



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Suffering as Identity and Love as Moral Exception: A Reflexive Thematic Analysis of Twisted Love

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Abstract

Although trauma, emotional regulation, and interpersonal relationships are widely examined in research, the psychological meanings embedded in popular fiction remain underexplored. This qualitative study employs reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) to analyse Twisted Love by Ana Huang as a psychologically meaningful cultural text. Four interrelated themes were constructed: pain as identity and resistance to healing, longing to be held without having to perform, loving through moral exception and destructive devotion, and reclaiming the self by refusing internalised blame. Results show how literary depictions of love emphasise suffering as identity, desire for unconditional acceptance, moral superiority, and self-reclamation by denying responsibility. These themes highlight moral disengagement in close relationships, attachment vulnerabilities, meaning-oriented coping, and agency in healing. It emphasises the importance of phenomenological and narrative approaches to comprehend intimacy, trauma, and selfhood outside of diagnostic or moralistic frameworks, enhancing understanding of how people actively create, defend, and change their inner worlds.

Keywords: Twisted Love, reflexive thematic analysis, popular romance fiction, trauma narratives, relational identity, moral disengagement, cultural scripts of intimacy.

INTRODUCTION

Experience of suffering are not solely psychological events; they are interpreted through culturally shared systems of meaning that structure how individuals understand themselves, their relationships, and the possibility of healing and improvement (Sullivan et al., 2018). Psychological suffering can affect a person's sense of identity, moral reasoning and interpersonal expectations, especially when distress becomes a permanent part of the way one perceives oneself rather than a temporary emotional state. Studies on attachment theory, trauma, and meaning-oriented psychology have shown that relational experiences not only affect emotional regulation and interpersonal relationships but also the narratives people use to create their identity and interpret subsequent relationships (Cassidy & Shaver, 2018; Neimeyer, 2001; Thompson et al., 2022; Zoromba et al., 2024). Importantly,

suffering is not just an experience of negative events that require elimination. Instead, individuals seek coherence by integrating painful experiences into broader life narratives, allowing suffering to become a source of authenticity, purpose in life, and self-definition (Frank, 2013; Kaftanski & Hanson, 2022; Peltomäki, 2023). Consequently, psychologically, healing may itself be troublesome, as dropping pain is considered equal to one's persona (Charmaz, 1995). From this perspective, healing is not the eradication of suffering but an ongoing process of moving forward to wholeness by integrating painful experience into a coherent and cohesive sense of self (Firth et al., 2015).

While psychological research has examined this process through clinical, social, and developmental frameworks, however, these meaning never created in isolations cultural perspective also play an important role in shaping how individuals make meaning of love, pain, and healing (Kirmayer & Jarvis, 2019; Shead et al., 2021). Human experiences of love, trauma, and morality are organized through culturally available narratives, symbols (e.g., religious rituals and family traditions), metaphors (e.g., trauma as a wound and healing as a journey), and relational scripts (e.g., norms for emotional expression, caregiving, and forgiveness) that provide socially shared ways of interpreting social life (Bruner, 2002; Lindquist et al., 2022; Shweder, 1996). Socio-culture context influences not only how suffering is recognized, but also what form of resilience, vulnerability, forgiveness and, intimacy becomes intelligible (Theron & Ungar, 2023; Tiwari et al., 2025). Rather than simply reflecting psychological reality, cultural text produces the constructing framework through which

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emotions, identities, and relationships are understood. Therefore, we consider literature a valuable site for producing contesting, and transforming culturally shared understanding of psychological experiences.

Fictional narratives, particularly popular romance literature, offer structured depictions of emotional struggle, relational devotion, and moral decision-making. Yet, the psychological significance of these narratives remains underexplored within empirical qualitative research. Fictional literature offers a valuable resource for investigating subjective experiences, as narrative texts function as meaning-making tools that construct our experiences instead of just portraying them (Holland, 1990; Tyson, 2012). Through dialogues, language, metaphors, and character development, novels illustrate culturally embedded understandings of trauma, love, and identity, allowing qualitative researchers to explore how emotional experiences are framed, justified, resisted, and changed.

