

LOVE REALITIES IN AFRICA: A NARRATIVE REVIEW OF CULTURAL AND LITERARY PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

This narrative review synthesizes scholarly literature on the conceptualization, expression, and experience of love across African countries. Drawing on 28 peer-reviewed sources from anthropology, psychology, literary studies, philosophy, and public health. The review was conducted in accordance with Cronin, Ryan, and Coughlan's (2008) methodological framework. The review identifies three major themes: (1) Love as an Ethical, Philosophical and Spiritual Worldview; (2) Love as a Cultural Institution; (3) Negotiating Love Through Gender, Power, and Identity. Findings reveal that while love is universally recognized, in Africa it is not a uniform Western import. It is a culturally contextually rich phenomenon shaped by indigenous philosophies, colonial legacies, economic realities, and contemporary transformations. Thus, love's meanings, practices, and implications vary significantly across ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic contexts.

Keywords: Love, Realities, Africa, Narrative review, Cultural, Literary, Perspectives.

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Love is experienced by all humans globally, yet its meanings, expressions, and lived realities are shaped differently across nationalities and cultures (Steen, Antoniou, Lindemann & Jerneck, 2024). Across generations, communities have preserved and communicated it through oral traditions, proverbs, storytelling, songs, poetry, folktales, and written literature (Amadiume, 1997). These cultural and literary forms provide a valuable insight into how relationships are constructed, maintained, and transformed within different societies. They also illuminate how love intersects with broader issues such as gender, identity, marriage, family obligations, sexuality, spirituality, power, and socio-political change.

Despite love being one of the most fundamental human experiences, its place within African scholarship has long been characterised by competing perspectives. On one hand, love is regarded as a universal human emotion that transcends cultural and geographical boundaries. On the other hand, scholars argue that the meanings and expressions of love are culturally situated and cannot be understood outside their social contexts (Cole & Thomas, 2009). This debate is not merely academic, it has important implications for understanding family structures, gender relations, public health interventions, social policy, and the lived experiences of people across the continent.

Historically, early anthropologists and missionaries overlooked or dismissed the existence of love in Africa because it did not conform to Western ideals (Vaughan, 2009). Western scholarship positioned love as a relatively recent invention of European modernity, emerging alongside industrialization, individualism, and the decline of arranged marriages (Giddens, 1992). Within this framework, African societies were often characterized as lacking romantic love, with marriage understood primarily as an economic and kinship arrangement rather than an emotional union. This denial served ideological functions, reinforcing colonial narratives of African "backwardness" and justifying intervention in African domestic life. However, this perspective has been increasingly challenged. Emerging scholarship argues that love in Africa has deep historical roots and is expressed through specific cultural practices (Cole & Thomas, 2009; Kiguwa, 2024; Mayer, 2025).

At the same time, contemporary realities, including indigenous traditions, colonial histories, urbanisation, migration, globalisation, religion, digital communication, and changing gender roles, continue to reshape

how African people experience and negotiate love and relationships. These overlapping influences create diverse relational realities that reflect both continuity with cultural traditions and adaptation to changing social environments. Rather than questioning whether love exists in African societies, contemporary scholarship seeks to understand how love is conceptualised, expressed, negotiated, and transformed within diverse cultural settings.

Despite the proliferation of studies on love in African contexts, significant gaps remain. Much of the existing literature is fragmented across disciplinary boundaries, with limited interdisciplinary integration between anthropologists, psychologists, literary scholars, and public health researchers. Additionally, many studies focus on either traditional or modern manifestations of love without adequately examining the dynamic interplay between them. Therefore, there is a need for an integrative synthesis that brings together insights from different disciplines and their interactions so that love can be understood as a space of negotiation rather than as mere continuity or abrupt break. Against this background, the current review synthesises existing literature on love, intimacy, and relational realities in Africa from cultural and literary perspectives. Specifically, it draws on evidence from multiple disciplines to highlight gaps that require further investigation. By integrating diverse cultural, literary, and empirical viewpoints, the review supports a more holistic understanding of how love is experienced, represented, and continually reshaped across Africa.

The question that guided the review was: How is love conceptualised, experienced, and expressed within diverse African cultural contexts?

