

## “I” LOVE “YOU”: ISSUES OF LOVE AND DOMESTIC ABUSE IN ACCRA, GHANA

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### ABSTRACT

*Domestic abuse remains a lingering predicament of romantic relationships. However, it appears that the novel coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) spiked a resurgence in domestic abuse globally. In Ghana, the stress associated with the pandemic and its concurrent social distancing and safety protocols partly aggravated domestic abuse. Both the traditional and social media repeatedly reported cases of all shades of domestic abuse. For a very long time, researchers have provided plausible reasons, including patriarchal social and cultural norms, women’s lack of autonomy over their bodies, and economic and cultural lives as major drivers of domestic abuse. Focusing on the phenomenon of the pandemic as a major entry phenomenon in holding the gendered status quo of domestic abuses, I discuss the issue of intimate partner violence by interrogating the issues of love. As I shall discuss, “I love you” generally serves as the entry protocol for initiating a romantic relationship. And yet, intimate partner violence remains a major fault line of romantic relationships. Deploying ethnographic data, involving interviews with students at the University of Ghana in 2019 and 2022, I argue that the issues of “love” in romantic relationships are complicated by their transactional undercurrents. Thus, in addition to all the reasons and concurrent measures offered to remedy domestic abuses, I argue that if the expression of romantic “love” could be routinised as part of human ontological social deficiency, anchored on human inherent dignity, the need for the other may stem the tide against othering as susceptible for abuses.*

**Keywords:** Love, domestic abuse, Covid-19, social media, need

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## INTRODUCTION

Globally and in Ghana, there was a spike in domestic and spousal abuses, amid a global Covid-19 pandemic (UN Women, 2020). The pandemic, therefore, exacerbated already cases of domestic abuses globally, which are believed to be driven by patriarchy, and appear to defy legal and socio-economic answers (Adjei, 2016). Domestic abuses, however, contradict the reality that nearly every form of conjugal relationship begins with “I” love “you” (Keshav, 2021). Consequently, my paper assumes that “love” as emotionally and rationally embodied (Brogaard, 2015), means lovers tend to be careful about the “whom” they love. Anchored on my ethnographic data, I argue that one’s rationalisation of oneself as ontologically incomplete could re-orient one’s understanding of love as needed for a meaningful life. It is against the idea of ontological deficiency that I offer a refreshed insight on the nexus between “love” and intimate partner abuse.

From the perspective of intellectual history and theory, my argument forms part of popular and academic discourses of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century (Phillips, 2004). Since that century, domestic abuse has constituted a major concern in analyses. Meanwhile, Simone de Beauvoir’s analysis of the subject, based on the gendered division of labour remains very perceptive and prescient. Beauvoir (1953) observed in the 1950s that men’s transcendental role tended to be exposed to the public, undertaking activities that are creative, innovative and have economic valorisation. On the contrary, women, undertaking immanent/domestic roles are hemmed in the home, based on their biological role as nurturers, limiting them to performing activities that are simply repetitive and fossilised in creativity (Beauvoir, 1953: 63-65). As a solution, therefore, she found respite in the theory of existentialism that Jean-Paul Sartre had developed in the

late 1940s (Sartre, 2007). Existentialism as a philosophy deconstructs nature as existential and instead holds essence as imperative. Thus, instead of the fatalistic role that nature is considered to bestow on human beings, existentialism holds individual agency and responsibility as key and primary. Apply this to women’s autonomy, Beauvoir asserted: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female represents in society; it is civilisation as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine” (Beauvoir, 1953: 273).”

However, the issue of marriage remains strong in nearly all societies, and it is held by religious groups as imperative to fulfilling the orders of God. Marriage also produces its own antinomies. To offset this, both Christians and Muslims routinise sacralisation of marriage. Christians take vows, while for Muslims, it is an act of worship (*concept of ibadah*) and in indigenous religions, it involves the ancestors (Owoahene-Acheampong and Prempeh, 2021). Against the sacralisation of marriage is what my respondents, to be discussed, consider as the centrality of love or “sweet-talking” as the entry protocol of finding a spouse. Nevertheless, since both the sacralisation and “love” hardly reduce intimate partner abuses, the point of interrogation for me, therefore, is: if love is such an important thing in conjugal relations, why all the abuses? And how can love be reconceptualised as a part of the mediatory answers to intimate partner violence? Concurrently, if “love” could be oppressive, then I similarly argue that the alternative measures of pragmatism and love for the sake of convenience never leaves any problem solved.

