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## Conceptualizing Love: A Reading of Selected African Love Poetry

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### Abstract

*Love is a human emotion. No community can claim a monopoly over it. It has been sustaining human existence since the beginning. African literature in general and African poetry, in particular, has not only been presenting it but has also been exploring its nuances in the African context. The paper aims to contextualize the idea of Love at both physical and metaphysical levels, as presented in African poetry. It is to argue that when entire Europe was in comparative darkness, Africans were enjoying and singing about their immediate lived experiences. It is also to argue that African literature is not just about protest and cultural clash. It also deals with as many ubiquitous ideas as other literature of other cultures. For this, the poems have been selected from both oral and written traditions. The approach adopted to understand the entire concept is that of analysis and comparison. It all leads to the following conclusions: African poetry is rich in terms of presenting various shades of love; it deploys both universal and African symbols to conceptualize love however at times it brings forward the notion of race concerning black women to counter the hegemonic stereotypes of the West, but most of the times it presents love as an essential human emotion.*

**Keywords:** Love; African Poetry; Love Lyrics; Oral Poetry; Written Poetry;

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Love is omnipotent. Love is omnipresent. It is ubiquitous. It is eternal. It is nurturing. It is the source of life. It cannot be defined. It cannot be classified. It cannot be measured. It cannot be explained. It is everything that all other things are not. It has defined our existence on the earth since eternity. Had love been not there, we would have perished as a civilization because of the intensity with which all the communities have been fighting with each other. It is love that has survived the human race so far. For ages, like other themes, such as nature, war, religion, and politics, love has been presented in the literature in various ways. From great epics of ancient India to great tragedies of ancient Greeks, from stories of Christianity and Islam to stories of the Jewish expulsion from their promised land, from folktales of native Americans to folksongs of ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia and the Middle East, love has remained a potent presence.

Africa, as Kevin Shillington puts it, is regarded as the cradle of human civilization. It was in Africa that homo sapiens started roaming, hunting, and husbanding initially. It also implies that probably in Africa, humans would have experienced love for the first time. Love is a matter of the heart. Love binds communities. Love gives meaning to the relationship between two individuals. If in Africa, people started cohabiting together, it means that they were the people who experienced love in the first place. It also implies that the Africans were the first who would have composed love songs.

When the entire world was trying to stand on its knees, remarks Chipasula, Africa had complex and well-defined societies. For Chipasula, Egyptians were the first who with their love of gaiety and desire to live life to its fullest, gave this world the gift of love poetry almost two thousand years before King Solomon and three thousand years before the birth of Christ and Christianity (Imran and Hart 2019.).

Chipasula opines that because of Colonialism, the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade, and the European plunder of Africa, people think that the only literature coming out from Africa is defined by political and social protest. The African writers that are taught and discussed worldwide are those who responded to the European Empire with their political and cultural agenda. To think that Africans are not, as Chipasula continues, capable of writing anything other than protest and cultural clash is thinking like the West. It is to disregard the aptitude of African Writers. It is to obliterate, as Chipasula maintains the humanness of the Africans. Since time immemorial, as Robert Collins and James Burns explain, Africans have been participating in all segments of life. They have a heart capable of feelings and genius powerful enough to imagine. This paper aims to conceptualize the idea of love as presented in African love poetry. The paper tries to problematize the nuances of love at both levels: physical and meta-physical. The poems taken for analysis are selected randomly from oral and modern poetry to lay down a concrete definition of love.