2. METHODS AND MATERIALS

This narrative review was conducted following the methodological framework proposed by Cronin, Ryan, and Coughlan (2008). The framework provides a systematic approach to reviewing literature while allowing the interpretive flexibility necessary to synthesise diverse types of scholarship.

2.1. Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across multiple academic databases, including Google Scholar, JSTOR, PubMed, Scopus, and African Journals Online (AJOL). The following search terms were used in various combinations: "love," "romantic love," "Sub-Saharan Africa," "Africa," "culture," "gender," "marriage," "relationships," "conceptions," and "representations." Boolean operators (AND, OR) were employed to refine searches. Additionally, reference lists of key articles were hand-searched to identify additional relevant sources.

2.2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they: (1) focused on love, romantic relationships, or marriage in African contexts; (2) were published in peer-reviewed journals, books, or academic dissertations; (3) published in English; (4) available in full text. Both empirical and theoretical works were included. No date restrictions were applied, as the review aimed to capture both foundational and contemporary scholarship. Studies were excluded if they: (1) focused primarily on non-African populations; (2) addressed love only tangentially without substantive engagement with the concept; (3) were opinion pieces or editorials without scholarly grounding.

2.3. Study Selection

The initial search yielded 841 potential sources. After 318 duplicates were removed, 523 titles and abstracts were screened. Of these, 88 were selected for full-text review. Following full-text assessment against inclusion criteria, 28 studies were included in the final synthesis.

2.4. Data Extraction

Data were extracted from each included study using a standardized table with the following columns: Author(s), Year, Country; Aim/Objective; Methods and Design; Population; Key Findings. Table 1 summarises the key characteristics of the 30 included studies. This extraction process was conducted

independently by the 1st author and verified through subsequent re-reading guided by both the 2nd and 3rd authors.

2.5. Data Synthesis

Given the heterogeneity of the included studies (spanning qualitative, quantitative, literary, and philosophical approaches), a narrative synthesis approach was adopted. This involved: (1) identifying key themes across studies; (2) grouping findings into thematic categories; (3) examining relationships between themes; (4) developing an interpretive framework that accounts for both commonalities and divergences across contexts.

2.6. Quality Assessment

Quality assessment was conducted using adapted criteria appropriate to each study type. For empirical studies, criteria included clarity of research aim/objectives and questions, appropriateness of methodology, rigor of analysis, and relevance to the review questions. For theoretical and literary studies, coherence of argument, engagement with existing scholarship, and originality of contribution were evaluated. Studies were not excluded based on quality assessment but were evaluated for their relative contribution to the synthesis.

Table 1: Data Extraction Summary

Author, Year, Country	Aim / Objective	Methods / Design	Population	Key Findings
Osei-Tutu et al. (2018) Ghana	Explore conceptions of love among Ghanaian Christians	Qualitative interviews	Ghanaian Christians	Religious beliefs strongly shape intimate relationships. Love is understood as commitment, sacrifice, respect, care, and spirituality rather than merely romantic attraction.
Dzokoto et al. (2018), Ghana	Examine romantic relationship rules in Akan proverbs	Content analysis of proverbs	Akan proverbs	Proverbs reveal a pragmatic approach to love, emphasising effort, morality, mutual respect, social regulation, and closely connected to family responsibilities and communal values.
Ramose (2024), Transnational (Africa/China)	Compare Ubuntu and Ren as ethical frameworks for love	Philosophical analysis	N/A (theoretical)	Ubuntu conceptualises love as relational, ethical, compassionate, and community-oriented rather than individualistic.
Karandashev (2022), Kenya	Examine romantic love in Taita marriage culture	Ethnographic review	Taita community	Love develops post-marriage, transactional elements, and community involvement. Romantic love within Taita marriage reflects both indigenous traditions and the increasing influence of modern romantic ideals.