Through my deployment of an ethnographic research method, the objective of my

research was to understand the seeming paradox between “love” and spousal abuse. I sought to answer the question: “Why do people kill those they love?” and “How do they construct the idea of love?” My research concluded that love remains a complex subject that is hardly conceptualised away from selflessness in a relationship. To consolidate my argument, I take into context the socio-cultural impact of the internet and social media revolution of the 1970s and towards the end of the 1990s, respectively. These two technological revolutions exacerbated the imposition of “I” selfishness over “you” conjugal relations, especially amid the socio-economic crisis. It has complexly produced what Turkle referred to as “alone together” (Turkle, 2011). Concurrently, my paper recommends a critical evaluation of conjugal relations in Ghana as the country is saddled with an economic crisis.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

I began collecting data for this research from November 2019 to April 2022 – by straddling England and Ghana as a doctoral student and later as a research fellow at KNUST. This study employed qualitative research approach, specifically informed by participant observation and in-depth interviews with my respondents and the narrative research design for the data collection and interpretation. In-depth interviews were conducted among students at the University of Ghana, Legon - Accra. I chose Legon for two main reasons: First, just like several public universities in Ghana and globally, Legon is a microscopic representation of Ghana and Africa as it has students from across the country and the West African sub-region. For convenience reasons, I focused on only Ghanaian students. Second, as a resident of Accra, I am very conversant with the University of Ghana, where I also studied for my Master of Philosophy. Subsequently,

I worked as both a graduate and teaching assistant for about four years, all of which fostered my multi-layered social interactions with students.

Meanwhile, considering that an open discussion of sex is a highly sensitive subject in Ghana’s public culture, I began the research using the approach of participant observation. I immersed myself in the daily lives of some of my respondents without crossing the line of demarcation between me and my respondents. As part of the immersion, I attended social gatherings that involved students, such as weddings, funerals, and “parties”. On campus, I participated in students’ open and public “processions” during Hall Week celebrations. Hall Week celebrations are annual social gatherings of students for entertainment and enforcement of social cohesion among students of the various halls on campus. Apart from the only female hall, Volta Hall, I participated by visiting the various traditional halls on campus, Commonwealth, Sarbah, Akuafo, and Legon, for the five years that I was on campus as a postgraduate student and teaching assistant.

Beginning with a participant observation offered some insights on the subject. I observed that several young women have deployed important ways of getting the attention of their loved ones. So, contrary to the old assumption that young women tend to be on the receiving side of a proposal from men, my fieldwork showed that young women deployed their culinary skills, generosity and incorporation of “rituals of love” – *kayan mata* – to get their loved one’s attention. Also, I became aware that female students talk as much about vulgarity as the male students, and several of them participate in the Profane Association of West Africa (PAWA) nights performances organised by fraternal haller such as the Commonwealth, the Atlantic Hall of the University of Cape Coast (UCC)

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and Unity Hall (Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi). This means that while my study was located in Accra, my observations and interactions with students in the three public institutions shed important insight into my analysis.

Through such participations, I gained insight and personal knowledge students have about romantic love and observed how they are mainstreamed through student popular cultures. All of these gave me multiple perspectives on the subject of romantic love among students. Even so, given the enchanted public discussion about romantic sex and to compare my observations and the views of the students with the older generation, I purposively selected four older adults – two males and two females. I chose them based on the following characteristics: married; public servants who work with students; and counsellors.

Given these entry protocols into the social lives of students and understanding of the cultural narratives about love, I started the process of selecting my respondents using the non-probabilistic sampling methods namely; purposive and snow-ball. I reached my participants first through familiarising myself with friends in the various halls and also with students I taught, who also helped me to identify other potential respondents. This snowball technique helped me to break the tension between the “stranger” and the researcher. However, to ensure confidentiality, I anonymised the data analysis to avoid giving hints and identifying respondents. This included not using their real names. Furthermore, the locations of the interviews were in open spaces such as eateries (with the Atlantic Oval featuring strongly). I encouraged respondents to use a third-person pronoun whenever they were willing to discuss personal and sensitive subjects about themselves. My positionality as male respondent also revealed some

ethical concerns that were adequately addressed to further foster confidentiality in my research. First, my social status as a former student of the University of Ghana, Legon campus and an early career academic added a complex mix to the issues discussed above. The students were careful about what they said and did not say. This was because several of them felt I belonged to the officialdom. Others also admired my youthful demeanour and openly talked. Either way, I kept a reasonable social distance, especially as the rumours of lecturers trading sex for grades remained rife on campus.

