Survival of the Fittest: A Cultural Materialist Reading of *The Mechanics of Yenagoa*

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Abstract

In a nation where educational attainment no longer guarantees upward mobility and where religious and political structures function more as performance than service, Afenfia's text provides fertile ground for examining the cultural consequences of economic precarity. Michael Afenfia's *The Mechanics of Yenagoa* is a cultural mirror of contemporary Nigerian society, reflecting on themes of inequality, informal survivalism, and institutional failure. The research emerges from a central concern: how do fictional narratives encode the material conditions and ideological contradictions of postcolonial societies? Anchored in Raymond Williams' theory of Cultural Materialism, which posits that culture is both the product and producer of social relations, the study interrogates how class, gender, and ideology are woven into the lives of characters, not as abstractions but as everyday realities. Using qualitative textual analysis supported by secondary data from critical reviews and reader responses, the research examines how informal economies, gendered commodification, and the performative power of religion coalesce to shape identity and survival. The study assumes that literature, particularly contemporary fiction, can function as a socio-cultural document that reflects and critiques prevailing ideologies. It also rests on the premise that urban Nigerian narratives, especially those set outside Lagos or Abuja, offer alternative geographies of meaning that are crucial to understanding the nation's broader socio-political fabric. The study finds that *The Mechanics of Yenagoa* is a critical artefact that reveals how neoliberal capitalism, charismatic religiosity, and social hustling reproduce inequality while offering illusions of hope. Through humour and street-level realism, Afenfia stages the contradictions of a society caught between aspiration and stagnation, tradition and improvisation, morality and material need.

Keywords: Cultural Materialism, Nigerian fiction, economic precarity, gender commodification, religious ideology, informal economy

Introduction

In the heart of Nigeria's oil-rich but deeply paradoxical Niger Delta lies Yenagoa, a city teeming with life, contradictions, and survivalist humour. It is here, in this bustling urban theatre, that Michael Afenfia stages *The Mechanics of Yenagoa*, a novel that at once entertains and unsettles. Through the seemingly unremarkable life of Ebinimi, a university graduate turned mechanic, Afenfia crafts a socially textured tale that peels back the surface of ordinary livelihoods to reveal the fault lines of contemporary Nigerian existence. The novel's unassuming humour belies its rich political subtext, presenting a world in which class mobility, masculinity, faith, and streetwise pragmatism converge in a dance of improvisation and resilience. This study approaches *The Mechanics of Yenagoa* through Cultural Materialism, which foregrounds the interplay between culture and material conditions and challenges us to see literature as shaped by and in turn shaping the socio-economic structures of its time. Drawing from the foundational insights of Raymond Williams, who insisted that culture is not a realm apart but "a whole way of life," this approach resists reading the novel merely as fiction. Instead, it treats Afenfia's work as a cultural artefact, one that reflects and interrogates the lived realities of a post-oil, post-idealistic Nigerian society. Ebinimi's life, riddled with debt, romantic entanglements, and church politics, becomes a metaphor for the informal economies and survival strategies that characterise many urban Nigerian lives today.

Critics and readers alike have embraced the novel for its blend of wit and depth. Described as "belly-deep laughter inducing" and "soap-operatic in its episodic suspense," the narrative's accessibility is part of its genius. However, beneath its humour lies a critique of structural injustice, a lamentation of failed institutions, and a portrayal of religious manipulation and political opportunism that mirrors Nigeria's contemporary landscape. From the fraudulent charisma of Reverend Ebizimor to the hustling morality of Aaron Barnabas-Treatment, the novel reveals how power is negotiated not through merit, but through proximity, charisma, and the constant reconfiguration of personal networks. Thus, this study not only tracks plot or character development but also probes deeper into the materialist logic that governs the novel's world. It asks: how does Afenfia's fictional Yenagoa speak to real-world contradictions between education and employment, between faith and exploitation, between morality and survival? How do characters, particularly women, negotiate identity and agency in a city where bodies and beliefs are often commodified? In answering these questions, the analysis weaves together insights from reviews, close textual readings, and theoretical perspectives to demonstrate that *The Mechanics of Yenagoa* is not simply a local comedy of errors; it is a radical reflection on the lived contradictions of neoliberal Nigeria.

