



THE LOVE POEMS OF TONY AFEJUKU

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Abstract

This paper locates the poetry of Tony Afejuku from the perspective of love. It concentrates on how Afejuku engages poetic resources to creatively contribute to the production of classic love themes in his collections of poems, *A Garden of Moods* and *An Orchard of Wishes*. The essay is critically developed through literary analysis of the primary texts. This is anchored in Robert Sternberg's *A Triangular Theory of Love* as its theoretical background. Moreover, there is the use of the interview technique to unravel the mindset of the poet concerning the subject of study. The findings reveal Afejuku's knack for the expression of private emotional feelings through the exposé of the enduring qualities of consummate, infatuated and empty love.

Keywords: Afejuku, Love, Consummate, Infatuation, Empty.

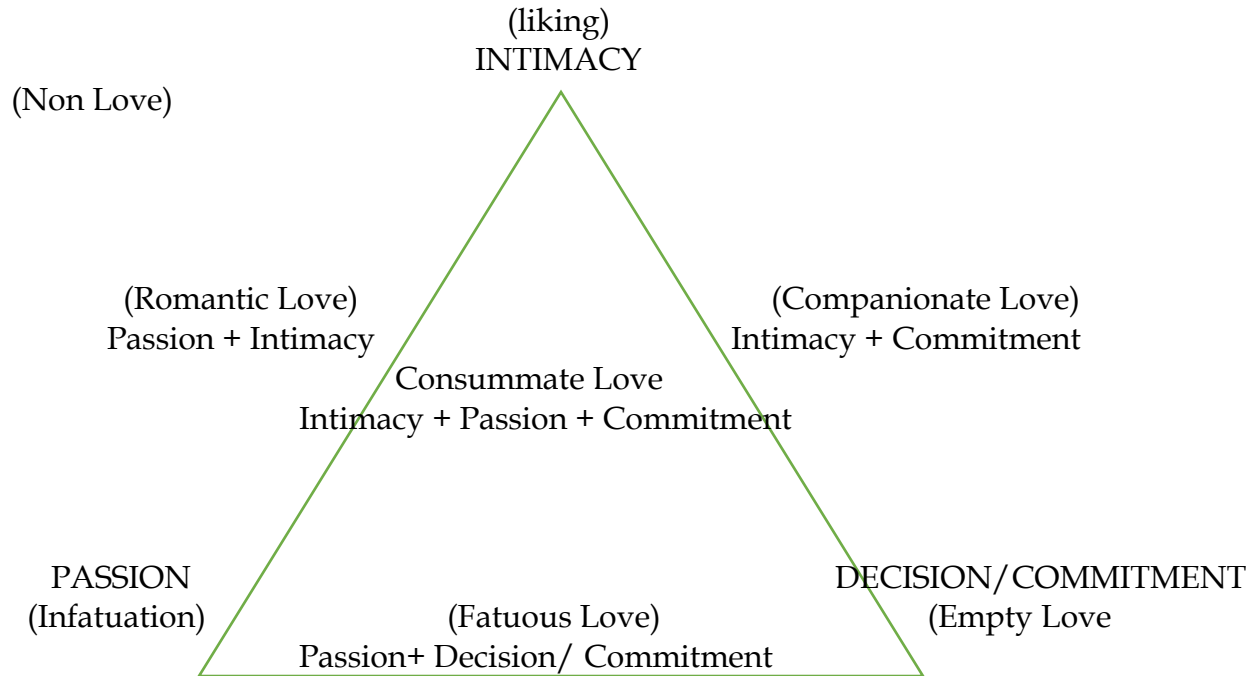
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Introduction

This essay critically examines the poetry of Afejuku from the perspective of love. It concentrates on how he skillfully engages poetic resources to espouse the enduring power of the emotional phenomenon. Attention is focused on two of his collections of poems entitled *A Garden of Moods* (1996) and *An Orchard of Wishes* (1999), henceforth *AGM* and *AOW* respectively. Apart from the use of literary analysis in the critical evaluation of the primary texts, we also sourced materials from the poet himself through the interview technique to enhance the quality of the paper. The purpose of the interview is strategic towards unravelling the mindset of the poet and granting us rare access into his emotional psychology concerning the subject of love. This is not unrelated to the fact that emotions of love are largely personal and private. In this regard, it is crucial to interrogate a lover in order to gain insight into his emotional responses and emotional status. In the case of Afejuku, a critical reading of *AGM* and *AOW* shows that he is more or less preoccupied with private intimations that encapsulate his thinking about the subject of love. These poetic intimations take us into his private relationships and experiences with different mistresses through love letters, and his general perceptions on the ingenuity of love, humanity, gender and the society at large.

