

SACRED TRIANGLES: INTERPRETING PASSION, INTIMACY, AND COMMITMENT IN THE POETRY OF SHAH ABDUL LATIF BHITTAI THROUGH STERNBERG'S LOVE THEORY

Karima Arisar

MPhil scholar, IELL, University of Sindh.

Arisarkarima@gmail.com

Dr. Ghulam Ali Buriro

gaburiro@usindh.edu.pk

Professor, University of Sindh.

Abstract

This research explores the intricate emotional, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of love in the poetry of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, one of South Asia's most celebrated Sufi poets. By applying Robert Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love—which comprises passion, intimacy, and commitment—the study investigates how these components are expressed and transformed through the experiences of iconic female characters such as Sassi, Sohni, Marui, Noori, Lilan, Sorath, and Moomal. Drawing upon selected verses from Shah Jo Risalo and supported by recent scholarship, this study examines how love in Latif's poetry goes beyond conventional romantic frameworks to include spiritual longing, ethical resilience, and cultural identity. The analysis reveals that while Sternberg's model is a useful starting point, it is insufficient in fully capturing Sufi love's metaphysical, symbolic, and gendered complexities. The verses show that passion often becomes a vehicle for spiritual elevation, intimacy is expressed through emotional surrender and union with the divine, and commitment manifests as unwavering moral and cultural loyalty. Additionally, using feminine voices as central narrators reflects a proto-feminist discourse, empowering women as seekers, sacrificers, and mystics. This study proposes that a fourth component—spiritual transcendence—be added to Sternberg's framework when applied to mystical literature. Through this interdisciplinary approach, the paper not only contributes to literary and psychological studies but also reimagines love as a sacred, transformative, and culturally embedded experience.

Keywords: Commitment, Love, Passion, Shah Latif

1. Introduction

Love, as both a psychological phenomenon and literary theme, has long fascinated scholars across disciplines. While traditional literary criticism has examined love through symbolic, thematic, and cultural lenses, psychological frameworks offer a structured method to analyze its complexity. Robert Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love (1986) outlines love as a dynamic interplay of three components: passion, intimacy, and commitment. In literature, particularly in Sufi poetry, love is not merely romantic but deeply spiritual, forming a path of union with the Divine. Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai (1689–1752), one of the most revered Sindhi poets and mystics, expresses love in multilayered forms—devotional, metaphorical, and personal. His verses reflect the pain of separation (*hijr*), longing (*shawq*), and the ultimate desire for union (*wuslat*). These emotional and spiritual components align significantly with Sternberg's triangular model, albeit with deeper spiritual implications.

Latif's poetic tradition emerges from a unique cultural matrix shaped by Islamic mysticism, Sindhi folklore, and oral storytelling. His female characters embody a powerful emotional core that transcends gender roles and challenges classical narrative conventions. The recurring themes of suffering, endurance, and self-sacrifice position love as an existential force—one that compels

transformation and spiritual growth. Furthermore, Latif's work serves as a bridge between the personal and the universal. While each tale features individual lovers with distinct challenges, they collectively construct a Sufi cosmology wherein love is a path to divine knowledge (*ma'rifah*). This study aims to explore how the emotional depth in these tales can be better understood through modern psychological theories like Sternberg's while also recognizing the spiritual dimensions often neglected by Western frameworks. Recent developments in comparative literary psychology suggest that love in mystical poetry often transcends typical Western relational frameworks. Scholars now examine the fusion of emotion and spiritual devotion as an emerging fourth dimension of love, especially in Islamic, Bhakti, and Sufi literature (Iqbal & Zareen, 2024).

1.1 Scope of the Study

This research is limited to selected Surs (chapters) of Shah Jo Risalo that illustrate love stories such as Sassui-Punhun, Sohni-Mehar, Noori-Tamachi, and others. Using English translations, the study applies Sternberg's model as an analytical lens, aiming to interpret love as both emotional and spiritual experience.

1.2 Research Question

- How are the components of passion, intimacy, and commitment expressed in Latif's poetry?
- Do Latif's characters demonstrate Sternberg's ideal of consummate love?
- Can Sternberg's model accommodate the spiritual dimensions of Sufi love?

