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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 the poet engages poetic resources to espouse classic love themes. One of the amazing qualities that arrest the reader of Afejuku's collections of poems namely: *A Garden of Moods* and *An Orchard of Wishes* is his panache for love themes. 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 mind-set of the poet concerning the subject of love to strengthen the quality of the paper. 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

I. Introduction

Tony Afejuku is a Nigerian academic, who has distinguished himself as an astute literary critic and poet. He is Professor of English and Creative Writing at the Department of English and Literature, University of Benin, Nigeria. He is the author of three volumes of poetry: *A Garden of Moods* (1996), *An Orchard of Wishes* (1999) and *A Spring of Sweets* (2014). He delivered the 245th Professorial Inaugural Lecture of the University of Benin on 10th June 2021 with a seminal lecture entitled

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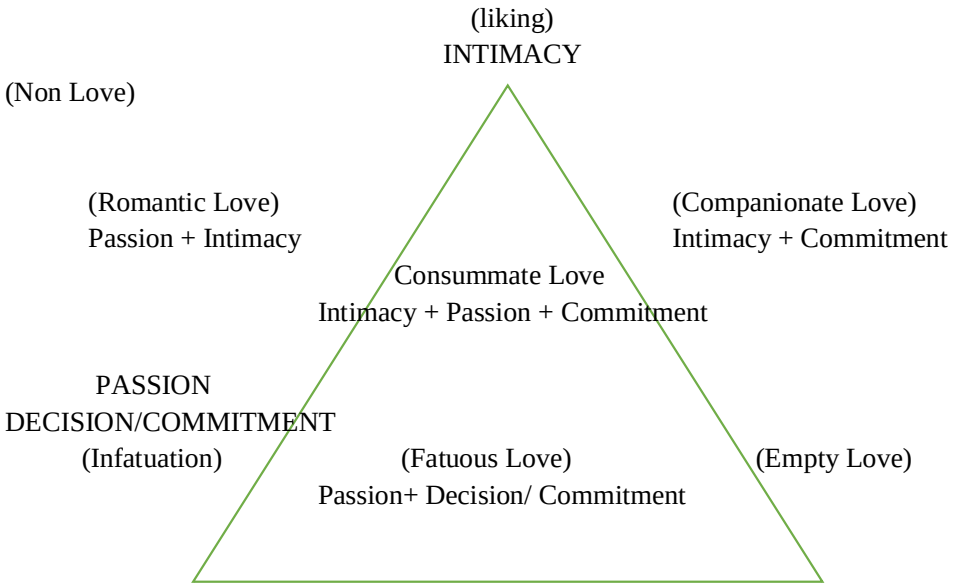
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The Autobiography of Nigeria. His scholastic vision cuts across Theory of Literature, Literary Criticism, Modern African Literature, Modern English/American Poetry, Autobiographical Studies, Phenomenology and Moral philosophy.

This essay critically locates the poetry of Afejuku from the perspective of love. It concentrates on how he skilfully engages poetic resources to espouse the enduring power of the emotional phenomenon. In this connection, attention is focused on two of his published collections of poems entitled *A Garden of Moods* and *An Orchard of Wishes*. Apart from the use of literary analysis in the critical evaluation of the primary texts, materials are also sourced from the poet himself through the interview technique to strengthen the quality of the paper. The purpose of the interview is strategic towards unravelling the mind-set 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 and it is therefore crucial to interrogate a lover in order to gain insight into the responses of his emotional status. In the case of Afejuku, a critical reading of *A Garden of Moods* and *An Orchard of Wishes* 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 it 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). The three basic components are "intimacy, passion and decision/commitment." Sternberg postulates further that these three basic components of love combine to produce eight different love types of "non-love, liking or friendship, empty love, romantic love, infatuated love, companionate love, fatuous love and consummate love" (123). However, in the context of this paper, our attention is restricted to three different types of love. These are: consummate, infatuated and empty love.

