* (64).

The poem, "Water Chronicles" is a critique of the inability of the various tiers of Nigerian government leaders to provide pipe borne water for their subjects, even when they have rivers running through their regions and cities. The poet's persona bewails that such ineptitude by the government leaders leads to serious water scarcity at the detriment of the masses. However, ordinarily there would not have been issues of water scarcity in the country and her various cities if the government had made serious efforts to provide the people with water. There is always shortage of water for drinking and domestic and industrial uses. As a result, the poor resort to self-help by engaging in primitive means of accessing water. And most of the water accessed through such means harbour diseases as they are not properly treated. This leads to fatal disease outbreaks. These lines reveal, *"Many rivers around us,/ Yet no water to drink,/ How can we live by the banks of the rivers,/ And yet have no water to drink oooo./ Year in year out by the rivers we sat,/ And there we cried.... / How can we every rolling year,/ Listen to our churning rulers,/ Coming with mouthwatering tales/ Of waterspouts pipes,/ In the midst of drowning floods/ With no drops for us to drink?/ There is water all around of us,/ Yet no single drop to drink"* (67). It can be seen

from those lines that the water crisis in the cities is as a consequence of the corrupt practices of the government leaders. Every administration always claims to have invested hugely in water resources in order to provide portable water for the masses yet at the end nothing comes out. In reality, this situation can be related to the case of Makurdi, the capital city of Benue State of Nigeria. The city is divided into two halves by the River Benue, the second largest river in Nigeria. During rainy season, the river floods the city and displaces people and destroy farms and properties worth millions of naira. In dry season however, the city dwellers experience severe water scarcity. They spend millions of naira trying to access water individually. But the Benue State government has since 1999 initiated a project called "Greater Makurdi Water Works" where each and every administration that comes in votes hundreds of millions of naira on the project with no result to show for it. Makurdi remains with no pipe borne water, and even necessary portable water.

In the poem, "He! Come and See" the poet's persona exposes and satirises the poor execution of contracts for public buildings in Nigeria. She reveals the various groups of public and civil servants that compromise to have poorly constructed public buildings. This can be seen in these lines, *"Heh come and see,/ The dour fruits of corruption in naija,/ The gigantic buildings tottering,/ On their foundations,/ Creaking and sighing from being deprived/ Of essential commodities,/ They've used poor wrought irons,/ They've used too much sand and the littlest cement,/ The woods are like spindles for a toy house;/ The nails less than,/ The waters less than,/ Everything less than!"* (72). "Naija", seen in those lines is a slang and pidgin word that refers to Nigeria. Therefore, the poem reveals the poor construction practices for civil public buildings as corruption. The contractors usually present their biddings for contracts with the highest quality of materials and professional execution designs there are. However, when they are awarded the contracts, they use low quality materials and inadequate mixtures to execute the projects. This makes the buildings to lost their integrity making them prone to cracks, collapse, leakages and fire outbreaks. This puts the public who use such buildings at great risk. The poet's persona reveals that those public and civil servants involve in such corrupt practices by way of receiving bribes. These lines reveal thus, *"Heh! Everyone that is anyone must have their own cut,/ And bleed the common one to anaemia./ The top person must have a cut,/ The contractor must have his cut,/ The supervisor must have his cut,/ The accounts must their cuts,/ The auditors have their cuts,/ The legislators have their cuts,/ Until they're almost cutting their fingernail, heh!"* (72). This points out the chain of public officials that facilitate bribery and corruption in Nigeria. Before the legislators support any project by approval, they make sure their personal interests are represented in it. This means that they must be bribed. The director of accounts and finance, before he releases the approved funds for projects, he makes sure he is bribed or he will frustrate the contractor. The project supervisors are bribed to overlook the poor quality of the work and approve it. The auditors are bribed so that they will not report the inflated amount of money for the project. Thus, at the end of it all, the project is poorly done and corruption is deeply enshrined in various public sectors. The poet's persona then accuses the corrupt public officials of constructing their personal buildings to the optimum standard with the proceeds of corruption while they produce death traps for