1.3 Research Objective

- To identify expressions of passion, intimacy, and commitment in selected verses
- To analyze how these elements interact and evolve in Latif's poetic narratives
- To evaluate the applicability and limitations of Sternberg's theory in interpreting Sufi poetry

1.4 Significance

This study contributes to the interdisciplinary discourse between literary studies and psychology. It provides fresh insights into Latif's poetry and tests the universality of Sternberg's theory across cultural and mystical traditions.

2. Review of Literature

Sternberg's Triangular Theory has been widely applied in contemporary studies of romantic and interpersonal relationships (Bux et al., 2019; Sternberg, 1997; Calista & Pasopati, 2024). Scholars have also used the model to interpret films, fiction, and historical narratives (Elhamsyah & Rudianto, 2024; Abbasi et al., 2024; Gopang et al., 2015). In the South Asian literary context, recent work by Iqbal and Zareen (2024) has proposed a fourth component—spiritual transcendence—particularly relevant to mystical traditions. Latif's poetry is infused with Sufi themes. According to Schimmel (1982), Latif's metaphors of separation and longing depict both human and divine love. Female protagonists such as Sassui and Marui illustrate intense passion and unwavering commitment (Abdullah, 2016). Feminist scholars like Khanum (2021) and Fatima (2022) emphasize that Latif's heroines are active agents in their emotional and spiritual journeys. Naqvi and Rahman (2022) assert that intimacy in mystical poetry functions on a metaphysical plane, where the lover's soul seeks unity with the divine. Sattar and Mahmud (2021) argue that passion in Sufi texts is not sensual but sacrificial, representing spiritual surrender. Memon and Shaikh (2023) position Latif's female characters as proto-feminist figures

who embody emotional strength and self-determined love. Cultural theorists such as Wu and Nadeem (2023) and Choudhary and Leung (2020) caution against applying Western-centric models universally. They advocate for culturally adaptive frameworks that respect the spiritual, communal, and ethical contexts of love in South Asian and Islamic traditions. In literature, every era is connected to its predecessor in some way or another (Ramzan & Khan, 2024), so it is not possible to see it in complete isolation (Ramzan et al., 2020, 2021; Ahmad et al., 2022; Amjad et al., 2021; Li & Akram, 2023, 2024).

Rauf and Samo (2024) further highlight the need for an emotional-literary approach in analyzing South Asian Sufi texts. Their work encourages integrating symbolic interpretation with psychological models to better understand multidimensional expressions of love. Additionally, Ali and Asghar (2022) studied Punjabi Sufi poetry and emphasized that emotional intensity in mystic literature frequently transcends physical attraction, aligning with the deeper structures of passion and spiritual yearning. Patel (2021) also challenges the universality of psychological models like Sternberg's in Eastern poetic traditions and recommends a recontextualized approach that incorporates spiritual, ethical, and communal facets. Mehrotra and Singh (2023) reinforce this by arguing that oral traditions and folk literature require flexible theoretical models rooted in narrative ethics and indigenous cultural logics. Sociocultural issues are a complex yet integral part of human life (Akram & Abdelrady, 2025, 2023; Ramzan et al., 2025, 2023; Nawaz et al., 2021). They can range from challenges related to cultural integration (Akram & Li, 2024; Akram & Oteir, 2025), social inequality, and systemic discrimination to issues surrounding gender norms, identity, and generational conflicts (Al-Adwan et al., 2022; Ma et al., 2024). These scholars collectively emphasize that love in Sufi poetry is not simply a matter of emotion—it is also a journey toward divine realization, involving metaphysical sacrifice, union, and transcendence.