In all, I sampled 50 students, ten from each of the five traditional halls on the Legon campus. The gender balance was tipped in favour of men, as in all, 30 of the respondents were male, while 20 were females. More of the males were willing to talk with me than the females. This was partly because of a cultural imposition on women not to open up too readily to a male “stranger” or what is considered generally in Ghana as “a lady’s prank” to pretend to be difficult when engaging a male stranger or potential lover. For this reason, several of the females kept rescheduling interviews, but I patiently waited until I had the chance to interview them. The patience I had, rather indicated to the female respondents that I was sincere in my stated objectives. This was because there is a certain logic in Ghana that, “He who is persistent in what he needs, especially from a lady is usually a sincere person”. After this stage, several of them were willing to share their personal phone numbers with me.

I started with in-depth interviews, using an unstructured interview guide that contained key themes such as romantic love, individualism, and social media. The unstructured research questions allowed for improvisation and my experiences of “surprises” that allowed for new questions and questioning of pre-research assumptions

(Flick, 2018). Interviews were conducted in English and Twi – languages I speak with native (Twi) and non-native (English) competence. An interview lasted for about an hour, depending on my observation of saturation in responses. So, for example, if I observed an answer run across the various interviews, I did not push for more answers. This was the case when I asked about the meaning of love. As I shall discuss in the discussion section, incidentally, nearly all the respondents said that love is about emotion, rather than rationality.

Instruments for data collection and analysis included a Sony audio recorder and a field note. Where I was allowed (very few for confidential reasons), interviews were recorded; otherwise, in my field note, I wrote copiously the responses of my respondents and my observations of their non-verbal cues; namely facial expressions and postures to give meaning to their responses. I had several follow-ups to fill in gaps where necessary. There was only a case where the oral response of a student was succinctly stated that I requested him to both write it and email it to me, which he gladly did. I recorded and transcribed a few interviews and re-read multiple times the content of my field notes—all of which allowed me to identify major themes for interpretative analysis. The themes of the research were derived after I had severally listened and noted the common issues that students referred to in their discussion of love. I realised that these recursive issues were entwined in indexing the rhetoric of romantic love. This means that apart from love, which formed the base of my research, other cognate issues such as the advent of social media and its concurrent source of individualism, love as pragmatism, signalled by the idea of slay queens, women's sartorial practices and men's enthusiasm to satisfy their sexual interests without investing in any sense of conjugal commitment featured very prominently. The implication of

all this was that the understanding students had about love was contextually informed—nevertheless, all of which blurred the role love should have played in mitigating abuses. Ultimately, the analysis of my data depended on my selection of some of the verbatim accounts of participants, non-verbal cues, and review of extant literature to support some of my findings.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The research discussed key themes such as: the concept of love; social media individualism and love and pragmatism, all of which morphed into my contextual understanding of issues of spousal abuse since the heart of the research was to understand the concept students had about love. The outcome of my interviews indicated that students' expression of love is contextually-situated. Love, understood contextually among students as a tangled web of women's sartorial choices, relationships as transactional and the pursuit of love as part of self-expression of one's interest, informs the issues of abuses in relationships. With these entanglements, I argue that love, in as much as it is emotional, has an element of rationality, which means what students consider as love cannot be discussed in isolation in appreciating the nuances of spousal abuses. It also means that, while the remedial solutions to intimate partner violence have recorded some positive impact, love rather tends to be complicated. The complexity of love in romantic relationships implies that the autonomy women have sought rather, possibly unintentionally, has routinised the status quo of gendered violence in the cycle. On the whole, however, with both male and female students, mainstreaming autonomy in matters of love, through pragmatic and self-centred obsession, contributes to objectification and *othering*, all of which induce fragility in intimate relationships and its attending violence.