Contemporary romance fiction, especially subgenres with emotional intensity, trauma, and morally complex protagonists, has gained substantial popularity. Despite its cultural reach, this literature is often dismissed as escapist or morally simplistic, resulting in limited scholarly engagement with its psychological dimensions (Garciano et al., 2023). Existing analyses have focused on reader reception, gender dynamics, or moral critique, leaving a gap in understanding how these narratives construct subjective experience and relational meaning. Specifically, there is a paucity of studies examining how love, morality, pain, and selfhood are intertwined through the perspectives and experiences of the characters.

Ana Huang's *Twisted Love* (Huang, 2021) provides a compelling case for such inquiry. The novel portrays characters whose relationships are developed by trauma, emotional repression, intense attachment, and moral ambiguity. The story follows 'Ava Chen,' a young photographer struggling with shattered recollections and latent anxiety, and 'Alex Volkov,' a high-functioning professional tormented by a traumatic past. Ava is nicknamed 'Sunshine' for her tenderness and optimism, despite being burdened by a childhood that she cannot fully remember. Alex, in contrast, carries the weight of loss and revenge, his life moulded by tragedy and characterised by emotional detachment and precision. This difference creates tension and misunderstandings, similar to real-life relationships, which are shaped by traumas and insecure attachment. Their relationship uncovers deep-seated trauma, encouraging both characters to confront and work through their emotions. The novel shows that healing is a slow and multifaceted process, relying upon communication, accountability, and emotional openness, rather than relying solely on love. Their journey reveals how unseen emotional pain or invisible scars cast long shadows, even when external success is accomplished. The present study approaches the novel as a narrative that constructs culturally embodied patterns and interpretative meanings surrounding love, identity, suffering, and healing rather than diagnostic evaluation or moral judgment. The researcher's interest does not lie in determining psychological conditions of the character but in examining how the narrative itself constructs understanding of emotional life and interpersonal relationships.

Existing scholarship on romance has examined themes of attachment, relational expectations, gender representation, and cultural meaning connected with romantic love (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Modleski, 2008; Radway, 1990). Psychological research has also highlighted the role of attachment, identity development, and meaning-making in respect of human relationships (Bruner, 2002;

McAdams, 2001). However, limited attention has been given to how romance fiction integrates the psychological process in cultural context such as relational needs, suffering-based identity, and moral exception.

To address this gap, the present study uses a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) interpretative approach to explore *Twisted Love* as a psychologically meaningful cultural narrative. Rather than merely evaluating the psychological functions of characters, the analysis explores how the novel constructs the experience of suffering, morality, identity, intimacy, and healing through the cultural lens. Grounded in a psychological literary framework, the study aims to connect literature and psychology while examining how experiences of love, pain, and morality are constructed through the characters' inner worlds and relational dynamics. Through this approach, it extends the application of reflexive thematic analysis to literary texts and highlights the empirical value of fiction in understanding culturally mediated psychological experience.

Research objective

How does *Twisted Love*, as a cultural text, construct and negotiate meanings of suffering, identity, intimacy, morality, and healing?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design

The present study adopts a qualitative research design using Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2021, 2022). RTA was selected to explore meaning-making, subjectivity, and identity construction, allowing in-depth examination of how psychological experiences are represented in Ana Huang's *Twisted Love*. The analysis focuses on manifestations of trauma, emotional repression, love, pain, and healing within the novel's characters and relationships. Grounded in a psychological literary framework (Holland, 1990; Tyson, 2012), how these experiences are interpreted through the characters and their relational dynamics.

Data source

The primary data for this study consisted of the novel *Twisted Love* (Huang, 2021). In qualitative inquiry, narrative text can be treated as artefacts that construct psychologically meaningful experiences, allowing researchers to explore characters' inner worlds, moral struggles, relational dynamics, etc. Literary fiction has been identified as a valuable material for social science and psychological inquiry, generating insight into human cognition, social experience, and emotions (Yazell et al., 2021).