the ordinary people. These lines capture "*Fat bellies have viciously taken their cuts,/ they've built their own sturdy storied buildings,/ and left the common peoples own gasping,/ for essential nutrients*" (72). The phrase "Fat bellies" is a metaphor for Nigerian corrupt leaders who have gluttonously fed themselves to obesity from the huge proceeds of public loot. The poet's persona goes on to reveal that even structures that were erected by the British colonial administration in Nigeria over a century ago are still standing and are stronger than the ones built by postcolonial political leaders. This comes in these lines "*colonial buildings that lasted like centuries,/ have overtaken national buildings in stride,/ oh! Come and see wonders of corruption in Naija,/ fine nation rendered ugly*" (73).

The poem, "A Sight Never to be Forgotten?" Portrays the imagery of hunger, starvation and death in Africa. These are revealed to be the consequences of social insecurity in the guise of civil war. The poem is a chronicle of the devastation of the civil war in Sudan that lasted from 1985 - 2005. At the height of the civil war, a South African photojournalist, by name Kelvin Carter, traveled to Sudan to capture the images of the war with his camera. He succeeded in his mission. However, one photograph stood out: that of an infant, lonely and apparently starved, looking emaciated, squatting with the head bowed and a vulture standing by watching it. That photograph provoked global sympathies and it won Carter the Pulitzer Prize in 1994 (Joshua Agbo 30). However, the sympathies metamorphosed into moral judgements, when the public learnt that Carter did not help the weak child to get to a United Nations Feeding Centre which the child was probably heading to. Carter left the child to its fate and the action drew condemnations and accusations that distressed him mentally. He decided to take his life. The poem reads, "*I saw the picture of an African child/ Bowled over with hunger,/ It hung its head to the earth,/ Its skeletal ribs spread like a calabash,/ Weak, distressed and shamed/ Crawling to the scent of food somewhere,/ In a lonely African 'scape', Ayod, Sudan.../ A vulture dark and large/ Loomed large hovering behind/ With an eagle eye on likely carcass./ The African child despairing alone;/ The vulture stood, a death sentinel, waiting to feed on the/ African child,/ In a lonely Sudanese 'scape; I cry./ Kevin Carter captured the two forever on lens:/ The child was beaded from a mother's loving hands no/ Longer there./ And Carter hopped away in a jeep with the spirit of the child in his shutter;/ Though to be fair, 'twas said, he shooed the vulture away -/ He never recovered from the sight./ Always wondered,/ What happened to the African child,/ Yes, I heard he survived the vulture, to die years later;/ African child, rest in peace*" (92). The last line of this emotional poem which reads "*African child, rest in peace*" and even the entire poem indeed, is not just a requiem to this particular Sudanese child alone in a ravaged situation captured by Carter but metaphorically a tribute to all African children caught up in such perishable situations and that have lost their lives innocently - say civil wars in nations as Nigeria, Rwanda, DR. Congo, South Africa, Mozambique, Algeria, Somalia et cetera. More so, Joshua Agbo, in his book, *How Africans Underdeveloped Africa: A Forgotten Truth in History*, vividly revealing the failure of Africa orchestrated by African leaders, examines Carter's photograph of the dying Sudanese child and the vulture behind critically and explains it as a metaphor of a failed Africa. Agbo puts,

[...] the child, for instance, represents the larger constitutive part of the continent, while the plump vulture that is waiting for the child to die so that it can feed on her body represents the oppressive class of African dictators. The photo along its story has the power to scar one's heart in such an unimaginable way; as it evokes so much emotions to tragedies happening around us day after day. (31)

