

AESTHETICISM AND DIDACTICISM IN AFEJUKU'S LITERARY WORK A SPRING OF SWEETS

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Abstract

Tony E. Afejuku, an Itsekiri from the oil-rich Niger Delta in Southern Nigeria, is a teacher, rights activist, and journalist with extensive travel experience across Nigeria, Africa, Asia, and the United States. His third poetry collection, A Spring of Sweets, has received limited scholarly attention despite its accessibility and richness in themes such as life, love, death, religion, politics, and advocacy. This paper examines the collection through three critical lenses: diversification, didacticism, and aestheticism. Diversification highlights the thematic variety in his poetry; didacticism emphasizes the transformative lessons imparted to readers; and aestheticism assesses the poems' musicality, visual beauty, and overall literary impact. The study concludes that Afejuku succeeds in producing poetry that is meaningful, engaging, and socially relevant.

Keywords: *Tony E. Afejuku, A Spring of Sweets, poetry, diversification, didacticism, aestheticism, Niger Delta*

Introduction

Poetry is the third of the tripod of literary generic nomenclature, the other two being drama and prose. Poetry is uniquely different from the other two in several respects. It prides itself with verbal density by which I mean that a tonne of thematic concerns which will take prose a lorry load of verbiage to espouse is condensed into a few, insightful, illuminating words. This happens without a slight reduction from the quality of its overall purport. In the second place, nowhere in literary works are the beauty and allure of language in greater display than in poetry. The whole gamut of figurative expressions and other peculiar usages are on full array to accentuate the uniqueness and aestheticism of poetry. This is not to say that elevated literary expressions are not deployed in either drama or prose. It is true to acclaim that these expressions are not deployed with the same profusion as they are in poetry. Poetry lends itself to greater malleability in the hands of a master poet in that its form and graphic presentation can be altered without doing damage to its theme. A poem does not necessarily have to meet the metrical, rhythmic and rhyming requirements of say, a sonnet, which must come in all of fourteen lines before it can make meaning to its reader. A poem may not also appear in print as quatrains or couplet or as an alloy of both before it is a successful poetic art. These, but definitely not all, are the essential inherent ingredients which make poetry unique and remarkably different from other genres of literature.

Afejuku's *A Spring of Sweets* is an anthology of poems whose themes and pre-occupations bestride all the activities of humanity from the cradle of birth to the grave. In a single breadth some of the poems celebrate the onset of life, the fulfillment and great accomplishment that come with procreation and in another, a poem definitively touches on the imminence and certainty of death. This is captured in "I can smell my Mortality" p37. In yet another poem there is appeasement and conciliation. This is the case as we see it in "For You", p48. The poet instructs in "To My 400 Level Class of 2007", a wish" p64 that a good workman never quarrels with his implements. He encourages his students to be the best in life and never to forget their teachers and their alma mater as they struggle later in life in the world of work to develop their nation.

"Texts", p67 is a poem which harps on the deleterious consequences of procrastination. In simple terms, the poem teaches that delay is dangerous. "Lenan's Mongoose" p81 affirms authoritatively that every woman (and man) has a price, speaking contextually and metaphorically. That beauty is short lived and that life itself, no matter for how long one lives, is transitory is undeniably factual. This is the kernel of the poem "How Beauty Dies" p86.

A large chunk of the poems, indeed all the poems in Option 5, are devoted to an espousal of the mythopoetic themes that LOVE encapsulates. Here, it is a case of love, affection, passion etc without borders. "A Poem for Sabrina as I imagine Her to Be" p.58, "Debashree" p.89, "Ipshita" p.90 and "Jashomati" p.92 all examine the impact of love in the lives of humans. The other two poems in this category are "Meenu" p.94 and "Meenu's Mother" p.95. A reading and re-reading of these poems show the omnipotence of the power of love. "An October Balled for fatherland" p.98 and "An Itesekiri Militant's Song" p.100 are poems of protest against the morally reprehensible neglect of the Niger Delta in spite of the enormous resources being delivered from her womb to nourish the rest of the country. Finally the poems "Epitaph on Two Nigeria Ex-Presidents" p.106 and "Written on the First Anniversary of the death of Afolabi Eni-Jones" p.107 remind us that power is transient and death inevitable.

It is important to state that Afejuku's anthology, *A Spring of Sweets*, contains sixty(60) poems in all. This paper has carefully identified the poems that are representative of the whole instead of treating all the poems in one fell swoop. The scope of this study, shown in the poems identified here, does not detract from the eminently intellectual qualities of all the contents of the poems. Spatial limitations will normally preclude an elaborate expatiation of all the poems since a few, which are representative of the whole, will do no harm or damage to the spirit and intent of this paper.