Theoretical Review

Cultural Materialism, a strand of Marxist thought that rose to prominence in the late twentieth century, insists on analysing culture as deeply rooted in material conditions, shaped by and in turn shaping socio-economic structures. Far from treating culture as a realm of abstract aesthetics, Cultural Materialism reveals how texts, rituals, identities, and ideologies are enmeshed with production, power, and social reproduction. With theoretical foundations laid by Raymond Williams and further developed by Stuart Hall, this approach bridges structure and agency, showing not only how material forces condition culture but also how it actively mediates historical change and human action.

Greg Beckett's article "Culture in Social Theory" reaffirms the materialist grounding of culture within Marxist thought. He accentuates how Williams and Hall advocate for a *dialectical* understanding of culture, one that is "both structured and structuring, functioning as a dynamic space where agency contends with historical constraints. Beckett explains that the cultural Marxist project "argues for a theory of cultural mediation as key to social reproduction over time" (Beckett 174). This mediation is crucial: it allows cultural materialists to examine how dominant ideologies endure not just through coercion but by embedding themselves in rituals, institutions, and symbolic practices. This emphasis on mediation also connects Cultural Materialism to contemporary debates on material agency. As Böschen et al. argue in "Material Agency as a Challenge to Empirical Research," recent scholarship has critiqued earlier "dematerialised theories of the social," instead highlighting how material objects and infrastructures actively shape social life (Böschen et al. 257). While cultural materialists may not fully embrace new materialist ontologies, they share the conviction that material culture is far from passive. Whether in the architecture of institutions or the circulation of commodities, materiality plays an active role in meaning-making and power relations.

The focus on material culture also resonates with historical and archaeological research. John Chenoweth's study of Quaker religious identity demonstrates that *"material culture of a social group can allow us access to ephemeral social identities"* (Chenoweth 324). This insight reinforces the cultural materialist claim that ideology is not merely discursive; it is materially embodied. From built environments to dress codes, coins and digital platforms, material objects carry ideological weight. As Mark Hall observes in his analysis of medieval Scottish coins, artefacts often transcend their

original function, becoming *"adaptable for new purposes… a staple of cultural behaviour"* (Hall 75). Cultural Materialism helps decode such transformations by situating them within broader socio-historical shifts.

What sets Cultural Materialism apart from classical Marxism is its insistence on culture as a site of *contradiction.* While traditional historical Materialism prioritised economic base and class struggle as the driving forces of history, critics argued that it risked reducing culture to mere "superstructure." Craig Browne revisits this tension in his critique of Habermas, noting that "historical materialism's employing abstract notions like modes of production and social formations" sometimes obscured the lived complexities of cultural dynamics (Browne 20). Cultural materialists address this by treating culture as materially grounded yet resistant, structured yet generative. This nuanced approach is particularly evident in how cultural materialists navigate the relationship between being and consciousness. James Cambridge, in his review of *Sociology and the New Materialism,* revisits Engels' famous metaphor of Marx's dialectical Materialism, "the dialectic of Hegel was turned over; or rather, turned off its head, on which it was standing and placed upon its feet", to reaffirm that "thoughts and ideas of the world are the products of objective material reality" (Cambridge 104). However, as Cambridge notes, contemporary theorists like Fox and Alldred seek a synthesis between Materialism and post-structuralism, advocating for *"the materiality of discourse*, a perspective that retains focus on power and agency without collapsing into economic determinism (Cambridge 105).

In today's rapidly evolving technological landscape, Cultural Materialism must also engage with digital mediation. Judy Wajcman, in her work on the sociology of science and technology, asserts that "technology and society… are mutually constituted*"* (Wajcman 351). This aligns with cultural Materialism's emphasis on reciprocal causation; technologies, like cultural practices, are shaped by social relations while simultaneously reinforcing power structures, gender norms, and labor conditions.

