

Debate & Analysis



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What is love?

This week we have seen truckloads of flowers sold in the streets and plush toys being exchanged in the currency of love.

At its heart, Valentine's Day is about expressing love, affection, and appreciation. "What is love?"

is not just a nineties upbeat song, but a question worth asking especially this month. A very complicated question indeed! Yet for a start, love cannot

be separated from its social context. Sociologically speaking love is not only an intimate, personal experience but it is a deeply social and cultural one,

formed by our positioning in the world. The way we experience love, express it, and even define it, is influenced by norms, expectations, and values of the society we live in. Sociologists have long studied love as a phenomenon extending beyond personal emotions and look at the web of social influences. I happen to lecture this within the field of Sociology of Emotions at the University of Malta.

It is a fact that love involves power dynamics. The way society organises relationships – whether through marriage, family structures, or social roles, effects how love is expressed. For example, traditional gender roles have often shaped expectations around love and relationships, dictating how men and women should behave in romantic situations. These roles, while evolving, still influence the ways in which love is negotiated, expressed, and valued in society.

Love is at times selfless. In Latin *Caritas* means love. This month we understood better how accurate the translation of this word is. Dun Victor Grech, did not just utter words on love on his deathbed but he personified selfless love to others, dedicating his life to those in dire living situation, struck by life crises.

Love can be liberating based on notions of individual choice. Take for instance the current campaign through adverts on TV and billboards to educate the public that control is not love and love requires consent. These messages drive home the importance of mutual agreement in sexual consent and against abuse. Yet, love is not always as liberating. Both in different historical periods as well as various societies today, love is understood through the lens of duty, familial obligation, or even economic necessity.

It is equally true that love is set within parameters. Borrowing Shakespeare's thoughts on this, it is indeed the case that 'the course of true love never did run smooth'. Society shapes

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the definition of un/acceptable love. Yet, these goal posts are not static but constantly moving. Slogans such as 'love is love' immediately reminds us of the freedom to love anyone, irrespective of their gender and sexual orientation. The latest performance *Id-dnub tal-Maghzulin* tackles love on the peripheries and the un/acceptability of love through times and cultures.

Love is also an industry. Symbolic gestures of affection are marketed as necessary for fulfilling the emotional expectations associated with Valentine's day. Advertisements had cluttered physical and online spaces this week, in a constant reminder of how products are packaged and sold as love and with love. What's more, this day accentuates the socially constructed ideals of love and the expectations of being loved in a culture where romantic love is often idealized. It is portrayed as the ultimate source of happiness and fulfilment. The cultural narrative of love as all-encompassing, passionate relationship can leave people feeling frustrated or incomplete if their own experiences of love don't live up with these ideals. People who may struggle with loneliness can experience heightening feelings of missing out on something essential to their happiness and well-being.

Feelings of love cannot be separated from other related emotions. Take grief for example as an expression of having loved. Grief is deeply intertwined with love, as the loss of a loved one often brings an emotional intensity that mirrors the depth of the love once shared. When we grieve, we mourn more than just the absence of a person; we grieve the lost opportunities for present fulfilment. Especially this month, the emotional weight of these unfulfilled possibilities can amplify the sadness, regret, and longing experienced in the grieving process. I recently had the pleasure to attend the launching of the book *Liberation at Last* by the author Mary Mallia. This book is a testament of love, between a mother and a daughter, yet drowned in feelings of grief after the mother ended her life. Raw emotions of love, anger, grief and hope are intersected in this book, as the protagonist navigates her life following such tragedy.

Away from the social construction of love, which might feel a bit heavy or academic, love is also very personal and subjective. At the heart of it, whatever definition love takes, it can have the power to leave an indelible mark on the heart and mind. I wish all readers the gift of love in its many forms.

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