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## **Erotic Love in Selected Poems of Sappho\***

**Raia Abdul-Wahid Abdul-Aziz**

Lect., Female Teachers Training Institute / Nineveh

**Kamal Marsho Alias**

Baca., Ein Sifni Preparatory School for Boys

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### **Abstract**



The present study sheds light on the theme love in some of Sappho's poems. It tackles the erotic side of love.

It is divided into an introduction and three other sections.

The introduction is devoted to some definitions of love and its types. It also alludes to some aspects of Sappho's life and the society where she lived.

The first section tackles the motivations of Sappho's writing erotic poetry which came to be social.

The second section deals with the defense of woman and attacking patriarchy through which she attempts to free woman from the dominating force of man.

In the third section the sexual satisfaction is tackled in details. It shows the reasons why Sappho wrote erotic poems which are mostly psychological. The themes of union and the fear of separateness are the most important ones.

Then the conclusion sums up the results the present study concludes.

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(\*) Received: 10/10/2011, Accepted: 9/1/2012.

## الحب الأيروسي في بعض قصائد سافو المختارة

رائعة عبد الواحد عبد العزيز

مدرس، معهد إعداد المعلمات، نينوى

كمال مرشو إلياس

بكالوريوس، إعدادية عين سفني للبنين

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### □ الملخص

تسلط هذه الدراسة الضوء على ثيمات الحب في بعض قصائد سافو وتعالج الجانب الأيروسي منه.

يتألف البحث من مقدمة وثلاثة مباحث، تركز المقدمة لبعض تحديدات الحب وأنواعه وكذلك تلمح إلى بعض جوانب حياة سافو والمجتمع الذي نشأت فيه.

يعالج المبحث الأول الدوافع التي تكمن وراء كتابات سافو الأيروسية والتي جاءت اجتماعية في أغلب أوجهها.

أما المبحث الثاني فيتناول صراع المرأة مع السلطة الأبوية إذ عولج فيه القصائد التي تحاول تحرير المرأة من قوة الرجل المهيمنة.

ويعالج المبحث الثالث الإشباع الجنسي ويظهر أسباب كتابة سافو للقصيدة الأيروسية والتي جاءت أسباباً نفسية إذ يكون دافع الاندماج بالمحب والخوف من الانفصال عنه أكثرها أهمية.

ثم ينتهي البحث بخاتمة تسلط الضوء على أهم النتائج التي تمكن الباحث التوصل إليها من خلال هذه الدراسة.

## 1. Introduction

Love is one of the dominating themes in poetry. It is found in the first survival literary productions. From the Illiad of Homer up to now love poems are distributed in different media of education and entertainment.

In language, the word "love" is defined as "Any of a number of emotions related to a sense of strong affection and attachment".<sup>(1)</sup> This is a general definition of the reality of love. Eric Fromm sees that "love develops from man's awareness of his separateness and his need to overcome the anxiety this separateness brings by achieving union with someone or something".<sup>(2)</sup> This idea is developed by Mike George who sees love as having the ability to unite all things. He confesses that love is beyond opposites. Ultimately love has no opposites. It is the very fabric that holds together all that exists at all levels".<sup>(3)</sup>

Love is of many different types but a distinction is made between two major types of it. Helmut Kuhn names them personal and non-personal loves. For him proper (personal love) which is the field of this study, is when the subject of love is devoted to a person. He says "being a lover in a proper sense seems only possible for sentient living organism which we consider to be personal".<sup>(4)</sup> The first type "personal love" refers to a deep ineffable feeling of tenderly caring for another person. This feeling encompasses a group of different feelings ranging from the passionate desire and intimacy of romantic love to the non-sexual emotional closeness of familial, platonic, and self-love.<sup>(5)</sup> However, romantic love is a sub-division of sexual love where the second sub-division is erotic love. Romantic love consists of feelings and emotions coupled with physical attraction. Hence, it is the carving for complete fusion, for union with another person physically and spiritually.<sup>(6)</sup> On the other hand, erotic love, which is derived from Eros, the most beautiful of all gods and represents love in Greek mythology, is described

