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Book review

Nikos Marketos

“Toxic Forms of Love”

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Reviewed by **Katia Charalabaki**, Psychiatrist, Systemic Psychotherapist



I will begin by saying that after finishing reading Nikos Marketos' book, I felt that the vast and deep volume of information that it offers could classify it as a University textbook...

In my review, I will follow the order in which its themes are presented.

1. In this work, there is a detailed description of the concept and of the different kinds of love. It begins with the heavenly ones (eros, fantasies, sex, dream-making, etc.), and then moves on to its “toxic” forms. Love is described using scientific, ethical, philosophical, social, experiential and even literary definitions. Very important concepts emerge from the definitions of love, like the “need for belonging”, the need for closeness, stability, security, intimacy, reciprocity and empathy. Naturally, when the author refers to the concept of the couple in the modern social era, he begins from the majestic concept of EROS, defining it initially as a “joyful

exuberance” and an idealisation. Chimaeras and delusions lurk in this stage, which ultimately – when not satisfied – lead to bitterness, disappointment and a sense of frustration. There is also the social form of love as defined by authors like for instance Simone de Beauvoir that is subject to differentiation. It is not the same for the two genders (we have here male and female love). And of course, the moral evaluation of both depends on the era, the dominant social system, and also the evaluating ideology (i.e. feminism).

2. The book also contains a thorough presentation of the historical evolution of the concepts of “eros” and “love”, as well as their study by scholars of different eras. Plato, in his “Symposium” characterises love as *a series of elevations* and the person that inspires love as the exciter of the ideal of the transcendent and true beauty that exists in the world of *Forms or Ideas*. He also discusses *methexis*, which is the process of Ego identification with objects or values. For Socrates, eros is the “desire for immortality”. Aristophanes discusses the story of an androgynous being (male and female in a single body), that Zeus cut in two as punishment. Ever since, the separated beings are desperately seeking their other half, and thus, the couple’s sexual intercourse, their orgasm, temporarily performs this merge. Aristotle (in *Nicomachean Ethics*) also discusses love, stressing the importance of *virtue* and *mutual good will*. The *Christian Religion* places emphasis on compassion, self-sacrifice, and love for all mankind (“Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself”). The existentialists (Jean Paul Sartre, Simon de Beauvoir) stressed the *liberty* and *responsibility* that come with love. And of course, love and eros comprised the raw material for a large part of the world’s literature (i.e. Shakespeare’s “Romeo and Juliette”), medieval themed literature (“Lancelot and Guinevere”) and their Greek literature counterparts, like Vincenzo Cornaro’s “Erotokritos”. The historical description reaches more recent times, places, countries, and social systems: From patriarchal societies that reinforced the dominance of men and the importance of economy in marriage, the proletarian love,

the concept of the open relationship and the postmodern era (with globalisation, information technology, gender equality, the feminist movement, gay movements etc.). The topic concludes with the mention of the “family life cycle” that includes all the natural stages (marriage, birth of children, raising children, adolescence, coming of age, old age) as well as extraordinary events (diseases, premature deaths, divorces, financial problems, immigration), all of which are themes that comprise fields of study and practice of the therapeutic process.

3. The next extensive and thorough section comprises of the description of what is stated in the book title: namely “toxic forms of love”, toxic interactions. Their description is particularly well-structured. I will mention them briefly here: *Dependence*. A dependent relationship is one that is falsely labelled as love, where jealousy, the tendency to control or subdue, and extreme possessiveness are dominant. *Passion*. The idealisation of the other person that leads to addiction, attachments and extreme dependence, like in movies depicting the “femme fatale” and the “demonic lover”. *Erotomania*. The person believes that somebody (usually a famous person) is in love with them, which often leads to delirium. *Polarisation in couples*. There may be an element of “opposites attract” in the beginning, but later on this may lead to intense polarisation and distress in the relationship that can even lead to divorce. *Projective Identification*. The one person renounces elements of their own self and projects them to the other person, or even projects their desires to the other person, who embraces them as if they were their own. This is a phenomenon that is not only observed in couples, but also in members of the family, in social relationships, in the workplace, and in politics. *Conflicts* that emerge from innumerable issues of their common life, like issues pertaining to *Power, Control, Jealousy, Envy*. And of course, a main reason for conflict (that comprises a central focus point for our work as family therapists) is triangulation, mainly with another member of the family, most commonly a child. The culmination of this kind of

relationships is “Domestic Violence” that has been widely researched, by the World Health Organisation among others. A discussion of domestic violence from a social class perspective is of particular interest. Poor families that live in deprived neighbourhoods have more instability and conflicts. Men with a limited financial capacity resort more often to physical violence. The proposed explanation is that this is a transference of the violence that they are subjected to due to poverty, towards those that are weaker than themselves, namely their wife and children. Another theme is that of “*Narcissistic rage*” as described by Kohut. This refers to an explosive mixture of anger, hostility and obsession on retaliating, when the sense of the grandiose self of a person with a narcissistic personality disorder is threatened. We then move on to “*Sadomasochistic relationships*” that have been described by psychoanalysts (Freud, Lacan, etc.) among others. Here the author makes a reference to Edward Albee’s play “Who’s afraid of Virginia Wolf” whose two main characters are a childless middle-aged couple (Martha and George) that play a continuous sadomasochistic game. I will now share with you a personal experience. As I was reading the plot of the play, I was wondering what Virginia Wolf (who was an English author suffering from depression, anorexia, and illusions and ended up committing suicide) had to do with the plot. I asked one of my daughters about this and she replied that initially the play was titled “Who’s afraid of the big bad wolf” from Disney’s “The three little pigs” movie, but that title had to be dropped due to copyright infringement. My conclusion was that reading the book functioned positively even for my own family relations! In this part of Marketos’ book, there is also a description of the very important issue of transference of problems of the family of origin to the next generations. Finally there is the discussion of a peculiar term, that of “Gaslighting”. It originates from a play (by Peter Hamilton) that also became an Oscar winning movie starring Charles Boyer and Ingrid Bergman, where a husband with a criminal past, the gaslighter (a narcissistic and psychopathic character), tries to drive his wife crazy.

4. Then we move on to the next important topic that is *the investigation of the root of the problem in the early years of life*. Here the author makes use of a very wide range of approaches and individuals that contributed to these studies, like the “*Object relations school of thought*”, Bowlby’s “*Attachment*” theories, “*Family systems theory*”, and Bowen’s “*Differentiation of self*”.

5. In the final chapter of the book, the author presents Bowen’s theories (Emotional Fusion and Differentiation of Self – as opposed to fusion or cutting-off, triangulation, multigenerational transmission, projective processes of the family), and he correlates the different theories (i.e. Bowen, Klein, Fairbrain, Bion, Mahler, Kohut, Winnicott) through their similarities and differences. It is a compelling conclusion to the book!

6. I will conclude with a personal reference regarding the author of the book. Nikos Marketos, apart from his significant work in psychiatry and systemic psychotherapy, has another avocation: Once a week he organises a “*Tango Night*”! This means that he leads a group that listens to music and dances to it in pairs, through a representation of an experience of art and of love, with no trace in sight of a toxic form of the latter!

We thank him...