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Meanings and implications of love: review of the scholarship of love with a sub-Saharan focus

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Love, as an emotion, binds people together in social practices that are contingent on culture, historical processes, and social trends. As such, love is a perfect site to study how people interact and to understand how power, equality, and sustainability play out in human relations. Despite its importance and much attention, love as a concept and form of interaction is not fully understood, especially not across cultures. In our research, mainly in sub-Saharan Africa, we show that alongside other emotions, love matters not only for passion in life or for wellbeing but also for improved resource use, increased gender equality, and, subsequently, higher food security and sovereignty – all signs of sustainability. While love is understood as a universal human phenomenon, definitions and expressions of love vary across time and cultures. Since love drives human interaction in many intertwined ways there is no single best way to define it. Yet, scholars have advanced the theory of love by identifying at least 40 major distinct but interdependent ‘love constructs’ fitting into the four main dimensions of affection, closeness, compassion, and commitment (Karandashev et al. 2022). In parallel to this and based on our review of the scholarship of love in a subset of 45 relevant academic articles from an 80-article systematic literature search of ‘love’ we find four core (and partly overlapping) types of how to speak about love as an expression and experience. These include: 1/ contextual love influenced by culture, space, and time; 2/ romantic and compassionate love; 3/ transactional love; 4/ post-humanist perspectives and ‘harmony love’. Finally, we examine love in relation to power; love-related emotions; and how understandings of love and culture impact gender relations.

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Introduction

Love is universal but contextual. Everyone who has been ‘in love’ knows that it matters (Sayer, 2011) and how it feels, often a fluttering, engaging feeling. Although the literature is brimming with illustrations (Sayer, 2011) and conceptual attempts to capture the essence of love, it often escapes clear scholarly definitions. It may be discarded as laughable, embarrassingly personal, or unimportant to study (Cole and Thomas, 2009; Sayer, 2011; Swidler, 2001), but love, passion, fear, and other affective dimensions of being with one another are increasingly recognised as fundamental in understanding development, social vulnerability, and thereby also sustainability (Clouser, 2016; Sayer, 2011; Wright, 2012).

Although culture is constitutive, it still allows multiple options and repertoires to be mobilised for various aims and purposes including social change (Swidler, 2001). In intimate contracts, spouses relate to each other in various forms of love and power (and other emotions). By unravelling how they think, speak and act (Schmidt, 2008) on love, one can get closer in identifying and explaining aspects of material and immaterial power. For that, as described below, we need to conceptualise love in ways that allow a fertile and multifaceted analysis.

Love and other emotions. Although emotional energy, such as love, drives much of human interaction (Collins, 2005) it is a non-obvious subject under scrutiny (Collins, 1992) in disciplines ranging from biology to anthropology, philosophy, psychology, and sociology. Emotions and emotional energy including affection, desire, fear, hope, and love are expressed through social and cultural practices (Collins, 2005; Wright, 2012) ‘that bind people to another’ (Cole and Thomas, 2009, 2) and that are contingent on context, culture, historical processes, social trends, and the exercise of power (Bauman, 2003).

Relevant research in feminist geography emphasises that love and affection in ‘relationships of intimacy’ (Morrison et al. 2012) must be held up to scrutiny to unpack power in sexual and love relationships. To exemplify, love is manifested as a dynamic power relation in intimate contracts with wider social implications (Collins, 2005) and is an effective entry point to capture issues of power, gender and identity including the negotiations of those. The study of love as an arena for power could thus show how emotions, such as love in intimate contracts, influence gendered resource management. For that setting, marriage, as an intimate relation, is best seen as a social institution that both reproduces gender inequality and mediates social change (Jackson, 2012).

On an individual scale, the emotional energy in love drives our motivation, intention, and action. The effects of love on a person can be defined in writer Jeanette Winterson’s (2007, 122) words: ‘I say I’m in love with her. What does that mean? It means I review my future and my past in the light of this feeling’. This echoes our understanding of what the power in love may imply in terms of imagination as well as in negotiation and compromises of relations in everyday practices and strategies; thereby referring to both expressions and experiences of love in relationships. But while personal aspects are central, it is necessary to keep social aspects in mind. To clarify this, we draw parallels to other feminist debates. For long, feminist thinkers have argued that work and labour in both the private and the public sphere should be identified, valued, and analysed as interdependent. Similarly, black feminist scholars of love-politics seek to interpret ‘love’ not only (or mainly) as an individual and personal experience but also as a social and collective concern and a subject for justice theory (see Nash, 2020). Such views allow us to challenge the focus on the private self and sphere and reorient it towards the public

social world beyond self-hood (Nash, 2020). In line with that, life choices (including love) could, in the famous words of Audre Lorde, be illuminated by the idea that the personal is political (1984, 113).