Author, Year, Country	Aim / Objective	Methods / Design	Population	Key Findings
Odhiambo (2003), Kenya	Analyse representations of love/marriage in Kenyan popular fiction	Literary analysis	Kenyan popular novels	Love is portrayed as negotiated within tensions and between tradition, modernity, gender expectations, and economic realities.
Cole & Thomas (2009), African countries	Examine love in African historical and contemporary contexts	Edited volume (multiple methods)	Multiple populations	Love in Africa is historically diverse, culturally constructed, and shaped by colonialism, gender, migration, religion, and social change.
Ruark et al. (2017), Rwanda, Swaziland	Explore love conceptions and links to HIV/IPV	Qualitative interviews	Adults	Love is idealised but can perpetuate harmful norms. Economic dependency shapes relationships.
Toivanen (2017), Ghana	Analyse love and modernity in Aidoo's novel	Literary analysis	Novel: <i>Changes: A Love Story</i>	Urban modernity creates tensions; women navigate conflicting expectations
Moolla (2024), Ghana	Analyse romantic love in Ama Ata Aidoo's oeuvre	Literary analysis	Aidoo's complete works	Present love as complex, feminist, political, and intertwined with identity and power.
Moolla (2023), South Africa	Examine love and national belonging in Rayda Jacobs' novels	Literary analysis	Jacobs' novels	Love contributes to healing, belonging, memory, and national identity in post-apartheid South Africa.
Tugume (2017), Ghana	Analyse gender relations in Aidoo's <i>Changes (Love stories)</i>	Critical analysis	Novel: <i>Changes</i>	Love relationships in <i>Changes</i> expose unequal gender relations and tensions between tradition and female autonomy.
Vaughan (2009), Sub-Saharan Africa	Historical analysis of romantic love	Historical review	Historical sources	Romantic love has evolved historically alongside colonialism, urbanisation, education, Christianity, and economic change.
Olaussen (2002), Ghana	Analyse urban intimacy in Aidoo's <i>Changes</i>	Literary analysis	Novel: <i>Changes</i>	Urban space transforms love, marriage, and women's agency within modern African cities.
Ndebele (2025), Zimbabwe	Examine Ndebele trickster tales in premarital romance counselling	Textual analysis; focus groups	Ndebele folktales and community elders	Trickster tales remain valuable to transmit relationship wisdom eroded by Westernisation.

Author, Year, Country	Aim / Objective	Methods / Design	Population	Key Findings
Thetso & Kolobe (2022), Lesotho	Examined the oral Sesotho poem used by Basotho boys as a courting strategy	Textual analysis	Textual analysis of the poem	Love embedded in language, using metaphors and objects, reflects abstract feelings.
de Bruijn (2008), Ghana	Analyse market literature for youth on love	Content analysis	Ghanaian market literature	Popular market literature teaches young people about romance, sexuality, morality, and modern relationships.
Ukpokolo (2012), Nigeria	Examine gender implications of love in traditional marriage	Philosophical analysis	N/A (theoretical)	Traditional marriage practices shape love through gendered cultural expectations, family obligations, and social hierarchy.
Hunter (2010), South Africa	Examine love in the context of HIV/AIDS	Ethnographic research	Men and women	Material provision is central to love. Gender inequality perpetuates HIV risk
Apio (2022), Ghana/Senegal	Analyse polygamy as affront to romantic love	Comparative literary analysis Textual and critical analysis	2 novels	Polygamy challenges romantic love by creating tensions between affection, equality, power, and marital expectations.
Coe (2011), Ghana	Examine love and care in transnational families	Ethnographic research	Transnational families	Love expressed through material care. Migration transforms family relationships. Love within transnational families is maintained through care, communication, remittances, and emotional obligations despite physical separation.
Nenadović (2023), Nigeria	Analyse "defiant love" in African fiction	Literary analysis	Two Nigerian novels	African fiction portrays "defiant love" as a resistance against patriarchy, social injustice, and oppressive cultural norms.
Pavlou (2009), South Africa	Conceptualize romantic love across cultural groups	Mixed methods (survey + interviews)	South African adults.	Cultural groups differ in conceptualising love, but share common themes of intimacy, trust, commitment, and companionship.