Africa, as Gareth Griffiths relates, is a huge continent. There reside countless tribes with countless languages. Each ethnic community has its distinct culture. In line with that, each community has given a distinct name to love. To quote Chipasula again:

For more than five thousand years, the Amazigh people of the Grand Atlas Mountains, whose name means "free or noble," though the Arabs called them Berber, or Barbarians, have expressed various versions of tayri (love) for one another in Tamazight, a very old African language. Other African names of love include whole (OshiNdonga); chikondi (love) and chikondano (reciprocal love) (Chinyanja); dining (Tshiluba); if (Yoruba); ihunanya (Igbo); lolo (Ewe); pendo, map end, mapenzi, mahaba, huba, anyone, and upendano (mutual love) (KiSwahili); rudo and Chido (ChiShona); hera (Luo/Dholuo); urukundo (Kirundi); thando (SiNdebele, isiZulu); ukutemwa (IciBemba); Chippewa (ChiTumbuka); and lerato (Sesotho) (22).

African love poetry is simple yet complex. It is conversational in tone. Ali Mazrui also argues that African traditional poetry is both conversational and evocative at the same time. The lines flow like rivers. The images are beautiful and relatable. One meets rising and setting suns, shining moons, lush green gardens, twinkling stars, snowcapped mountains, silent nights, open and wide deserts, rainfalls, windows opening on grasslands, brides in their best attire, grooms entering their wedding chambers, and friends teasing would-be grooms and brides. At the same time, one also observes, deserted brides, killed grooms, separated lovers, faithless beloveds, and adulterous lovers. In a nutshell, African love poetry manifests all the qualities and conventional symbols that one finds across cultures. As Tanure

Ojaide remarks that African poetry is as much African as it is universal, as it deals with universal human emotions which have universal relevance.

To begin with, one can easily find lovers glorifying their beloved's beauty in these poems. They go to any extent to eulogize the physical charms of their women. The overall tone in such poems is that of awe and surprise at the same time. The speaker employs hyperboles to explain his love. His comparisons and descriptions are both mind-blowing and mind-boggling. For example, in "Love Praise my Dark-Brown Girl is like a Cow," the speaker states that his ladylove is the most beautiful woman in the vicinity. Her beauty is unsurpassed by anyone. She is a paragon of virtues. All desire her, but his love for her is supreme.

He loves her all the time. Her eyes, ears, and hair all are meant only for him. He goes on to exclaim that her mother brought her into this world only for him. When he is with her, he loves her, when he is not with her, he loves the more. The speaker even tells the readers that his beloved knows the ways of the world. She is fastidious in the presence of others, but when they are alone, she laughs wholeheartedly. The speaker sings:

She does not laugh at anything,  
She does not laugh when we are with people,  
She laughs only when we are alone together.  
Each time I look into her face. It is as if the sun rose newly.  
When I have to leave her,  
It is as if night came over me.  
When she goes for water, help her,  
When she treads grain, tread for her too,  
When she goes to sow, sow for her too,  
When she walks about, carry her!  
O my Nehoja, you are my adornment!  
All the young men offer you their beads.  
My treasure is the most beautiful among all strings of beads,  
She is like a delicately cut thong (Chipasula 26).

Likewise, in "Song of a Bridegroom in Praise of his Bride," one encounters such a lover again who extolls the beauty of his would-be bride. The speaker explains with pride that his bride is the prettiest woman in the whole surrounding. She is discernible among the other women because of her extraordinary beauty. She is loved and desired by all, but the speaker is the only one who feeds upon her beauty. In her presence, the sun becomes the moon and the night becomes bright. Thus, the protagonist claims:

They run in their eagerness to give Namujezi gifts.  
Namujezi's beauty is indescribable.  
Jinkono's flower shines like a star.  
I saw her from far away,  
before she came to us.  
Namujezi, your eyes—how fresh- new they are!  
And your teeth—as if you had gotten them only yesterday!  
And your eyes—like those of a hornless cow!  
Namujezi, open your eyes, clear as water;  
Your teeth just  
laugh, laugh out, So that we may see them (Chipasula 28).