The study, therefore, explores the possibility of redefining love as both rational and emotional in revealing the human ontological incompleteness in social terms. If human beings are socially incomplete, then love could be conceptualised as seeing the other as a partner for life, instead of a body to be sexualised or resources to be exploited for personal gratification. My understanding of love as an expression of social incompleteness could mitigate the transnational mainstreaming of conjugal relationships, which tend to foster spousal abuses. Based on the outcome of my data, which brings out love as contextually defined, I have thematised my discussion to reflect the ways students negotiate around romantic relationships on campus. In the following, therefore, I discuss the interface between the rise of social media and issues of love. I argue that social media has stimulated and visibly presented individualism, as ideal in the expression of love. It has diminished communalism, which if it were to serve as the anvil of love, would have contributed to mitigating the issues of spousal abuses. My point here is that, the students involved in the study were rather more discreet in their conjugal relationships, which denied them the benefit of social support in times of crisis. Deploying this as a major entry point of analysis, I discuss the concurrent impact of individualism in fostering love amongst students as pragmatism and pursuit of *self*. To provide examples for this, the remaining sections explore issues of slay queens as a major demonstration of love as pragmatism, which is concretised in students' sartorial choices and mechanistic indulgence in sex.

### **Social media and the idea of love**

I have already mentioned that human beings have a strong sense of gregariousness. The gregariousness of human beings is also because human beings are the product of complex forms of socialisation. This

socialisation involves a complex transition from a biological being to a social being. As social beings, human beings are also meaning-seeking and identify with others for both meaning and fulfilment. Historically, therefore, societies had streamlined human social inclinations through sociogenic activities, of which marriage was/is key. Until fairly recently in the case of Ghana since the 1980s, several young men and women largely depend on their parents in their spousal choices (Awedoba, 2002). That children had to depend on their parents and the older generation for their (children's) marital choices because in several instances the older generation held in their custody the resources for marriage. However, since the 1970s, the increase in young men and women receiving western education has empowered the youthful constituency to decide their marital choices (Takyi, 2006). Parents are not only significantly losing their control over the marital choices of their children; they are also running out of popular knowledge that shapes contemporary marital choices and sex practices.

Most parents are unaware of the "slay queen" practices. One of the four adult persons I spoke with said that she did know anything about "blow job". When I explained to her what it was, she said, "That is a taboo and must not be allowed. Do you say you people do that these days?" Another of my adult respondents, a professor said that "blow job" is nothing short of Ghanaian penchant for mimicking. I must point out that I do not necessarily subscribe to any older generational impression that what they consider sexual immorality is a novel thing in the contemporary youthful culture. More recently, academics have paid attention to the sexual pleasures as part of the regime of sexuality in Ghana (Fiaveh, Okyerefo, and Fayorsey, 2015).

The difference between their generation and perhaps the contemporary world is the visibility of what otherwise would have been a secret practice.

The above means that the way people used to have sex before the saturation of the media space with pornographic images, may involve what the older generation may consider an aberration. However, because of the strong sociogenic structure of the pre-social media societies, such practices were hardly put into public knowledge. With the explosion of social media in Ghana since the turn of the millennium, the media has become an important channel for individualism. While the idea of the African as a communal being is complex, including the fact that the individual was a constituted being, social media has affected sociogenic activities. Several offline activities have been transitioned online. Commerce, teachings, and in extreme cases, naming ceremonies are performed both online and offline simultaneously (Prempeh, 2021).

Social media has rendered visible knowledge about sex that hitherto would have been treated as a canonised secret. It is now easier for the youthful constituency to break traditionally imposed sex taboos as they discuss sex matters freely online. Similarly, through social media, the older generation is gradually losing their control as counsellors, as several young men and women, including those who are not married, freely offer themselves as relationship coaches and experts. Again, the youthful constituency entering into the arena as counsellors are also because of the proliferation of information, mediated through several channels, such as social media. For all these reasons, knowledge about the marriage economy that one would have known after one had gone through an initiation rite are more or less readily available online.

The aspect of social media that directly relates to the issue of love is social media-informed confirmation bias. Through social media, individuals identify and join groups that share their conjugal preferences. With WhatsApp, one can join and leave accordingly if a particular online group does not enforce their preferences in life. Also, Facebook allows individuals to literally “like” any other comments. When one’s comments to a post are considered hateful, the commentator risks being culturally cancelled. Consequently, social media has fostered a form of individualism that significantly offers individual freedom from traditional norms of sexual preferences. For this reason, social media has become a conduit for “expressive individualism” (Bellah et al., 1985). I admit that social media also reinforces loneliness and the multidimensionality of social exclusion. For example, those who do not readily identify with a particular youth’s popular culture on sex and sexuality feel isolated. The importance of social media however is the space it affords for the youth to conceptualise love and practice it.