The poem, "Shame of Africa" is a critique of Africa and her leaders who have failed her peoples and left them to devastation. The poem portrays the maladies ruining the peoples of Africa as deadly diseases, illegal migration, bad leadership, corruption, greed and massive loot of public wealth and underdevelopment. The poem then lampoons Africa calling on her guardians to look at the mess she has become as a result of their negligence. The poem reads, "*Lampedusa, shame of Africa,/ Cholera, shame of Africa,/ Typhoid, shame of Africa,/ Leprosy, shame of Africa,/ Malaria, shame of Africa,/ Tuberculosis, shame of Africa,/ Chicken pox, shame of Africa,/ Ichinji, shame of Africa,/ Vesico-vaginal fistula, shame,/ Measles, shame of Africa,/ Hepatitis, shame of Africa,/ Two mouthed ogres, shame of Africa,/ Kleptomania, shame of two mouthed ogres,/ My father's, my mothers, see what you do to mother Africans*" (93). "Lampedusa" represents the imagery of the horrific experience of African migrants passing through the Mediterranean Sea to Europe in overcrowded boats that sometimes sink them to destruction. Most times such migrants are arrested by European police and locked/camped in a camp set aside for that purpose at Lampedusa Island in Italy under poor conditions. However, Africans engage in such dangerous journeys because of the civil wars, famine, high unemployment, poverty, insecurity and poorly managed plagues that provide only a bleak future. Thus, it can be correctly argued that such things as illegal migrations damaging Africans are as a consequence of bad and failed leadership in Africa. More so, while diseases like cholera, typhoid, leprosy, malaria, tuberculosis, chicken pox, vesico-vaginal fistula, measles and hepatitis portrayed in the poem are eradicated, prevented or controlled to minimum danger through serious and sustained vaccination, quarantine, free/subsidised treatments and intensive health care awareness campaigns in other continents, in Africa, governments are inept and unserious about the health management of their peoples. Vaccinations, treatments and disease control are not sustained and properly sponsored. Health ministries receive low budgets while health workers get poor or no support in provision of facilities or training. Worst of it, even the low budget that is meant for health is looted by corrupt government officials. This has contributed to the high mortality rate in Africa and short life span. The imagery of "Two mouthed ogres" and "Kleptomania" reveal the thoughtless greed and primitive desire for siphoning public wealth and leaving the masses into extreme poverty and suffering which according to the poem is a "shame of Africa", especially to the leaders.

What this section unravels is the imagery of bad leadership and corruption portrayed in the poetry. These manifest in form of inequity, corruption, social malaise, nepotism, injustice and failed leadership. These are revealed as the factors causing hardship and slow growth of Nigeria and Africa in general. This then provokes the mind into engineering positive changes.

7.2. Imagery of Death and Mourning

Imagery of death and mourning are also significantly reflected in the poetry. The grief that death causes the human mind to undergo is one of the subjects explored by the poetry. Mores so, the inevitability of death, the fear of dying, the strangeness and unexpected death apprehensions are features in the poetry. As a result, some of the poems are plaintive while others ponder on the nature of death in the realm of human existence. The poem, "By the Whiskers" and "Death Whizzed" portray the poet's persona's experience of death scare and a thankful feeling of escaping it. "By the whiskers" reads, *"Death whizzed by,/ Clashing through winds,/ It held me by the whiskers,/ I flew like a feather,/ It thundered like a tipper"* (76). The expression "I flew like a feather" is a simile that shows that the poet's persona escapes from death by stroke of luck while "It thundered like a tipper" shows the dreadedness of death. The poem, "Old pictures" is a reflection on the melancholy of death which separates loved ones. The poet's persona laments that what the survivors of the dead are left with as a point of communion with the lost loved ones is their photo images. The photo images however, bring back the grave feeling of lost. These lines reveal, *"Old pictures are like fruit trees,/ They tell mysterious tales,/ Of the grim reaper,/ Who plucks souls and bodies./ As we stare at one another,/ Across the great gulf of time,/ Looking deep into each other's eyes,/ Fathomless depth, we stare in wonder"* (78).

The poem, "Our Benefactor is Gone" is a dirge for a leader who has passed on. The poet's persona extols the leader's benevolence and inspiring personality that benefited his followers. She then laments the void left behind by the leader's demise as huge lost to the followers which will for long saddened their minds. These lines reveal, *"Our elephant has fallen./ The iroko of our land,/ That provided a shade for the struggling sapplings,/ The oak tree that provided a shade for all seeking succour,/ Our elephant has been felled by the hands of fate... / To whom shall we paen our pains?/ To whom shall we pass the next five hundred poets,/ To be an oasis to quench their thirst?/ To provide shade from their pain?/ Oh, our elephant is no more,/ Tell not to the people of Benue!"* (88).

