

## Depiction of the theme of Love in Arabic and English Literature Based on Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love

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### Abstract

*The present paper elucidates how the theme of love is depicted in Arabic and English poems. The purpose of the current paper is to look closely at the concept of love and how the term has changed over time. One Arabic poem and one English poem were used for this purpose. These poems were closely read, interpreted, and critiqued in light of Sternberg's triangular theory of love (1986). It is found that the theme of love has become much more complicated with its negative new shades of meaning. It is also found that under the name "platonic love," the word love has lost much of its connotative meanings, thus becoming synonymous for words like attachment, passion, and liking. The term love has become more intense, forceful, and pivotal yet empty of its real value, being referred to and understood as "modern sex." Based on Sternberg's triangular theory, love with its real value, was distorted even in great literary traditions and works of literature because the modern lover (man) only lives the futile moments of sex without worrying about reproduction.*

**Keywords:** love, Triangular –theory of love, modern sex, passion, modern love, man's love, woman's love.

### Introduction

Love, with its simplest linguistic structure, consisting of only two sounds in Arabic language and English, has become very complicated recently. Alas! Even great models of Arabic literary love traditions, viz, *3antar and 3bla*, *Qais and Leila*<sup>1</sup>, have melt in the cycles of modern love and/or what I termed as "man's love" and/or "modern sex" and therefore have become extinct. It is apparent that with the advancement of technology and the development of audiovisual equipment, love has become very widely spread between all ages. Admire, adore, fond of, worship, and feel affection have all become synonymous for love. Here, we need no scientific evidence to infer that people don't realize which mental state they belong to. Media, publicity, and cinemas have contributed to the change that plagued the term love. One could rarely watch any movie, series, or even cartoons without noticing the abundant love expressions and scenes, but, of course, void of its real value.

It is true that great masterpieces of love in both Arabic and English literary traditions, viz, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Qais and Leila* and *3anter and 3abla* have introduced humanity to a great theme of endless and unforgettable love. However, it seems that love undergoes an evolution process like any other natural phenomenon in the globe. However, not all cultures have embraced love. The Greeks, for example, showed much ambivalence about it. *Eros* is depicted as 'bittersweet' while the term "platonic lover" was not of a great deal for them" (Ferrari 248-9). In fact, Plato, as most critics noted, has never openly tackled and/or embraced love but he rather tackled *Eros* or passionate sexual desire. Almost all cultures, it can be inferred, including the Arabic culture, have come to treat *Eros* as an "effective basis for the single most highly prized element in a life's partnership" (Halperin 162).

### 2. Objectives and Method

This study aims to discuss a number of different yet conflicting thoughts and readings about love. These readings were taken from students' interpretations from poems that used to be taught by the researcher for undergraduate students. Many themes were inferred from class discussions in English poetry and comparative literature classes where students were asked to provide thoughts and ideas to help them better clarify understanding the concept of love. The poems consulted in this paper are Nizar Qabbani's *A Letter to a female Student* and William Shakespeare's *When my Love Swears She is Made of Truth*. The choice of these poets in particular was not haphazard.

They wrote masterpieces that tackled the theme of love as well as being very popular in both cultures; when it comes to love poems, they are the most often-cited. This, in fact, might respond to people who argue about the insufficiency of only two texts to be representative of the theme of love in two different cultures, whether in light of their literary traditions or the periods they were written in.

To elicit the main features of each poem, the present researcher will closely read certain excerpts taken from the poems, and then provide some critical thoughts about the way love is depicted by major authors who tackled such theme (e.g., Plato). Further, these excerpts will be judged in light of Sternberg's triangular theory of love, as through his theory of love, the so-called lovers can be helped to understand the range and composition of the phenomenon of love" (Sternberg 120). In short, since Sternberg's theory adheres to different patterns of love (nonlove, liking, infatuated love, empty love, romantic love, competitive love, consummative love) (123-4), I will identify which pattern best resembles love in the selected poems.

### **3. Theoretical Background**

#### **3.1 Definition of love**

Love, according to Webster's New World dictionary, is defined as a strong affection for or attachment or devotion to a person or persons. Love further implies an intense fondness or profound devotion. Generally speaking, love can be treated in a broad sense to mean the feeling of "benevolence;" Emmit defines love as an antonym for forceful sex and that both love and force are thought of as the "ultimate antithesis in human relations" (149). However, Freud looks at love as being a prerequisite for a good mental health (qtd. In Daniell 48). Notably, these critics have ignored certain ethics about their definition of love. While most traditional schools of criticism have thought of love in terms of its platonic features and spiritual denotations, these critics have looked at love in light of its physicality, mechanicality and sexuality.