The diagram below represents Sternberg's theoretical postulation of the different types of love:



Source: Robert Sternberg, "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 is one that 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). Kola Eke concentrates on the strands of elegy that flow through them (451- 64). In a similar manner, Kola Eke and Edafe Mukoro underscore the similar elegiac dispositions of Afejuku, Adimora-Ezeigbo, and Eghagha on their mother's transition to glory (183-95). The idea of "new consciousness" occupies the critical mind of Sunny Awhefeada ("New Consciousness" 228-47), 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 place, Emmanuel Babatunde Adeleke considers the poems of Afejuku as reflecting various forms of poetic moods (242-49). Uduma Kalu explores the theme of political bondage (65). While Clement Odia is obsessed with the eco-critical issues that pervade his poetry (253-60).

There is no doubt that critics have made valid statements on the poetry of Afejuku. However, none of them has considered Afejuku 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 emotional phenomenon on humanity.

II. Consummate Love

One of the striking qualities of Afejuku's poetry is the direct expression of intimacy, passion and commitment that they demonstrate. The poems are charged with obsession that characterizes ideal loving relationship. Sometimes, they are crafted as love notes to appreciate the consummate love that exists in relationships. 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! ("Veraleromilia", lines 1-5).

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 (the wife) and Emily. The coinage of the title is creatively sourced from these names and poetically presented as a character. One must submit here that these three female personalities must have made significant impressions in the poet's perception of consummate love. Besides, one thing that is not subject to argument here is that the words in the poem can generate excitement in anyone reading it for the first time. The speaker in this instance is seen craving the consummate companionship of his "lady of ladies". The passion with which he craves indicates how much he has come to appreciate her. 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, desires and wants. From his words, one could perceive an unusual boldness that aligns with his emotional expression and romantic feelings.

Instructively, the strength of the poem lies in the speaker's use of appropriate diction. The first two lines of the quoted extract serve as loving invitation to the imaginary mistress to exercise her loving "warmth". The use of repetition reinforces the deep cravings and wanting desire of the speaker. It also shows his commitment in the relationship. Besides, there is a sense of urgency in the tone of language. The urgency is an effect of a genuine display of sensual warmth and feelings. Moreover, the beauty in the speaker's appreciation of his partner is reflected in his expressions. One can sense that he is eager to see the intimate response of his mistress. Hence, he becomes deliberate in his call for her to unveil her sense of 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 a sense of possession and ownership and charges the romantic atmosphere further. It must be pointed out here that these are not just mere encomia, rather, they are expressions of genuine love that are rooted in completion. The strength and potency that the words possess appeal to one's auditory senses. Consequently, the critical reader could sense in the speaker's use of language the ascending sensual excitement and stimulation laced with sustained interest as well as commitment. 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 luring bliss of selflessness through unrivalled commitment and passion. It thrives on eternal values such as "eternal oneness", "eternal eminence" and "eternal paradise" ("Veraleromilia", 6-8).

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

> 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- ("Veraleromilia", 10-16).

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 therapy to humanity. The point here is that consummate love is therapeutic, while the consummate lover is a psycho-therapist. It follows then, that this type of love 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 significance. It enhances one's psycho-physical well-being and it is by implication 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 a sense of 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 afresh 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 in the poem through the image of a farmer. In this case, 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 and paragon of love. 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 ("Letter to Alerosa", 1-12*)*.

What these lines tell us is that the marriage of Afejuku has attained "complete love." There is no place for "anger" and bitterness in his relationship with "Alerosa." The use of contrast in the poem's opening lines is suggestive of the couple's generation of "smile", "dance" and "laughter" from "anger." The consummate love in the relationship transcends emotional fluctuations and registers their maturity in matters of the heart. No wonder in acknowledging her in his inaugural lecture, Afejuku

refers to "Alerosa" as "my damsel, my nymph, my Alero, my one and only Alerosa of my sweet poetry of sweet love with whom I have created my greatest poems..." (x). And in another place, he considers her as "our gods'/most/accomplished exemplar of Itsekiri womanhood" ("Prophecy" 17-19). Yet again he describes her as "my turtle-dove.../my Alerosa, conjurer of sweets in spring and springs/ brighter, warmer, saintler than Selene..." ("A Love Letter From Connecticut" 5, 10, 11).