The theoretical background adopted in this essay is from the Social Psychological field and is based on Robert Sternberg's *A Triangular Theory of Love*. In the theory, Sternberg looks at the subject of love from the perspective of "three components that together can be viewed as forming the vertices of a triangle" (119). These three components are: "intimacy, passion and decision/commitment." Sternberg postulates that these three components of love combine to produce eight different love types: "non-love, liking or friendship, empty love, romantic love, infatuated love, companionate love, fatuous love and consummate love" (123). However, in this paper, our attention is restricted to three of these different types of love; namely the: consummate, infatuated and empty love.

The diagram below represents Sternberg's postulation of the different types of love in his theory: *A Triangular Theory of Love*.



The above diagram gives us the image of love in terms of the three components that form the angles of a triangle. According to Sternberg, the intimacy component involves “feelings of closeness, connectedness and bondedness in loving relationships” (119). The passion component “refers to the drives that lead to romance, physical attraction, sexual consummation, and related phenomena in loving relationships.” The decision/commitment component is based on cognition and relates to “the short-term, the decision that one loves someone else and in the long term, the commitment to maintain that love” (119).

In terms of the definition of the eight types of love, Sternberg uses the above diagram to expatiate further. First “Non Love refers simply to the absence of all three components of love” (123). Second, “Liking results when one experiences only the intimacy component of love in the absence of passion and decision/commitment.” It essentially describes “friendship.” Third, “infatuation results from the experiencing of passionate arousal in the absence of the intimacy and decision/commitment components of love.” It is a “love at first sight” experience that is loaded with extreme physical attraction and arousal. Fourth, empty love “emanates from the decision that one loves another and has commitment to that love in the absence of both the intimacy and passion components of love.” We find this kind of love in “stagnant relationships... that have lost both the emotional involvement and physical attraction that once characterised them” (124). Romantic love “derives from a combination of the intimacy and passion components of love.” It consists of emotional bondedness and “the arousal brought about by physical attraction and its concomitants.” Companionate love “evolves from a combination of the intimacy and decision/commitment components of love.” This type of love is often seen in long-term committed relationships such as “marriages in which sexual attraction has died down.” In fatuous love there is “the absence of the intimacy

component." Therefore, it is essentially characterised by instability in the form of a "whirlwind" and it is subject to termination. Finally, consummate love or complete love "results from the full combination of the three components." This is the kind of love that "many of us strive" to attain because of its quality of completion.

Robert J. Trotter supports the theory of Robert Sternberg when he considers the three components of love as "the warm, hot and cold vertices of Sternberg's love triangle" (111). Trotter's depiction of Sternberg's components of love gives credence to the theory. To Trotter, the three basic components of love represent the totality of the principle of love and its different forms in human relationships. He sees the theory as the basis upon which the manner of loving expression should be viewed. No wonder he concludes that "how one loves depends on many things, including who is loving and who is being loved" (111).

The poetry of Afejuku has received critical attention. For instance Romanus Egudu focuses on the "positive and negative non-erotic images" in Afejuku's poetry (37-43); whereas Kola Eke concentrates on the strands of elegy that flow through them (451-464). In a similar manner, Kola Eke and Edefe Mukoro underscore the elegiac dispositions of Adimora-Ezeigbo, Afejuku and Eghagha with specific focus on their mother's transition to glory (183-195). The idea of "new consciousness" occupies the critical mind of Sunny Awhefeada ("New Consciousness" 228-247), and again, the critic centres his thoughts on the "romanticism and alienation" features in Afejuku's poetry ("Romanticism and Alienation" 31-50). Clement Chukwuka Idegwu considers Afejuku's poetry as depicting man as an "endangered species" (77-86). In another review, Emmanuel Babatunde Adeleke considers the poems of Afejuku as reflecting various forms of poetic moods ((242-249). Uduma Kalu explores the theme of political bondage (65); while Clement Odia is preoccupied with the eco-critical issues that pervade his poetry (253-260).

There is no doubt that critics have made valid statements on Afejuku's poetry. However, none of them has considered him as a love poet. This paper shows that Afejuku's poetry underscores love as consummate, infatuated and empty in order to stress the enduring qualities of the phenomenon on humanity.