New materialist historiography has sought to move beyond the "cultural turn" of the 1980s by rethinking materiality beyond its opposition to the symbolic. Hans Schouwenburg identifies two strands within the material turn: one that "extends the programme of the cultural turn," and another that envisions "a new conceptualization of developing theory… which cuts through established dichotomies between matter and meaning" (Schouwenburg 61). While cultural Materialism is distinct from new Materialism, it remains attuned to these developments, striving to dissolve rigid binaries and instead examine the dynamic interplay between culture, discourse, and materiality.

Ultimately, cultural Materialism persists as a dynamic and politically engaged framework, one that resists reductionism while foregrounding the contested nature of culture. As Beckett reminds us, Marxist social theory must grapple with "determination, social reproduction and the problem of social action and agency" (Beckett 174). These are not just abstract concerns but vital questions for understanding how societies sustain, transform, and legitimise themselves through material and symbolic means. In its commitment to historicity, contradiction, and lived experience, Cultural Materialism continues to offer an indispensable lens for analysing the cultural politics of our world.

Literature Review

Michael Afenfia's *The Mechanics of Yenagoa* (Masobe Books, 2020) follows the misadventures of Ebinimi, a university-educated mechanic navigating the chaotic, humorous, and sometimes dangerous urban landscape of Yenagoa. As Oyindamola Adeoti notes, the narrative "follows Ebinimi … as he navigates life in Yenagoa as a young unmarried man who gets into one problem after another" (Adeoti, para. 1). Sylva Nze Ifedigbo further points out that the novel "grips the reader from the first page and keeps you flipping the pages like a compulsive disorder" (Ifedigbo, para. 1),

making it an accessible yet incisive social commentary. Afenfia's prose is praised for its comedic timing and vivid portrayal of local life. Adeoti comments on the frequency of "LOL moments" and moments of frustration at Ebinimi's folly (Adeoti, para. 2). Masobe Books' own review characterises the novel as "rip-roaringly hilarious, belly-deep laughter inducing and chest-achingly funny" (Masobe review, para. 1). This blend of humour with urban grit allows the novel to entertain while engaging with deeper social issues—the novel foregrounds working-class realities in a Niger Delta city. Rachel Eyo writes that Afenfia renders "an exploration of the dynamics between working-class people as they undertake a colourful tour of Yenagoa" (Eyo, para. 1). Similarly, Ifedigbo emphasises that the story reflects "the dysfunction of society, the everyday coping mechanisms of ordinary people, the breakdown of marriages and the games people play to get and retain power" (Ifedigbo, para. 7). The mechanic workshop becomes a microcosm for examining economic precarity, informality, and relational economy.

Ebinimi's entourage, his girlfriends, apprentices, his sister, and the manipulative pastor play key roles in the novel's social satire. Adeoti lists characters including "his girlfriends, Adinna and Blessing; his workshop boys … and the pastor that has made his inherited home his church headquarters" (Adeoti, para. 1). Ifedigbo similarly describes Ebinimi's web of "entanglements" and how his choices "impact on or are influenced by" others (Ifedigbo, para. 2-4), highlighting the relational nature of his troubles. Set in Yenagoa, the novel brings to life a city rarely foregrounded in Nigerian fiction. Eyo remarks on the setting as "one of Nigeria's lesser known cities" (Eyo, para. 1). Folio Review praises Afenfia for his authentic use of Nigerian Pidgin: "the fact that most of the dialogue … is written in Pidgin … makes it more authentic" (Folio Review, para. 5). This linguistic realism deepens the regional texture and grounds the novel's social realism in everyday speech.