The poem, "My Dreams Gone!", too, is a dirge to lost fellows who are murdered by criminals. The poet's persona laments how the fellows' lives are cut off in their youth, struggling with hope for a better future. For their sudden murder leaves their young families vulnerable and hopeless while all their sufferings in working hard to become important people end in vain. These lines point, *"Oh my dreams gone like vapour!/ Oh my dreams gone!/ Gone to the wind,/ Just like that, gone!/ Oh how in agony I mourn,/ Hopes dashed,/ By gun crazy, trigger happy thugs,/ Gunned down in the prime of my youth"* (89).

The poem, "What is it that Pains Us?" is a reflection on the fright of dying, disturbing thoughts of death and the hatred for death. In the first stanza of the poem, the poet's persona presents rhetorical questions that touch on the human existential anxieties, especially of what would remain of them after death. It reads, *"What is it that pains us in this thing,/ Is it that the world will keep on rolling,/ As if we never existed,/ That its humming noises will keep on humming,/ Making its music as if we too never enjoyed music,/ That its light will be dazzling those gyrating,/ As if we too never gyrated or vibrated,/ Having such a good good time,/ Which we never thought could end?"* (106). What is seen in these lines is a deep reflection on the incomprehensible nature of death and the uneasiness of being lost in the

memories of the living. The concern is also that when one exits the living, life continues to move on in its exciting moods which the dead are not invited or carried along in thoughts, which is another sad thing in dying away. In the second stanza, the poem expresses sadness over the total dominion of death over humans. It posits that humans do not have a say over death strikes whenever and however it wants. This makes them helpless. If not, humans would wish to live and not die or at least, possibly, choose their time to die at their free will or not to even die at all. It also projects a disgust towards the reverse relationship between humans and the earth. This is for the reason that when alive, humans walk on earth but when they die they go under the earth and have it lay on them. This then separates humans from the earth closing them into oblivion. It reads, "*That we could forever live and dine,/ Till we personally said I'm done with it?/ Yes, what is it that pains so much,/ When the world lay so much at our feet,/ But now decides to lay its feet on us,/ And we can only see its backside,/ As it removes our punny hands off itself,/ As if we were leprous and abhorrent?*" (106). The last stanza of the poem reveals the inevitability of death as another discomforting fact of life. It expresses the hatred humans have for death and the internal thoughts of individual humans that keep death away from them believing it will not happen to them as it happens to others. But then, everybody keeps succumbing to it. It reads, "*This thing that pains so much,/ When we see it passing over another,/ And we say to ourselves, never me;/ That some how, I will wriggle out of this thing,/ That's not so much for me as it is for others,/ This thing that pains so much,/ That we see everyday,/ But always keep shelving:/ That of course, how can there ever,/ Ever be a rainy day for me,/ With all the umbrage I harbor at it,/ And then it arrives so surprisingly,/ This thing that pains so much*" (106-107).

In the poem, "Being Dust" a feeling of sorrow over the fact that one dies and the body transforms into nothingness aligning with sand is expressed. The poem laments that it is the thought of dying and becoming dust that pains. This is for reason that in a state of life, humans control dust, but in death, dust take over and engulf their bodies. It reads, "*It's that realisation of being dust/ That's so galling./ Imagine we walk on dust,/ we brush ourselves of dust,/ we spit on dust,/ but alas at last/ we become one with dust*" (108). However, the poem in the last stanza expresses relief in the belief that no matter the power of the dust over the body, the spirit overpowers it and floats above the earth into the heavens. "*But Alleluia,/ Like the phoenix,/ The sprit ethereal rises,/ And cannot be held back by dust./ Dust, I see you*" (108). The belief expressed here conforms to the Christian faith which preaches that a human is made of two forms, the body and spirit. The body dies and rot away becoming dust but the spirit does not die. It leaves the body upon death and travels back to its maker, Jehovah, for consideration for eternal living.