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as a temporary mental disturbance. When, in love, one's whole world seems to be changed, everything is upside-down. This type of love seeks only the union. It has two sides: the first one is about a reciprocal love relationship. It is harmonious, pleasurable relationship.<sup>(7)</sup> The second type, which is more frequently represented in Greek poetry, is the unrequited desire the lover feels for the absent or unresponsive lover. Hence; erotic poetry comes to be a war, a disease, madness and even death.<sup>(8)</sup>

As far Sappho, a Greek poet from the sixth century B.C., her poetry is unmistakably and erotic. The destructive passion of love finds an exalted and profound articulation where she uses traditional poetic elements to describe the dangerous power of eros. For her, the fulfillment of love is blissfully sweet, while longing for an unsatisfied desire or the pain of separation from an absent beloved destroys the lover's body and mind.<sup>(9)</sup> She devoted most of her poetry to describe sensual pleasures and physical effects of passion in real striking ways. The following lines show the erotic quality of her poetry in which Sappho seems to be burning with desire:

*You have done well to come; I have  
Been longing for you. Like a spring  
Of water you well up in my soul, a  
Flame with desire welcome, my  
Gyrinnol. (LL 1-5)\**

The image of flame and water is highly suggestive and highly concerned with sexual desire and its consequences.

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## **2. The Motivations behind Sappho's Composing Erotic Poetry**

### **2.1 A Social Approach:**

What was known about the ancient Greek society was that it was sexually segregated. Women were thought to be inferior to men. Young girls had no contact with male societies, so they accepted whatever a spouse, even a stranger, their father would select for them.<sup>(10)</sup> Marriage was viewed as socioeconomic (and sometimes political) institution because the archaic and classical Greeks did not appear to appreciate and esteem matrimony or the sexual role of women.<sup>(11)</sup>

Women were looked upon as chattels to be transferred to strengthen a family state. Even Greek poets seemed to undervalue the bonds of marriage.<sup>(12)</sup> These reasons led Sappho to organize her erotic poetry in order to sanctify these bonds. In fact she regarded the marital union as an important and equal source of pleasure to bridegroom as well as the bride. Fragment 115 L-p is a good example for the solemnization of voluptuous beauty:

*To what, O beloved bridegroom shall I liken you  
I should liken you most clearly to a slender  
Saplin. (LL 1-12)*

Fragment 141 L-p also describes prayers for "Nothing but blessings" to the bridegroom:

*There a bowl of ambrosia;  
Was mixed and ready;  
And Hermes took the pitcher and powered  
wine for the gods;  
They all held glasses;  
And made libations, prayer all good things  
For the groom. (LL 1-6)*

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Even in Fragment 112 L-p she praises the bridegroom for being fortunate and the girl's beauty as honored by Aphrodite:

*Fortunate bridegroom the marriage that you  
prayed for;  
Is accomplished, you have the girl for whom you  
prayed.  
And you, bride, your appearance is full of grace,  
your eyes  
Are gentle and love wells on your delightful face:  
Aphrodite has honoured you beyond all others.  
(LL 1-5)*

In the ancient Greek society, there was a sexual apartheid of males and females. Those classes were exclusively male ones. As man engaged in warfare, politics, athletics, worshipping of the great male deities, art, even the request for wisdom.<sup>(13)</sup> Every sector of the state should be devoted to man. These organized and conducted activities in accordance with well-defined rules served as an elaborate and prestigious institutions that helped man, not only being shrewd, skilled at speaking, strength and stamin, but also enabled him to surpass others and achieve the recognition as being (agathon) superior as well as sensually attractive (Kalos).<sup>(14)</sup> So women at those times needed a sensual awareness so that they could perform adequately the role to which their society assigned to them and to find the sexual validation that could match their needs. They needed to become more socialized and sexually initiated to become brides and the prospect of losing their maidenhood. In this perspective, Sappho's sensually expressive verses may be viewed as an institutional force and a reflection of her social setting. In other words, her poems are a social vehicle for imparting sensual awareness and sexual self-esteem to women on the threshold of

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marriage and maturity. Her wedding poems, along with her lyrics, where nuptial ceremonies soar high, focus on the bride's sexual initiation and its attendant joys.<sup>(15)</sup> Her odes also glorify female deities such as Aphrodite, Hera and Artemis. One of Hera's holy festivals was devoted to a female beauty contest. These competitions had only one purpose which was to reinforce women's pride in their looks by emphasizing and placing a competitive value on young women's physical beauty.<sup>(16)</sup> Any how Sappho's poetry seems to work as an institutional means of education especially that which deals with beauty, sociality and morality.