Focusing on the interaction between individual and collective scales, our mapping here reveals understandings of how love, affection, and similar emotions can influence human interactions in varied forms of relationships, and in extension, how that may impact sustainable development in sub-Saharan African agricultural settings.

Love, gender, and sustainability. Gendered access to land and power in sub-Saharan farming societies is widely studied, whereas the division, provision, or outcome of labour in this context is not. Even less is known about embodied and affective dimensions of food production, reproductive work, and household food security (Steen, 2011). This means that gender-sensitive sustainability studies must address material, immaterial and emotional challenges, here with a focus on emotions in nature-society relations and on feelings of affection such as love between spouses in intimate relations. Sustainability is here defined broadly in terms of its three main types of dynamics – human-environmental, intergenerational, and intersectional interaction and outcome.

Research on gender in societies where women depend on men for productive resources focuses more on gendered control of land and other productive resources than on immaterial resources such as labour, intra marriage dynamics, or emotions. Empirical and theoretical research and representations of love in sub-Saharan Africa are still scant, especially outside African scholarship (Cole and Thomas, 2009; Thomas and Cole, 2009) and the failure to engage in research on love in sub-Saharan Africa is partly a product of colonial history. Europeans justified their domination in various ways such as by depicting African people as hypersexual or lacking the emotional or intellectual depth required for nobler sentiments like love (Thomas and Cole, 2009; Tocco, 2010). To avoid falling into the trap of reiterating still-pervasive depictions of African intimacy as reducible to sexual urge, biological reproduction, or economic survival, we must engage more profoundly in research on love in this context (Tocco, 2010) and do so to highlight how it is expressed and experienced (see Steen and Jerneck, forthcoming). While doing so, we also acknowledge that romantic love is not necessarily a Western construct, but a universal emotion that is historically and contextually contingent (see Karandashev, 2015 and Karandashev et al. 2022 for further discussion).

In this article, we map out how love is understood (in different contexts) and how it influences human, and gendered, interaction. While our main focus is intimate contracts, we will address other sites of love occasionally. Below, we describe our search methods for the literature review and the material that we generated. After that we present, discuss, and compare findings. Finally, we sum up and seek to draw some conclusions.

Methods and material

The starting point refers to our interest in how love, and similar emotions, may influence sustainability in sub-Saharan Africa, here understood more specifically as increased food security and food sovereignty with due attention to socio-environmental conditions and concerns. While the first question guided our literature review – *How is love defined and studied in the scholarship of love research?* – it was mainly aimed at shedding light on the second and main question ‘*What does love mean across sub-Saharan African cultures?*’ The ambition was to bring sub-

Table 1 Keywords used for the systematic search in Web of Science.

First-order keywords: core concepts	Second-order keywords: definitions of love	Third-order keywords: relations of power	Fourth-order keywords: thematic coverage
love AND *love power* AND	*emotion* AND *intimacy* AND *love triangle* (Sternberg) AND *affection* AND *romance*	*femininity* AND *gender* AND *masculinity* AND *power* AND *marriage* AND *marital power* AND *marital relations*	*Africa* AND *agriculture* AND *farming* AND *marriage* AND *nature* AND *environment* AND *labour* AND *development* AND *sustainable development* AND *rural development* AND *anthropology* AND *culture*

Table 2 Coding clusters and categories.

Six main clusters for coding	Twelve specific coding categories
Article type and the relevance of love	Short summary; article type; love; what does love do?/what is love capable of?/relevant to whom?; other emotions
Location and actors	Geographical area; urban, rural or other domain; actors/agents; participants' identity
Power	Type of power, implicit or explicit, etc.
Processes of negotiation	Bargaining, cooperation, negotiation; compromises, priorities, trade-offs; winners and losers
Methodology	Methods of data collection; analysis
Other	Article quality; notes; hyperlink

Saharan scholarship on love in conversation with the broader field of research. For the literature review we developed a list of key terms to be checked in titles, keywords, and abstracts (Table 1) and limited the search to English language texts including book chapters, conference proceedings, peer-reviewed journal articles and review articles published until July 2021. Primarily we relied upon the search engine Web of Science later cross-checked with Google Scholar to ensure relevant coverage and resulting in a catalogue of 80 texts.