Theoretical Underpinning

The appropriate theoretical prism from which the poems are examined is the archetypal literary critical standpoint. This is the kind of literary theory that interprets a text by focusing on recurring myths and archetypes in the narrative, symbols, images and character types in a literary work.

The Scottish anthropologist, Sir James George Frazer, wrote the first treatise dealing with cultural mythologies. His work is titled *The Golden Bough*. In the seminal publication, he identifies practices and

mythological beliefs shared amongst primitive and modern religions. He argues that the death re-birth myth, for instance is present in virtually all cultural mythologies.

For his part, Carl Jung theorises that myths and archetypes exist in relation to the unconscious, inaccessible part of the human mind. From the perspective of Carl Jung, Walker deduces that myths are the “culturally elaborated representations of the contents of the deepest recess of the human psyche; the world of the archetype”.

From the foregoing one can generate a link between the issues raised in A Spring of Sweets and the archetypes that have existed from timeless prehistory from one generation to another and from one culture to another. Issues concerning birth, death, achievement, transitory nature of power and protest are recurring decimals in the literary calculus of all cultures and generations.

Diversification and Didacticism

The point being made about diversification here is that this collection of poetry is a pot-pouri of various thematic concerns. This is contrasted with some collections which may be monothematic. And that is what the collection does essentially. Afejuku’s collection deals with love, with death, with procrastination, with the ephemerality of beauty, with the fleetingness of man and his earthly accomplishments, with the transience of power and with appeasement and conciliation etc.

This paper now looks at some of the issues addressed in this collection of poems, even if it shall be done cursorily.

Childbirth, the creation of a new life, is celebrated in “Grand-boy and Grand-girls (For his kids” kids)”. Of all the things that give the poet beauty and inner joy, none compares with the joy he experiences when his grandchildren are sired. He gives graphic expression to this when he writes:

How do I challenge and wrestle with my inner chaos

In order to create great beauty?

And what beauty can be greater than

My grand-boy and grand-girls created,

In two Aprils and one July respectively, By Brother and Sister.

My own prime creation grander than

My grand poetry and great poem p.30

The couplets in stanzas 3 and 4 show that nothing on earth compares with the sense of joy, satisfaction and fulfillment which accompany the birth of three grandchildren, one boy by his son and two girls by his daughter. Even the beauty of his poetry, the loftiness of his elevated language and the musicality of his lines of poetry do not come near the joy he experiences at the birth of these grandchildren.

He waxes philosophical and becomes manifestly allusory when he writes:

That no witch or wizard can encamp

Against again –

Or is it not our people’s crack saying

That begetters of grand-lives know no fear

Though evil wars and creators

Arise against them and against them and against them? p.31 A poet with a religious turn of mind, Afejuku reaches far into the thoughts, praise songs and worship of King David, the Psalmist, contained in Psalm 127:3-5. See the thought of the Psalmist on the value of children:

3. Lo, children are an heritage of the LORD: and the fruit of the womb is his reward.

4. As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children of the youth.

5. Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them: they shall not be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate.

In "I can Smell My Mortality", Afejuku reconciles man in general, not necessarily himself alone, with the reality and inevitability of death. This will come when it will and in any form; vehicular or air mishap, train derailment, boat capsize, poison, war, illness etc. Whether at a young, middle or old age, a man born of woman is bound to swap mortality for immortality. The following lines contain his thoughts on the inescapable truth that death writes *c'est finis* to a man's life history. He also adds a death wish: "no anguished tears as the boatman rides me home". p.37.

Hear him in the following:

I can smell my mortality and the air knows it, as well as the dust that beckons, the dust that will enclose me with whistling times passage; so give me adoration and love and love that will write my immortality in and on a stone of love, p.37.

From the poem, "For You", we see that in any relationship, anger is a constant factor, a condition that engenders the necessity for appeasement and reconciliation. This is what a wise partner, or spouse, be it man or woman, does when strained relationships ensue.

Hear Afejuku:

Since your anger

Heralded and byed

Me that night;

Since she showed

Me the door

That night

Weary sorrow

Has been

My Companion. p.48

One is ensconced by an eerie feeling of spiritual dismemberment when a lover becomes implacably vexatious and turns her back, looking the other way and turning deaf ears to all entreaties aimed at an amicable resolution of the issues in dispute.

The large heart of a teacher and mentor and the unconditional love of an *in loco parentis* are seen on display in "To my 400 level class of 2007, A wish". As days roll into weeks, weeks into months, and months into years it is time for students who, four years ago enrolled for a degree course, to graduate. He foretells of a great future for them and reminds them to be good Ambassadors of their alma mater. These feelings are condensed in the following lines:

O you all little masquerades of ours Who shall be big masquerades

Tomorrows, tomorrow, and tomorrow.....

