

## **A Necropolitical Reading of Selected Poems from Adeoti's *Stoning the Wind* and Ofeimun's *The Poet Lied***

**Ayobami Kayode  
&  
Toyin Shittu**

### **Abstract**

This study focuses on selected poems from Odia Ofeimun's *The Poet Lied* (1980) and Gbemisola Adeoti's *Stoning the Wind* (2024) through Achille Mbembe's necropolitical framework. It argues that both collections constitute a sustained poetic testimony to the death-worlds of Nigeria's postcolonial history. Three necropolitical concepts — the death-world, necropower, and the disposable body — organise the comparative close reading of eight selected poems, four from each collection. The analysis demonstrates that both poets document the same structural condition across different historical phases (Odia Ofeimun is of the second generation while Gbemisola Adeoti belongs to the third generation): a postcolonial sovereignty exercised as the capacity to expose populations to death, through direct violence and structural abandonment. The study further argues that both collections deploy formal strategies of naming, witnessing, and countervisuality to assert the grievability of lives which the necropolitical order renders disposable.

**Keywords:** necropolitics, death-world, disposable body, Nigerian poetry, postcolonial sovereignty, necropolitical testimony

### **Introduction**

Nigerian poetry has long served as the primary archive of the country's political catastrophes. From the civil war verse of J. P. Clark-Bekederemo and Christopher Okigbo to the protest poetry of the second generation of Nigerian poets, politics has been the focus of Nigerian poets. The Nigerian poetry has consistently chronicled the Nigerian history and documents communal struggles, critiques governance, and preserves cultural memory through verse (qtd. in Idowu 209). This commitment finds its fullest expression in two collections separated by three decades in Odia Ofeimun's *The Poet Lied* (1980) and Gbemisola Adeoti's *Stoning the Wind* (2024), which together constitute a sustained poetic testimony to the death-worlds of Nigeria's postcolonial history. The present study analyses eight selected poems, four from each collection, through the theoretical framework of necropolitics, arguing that both collections

document the same structural condition across different historical phases: a postcolonial sovereignty exercised as the capacity to expose populations to wanton death.

### **Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework governing this study is Achille Mbembe's necropolitics, developed in his 2003 essay and his 2019 book of the same title. Mbembe argued that Foucault's biopolitics, the account of how modern states govern by administering life, through "making live and letting die" (Foucault 241). In classical sovereignty, as Foucault established, "the very essence of the right of life and death is actually the right to kill" (240); Mbembe argues that colonial and postcolonial sovereignties never fully departed from this formula. Agamben's elaboration of bare life is equally foundational: his figure of *homo sacer*, the life that "cannot be sacrificed and yet may be killed" (82), the body held in "life's irreparable exposure in the relation of abandonment" (83), is the Agambenian precursor to Mbembe's disposable body. Three of Mbembe's concepts are deployed for this study. The death-world names "new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the living dead" (*Necropolitics* 92). Necropower names the sovereign capacity to produce these conditions: as Mbembe states, sovereignty resides in "the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" ("Necropolitics" 11), exercised through direct violence and through what Foucault calls indirect murder: "the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people" (256). The disposable body is the life rendered expendable by this order, whose death, as Mbembe puts it, is the product of "the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not" ("Necropolitics" 27). Emerson's reformulation clarifies that necropower operates not only as an external force but as an internalised condition, one that "enters the body to form part of it, dissolving in the body" (3).

Despite the richness of existing scholarship on both poets, neither collection has been subjected to a necropolitical reading, and the two have not been studied comparatively. Bello's Marxist study of Ofeimun establishes that the poet's work presents a society in which "the ruling class shows little or no pity for the toiling masses" (1), while Agofure's New Historicist reading situates *The Poet Lied* within its socio-historical context, reading "Exodus '67" as capturing the traumatic experience of "how so many Nigerians had an untimely exodus to their graves" (7). Idowu's study confirms the direction the field is moving, arguing that Nigerian poets function as "cultural historians and moral

witnesses” who document “lives rendered disposable” (207). What none of these readings provides is a framework capable of naming the structural logic that makes the death-world a recurring condition rather than a series of discrete episodes. Necropolitics provides precisely that framework, moving analysis from the observation of violence to an account of the sovereign power that produces it. Awuzie has demonstrated that necropolitics is not an imported framework alien to Nigerian literary scholarship, arguing that it “can better be deployed to describe the social-existential situation that is constantly reflected in postcolonial Nigerian poetry where the differential value placed on people results in psychological problems for others” (1).

