

LOVE IN THE POSTMODERN ERA: A PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDY OF J.K. ANOWE'S SELECTED POEMS

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Abstract

J.K. Anowe is one of the emergent groups of poets that have been described by critics as 'confessional poets' because of their extremely personal and autobiographical nature of their verse. The emergence of J.K. Anowe and his contemporaries at this point in time can arguably be linked to the continued spread of the postmodern culture around the world, enabled by the invention of the internet and social media which has led to Africa experiencing further cultural diffusion. However, scholarly research about this group of poets is lamentably scarce. Therefore this paper attempts to fill the lacuna by studying some selected poems by J.K. Anowe, and these are 'Stranger', 'Letter to Lucille' and 'You Sing of a Leaving'. These poems are purposively chosen for their romantic and sexual themes. Deploying certain aspects of psychoanalysis as propounded by Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and Jacques Lacan, this paper attempts to show how the poet in his search for autotomy and meaning in his love affairs, depicts raw emotional intensity and existential angst, against the background of the chaos of an empty, postmodern universe. The paper's findings indicate that our society is undergoing a tremendous change influenced by the western-inspired postmodern culture. The paper concludes that the emergence of self-absorbed poets such as J.K. Anowe and his contemporaries is symptomatic of this change taking place in Africa.

Keywords: Postmodernism, psychoanalysis, confessional Nigerian poetry, fragmentation, the individual

Introduction

Though postmodernism as a concept is hard to define, many scholars such as Mary Klages and Francis Abimbola agree that we are living in the postmodern era – a historical condition that is said to have emerged out of the contradictions of modernist ideas that dominated Euro-America in the early 20th century (Klages 115, Abimbola 86). Characterised by a skeptical or ironical attitude toward all grand narratives, postmodernism has had a profound impact on human lives since the late 20th century. It has led to the loss of tradition and values, and to the commodification of culture, resulting in mass production of images and information. Postmodernism has redefined societal roles and relationships, leading to the breakdown of the family and community and the rise of unbridled individualism. Lopez and Garry Potter describe the postmodern conditions thus:

It is the best of time; it is the worst of times. It is a time for the celebration of diversity. It is a time of fear of the other who is different. It is a time of technological marvel and a time of fear and distrust of science. It is a time of unprecedented affluence and a time for the direst poverty. It is a time for nostalgia for the old and enthusiasm for the new. It is a time of optimism and hope for humanity's possibilities of freedom and happiness and yet of grim pessimism and fear about the future (Lopez and Potter 3).

One of the many aspects of our lives that the postmodern thought and culture has impacted is how our conception of romantic love has changed. Romantic love in this postmodern era has been emptied of any depth – stripped of its erstwhile idealistic and ennobling force. In a world characterised by rapid and constant change, life has become too fast-paced and unstable to build deeply intimate relationships. Developments in technology, mass media, medical sciences and digital communication have wrought massive changes in our public space and perception and have shifted our moral perspectives. There is now a preoccupation with the surfaces and the spectacles. Romantic relationships or liaisons are now easily built or destroyed. The proliferation of social media has not only enabled but has also diversified easy communications and interactions among people so that the constancy, stability and exclusivity we seek in romantic relationships can no longer be guaranteed. We are now living in a world of superficial encounters and temporary connections, a world where meaning is unrealistic and even unnecessary.

In much of contemporary Nigerian literature, especially poetry (the genre with which this paper is concerned), the notion of romantic love is being circulated as a sign of sexual exploration and excess – a non-committal and fleeting liaison, marked by uncertainty and a sense of adventure and seen as temporary experience. Romantic love or more appropriately sexual love has become a major feature of contemporary Nigerian literature. Some scholars and critics have criticised this undue preoccupation with sex and sexuality by the present generation of writers. For instance, Allwell Abalogu Onukaogu and Ezechi Onyerionwu write:

The conscious imaging of sexuality has become such a dominant feature in Nigerian and African literature as a whole to the extent that it appears to have been elevated to the status of a narrative subject. For the cotemporary Nigerian writer, sexuality has become more of a rule than a taboo; it has emerged from the provinces of the sacred and has now been banalised to degrees that new “blasphemous” grounds are being broken in the artistic conversations involving it. (Onukaogu and Onyerionwu 174)

J.K. Anowe is one of the emergent poets in contemporary Nigerian literary space that have been described as “confessional poets” by critics because of the very personal and individualistic nature of their poetry. The group of Nigerian confessional poets comprises Pamilerin Jacob, Adedayo Agarau, Romeo Oriogun, Samuel Samba, Shitta Faruq Ademola, D.M. Aderibigbe, Logan February, Sadiq Dzukoji, Tares Oburumu, Nomi Kechi, J.K. Anowe (the subject of this essay) and several others. They write about their personal struggles and traumas, about their romantic or sexual entanglements and about how unstable their lifestyles are, seeking distractions in ways that do not conform to the society's heteronormative structures.

J.K. Anowe is arguably the most confessional of this group of poets not only because of the intensity of his self-disclosure but also because of his powerful use of evocative imagery. He has published two chapbooks. He has been a Gwendolyn M. Carter fellow in Africa studies, and he is currently an MFA-M.A. candidate at the Litowitz Creative Writing programme.

Analysis of the Selected Poems

J.K. Anowe is one of the emergent poets who are returning the Nigerian verse to the depiction of individual subjectivity and specificity after almost four decades of it being made the pulpit for the dissemination of social advocacy and concerns. Anowe like his contemporaries valorises inner feelings and subjectivity. His poems are so full of raw emotional intensity and existential angst that they lend themselves easily for psychoanalytical exploration. The researcher has selected three of his love poems for study in this paper; *Stranger*, *Letters to Lucille* and *You Sing of a Leaving*. Anowe's love poems are not love poems in the conventional sense of the word; they are rather

passionate cries of a psychically disturbed subject, who feels alienated from society, and is unable to build a deep fulfilling romantic relationship with any member of the female sex. His love poems are set in urban, postmodern spaces amid a culture of what Richard Hoggart describes as an “almost entirely unvaried diet of sensation without commitment (that) is likely to help render its consumers less capable of responding openly and responsibly to life (that) is likely to induce an underlying sense of purposelessness in existence outside the limited range of a few immediate appetites” (Hoggart 28). The persona in these poems seems to be attracted to older women or women who have a more mature bearing than he, a classic Freudian case. In *Stranger* Anowe writes:

And after you've made me feel grown up
In the backseat of your car
We'd sit in the crevice of a silence so mild
To share a cigar
Unlit by the same firefly that enkindled a feast
Of bonfires in our desert hearts.
There's no method to the madness of a directionless road.

The excerpt above talks about two lovers with no genuine love for each other shown by the metaphor 'our desert hearts', who have just had sex in the back seat of a car. It is clear the relationship has no future. Whatever had happened between them was no more than a fling. They are stranger in each other's arms. The relationship seems to have ended before it has even started. And yet whatever the unfolding destiny of the relationship is – whether it is already in its dying stages or on its tortured course to something worthwhile, there is an unfinishedness to it that is ominous. The persona describes their relationship as a /directionless road / that stumbles into another lonely dirt road /

For we.
We're stalemate
Water in our kiss
Fire beneath our feet
A sarcasm that goes unnoticed
There's this little trick you do
You move your lips
Those boyish Siamese twins that nibble all of me
& a stranger leaps out.

It is clear the poet persona has chosen an older woman as a lover for all the sexual education he can get and the woman in turn has chosen him for the vigours of his youth. Both seem aware of and acknowledge the unconscious and irrational desires that have influenced their choice. Their affair is no more than what Freud describes a passionate romantic relationship to be – an attempt to retrieve an aspect of the original love that existed between a child and his/her mother and later his/her father as the case may be. Though different in age and experience, both lovers seek to satisfy the same psychic pull. More importantly for the woman, there is that Lacanian lack that she hopes to have satisfied with the poet's youth; not just to relish the vigours of his young body.