On the other hand, Sternberg looks differently at the concept of love. Adopting the theory of triangular love, he argues that love is a psychological phenomenon where intimacy, passion and decision and/or commitment constitute the components of it which he views as "a comprehensive basis for understanding many aspects of the love that underlies close relationships" (119-120). He further argues that a true and real love can only be obtained with the aforementioned trichotomy, as "the amount of love one experiences depends on the absolute strength of [the] three components, and the kind of love one experiences depends on their strengths relative to each other" (119). For Sternberg, a triangular theory or what is termed as "real love" grows stronger when these components interact with each other. In Sternberg's scale, one component alone will result with a staggering love or even "nonlove". So, love for him is a "set of primary structures that are best understood separately rather than as integrated whole. All [the set of feeling] contribute simultaneously to the experience of love" (Sternberg 121).

#### **3.2 Nizzar Qabbani's Perspective on Love**

Nizzar Qabbani (1923-1998), a major Syrian literary figure and diplomat, was considered the spokesman of women, especially when his sister committed suicide because she was reluctant to get married to a man whom she didn't love. This experience had a profound effect on him, and, therefore, paved his way to writing lots of poems in defense of women's rights by criticizing traditional Muslim society and male Chauvinism. Accordingly, he decided that he would dedicate his poetry to fight the social conditions that led to the killing of his sister. As far as love is concerned, Qabbani sees love in the Arab world as a prisoner and that it was his responsibility to free it, "I want to free the Arab soul, sense and body with my poetry" (PoemHunters.com).

However, readers of Qabbani, as they delve in the world of his love poems, may well notice how he not only liberated and stripped love off its aesthetic values, but also how he blindly eroticized it. That's why readers are always bombarded with many complexities and contradictions when they closely read his love poems. Below is the first example, a poem called *Ila Telmeethah* (translates into: For a female student). Generally speaking, this Arabic poem resembles and reminds of great authors who looked at sex and bed as the medium of life. For example, it takes us back to Donne's *The Sun Rising* where the bed is characterized as the "center of the real world" and where the lover is a m curious man, or an explorer, of the relations between the beloved body and soul because he has very little interest about women's feelings. That's why man's poetry about love was mostly about love, with its stripped positive meaning, lust as well as his desire for the opposite sex (Islam Khan 17). Qabbani's poem reads,

Tell me some soft words, even with a lie,  
 Your frozen-like statue may almost kill me!  
 You are still a child in the art of loving!  
 Long distance stands between you and me.  
 Love stories have surely spoiled you  
 For all are but coma, myth and imagination  
 Love is not an oriental novel  
 Where heroes get married by the end!  
 Love means sailing without a ship  
 Yet feeling arrival is almost impossible  
 It is to feel jerks on the fingers  
 Questioning the everclosed lips  
 It is the sadness fountain that delves deep inside  
 Around which harvests and plains do yield  
 It is despair... it is our fatal suspicion

[My own translation]

Apparently, the structure of this poem is twofold. Each represents one major idea about love. The two ideas show two different perspectives about the way the speaker depicts love in different yet mismatching ideals, though. While the first deals with the speaker's sweetheart's role in love, the other pertains to the speaker's own understanding and definition of love. That is to say, both define and look at love from two dissimilar perceptions: woman's role in love versus man's love. For the woman's part, it is apparent that no role is assigned to her. She remains silent, if not silenced, by man's arising erotic appetite. Further, she is not given a chance to express her own emotions but is openly accused of being ignorant, childish, passive recipient, idle-like, and most importantly, spoiled.

For man's part, Qabbani urges his mistress to practice "the modern love" in which she is supposed to tell him "fine words," yet blaming her for her childish sexual behavior and for her purposeful ignorance during their sexual intercourse. This can be clearly illustrated in the first four lines in his poem. To motivate his mistress, the speaker, seemingly an eastern man torn between his religious commitments and social obligations and between his semi-explosive sexual desires, tells her off for being ignorant for his explicit, yet unsaid, sexual needs. In other words, she must use her supernatural womanish powers to please him and fulfill his sexual desires. For him, two major roles are assigned to each lover: the victim, the male lover, and the killer, the female. He accuses her of killing him because of blindly being irresponsive and acting as an inanimate with him. Also, he hints at two mismatching kinds of love, though not mentioned overtly. The first one is man's love, a revolutionary one. The second one is women's love, a silent one that needs to be automatically revitalized to become more rebellious. For him, she lacks the proper experience in dealing with man. The speaker further brings evidence that his mistress is responsible for the psychological and emotional pain he experiences due to adhering to love stories over media and books.