This study fills the gap by demonstrating, through comparative close reading of eight poems, that the death-worlds Ofeimun documents in the civil war era and those Adeoti documents in the Fourth Republic are not separate historical episodes but structurally continuous expressions of the same necropolitical logic. The study adopts a qualitative approach combining close reading with comparative and theoretical analysis, paying close attention to diction, imagery, figurative language, tone, and formal structure.

### **The Death-World as Total Condition: “Infernal” and “A Dustbin Laden with Bomb”**

Mbembe’s death-world is not a zone of exceptional violence but a total condition of existence in which populations are subjected to “living conditions that confer upon them the status of the living dead” (*Necropolitics* 92). Ofeimun’s “Infernal” and Adeoti’s “A Dustbin Laden with Bomb” construct this condition as total, a state of existence from which there is no exit and within which death has become the governing principle of social life. Their formal strategies differ, but the necropolitical logic they enact is structurally identical.

“Infernal” opens with an image of absolute dispossession that places the living inside the garment of the dead from its first lines:

The phantoms smoked the days away  
with our faces in the shroud  
The phantoms gobbled the earth  
with our faces in the shroud  
All-emptiness: no reality to feed upon  
We floundered between nothings (36)

The shroud is not metaphor for hardship; it is the specific garment of the dead. Ofeimun places the living inside it from the outset, enacting precisely what Emerson theorises: “those that live death do not so much inhabit death worlds but the reverse: death inhabits them” (43). The collective “we”, a population, not an individual, flounder “between nothings.” To flounder between nothings is not to suffer a particular deprivation; it is to occupy a space that the necropolitical order has evacuated of the conditions that would make life fully human. The refrain “we floundered between nothings” returns at the close of stanza to stanza four, performing through formal repetition the inescapable, cyclical nature of the death-world condition. “All-emptiness: no reality to feed upon” names the condition as ontological rather than merely material: it is not food that is absent but reality itself, stripped away by necropower’s systematic withdrawal of the conditions that constitute meaningful existence. Foucault’s formulation is precise here: death in the biopolitical-necropolitical register is “something permanent, something that slips into life, perpetually gnaws at it, diminishes it and weakens it” (244). Ofeimun gives this formulation its concrete poetic body.

The poem’s fourth stanza introduces the question of prayer and its failure under necropower:

We prayed. But what sky listens  
to a whining people seeking  
fit conscience in machine guns  
we prayed, reaching for the unborn  
we floundered between nothings (36)

The juxtaposition of prayer and machine guns is not merely ironic, it is a precise account of necropower’s displacement of every other framework of meaning, including the transcendent. Sovereign power has displaced divine authority as the arbiter of who lives and who dies. Mbembe’s formulation that sovereignty resides in “the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” (“Necropolitics” 11) is here rendered as the condition in which prayer becomes structurally meaningless: the sovereign has already decided. The poem’s final stanza completes the picture: “The living had been derailed; / and the dead, pushed to shallow graves / could not afford a smile of mockery / with their rotted lips.” The dead are “pushed” to shallow graves — disposed off, not buried. Ferrándiz and Robben identify the mass grave as a necropolitical instrument designed to “occult massacres, destroy incriminating evidence, prevent martyrdom, and deny the bereaved relatives their mourning” (57). Even

in death, the disposable body is denied the rituals that would constitute it as a life that was lost.

Where “Infernal” constructs the death-world through collective voice and formal repetition, Adeoti’s “A Dustbin Laden with Bomb” constructs it through a single named body. The poem opens through establishment of Afilaka’s poverty with vivid precision before the bomb detonates:

Afilaka patches his torn cap with care  
too poor to purchase a spare  
Afilaka heads for the city centre  
in search of a morning meal  
he reaches for the refuse bin  
his main source of main meal (94)