### **3. A Defense of Women against Patriarchy**

In her poetry, Sappho tries to defend women's stature, to glorify them and equalize them not only to men but also to gods. She puts them among the most beautiful things on earth. A good example for this attempt is the portray of "Helen of Troy" in Fragment 16. In this poem the poetess gets resort to different images with the help of descriptive analytic language and the extraordinary rhetorical strategy that is the ascending and descending tone of the structure and idea, moving from particularity of narrative discourse to a more general, logical and philosophical language. The poem starts with a kind of a question in which the speaker wonders about what is beautiful on earth:

*Some say a host of horsemen, others of infants  
And others of ships, is the most beautiful thing  
On the dark earth: but I say, it is what you love.  
Full easy it is to make this understood of one and  
all:  
For she that surpassed all mortals in beauty,  
(LL 1-5)*

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The introduction sheds lights on the focal image that is of the epic heroine "Helen of Troy". To the poet, Helen is not the most beautiful thing on earth, but she moves toward it, drawn by desire. What Sappho wants to say is that she reckons Helen a superlative who surpasses all mankind in her beauty.

In accordance with the transmission of idea, the poem seems to be alive in some parts of it, where Helen is leaving, sailing, and going which is an act of movement:

*Helen, her most noble husband  
Deserted, and went sailing to Troy, with never a  
Thought for her daughter and dear parents.  
(LL 6-8)*

Then in the next lines the reader is introduced to gaze at what Helen has left behind for the sake of love. This scene is static.<sup>(17)</sup> These lines are connected with the last lines where the poet mentions Anactoria and would like to see her shining face, way of walking than to see the Lydian Chariots and the armed's foot soldiers:

*The [Cyprian goddess] led her from the path...  
...(which) now has put me in mind of Anactoria a  
away;  
Her lovely way of walking, and the bright  
radiance  
Of her changing face, would I rather see than.  
Your Lydian Chariots and infantry full armed.  
(LL 9-13)*

The reference to war represents the war of desire. The soldiers, the sailors, chariots and war, all these are the world of

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men and patriarchy, whereas Helen and Anactoria represent the feminine world of beauty.<sup>(18)</sup>

This poem could be considered a response to the poetry of male poets who have talked about the military beauty in positive terms, but of Helen's beauty (as a woman) they talk as baneful and destructive. For Sappho, Helen is justified for following her desire and feelings as a woman. The point here is that Sappho wants to speak as a woman's voice and to a great extent igniting the blaze toward establishing a feminist culture.

To give this idea more support, poem 1 of Sappho gives a good proof where the poet is defending and glorifying the female goddess Aphrodite:

*Artfully adorned Aphrodite, deathless  
Child of Zeus and weaver of wiles I beg you  
Please don't hurt me, don't overcome my spirit,  
Goddess with longing,  
But come here, if ever at other moments  
Hearing these my words from afar you listened  
And responded: leaving your father's house, all  
Golden, you come then. (LL 1-8)*

The image of Aphrodite and her chariot are driven from Homer's "Illiad 5" where Diomedes forces Aphrodite to retreat from the battlefield after stabbing her in her hand. Aphrodite is portrayed here as a weak (feminine) goddess who is unsuitable for participating in male wars. The whole picture taken out from Illiad 5 that if feminine (women) try to partake in men's affair, they will be obliged to retreat and driven out at spear point.<sup>(19)</sup> Whereas in Sappho's poem 1 the whole picture is reversed. Sappho herself in this poem represents a multiple identification of its characters. She represents both Aphrodite and Diomedes.