It is not just men who are worshiping the beauty of women. Women, also, on their part voice their adoration for their lovers. In African oral poetry, love is not one-sided. It is reciprocated equally. Here, women are not dumb and docile. Here, women are not just objects of reverence. Here, women are loud and clear like their counterparts. As Chipasula (2009) observes, "traditional belief that the love song is an exclusively male genre because men must conduct courtship, an important prelude to marriage, begs reconsideration. Many African folk traditions are rich repositories of women's love songs that continue to empower contemporary women." To illustrate, one can cite "Lightning Strike my Husband", a highly lyrical translation of Acholi song by Oct P'Bitek.

In the poem, the narrator is a woman who loves another man except for her husband. She is candid in her prayer to the spirit of lightning. She implores the Lightning to kill her husband. She, like her male counterparts in the above-quoted poems, sings the praise of her lover. She urges Lightning to behold her lover who walks gently, talks musically, fights bravely, sits elegantly, and blows the horn rhythmically. She further beseeches Lightning to destroy her husband as she does not love him. She prays:

Lightning, strike my husband,  
Strike my husband,  
Leave my lover;  
Ee,  
leave my lover.  
Snake, bite my husband,  
Bite my husband,  
Leave my lover;  
Ee,  
leave my lover (Chipasula 40).

Similarly, another Acholy poem translated by Oct P'Bitek, "Where has my Love Blown his Horn", can be cited to further develop this point. Here too, a woman is the protagonist. She is not muted or subdued. She is in quest of her lover and she is making inquiries about him. Here, she is not bewitched by his physical charms. The lover is neither rich nor a superman. He is an ordinary man who is loitering from one place to another for work and cattle. The narrator keeps asking her clan's men about her lover. She tells everyone that her lover is poor and has no cattle. She keeps listening to his tune and keeps remembering him.

Love in this poem is not limited to physical harm. Here, love resides in the soul and the pain of separation intensifies it. Here, the living apart of the lovers does not diminish the affection rather it increases, at least in the speaker's heart. She questions:

Where has my love blown his horn?  
The tune of his horn is well known.  
Young men of my clan,  
Have you heard the horn of my love (Chipasula 42)?

In some of the poems, one confronts both joy and sorrow simultaneously caused by love. These poems are not dominated by one overarching emotion. There is always a moment of twist. For instance, "Love Songs" from Ghana can be cited to bring home this argument. In this lyric, a woman is a central character. She describes her experience of one night when she is visited by her lover. She is sleeping and it is raining outside.

Suddenly, she gets up because of knocking on her door. She finds her lover outside. She decides to follow him without any second thought. For her, her love is important not the codes of society. She is very happy and enthusiastic. Later, she comes face to face with yet another beloved of her lover. She is overtaken by grief and jealousy. In a society, where polygamy was sanctioned by law, one can even notice the internal working of a woman's mind and heart. She is not ready to share her lover, but she cannot do anything. She records:

He has two loves,  
He has two loves,  
I go to see him off.  
I meet the other woman.  
I cannot go on,  
I cannot go back,  
I burst into tears (Chipasula 43).

In other love lyrics, one can easily observe strong erotic imagery. People in Africa consider sex as fulfilling. It is as natural as drinking water or eating food. Love is incomplete without physical fulfillment. However, sex before a wedding is not approved, but after the wedlock, it is vibrant and a source of regeneration. In "Women's Song" from Ivory Coast, the ladylove urges her lover to take

her somewhere where they can fulfill their desires. She is not ashamed of asking for that. Her approach is realistic and universal. She is bold and confident when she says:

O handsome Sokoto,  
O handsome Sokoto,  
O pretty youth, Take me and let us go,  
yes, O master, take me and let us go!  
Take me and let us go to the ford across the Agbagnian,  
Take me and let us go quietly as far as the ford across the Agbagnian.  
O Sokoto, O pretty youth, O master, take me and let us go,  
take me and let us go as far as the ford across the Agbagnian (Chipasula 55)

“I Want to be with my Love in a Garden”, a love lyric from Morocco, also anticipates such a union. Here also, the lovers are in search of fulfillment. Here also, they are looking for a secluded but refined place to concretize their love. Here, the love is not reduced to a mere bodily act but is presented as a very subtle and nurturing experience. The lovers are healed in each other company. Their union at the bodily level refines and sublimates them. The poem ends on the note of satisfaction which indicates that the feelings and passions are not exhausted. The lover asserts:

I want to be with my love in a garden  
surrounded by pavilions with lovely cushions.  
In its center are fountains and water jetting up like milk.  
The nightingale glorifies the orchard and its seven-colored pears with songs.  
A young man goes from room to room, gracefully.  
The jasmine drops its branches.  
Sitting by my friend,  
I will be healed (Chipasula 45).

