

Romantic love

A human universal and possible honest signal

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Abstract

Some forms of love have the ability to transform perfectly normal people into seemingly powerless victims. The tragic example of one of the richest women in Germany whose love to a professional gigolo has profoundly unsettled her life reminds us of the powerful mechanisms bringing about what is rightly termed “falling in love”. Most representatives of the arts and humanities are convinced that such “romantic love” can only be felt by members of modern societies and historically only came about to be a specific mind-set when modernity started. If contemporary citizens would be asked in the street, whether a woman or man in traditional society could and would experience the kind of special states of mind and soul connected to falling and being in love, many would probably intuitively say: “That may well be possible. Why should they be so different from us in such essential aspect?” When one talks to academic colleagues, the situation is, however, different. The authoritative view of some of the great scholars of sociology and related disciplines has created the firm conviction: “Romantic love is specific for our kind of modern”, and many would add: “occidental, society”. In this essay, this concept of cultural specificity is challenged and examples from written and oral literature are presented, as well as findings of crosscultural evolutionary biology which, altogether, render this sociological concept obsolete. To conclude, romantic love has to be regarded a human universal phenomenon and may serve as honest signal

of one’s deep emotional involvement, thus influencing mate-choice.

Introduction

Susanne Klatten, 46, married, mother of three, one of the richest women of Germany, boss of her own company, was recently reported by the media to have fallen in love with Helg Sgarbi, a good looking, tall Swiss man in his thirties and alleged professional gigolo (e.g., *Doppel* 2008, *Popham* 2008, *Werner* 2008). Ms Klatten had a lot to lose: her husband, her children and her carefully guarded reputation. She had always shielded her private sphere from the press. She lived a life of duty and performance. When she took time out, a rare occasion, in an expensive wellness hotel in Tyrol, Austria, she fell victim. Her lover, whom she met at other occasions as well, told her that he was under threat from the Mafia for having injured, in a car accident, a child of one of their families and that he needed a large sum of money to solve the problem. Ms Klatten gave him 7 Million Euro. Only when he asked for more, she refused. She then received blackmail threats from Sgarbi (the romantic meetings in hotels had been documented as proofs for Ms Klatten’s secret sexual affair) who was connected to an Italian gang – in their estate in Southern Italy luxury cars and large sums of cash were found. After police and law agencies became involved it turned out that this particular Swiss gigolo had played the same game with other women who also had become victims of their romantic love affairs with him. One of them, a 67 year old rich widow, handed out sizeable amounts of money at several occasions,

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even *after* she had become suspicious. – Could this (falling so much in love that the stricken person could not rely on her/his sound judgement any more) have happened, *mutatis mutandis*, in the African Kalahari or the mountains of New Guinea? And what actually happens to transform perfectly normal people into seemingly powerless victims of their love-bond with a criminal?

Most representatives of the arts and humanities, this is my personal experience since I gave my first presentation on this topic 20 years ago at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, are convinced that “romantic love” can only be felt by members of modern societies and historically only came about to be a specific mind-set when modernity started – in the outgoing Middle Ages and with the processes of Enlightenment in the Renaissance.

If contemporary citizens would be asked, in the street, whether woman or man in traditional society could and would experience the kind of special states of mind and soul connected to falling and being in love, many would, I believe, intuitively say: “That may well be possible. Why should they be so different from us in such essential aspect?” When one talks to academic colleagues, the situation is, however, different. The authoritative view of some of the great scholars of sociology and related disciplines has created the firm conviction: “Romantic love is specific for our kind of modern”, and many would add: “occidental, society”.

In this contribution, I will challenge this concept of cultural specificity and present examples from written and oral literature as well as findings of crosscultural evolutionary biology which, I believe, render this sociological concept obsolete.

Some “symptoms” constituting “romantic love”

Some of the disagreement concerning the specific psychological and, indeed, physiological, neurobiological mechanisms (see below) set in action when humans are falling in love and follow their erotic, sexual and social inclinations sparked off by “romantic love”, may stem from definitional problems. What actually is “romantic love”? Cultural sociologists and other critics of this term and concept have always conceded (see *Giddens 1992*) that members of other cultures can be driven by sexual desire and passion like ourselves, yet, they did not and mostly still do not ascribe to them the much more complex, refined, as it were, state of being enmeshed in romantic love. One problem, perhaps

especially for German academics, is that the period and concept of “romanticism” exercised such strong influences on the concepts concerning the history of ideas that it blinds the eye for the meaning of romantic in the term “romantic love”. For Anglosaxons this effect of a narrower semantic determination may not be as strong: “romance” is likely a more tangible and important concept for them than the cultural ideals of romanticism.