Consummate Love

One of the striking qualities of Afejuku's poetry is that it is sometimes a direct expression of intimacy, passion and commitment. His poems are charged with the obsession that characterises ideal loving relationships. Sometimes, they are constructed as love notes to appreciate the consummate love that exists within a relationship. One of such poems is entitled "Veraleromilia." The poem is cast in the form of romantic expression:

Show me your warmth, V
 Show me your warmth,
 Your warmth which I crave
 To behold O Lady of Ladies
 V mine, Lady Eminence! (AOW 26)

To understand this poem better, one would need to have some information about the poem's title. Evidently, the word "Veraleromilia" is not an English term; rather it is coined by the poet himself from the names of three of his former girlfriends. These are Vera, Alero (his wife) and Emilia. The coinage of the title is creatively sourced from these names and poetically presented as a character. Undoubtedly, these three female personalities must have made significant impressions on the poet's perception of consummate love. The words in the poem are capable of generating excitement in anyone reading it for the first time. In the extract, the speaker is seen craving the consummate companionship of his partner. The passion with which he desires his partner indicates how much he has come to appreciate the consummate love that exists between them. Moreover, there is evidence in the above lines that the speaker is in love. The beauty of the speaker's love is laced with cravings and desires. From his words, one could perceive an unusual boldness that aligns with his emotional expression and romantic feelings.

The strength of the poem lies in the appropriate use of language. The first two lines serve as loving invitation to the imaginary mistress to exercise her loving "warmth." The use of repetition reinforces the deep cravings of the speaker and also shows his commitment to the relationship. Besides, there is urgency in the persona's tone. The urgency is a product of a genuine display of sensual warmth. Moreover, the speaker's appreciation of his partner is reflected in his expressions. One feels he is eager to see the intimate response of his partner. Hence, he becomes deliberate in his call for her to unveil her passion.

Looking at the manner in which the speaker appeals to his partner's sense of love, one wonders how intense the romantic atmosphere has become. To further highlight the impact of intimacy, the speaker proceeds to another level by referring to his partner as "V mine." The use of the expression "V mine" reveals an assurance of possession and ownership and charges the romantic atmosphere further. One must point out here that these are not just mere encomia; rather, they are expressions of genuine love that are rooted in completion. The force that the words possess appeal to one's auditory senses. Consequently, one notices in the speaker's tone the build-up of sensual excitement and stimulation interwoven with verbal adoration. The use of hyperbole in line four reflects the place that the Lady's love has come to occupy in the heart of the speaker. It is full of bliss, selflessness, unrivalled commitment and passion. It thrives on eternal values such as "eternal oneness," "eternal eminence" and "eternal paradise."

In the third stanza of the poem, the speaker further highlights the power of consummate love:

Now, cleanser of pains and sorrows,
Stem to stand me erect again,
I, a broken iroko, one who needs
A part of your being to lean on,
I, a tough oak now broken,
I, who need a part of your cutting
To make my ascent, my height again-

In the above lines, there is the concentration of medical and agricultural imagery to underpin the strength and reviving power of consummate love through the character "Veraleromilia." First, the mistress is seen as a "cleanser of pains and sorrows." In other words, her demonstration of love is evoked as a cleansing agent of psychological and mental trauma. One is amazed by the power of consummate love to function as a psychiatric healing tool to humanity. The point here is that consummate love is medicinal. It does not only function as an anti-depressant, but it also has anti-pyretic value. Besides, the fact that it is a cleansing agent informs us of its anti-septic value. It enhances one's psychological and physical well-being. It is definitely an alternative to drugs. Its beauty and advantage lie in the fact that it has no side-effects.

Second, one needs to slip into the world of agriculture to fully grasp the significance of consummate love in the poem. The expression in the second line stresses the significance of consummate love as a tool of support in relationships. The picture is that of a broken tree that is leaning on the "stem" of another, thus deriving life and support from it. There is support and assistance in the relationship. This means that when people demonstrate consummate love, there is strength and revival in the community or relationship. It keeps relationship fresh and stimulates confidence and reliance in the other partner. It is a type of love that thrives in the growth and progress of its practitioners. The beauty in these ideas is captured through the image of a farmer. The pruning process stimulates growth and "ascent" as well as emotional balance in the relationship.

In another poem addressed to his wife "Alerosa" entitled "Letter to Alerosa," Afejuku again restricts himself to the expression and display of consummate love in words that strengthen his admiration of his sweetheart. The poem is cast in a conversational manner:

I'm angry
Yet I smile, Orchard smile
as we do in Ode-Itsekiri

When anger retires
and shares space
with dance

So let's dance
and bury anger
with laughter

As done where
anger dances
with dance (AOW 29).

the image of two lovers whose “lips” are interlocked in a gust of sexual passion. The visuals underscore the extreme physical attraction that pervades infatuated love.