Marriage plays a vital part in the African context. A woman is regarded as complete only after her wedding. However, this process is not over with marriage until she becomes a mother. This is yet another aspect of love. Her relationship with her husband is fulfilling only after she gives birth. She is someone who is well-loved and who has many children. “A Mother to her First Born” from Uganda is such a poem where a mother while addressing her first child, proclaims the same sentiments. She is telling her child that his arrival has made her life complete. She feels proud of her son and dreams about his golden future. She is sure of her son’s success and visualizes a promising future for him. In her impassioned expression, she avers:

Oh my child, now indeed I am happy.  
Now indeed I am a wife—  
No more a bride, but a Mother- of- one.  
Be splendid, child of desire.  
Be proud, as I am proud.  
Be happy, as I am happy.  
Beloved, as now I am loved.  
Child, child, child,  
love I have had from my man.  
But now, only now, have I the fullness of love (Chipasula 50).

It’s not that African Love poetry only deals with characters. At times, it deals in abstractions as well. At this moment, one finds a heavy dose of philosophy. Here, the speaker does not tell about his passions or his nights with his beloved. Here, the speaker is more concerned about the universal aspect of love. The protagonist, in such poems, tries to theorize the concept of Love. “Love does not Know Secrets” from Swahili is one such poem.

In this poem, the lover speaks like a preacher. He argues that it is not possible to hide love. You cannot keep it a secret. Anyone in love can testify this. When someone is in love, that someone becomes humble. Love is like an incurable disease. To be in love is a sublimating experience. The lover argues:

Love knows no secrets,  
when it is hidden it will be discovered.

Love has no choice;  
when it seizes a man,  
he will confess everything,  
everything that was not done (Chipasula 55).

Sometimes, the lover talks only through metaphors. In such poems, it is up to the readers or listeners to decode the meaning. The speaker talks in riddles. Yet another Swahili poem “Match in the Petrol” can be cited to prove this. Here, the speaker presents the union of lover and beloved as explosive as the coming together of match and petrol. The fire in the hearts of lovers is bound to kindle with an explosion and no one will be able to extinguish it. The intensity of the whole situation is metaphorically presented with the analogy of match and petrol. The speaker proclaims:

A match, petrol, when you have put them away,  
these are two things that must not meet,  
that could never go right,  
the place would certainly explode.  
The best thing is to keep them far apart,  
then you will have peace (Chipasula 55).

Yet another category of love poetry is that it also presents jilted lovers. These lovers may curse the beloved or they may bless the beloved depending upon their disposition and temperament. These lovers may sometimes question their fate and at other times, they may criticize society for being indifferent. African love poetry is no aberration in this regard. In “Complaint of a Jilted Lover” Thonga presents such a case.

In this poem, one meets a lover who has been jilted. The blow is too much for him. Love has not ennobled him. He has not risen above the principle of claiming and owning. He does not believe in giving and forgiving. He curses his beloved:

Refuse me if you will,  
Girl. The grains of maize you eat in your village are human eyes,  
The tumblers from which you drink are human skulls,  
The manioc roots you eat are the human tibia,  
The sweet potatoes are human fingers.  
Refuse me, if you will, girl (Chipasula 60).

Likewise, one also discovers a jilted lover who is cursing the entire womenfolk. For him, all women are traitors. For him, women know only duplicity. Their heart is full of notoriety and mischief. All women, for such a lover, are untrustworthy. “Zulu Love Song” from the Zulu tribe of South Africa can be quoted here. In this poem, the lover beholds some girls going to stream with their pots.