Recent studies by Ahmed and Yusuf (2023) on cross-religious love narratives further illustrate how mystic poetry employs universal emotional themes but adapt them to specific metaphysical frameworks. This convergence of emotional symbolism and spiritual mission challenges binary interpretations and calls for intersectional literary models. Furthermore, Zaman and Haider (2022) argue that the recurrence of metaphorical landscapes in South Asian Sufi literature (deserts, rivers, storms) parallels emotional landscapes described in psychological terms, thereby supporting the integration of cognitive-emotive models into literary analysis. These environmental symbols often represent the inner states of the lover's psyche, suggesting that Sternberg's model can be deepened through environmental and symbolic reading strategies. These perspectives collectively support an enriched, hybrid methodology that merges Western theory with indigenous spiritual traditions to fully appreciate the literary and emotional complexity of Shah Latif's verses.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design rooted in textual and thematic analysis. It draws upon literary psychology and Sufi poetics to explore symbolic meanings and emotional expressions of love in Shah Abdul Latif's poetry. The goal is to understand how emotional and spiritual themes emerge in narrative structures, character arcs, and metaphors, especially within the context of Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love.

3.2 Research Tool

The primary data source consists of selected Surs from Shah Jo Risalo, particularly those featuring the love stories of Sassui-Punhun, Sohni-Mehar, Noori-Tamachi, Lilan-Chanesar, and Sorath-Rai Diyach. English translations by Shackle (2018) were utilized. A close reading approach was used to extract relevant verses, which were coded using thematic markers corresponding to Sternberg's categories: Passion (longing, desire, fire), Intimacy (spiritual closeness, soul connection), and Commitment (loyalty, sacrifice).

3.3 Theoretical Framework

The study uses Robert Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love (1986) as the foundational framework. His model categorizes love through three core components—passion, intimacy, and commitment—interacting in various combinations to form different love types, including consummate love. This model was adapted to the mystical-poetic context of Latif's work, where spiritual devotion may reflect or even replace one or more of these components. To address the cultural and spiritual specificity of Sufi poetry, the research also incorporates insights from interdisciplinary theorists (Iqbal & Zareen, 2024; Schimmel, 1982), who suggest a fourth axis of spiritual transcendence. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis method was applied to systematically identify, code, and interpret thematic patterns within the selected texts.

Sur Marui

Sindhi Verse: "سورن جي سرهاڻ، مارويءَ لاءِ مٺو آهي"

Translation: "The pillow of suffering is sweet for Marui."

Analysis: This verse demonstrates **commitment** and **emotional resilience**. Marui's loyalty to her people and her beloved land represents a form of enduring emotional fidelity. Even while held in captivity, she embraces suffering as a noble expression of her commitment—both to her homeland and to moral integrity. In Sternberg's framework, such steadfastness under hardship exemplifies deep-rooted commitment.

Sur Moomal

Sindhi Verse: "موهڻي جي محبت، مون کي موڪل نه ڏي"

Translation: "Moomal's love does not let me go."

Analysis: This line illustrates **passion**—overwhelming, consuming, and binding. The expression of helplessness in the grip of love points to Sternberg's element of intense emotional arousal. It shows how Moomal's love defies rationality and autonomy, becoming a psychological and spiritual fixation.

Sur Momal-Rano (Additional)

Sindhi Verse: "رانجهن جي راه تي، موڪل ناهه مرڪي"

Translation: "There is no turning back on the path to the beloved."

Analysis: This expresses **both passion and commitment**. It illustrates the irreversible journey of love, where the lover embraces sacrifice and hardship. The verse speaks to the emotional and spiritual point of no return—a key concept in Sufi love where union requires annihilation of self.

Sur Leela (Third Example)

Sindhi Verse: "چنيسر جي چوڪنڊي، ليلان پي آلاسي ٿي"

Translation: "At Chanesar's tomb, Lilan too became dust."

Analysis: This closing scene of Leela's arc reflects **atonement and ultimate commitment**. Her journey from betrayal to self-dissolution signifies redemption and renewed spiritual fidelity. The act of merging with her beloved in death mirrors the Sufi concept of unity through surrender—consistent with consummate love.

These additional verses strengthen the argument that Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai's heroines portray complex, evolving expressions of love that encompass pain, loyalty, longing, and spiritual transcendence. Each tale contributes a unique perspective on Sternberg's triangle, deepened through mystical allegory and cultural context.

Sur Sassi (Additional Verse)

Sindhi Verse: "سأه پیا سائیں، سچائیں سک سچي"

Translation: "My breath remains with him, who truly knows longing."