The persona in Anowe's poetry in spite of all his self-revelatory confessions about his childhood, his mother, his love liaisons and other personal matters, maintains almost an unbroken reticence about his father. It is a trait in the poetry of the present generation that the persona in their poetry seems to have a conflictual relationship with the father. In the psychic world of our young poets the father seems to play a secondary role compared to the mother. This seems to have much less to do with the male psychology than the near physical absence of the father from the poet's life. We see this in the poetry of D.M. Aderibigbe and Romeo Oriogun who represent the father as a repressive and authoritarian figure. Saddiq Dzukogi seems to construe the father-figure as the manifestation of all the patriarchal tendencies influenced by the Islamic religion in the north. O-Jeremiah Agbaakin

wrote a whole chapbook *The Sign of the Rain*, employing the biblical troupe of Abraham's attempted sacrifice of his son, Isaac to depict what the poet describes as "the subliminal violence in a father-son relation, earthly or divine". Samuel Samba's persona stages a revolt against the domineering father who frowns at his homosexual leanings. Pamilerin Jacob writes complexly about the admixtures of high feelings that enmesh father and son. J.K. Anowe passes over the father in dignified silence and talks about the mother. Only in Gbenga Adesina's poetry do we have fewer ambiguities in the depictions of the relations between father and son. In J.K. Anowe's poem under review, it is safe to surmise it is either the persona's father has been in one way or another absent or the persona has been completely under the spell of the mother. Consequently, the persona's preference for mature women can be interpreted as deriving from a fixation of the infantile feelings of tenderness for the mother. The libido has dwelt so long in its attachment to the mother, even after puberty that the maternal characteristics remain stamped on the love objects the persona chooses as lovers. But the persona's love choices can never fully satisfy him. Hear Freud:

If the love-subjects chosen by our type (the persona) are above everything mother-surrogates; then the formation of a long series of them, which seems so directly to contradict the condition of fidelity to the woman, becomes comprehensible as well. We learn through other examples which psychoanalysis has brought to light that the pressing desire in the unconscious for some irreplaceable thing often resolves itself into an endless series in actuality – endless for the very reason that the satisfaction longed for is in spite of all never found in any surrogate (Freud 53).

Freud believed that a grown man's conscious mind likes to regard the mother as a personification of impeccable moral purity; but the paradox represented by the mother surrogate that the man has chosen as lover muddles the whole image. In the poet-persona's lover is the very relation of sharpest possible contrast between the "the mother" and "the harlot", two contraries that are often in the unconscious a united whole (Freud, 54). The contradictory feelings generated in the persona as a result of his subconscious libidinal attachment to the mother make the body of the mother seem 'the site of the uncanny'. In the "Spectral Mother: Freud, Feminism and Psychoanalysis", Madelon Sprengnether argues that the body of the mother "becomes that which is longed for yet cannot be appropriated, a representative of both home and not home, and hence, in Freud's terms, the site of the uncanny" (Sprengnether 9).

Freud argued that due to the powerful social taboos attached to certain sexual impulses, many of our desires and memories are repressed. Regression becomes the centre around which the whole personality of a well-adjusted man revolves. Chris Clause in his explanation of Freud's notion of repression opines thus:

Repression refers to the ego's efforts to subconsciously keep anxious thoughts and impulses out of consciousness and maintain them in the subconscious mind, where they can be buried and hidden. By repressing certain thoughts and impulses, the Ego is attempting to protect us from the harsh reality of their existence. The unconscious was both a cause and effect of the repression. Three conditions lead to a return of the repressed into consciousness. When the counter-cathexis holding it down weaken; when the drives below it get stronger; or when recent events similar in theme to what's repressed reawaken it; in all three cases the repressed shows up in the very method used for repression (Clause 6).

Though the persona in Anowe's poem seems to have been able to repress his erotic desires and passions for the mother, they show up in the kind of women he chooses as lovers. In poem after poem the persona goes for women stamped with maternal characteristics. But he seems unaware about what motivates his love-choices.