In fact, man's love, as defined by the lover, seems very western-oriented as it presents some thoughts that don't match with the nature of the Arab woman who is always viewed as shy and introverted. For man, love is not supposed to be traditional the way Arab and eastern (oriental) women would normally solicit; it should have certain abnormal features viz, melodramatic, adventurous, risky, puzzlement-oriented, confusing, sad, endless, fatal, crises-driven, skeptic, hopeless, melancholic, and most importantly, secret. In Sternberg's view, this is known in Sternberg's scale as "liking" or "infatuated love" where a lover would experience some special moments of love far away from intimacy and/or commitment. Sternberg comments on "liking" as being one pattern of love. He adds,

The term *liking* is used [...] in a nontrivial sense, not merely to describe the feelings one has toward casual acquaintance and passer-bys in one's life. Rather it refers to the set of feelings one experiences in relationships that can truly be characterized as friendships. *One feels closeness, bondedness, and warmth toward the other without feelings of intense passion or long-term commitment.* (Sternberg 123; emphasis added) Once again, Sternberg emphasized what I previously referred to as *3 sharh*, an Arabic term equivalent to "friendship", where one does have some respect for the days they lived together and the nice memories they had but just for the short time, thus meaning there is neither commitment nor intimacy.

It sounds as if the speaker demonstrates an erotic feeling equipped by a sexual desire towards his beloved. Qabbani's lover inquires a more intense and more passionate sexual desire, thus reminding with Dover's perception of *Eros* which he attempts to define as "the intense desire for a particular individual as asexual partner [ in response] to the stimulus of visual beauty" (Qtd. in Halperin 163).

Such negative depiction of love as being just one aspect of sex reminds of and supports T.S. Eliot's perspective in his *The Waste Land* in which he explores about how sex has dramatically yet deliberately invaded the noble meaning of love. Love is degraded and condemned. Eliot's *The Waste Land* hints at the mechanicality of love and how love has become money-oriented. Not only, in Eliot's perspective, does love lead to the destruction of individuals but it also leads to the annihilation of grand cultures, e.g., the Western culture (Qtd. in Jaleel, 2016). The excerpt below, taken from Eliot's *The Waste Land*, further supports Qabbani's perspective in which he argues that love is utopian and that there is no way to have real love. Eliot maintains,

*Your arms full and your hair wet  
 Could not speak, and my eyes failed  
 I was neither living nor dead  
 I knew nothing looking into the heart of light  
 The silence, Oed 'und leer das Meer' (The Waste Land 37-42)*

In fact, Eliot shows that the failure of the love relationship is mainly because of his beloved, Marie, and because she caused him a shock in feelings. Like that of Qabbani's lover, the sweetheart is silent, speechless and unable to act, argue or rebel. She is just a passive recipient. He has no access to her heart, though. So, apparently, there is barricade in their relation. In short, Qabbani's lover only theorizes about love but never actually approached its aesthetic value.

### 3.3 Shakespeare's View of Love: Sonnet 138

Despite the big gap in time between Qabbani and Shakespeare, readers might be stunned to notice that there is much commonality in between them when they tackle the issue of love. Openly, Shakespeare's sonnet 138, *When my Love Swears that She is Made of Truth*, demystifies the insincere relationship between partners who claim that they love one another. It also divulges the insecurities concealed behind the couples' relationship: There has never been a true love relationship between the two partners. All that has been there is no more than an erroneous, temporal, and erotic relationship which is fully strengthened by the woman's incessant, emotional, and psychological support equipped with the man's patience. The sonnet reads,

*When my love swears that, she is made of truth,  
 I do believe her, though I know she lies,  
 That she might think me some untutored youth,  
 Unlearned in the world's false subtleties.  
 Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young,  
 Although she knows my days are past the best,  
 Simply I credit her false-speaking tongue:  
 On both sides thus is simple truth suppressed.  
 But wherefore says she not she is unjust?  
 And wherefore say not I that I am old?  
 Oh, love's best habit is in seeming trust,  
 And age in love loves not to have years told.  
 Therefore I lie with her and she with me,  
 And in our faults by lies we flattered be.*