Twisted Love was selected as a purposive cultural case because, as a contemporary dark romance novel featuring a morally grey protagonist, it provides a rich narrative for examining the construction of trauma, love, moral exception, and healing. Its popularity also reflects its cultural relevance within contemporary romance fiction.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2021) to construct, analyse, and report patterns

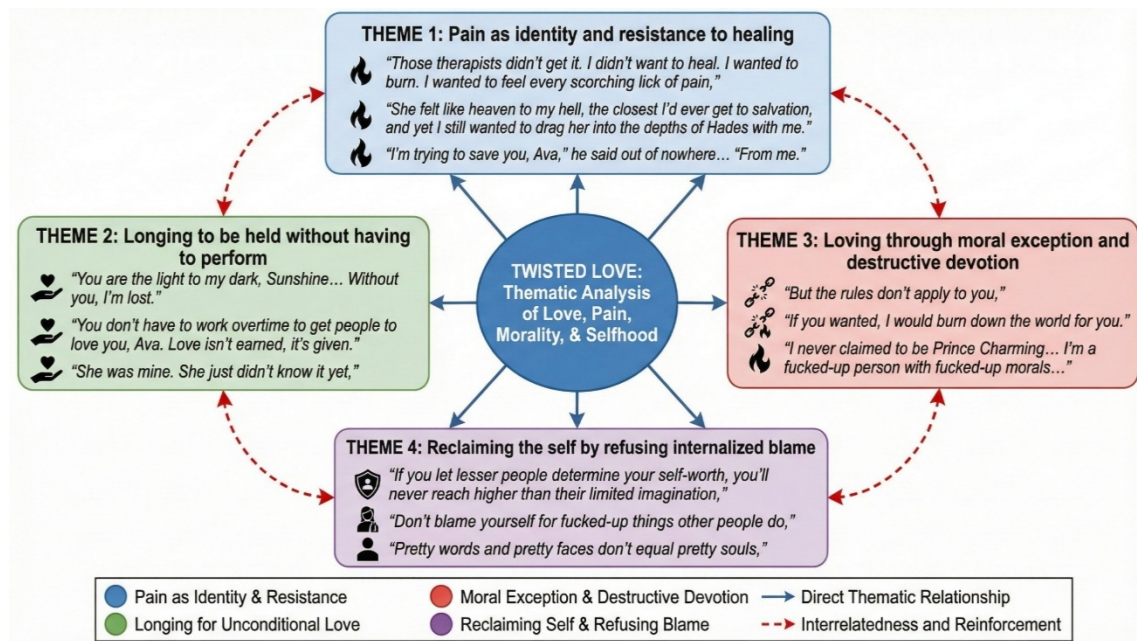


Figure 2. Interconnected Thematic Map: A Reflexive Thematic Analysis of Twisted Love (Created Using Gemini Advance Pro)

Theme 1: Pain as identity and resistance to healing

This theme captures the ambivalence of trauma as revealed by the key dialogues of the characters throughout the novel that highlight the paradoxical desire to hold onto the pain that validates their existence, while they crave love to heal themselves. It shows how pain emerges as a central component of identity; it is not merely experienced as suffering, but it is valued by the characters.

During a moment of introspection, Alex reflects on his resistance to therapy and healing, stating, *"Those therapists didn't get it. I didn't want to heal. I wanted to burn. I wanted to feel every scorching lick of pain"* (Huang, 2021). The narrative constructs pain as desirable and self-affirming rather than something alleviated. The character found himself in opposition to the therapeutic help, which is misaligned with the character's needs, making it futile for him. The language of 'burning' and 'scorching' suggests an intense engagement with pain through which pain becomes a central source of authenticity. From this meaning-orientation perspective, healing is not absent due to the lack of awareness, but the narrative portrays it as actively refused, as it conflicts with the characters' self-definition.

Relational meaning further reinforces this identity. Love is not only perceived as redemption but also as salvation that remains unclaimed. Reflecting on his growing feeling for Ava while remaining attached to his suffering, Alex admits, *"She felt like heaven to my hell, the closest I'd ever get to salvation, and yet I still wanted to drag her into the depths of Hades with me"* (Huang, 2021).

Although love is recognised as a potential source of redemption, metaphors like 'heaven' and 'hell' represent how the narrative constructs a character who doesn't want to leave their pain behind. Instead, they want the other person to be a part of that pain too, reflecting a relational extension of the identity. Therefore, redemption is not resisted because it is unachievable; it demands the reconstruction of the identity.