Since this lover had a hard time in his relationship, he thinks that nothing is right in the world. As his beloved proved to be unreliable, he thinks that all the women in the world are like his girl. While watching some women emptying their pots into the lake, he opines that the pots contain pain and broken hearts of the lovers. In sheer frustration, he remarks:

Drive me, O Troubler,  
up to the Northland,  
To seek a maiden whose heart is single,  
For the heart of these others is double and false!  
For the heart of these, I know, is false (Chipasula 75)!

Quite contrary to this, Mririda n'Ait Attik from Morocco in “The Bad Lover Leave me” presents an altogether opposite scenario. In this poem, the jilted lover is a woman. Her attitude towards her deceiver is not that of cursing or blaming. The speaker does not become a cynic and does not start thinking that all men are alike. Here, the woman is emboldened by the betrayal. She becomes more assertive. She is not let down by her lover as she is a woman. She chides him in his presence.

Her act of scolding is therapeutic for her. She claims the space that she deserves. Her fury is directed only at the perpetrator, not at anyone else. She abuses her lover and demands an explanation. She says that when he was undressing her, why did he not tell that he was just interested in her body? She asserts aggressively:

Guest of mine for the moment,

my slave, Don't you feel my disgust and hate?  
One of these days. The memory of tonight will bring you back to me  
Conquered and submissive again.  
You'll leave your pride at the door And  
I'll laugh at your glances and your wishes.  
But you'll have to pay three times the price next time!  
This will be the cost of your insults and pride (Chipasula 80).

In "The Brooch" by Mririda at Attik, once again comes face to face with a bold and resolute beloved who is jilted. Here also, the protagonist is not weeping or surrendering because of her fate. The speaker is trying to come to terms with reality. She is trying to accept her situation with courage. She is trying to move on. She tells her grandmother that the brooch given to her by her lover reminds her of him. It is not easy for her to forget him as the brooch is there in front of her.

Her grandmother advises her to throw away the brooch. As a result, she will be able to come out of her grief. The granddaughter answers that she did that a month back. Still, she is not able to forget him. She, further, argues that as the brooch gave her a red scar on her hand, she sees it while drinking, spinning, and washing. She tries her best to keep him away from her thoughts, but in vain. Her grandmother cannot say anything, but: "My granddaughter, may Allah heal your pain! / The scar is not on your hand,/ but in your heart" (Chipasula 82).

African love poetry also presents happy conjugal life. It is not difficult to encounter honest and faithful couples. Such scenes of mutual love and faith inspire hope and confidence in readers. For example, "Dubem's Patience" by If Amadiume from Nigeria can be a good read. Here, the wife dismisses her suitor on the ground that he is her past now. She is with her husband and does not want to leave him. She then enumerates her husband's good deeds. Her cataloging of her husband, Dubem's virtues, is full of admiration and reverence.

She is total with her husband and has no desire to betray him. She counts his small, but countless acts of care:

For it is Dubem with the strong arms,  
who gives me yam from his large store.  
It is Dubem, who says to me,  
"Have the children eaten?"  
It is Dubem, who says to me,  
"Is your head aching?"  
It is Dubem, who says to me,  
"Woman, rest, I shall finish the digging for you" (Chipasula 83).

A question that has been troubling all the ages is what is love? Intellectuals and sages have tried defining it. Love is a matter of the heart, not the mind. People who are in love can explain it better. It is related to feelings and experiences. African love poetry also tries to conceptualize it. Juma Bhalo from Kenya in "Love of which I Speak" is a wonderful attempt in this regard.