Ifedigbo observes that the novel's structure, originally serialised, carries a "soap opera" quality, with cliff-hangers and episodic arcs (Ifedigbo, para. 1). Chapters frequently end with suspense, maintaining momentum across the narrative. However, he notes that some sections, particularly the backstory interludes, felt unnecessary in book form and disrupted the narrative flow (Ifedigbo, para. 5-- 6). Nonetheless, the pacing is mainly effective in sustaining reader engagement. Also, across the reviews, key themes include religion as power, gender politics, corruption, and survival strategies. Adeoti highlights the "fraudulent pastor trope" and the critique of "politics and abuse of power in the Nigerian system by politicians and policemen" (Adeoti, para. 2). Folio Review notes how Afenfia "weaves an interesting web, knitting together the vices of society," including cultism, injustice, adultery, blackmail and more (Folio Review, para. 6-7). This accentuates the novel's status as both comedic and ethically charged social satire. Critical reception positions *The Mechanics of Yenagoa* as a significant and entertaining Nigerian novel. The novel's fast pace and Dickensian energy earn praise for making Yenagoa vivid for readers (Adeoti para. 1, Eyo para. 1). It is described as a "modern-classic tale of small lives navigating a big city" (Adeoti, para. 1). Ifedigbo concludes that despite minor editorial issues, it is "a quality addition to your book pile" and "a good way to relax after all the bustle of the day" (Ifedigbo, para. 8).

Textual Analysis of Michael Afenfia's *The Mechanics of Yenagoa*

At the heart of *The Mechanics of Yenagoa* lies a trenchant commentary on the ironies of social mobility in post-oil Nigeria. The protagonist, Ebinimi, is introduced as "a graduate of Banking and Finance with MBA in view. Na me choose to become a mechanic, nobody force me" (10). This emphatic self-definition reflects not only pride but underlying frustration. Cultural Materialism allows us to interpret this ironic descent not as individual eccentricity but as a reflection of systemic failure, in which educational credentials no longer guarantee access to upward economic mobility. Instead, survival depends on informal economies and socio-political patronage.

Ebinimi's decision to run a mechanic workshop despite his academic background is less a free choice than a response to the material conditions of unemployment and underemployment. The narrator accentuates this when he reflects, "Maybe if my parents had been alive, I would have followed a different path… I graduated from the university because I know it would have made my parents proud" (2). The implication is that the prestige of education is residual, clinging to older values, while economic survival in the present demands something else entirely. His workshop thrives not on formal business principles but through his proximity to social and religious networks. His location, sharing compound space with the booming Jerusalem Warriors International Church, brings him clientele less interested in car repairs than in accessing the divine promises the church advertises. The narrator says: "Every single day, power-hungry politicians, profit-seeking businessmen, lonely married women, and desperate single ladies trooped into number 9 Kalakala Street… under the guise of fixing their cars. But what they really came to do was procure miracles" (8).

The implication is clear: his workshop is an economic beneficiary of spiritual capital. Nowhere is this entanglement between informal capital and class more evident than in Ebinimi's chance entanglement with Aaron Barnabas-Treatment, a rising political figure. Initially, Aaron's SUV is borrowed by Ebinimi for a secret rendezvous with his lover, but the situation turns dangerous when thugs mistake him for the real owner. Later, when the actual Aaron finally meets Ebinimi, he says: "Look ehn Ebinimi… come to my office on Monday. I think I have a small job for you to do for me". He then hands him "five hundred thousand naira… Use it for your school and also for your business" (28). This interaction encapsulates the informal patronage economy of Nigeria, where contracts, favours, and survival itself depend on whom one knows rather than what one knows. The mechanic yard thus becomes symbolic of a post-industrial Nigeria, where youth like Ebinimi are caught between the residue of meritocratic dreams and the dominance of patron-client politics. In this setting, "hustling" becomes ideology, a systematised form of navigating state failure and structural exclusion.

Under cultural Materialism, religion is not merely a belief system but a mechanism of ideological control, serving to justify inequalities, redirect dissatisfaction, and maintain the socio-economic status quo. In *The Mechanics of Yenagoa*, Reverend Ebizimor and his Jerusalem Warriors International Church exemplify this process. The church is not merely a site of worship but of business, aspiration, and manipulation. As Ebinimi bitterly reflects, "I had lost control over what went on in my compound… Yet after four years of being co-tenants, it was beginning to feel like I was the tenant and the church and its members were my landlords" (8). The church's theatrical spectacles of miracles, healings, and prosperity attract a desperate populace hungry for relief from hardship. "In shiny black and gold lettering, 'REVEREND EBIZIMOR AND THE JERUSALEM WARRIORS INTERNATIONAL' was now visible from at least one kilometre away," (7) signposting the church's presence as both a spiritual brand and a socio-economic force. In this context, spiritual power translates to material dominance.