This contradiction between the pain and the love is further intensified through the illustration of the self as inherently dangerous by justifying the refusal of

redemption. While attempting to distance Ava to protect her, Alex tells her, *"I'm trying to save you, Ava," he said out of nowhere... "From me"* (Huang, 2021). Here, the narrative constructs Alex, declares himself as a danger or threat, reinforcing the idea that pain is intrinsic and inevitable. The language of protection simultaneously shows solicitous behaviour and self-condemnation, which allows the individual to rationalise his suffering. This theme illustrates how holding onto pain works as an identity maintenance strategy. Refusing healing is not weakness but a conscious choice that helps the character to protect his sense of self, even if it is causing suffering.

Theme 2: Longing to be held without having to perform

This theme expressed a deep emotional acceptance and unconditional regard, where intimacy is desired not just as achievement, reward, or perfection, but as an act of choiceless awareness. Across the extract, the narrative constructs exhaustion and attachment fatigue while longing for love and to be valued simply for being, not doing. While expressing how central Ava has become to his sense of self, Alex tells her, *You are the light to my dark, Sunshine... Without you, I'm lost* (Huang, 2021).

The above quote constructs an emotional dependency shared by inner emptiness, where the self is organised around the presence of the other. The metaphors like 'light,' 'dark,' and 'Sunshine' not solely signify an emotional dependency or weakness, but a lived experience of ontological vulnerability, through which the narrative positions the connection moves beyond the need for belongingness and becomes the means of survival.

While reassuring Ava that love should not be earned through constant effort or self-sacrifice, Alex tells her, *"You don't have to work overtime to get people to love you, Ava. Love isn't earned, it's given"* (Huang, 2021). Alex's dialogue constructs the core struggle of the theme. The metaphors of 'work overtime' frames love as labour—something that must be continuously produced, justified, and maintained through efforts. Reflexively, this statement offers a counter narrative by stating, 'Love isn't earned.' This dialogue resists the conditional and effort-

based notion of affection and voices a non-contingent definition of love.

In contrast, reflecting on his growing attachment to Ava, Alex internally acknowledges, "*She was mine. She just didn't know it yet*" (Huang, 2021). The narrative complicates articulates a chaos between unconditional regard and possessive certainty. This statement expresses an indecisive emotional dimension, in which affection is experienced as irreversible while side-by-side asserted through ownership. The certainty embedded in '*She was mine*' functions narratively as a psychological defence against rejection or any kind of contestation, positioning control as a defence against vulnerability. The narrative thereby illustrates how unmet emotional desire can manifest as a longing for control, where love is asserted as a fact instead of relational reciprocity. On this positive side, the notion of possessiveness is not portrayed as an unconditional acceptance but as the outcome of insecurity within the relation. The narrative suggests that Alex's desire to be possessive of Ava is driven by his need to maintain his only relationship to avoid isolation of emotions. Therefore, there is a simultaneous presence of a desire for unconditional acceptance and possessiveness.

Theme 3: Loving through moral exception and destructive devotion

Huang's deception of its character captures how love has emerged as a relational bond where the boundaries of licentiousness don't matter or are redefined. Throughout the novel, the narrative constructs love not as an ethical partnership rooted in mutual care, but as a remarkable state that allows one to deviate from moral and emotional relations.

While explaining to Ava that his actions towards her exist outside the rules he follows for everyone else, Alex tells her, "*But the rules don't apply to you,*" (Huang, 2021) conveys the creation of the moral exception, under which the acts of the beloved are symbolically free from the ethical frameworks. The narrative does not reject the ethics and existence of moral rules, but they selectively ignored and consciously suspended them for the sake of their relationship. Within this meaning-making, love is a justificatory or rationalised force to disobey societal norms and responsibility.