Under the roof of the linguistic term “romantic love” various subjective experiences, most of them feelings, constitute the inner condition typical for this experience, the begin of which is usually called “falling in love”. The following “symptoms” (as a matter of fact the specific psychic reactions of people under the spell of “romantic love” have been classed, by physicians, as ones very similar to psychiatrically relevant states, e.g. like that of addiction, see *Liebowitz 1983*) are commonly found:

“Electrified” reactions, elated, joyous feelings, “butterflies in the stomach”, increased heartbeat and sweat production, changed body posture and facial expression, signs of sexual arousal, generally a heightened feeling of wellbeing, often an activated state of mind (cp. creating poems, music...)

- when thinking of him/her
- when her/his name is said by someone, when his/her place, town etc. is mentioned by someone (even the announcer of the news broadcast)
- when the other comes into view
- when one is together with the other
- when erotic signs and symbols of belonging to each other are understood and responded to
- when physical and sexual contact is possible and rewarding.

The other

- is seen as a very special person, e.g. as having very special positive characteristics (an “angel”), as having very special admirable capacities and talents
- is often addressed in caressing terms, usually employing linguistic elements of parental care (diminutives, higher pitch of voice etc.) and of infantile ways of speaking and behaving (cp. the hypothesis that love as it is typical in our human species was made possible once parental care became established in the phylogeny of our animal ancestors, see *Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1972*) and/or building on common experiences especially during the early phases of the relationship
- is often unconditionally trusted, to degrees which can be so extraordinary that other persons shake their heads in utter disbelief and rejection. Even the

individual who exhibits this unconditional extraordinary trust would never have done so outside the neurobiological state of being romantically in love – indeed the mechanisms of addiction come to mind.

When one is separated from the other by distance or, worse, after disagreement or fight, a depressed, often desparate mood is common.

Metaphors and symbols play a powerful role in the romantic love relationship. Sometimes, even small, normally insignificant gestures or words can exercise strongly arousing states, including sexual arousal.

Secrecy is an important part of the romantic bond. It seems that this is the case not only because many of these relationship are “illegal” or “undecent” in the respective culture and must, therefore, be hidden, but because secrecy as such has a positive feed back on one’s erotic and loving feelings. This may well be another endowment of our evolutionary past when powerful alpha males were trying to prevent other males to copulate with females in oestrus. Consortship (cp. for chimpanzees *Hasegawa & Hiraima-Hasegawa 1990, Nishida 1990*) between a “couple” attracted to each other and coitus in secrecy was the answer. Both are still typical for our species.

This enumeration is by no means meant to be exhaustive, but it may serve as sufficient base to understand “romantic love” as a specific perception and state of mind which, albeit its individual variance, has a core of rather fixed modes of feelings, sets of mind and bi-psychological states so that one is justified to use it as psychosocially very important perceptual and behavioural entity: romantic love... from now on without quotation marks.

Some topoi in the arts and humanities concerning romantic love

The classic position of cultural sociology and similar disciplines has been described by their proponents in the following way:

The “romantic love-code”, as product of cultural codification, has developed at the beginning of modern society and represents the base and the beginning of a sexual partnership. It is intrinsically connected to occidental traditions, modern age and bourgeoisie and is medium for the separation of private and public spheres in the modern age. Many still influential authors have, on this assumption, created the theory of culturally specific romantic love. Some of them are:

for the cultural sociological position

- N. Luhmann “Liebe und Passion. Zur Codierung von Intimität” (1982),
- A. Giddens “The Transformation of Intimacy. Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Society” (1992), who concedes, that more or less universal passion may exist in other types of society, but that they should be differentiated from romantic love which is seen as culture specific,
- K. Lenz “Soziologie der Zweierbeziehung. Eine Einführung” (2006),
- K. Hahn & G. Burkart (eds.) “Studien zur Soziologie innerer Beziehungen” (1998, 2000),

for the historic-constructivist position

- M. Foucault (1976, 1984a,b) “Histoire de la sexualité”, a quote from vol. 1 (translated by the author): “Sex shall be hidden?”

Veiled behind new prudery, once again be placed under the bushel of sinister demands of bourgeois society? On the contrary, it is ablaze.” He attempts a “New interpretation of the total sexual ‚dispositif‘”, states that Diogenes was masturbating in public and believes that “...breaking through the intimacy of sexuality...” is the order of the day.

In vol. 2 he writes about one of the very rare cases where hints at romantic love could be read into the text: Diotima explains to Sokrates that love tries to “beget by thought” (role of the mind, phantasy, symbols as a sign of romantic love?)

- Ariès, P. & Béjín, A. (eds.) “Sexualités Occidentales” (1982)

German translation: „Die Masken des Begehrens und die Metamorphosen der Sinnlichkeit“ (1984, with M. Foucault).

Foucault often refers to the texts of classic philosophers. I find it surprising that he does not refer to Greek mythology which provides, as that of other cultures, many examples of romantic love as a recurring topos. I just mention a few of them.