In the successive stanza, the amorous atmosphere in the poem gathers momentum. The speaker moans:

This night of first time
 hers
 That is sweetest
 As my lasso bites a fertile pea
 This banana night;
 As strokes create gyrations
 and split a pod

The implication of the poem’s opening couplet suggests the female partner is having her first experience in the act of coitus. The use of the possessive pronoun “hers” as the only word in line two reinforces that suggestion. The speaker therefore qualifies such a “first time” experience as the “sweetest.” At this point, the amorous nature of the poem takes another dimension as Afejuku uses imaginative resources to capture the scene through the agricultural and rope imagery. In the poem, the agricultural image “fertile pea” is suggestive of the “virgin’s rose”, while the rope imagery “lasso” represents the sexual organ of the speaker. The verb “bites” is invested with the sensation of touch. In this connection, the deft use of this imagery demonstrates the speaker’s deft use of his “lasso” to break the hymen of the “virgin’s rose.” As the action progresses, there is an infusion of kinesthetic imagery of movement that espouses how the continuous “strokes” of the speaker’s “lasso” creates “gyrations” that “split a pod” in the “virgin’s rose.”

In another poem entitled “Passion Wish,” our attention is again drawn to the emphasis on bodily sensation and expression of infatuated passion and love. As usual the poem is cast in a romantic manner:

O Lady mine of lovely pyramids
 My caresser and douser of flaming thirst
 My lover of fragrant juice

How you touch me

with rare warmth and mellow joy! (AOW30)

The sensational and romantic feelings invested in this poem strengthen the idea that infatuation thrives on sexual passion and satisfaction. From the above lines, the speaker reveals the reason behind his appreciation of his “Lady.” He sees her as a tool for sexual satisfaction. In other words, his love for his “lady” is based on her sexual abilities to quench his “flaming” sexual “thirst.” This attitude highlights the principle of

infatuated love. It is selfish and sensual in nature. Moreover, there is a supposition built into this poem that emphasises the low quality of infatuated love as a principle in human relationship.

In the above extract, the reference to “pyramids” casts our minds to the Egyptian “pyramids.” The use of this striking image stresses the enduring sexual appeal of the “lady.” To the speaker, the lady’s centre of attraction is her sexual athleticism – in the same way that the “pyramids” of Egypt are the hub of interest in Egyptian tourism. Closely related is the use of thermal and olfactory imagery to portray the “lady” as a ‘fire-fighter’ whose caresses serve as water that dowses or quenches the speaker's sexual and emotional flames. Besides, her sensual elegance and charm are seen as giving out sweet-smelling savour of “fragrant juice” thus brightening the attraction of the “lady.”

The speaker’s infatuation for the “lady” is cast in alluring and beautiful language but, in a way, the passion-driven words are empty of any “real emotional intimacy.” Although not clearly stated, one could infer that the speaker's infatuated appeal is for self-satisfaction through sensual and sexual means. In this connection, the word “touch” in the closing couplet demonstrates how the “lady” satisfies the speaker’s bodily sensation with “rare warmth and mellow joy.”

Empty Love

The idea that love could be empty is one that brings to mind Afejuku’s comment concerning the definition of love. He says:

Love means Joy... love is a mystery... but there is no love, no real, genuine, unalloyed, unadulterated love, none! ... But can we find it (Real love)? And if there is, where can we find it? Every love is an art of experiment, every friendship is experimental... (Audio interview).

The statement above epitomises the theme of empty love that runs through the poem entitled “Quarrel at Home.” Right from the beginning of the poem, one notices that the speaker’s frustration is loud and clear:

Without doubt what I never believed
Before I now believe:
The cause of my wreck, the cause
Of my unrealized ambition, the cause
Of my every noble idea and dreams
Conceived in infancy now dashed to the rocks
And the pieces buried in the earth,
Is you-
Stone-hearted, barren shrew;
No longer will you spot my nuptial bed (AGM 33)

In the above lines, the speaker expresses his huge disgust and frustration at the display of empty love by his partner. There is a sense of amazement that such a

disposition could be demonstrated in a relationship. Consequently, he heaps the reasons behind his regrets on his partner. The reader is struck by the power invested in the repetition of the phrase "The cause of" The feeling generated by the expression suggests the speaker's biting hatred for the partner. One could say that the speaker has become disillusioned. There seems to be a total destruction of his belief system in the efficacy of love. Closely related to this thought is the suggestion that the quality of love that emanates from such a relationship could birth disenchantment and frustration. Little wonder then that our attention is arrested by the connection between empty love and the termination of "dreams" in the poem. No wonder the speaker refers to his partner as "stone-hearted, barren shrew." These terms reflect the cruel and vicious capacity of empty lovers.