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The goddess, like Sappho is suffering and is consoled by the powerful goddess Aphrodite borrows Ares's chariot and escapes from the battlefield and rides to heaven in Illiad 5 while in the poem, she has a golden chariot driven by sparrows and descends from heaven looking after matters of love and lovers:

*Hitching up your chariot: lovely sparrows  
Drew you quickly over the dark earth, whirling  
Of fine beating wings from the heights of heaven  
Down through the sky and  
Instantly arrived – and then O my blessed  
Goddess with a smile on your deathless face you  
Asked me what the matter was this time, what I  
Called you for this time.  
What I now wanted to happen in my  
Raving heart: "Whom this time should I  
persuade to  
Lead you back again to her love? (LL 9-19)*

The poet double characterization is seen clear where Sappho also represents Diomedes who is weak and seeks mercy from the mighty goddess and representation of wounded, weak female (Aphrodite, Sappho) who also seeks the consoling of the goddess. This double characterization reveals an admired feature in her poetry that is the adoption of multiple points of view in a single poem.<sup>(20)</sup> Sappho's adoption of the Homeric characters serves to heroize her world of poetry and serves its readers in rereading Homer again, but from a feminist point of view.<sup>(21)</sup> In the last four lines, the poet asks Aphrodite to save her from the agony she lives in:

*Come to me again, and release me from this  
Want pass bearing. All that my heart desires to  
Happen – make it happen. And stands beside me.*

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*Goddess my ally. (LL 25-28)*

Obviously, her dilemma is represented by the burning desire in her heart.

#### **4. Sexual Satisfaction**

Concerning sexual satisfaction and its fulfillment in Sappho's poetry, the poet has chosen women's love as a vehicle for this respect. For Sappho, the organization of erotic poetry is drawn from her well awareness of the romantic impulse; her extraordinary familiarity with the human motive for union and the inevitable separateness. Lesbian "Homo erotic" poetry has offered the most respective setting for romantic eros. It has provided lesbian poets an outlet for escaping to a realm of beauty.<sup>(22)</sup> These poets are obliged to accept the damaging effects of a lacerating eros.<sup>(23)</sup> In her poetry she speaks about eros especially in fragments 47 L-P and 130 L-P where it is compared to an elaborated power of nature, a violent wind or an overpowering creature:

*Eros has shaken my wits, like a violent wind  
from the  
Mountain falling on Oaks. (Fragment 47 L-P)  
Eros looser of limbs, tosses me about,  
bittersweet,  
Overmastering creature (Fragment 130 L-P).*

Eros in the first fragment is given an overmastering power "a violent wind" that controls and dominates its own victim. The metaphor is widely clear in these lines. In the second fragment the poet uses metaphor and paradox where eros is represented as a voluptuous savage image of a creeping subversive being who usually loosen limbs, who steals up like a creature to wreak his

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own victim.<sup>(24)</sup> These images offer relief to the speaker. Sappho's ability to confine an emotional event into very few words is achieved through her use of paradox and metaphor which eventually leads to her satisfaction of desire.<sup>(25)</sup>

Another feature that distinguishes her poetry is the use of apostrophe. Most of her poetry is characterized by the multiplicity lovers and an absence of the beloved. This absence is an absence of desire and it is associated with longing and pain. This longing is associated with a kind of death in some of her poems and it refers to the diminishing of verbal power:<sup>(26)</sup>

*Honestly I would like to die (Fragment 94 line 1)*  
*A desire to die takes hold of me. (Fragment 95*  
*line 8)*

In order to overcome this absence and soften the pain of separation and loss, Sappho embarks the use of apostrophe to add life, action, and dramatic dimension to her poetry. So both the addresser and the addressee are intermingled in the poem. By evoking past, calling up its memories and making present deities and myths of love, Sappho creates a recipe to cure the sufferings of love and longing.<sup>(27)</sup> Through the recuperation of memories the poet's private discourse shifts to rather a communal one. This means that the poet's self is dissolated in the discourse in order to construct an erotic situation and to achieve the fulfillment of desire. Fragment 94 is a good example to examine the power of apostrophe and its influence on the erotic act and to determine the limits of a Homo erotic love:

*Honestly, I wish I were dead.*  
*Weeping she left with many tears,*  
*And said; "Oh what terrible things*  
*We endured. (LL 1-4)*