In the second round we coded the introduction and conclusion in the 80 texts to determine their relevance – high, medium, or low – according to six emerging clusters, which resulted in 45 highly relevant texts. The twelve categories represented six clusters, with various sub-themes (Table 2), each treated as a column in the literature tracking table. We extracted relevant information from each article and entered as text in Excel, which yielded data in 1360 cells, including some labelled ‘n/a’ or ‘not specified.’

Finally, we systematically analysed the completed literature tracking table by adding a synopsis of each article and column. The column content was then systematically colour-coded across the data set. Ultimately, information for each thematic category was arranged horizontally in Excel and details for the 45 selected texts arranged side by side for ease of viewing and preliminary visualisations.

Results and discussion

Overarching insights. Love is researched in many disciplines. In Web of Science, we found most categories in the humanities, such as art and literature, and in behavioural sciences, such as psychology, but fewer hits in family studies, healthcare science services, history, religion, sociology, or ‘social science other topics.’ The overarching insight from the survey is that love is best understood, not as a single, universal concept, but as a vastly diverse and contextually specific social phenomenon. This finding echoes other studies in the field of love research since the 1960s (e.g. Karandashev, 2015; Karandashev et al. 2022).

To reflect diversity in the literature on love, we identified four core (and partly overlapping) types of speaking about love as an expression and experience: 1/ contextual love influenced by culture, space, and time; 2/ romantic and compassionate love; 3/ transactional love; 4/ post-humanist perspectives and ‘harmony

love’. While the intention was to make distinct themes there is obviously certain overlap. Finally, we examine love in relation to power; love-related emotions; and how understandings of love and culture impact gender relations.

Contextual love: influenced by culture, space, and time. Love is often spoken of as a universal feeling. However, in the literature, love is widely agreed upon to be contextually specific – thus, a complex, multi-dimensional and far from universal feeling (Bhana, 2013a). Beall and Sternberg (1995, 433) state that ‘Love is a social construction that reflects its time period because it serves an important function in a culture’.

During the Enlightenment, love was understood as a rational experience only to become an uncontrollable passion during 18th and 19th century Romanticism. Later on, love is said to be defined and experienced according to the context. Here culture defines what is considered moral or immoral in relation to love and how thoughts, feelings, and actions are associated with and follow from that (Beall and Sternberg, 1995). Culture also influences what is considered desirable and attractive. For example, in the 1990s Beall and Sternberg described how the individualistic culture associated with the US and the West often values the explicit expression of emotions, including love, and that of ‘finding oneself. In contrast, Chinese culture was described as valuing relationships, meaning that people were more likely to define themselves by a relational role such as father, sister, or spouse (ibid) rather than only in individual terms (Karandashev, 2015). Even when love is similarly defined across settings, its manifestation will depend on culture (Eugénie, 2016). Bhana (2013b) further concludes that since love is socially and culturally bound it will be experienced, felt, and enacted depending on gender and how gender is perceived and expressed in a particular context.

Romantic, compassionate, and confluent love – how to reach emotional fulfilment? In the reviewed literature, we identified a variety of types of love expressions. Again, this illustrates the complexity of love, as an emotion and a relational experience varying across cultures, space, and time. Broadly speaking, *loving* is commonly accompanied by a sense of ‘closeness, belonging, and an attachment to a significant other’ (Osei-Tutu et al. 2018,

83). Depending on the nature of this *significant other*, love expressions may be distinguished into romantic, parental, compassionate, or altruistic love, while levels of intimacy, passion and commitment diverge (ibid.).

In the surveyed literature, the idea of *romantic love* is construed as predominately 'heterosexual, monogamous and permanent', as suggested by the familiar 'living happily ever after' or 'one true love' narratives (Vincent and McEwen, 2006, 39). Central to this is a fixed male-female binary, which serves the purpose of each partner 'completing the other as a result of the inherent separation between them' (Vincent and McEwen, 2006). In other words, the 'flawed individual' is made whole (Giddens, 1992, 45 in ibid). Importantly, romantic love perpetuates stereotypical versions of femininity and masculinity. Supported by Simone de Beauvoir, love holds a different meaning to men and women (1953, 642). Accordingly, men are portrayed by de Beauvoir as remaining 'sovereign subjects' within love relationships and are less likely to place their love affairs in the context of long-term visions of perfect harmony (ibid.). Contrastingly, women are represented to be consumed by love and the idea of finding their significant other or soulmate. Vincent and McEwen stress that romantic love has at its heart a highly 'restricted mode of femininity', which entails that women suffer and endure pain in the name of love (2006, 41). The embodiment of this type of romantic feminised love refers to jealousy, breaking up, followed by a passionate reconciliation (ibid). Vu (2020) and Baum (1971) stress that a worldwide rise in individualism in times of neoliberalism compels young people to increasingly choose marriages based on this ideal of love and romance.