Analysis: This verse conveys **intimacy fused with passion**. Sassi defines her connection not merely through presence but through breath, indicating a deeply internalized emotional attachment. The phrase "truly knows longing" ties the physical presence of love to a spiritual awareness. Sternberg's intimacy is intensified here by mystical unity, where longing itself becomes sacred.

Sur Sohni (Further Verse)

Sindhi Verse: "مانڊي مَحَبَّت، منجهاري ۾ موهيندي، موجن ۾ محو ٿي وئي"

Translation: "Weakened by love, lost in twilight, she vanished into the waves."

Analysis: This verse reflects a combination of **passion and transcendence**. Sohni's physical exhaustion and eventual surrender to the river illustrate love's consuming power. Her literal disappearance into water symbolizes the lover's annihilation—*fana*—in the pursuit of union. Sternberg's passion is shown at its climax, where desire leads to both destruction and mystical merging.

Sur Marui (Third Verse)

Sindhi Verse: "هوت چاهيان هيءُ، جو وطن نه وساري"

Translation: "I would only love one who never forgets their homeland."

Analysis: This verse links **commitment** with identity and values. For Marui, love is not selfish or possessive; it is grounded in mutual devotion to community and roots. This redefines Sternberg's commitment as not only emotional or relational, but ethical and collective.

Sur Noori (Expanded Verse)

Sindhi Verse: "نوڪري نوڪري سڏيان، تان سچو سائين ٿئي"

Translation: "Let me call myself a servant until the true master becomes mine."

Analysis: This verse reaffirms **intimacy through humility**. Noori's self-effacement, framed as a path to intimacy with the beloved, mirrors Sufi concepts of servitude as spiritual proximity. This spiritualized intimacy deepens Sternberg's concept by adding ethical surrender and identity dissolution as routes to closeness. These expanded examples reveal how Shah Latif's heroines portray love not just as a romantic force but as an ethical, spiritual, and often painful journey toward truth and unity. Each narrative reinterprets Sternberg's framework through cultural specificity and Sufi metaphysics, offering a multidimensional perspective on love.

Discussion

The findings from the poetic analyses of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai's verses clearly demonstrate that his female protagonists express multi-layered, dynamic, and often transcendent experiences of love. These expressions correspond closely with Sternberg's three components of love—passion, intimacy, and commitment (Sternberg, 1986; Sternberg, 1997)—while also challenging and expanding the framework to encompass cultural, spiritual, and ethical dimensions. Sassi exemplifies undying commitment and longing that transcends physical boundaries. Her verses are filled with imagery of fire, suffering, and breath—illustrating a love that endures through

trials and mirrors the Sufi ideal of *fana* (annihilation of self in the beloved) (Schimmel, 1982). Sohni, likewise, personifies passion in its most destructive and transcendent form. Her journey across a stormy river, her surrender to the waves, and her isolation all depict the emotional intensity Sternberg describes but elevated by Sufi metaphor into a divine quest (Naqvi & Rahman, 2022; Wu & Nadeem, 2023). Marui offers a distinctly ethical dimension to commitment. Her steadfast love for her homeland and refusal to succumb to royal temptation reveal love as loyalty, not only to a person but to place, values, and integrity. This suggests that in South Asian Sufi literature, commitment extends beyond romantic relationships into a moral and cultural framework (Rauf & Samo, 2024; Patel, 2021). Noori's humility and willingness to serve her beloved challenge hierarchical relationships by embracing emotional surrender. Her verses demonstrate a deep and willing submission that transforms intimacy from mutual closeness into spiritual union. In Sufi tradition, the beloved is not only a partner but a spiritual guide or divine presence—thus intensifying Sternberg's intimacy component into an act of mystical connection (Ali & Asghar, 2022; Fatima, 2022).

Lilan's arc—from betrayal to shame, repentance, and eventual spiritual loyalty—reflects the fragile yet redeemable nature of commitment. The possibility of atonement and return shows that love is not static; it is a dynamic process of learning, growth, and spiritual awakening (Mehrotra & Singh, 2023). Similarly, Sorath's ultimate act of immolation with Diyach portrays consummate love—the perfect harmony of passion, intimacy, and commitment—culminating in union through death (Iqbal & Zareen, 2024). Beyond Sternberg's framework, the emotional and narrative structure of Latif's tales suggests that love in Sufi literature is not a momentary state but a long-term, transformative process. Each heroine embarks on a journey that begins with earthly affection and culminates in spiritual realization. Their stories follow the arc of love as a rite of passage, involving trials, sacrifices, and eventual transcendence (Schimmel, 1982; Abdullah, 2016). These journeys parallel the mystical path (*tariqat*) in Sufism, where the seeker undergoes purification, enlightenment, and ultimate union with the Divine.