The moral suspension becomes more intensified. Expressing the extent of his devotion and willingness to protect Ava regardless of the consequences, Alex declares, "*If you wanted, I would burn down the world for you*" (Huang, 2021). Here, the narrative constructs devotion of the character is expressed through extreme, destructive imagery. Love is measured by the willingness to cross every social, moral, and personal boundary at any cost, even if the acts cause harm, chaos, or loss. From this perspective, destruction is not seen as a negative consequence but as proof of the commitment towards their love. Rather than functioning solely as an expression of personal emotion, the dialogue draws upon the romantic trope of absolute devotion, where love is demonstrated through the willingness to prioritise the beloved above all else. Importantly, the narrative does not substantially condemn this extreme devotion. Instead, because Alex and Ava ultimately achieve relational fulfilment. Consequently, devotion is represented not merely as emotional intensity but as a morally exceptional form of love that the narrative ultimately accommodates.

Finally, while revealing his perception of himself during an intimate conversation with Ava, Alex admits, "*I never*

claimed to be Prince Charming... I'm a fucked-up person with fucked-up morals..." (Huang, 2021), the character admits moral flaws openly as its own vulnerability instead of justifying them in the name of love. This confession is not a space for growth or reflection conversely; it implies the term that love must accept immorality as a part of devotion. Responsibility is not neglect, but it is overlooked for the loved ones.

Theme 4: Reclaiming the self by refusing internalised blame

This theme uncovers the characters breaking free from self-blame and taking control of their self-esteem. The character no longer believes in taking responsibility for the acts of others that cause harm. Instead, they began to redraw the boundaries for moral accountability and responsibility. Healing is described as becoming more discerning—about whose opinions are permitted to enter the self-concept—rather than as growing softer or more forgiving.

While encouraging Ava to stop defining herself through other people's judgements, Alex tells her, "*If you let lesser people determine your self-worth, you'll never reach higher than their limited imagination*" (Huang, 2021) articulates the self-worth and conviction that not everyone's opinion deserves space within the self. Words like '*lesser people*' and '*limited imagination*' express Alex's recognition that being judged or seeking the others' justification only limits him and never lets his true potential come out, which can trap him in a smaller version of himself.

Similarly, while reassuring Ava that she should not internalise responsibility for others' harmful actions, Alex tells her, "*Don't blame yourself for fucked-up things other people do*" (Huang, 2021) unveils the emotionally charged language and voices the long-standing exhaustion and self-blame. It shows the turning point where the character understands that blaming oneself for the consequences of others' actions is not fair. Refusal and letting go of the blame, seen as self-protection rather than avoidance of responsibility. The narrative distinguishes releasing responsibility for harms caused by other from accepting accountability for one's own actions, positioning this distinction as central to the characters healing. Additionally, Ava's own voice reflects the development of agency and self-assertion. When Josh attempts to assign the Alex the role of protecting her, Ava resists this by stating, "*I don't need a babysitter. I'm twenty-two years old*" (Huang, 2021). She further insists, "*I can handle myself*" (Huang, 2021), and when the disagreement escalates, she intervenes directly: "*People!... Stop arguing. Josh, stop trying to control my life. Jules, stop provoking him*" (Huang, 2021). These responses position Ava as an active participant rather than a passive recipient of protection. The narrative portrays her as asserting autonomy, challenging paternalistic control, and expressing her own capacity for independent decision-making, thereby demonstrating that healing is supported not only through reassurance from others but also through the exercise of personal agency.

Further, reflecting on the lessons he has learned from painful experiences, Alex remarks, "*Pretty words and pretty faces don't equal pretty souls*" (Huang, 2021), presents the lesson learned from the experiences and reflects the emotional wisdom. The quote explicitly distorts outward attractiveness in both linguistic forms, like '*pretty words*,' and physical forms, like '*pretty faces*.' Through this realisation, the self learns to distrust the appearance that was previously justified as self-blame. Now, a shift in moral perception has occurred, where the character believes in

critically evaluating rather than idealising others. Although this theme represents emotional maturity and self-respect. Reclaiming the self is not through self-improvement, but through self-exoneration, where healing is not about becoming soft and more forgiving but about becoming more honest and self-forgiving.