This understanding of romantic love is becoming increasingly challenged by a vast emergent body of queer literature. Doan et al. (2015) explore to what extent the expression of emotions of love differs across social groups. Specifically, the authors investigate whether American heterosexuals differentially attribute love to lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples (Doan et al. 2015, 401). Underlying their investigation, is the assumption that social norms and cultural standards play a role in the expression and experience of emotions. They find that stigma and societal prejudice may lead to a lower level of granted legitimacy and recognition of a loving homosexual relationship, which in turn affects the couple's level of public expression of their emotions (ibid. 406). In fact, 'nowhere could the queer reader find a romance that depicted a queer couple with any hope for future fulfilment' (Barot, 2016). While queer theory has had something to say about sex, its perspectives on love were entirely omitted until recently, according to Halperin (2019, 396). Love was seemingly 'too intimately bound up with institutions and discourses of the "normal", too deeply embedded in the standard narratives of romance, to be available for "queering"' (ibid). As a consequence, the LGBTQI+ (*lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, 2-spirit queer questioning, and intersex*) community has been denied access to love, both as a representation and a form of life (ibid, 397). This adds another dimension to the struggles related to the political recognition and oppression of LGBTQI+ subjectivities.

Exploring the history of romantic love in sub-Saharan Africa, Megan Vaughan (2009) illustrates that the nature of romantic love is subject to much contemporary debate across the African continent. Romantic love is often construed as a Western, 'alien import' at odds with African tradition. While Vaughan demonstrates that contemporary African discourses often make the association between romantic love and modernity, her findings also reveal that some pre-colonial or 'traditional' African societies and cultures have a rich vocabulary for feelings and emotions, typically ascribed to 'Western' perceptions of passionate desire and romantic love. For instance, the Taita of Kenya

used words for *lust* and *infatuation*, in relation to irresponsible feelings felt by the young for each other, while *romantic love* is used when passion is combined with enduring affection (Vaughan, 2009, 11). A focus group study with young South African males yielded similar results (Manyapelo et al. 2019). The participants stressed that the isiZulu expression for 'I love you', as opposed to 'I like you', is only used by men when they want to propose a romantic relationship to a woman (ibid, 5). Similarly, traditional Swahili songs revolved around passionate love poetry, full of loss and longing, and of unrequited love. Importantly, Vaughan stresses that love, across African societies, takes forms that are far richer and more diverse than can be allowed for by the restrictive ideals of romantic love (Vaughan, 2009, 23). Karandashev and others (Karandashev, 2015; Karandashev et al. 2022) confirm that romantic love is not solely a Western construct.

Osei-Tutu et al. (2018) investigated love expressions among Ghanaian Christians. In collectivist communities of sub-Saharan Africa, love is typically associated with expressions of affect towards others including social relationships and material provisioning. In addition, it involves a deep commitment to sharing, reciprocity, fidelity, and exclusivity in social relationships. Conducting interviews with over 60 participants, Osei-Tutu et al. found that communal and maintenance-oriented love appears to be the dominant love expression among Ghanaian Christians. A distinction between *agape* and *eros* love was identified, the former being a 'universal type defined as a concern or regard for people of all sorts', and the latter being defined as a 'desire for something or someone'. While *agape* is centred on the benefits of the other person (including children), *eros* is self-oriented and is directed towards benefits to the self. *Agape* love was the dominant type of love expressed by the Ghanaian Christian participants, while they often quoted biblical perspectives or the words of God. Additionally, Vaughan identified three major understandings of love in her interviews: to meet someone's needs, to help people in need, and to care for someone. Thus, the overall expressions of love among the respondents were communally oriented, which is expressed primarily through the distribution of basic material resources, taking care of family obligations and the needs of neighbours. In short, in collectivist cultures, love arguably captures feelings of responsibility for and care of others. This type of love is mentioned in the literature as companionate, or altruistic love. It is juxtaposed to the notion of romantic love explored above, which centres around the individual's experience of how love (and infatuation) makes one feel.

In line with this, it can be useful to refer to how sociologist Anthony Giddens (1992, 117) proposes the idea of confluent love as the alternative to romantic love. This understanding of love is rooted in equality and the necessity of emotional involvement and commitment between partners. Importantly, this type of love is not oriented towards permanence, but rather towards the *emotional fulfilment* of each during the time of engagements.