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As the poem starts with a wish to die, a conclusion is clarified that is the desire is unsatisfied and the longing is at its most. The speaker of this line is the addressee where she thinks that parting is the end of life and love. Snyder views the poem as "A capturing of past events through memory, by which the "dreadful things" mentioned by the girl, are transformed into Sappho's beautiful things beginning in stanza 4".<sup>(28)</sup> A change of discourse from private to communal one happens as the apostrophizing voice changes from personal deixis to an inclusive or exclusive deixes which means that the speaker and the addressee are dissolated in the time of the discourse. Then the mode of discourse which has started with a wish to die, also changes into a wish to create when the speaker asks the addressee to remember and remember me in line 8:<sup>(29)</sup>

*"Go, be happy, and remember me; (L 5)*

It is a shift from pessimism to optimism even if it is in the past, the reciprocity of discourse and the transmission of apostrophes portray an ideal world of women and both provoke and proclaim desire:

*For you know how we cared for you.  
And if not, then I want  
To remind you... of the wonderful  
Things we shared (LL 7-10)*

Then, a counterpart of the first image of the poem and to its delineated voices is drawn where one of the idyllic and blissful image of satisfaction, where boundaries of persons, objects and places are broken down and submerge in the aura of sensations and erotic stimulation:

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*For many wreathes of violets and roses...  
 You put on by my side,  
 And many woven garlands  
 Fashioned of flowers,  
 You tie round your soft neck,  
 And with rich myrrh,  
 Fit for a queen, you annointed...  
 And on a soft bed,  
 Tenderly  
 You satisfied [your] desire. (LL 11-20)*

The speaker uses images of violets, roses, perfumes and soft beds to create an atmosphere of seduction. These images are generic ones. They refer to no specific ritual function or purpose except for sensual enjoyment of the lovers and its poetic enactment.<sup>(30)</sup> It could be noticed that women's desire is different from man's desire in so far as it is not localized in space:

*And there was  
 No sacred place  
 From which we were absent  
 No grove  
 No dance  
 No sound. (LL 22-27)*

This idea is emphasized in the last lines where the negation "No sacred place, no grove, no dance" takes place. Jessica Benjamin sees that:

*When the sexual self is represented by the  
 sensual  
 capacities of the whole body, when the totality  
 of space*

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*between outside, and within our bodies the site  
of  
pleasure, then desire escape the border of the  
imperial phallus and resides on the shores of*

endless worlds.<sup>(31)</sup>

This ensures the whole discussion about the subject we have dealt with.

### **Conclusion**

Love is highly influential in man's life and behavior. It is an attempt to win over separateness. There are many kinds of love, but the most important ones are personal and non-personal around which many commentaries and tales are woven. In these two kinds, emotions and physical attraction are fused together. However, most of Sappho's poetry tackles erotic sides of love for she fears separation and unsatisfied desire. She describes sensual pleasures in striking ways. At any rate, her writings can be regarded as a reaction against the patriarchy of her society. Finally, when she describes her supposed lover, she highly uses different images such as animal, plant, soar and the images of the presence and the absence. It seems that the image of absence is highly dominating. The poet always imagines that the lover is absent and this gives her more freedom to long and to burn with desire as she usually describes.

## Notes

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  - 7- Greenberg, p. 630.
  - 8- *Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature*. eds. Gaetan Bralotte and John Philips. (New York, Talor and Francis Group, 2006), pp. 588–89.
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  - \* All the poetic lines are taken from *The Poetry of Sappho*. Powell Jim trans. New York: Oxford University Press. 2007.
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  - 11-S. Pomeray, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*. (New York, Shocken Books. 1975), p. 33–42.
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  - 15-Reading Sappho: A Contemporary Approach. Ellen, Green, eds. (California, California University Press, 2006), p. 135.
  - 16-Greene, p. 138.
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  - 23-Lyn. H. Wilson. *Sappho's Sweet Bitter Songs: Configuration of Female and Male in Ancient Greece*. (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 59.
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  - 28-Jane Mc Intosh. Snyder, *The Women and the Lyre: Women Writers in Classical Greece and Rome*. (Caribondale: Southern Illinois University Press), p. 240.
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  - 30-Eva Stehla, *Retreat From the Male: Catllus and Sappho's Erotic Flowers*. (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1977), pp. 83 – 102.
  - 31-Jessica Benjamin, *The Bands of Love: Psychological Feminism and the Problem of Domination*. (New York, Parentheon, 1988), p. 130.
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