The Reverend's ideology blends Pentecostal rhetoric with financial coercion. After Ebinimi narrowly escapes a gang attack, the Reverend reminds him: "What is twenty thousand naira compared to your life? Please try and pay that money this week. You can give it to the church treasurer if you don't see me. That is what the Holy Spirit ministered to me" (17). Such manipulation of fear and guilt reflects how prosperity gospel ideology monetises survival anxiety. Beyond economic exploitation, Reverend Ebizimor exercises patriarchal control over women in the name of divine guidance. Ebiakpo, Ebinimi's sister, idolises him to the point of irrationality, believing "Reverend Ebizimor was responsible for her first and only pregnancy. Responsible, not in the sense of him being Anda's biological father, but that his prayers… made her union with her husband fruitful" (7). This belief drives a wedge between her and her husband, rendering her a spiritual subject more loyal to the pastor than to her family. Similarly, Blessing, the choir mistress and Ebinimi's lover, becomes

embroiled in scandal and conflict due to her ambiguous closeness with the Reverend. When accused of infidelity, she replies, “The man na my reverend and the founder of the church, me I be choir mistress… We nor go choose song or plan how to conduct service again?” (9) Yet the innuendoes and the surrounding gossip reveal that the spiritual realm is also a site of sexual politics and power negotiation. In cultural materialist terms, religion here functions as an ideological state apparatus, offering consolation while reinforcing social hierarchies. The church becomes a place where economic aspiration and spiritual devotion merge, turning devotion into a transactional system: you give to receive; you worship to prosper. This captures Althusser’s idea of ideology as lived experience rather than abstract belief. Also, *The Mechanics of Yenagoa* reveals the commodification of the human body, especially the female body, as a functional response to systemic deprivation. In a society where formal employment is scarce, women like Blessing and Adinna leverage sexuality, beauty, and romantic performance as informal currencies to access power, protection, and basic livelihood. Blessing, for instance, openly asserts her sexual agency as an instrument of economic negotiation. She angrily reminds Ebinimi, “Nor be me, a whole choir director and Lagos-trained beautician and makeup artist agree to open leg for common mechanic like you?” (10). The rhetorical layering here is critical: even her artistry and vocational training are subordinated to her sexual appeal, highlighting how economic capital for women is often tethered to heteropatriarchal exchange. Her body becomes a site of trade, where affection, attention, and sexual availability are monetised, if not directly, then implicitly, through expectations of financial reciprocation.

Though she is described as “the sugar in my tea, the cockroach in my cupboard, the kidney in my suya" (8), these endearing metaphors, uttered by Ebinimi, are undercut by his more profound suspicion that her pregnancy is a ploy to access the ₦500,000 windfall he stumbled upon. He reflects: "It was like she wanted to force me into handing her money because I confided in her about the five hundred thousand naira… three weeks ago" (11). The very domesticity of love is tainted by capitalist suspicion; trust is not a given, it is hedged by material contingency. Similarly, Adinna, initially portrayed as more emotionally reserved and sophisticated, succumbs to the same survivalist structures. She is “crazy about me – she really was… but after a while I got comfortable accepting things from her because I knew she could afford them” (14). The transactional nature of their relationship is thinly veiled. The narrator rationalises his dependence by framing it as **a** redistribution of state wealth, since Adinna’s own gifts to him are funded by her commissioner-lover: “In some sense, I felt like it was my share of the Bayelsa State government resources coming back to me” (15). This convergence of sex, love, and political corruption exemplifies what cultural materialists call "the political economy of intimacy. Adinna is the classic figure of the working-class romantic hustler, caught in the same economy of exchange as Blessing, but cloaked in the respectability of the civil service. Her transition from Ebinimi to Aguero, her best friend, is emblematic of neoliberal fluidity, in which relationships are dictated by convenience and material promise rather than commitment or continuity. Even Reverend Ebizimor, who operates from a platform of spiritual sanctity, becomes complicit in this commodification of women. When Blessing is accused of sexual impropriety with him, she protests: “The man na my reverend and the founder of the church, me I be choir mistress, we nor go get meeting again? We nor go choose song or plan how to conduct service?” (9) Her defensive tone accentuates her awareness of a reputation market, where proximity to male religious power is both an opportunity and a liability. Meanwhile, rumours and surveillance within the church weaponise her gendered vulnerability.