The naming of Afilaka is itself a political act. The poem establishes him as a disposable body before the explosion: his dependence on a refuse bin for food has already placed him within the death-world, already constituted as a life for whom the state has withdrawn the conditions that sustain meaningful existence. Idowu identifies this mode of necropolitics as “the reduction of life to bare existence” is “not a symbol of resilience but of abandonment, of a state that has relinquished its duty to protect” (213). The bomb concealed in the dustbin “concealed by a silken drape” literalises Foucault’s indirect murder: “the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people” (256). The state’s failure to secure the urban space, its abandonment of Afilaka to the necessity of scavenging in weaponised spaces, is structurally equivalent to the murder that follows. The onomatopoeic “GBOAAAAM!!!” refuses the aestheticisation of Afilaka’s death; after it, the poem pivots to a quiet irony: his “fractionated flesh / and pulverised bloody bones / sing blissfully in error” (94). The body has been reduced to fragments that cannot know their own destruction. The poem’s closing lines: “All that glitters is bomb / that shortens the space of life / from the womb to the tomb” (94), generalise Afilaka’s fate into a structural condition. In the death-world, the entire arc of a disposable life is compressed to nothing.

### **The Death-World as Atmosphere: “Sick Times” and “This Road Is Sated”**

The death-world operates not only through spectacular or pronounced violence but through what Emerson, drawing on Berlant, calls slow death: “making killable is not only immediate but incremental and accretive, playing out across

a range of spatiotemporal scales” (5). Ofeimun’s “Sick Times” and Adeoti’s “This Road Is Sated” construct the death-world as atmosphere: a pervasive, ambient condition that accumulates rather than erupts. Their formal strategies are calibrated to render this slow death visible: the accumulation of decay images, the personification of landscape as a death-agent, and the dissolution of clear boundaries between the living and the dying.

“Sick Times” opens with a force that resists direct naming:

Some clammy ‘thing’ spewed out of time  
drowns the laity, encumbers breath  
of the raw, the fresh.  
Overlaid by the putrid stench  
of pregnant over-anxious gutters  
some bloated dialect in the wind is  
sweeping heads to mud. (22)

The “thing”, placed in quotation marks, withheld from direct naming, is the death-world itself: a force so ambient that it has no precise name because it has become the condition of existence. It “spews out of time,” locating its origins not in any single political event but in the accumulated weight of postcolonial history. It “encumbers breath”: a precise necropolitical image, since breath is the most elementary condition of life, and to encumber it is to perform exactly the slow structural diminishment that Foucault described as death “perpetually gnawing” at existence (244). The poem’s second stanza deepens this: the “thing” is now “grown soggy / with the rain of absences” and is “rolling the corpses of naked dreams / down the relentless flow of sizzling rivers” (22). The “rain of absences” is a precise formulation of structural necropower: not the presence of violence but the systematic withdrawal of what life requires, the absence of infrastructure, governance, and future. Dreams are rendered as corpses because the death-world does not only kill bodies; it kills the possibility of life. The poem’s third stanza identifies the institutional source: “an ominous nebulae of measureless quackery / has outvoted understanding” (22). The political institutions that should constitute the bios, the qualified political life, of the Nigerian state have been colonised by fraud and pretension. Governance has become the systematic negation of the faculties that constitute a fully human life.

Adeoti's "This Road Is Sated" extends this atmospheric construction into the specific domain of infrastructure:

the thin road now wears satiation like a coronet  
eating to swollenness, the fresh flesh of travelling toddlers  
drinking to discomfort, the rancid blood of old travellers  
on life's jarred and jaded journey. (102)

The road is not merely dangerous; it is predatory, actively consuming the bodies of those who use it. This personification formally enacts what Idowu describes as necropower "exercised through neglect and abandonment in postcolonial states" (211): the road's hunger is the figure for the state's structural abandonment of its population to death-inducing conditions. The poem's third stanza introduces the agents of state power, "the Lords of long sticks", who "host rituals of virulent kicks / on the ribs of quacking wrecks" while "the earth opens its genocidal bags" (102). The word "genocidal" is not hyperbole; it names the structural logic by which a population's exposure to lethal conditions is organised and maintained. Emerson's argument that: "letting die fails to consider the underlying social relations that inform abandonment", doing nothing is "an active, structured exercise of power" (11) is garmane. The poem's catalogue of victims, "pastors and pastoralists / farmers and fishermen / winnowers and widows" (102), performs a necropolitical accounting. The list moves across social categories to establish that the road's predation is indiscriminate: necropower does not select victims individually but brands entire populations as killable through the conditions it produces. The poet concludes through "This road is well-fed," with a flat declarative that registers the death-world's satiation as normalised, structural, beyond outrage.