Shakespeare's interpretation of love seems to be realistic yet pessimistic. Like the vast majority of his sonnets, he presents the idea of having a psychological problem with his "dark lady". In the first three quatrains, he openly divulges the fake relationship between him and his mistress. In the final couplet, he tells the conclusion and the summary of their life: both lie to one another for the sake of life continuity. However, under the name of love, everything is safe and sound.

In short, Shakespeare's sonnet represents the view of the vast majority of people, which mostly responds to the way love is depicted in eastern communities.

In fact, most people embrace Shakespeare's thought of the way people should base their love. In it, the reality of love is depicted in a negative way: Love means sex and only sex. Its max out takes place when the male lover is at the peak of youth; when he ages, he cannot be considered a good lover simply because his force of sex is vanished, a feature that reflects negatively on the primitive conception of love. Here, the love relationship in Shakespeare's perspective is doomed to failure because, according to Bloom, when marriage isn't based on love or romance it acts like an "alienating institution" (198).

The end of love for some lovers means the end of life, so continuing with the same company keeping the same pace of emotion and feelings, even with fake promises, would enhance people's own pride about their erotic and sexual power. However, deep inside, each partner is fully convinced that the current relation is not sincere enough to praise; it is just a respect for the long-life journey spent together and a fear from the future. Shakespeare's perception of love, in fact, debunks the fake feelings attached to the love relationship. While the mistress is unable to show real love for her man yet swears that she loves him, he accepts her emotions yet knowing them to be insincere. Here, the bitter fact is that he recognizes that whatever she says is no more than a lip service and a false piety. In the mean time, she knows that he fully knows that she isn't sincere.

Supported by Qabbani and Shakespeare, Sternberg explains that as time between couples passes passion decreases because passion typically plays a moderate role in strengthening love ties between lovers. This justifies the coldness and instability observed in relations between lovers who adapt to and adopt this pattern of life. Unexpectedly, the power of sex, instead of functioning as empowering factor, reflects negatively on lovers by combating trust and faith between them.

As far as Sternberg's theory of love is concerned and with regard to the match between the trichotomy of Sternberg's theory of love and Shakespeare's depiction of love in Sonnet 138, one can easily get the impression that Shakespeare's love parallels with "passion" on Sternberg's scale. Here, the untalkaboutable conflict in sonnet 138 is driven by the "lack of romance and physical attraction" but it is enforced by the sexual consummation rather than a "warmth relationship" (Sternberg 119).

### **3. Conclusions**

The traditional meaning of love has dramatically changed and started to lose its innocent meanings. As argued by Halperin, it was found that there is hardly any "platonic" love about the erotic doctrines or even the ideal relationship between lovers and their beloved (162). In addition, it has been found that there is a commonality in between Arab and English poems concerning the depiction of the theme of love. There is no pure love and no everlasting love relationship; all should be based fully on lies to survive. Both Qabbani and Shakespeare, though belong to remote cultures, see lying to one another a major pillar for an endless love. All kinds of love depicted in the present study embrace a temporal relationship based on sexual and physical desires, which, in Sternberg's words, is referred to as "passion" (120) and that almost immediately end with the end of the sexual instinct.

However, the eastern man, unlike his westerner partner, keeps struggling in between his sexual desires and his religious faith, which are always in conflict. An eastern man embraces what he calls "3ishrah" [which translates into respect for the sake of previous days] rather than love, or even intimacy. The westerner lover, on the other hand, remains eager to have a relationship despite the insecurities that encompass it. A westerner man, like his eastern counterpart, embraces passion.

In short, both Shakespeare and Qabbani share the view that there is no sincere relationship between humans unless there are certain mischievous manners involved. Alas! In addition, both complain, whether overtly or covertly, about the routine of the love relationship during their sexual intercourse, thus urging for "modern sex," under the pretext of modern love. This explains why the two love relationships in both poems have promised no fruitful outcomes. Eventually, it can be inferred that modernity and technological advancement have had negative influence on human beings by turning them into cold and indifferent (confused) personalities, being unable to create any sense of warm and intimate communication with the other sex.

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