Transactional love – is it love? Transactional love examines the interconnectedness of love and financial support to explore whether – and if so, also explain how – emotions are associated with economic benefits. While the West generally rejects the interconnectedness of love and provision due to the Western conception of love as a spontaneous and private emotion, Cole argues that material support is involved in Western romantic relationships (Bhana, 2013a). However, she states that the connection between love and provision is often more explicit in African romantic relationships where poverty is more prevalent. Similarly, Bhana addresses the connection between love and

provision, stating that ‘money and love are not separate issues but rather entangled in feelings, desires and ideals of love’ (Bhana, 2013b, 6).

To take some examples from sub-Saharan Africa, Jackson (2012) traces the characteristics of Shona marriages in Zimbabwe from the colonial period to the 1980s and demonstrates how changes in culture and marriage customs influenced the connection between love and provision. She found that with the weakening of kin relations, the bride price increasingly became a man’s responsibility rather than his family’s. In response, women sought men in financially secure positions as they knew they could not depend on his family for support. The weakening of kin relationships also increased women’s autonomy. In households that were separate from their in-laws, women had more power over their husband’s finances. Additionally, the decreasing frequency and importance of paying a bride price provided women greater ability to leave the marriage with less financial repercussions and greater rights over their children (*ibid.*).

In her study on love and provision among financially disadvantaged youth in Tanzania, Stark (2017) found that men who are poor felt disempowered compared to wealthier men, while women felt exploited by men that could not satisfactorily provide financially. Stark defines transactional intimacy as ‘a continuum of relationships with sex work at one extreme, and provision of needs by a primary male partner (permanent boyfriend or husband) at the other’ (Stark, 2017, 571). Stark chooses to use the term ‘transactional intimacy’ over ‘transactional sex’ to emphasise the emotions involved in the long-term relationships she studied. Due to conceptions of love that include the male as a provider, men who are poor described feeling they could not get married if they did not have enough resources to support themselves and their spouse. A few men allowed their girlfriends to have intimate relations with other men as a means of earning money. Men also described having multiple girlfriends for fear that one of their girlfriends would leave them for a wealthier man. Many women in the study expressed conflicting views on transactional love. Women described understanding gifts as an expression of love; yet they also spoke of ‘clean love’, a love that is free from material relations.

In a similar qualitative study among sex workers in rural Ghana, Onyango et al. (2019) explored the relationship dynamics between sex workers and their intimate partners. The authors found that most relationships between sex workers and their intimate partners were mutual, reciprocal, and transactional, while many of the participants (both male and female) described their relationships in terms of friendship, love, and a hopeful future (*ibid.*, 31). Both men and women expressed that they support each other financially, share resources and support one another emotionally (*ibid.*, 38).

These studies demonstrate the complex connectedness between love and provision. While the connection may be more apparent in sub-Saharan African relationships, this should not be viewed as inherently negative (Thomas and Cole, 2009). Love and affection can coexist within transactional relationships as demonstrated by Cole’s finding showing that bride-wealth may include an affective dimension demonstrating a man’s love for his fiancé and her value (*ibid.*).

Post-humanist perspective and ‘harmony love’. The capacity to love and to form an emotional attachment is a fundamental human condition, according to González Morales (2019). He stresses that ‘the human condition refers insurmountably to love, which because of it and in it, is what makes humans what we are’ (*ibid.*, 6). Similarly, love is presented as the ‘essence of our lives’ and as the enabling factor for achieving spiritual growth and

happiness. The primary objective of spiritual growth is to improve ourselves and to achieve love: Love for yourself (self-love), love for others, and love for other living beings (non-humans) (Pličanič, 2020, 407). An emergent body of literature explores love and emotional attachment that goes beyond human-to-human interaction, and instead extends to other non-human beings.

Drawing from Donna Haraway, Engelmann (2019) defines a post-humanist love as a love that is not limited to human entities. Instead, love is the foundational principle of awareness, interconnectedness and situatedness shared by all beings. (Affectionate) love, then acts as an affirmative action towards all living entities and is the integrating factor between all species. Similarly, Blom et al. (2020) stress that love is the most powerful of emotions, which has the capacity to heal, as it is the innate ability to feel with one’s heart. The authors propose a post-humanist perspective of love as an outward emotion, towards nature, which provides a way of ‘knowing nature’. It is about complementing nature to become one, through our senses and inner-knowing. This kind of post-humanist love, then, channels our connection and appreciation for the natural world and as such can be considered one of the drivers for the restoration and sustainability of Earth’s natural health and beauty.