The ubiquitous expression of social media finds expression in the sermons of pastors, whose officiating of marriages in Accra, I attended. For example, in one of such weddings, the officiating pastor cautioned the would-be-couple to, “Stay away from putting your marriage on Facebook; stop seeking counselling from Facebook. Don’t let your love be a matter of public show.” Also, at other social gatherings, such as funerals and parties, students both left and found new “lovers.” For example, a male student reported that, “I reconnected with my childhood friend in Sunyani when we both met at a friend’s party at the Akafo Hall, and later fell in love with her.” Another student also indicated that, “Through a stray WhatsApp message from a student I had never met, I initiated conversation with him, when he appeared rather nice and gentle. I

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later got to know that he was in my faculty and that was it; we found love.”

Given that such love operates away from family and other institutions of social control, it intensifies fragility and vulnerability among students with no direct kinship ties on campus or in Accra. The following was the experience of a student from Bekwai: “Initially, we were doing well, but it turned out that the guy had another girlfriend from his previous school. When I insisted on walking away, he beat me, knowing I hardly had anyone to complain to.” Against the complex issues of facelessness, the students I interviewed did not apply to the university’s counselling section, for two main reasons: they felt it was time-consuming and for the men, a show of weakness. The outcome of this deficit is that students routinise love as pragmatism, indexed in the discourse around slay queens.

### **Love, slay queen and abuses**

Love as a word/concept has had extensive prose and poetic attention (Gray, 2017). As an often-used word, the increasing cases of domestic abuses amid a pandemic rather led me into asking more about what students think about the concept. The reason for this was also because, if love is expected to be beautiful and caring, why the paradox? Why didn’t people show more love-oriented care amid the pandemic? Asking about what love, therefore, is, I collected the following:

One student said: “Love is about a strong feeling that cannot be explained. It is simply sweet and blind”. Another student said, “Love is that which cannot be reasonably explained and yet very real in bringing people into romantic affairs.” Yet, one of them was a protestant Christian, summarising Paul’s description of love, as recorded in I Corinthians 13: 4-8, said that “Love is about selfless care for the other, which is often

emotionally driven.”

Based on the students’ responses, love is more emotional than rational. That the force of emotion in love weighs against rationality has been observed in most ancient cultures. For example, the Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu is reported to have said, “Love is of all passions the strongest, for it attacks simultaneously the head, the heart and the senses” (Brogaard, 2015: xi). Love is emotional because it is not always something that is consciously felt, because it tends to lie below the conscious awareness of lovers (Brogaard, 2015). Nevertheless, love as an emotion retains some rationality since lovers tend to make choices over whom to love (Ibid). Consequently, when I asked about the extent to which emotion sustains a romantic relationship, they all admitted it rather makes romantic love transient. One of the female students said, “The young men often take interest in our bodies and breasts.” Similarly, a male student also said, “The ladies fall in love because of the money and other material things we give them.” These responses also bring out the fact that people are not just blind about love or overly emotional about it. For example, men readily find interest and attraction for women with well-endowed thighs, breasts and hips and would love those bodily parts in their minds (Townsend, 1998: 18). Women are also attracted to men with material resources more than men’s age and physical appearance (Ibid., p. 6).

The rationality of love also signifies that falling in love is also about falling in love with what one desires to possess—complicating the issues of romantic love and the fractious nature of campus intimate relationships. It also sustains the commercialisation and objectification of sex as part of the legacies of colonialism in Africa (Aderinto, 2016). At the UCC, where I had my undergraduate education, romantic love as ephemeral was profiled as “*Ye kura kura mu kwa*” (to phrase

in popular highlife music which roughly translates as, “We are just holding on”). On the Legon campus and other universities in Ghana, students assume that intimate partners are usually driven by convenience. Such lovers are considered to leverage the *other* to complete their education, often undergirded by financial needs and/or a deficit of social ties. There are therefore terms such as “Help me finish my course” used to characterise romantic relationships. A male student from the University of Ghana expressed this as follows:

*As for the girls, they are very good at getting what they want. At the university, several of them tend to have interests, other than academic. These interests include making sure they physically appear at their best; attracting their choices of potential spouses. All of this could affect their attention to academic work, which means they would want a guy who can easily help them finish their programmes. Such ladies can easily pretend to love you and you will do their assignments for them, but it will not end anywhere, soon after they have either passed or completed their programmes. But I also understand them, after all, at the university, we must be ourselves.*