Author, Year, Country	Aim / Objective	Methods / Design	Population	Key Findings
Kelbessa (2014), Ethiopia	Examine love-sex songs and HIV/AIDS	Content analysis	Oromo love songs	Love songs communicate courtship, sexuality, cultural values, and HIV/AIDS prevention messages.
Das (2023) in Leetsch (2021) Africa	Analyse love and space in diasporic women's writing	Literary analysis	African diasporic women's fiction	Love is portrayed as intertwined with migration, identity, memory, and belonging across multiple spaces.
Ajibola (2021), Nigeria	Examine love and identity in Nigerian migrant fiction	Literary analysis	Nigerian migrant novels	Love transcends boundaries; it is central to the negotiation of migration, identity, displacement, and belonging.
Achebe, (2019), Africa	Examining indigenous concepts of love, courtship, marriage, and family formation across African societies	Historical and cultural review	Historical African societies across diverse ethnic groups	Romantic love has always existed in Africa despite colonial stereotypes.
Kiguwa, (2024), South Africa	To examine Bhekizizwe Peterson's Black Love Project	Qualitative critical analysis	Cultural texts	Black love is conceptualised as collective care, dignity, resistance, belonging, healing and liberation from colonial and apartheid histories.
Mayer, 2025, South Africa	To explore how love is understood, experienced, and expressed among culturally diverse South Africans	Qualitative hermeneutic-interpretive study.	South African adults	Love is culturally constructed and influenced by ethnicity, language, gender, age, and family values.

3. SYNTHESIS AND ANALYSIS: FINDINGS

Thematic analysis of the 28 included studies revealed seven overarching themes. Across the findings, love consistently appears as a multidimensional social institution that simultaneously expresses individual affection, collective responsibility, moral obligation, cultural identity, and social continuity.

3.1. Theme 1: Love as an Ethical, Philosophical and Spiritual Worldview

Patterns emerging across the reviewed literature are that African love is fundamentally relational rather than individualistic. Instead of prioritising personal fulfilment, the reviewed studies consistently portray love as an ethical responsibility directed towards sustaining families, communities, and collective harmony. This orientation is particularly evident within discussions of Ubuntu, where one's humanity is realised through relationships with others rather than through autonomous self-expression (Ramose, 2024; Achebe, 2019). Acts of love are not only feelings of satisfaction but also a contribution to family stability, social solidarity, and moral responsibility (Achebe, 2019; Cole & Thomas, 2009; Karandashev, 2022). Osei-Tutu et al. (2018) found that love is rarely defined through passion or physical attraction alone. Instead, it is associated with sacrifice, commitment, forgiveness, patience, and care for others.

Such findings suggest that moral character precedes emotional experience in defining authentic love. Mayer (2025) similarly shows that contemporary South Africans continue to describe love through notions of respect, responsibility, spirituality, and family commitment despite increasing exposure to global relationship ideals. Moreover, in Africa, relationships are repeatedly evaluated according to their capacity to strengthen social cohesion, preserve cultural continuity, and promote communal flourishing rather than just maximising personal happiness (Achebe, 2019; Cole & Thomas, 2009; Karandashev, 2022; Ramose, 2024; Mayer, 2025; Kiguwa, 2024). Even literary representations consistently portray successful relationships as those that balance individual desires with communal obligations (Moolla, 2023; Toivanen, 2017; Tugume, 2017). Therefore, Ubuntu should not be understood merely as an abstract philosophical concept but rather as an active relational ethic through which intimate relationships are organised.

The findings further highlight the close interconnection between love and spirituality, with intimate relationships consistently situated within religious and spiritual worldviews that provide moral legitimacy to courtship, marriage, and family life. Ghanaian Christians interpret love as a divine responsibility requiring selflessness, obedience, and mutual care (Osei-Tutu et al., 2018). Achebe (2019) attests that indigenous marriage systems were historically embedded within spiritual beliefs concerning ancestors, kinship obligations, fertility, and communal continuity. Mayer (2025) participants extend this interpretation by integrating religious teachings with cultural traditions to develop understandings of love that reflect both Christian values and indigenous moral philosophies.

3.2. Theme 2: Love as a Cultural Institution

Culture emerges as an active and evolving process through which meanings of love are continually negotiated. The findings show that in Africa, love is deeply intertwined with cultural values, beliefs, and practices. Thus, the institution of love reflects both continuity and adaptation, revealing the dynamic nature of African cultural systems rather than their rigidity (Cole & Thomas, 2009; Vaughan, 2009; Hunter, 2010). Hence, love is not portrayed as a purely private or spontaneous feeling but rather as a socially organised institution shaped by shared cultural norms, moral expectations, and collective responsibilities. Courtship and marriage emerged as subthemes. The studies revealed that courtship and marriage are not simply mechanisms for expressing affection; they constitute important cultural processes through which communities reproduce social values, maintain cohesion, and preserve collective identity (Achebe, 2019; Dzokoto et al., 2018; Karandashev, 2022; Mayer, 2025).