Fundamentally, the use of the word "barren" in the poem produces two ideas. First, it functions as a metaphor of emptiness. By extension, the heart of an empty lover is bereft of love components such as intimacy and passion. Second, it underscores a worthless personality. No wonder the speaker proclaims bluntly, "No longer will you spot my nuptial bed." Again, there is a twofold explanation to this expression: first, there is the suggestion that the couple is married. Second, it is evident that the speaker wants an end to the relationship. As a result, the expression of disenchantment and frustration continues in the succeeding stanza of the poem:

Away! Pack, pack and go!
 Let your lovers all embrace you in their arms:
 Be their bed,
 Think of your cheap Jewellery from Mecca
 And your Cotonou laces -
 Away! Don't let my violent hands touch you...

One hears the heightened emotional frustration in the language of the speaker. There is the deliberate use of repetition in these lines to reveal the vicious anger in the speaker. He is fed up with the relationship. In the context of the poem, the expression "be their bed" encapsulates the speaker's unquantifiable contempt for his mistress. It is an expression that belittles her values and degrades her status of womanhood. Furthermore, the use of the word "cheap" does not only describe the "Jewellery" and "Cotonou laces," but it also emphasises the character of empty love. The word draws our attention to the nature of empty love as being ephemeral, materialistic and commercial. In a way, it is the "causer of eternal hell" in relationships.

In another poem entitled "J's Valentine," the speaker again highlights his disgust at the display of empty love by another female partner. In the verse, there is a subtle suggestion that "women" are the chief practitioners of empty love. The speaker believes that it is the demonstration of empty love by "women" that equates them with "the bark/in a wild sea tossed about by waves" (32). The imagery here evokes two ideas: First, empty lovers lack stability. Second, they lack control. The line also draws our attention to the biblical description of a weak Christian - One who is "tossed to and fro, and carried about by every wind of doctrine" (Ephesians 4: 14). The relevance of this biblical reference

to the poem reveals the place of maturity in relationships. By implication, the speaker considers “women” with empty love as immature in the things of the heart. He believes it is their emotional immaturity that makes them lack self-control, patience and steadfastness. In the light of this, the speaker proclaims his lack of trust for “women” in the poem's succeeding lines. The lines are loaded with vexation:

Women for nothing in the world
 Will I take you into confidence,
 And not even my flattering smiles
 Will you see-
 Nor yours will I see-they are dreadful
 And your love is gossamer,
 A thin fragile thread (AGM 32)

These lines are charged with fiery poetic language. There is an outpouring of the speaker's thoughts in relation to “women” with empty love. The vicious and violent strength in each word serves as an insight into the damage the display of empty love might have caused him. While reading the lines above, one's mind flashes back to a comment made by Afejuku himself that “women are not meant to be trusted, only a foolish man trusts women...whether they are your mothers, your sisters, ...women are the same...I am telling you... when a woman wants to treat you bad, she doesn't look back... she forgets about the good old days.... Is there any woman who is virtuous?...” (Audio interview).

Looking at the above lines, one could sense a rare exposition of the mindset of the poet towards “women” with empty love. One could infer that there is frustration and lack of trust in the speaker's relationship with “women.” It is very important to state here that the speaker's attitude towards “women” is a product of his experience. Moreover, the use of the word “dreadful” underscores how terrible, unpleasant and pretentious the “flattering smiles” from an empty lover can be. Again, the metaphoric use of the word “gossamer” aptly defines the sentiments of the emotional disposition. The image evokes the fragility, uncertainty, and weakness of such a love. The imaginative beauty of the speaker's diction grants us profound insight into the character of this kind of emotional phenomenon.

Conclusion

The idea that Afejuku is a love poet is one of the elements that will make his poems remain ever green in our hearts. This has become possible because one of the striking characteristics of his poems remains the constant comment on the subject of love. From poem to poem, Afejuku's poetry is charged with passionate appeal to us to recognise the place that love occupies in our world. Moreover, it is interesting to note that the poet does not restrict himself to a particular type of love; rather he uses the principle of variety in pushing his case for the theme of love. The critical reader of his poems would observe that if his attention is not on the consuming influence of consummate love, it could be on

the self-seeking infatuated love. Sometimes, he switches his poetic creativity to empty love to further stretch our imagination on the emotional phenomenon.

Finally, the poet's engagement with poetic resources is commendable. As regards his use of repetition, one notices that the technique is used to reinforce the enduring strength of his themes. He gradually builds his poems from the start through the concentration of the musical device. Moreover, the use of imagery ranges from agriculture, medical to floral. They act as imaginative tools that generate pictures in the reader's mind. In the end, one would conclude that the love poems of Afejuku would strengthen his place as one of the foremost modern African poets to experiment with love poetry.

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