Some lovers may be opportunistic and rather concentrate on achieving their pre-determined interests as has been studied by some academics. For example, from the evolutionary perspective, it has been suggested that men require sex as an opportunity to pass on their genes to the next generation (Bleske and Buss, 2000). For women, gaining economic protection from a man is a good reason for forming a romantic relationship (Ibid). Consequently, framing love, in addition to being emotional, in such evolutionary opportunistic terms may contribute to abuses during a crisis. When women are unable to perform roles

considered to signal them as good wives, it tends to draw abusive reactions from some men. At the same time, the emotionality of love could imply students are also concerned about what “charms” than what one *needs*. A female student explained this as follows:

*We are aware that men are driven by what they see. This also means that as a woman I dress to express myself; I am also aware that looking my very best is what draws men’s attention. Already men would want to see us, so a little touch of the make-up charm is enough to get away with what I want.*

In all this, concerns have been raised about whether women dress to seduce men or not. But the general understanding that women’s cleavages are deliberately orchestrated to seduce men is not readily acceptable to some scholars, as they have argued that the breast is not necessarily meant to be sexualised, as it is largely the source of life to a new human being (Oduro and Karikari, 2022: 32). In some Ghanaian cultures, this tendency of conceptualising the breast is signalled by elderly women unreservedly exposing their breasts in the domestic sphere (Ibid, p. 32). Others rather argue that women’s showing of sensitive parts of their bodies, such as thighs, has a direct nexus with promiscuous lifestyles on campus (Anku, Danso, and Kuwornu-Adjaottor, 2018). This debate about women’s clothing is also about the emphasis Ghanaian cultures place on modesty and virtue (Ofori, et al., 2014). For all this, some have concluded that as much as women have sartorial agency, they cannot let down the socio-cultural values of society (Nyantakyi and Adu-Ayem, 2016).

The discussion so far signals the complexity of love for the sake of opportunism. Specifically, it indicates that whereas love is emotional, intimate partners are also rational about what they want from the *other*. This trend

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could generally lead to the *othering* and objectification of the other's body. Along this line, one of the students told me a story about a young man who deliberately led a student into committing a few abortions, because, as I was told: "he wanted the lady to keep her slay queen Coca-Cola bottle features."

A woman's body and its real and imagined appeal to men has also reinforced the narratives around slay queens in Ghana. 'Slay queen' is the common youth popular slang that has been used for the last half-decade to designate young women whose level of commercial sex work is rather more complex and as I was told "more respectful". But in scholarly discourses, the term is conceptualised as part of patriarchal norms that tend to sustain the gender status quo of men weaponising sex against women (Lomotey and Diabah, 2022). Meanwhile, in student popular culture, the issue is quite different. A female student narrated the etymological trajectories of "slay queen" as follows, "Initially, the term slay queen was used to designate a woman who keeps herself well, has vibrant sartorial choices and enjoys a good meal. It was relatable to the Akan notion of "*preman ni*". But another student said that, "A slay queen now is a civilised and more organised form of prostitution". The perception that slay queens are more civilised in their "profession" was expressed in a post that was shared on WhatsApp as follows:

AVOID PEOPLE  
WHO PUT  
BREAD INSIDE  
TEA, THEY  
WILL PUT  
U INSIDE  
TROUBLE ONE  
DAY 🤔

The "civility" of slay queens is often used in contrast to what people think is primitive prostitution where the lady hardly had control over her sexuality, except for her trading of sex for money and other forms of favour. For slay queens, they are said to have agency and often determine the patterns of the relationships; they are aware that their "sugar daddies" are married and yet, do not feel compelled to compete with the wives of their "clients" – all reflecting the complexities of sugar daddies and sugar mummies relationships (Kuate-Defo, 2004).