The concept of ‘harmony love’ is introduced by Suvorov and Suvorova (2016, 2015) as the supreme moral law, grounded in ethics and peace. Love is understood as the capability to understand the problems of another person and to go against one’s interests for the sake of others, and to make the joy of others their own. Love is a creative force which is the foundation for the ethical and moral perfection of human potential. The authors argue that this principle of harmony love may be a driver for holistic sustainable development, taking both society and nature into consideration.

Both the post-humanist perspectives on love for nature and the concept of harmony love argue that love holds a transformative potential to drive sustainable development (Engelmann, 2019; González Morales, 2019; Pličanič, 2020; Suvorov and Suvorova, 2015, 2016). Underlying this, is the requirement that humanity’s love for the natural world be rekindled. Humans across all cultures must once again learn to connect with and love nature in order to protect and nurture the natural environment.

Love, power, and inequality. At the household level, love is often analysed in terms of division of labour, resource management, and power. For instance, Lambrecht (2016) explores the process of negotiating access to land and resources among marital partners in Ghana. Her findings reveal that community leadership and land ownership, as well as resource access are highly gendered and largely male-dominated, with merely 10 percent of agricultural parcels being owned by individual female farmers (*ibid.*, 2016, 188). Importantly, access to land and land ownership are not in fact negotiated at the individual or household level, but are instead deeply embedded in social norms, rules and perceptions about men’s and women’s roles, responsibility and capabilities in their households, families, and communities. According to Lambrecht, these societal expectations rest on the assumption that husbands ‘love, lead and provide’, thus revealing an explicit imbalance in power relations (*ibid.*, 2016, 192).

As love is culturally bound, it is greatly impacted by societal gender relations. Gregoratto (2017) states exploitation can occur within a romantic relationship and is often rooted in social factors such as race, gender, and cultural definitions of love. For example, when love is defined as unconditional and selfless, and women are expected to be caring and sensitive, relations can end with the labour exploitation of women in unpaid domestic work. A study

on sex and love within marriage in Zimbabwe explored how power is displayed (Mugweni et al. 2012). In the study, some of the men interviewed declared sex with their spouse as their right because they had paid a bride price. Some men also described forcing their partners to have sex when they did not want it, as a way to teach their wives to be obedient and submissive. Many of the women who experienced intimate partner violence within marriage did not report it due to a taboo surrounding sex and marriage, as well as fear of losing their husband's financial support if they reported it. However, other women in the study reported withholding sex until they received what they desired from their spouse, for example a material item, thus an example of transactional love (ibid). In conclusion, sex was used in different ways by both genders to assert power.

Jackson asserts 'conjugal love is a social relationship which may either deepen, or diminish, the effects of wider patriarchal environments' (Jackson, 2012, 43). This is an acknowledgement that relationships do not exist in a vacuum and are influenced by their context. However, relationships are not bound to replicating cultural norms. Spouses have agency within a relationship to negotiate relations and power. Similarly, Bhana states 'To claim that love is a bond of inequality simplifies relations of intimacy and ignores the possibilities of tenderness and agency despite the widespread forms of inequalities' (Bhana, 2013b, 6).

Love-related emotions. As definitions of love differ across cultures and contexts, so do the emotions expressed and associated with it. Rostami et al. (2014, 697) stress that the ability to distinguish and express emotions, increases the intimacy and sense of security, heightens the ambiguity tolerance in individuals and is essential for the continuation and preservation of a successful marriage. In short, the expression and interpretation of emotions is central to love and social relationships. Vincent and McEwen (2006) distinguish between the set of emotions associated with romantic love, as opposed to confluent or companionate love. Romantic love is heavily dominated by feelings of heartache and pain, since it is 'natural for heroines to suffer, to endure pain, in the name of love'. The lived demonstration of this kind of love is through high levels of jealousy, breaking up, and passionate reconciliation. Romantic love, according to the authors, is necessarily irrational, meaning that lovers are often unable to comprehend their own feelings and emotions. Juxtaposed against this, the set of emotions associated with confluent love involves equality, commitment, and mutuality between the partners, which grants the emotional fulfilment of the couple.