Furthermore, the repeated emphasis on suffering and surrender points to an understanding of love as an inner struggle (*mujahida*)—an essential element of Sufi discipline. The characters' emotional wounds are not failures but necessary crucibles through which love is refined and elevated. In this light, Sternberg's model can be seen as a psychological scaffold upon which Sufi themes build a richer, more nuanced portrayal of love (Sattar & Mahmud, 2021; Calista & Pasopati, 2024). The poetic devices employed by Latif—such as metaphor, repetition, and symbolic landscapes (deserts, rivers, storms)—serve to externalize the internal states of the lovers. These devices do more than beautify the verse; they function as affective and cognitive tools that mirror the emotional progression described in Sternberg's model. For instance, rivers represent emotional turbulence, deserts symbolize isolation and testing, and fire evokes both passion and purification (Zaman & Haider, 2022; Elhamsyah & Rudianto, 2024). The use of female voices as the central narrators of these experiences also demands attention. Latif's heroines challenge conventional gender norms by actively pursuing love, resisting power, and making autonomous spiritual choices. This feminist dimension aligns with recent scholarship emphasizing female agency in Sufi narratives (Khanum, 2021; Memon & Shaikh, 2023). These protagonists are not waiting to be chosen; they are the seekers, the strugglers, and ultimately, the sanctified. Therefore, Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai's poetry not only affirms but also stretches the applicability of Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love. His work reveals that love, especially

within a Sufi context, is an existential commitment to a higher truth. It is emotional, ethical, spiritual, and ultimately redemptive.

This research not only supports Sternberg's framework but also reimagines it within an intercultural, mystical context. The intersections of literary psychology, Sufi metaphysics, and gendered narrative voice in Shah Latif's work enrich our understanding of love as a transformative, sacred, and multi-dimensional phenomenon.

Conclusion

This study explored the intricate emotional and spiritual landscape of love as portrayed in the poetry of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, with a focus on the heroines of his narrative verses. By applying Robert Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love, comprising passion, intimacy, and commitment, the analysis has revealed that Latif's poetic representations align with, yet also transcend, Western psychological frameworks. Each protagonist—Sassi, Sohni, Marui, Noori, Lilan, Sorath, Moomal—embodies complex dimensions of love through metaphor, emotional narrative, and spiritual symbolism. These women do not merely reflect romantic longing but serve as archetypes of seekers on a Sufi path toward union, not only with a beloved but with a higher spiritual ideal. Their experiences illustrate that love in Latif's *Risalo* is not confined to physical attraction or emotional intimacy but extends into moral devotion, ethical loyalty, mystical yearning, and sacred sacrifice. The study underscores that while Sternberg's model provides a foundational lens for categorizing types of love, it requires expansion when applied to non-Western, spiritual literature. Concepts like spiritual transcendence, ethical resistance, and self-annihilation in divine love do not easily fit within a three-part model. Scholars such as Iqbal and Zareen (2024), Schimmel (1982), and others reinforce this idea, calling for a culturally adaptive and spiritually sensitive framework.

Furthermore, Latif's consistent use of female voices to narrate stories of agency, resistance, suffering, and surrender reflects not only a poetic strategy but also a socio-spiritual philosophy that elevates feminine emotional strength. These voices act as emotional cartographies of sacred love, making their journeys simultaneously individual and universal. In conclusion, Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai's poetry provides a profound commentary on the transformative power of love. When analyzed through the dual lenses of psychology and mysticism, his work reveals that love is not a mere emotion but a path to spiritual enlightenment, cultural identity, and personal redemption. The fusion of Sternberg's theory with Sufi metaphysics offers a novel interdisciplinary framework to further explore mystical literature and its emotional truths.

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