Together, these four themes provide a development continuum as opposed to the four individual themes themselves. Initially, suffering is portrayed as part of one's identity (Theme 1) before evolving into the desire for unconditional acceptance (Theme 2). This desire then transforms into something that can become a source of possession and moral exception (Theme 3) before being reborn through the process of healing via the redrawing of personal boundaries, responsibility, and self-respect (Theme 4). As a whole, these four themes show how the novel perceives love not as a static emotion but as a process.

DISCUSSION

The findings illustrate Twisted Love creates subjectivity through entwined experiences of pain, love, morality, and selfhood rather than using psychopathological or moral judgment. Pain functions as an identity anchor across themes, actively chosen to maintain self-authenticity and coherence, making healing dangerous rather than freeing. Love appears as both safety and danger; it is desired as unconditional holding devoid of performance, but it is complicated by control, dependence, and a fear of being vulnerable. The analysis also reveals how intimacy can reshape moral boundaries by framing devotion through moral exceptionalism, where love justifies destructive commitment and ethical suspension. Crucially, the story also depicts a shift away from internalised blame and toward psychological development and agency. Instead of accepting forgiveness or softness, healing is reinterpreted here as regaining evaluative authority over oneself. Together, these themes show how romantic narratives can dramatise identity preservation, moral negotiation, and self-reclamation in modern popular fiction, highlighting a phenomenological tension between suffering and connection. In Twisted Love, love is not portrayed as a simple escape from suffering but as a psychologically volatile space in which pain is preserved, moral boundaries are suspended, and the self is threatened and reconstituted through relational closeness.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the four themes represent an interconnected psychological process rather than independent experience. The movement from identity-bound suffering to the search for unconditional acceptance, the emergence of moral exception, and the eventual restoration of agency illustrate how Twisted Love constructs healing not as the absence of pain but as the reorganisation of identity, responsibility, and relational boundaries. This integrated pattern constitutes the study's central conceptual contribution. Beyond the interpretation of individual characters, the novel also provides a cultural model of contemporary romance by constructing wounded masculinity as deserving unconditional love while positioning women as central to processes of emotional healing. From a cultural psychology perspective, these representations make available broader cultural meanings about love, suffering, gender and recovery.

The theme *Pain as identity and resistance to healing* captures how pain operates as a central organising feature of selfhood rather than an affective state to be resolved. Through our analytic position, we interpreted that refusal of

healing not as denial or lack of insight, but as an effort to preserve the narrative coherence of the self, especially in the meaning frameworks where suffering is equated with proper depth, authenticity, and moral seriousness. In reflexive thematic analysis, these interpretations are understood as situated sense-making rather than neutral discoveries, which are mostly shaped by researchers' active engagement with both the data and its broader cultural resonances (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The novel's characters' language constructs pain as vivid, desirable, and self-affirming, because metaphors of "burning" and "scorching" do more than describe distress; they actively position pain as a site of aliveness and truth. Adopting a constructionist view of language, these expressions are not vehicles for communicating an inner psychological state but are understood as producing pain as meaningful (Burr, 2015). From this point of view, healing becomes threatening not because it is unknown, but because it risks dismantling an identity anchored in intensity and endurance.

At the same time, the positioning of pain is not stable because pain is also framed as identity-affirming; the simultaneous longing for love and redemption reveals an ongoing negotiation rather than a settled self-concept. Here, love is imagined as a form of salvation, yet it is also resisted, as seen in the desire to draw the beloved into one's own suffering. In this way, pain functions both as a source of coherence and as a barrier against relational transformation.

This tension is further reinforced through the construction of the self as inherently dangerous. By framing oneself as a threat from whom the beloved must be protected, suffering is rendered both inevitable and morally justified. This framing allows care and self-condemnation to coexist, enabling the character to refuse redemption without appearing irresponsible. While Frank (2013) conceptualises suffering as a source of narrative coherence, the present analysis extends this understanding by suggesting that pain here functions not only to organise the self but also to protect it. Additionally, the novel is not only able to present trauma as a source of mental suffering. Alex's traumatised past is also created in such a way that it makes him romantically appealing to others as his emotional suffering turns into something desirable. Therefore, the novel is both criticising and explaining as well as romanticising trauma.