3.2.1. Subtheme 2.1 Courtship as a Cultural Performance of Social Identity

According to the reviewed literature, courtship represents far more than the initiation of romantic relationships. Rather than serving solely as a process through which two individuals evaluate emotional compatibility, courtship functions as a cultural performance that communicates respect, identity, social competence, and adherence to communal values. Traditional courtship practices transmit cultural knowledge, moral expectations, and gender roles across generations. The analysis of Akan proverbs by Dzokoto et al. (2018) illustrates that courtship is governed by culturally sanctioned rules emphasising patience, reciprocity, honesty, and social responsibility. Their continued relevance suggests that intimate relationships remain subject to moral evaluation within many African communities.

Similarly, Thetso and Kolobe (2022) argue that Sesotho courtship poetry historically enabled young men to express affection while displaying cultural competence, emotional intelligence, and social maturity. Likewise, courtship songs are not simply romantic performances, they represent culturally legitimate forms of communication through which relationships are publicly negotiated. Hence, Zimbabwean trickster tales continue to function as educational resources within premarital counselling (Ndebele, 2025). During courtship, couples learn how to express affection and embody the values expected of responsible partners and future family members. The continuous participation suggests that courtship remains an important cultural mechanism through which societies prepare individuals for intimate relationships.

3.2.2. Subtheme 2.2 Marriage as a Social Institution of Collective Responsibility

The reviewed literature affirms marriage as a central position within African conceptualisations of love because it transforms individual affection into a socially recognised institution. Unlike other perspectives that conceptualise marriage primarily as the culmination of romantic love, African scholarship portrays it as a multidimensional institution linking individuals, families, ancestors, and communities. Achebe (2019) argues that indigenous African marriage systems historically integrated emotional attachment with broader social obligations, including lineage continuity, economic cooperation, child-rearing, and kinship alliances.

Marriage legitimised romantic relationships and responsibilities towards extended family networks and future generations. Taita marriage similarly illustrates that romantic affection increasingly coexists with longstanding cultural expectations concerning family involvement, bride wealth, and communal participation (Karandashev, 2022). This coexistence reflects the adaptive capacity of African marriage institutions rather than their erosion. Traditional marriage practices are argued to embody philosophical understandings of reciprocity, obligation, and social harmony (Ukpokolo, 2012). Although these practices have often been criticised for reinforcing gender hierarchies, they simultaneously emphasise collective responsibility, relational interdependence, and preserve cultural continuity.

Literary analyses reinforce these interpretations by illustrating how fictional characters continually negotiate tensions between romantic aspirations and communal expectations. In Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes*, marriage is portrayed not as a private emotional decision but as a social institution shaped by competing expectations concerning gender, family, and cultural legitimacy (Toivanen, 2017; Tugume, 2017; Olausson, 2002). Similarly, Odhiambo (2003) demonstrates that Kenyan popular fiction repeatedly depicts marriage as a contested space where personal desires encounter social and cultural obligations. Love is therefore understood within an institutional framework that balances personal affection with cultural values.

3.3. Theme 3: Negotiating Love Through Gender, Power, and Identity

While African societies institutionalise love through culturally sanctioned systems of courtship and marriage, the reviewed literature simultaneously reveals that these institutions are not ideologically neutral. Rather, they are embedded within gendered relations of power that shape how love is experienced, negotiated, resisted, and transformed. Love emerges as a contested social space where competing interests, identities, expectations, and inequalities intersect. There are sites in which expressions of affection hits broader struggles such as authority, autonomy, gender justice, and social identity (Hunter, 2010; Ukpokolo, 2012; Moolla, 2024; Tugume, 2017; Nenadović, 2023).