In the poem, the enthusiasm of the speaker is effectual as he celebrates the place of consummate love with his mistress on the dancing floor. Here, the reader is catapulted to the world of undertakers and funeral directors. The deceased in this case is "anger" and the burial rites are performed by two persons under the influence of "complete love" as well as "laughter." The analogy testifies of Afejuku's mastery of poetic resources intertwined with simplicity. He does not sacrifice his simple style on the altar of mediocrity, rather, he blends simplicity with sophistication of meaning, thus fulfilling Aristotle's comment that "the greatest virtue of diction is to be clear without being commonplace" (62).

III. Infatuated Love

One characteristic feature of infatuation is that, it is passion driven, but lacks intimacy and commitment. This feature thus characterizes infatuation as mere lust because it lacks the soul of genuine love. One could infer from the above statement that infatuation thrives on fantasies. It is characterized by extreme arousal of love wishes expressed through amorous words that are bereft of genuine emotional and commitment foundation. In the poem entitled "Passion X," one senses infatuation in the words of the speaker. Hear him:

This night is blissful
This night of banana breeze
This night of red bed on grass
green
This night of embrace
of red colour
and lips to lips silence ("Passion X," 1-7).

Here the speaker is expressing his amorous passion towards an unknown mistress. In the field of mathematics, the symbol "X" is generally regarded as representing the unknown. In this connection, the speaker skilfully transforms himself into a mathematician so he could express his infatuation for his mistress. The repetition of

the phrase "this night" emphasises the intensity of the speaker's infatuated passion for his mistress. It shows that his concern is not for the development of intimacy in the relationship, rather his attention is subsumed in the sensual and sexual satisfaction he gets. He goes on to define the "night" as "blissful," "banana breeze" and "green grass". Here, apart from the music that these alliterative techniques generate, one could sense the amorous atmosphere in the poem. It is a passionate scene that is not only based on lust, but is rooted in selfishness and personal ego. One could see that the speaker's crave for bodily sensation and satisfaction is further captured in the closing lines of the poem. With the skilful use of imaginative brilliance, the reader could picture the image of two lovers whose "lips" are interlocked in a gust of loving display of sexual passion. The visuals underscore the sense of extreme physical attraction that pervades infatuated love. Moreover, the amorous intensity of the sensual atmosphere articulates the superficial characteristics of 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 ("Passion X," 8-14).

The implication of the poem's opening lines 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 sensational 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 these imagery demonstrate 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 which 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," 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! ("Passion Wish," 5-13)

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 intricate supposition built into this poem that emphasises the low quality of infatuated love as a principle in human relationship.

In the poem, the reference to "pyramids" cast 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 is the hub of interest in Egyptian tourism. Closely related here 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".

One thing that is certain here is that the speaker's infatuation for the "lady" is cast in luring and beautiful language. 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 lines demonstrates how the "lady" satisfies the speaker's bodily sensation with "rare warmth and mellow joy."

IV. 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 here:

> Love means Joy… love is a mystery… but there is no love, no real, genuine, unalloyed, unadulterated love, non! ... 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 epitomizes 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
> ("Quarrel at Home", 1-10).

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 "[t]he cause of …." The feeling generated by the expression suggests the speaker's utter disgust and biting hatred for the partner. One could say without mincing words 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 birthed 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 for 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 boldly, "[n]o 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…
> ("Quarrel at Home", 11-16).

Here, one senses 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 unquantifiable amount of contempt for his mistress. It is an expression that belittles her value 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 yet 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" ("J's Valentine" 4-5). 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", The Holy Bible 4: 14). The relevance of this biblical reference to the poem reveals the place of maturity in relationship. 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 laced with disgusting feelings:

> 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 ("J's Valentine" 13-19).

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 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 trust 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 mind-set of the poet towards "women" with empty love. One could infer that there is a sense of 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 could be. Besides, 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.

V. 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, one senses that Afejuku's poetry is charged with passionate appeal to us to recognize 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. This spread of poetic influence is one factor that is very prevalent in his poems.

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 range 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 ever experiment with love poetry.

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