

A Nigerian Poet's Dangerous Amorous Episodes

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In the traditions that established earlier voices in modern Africa poetry, sociopolitical maladies have remained an arch theme. In the words of Omafune Onoge, what rocks African poetry most is the crisis of consciousness. And it is expected. Given the social political terrain of postcolonial Africa and the disillusionment that followed. Most African poets, ranging from Frank Chipasula, Dennis Brutus, to J. P. Clark steeped their poems in the post-independence conditions and subjectivities. Most poets, of African modern poetry, charge their lines with functionalist and social realist tempers. Okot b’Pitek’s *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol* are landmark collections of poems that tap into the subject of love, but with a solemn caution of incursive Western modernity as it determines the emotional geography and desire in late colonial East Africa, specifically Uganda. Dami Ajayi emerges from the tradition of griots who have chosen love and amorous episodes of life as an impelling topic to carve their words around. But in retaining his own uniqueness, Ajayi does not eschew banality as subject too, seemingly giving in to what the Cameroonian philosopher, Achille Mbembe, inspires in *On the Postcolony*, that power is banal and the vulgar is aesthetical. In everyday life then, we can locate trauma, love, power, injustice, betrayal, and trust. The street, beer parlors, corridors of the nail fixers, the palm wine lounge, the barber shop, bus stop as the rhythm of everydayness informs Ajayi’s earlier collections, *Clinical Blues* and *A Woman’s Body is a Country*. In his latest return, Ajayi takes a departure even though he retains his most unique element of the mundane. The Nigerian poet enters a dangerous amorous episode.

Perhaps what best captures the impulse of Ajayi’s latest collection lurks in the words of the Latin American love philosopher and poet, Pablo Neruda, who argues concisely and evocatively that, “Love is so short, forgetting is so long.” In “Tonight I Can Write,” translated by W. S Merwin, that contains the phrase, Neruda remarks about the imbalance of emotion, unrequited love, the transit of affections which is replete with several bumps. Without steadfastness, commitment, sacrifice, and emotional alignment, accidents may happen. Enter Ajayi who offers us in his latest volume what this mishap looks, tastes, and smells like. Across the forceful images and passionate stanzas that give life

to his verses in *Affection and Other Accidents*, there is also a first-person witnessing going on. Ajayi's new bundle is a shuttle into tribulations, grief and the harrowing landscape of love. It is a rebuttal that love is never a utopian planet where two lovers are fired with meteoric energy that herds them the same way. Ajayi warns that if care is less taken there could be a detour. Affection can be accidental, he says, from his titular anchor. What does it mean then to fall in love accidentally? Is healing possible with wounds and the cost of sorrows that follow such a tragic slip? Does it mean such metaphoric accidents always come with their bruises?

In what one can describe as a personal narrative of pain, we see the restless mobility of lovers who are unable to triumph over the hurdles of affection. What informs Ajayi's choice of non-fiction form in the first segment is immediately visible as we see him moving on "Third Mainland Bridge" to win his lover's heart: "I was compelled to ask you to marry me again." Soon after, we move from Lagos to Cologne, Germany, where the love fuse seems to be gradually melting. The voltage of emotion has dwindled. The psychical impact has brought a personal brunt to the persona, who Ajayi does little to hide, that he is the one speaking. Nonetheless, the painter's brush stroke has left us brooding when Ajayi declares, "We were to be married that summer. A perfect Danish wedding with all your family & friends & none of mine." I will reject the hypothesis that the first section of Ajayi's latest work is prose poetry. It lacks the internal constituents of poetic evocation. It pays less attention to the beauty of lyrics, metaphor and bolts of imagery. It is untidily painful. I will agree it is an autobiography that throbs with soreness. Nevertheless, it is a choice that I would argue has plainly conveyed the poet's anger in the most generative sense. It is not infused with embellishments, rather it takes you into the personal world of two previous lovers, one present, the other also present passively in her lover's account. To go back to Neruda's words, Ajayi is not forgetting all these memories that fold into a loss for him. What counts as a short time for us here as well is the three years of Ajayi's love timeline as seen in the first "Interlogue I".

Love is a windy social field with many pressures. There is the pressure of parents nudging incessantly that you are getting old as Ajayi would reveal in his "Aubade to Greying Hair." In that episode, the parents purvey a thought that part of life achievements is seeing their son getting married. Hence, they enlist themselves in the service of matchmaking as cupid advocates. Ajayi does not evoke in the collection that he is all innocent as observed in the poem, "Youth," which unveils adventure and exuberance as deciders of inordinate desires. Ajayi moves into different themes such as global politics of the pandemic in "Interlogue II" and the results of the consequence of his emotional mishap where,

fantasies or traumatic pasts,
reach inwards
for the dove's gentleness
& sit out the gale outside Waterstones
(Waterstones 14)

In the poems under "Interlogue II" again, we encounter the unreliable narrator. Why the persona might have chosen "she" as a pronoun of choice is clear. It harks back to the subject Ajayi engages from the start of the collection. Even so, we cannot conclude from the vague imprint the poem leaves that the speaker is referring to the same lover. The lines are nonetheless filled with anxieties and mistrusts. For another accident, we can call in the instance of "Cancelling R. Kelly," the American popstar who is currently serving a term for dipping into salacious adventure with underage girls, sex trafficking and racketeering. In essence, Ajayi's poems spread across five different sections divided by interlogues. His poems dovetail into other incidents of grief, in loss of friends and families. Nevertheless, is Ajayi writing an anti-love manifesto if we are to agree by the temper that forms the artery of the collection?

Ajayi's poems barely escape pessimism as a result of personal loss and cost of affection. Could it be a fatigue of forgiveness in the continuous error of affectionate transactions? It seems what we have as a chorus in Akeem Lasisi's *Nights of My Flight* is completely absent in Ajayi's work. This is understandable assuming Lasisi's local address is the constituency of traditional Yorùbá lovers/audiences who are still ruled by the indigenous values. And the central persona is a female speaker anticipating her exit from her parents' home. Even if Lasisi's protagonist is a Western-educated figure, she does not exude the Western-inflected emotional paraphernalia in Ajayi's work. In the cache of poems Ajayi presents, protagonists are modern lovers who are following new social protocols for love, yet do not find a match in each other. In it too, Ajayi has retained the signature of his poetics by his deployment of accessible language and lapidary details of poems that cross into the poet's personal life and everyday realities. Whether Ajayi is interested in the political moorings that steer the course of Nigerian poetry is a thing to be left for the future. For now, in his new theology of love and anti-love, he is still prejudiced with his old subject, still in a new way.

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