How we wish you devour eternal fames

As you leave us now, as you disembark now

Into new seasons of quiet and boisterous Futures we your teachers and successors

Shall forever remember and glorify. p.64.

One learns from here that it is a bad workman who quarrels with his tools. Some teachers don't find any measure of goodness and competence in their students. All of them are seen as nincompoops. Afejuku sees it the other way. He is pleased with what he has done with the graduating students and promises to replicate the same thing, even in greater quantum and quality, to the succeeding student undergraduates. He hopes that meaningful and rewarding bonds can be created amongst teachers and their departing students so that a feeling of nostalgia resonates each time there is news from either side of the divide.

"Lenan"s Mongoose" is a short yet insightful and very deep piece of poetry that teaches us that if we persist and are unremitting in our grim and desperate struggle to overcome any situation, it is certain that we will triumph. Because of its shortness the poem is reproduced here verbatim:

Lenan, Lenan, Lenan

A name and a female

Lurking in my unyielding heart;

A rat gnawing my cane,

A snake poisoning my juices;

Crushing damsel crushing me;

Monger of mustard seed,

At last I am your mongoose. p.81.

Every man desires a woman of beauty and grace, an admirably smashing belle. But in most cases, women in this phylum are hard to get. It must however be said that every woman has a price. The images of the „rat gnawing at my cane" and the „snake poisoning my juices" make it possible to have „a damsel crushing me". If some ladies have no price at all but remain impenetrably vacuous" then most princesses and daughters of aristocrats will remain unmarried. With persistence and unexampled determination, the waiting game will end and the supplicant can holler triumphantly, „at last I am your mongoose". From the eater comes something to be eaten.

Afejuku reminds us all of the mandatory transformation that every mortal must experience in the process of growth. From birth through adolescence, to adulthood and old age, our physical body changes as we age chronologically. This change is captured in "How Beauty Dies". The first stanza of the poem says it all with graphic details and gripping insightfulness.

How beauty goes and dies:

Creased face, crumpled back and shoulders, emptiness

Of thought; disappearing hips And shriveled vagina and breasts!

O how now they retreat! And thighs? How fleshless, plumpless

And now too numb for romance and love's big games!

The poem details the physical deterioration that man experiences as he advances in age. In addition there is a manifest decline in his mental acuity (emptiness of thought) and his looks no longer attract observers as the case is in younger years. Man invariably witnesses aesthetic decrepitude.

All the poems in option 5 of the collection can be summarized under the title, Love Beyond Borders. The peregrinations and salacious escapades of the poet persona are given ample expression in "A poem for Sabrina as I imagine her to be", "Debashree", "Ipshita" and

"Jashomati". Other poems in the collection are "Menu" and "Menu's Mother".

These poems copiously demonstrate the truth in the saying that Love is a weapon that conquers all strives. Love is also presented as a universal phenomenon. The subjects of all these poems are women from far away India. We are being educated about the fact that one can find love in the arms and bosoms of any women from any part of the world.

The stature of this poet will have suffered some detraction if his collection does not include a poem of protest, as an Itsekiri from the oil-rich but mindlessly exploited Niger Delta region.

One of his poems, "An October Ballad for Fatherland" rails and rakes against government for its thoughtlessness in the continued despoliation of that region without adequate compensation for the environmental degradation the land suffers. Whilst the entire nation rejoices in October which symbolizes independence, the region, the proverbial goose that lays the golden egg is left famished, abandoned and criminally neglected. The first stanza reads:

Another October

And the bells ring and twinkle and ring..... Golden bells of delight!

What a fiesta of merriment in pain

And pain in merriment

From Warri of oil to Maiduguri of leafless tress!

How they twinkle and ring and twinkle

In celebration of dark glory

In an icy day in a floral October

When in the mangroves of Warri

Our rivers sing songs of doom with music

And showers and strokes of pain

Of delightless delight in an orchestra

Of bells and bells and bells

And the jingling and twinkling of bells!