In this small poem, the protagonist illustrates the nature and meaning of love for the layman. Love, for the narrator, is a divine experience. Love is nurturing. Love destroys boundaries. Love brings down walls. Love is a necessity. Love unites us all. Even, God has commanded us to love each other. Love can put wars to an end. Had love not been there, evil would have dominated the world throughout. Love is the ultimate source of peace and happiness. The speaker points out:

The love of which I speak,  
so that we may all enjoy it one day,  
is praising one another's hearts,  
then we shall be one.  
That is the best love for wise people;  
they will receive every treasure,  
when their intentions are pure (Chipasula 100).

Love poetry is not just about the joy of meeting. The pain of parting is equally present in love poetry. The pain of separation because of death is something that heightens the impact of the poem. Death is preceded by life. Therefore, wherever death is the cause of separation, it is counterbalanced by

memories of happy days when the lovers were together. This contrast of life and death makes the poem more poignant.

Syl Cheney Coker from Sierra Leone presents such a situation that evokes pity and sympathy for the lovers. In “My Wife Dying from Cancer”, Coker unfolds the contrast of past and present. The speaker is very sad. His wife is on the death bed. Madison has stopped working upon her. She is reduced to a mere Skelton. The narrator remembers the good old days when his wife was fine and they used to walk near the lake. They used to dream together for a good and healthy life. They used to dream of owning a house.

It was all twenty-four years ago. The present moment is difficult for both lovers to confront. The lover ruminates:

Now, it is you that lie waiting for a new God all day long,  
as I sit holding your hand,  
flying in from Las Vegas,  
even though the tarantulas of security and agonies of a wait at the airports are scripts  
undeserving of memory (Chipasula 105).

Coker continues this agony of death and disaster in “Homecoming”. Here, the husband has come back after burying his wife who has just died. The house looks desolate and hollow to the husband. He is not able to rest. Everywhere, there is silence. He remembers his wife. He thinks that she is walking in the house but soon realizes that it is not true. He imagines that his mother has come back from her grave to console him. The garden looks empty to him. There is no noise anywhere. He finds that the desk, on which he is writing, has rotten with time. Finally, he pledges to plant a tree to commemorate those who are not alive physically. Such poems present that African love poetry is conscious of the reality of life. It is not a utopia that will take the readers into a new world. It is as much rooted in reality as any other form of expression is.

African love poetry is overtly political at times. It intentionally brings the notion of race and colonialism. There are songs written to glorify the beauty and body of a black woman. There is a conscious effort to subvert the myth of white beauty. For example, David Diop from Senegal, writing in protest tradition, challenges the idea of white women being beautiful and desirable in “Rama Kam A Song for Black Woman”. The poet, here, eulogizes the blackness of black girls to counter the hegemony of the European notion of beauty. To quote Shyam Agarwalla (2000), “It may be safely said that African literature is resistance literature. Amilcar Cabral also says that it is fighting literature, opposition literature, a literature which deals with nation-building, literature which negates oppression” (29).

The speaker remarks that his black girl is prettier and more desirable. She is charming and seductive. Her mouth, eyes, lips, and hair are more beautiful than any other thing. He likes everything related to her including her dance and her body. The lady is presented as an absolute icon of beauty and glamour. The speaker sings:

I like your wild beast look And your mouth that tastes of mango  
Rama Kam Your body is black spice That makes desire sing  
Rama Kam When you pass The loveliest girl envies The warm rhythm of your hips  
Rama Kam When you dance The tomtom Rama Kam The tomtom stretched like a  
victorious sex Gasps under--- (Chipasula 113).

To conclude, it can safely be argued that African poetry presents a rich tapestry of moods and emotions. It is not unidimensional, but it has multiple layers. The inherent variety of lovers and their attitude towards each other makes it even more beautiful. The innate music of both language and thought makes the readers and listeners want to read and listen more and more. It is complex and simple at the same time. It presents the aesthetically rich lives of Africans and repudiates the claim that Africans are not capable of exercising their creativity and imagination. It also affirms that when Europe was in darkness, Africa was living and enjoying its golden age. Africans at that time were composing love lyrics and dancing to its rhythms.



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