Furthermore, in the poem under review the lovers' passionate sex seems to have stripped them to the core and exposed them as strangers on two levels – one, the fact that the two lovers hardly know each other, yet they have descended from the summit of a most passionate sexual epiphany and two, the fact that the love-making seemed to have revealed to them certain aspects of themselves that they or at least the persona little suspected they have.

Then I stand before you
Just as naked
Just as ominous
Just as fleeting as the day God was born
To contemplate what we've become –
Bread broken over dialects of war

Carl Jung talks about humans not having complete knowledge of their motives when they are in a romantic relationship with a member of the other sex because large areas of their psychic life still remain unconscious, although they think they do; “for they constantly over estimate the existing contents of consciousness, and it is a great and surprising discovery when they find that what they had supposed to be the final peak is nothing but the first step in a very long climb.” (Jung 165). The poet-persona is still imperfectly informed as to his motives of being in love relationship with an older woman, although certain contents in his unconscious are rising to the surface, and he is becoming aware of them. He is yet to have what Jung describes as a 'psychological relationship' with the woman, “since he has only recently emerged from the mists of his original unconsciousness, he is certain to have wide areas which still lie in the shadow and which preclude to that extent the formation of psychological relationship” (Jung 166).

Letters to Lucille, an excerpt from a much larger poem is about an adulterous relationship between the poet-persona and presumably another older woman. If she is not older, then by virtue of her marital status, she possesses a certain maturity that the persona cannot be said to have. Anowe writes:

Woman with a husband
We've gotten to this bridge
burning as it is
& i don't know if i want us to cross
burn all our night time conversations – stray
as they are – on these ripped canvasses we
we mistake for skin.

It seems the two lovers have just engaged overnight in digital sexual interactions – sexting, video-sexing, chatting and the like, what Barbara Kirshenblate-Gimblett describes as “technologies of connection and telepresence” (Kirshenblate 342). “The ripped canvasses” they mistake for skins refer to the cracked screens of the lovers' smartphones or laptops. Since Nigeria domesticated the internet and the introduction of smartphones, there has been an increasing use of digital media for sex-related activities by people, especially the millennials. Online pornography, sex-dating apps, webcam sex, etc., are all digital spaces where people have virtual sex. The poet-persona wishes to have erased all the evidence of their overnight virtual copulations not because of guilt but because of something else. In fact the lovers are hardly conscious of the sin they are committing or even of the unethical nature of their affair; only of the recognition of the sexual basis of life in the 21st century and the unbridgeable gulf between their romantic expectations and the complex realities of their entanglement. This indifferent attitude towards societal norms is indicative of the pervasive impact of the postmodern culture. Postmodernism has not only continued to influence the social, political, cultural and religious institutions, it has impacted the most intimate and personal aspects of people's lives. It has created an atmosphere of moral degeneracy in which all conventional norms and

expectations are disregarded.

It is clear that the lovers' overnight digital sex has been unsatisfactory. Their overnight pursuit for an encounter with *jouissance* across the screen – itself an effect of pornography – is what Lacan would characterise as a fruitless attempt to fuse the imaginary with the symbolic. Their love making had been no more than a simulation, a product that pornography produces and markets. Pornography is often invoked as a symptom in terms of being both the cause and the effect of the modern cultural decline (Katie Goss, 4). The lovers' digital sexual act was unsatisfactory because it bears close resemblance to pornography. Indeed, it is pornography by other means. And as Katie Goss asserts:

With pornography you do not always 'get' what you see – pornography does not conform with one's own fantasy can be comical, inane, traumatic or thoroughly devoid of eroticism (Goss 4).

The lovers' sexual act was unsatisfactory because what they engaged overnight with was an image instead of the act itself which left them longing for something more to experience than the image could satisfy. And this has left them in a situation which Katie Goss citing Lacan, characterises as: “Where symbolic formalisation and imaginary processes never fully correspond” (Goss 4) because the lovers as sexuated subjects are bound to meaning in symptoms and *jouissance*, “formed by kinds of knowledges (in the Real) that are both a solution and an error, symptoms that resolve contradictions into the symbolic and imaginary registers of meaning while simultaneously bearing witness to their incommensurability” (Goss 4).