Vaughan (2009) asserts that emotions are socially and symbolically produced. They can be both feelings and meanings and are both individual and social in nature. Importantly, emotions are influenced by culture, meaning that the salience of expressions of love by individuals and among communities differs cross-culturally. In his investigation, Vaughan contrasts the sets of emotions associated with romantic love within societies in sub-Saharan Africa with Western ideas of love. She found that in sub-Saharan African societies, passion, lust, and infatuation are expressed and interpreted as emotions equated with youth and irresponsibility. 'True' love or companionate marriages, on the other hand, are understood to be guided by mutual feelings of trust, respect, and moral responsibility. This stands in stark contrast with Western emotional expressions of romantic love which often include passion, desire, and pain. Osei-Tutu et al.'s (2018) investigation of the expression and meaning of love in Ghana yields similar results. They contend that individualistic societies tend to value passionate love more, while collective cultures tend to value companionate love more. Passionate love centres around the experience of how love makes one feel, while

companionate love captures feelings for and care for others. There may of course be exceptions to these rather generalised views.

Ruark et al. (2014) stress that there is a gendered difference within the emotional experience of love. Conducting in-depth interviews with 28 Swazi men and women, the authors found that women are typically motivated by love, emotional attachment, and loneliness, while men are motivated to enter a relationship by lust, sexual desire, love and attachment or alcohol use. Men did recognise a distinction between sexual relationships and real (more encompassing) relationships, the latter of which involved love and emotional attachment, while the former is mostly driven by lust and alcohol use. While emotions of love, such as affection and tenderness are typically attributed to 'femininity', women also expressed strong emotions when discussing their partners' infidelity. This alludes to the assumption that social and gender norms, as well as cultural standards play a role in the expression and experience of emotions. Doan et al. (2015) explore to what extent the expression of emotions of love differs across social groups, in this case homosexual and heterosexual couples. They find that stigma and societal prejudice leads to a lower level of granted legitimacy and recognition of a loving homosexual relationship, which in turn affects the couple's level of public expression of their emotions.

To conclude, emotions are at the core of romantic or social relationships and are inextricably bound to expressions of love. Emotions associated with love differ historically and cross-culturally, are gender-specific and shaped by societal norms and range from positive feelings such as affection, care, tenderness, or commitment to negative feelings of pain, jealousy, or irrationality. Yet, findings may have to be further investigated – and new insights generated.

Gendered love and labour. As stated above, Ruark et al. (2014) argue that there is a gendered difference within the emotional experience of love. Men did recognise a distinction between sexual relationships and real relationships, the latter of which involved love and emotional attachment, while the former is mostly driven by lust and alcohol use. Women expressed strong emotions when discussing their partners' infidelity, which often materialised in sadness or anger (ibid, 136).

Gender norms can influence how a heterosexual couple divides their unpaid domestic labour and income generating labour. A study in Tanzania and Zimbabwe found that men who wanted to provide practical support to their wives by assisting with domestic work were heavily stigmatised by other community members who would say that these men are completing a woman's work or have been given a love potion by their wife (Comrie-Thomson et al. 2020). It was more acceptable for men to provide assistance when their spouse was ill, or to phrase it as a favour to their spouse, rather than that of a regular duty. Nonetheless, both men and women reported their marriages were 'happier, more loving, more peaceful and more mutually supportive following increased male partner practical support' (Comrie-Thomson et al. 2020, 731).

While a number of studies demonstrate that a household spends more on items such as food and child education when women control a larger proportion of household assets (Fafchamps et al. 2009; Lachaud, 1998; Quisumbing and Maluccio, 2003), Kevane (2012) is critical of this assumption and shows how factors beyond gender could be contributing to the observed outcome. For example, this may be impacted by decisions of who to marry, especially in situations where men and women with similar views on spending and consumption choose to marry each other. Similarly, farming practices that appear to be

determined by gender within a household may be more influenced by external factors. A study on farming practices in Southern Ghana showed women's plots of land were less invested in than their spouses because their claim to the land was more insecure due to patriarchal allocation of land practices by village elders. In areas where women only have secondary rights to the land through a male relative, it can be more sensible to invest more resources and time in their spouse's land which is securely held (*ibid*) (Steen, 2011 shows similar examples from a Zimbabwean context). These studies demonstrate how context and culture influence gender relations and the division of labour within a household.

Conclusions

The article brings a comprehensive and applied perspective on love, as a construction of society based on intra and interpersonal relationships. In this systematic review, we set out to examine how love, as a study site of social interaction, may be adequately understood and how it influences power, sustainability, and gender relations. After reviewing the literature, we may now conclude that despite its universal importance, love as a concept and a form of human interaction is still under-examined, not yet fully understood and thus deserving more attention in both in-depth studies and more comparative cross-cultural research.