The theme *Longing to be held without having to perform* framed intimacy as a desire for unconditional acceptance rather than achievement-based validation. From our interpretative position, this longing is not understood as emotional dependency, but it emerges as a response to relational contexts in which worth is repeatedly tied to effort and performance. This is experienced in research on conditional regards, which similarly describes that when acceptance is contingent on behaviour, individuals experience relational exhaustion and heightened concern about self-worth (Assor et al., 2004).

Love is thus imagined as a space of rest from continual self-justification, where value is granted for being rather than earned through doing. This meaning is articulated in the rejection of love-as-labour, where intimacy and affection are framed as something that must be continually produced and justified. The counter-position reflects a longing for long contingent acceptance, suggesting that love "isn't earned," resonating in research on performance-based self-worth that links conditional valuation to emotional strain in close relationships (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001).

However, this construction is unstable, because this theme reveals a turn toward possessive certainty and the desire to be loved without effort, suggesting that when relational safety is fragile, longing for acceptance may shift into control. This shift aligns with relational research indicating that when truth and emotional safety are replaced by control, relationships lose moral balance and long-term stability (Kumar et al., 2025). Research on attachment suggests that unmet need for security can transform closeness seeking into possessiveness as a strategy to manage fear of loss (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2017). Overall, this theme highlights how the desire for effort-free love coexists with vulnerability that complicates mutuality and relational openness.

The theme of *loving through moral exception and destructive devotion* describes how love is constructed as a relational space in which moral constraints are selectively suspended. From our interpretive position, this pattern is understood as an active reconfiguration of morality in which devotion legitimises ethical exception, rather than signalling an absence of moral awareness. This interpretation gained analytic salience through repeated framings of moral violation as evidence of relational intensity and loyalty, rather than as an ethical failure. This aligns with research on moral disengagement, suggesting how individuals selectively deactivate moral self-regulation to justify harmful actions when those actions are reframed as serving a valued goal (Bandura, 1999; Bandura et al., 1996). Assertions such as “the rules don’t apply” show this process, where ethical standards are not rejected outright but temporarily suspended for the sake of the beloved. In this construction, love functions as a justificatory force that renders accountability negotiable, rather than obligatory within the relationship.

Sometimes, moral exception is intensified through imagery of destruction, and then it is offered as proof of devotion. Willingness to “burn down the world” for a beloved portrays commitment through readiness to violate social, moral, and personal boundaries. This aligns with the research on the sacralisation of values, which suggests that when relationships become morally sacred, harmful actions can be reinterpreted as virtuous because the valued bond is positioned beyond ordinary ethical evaluation (Atran & Ginges, 2012). From this perspective, destruction is not perceived as a moral cost, but it looks like a confirmation of the sincerity and depth of commitment.

This theme also highlights how moral responsibility is negotiated, because the expressions of moral flaws are not oriented toward self-examination or ethical change, but as a condition that love must accept. This resonates with research on moral licensing, where acknowledgement of prior moral identity or imperfection reduces the perceived obligation to alter harmful behaviour (Merritt et al., 2010). In this way, responsibility is not denied but neutralised, allowing devotion to persist without moral transformation. Overall, this theme illustrates how love is mobilised to produce moral exception rather than moral accountability.

The theme *Reclaiming the self by refusing internalised blame* explains how healing is framed as a reorganisation of moral accountability and is constructed as distinct from increased tolerance, softness, or self-sacrifice. From our interpretive lens, the refusal of self-blame is understood as an active boundary-setting process in which the self is disentangled from responsibility for others’ harmful actions. This interpretation aligns with research on internalised blame, suggesting that individuals often assume excessive responsibility for relational harm as a means of preserving attachment, coherence, or moral worth (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Here, healing is framed as

discernment about whose judgments are allowed to shape self-worth, rather than as becoming softer or more forgiving.

This meaning is expressed through assertions that question the legitimacy of external judgments in defining self-worth. Statements that reject the authority of “lesser people” define a value that reflects a shift from externally anchored self-evaluation to internally regulated self-respect. This aligns with research on contingent self-worth, which indicates that chronic reliance on others’ evaluations narrows identity and undermines psychological integrity, whereas withdrawing from illegitimate sources of judgment supports autonomy and self-coherence (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001).

