

Love and Companionship Should not be Sold

By Karibu Staff

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In South Africa, February is often nicknamed 'the month of love'. In some sense, this helps build up to the middle of the shortest month of the year, a buildup to Valentine's Day. It is without doubt that the ideology underlying thoughts about the concept of love, tender emotions, care, and how romance is performed, or what it is, has, over the years, increasingly come under the dominance of the market.

Annually, as 14 February approaches, the public sphere becomes charged with carefully curated messages about what love should look like and how it should be expressed. Thousands of advertisements, conceived as messages for 'consumers', tell people that love can be represented by a myriad of symbols and experiences on sale, highlighted during this season. These productions are created in large quantities as the excitement around Valentine's Day intensifies. However, like many things, the idea of love is also a contested terrain.

This raises an important question: how does love function under capitalism? To answer the question about the way love functions under capitalism, here is a rejoinder: "...love, far from being a purely personal or natural phenomenon, is deeply influenced by the economic structures that surround us. In a capitalist society, where transactions, self-interest, and individualism dominate, the way we perceive love has been shaped by these forces," says Abdi-Hakan Ali. Further on, engaging the reflections of Alain De Botton, on the very tender phenomenon of love, Ali notes that Marx's concept of 'commodity fetishism'—where commodities mediate social relations between individuals—can be applied to modern relationships. "Love, like other human experiences, becomes commodified, packaged into something to be consumed or possessed."

Ali's intervention, engaging De Botton and Marx, invites us to think more critically about how intimate human experiences are shaped by broader economic systems. If commodities increasingly mediate our social relations, then the rituals surrounding Valentine's Day are not merely innocent gestures of affection. They may also reflect deeper patterns in which market logic infiltrates private life.

To explore further this commodity fetishism, we asked experienced unionist and former student leader, Vusi Mahlangu, to share his thoughts about love from his perspective, and this is what he shared: A Marxist Reflection on Valentine's Day

"Valentine's Day began as a European Christian tradition linked to St. Valentine, but under capitalism, it has become something else entirely — a global ritual of consumption. Today, love is packaged, priced, and performed. Flowers, dinners, gifts, hashtags — affection measured in receipts. Capital has done what it always does: it has turned a human emotion into a market event.

Karl Marx warned that capitalism reduces human relations to exchange relations. Valentine's Day is perhaps the most fitting example of that transformation."

Mahlangu did not end there but shared another conception of love, one rooted in socialist feminist thought. He continued, "Alexandra Kollontai, writing in *Make Way for Winged Eros!* (1923), argued that in a truly emancipated society, love must be free from possessiveness and economic dependency. She wrote:

“The new morality will demand that love should be free, independent, and based on mutual respect and equality.”

What she envisioned — often called Red Love — was not anti-romance. It was anti-ownership. Love not as property. Not as transaction. Not as seasonal obligation. But as solidarity between equals.

If love needs a corporate reminder and a price tag to exist, perhaps the market has colonised us more than we think.”

Taken together, these reflections suggest that the struggle over love is not merely cultural, but political and economic. If capitalism has the power to commodify emotions, then reclaiming love as a human relationship grounded in equality, care, and solidarity becomes part of a broader struggle against commodification itself. Love and companionship, in this sense, should not be sold, they should be lived.

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