One of the poems being treated in this collection “Epitaph on Two Nigerian Ex-Presidents” underscores the statement that whatever has a beginning much surely has an end. We also deduce from the poem that power is but for a short time no matter for how long the man of power wields it. The poem describes the enormity of the power and influence of the expresidents when they are in power. He pooh-poohs them for their tyranny and lack of vision for which the citizens excoriate them. The description the poet offers about the former men of power is best captured in its original form as follows:

The Presidents who with all their strength

Governed in strife, the sweepers

To the right and the left;

They are here,

The great tyrants and turners

To the front and to the back;

They are here,

The hill-top chiefs, *Owu's* and *Minna's*

Stealth chefs and grinders

Of our fates and destinies,

They are here now in dust;

They are here,

Their Excellencies that all the State eternally distrust. p.10

I have decided to quote the relevant part of this poem *in extenso* because it captures the mood of both the poet and the Nation which, at one point or the other in its political history, are governed by these “great tyrants and turners”. The poet is sad about the inhumanity of those leaders when they held sway and concludes that both men should be recorded on the wrong side of history. As far as he is concerned both men are dead to the vast majority of the people they impoverished when they ruled. The poet says “they are here now in dust” which could mean that they have been interred in the cemetery of history or they are now sitting on dust instead of on an exotic furniture in a stately and cosy palace with the ambience of power and influence.

In concluding this collection, Afejuku writes an elegy in remembrance of an outstanding member of his generation and town. Eke notes that Afejuku occupies a distinctive position as one of the very few Nigerian poets who have experimented with elegiac poetry. p.89. In their book, *Poetry: An Introduction*, Ruth Miller and Robert A. Greenberg say that elegy is a:

Lyric poem which commemorates the dead, may convey profound personal emotion but tends to do so according to a set of long established literary traditions.... the grief is stated, the cause of death told; earlier happier days are recalled; nature sympathises and joins in the lament; the body is attended, and mourners arrive to pay last respects; finally, there is a reflection on death and immortality ending with consolation. p.170 – 180.

Whilst these authors are entitled to their opinions as contained in their definition, all the conventions identified and itemized are not always invariably present in all elegiac poetic creations. For this part, M.H. Abrams says that elegy has been used to denote somber meditations on the affairs of the world, complaints about love and a sustained lament for death. p.47.

In the poem "Written on the First Anniversary of the death of Afolabi Eni-Jones" Afejuku sings a song of lamentation about the subject of the poem whose death which occurred a year earlier is being remembered because he leads a worthy life "of Love, friendship, solid beauty of honor". When a person of importance dies, he is mourned and long remembered for his outstanding contributions to his people and environment when he lived. This poem does just that when Afejuku apostrophises:

O Eni-Jones, home-boy, Okere-boy, Warri boy,

Town-boy of every delight who richly loved his land

We remember and always will remember

Your high romance in our well-remembered light

As well as your magic hand of patriotism On behalf of your people of grandeur And of blessed prosperity! p.107.

The dead here is remembered for his patriotism to his "people of grandeur", who, for his exemplary attribute will not forget him in a long while. This is the case with all poems of elegy: there must always be a reason whose cogency forms the nucleus of the songs of lamentation sung at the demise of a compatriot.

Aestheticism

Aesthetics refers to the notion in literature that attaches great importance to the beauty of an artwork, especially its physical appearance and visual appeal. This does not detract from other elements that make up a literary work which add up to its overall success. Apart from the high quality and solid contents of the poems in *A Spring of Sweets*, the physical appearance of the poems speaks eloquently to their aesthetic value. Some of the poems are long, some are short, some are written in couplets and some do not have any regular metric pattern. In 'Ten Lines for Amaks' the couplets are arranged with indentations in all the second lines. The arrangement in 'A love letter from Connecticut' is something different from the regular run of poetry. See this for instance: I'm here in Connecticut thinking about you I'm here in Bloomfield dreaming of you.

.....
Brighter, warmer, saintlier than Selane

Hooray

Hooray

Hooray

For.....Alerosa,Conjurer of sweets Sweeter than Selane's.....

Hooray

Hooray

Hooray

This sort of aesthetic ingenuity is seen in 'O sweet!' where Afejuku experiments with graphological variations and punctuations.

In 'Funwen', we see another kind of aesthetic experimentation. Let us consider this:

.....She 'll forever bear

gladly, warmly,

peacefully,

we hum and dine

and roll and glide

forever p.44 And this:

Fertile strokes.....

joyful strokes.....

Funwen and.....I.....lilies benign strokes.. lilies.....

And forever is the oneness in sweetness and sweetness.....

..... sweet strokes forever..... cannons.... p45

We can go on and on, ad infinitum et nauseam, to highlight the beauty and the visual delight that one experiences as the poems are read and assimilated. This design adds to the success of this collection of poetry.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that *A Spring of Sweets*, the third in the collection of poems by Tony Afejuku is highly successful in that it achieves a remarkable coadunation of manner and matter. Additionally, the three areas touched upon in the analysis of the poems; diversification, aestheticism and didacticism are explored to highlight the saliency and importance of the representative poems in the anthology under examination. The reader of these poems is left permanently with the impression that every one of them teaches him a lesson. In addition the reader finds that every matter under the sun is handled admirably and satisfactorily in the poems selected for analysis and examination.

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