In Africa, expectations surrounding masculinity, femininity, marriage, caregiving, sexuality, and emotional expression are continually negotiated within intimate relationships. This confirms that love itself is socially constructed through unequal power relations. However, the reviewed studies argue that these power structures are increasingly challenged by women, young people, literary narratives, and changing socioeconomic conditions. Poverty, unemployment, labour migration, and economic instability increasingly influence relationship formation, marital expectations, and emotional wellbeing (Hunter, 2010; Ruark et al., 2017). Love therefore becomes both a mechanism for reproducing inequality and a potential space for resistance and social transformation (Hunter, 2010; Kiguwa, 2024; Moolla, 2023). Therefore, African intimate relationships are dynamic arenas in which cultural norms are continuously contested, renegotiated, and reconstructed. Thus, power operates simultaneously through affection, obligation, care, and resistance.

A dominant pattern structures love through prescribed gender roles that shape expectations regarding emotional and feelings' expressions. Although these roles vary across African societies, the literature shows that men and women frequently enter intimate relationships with socially constructed obligations that extend beyond personal preferences. Ukpokolo (2012) argues that traditional marriage systems frame love within philosophical understandings of complementary gender roles to fulfil different yet interconnected responsibilities for maintaining family stability. While these arrangements emphasise reciprocity and social cohesion, they also institutionalise unequal distributions of authority that may constrain women's autonomy.

Love therefore becomes intertwined with broader cultural expectations concerning obedience, caregiving, and family honour.

Similarly, Hunter's (2010) illustrates that constructions of masculinity and femininity profoundly shape intimate relationships in Africa, positioning males as providers. However, economic insecurity, HIV/AIDS, and shifting labour markets have altered traditional male provider roles, creating new tensions between cultural expectations and material realities. Ruark et al. (2017) explore how conceptions of love in Rwanda and Swaziland shape vulnerability to HIV and intimate partner violence. Their qualitative study reveals that idealized love characterized by trust, commitment, and unconditional acceptance can paradoxically increase risk when it discourages partners from negotiating safe sex or discussing infidelity. As men's ability to fulfil socially prescribed responsibilities declines, intimate relationships increasingly become sites of negotiation, conflict, and adaptation. The findings suggest that gendered expectations remain influential but are no longer universally accepted. Instead, intimate relationships increasingly reflect ongoing negotiations between inherited cultural norms and emerging ideals of equality. Moreover, some participants perceive relationships as partnerships rather than hierarchical unions, indicating that traditional gender norms are increasingly being reinterpreted rather than merely abandoned (Mayer, 2025).

While much of the historical literature documents patriarchal structures governing intimate relationships, an equally important pattern concerns women's active role in redefining the meanings of love. Across literary analyses and feminist scholarship, women are consistently portrayed not as passive recipients of cultural expectations but as agents who question, negotiate, and reconstruct dominant narratives of marriage, intimacy, and identity (Toivanen, 2017; Tugume, 2017; Moolla, 2024; Apio, 2022).

The recurring analyses of Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story* provide particularly compelling illustrations of this transformation. Toivanen (2017), Tugume (2017), and Olausson (2002) collectively illustrate that Aidoo challenges conventional assumptions regarding marriage, female fulfilment, and romantic commitment. Rather than presenting love as unquestioned devotion, the novel exposes tensions between women's aspirations for autonomy and cultural expectations of marital conformity. Female characters negotiate competing obligations to family, career, emotional intimacy, and personal independence, revealing the complexity of contemporary African womanhood.

Moolla (2024) extends this argument by examining Aidoo's broader literary oeuvre, where love repeatedly emerges as a political rather than purely emotional experience. Women's relationships become sites for interrogating patriarchy, nationalism, colonial legacies, and gendered inequalities. Love is therefore transformed from a private sentiment into a means of critiquing broader social structures that shape women's lives. Similarly, Apio's (2022) comparative analysis of Ghanaian and Senegalese novels highlights how polygamous relationships expose unequal distributions of affection, power, and recognition within marriage. Rather than portraying women solely as victims of patriarchal systems, the novels reveal diverse strategies through which women negotiate dignity, solidarity, and resistance within unequal marital arrangements.

Beyond gender relations, Moolla's (2023) analysis of Rayda Jacobs' novels illustrates that love contributes to processes of healing and belonging within post-apartheid South Africa. Love therefore becomes politically significant because it enables individuals to negotiate identities shaped by colonialism and apartheid. Within Nigerian fiction, characters challenge expectations imposed by patriarchy, class, ethnicity, and political authority, suggesting that intimate relationships possess transformative political potential (Nenadović, 2023). Migration further complicates these identity negotiations, positioning love as central to displacement and cultural adaptation (Ajibola, 2021), showing that romantic relationships are important sites where migrants reconstruct belonging across cultures, balancing homeland traditions with new social environments.

4. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this review was to synthesise existing evidence on conceptualisations, expressions, and experiences of love within African contexts. While the reviewed literature explored diverse geographical settings, disciplinary traditions, historical periods, and methodological approaches, there was remarkable convergence regarding the social nature of love. Love was repeatedly conceptualised as an ethical practice situated within relationships between individuals, families, and communities. This finding challenges dominant Western scholarship that has historically privileged individual emotions, romantic attachment, and personal fulfilment as the defining characteristics of love (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Giddens, 1992).

The findings therefore suggest that existing global theories only partially explain African experiences of love. Attachment theory, for example, conceptualises love primarily as an emotional bond formed through early caregiver relationships and later expressed within adult romantic partnerships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Likewise, Giddens' (1992) argues that contemporary intimacy increasingly depends upon mutual emotional satisfaction, equality, and individual autonomy rather than external social obligations. Although these theories illuminate important psychological dimensions of intimate relationships, the findings of this review indicate that they inadequately capture the broader communal, ethical, spiritual, and historical dimensions through which love is experienced across many African societies.

Furthermore, the findings showed that intimacy remains embedded within wider social networks, rather than being an exclusively private relationship between autonomous individuals. Marriage, courtship, caregiving, kinship, spirituality, reciprocity, and communal wellbeing emerged as interconnected rather than separate domains. This suggests that love derives its ethical significance from responsibilities towards others rather than individual emotional fulfilment alone. These findings resonate more closely with African relational philosophies grounded in interconnectedness than with theories emphasising radical individualism. In this regard, Ramose's (2024) comparison of Ubuntu with Ren in Chinese philosophy provides an important theoretical lens to understand the current findings. Both philosophical traditions conceptualise humanity as fundamentally relational. The findings further resonate with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (2022) argument that indigenous African knowledge systems remain essential for understanding contemporary African societies. Ngũgĩ contends that colonial epistemologies have frequently marginalised African philosophies by privileging Eurocentric categories of knowledge.

An equally significant theoretical implication concerns the universality of love. De Munck, Korotayev, and McGreevey (2019) argue that while romantic love appears across cultures, its meanings, expressions, and social functions vary considerably according to historical and cultural contexts. The present review strongly supports this proposition. Although emotional attachment emerged across all reviewed societies, its interpretation was consistently mediated through local philosophies and communal expectations. This finding suggests that love may indeed represent a universal human capacity, yet its lived expression remains profoundly culture specific.

Nevertheless, the review also complicates narratives that portray indigenous philosophies as static or resistant to change. Hoffman (2021) argues that contemporary societies increasingly negotiate multiple cultural identities simultaneously rather than replacing one worldview with another. This interpretation aligns closely with the review's finding that African relational ethics are continuously adapted rather than abandoned. Participants across several studies integrated communal obligations with emotional intimacy, personal autonomy, and gender equality without perceiving these orientations as mutually exclusive. Thus, cultural continuity appears to depend upon adaptation rather than preservation in its original form.

However, the findings do not suggest that African understandings of love exist in opposition to Western conceptualisations. Instead, the evidence indicates increasing convergence between indigenous relational ethics and contemporary global understandings of emotional intimacy. Across multiple studies, participants increasingly valued companionship, mutual respect, communication, emotional support, and personal fulfilment alongside longstanding commitments to family responsibility, reciprocity, and collective

wellbeing. Thus, African societies appear to be actively integrating diverse relational philosophies into hybrid forms of intimacy that remain culturally grounded while adapting to changing social realities.

Based on the review, African love emerges as a dynamic social practice characterised by negotiation, adaptation, resilience, and ethical responsibility, rather than as a fixed cultural institution. This interpretation aligns closely with Hooks' (2021) proposition that love should be understood as an active ethical practice involving care, responsibility, knowledge, trust, respect, and commitment rather than merely an emotional state. Across the reviewed African studies, these principles repeatedly emerged within proverbs, marriage customs, philosophical writings, oral narratives, and qualitative interviews. However, Hooks argues from feminist and social justice perspectives, while African scholarship extends it and situates ethical practices within communal life rather than primarily interpersonal relationships. Thus, the current findings illustrate how similar ethical principles are deeply embedded within indigenous African philosophies of relationality.