My study also revealed that the slay queens are good rivals because they do not interfere with the marriage of the clients, as they consider themselves above such tensions, which belong to the "pre-modern" era. A joke that captured a seeming slay queen who had a piece of advice for fellow slay queens that they should

*Leave when you visit so that they can also visit and wives should understand that they need not monopolise their husbands in a liberal world after all, we are also socialists in sharing what we all want.*

The seeming contradictions between liberalism and socialism in the social practices of slay queens also point out the complexity of the practice. Usually, it is not only slay queens who know their "clients" are married, the wives of their "clients" also know their husbands have slay queens. Slay queens are said to usually fall within the category of upward social and middle-income young women, the majority of whom are university graduates; well employed and yet feast on male celebrities and politicians to take care of their (slay queens') needs. A student, in this sense, described slay queens as,

*Those who know where all the best restaurants are in Accra and can spend a man's money. They usually invest in their bodies more than undertaking any*

*productive business activity. They may buy a house and a car that their “bodies” as it is rumoured help them to take care of. Once you see their bodies, you would just take a step to take care of them – the enticement is strong.*

The assumption that slay queens invest in their bodies as it serves as the entry to their romantic love, is considered by the students as a form of abuse in romantic love. But it is not a shared truth among students that slay queens are just interested in their bodies. A female student, who said her boyfriend misconstrued her for a slay queen relayed her reason for quitting the relationship as follows:

*I quit a relationship because I realised the gentleman was more interested in my body than my welfare. Yes, I love to look good, but I felt the gentleman wanted my body instead. I wanted someone who cared for me, and helped me take care of my needs, including payment of school fees. The young man was rather more concerned about my body curves. Yes, it is more expensive to take care of my shape, but I felt the gentleman was misleading and abusing me. He forced me to have an abortion, which I have hardly overcome in terms of reconciling that with my religious conscience.*

### Love and individual sex egoism

The above response adds to the texture of romantic issues as highly transactional. Incidentally, this leads to ideas about sex types in romantic love, which also reveals the extent to which labels and gendered jokes could mainstream abuses. For example, a male and female student both corroborated that the narratives about sex and romance, involving money and labels have sustained the mantra that, “there is duty sex and beauty sex”. Pushing for further meaning

for the expression, one of the students said, “Duty sex is where a lady gives her guy sex as a matter of duty, not because the lady is ready and willing; while beauty sex is when a lady and her guy engage in a consensual sex.”

A student shared how women also tend to negotiate around the idea of “duty sex” which she said is forced on them: “We also fake orgasm, by pretentiously moaning during the sex act.” The men, incidentally know that the woman often fakes orgasmic feelings. On a WhatsApp platform that I am a member of, a male friend added the following, “Even if she’s not moaning, keep enjoying your thing bro. You’re not a DJ to worry about the sound.”



The idea of duty sex, according to the students could be very oppressive if they do not get any material gains in return – indexing the idea of sex as “cocoa” for commercial sex workers (Adomako, 2007). A male student

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said that her girlfriend blackmailed him and nearly ruined his reputation when he failed to provide anything useful to his girlfriend after rounds of such duty sex. He relayed his experience as follows:

*I dated this girl for a year on campus and we had lots of fun together. But it turned out that she also had her agenda. I tried to give her much of what she wanted. But unknown to me, she also was thinking about how to get more than what I was giving her. She would not be very hard in turning away my advances for sex. But it all turned out to be a trap, where she considered her yielding to sex as part of making more demands. When I could not supply all her demands, the result was all the threats she issued. Known for my pious life in public, I was more concerned that if she did anything out of vengeance, I would be in trouble. So, I had to do more for her.*

A female student also expressed concerns about duty sex as follows:

*Duty sex could be painful especially when one is responding to it because one has been offered a favour in the past. Imagine taking a gift from someone you definitely wouldn't want intimacy with and yet you have to give in, because his gifts have sustained you. Hmm.*

From the above, the students corroborated that the cases of spousal, wife battery and killing of girlfriends, maiming and other forms of abuse could be a result of the retention of unequal gendered norms in romantic relationships. One of the students who felt her boyfriend had not treated her fairly refused duty sex and in consequence, her boyfriend slapped her. As she said, "This left me with one of my eyes badly swollen." The challenges identifiable with duty sex also mean that women tend to have their coping strategies. One of the students said to me, "Often, they tell their boyfriends that they

are menstruating. I struggle to know the menstrual regime of my girlfriend, because she claims she is always in her red lines."

During the research, I recollected a joke one of my professors made about a Ghanaian working in Nigeria who hardly returned home. And when he did, he was eager to have sex with his wife. But because his wife was not happy about leaving her behind, she told the man she was menstruating. Accordingly, the man told her, "Who told you that you are having your menses and who made it a taboo? Even your great-grandfather couldn't handle that needless rule!" Menstrual taboo is one of the ways societies either restrict women's sexuality rites or women also use to exercise agency over men's sexuality (Douglas, 1969). Thus, whether the menstrual blood is pure or not such that it leads to spatial segregation among some Akan cultures, the women I interviewed for this research creatively deployed menstruation to subvert duty sex. It is most likely that duty sex was one of the reasons for the passage of the Domestic Violence Act and its attendant issue of marital rape generated lots of contestations among men.