The rejection of self-blame is further intensified through emotionally charged refusals to take responsibility for others’ wrongdoing. Persistent self-blaming is presented as leading to exhaustion and injustice rather than as a form of moral virtue. Letting go of this self-blame is framed as self-protection rather than moral avoidance and marks a redistribution of responsibility. This expression resonates with research on moral injury and self-blame, which reflects that healing often involves reassessing distorted responsibility appraisals rather than increasing self-criticism or forgiveness (Litz et al., 2009).

Importantly, this process also helps in the re-evaluation of surface and idealisation. The realisation that “pretty words” and “pretty faces” do not guarantee ethical integrity reflects a broader shift from idealisation to critical appraisal. Through this interpretation, earlier self-blame is reinterpreted as a product of misplaced trust and moral naivety, rather than personal deficiency. This interpretation is also supported with research on betrayal and moral learning, which emphasises that healing involves revising moral judgements of others rather than directing increased scrutiny towards the self (Freyd, 1996). Taken together, this theme demonstrates that reclaiming the self is achieved through self-exoneration rather than self-improvement. Healing is not portrayed as becoming endlessly forgiving but as developing clearer judgments about responsibility, harm, and relational boundaries.

This study offers a reflexive and theoretically grounded interpretation of *Twisted Love*, which is one of the major strengths of this study, showing how love, pain, morality, and selfhood are meaningfully constructed rather than simply represented. Themes of the study are conceptually coherent and demonstrate the analytic value of reflexive thematic analysis in literary research. In addition, the study demonstrates methodological innovation by applying RTA to a contemporary popular romance novel, extending the use of RTA beyond participant-based qualitative data. A further strength lies in the explicitly reflexive stance adopted throughout the analysis, where interpretations are presented as situated sense-making shaped by the researchers’ analytic positioning rather than as objective psychological claims. Establishment of psychological theories strengthens analytic depth without imposing deductive frameworks, allowing themes to remain grounded in the narrative materials while contributing conceptually to understanding love, suffering, and healing.

The analysis is based on a single novel, which limits transferability, and the interpretive density may reduce accessibility for some readers. The study also does not include readers’ perspectives or compare *Twisted Love* with other romance novels. Therefore, the findings should not be considered representative of contemporary romance fiction as a whole, and the analysis primarily reflects psychological meanings rather than literary form. As a

reflexive study, findings remain shaped by the researchers' analytic positioning, allowing for alternative interpretations. The findings highlight the importance of addressing identity-bound pain, internalised blame, and moral boundary distortions in therapeutic and relational work. This study also demonstrates the value of fictional narratives as tools for psychological education, reflection, and training, offering insight into how cultural narratives shape understandings of love, suffering, and healing.

CONCLUSIONS

This study shows how Twisted Love constructs intimacy as a site of identity maintenance, moral exception, and boundary-setting rather than uncomplicated healing. Suffering functions as an identity resource by providing coherence and meaning to the self, while devotion legitimises ethical suspension by reframing harmful actions as signs of loyalty and relational depth. Through RTA, the study offers an interpretive contribution to qualitative understandings of love, morality, and identity and suggests that emotionally intense romance fiction can serve as a valuable cultural site for examining how ideas of suffering and healing are produced. More broadly, the findings suggest that romance fiction functions as a cultural space in which meanings of loyalty, possession, acceptance, responsibility, and agency are continually negotiated.

DECLARATION

AI Disclosure

Gemini Advanced was used solely to generate the relative frequency word cloud as an exploratory visualisation of the dataset. It was not used for data coding, theme development, interpretation, or manuscript writing. All qualitative analyses and interpretations were conducted independently by the researchers, who take full responsibility for the final content.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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Data availability

The data is available online on the OSF data repository with a link <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/2VYSQ>

Author(s) contribution

Bhumika Patel (BP) conceptualized the study and collected the material. Abhay Shukla (AS) analysed the data and wrote the results. Bhunesh Kumar (BK) wrote the discussion and conclusion. AS and BK prepared the initial manuscript draft. Gyanesh Kumar Tiwari (GKT) reviewed and improved the draft and made the final revisions. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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