One of the most compelling findings emerging from this review is that love cannot be understood independently of the gendered social structures within which intimate relationships are constructed. Across the reviewed studies, love consistently functioned as a site where power, identity, cultural expectations, and social transformation intersected. Rather than portraying African intimate relationships as either uniformly patriarchal or progressively egalitarian, the evidence revealed a far more nuanced reality in which gender relations are continually negotiated within changing historical, economic, and cultural contexts. This is consistent with the findings of Tamunomiegbam & Arinze (2024), who identify a complex interaction between traditional values and new gender perspectives, shaped by influences such as globalization, education, and activism.

Odozor (2022), on the other hand, argues that African theological understandings of love cannot be separated from concepts of justice, reconciliation, and human dignity. This perspective reinforces the review's finding that spirituality and morality remain central components of intimate relationships across diverse African contexts. Additionally, the review revealed that love regularly derives meaning from shared moral obligations. The review therefore extends Odozor's theological argument by illustrating that these ethical dimensions are observable not only within religious discourse but also within literary narratives, oral traditions, philosophical analyses, and qualitative studies of everyday life.

These findings further challenge the longstanding tendency within international scholarship to conceptualise African relationships primarily through deficit narratives centred on patriarchy, poverty, or cultural conservatism. Although such structural realities undoubtedly influence intimate life, they do not exhaust African understandings of love. Instead, the reviewed literature consistently highlights sophisticated ethical frameworks that integrate emotional intimacy with collective responsibility. This represents an important theoretical contribution that situates African scholarship as an essential resource for expanding global theories of love beyond predominantly Euro-American paradigms.

5. CONCLUSION

The review has examined love realities in Africa. It highlights the multifaceted nature of love in African contexts, emphasizing its ethical, cultural, spiritual, and political dimensions. Across diverse African societies, love is predominantly understood as a relational and collective practice rather than an individualistic or purely emotional experience. Grounded in philosophies such as Ubuntu, love is framed as an ethical responsibility that fosters social cohesion, family stability, and communal harmony. Studies consistently reveal that love is associated with values such as commitment, sacrifice, respect, care, and spirituality, rather than being limited to romantic attraction.

Furthermore, love is deeply intertwined with spiritual and moral frameworks, as seen in indigenous African marriage systems and contemporary religious practices, which imbue intimate relationships with a sense of divine or ancestral responsibility. The findings also emphasize the role of love as a cultural institution, with courtship and marriage serving as mechanisms for transmitting social values, preserving cultural continuity,

and fostering collective identity. Courtship is portrayed as a cultural performance that emphasizes social responsibility, emotional intelligence, and adherence to communal norms. Similarly, marriage is framed as a multidimensional institution that integrates personal affection with broader social and economic obligations, such as lineage continuity, kinship alliances, and community participation. However, these institutions are not ideologically neutral; they are shaped by gendered power dynamics that often reinforce traditional roles and hierarchies. Despite this, women and marginalized groups are increasingly challenging these norms, using love and intimate relationships as spaces for resistance, negotiation, and social transformation.

The implications of these findings are significant for understanding the evolving nature of intimate relationships in Africa. They suggest that love is not merely a private or emotional experience but a deeply social phenomenon that reflects and shapes broader cultural, economic, and political realities. Future research should further explore the intersections of love with migration, globalization, and technological change. These factors continue to reshape intimate relationships and cultural norms. Additionally, there is a need for more empirical studies that examine how younger generations in Africa are negotiating traditional and modern ideals of love, particularly increasing exposure to global relationship paradigms. This will scholars to provide a more nuanced understanding of how love operates as a dynamic and transformative force in African societies.

Gaps in the Literature

Several significant gaps emerge from this review. First, there is a need for more empirical research on love in African contexts that moves beyond literary analysis and philosophical speculation. While these approaches provide valuable insights, they need to be complemented by ethnographic, survey, and mixed methods research that document how love is lived in specific communities.

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