### **The Disposable Body: "Exodus '67" and "Summoned to Die"**

The disposable body, the life rendered expendable by the necropolitical order, whose death produces no official mourning and no accountability, is the figure at the centre of Ofeimun's "Exodus '67" and Adeoti's "Summoned to Die." Both poems are structured around moment of death, but their necropolitical argument concerns the structure of disposability that precedes it: the conditions already in place, before the lethal event, that have constituted these populations as lives for which no protection is owed.

"Exodus '67" opens with the inversion of the natural order as the figure of sovereign violence:

The iroko is spitting fire

*if you have a child strap him to your bosom*  
Chapters that the writing down would demean,  
chapters that rend our talking drums  
chapters that tongues will fail  
ram down the crags of memory (28)

The iroko, among the tallest and most enduring of West African trees, spits fire: the natural and cultural order has been inverted. The italicised imperative, “if you have a child strap him to your bosom”, is the most direct address to the disposable body in the selection. It is the voice of collective survival in conditions where the state has abdicated its protective function entirely as no institution, no authority, no structure can be appealed to. The only protection available is the body of the parent pressed against the body of the child. This is bare life in Agamben’s precise sense: “life exposed to death” (88), stripped of every form of political and legal protection. The poem’s middle stanzas dissolve the boundaries between living and dead: “The days crawl on a thorned belly, / dense, unnerving biers try / the living corpse: ‘in brotherhood we stand.’” (28). The “living corpse” is Mbembe’s living dead given its most direct poetic formulation: the person who is biologically alive but whose social and political existence has been reduced to zero. The closing lines name the condition without mediation:

behold these meaningless abattoirs of history  
behold these senseless abattoirs  
and this seed about to be earthed:  
‘what unhealthy hate convulses us all!’ (28)

The word “abattoir”, a slaughterhouse, is not metaphor but diagnosis. The civil war is not tragic accident; it is organised slaughter. Mbembe’s formulation that sovereignty is “the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not” (“Necropolitics” 27) finds its most violent instantiation here. Agofure reads this passage as capturing the traumatic experience of mass death (7), but necropolitics goes further: the abattoir names a sovereign decision, not a historical catastrophe. “This seed about to be earthed” — the child, the future — is the ultimate disposable body: a life whose potential has been foreclosed before it has had the chance to develop.

Adeoti's "Summoned to Die" approaches the disposable body from a different historical angle. Móyeni is not a victim of military violence; she is a victim of structural poverty:

In her room,  
Móyeni is scampered awake from sleep  
by clanging thud of James' jerry can  
on the floor  
James asked her to come along  
and join the party of free scoopers  
fetching free fuel from a sloshing rivulet  
flowing out of the tanker's belly, (98-99)

Móyeni's motivation is established precisely: she is "swayed by the prospect of / paying fees and feeding her children" (99). These are not extraordinary desires; they are the elementary requirements of a life that the necropolitical order has made inaccessible through ordinary means. It is not Móyeni's presence at the tanker spill that defines her as disposable but the conditions that made the spill her only available resource. Akanwa et al.'s formulation is exactly applicable: "the land is rich but its people get virtually nothing from the land" (51). Nigeria's resource wealth is embodied in the tanker's fuel; Móyeni's jerry can is the necropolitical paradox in miniature, disposability in a landscape of abundance. The fire that kills her: "smoke and fire balls rolled in fury / from the belly of the tanker / encircling all along its path" (99), comes not as sudden event but by accumulation, enacting the logic of slow death. The poem's title makes the necropolitical logic explicit: "Summoned to Die." The passive construction removes agency from Móyeni and places it where it belongs, with the structural condition that left her no alternative. The closing moral: "He who seeks a date with cheap fortune / May keep appointment with costly misfortune" (99), is the poem's deepest irony: the necropolitical order not only kills Móyeni but generates the proverb that will be used to explain her death as her own fault.