In the reviewed literature, which comprises a catalogue of 80 selected texts with a focus on a subset of 45 articles, we identified four core types of love. First, love is conceptually specific as it is influenced by culture, space, and time. Second, the genres of romantic, compassionate, and confluent love, which are commonly construed as Western ideals, could also be identified across sub-Saharan African cultures. Third, transactional love describes the interconnection of love and material provision or financial support and was the most visible type of love in sub-Saharan African relationships. Finally, post-humanist perspectives of love are not limited to human entities, but instead constitutes an affirmative action towards all living entities as the primary integrating factor. Such love may be further explored in relation to themes such as 'love of the environment and nature' – also in the context of agricultural settings in sub-Saharan Africa.

Based on this systematic categorisation of how love is best understood, we also examined love in relation to power and a range of diverse emotions and gender relations with a specific focus on labour seen as a resource next to land in many sub-Saharan settings. Especially at the household level, exploitation can occur within a spousal relationship. Because of this, studying love in relation to the division of labour, resource management and power, reveals how spouses actively negotiate their power relationship. Furthermore, we clearly noticed that the expression and interpretation of emotions is central to social relations and love. The array of emotions associated with love, which we identified in the literature, largely corresponds with the distinct love genres presented above, and are influenced by culture. Similarly, understanding how love and culture impact gender relations may help reveal the division of a couple's unpaid domestic labour and income generating labour.

To conclude here, we made the case that love not only matters for emotional wellbeing and interpersonal relations, but also influences resource use and division, gender equality, power and sustainability understood in human-environmental, intersectional, and intergenerational terms which we have also explored in further studies (Steen and Jerneck, forthcoming). The findings from the literature review have revealed that by examining love, our understanding of power relations, as well

as negotiations in spousal relationships may be enhanced, as love directly relates to the division and use of labour (in farming households and mainly with a focus on women's labour) and other resources. The scholarship of love, then, delivers novel perspectives and insights into gender inequalities, and in turn, contributes – or may contribute – to women empowerment.

Beyond the household level, we reviewed a broad body of literature of diverse, cross-cultural representations of love. On this basis, we found that love is best understood as a universal phenomenon, which is also culturally and socially-bound, as well as contextually specific. Importantly, the preconceived idea that 'romantic love' originated in Western or modern societies and can be reduced to a mere 'imported good' across non-Western cultures and societies, has been disproved, thus also echoing findings in other reviews (Karandashev, 2015). Simultaneously, we demonstrated that the complex connectedness between love and provision, introduced as 'transactional love', which was found to be more prominently discussed in the context of sub-Saharan African relationships, can coexist with emotions of love, passion, and affection. The diversity of conceptions of love, both in its expression and experience, was further exemplified by the post-humanist perspectives, or 'harmony love'. Resting on the assumption that love is not limited to human entities, but instead extends far beyond it, love may be construed as the foundational principle of awareness, interconnectedness and situatedness shared by all beings. This ultimately channels humanity's connectivity with nature and the world and may therefore drive the restoration and protection of Earth's biodiversity. Provided that humanity's love for the natural world is rekindled, love holds a vast transformative potential to promote sustainability in terms of protecting and conserving the natural environment and driving climate change action.

In addition to providing a systematic overview of the scholarship of love, we set out specifically in this article to examine what love means across sub-Saharan African cultures and societies as exemplified by the cases and examples we found. Out of the 80 reviewed articles, only 20 articles explicitly investigated love in an African setting. This indicates that African conceptualisations and experiences of love remain underrepresented in the debate on the theory of love. The article is an attempt to challenge this as we not only presented the richness of love (and its interpretations and expressions) in sub-Saharan Africa, but also illuminated the implications and contributions that the scholarship of love can make to improved gender equality as one aspect of sustainability. Finally, the overwhelming majority of the articles and texts that we reviewed either completely omitted or barely discussed queer perspectives on love. While there is a growing, emergent body of queer literature, we noticed the gap in the scholarship of love to fully encompass queer experiences.

As regards calls for further research, first we suggest combining literature and research on polygamy and polyamorous love in order to enrich the understanding of the relationships between love, sex, power and gender. Second, we would encourage scholars to enrich the theory of love through cross-cultural investigations, profound ethnographies, in-depth cases, and wider discursive studies from where to draw further insights that may illuminate and advance the theory of love and the contribute to empower sub-Saharan smallscale farmers.

Data availability

As this is a literature review, no original data were generated or analysed.

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Author contributions

KS conceived the idea, designed the review, structured the article, and contributed to analysis and writing. AA and LL carried out the review searches, drafted the article, and contributed to analysis and writing. AJ contributed to analysis and writing. The information and views set out in this publication are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the employer.

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