The two lovers have reached a stalemate. The poet acknowledges that he is psychically unstable and yet in his own way he loves his partner and will be unwilling to let her go. Anowe writes:

Or just jump in the river
& drown
You wont leave him for me – I know this
You wont.
Not even if I took you stargazing
& left a kiss stranded on
those ruby lips...

I miss you even before you go
Even though my mother says
It is the most tragic way
to love a part of your own body
that is unwhole.
But I'm guessing you already know this
Among many unsaid things.

What the poet persona calls “many unsaid things” that he assumes his lover knows are repressed materials in his psyche that both of them are unwilling to logically confront. The poet lapses into obscenity to express his frustration at society's restraints. The Id's pleasure principle will not relent in demanding satisfaction in breach of societal norms and conventions. The poet's mother though serves as the super-ego which seeks to restrain the poet's hedonistic Id, she becomes the object of the poet's unconscious libidinous attachment. His unwillingness to let his lover go in his own unconscious way of sublimating his Oedipus complex in a lesser socially forbidden sexual attachment.

We'll hold each other afloat
we'll become water
because water does not drown

so I may be for you
& you for me
The only thing that may never be ours...

It is interesting the poet uses water imagery which connotes endless depth, a depth that can never be reached. What the poet seeks with his partner is a state of completeness analogous to lacanian realm of the Real. But the Real is inaccessible because it exists as an absence in conscious thought. People experience that sense of lack by their entry into the symbolic realm when they become a speaking subject. They spend the rest of their lives trying to nullify the lack, to enter into the realm of the Real and feel that sense of completeness, reminiscent of the one they felt in their early life in the realm of the imaginary where they felt completely merged with their mother. But this is impossible because they are in the realm of the symbolic dominated by the rule of the father, society's norms where they feel that continual deferral of completeness, that non-arrival at totality. John Shannon Hendrix describes Lacan's concept of the Real more succinctly. He writes:

The real is the inability of the signifier in language to relate to the signified, the impossibility of meaning in language, and the impossibility of the subject. In every attempt the subject makes to represent itself in language or perception, according to Lacan, something is missed or left behind (Hendrix 2).

The last Anowe's poem to be studied in this paper is *You Sing of a Leaving*. This poem encapsulates all what the conventional morality may consider taboo subjects – mental ill-health, substance abuse, masturbation and suicidal tendencies. The poem is about a lover joining the group of women who have left the poet-persona. Anowe writes:

I want a metaphor when I said I'd give you the world to look at – a rapid of wry lying on the cold bedroom floor all meat & bone & deflation the horizon that welcomes all my ruinous loves when they said good bye over the telephone.

The poem is set on the page like a piece of prose with hardly any punctuation so that the sentences run turbulently into each other like the rapids, perhaps to denote the poet's psychological state. The poet uses the personal pronoun 'I' in the lower case to connote 'deflation'. The poet puts on exhibition all the polarities of his consciousness and his attempts to reconcile them in some sort of self-transcendence with a lover. But his erratic behaviour, his constant hunger for sensual stimulation and his dependence on intoxicants continue to alienate him from his lovers. Things have come to such a pass between him and his present love that he writes:

im sorry i jerked off before we made it to the bedsorriesthis poem of a future long past still a knife stuck in my windpipe i'm only a man because god wore damaged boys inside out so well.