The poem, "Is Death" is short and it is a rhetorical question that shows the resignation to the inevitability of death after hating it and lamenting about its cruelty with no solution. A lasting hope is then taken in the fact that, no matter what, all humans must experience it. "*After all,/ is death not but a quealsy meal,/ all must mouth?*" (109). In the poem, "The Process" regret is made against the undertaking, funeral preparations and the final burial of a dead body. The poetic voice in this poem laments that death itself is no longer scary but the procedures through which a dead body passes through to the final burial ground. "*It's not the fact that's so/ Frightening,/ It's the process of it.../ That lying helpless*

more/ Than a hapless babe./ Helpless under prying eyes,/ Under prying skies;/ All the poking and the prodding/ From unknown hands/ That commodify to prepare/ For the lone journey" (112). Also scary, as the poem reveals, is the decomposition of the body after burial caused by bacteria, worms, ants and rodents. *"how you will lie prostate alone,/ in the midst of ants and rats,/ that awful helplessness,/ that descent into formlessness"* (112). The desertion of the dead person's loved ones and relatives from his dead body and even fear of it is lamented. The poem reveals that these thoughts and observations and state of the body after burial make the thought of dying and undergoing them traumatising. *"How those you've always loved/ And known,/ Friends and foes,/ Suddenly become afraid of you,/ Will leave you alone and alone,/ In that six feet depth"* (112-113).

In this section the imagery foregrounded are death and mourning. The imagery of death is revealed as something tragic, scary, sad but unavoidable while mourning is the act of honouring the dead and purging the mind of grief.

7.3. Imagery of Anger

The imagery of anger as a form of provocation with a tendency for destruction is mirrored in the poetry. This comes in poems such as "Hot bloods", "Anger I", "Anger II", and "Anger III". The poem, "Hot Bloods" reveals how one is seized by boiling sensations that initiate erratic actions that can be damaging. It reads *"Hot bloods like saucy peppers,/ pound the mortars of my nose,/ break the boundaries of sense"* (50). The expression "Hot bloods like saucy peppers" is a simile that communicates the instigation of tempers. The poem, "Anger I" portrays the imagery of anger as something piercing that can cause fatal injuries or shatter events. The poem reads *"Bristling briers,/ thorning trees,/ anger"* (51). In the poem, "Anger II", anger is revealed as something burning and discomforting. Its lines reflect *"Like Siamese-Cat -/ scalded with fiery coals,/ Anger"* (52). The statement *"Like Siamese-Cat -/ scalded with fiery coals"* is a simile that indicates the cruelty of anger to the living. In the poem, "Anger III", anger is described as a delicate thing with an attractive cover but rotten core. It reads *"Simmering anger is a satin gown/ infested with festering red worms/ on red soil wriggling in the sun"* (53). These lines reveal that anger is a dangerous affliction.

8. Conclusion

Ajima's *Soft Winds* is a poetry full of imagery and the imagery envelopes it with literary beauty. The imagery is adeptly embedded in the individual poems making them profoundly touching. The imagery manifest in two mixes; the sweet imagery and the bitter imagery. The sweet imagery exudes the feelings of mellowness, excitement and inspiration. The bitter imagery, on the other hand, elicit provocation and soberness. Therefore, the poetry represents balanced and obtainable experiences in human society which serve and project the cause of humanity. It approves merrymaking in situations of candid breakthrough and disapproves inequity and oppression and yearns for the upliftment and freedom of the oppressed. Overall, the poetry through its imagery impels critical thoughts on the nature of human existence and the world around humans.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Iorwuese Gogo is a doctoral student of African Literature at Federal University of Lafia, Nigeria. He is a co-editor of the book, *Ecocriticism: Lenses from African Literature*. Gogo has published numerous literary essays in national and international journals and books. He won the Ace Booksquare book review competition for the month of November, 2021. His works can be found on amazon.com, ResearchGate, Google Scholar and Academia.edu.

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