### **The Silence of the Killed and Necropolitical Testimony**

Necropower exercises its authority not only over living bodies but over dead ones. Ferrándiz and Robben establish that mass graves "functioned to occult massacres, destroy incriminating evidence, prevent martyrdom, and deny the bereaved relatives their mourning" (57). This fourfold function: occulting, erasing evidence, preventing martyrdom, denying mourning — is precisely what Ofeimun's "The Dead" and Adeoti's "Unknown Fire in Arsonists'

Paradise” address. Both poems are organised around the figure of the ungrieved, unnamed, unaccounted dead: lives whose disposability extends beyond death into the management of their absence.

Ofeimun’s “The Dead” is the shortest poem in the selection and its most formally precise:

The dead do not complain  
they are content with mass-graves  
once the convenience of the living  
come into the matter.

The dead do not scream  
for rehabilitation, like us.  
They are rehabilitated. (41)

The irony is structural: the dead are “content” not because they are satisfied but because they have no capacity for discontent. The phrase “the convenience of the living” is the poem’s most precise formulation: the mass grave is not a failure of care but a deliberate administrative act, a decision by those who exercise necropower to manage the dead in the way that generates the least political consequence. Robben confirms this: mass graves are “an in-the-face display of necropower” that extended sovereign authority “by denying them an identity and a proper burial” (66). The poem’s final sentence, “They are rehabilitated”, is devastating in its brevity. “Rehabilitated” is the bureaucratic language of the state applied to the act of permanent erasure: the dead have been removed from the space of political contestation. The living, “us”, still scream, still demand, still contest their disposability. The dead cannot. As Idowu writes of Nigerian poetry’s testimonial function: “in the silence that follows gunfire and grief, poetry remains, speaking, mourning, and remembering” (222). “The Dead” is precisely this: poetry that speaks for those who have been rehabilitated into silence.

Adeoti’s “Unknown Fire in Arsonists’ Paradise” addresses the same silence through a different formal means, the register of concealment and anonymity:

Unknown fire  
kindled by invisible hands  
of unnamed vengeance seekers

who are weaned on the creed of  
“eye for eye, nose for nose”  
ghostly avengers sworn to roasting all in sight; (96)

Every agent in the poem is unnamed, invisible, unknown. This is the necropolitical erasure of accountability: when the killers are invisible and the fire is unknown, there is no homicide, no perpetrator, no political consequence. The poem’s geographical extension: “Like a wild beast from the East / the fire roars in the wild forests of the West / burns through brushwood of the North / to the undergrowth of the South” (96), transforms a local act of arson into a national condition: the arsonists’ paradise is the whole country, and the Foucauldian caesura between those the state protects and those it exposes to death has collapsed entirely. Yet the poem’s speaker watches “unseen”: “I watched unseen / the unknown kindlers of unseen fires / as they dance on walkways and flyovers” (96). This watching is the political act. The poem does not name the perpetrators, it cannot, but it names the structure; the geography, the rhythm of the violence, and the sovereign indifference that enables it. This is what Robben identifies as countervisuality: “the assertion of the right to look” in defiance of sovereign authority (71). The poem refuses the anonymity the arsonists depend on: it watches, it names the structure if not the perpetrators, and it refuses the silence that necropower enforces.

### **Conclusion**

This study has demonstrated, through comparative study of eight selected poems, that Ofeimun’s *The Poet Lied* and Adeoti’s *Stoning the Wind*, through Mbembe’s necropolitical framework, reveals a historical structure that studying either collection alone cannot disclose. The Nigerian postcolonial death-world is not episodic but structural, reproduced across the full arc of postcolonial history by the same necropolitical logic: a sovereignty exercised as the capacity to expose populations to death through direct violence, structural abandonment, and the conditioning of the state in which the poor have no choice but to enter lethal spaces.

The study contributes to Nigerian literary scholarship by extending necropolitics as a precise analytical framework for studying political poetry, moving beyond existing applications to offer a comparative necropolitical reading across two generations of Nigerian poets. It contributes to the broader application of Mbembe’s theory in African literary studies through a modelling of its use in a comparative poetic analysis across two generations. The study further argues that poetry, within the death-world, remains one of the primary

instruments through which populations assert their own grievability against the sovereign power that has decided otherwise. The necropolitical framework applied here has the capacity to illuminate the full arc of Nigerian poetry's engagement with death, disposability, and sovereign power: an engagement that, as both Ofeimun and Adeoti demonstrate, has not yet reached its end.

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