The poet-persona has become so fragmented, and so alienated from his lover that he has lost interest in sex with her. He says it is easier imagining her stomping towards the door than to engage in 'pelvic thrusts' with her. He engages in masturbation instead right in his lover's presence. The poet's sexual alienation from his lover is one of the symptoms of the age. One of the drawbacks of the continual spread of the postmodern culture is the proliferation and saturation of society with images, especially of an erotic nature. The consequence of this is that people, especially the millennials tend to find the consumption of pornographic materials more enjoyable than actual sexual activities. Other consequences of such a pathology include addictive sexual behaviours, sexual aggression and victimisation and depression. The persona's engagement in autoeroticism right in his lover's presence does not only demonstrate the fact he is no longer sexually interested in her, it is also a manifestation of Lacan's dynamic conception of desire as a perpetual absence in presence, a fantasy whose satisfaction only paves the way for more fantasies. Lacan conceived desire as unsatisfiable as

the object and the cause of desire is an unobtainable object, 'object petit a' which the subject continually associates with different things they wrongly believe will satisfy their desire. 'Object petit a' exists as a consequence of the fragmentation of the subject in the symbolic realm, so desire is said to result from an unsolvable lack at the heart of the subject. The poet-persona lives in the fantasy version of reality because of his entry into the world of images and symbols. What this means is that his desire is never properly his own, but is created through fantasies that characterize cultural ideologies rather than in his own material sexuality. In other words the poet's desire is dictated by the super ego. According to Lacan what we believe to be our most private and rebellious desire is in fact dictated, even commanded by the super ego, the society's norms and conventions. This situation splits the poet. The poet-persona is so frustrated and in such a dire psychological state that he imagines setting his lover on fire. He writes: tie you to the bedside & set the house on fire, watching everything but Your curse burn but you already sing of a leaving & I can only suffice the sound of my own voice asking you (not to stay) to leave me some morphine at the door.

The poet seems to have devised his individualistic moral code which resolves around freedom of sexual expression and to be left alone (in his drug-induced fantasies). Nevertheless, the fact that the poet puts on exhibition the divisions within himself when it comes to romantic attachments in his logically written poems, and more importantly in his constant references to poetry as a means of self-expression, shows that he is self-aware and he is perhaps using poetry as another substitute gratification to compensate for the socially forbidden desires he could not satisfy – like tying his lover to the bed and setting her on fire. The lover has become a source of unpleasurable feelings to the poet-persona for reason for all his self-awareness, he cannot fathom. The poet's situation in Freudian psychoanalysis can be reducible to the unbridled Id that the superego can barely tame. It was Freud's thesis that there are darker forces lurking beneath our rational surface which when not brought into consciousness lead us to choose self-destructive path, and commenting on the self-preservative nature of the ego when it becomes infected by sexual function, he writes:

The ego hates, abhors and pursues with intent to destroy all objects which are a source of unpleasurable feelings to it, without taking into account whether they mean a frustration of sexual satisfaction or of the satisfaction of self preservative needs. Indeed, it may be asserted that the true prototypes of the relation of hate are derived not from sexual life but from the ego's struggle to preserve and maintain itself (Freud 138).

Ultimately, Anowe's verse is an extremist art, to borrow a term Alfred Alvarez used in describing Sylvia Plath's verse. An extremist art, according to Alvarez is an art in which 'the artist pursues his insights to the edge and then beyond it, until mania, depression, paranoia and the hallucinations that come in psychosis or are induced by drugs become as urgent and as commonplace as Beauty, Truth, Nature and the Soul were to the Romantics (Alvarez 13). However this may be, Anowe succeeds in making poetry a vehicle for autobiography and self-analysis – a site in which he articulates his hidden desires and instincts as a way of sublimating them, and thus striving for some sort of self-transcendence he could not attain in romantic relationships.

Conclusion

The emergence in Nigerian verse, known for its conservative and communitarian spirit, of an individualistic persona of such extreme and violent emotions as above only points to the fact that the society is undergoing tremendous changes in all aspects of life, and these changes are as a result of the rise of a rational and secular mindset that the spread of the postmodern culture engenders amid outcrumbling traditional institutions. The poet-persona's struggles with his romantic entanglements with women are only a part of his search for autonomy and meaning amid the chaos of a rapidly changing and empty universe. Additionally, J.K. Anowe seems to have turned the genre of love poetry to a highly personalised site for exploring the psyches of tormented and fragmented

personae, a trope that is becoming common in Nigerian confessional poetics.

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