In all this, one of the students who communicated his response to me via email after I had interviewed him wrote as follows:

*Now in the generation, the outburst of social media and telenovelas depicting love as an array of sexualism is a major cause of concern and source of abuse. Men now propose to women and lure them with the phrase I love you just to have sex with them. That is, in an effort to satisfy their sexual desires, they exploit the weakness of vulnerable girls by deceiving them with sycophantic love. Not only do the men need them for sex, but also for frugal tasks like cooking and cleaning. Thus eating into the fact that women perceive themselves as helpers inborn in their personalities. As*

*such, since the man has little or no real love (basis the need of the woman for her sexual responsibility or indirectly objectifying the woman as a tool to be explored) for the woman, he finds no reason to care for her and subjects her to abuse whenever he deems fits. A relay of him being in control-mostly financially. Yet again, the minute fraction of women who think otherwise emphasise the roles they play on what can be offered to them(duty sex). So if they will be subjected to abuse and yet be fully taken care of financially,they seem okay. I've been witness to a few occasions where women failed to leave such abusive relationships on the basis that the men provide for them and they would endure. Psychologically, others stay in abusive relationships.*

## **CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS: THE FUTURE OF LOVE**

The complex issues of love as emotional and rational both generate directly and indirectly, sexual violence and psychosocial abuses in conjugal relationships. The research reinstates previous research observations that issues of androcentric, kinship ties, and the commercialisation of sex in postcolonial Ghana are all part of the causes of domestic abuses. Nevertheless, as part of my conclusion, I wonder whether more scholarly works need to be done on love. Could love be rather defined as “need”? So that instead of love as emotional and/or rational which brings in its wake the multidimensionality of sexual violence, it may be possible that if love is rather called need, where both persons involved see the other as a necessity for life, sexual violence may reduce.

Also, the idea of “I” love “you” raises complex issues for all forms of conjugal relations. In many instances, as the discussion above has shown, individuals have often struggled to suppress the “I” in their expression of love.

In Ghana, as elsewhere, everyone enters into a conjugal relationship with a tall list of what they want. The tall lists are not in themselves problematic, but the challenge is when the lists become a subterfuge for the individual to impose “I” on the other. Also, self-centeredness leads to self-preservation, especially as it helps an individual to be intentional about spousal choices, the challenge as my research has demonstrated is complex. For example, several individuals in a relationship struggle to negotiate and reorient themselves to accommodate the other’s self-interest. This tension, as I have demonstrated above, leads to conflict and all forms of sexual violence.

The churches have sought to deploy the vow to ameliorate the situation. But the vows have not helped much. There are even some neo-Pentecostal church leaders, who as part of their prosperity gospel, denounce the “for better, for worse” aspect of a marital vow as unscriptural (Erhabor, 2019). One such leader heads a major thriving neo-Pentecostal church in Nigeria with branches across Africa, including Ghana. While this leader may theologise a romanticised Christian life devoid of troubles, my research indicated that nearly all human relationships are laden with troubles. The question that needs a critical reflection and more research is how conflicts could be minimised in conjugal relationships. In my own reflections, I surmise that marriage as “need you” as opposed to “loving you” may help mediate the issues of spousal abuse. I surmise that if one needed one, one would be mindful of how one treated the other. In all this, my research is not devoid of limitation; for example, to what extent can love as need contest favourable against the strong pulls of kinship ties that tend to affect the stability of marriage? All this reinforces my argument for love to be considered as both emotional with an element of rationality which should rearticulate the human being as socially incomplete, and in need of a *life’s*

partner. I surmise that if intimate partners were to consider the other as existentially of worth and needed for life, potentially spousal abuse may see some decline. My line of thought also indicates that the answers to love cannot solely rely on technical answers, including legislation. To be sure, laws and their concurrent impact would help, but since love is about social relations, it is also about trust. Meanwhile, trust cannot be engineered through technical means, but through pre-emptive means with words. The words “I love you”, therefore, should be taken as an index of an admission of incompleteness to foster humility and selflessness in intimate relationships.

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