Eventually, Afenfia paints a society where femininity is capital and female bodies are persistently situated within exploitative exchanges, whether through faith, romance, or political affiliation. Cultural Materialism exposes these dynamics as symptoms of a system where women are structurally coerced into transactional roles by economic instability and patriarchal logic. Raymond Williams’ triad of dominant, residual, and emergent ideologies finds vivid dramatization in the ideological atmosphere of *The Mechanics of Yenagoa*. The dominant ideology is clear: neoliberal capitalism, in

which wealth, connections, and performative religiosity determine status. In Ebinimi's world, value is no longer rooted in character or education; it is manufactured through image, consumption, and social leverage. The dominance of this ideology is seen in how multiple characters adapt their identities to survive it. As Reverend Ebizimor capitalises on spiritual despair, Ebinimi capitalises on moral ambiguity. Even his reflection about finding the hidden ₦500,000 betrays his ideological drift:

> The reasonable thing to do was to go to the police… However, both Broderick and Biodun's mothers picked the same morning to be rushed to the hospital… As for Blessing… she didn't keep her wants for the loot a secret. (11)

Here, Afenfia presents the breakdown of residual values: the fading belief in honesty, hard work, and social responsibility. The initial image of Ebinimi symbolises these values as an educated, decent youth trying to earn a living through clean work. However, that persona collapses under the pressures of an emergent order where morality becomes a luxury. Saka and Biodun, his apprentices, represent elements of that residual ethos, but the emergent ideology of survivalism rapidly contaminates them. Even their reasons for needing a cut of the ₦500,000 are cloaked in familial urgency: hospital bills, school fees. These are not moral flaws; they are desperate survival tactics, pointing to a new ethical economy, where traditional good and evil have no clear place.

The emergent ideology that drives the narrative is thus urban resourcefulness, or what we might call "strategic morality." Ebinimi is not a villain; he is a man adapting to a broken system. His psychological disorientation, his inability to decide whom to trust, what to confess, or which lover to stay with, mirrors the larger ideological disintegration of postcolonial Nigerian society. As he confesses after being nearly killed in mistaken identity, "Suddenly, I didn't know where the ignition of the car was, or what to do with the keys. I couldn't find the throttle and even the steering wheel felt like it weighed a ton" (19). This metaphor of mechanical confusion doubles as ideological paralysis. He is a man caught between inherited values and lived realities. The car, an emblem of modernity, refuses to obey. His world, like the country he lives in, is out of control.

Conclusion

The Mechanics of Yenagoa stands as a compelling literary case study of how ordinary lives are shaped, strained, and sometimes subverted by the forces of class, ideology, and economic necessity. Through the lens of Cultural Materialism, the novel reveals the complex interplay between personal agency and structural constraints in a society where education no longer assures opportunity and where power is often mediated through religion, gender, and informal networks. Ebinimi's struggles, though laced with humour and chaos, mirror the deeper crises of postcolonial Nigeria, where survival often means navigating a fractured system with creativity rather than conformity. This study, therefore, recommends a broader scholarly engagement with regional Nigerian narratives that capture lived experiences outside elite centres and urges future researchers to examine how literature from the margins can critique dominant ideologies more sharply than conventional political discourse. Furthermore, there is room for interdisciplinary approaches that blend cultural studies, urban sociology, and religious critique to further examine the roles of space, belief, and labour in shaping postcolonial African subjectivities.

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