Helena, her husband Menelaos absent, is curious about Paris who arrives at Sparta, clad in shiny armor. To meet him, she arranges a ritual to be carried out by her in the Artemis temple where Paris just finishes his sacrifice. He is struck by her beauty and convinced that she must be the woman promised to him by Aphrodite. He starts to court Helena, in the royal palace, by masterfully playing a string instrument, by seducing words and the fire of his passion. Helena changes sides. – One

must wonder whether she regretted this choice in the ten years she stayed in Troy. Paris did not play a very prominent role in the defense of his city and among its leaders.

Herakles falls so much in love (“sinking deep into female lust”) with Omphale, whose slave he is (as punishment of slaying Iphitos) that he wears women’s cloths and jewelry, an early example of amour fou, which, like erotomania (Brüine 2003) is the likely outcome of romantic love when there is no shared equilibrium of involvement and investment of the two partners – Ms Klatten’s touching case is the modern version. Nothing has changed: men and women can become victim of the potent volcanic forces released by their experiencing, for the first time perhaps, to be bonded by romantic love. Too bad, when this is not a mutual affair – as is, fortunately, one might say, usually the case.

Dido and Aeneas (the latter destined by Jupiter to become the founding father of Rome) are hunting in the mountains near Carthago. A tremendous thunderstorm with hail showers forces the party to seek shelter, wildly swollen rivers separating its members. Through these events (fabricated by Juno) Dido, in her beautiful hunting dress, and Aeneas suddenly find themselves close to each other in a cave, lightning and nature’s forces all around them.... Aeneas falls victim to her passion, which started the moment she saw the Trojan hero. He becomes engaged in building up Carthago instead of Rome, wearing a cloak made by Dido’s hands, but is, in the last moment, summoned by Jupiter via Merkur and leaves a desperate, devastated Dido who commits suicide with his sword. – Dispair, jealousy and hatred as counterparts of passion, romantic love and unconditional commitment.

Another gripping case is that of Medea who is inflamed (following the plans of Hera who can’t help to interfere in the lives of mortals) by Eros’ arrow and wildly falls in love with Jason at first sight. She, who is usually shy and withdrawn, becomes restless, breathes heavily, changes colour and mood in his presence. She worries about the dangers Jason is about to face even before the first personal encounter. Then, she meets him who is made superhumanly beautiful and impressive by Hera. She feels her heart leave her bosom and nearly faints. They start to talk to each other. Love’s magic goes on... as does destiny and tragedy: The transformation of a woman, excessively committed to romantic love, to a raging, revenging monster.

In Afghan (Borcharding 1975) and Nepali (Heunemann 1980) fairy tales, i.e. accounts from cultures very

different than our European ones, as in many tales around the world, the topos of romantic love is the core of many of these formerly orally transmitted texts: A usually exceedingly beautiful and innocently pure young woman is enchanted by the efforts of the young hero who exhibits superhuman performances, defeating monsters much stronger than himself, in order to free the languishing lady and elope with her. – Being “stolen” by one’s lover is, it seems, a universally attractive way to start or continue a love affair (see below).

It remains a mystery to me why the protagonists of the allegedly exclusive western romantic love code did not refer to this corpus of texts, especially that they did not take one of the most famous examples into account, the *shir ba shirim*, the Song of the Songs of the Old Testament, a text written much before the age of enlightenment. Only a few lines of this classic love poem may suffice to back my claim that here we are dealing with an exquisite proof for the universality of romantic love (Box 1).

Woman and man are alternately speaking and, as is typical for being romantically involved, praise the other’s unique and wonderful characteristics and allude to the places where they have met or will meet, among them a garden. When it is difficult for the lovers, who usually are not legally married, to find an intimate room for their illegitimate and thereby particularly arousing embraces, nature offers an alternative. The cedars, in this poem, are portrayed as the beams of the house, the bed “is green”. The parallel to the two love poems further down is quite striking. Nature is the metaphor for sprouting growth, for vitality and sexuality, and presents a scenario outside the rules and norms of the village, the town. Thereby, it symbolises untamed desire and holds the promise of sexual fulfilment.

The second text, i.e., Walther von der Vogelweide’s well known love poem was, admittedly, written in the Middle Ages and may, therefore, serve as proof for the cultural relativists that only around this time romantic love was born. Yet, what did people feel, think, talk about and transform into songs before this period? Was romantic love, at that time, just falling from the sky, coming into existence de novo? This is not very likely. For my translation of the poem, see Box 2.

Hardly any text singing about love can breath a more romantic spirit. Secrecy, symbols, joint reflexion about how a passerby would be able to figure out what happened in this love bed of flowers, hinting at unheard sexual pleasures, all the feelings, thoughts and reactions of a person deeply involved in a romantic love

I/1 **The song of songs, which is Solomon's**

- 2 Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine...
- 13 A bundle of myrrh is my well-beloved unto me; he shall lie all night betwixt my breasts.
- 14 My beloved is unto me as a cluster of camphire in the vineyards of Engedi.
- 15 Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair; thou hast doves' eyes.
- 16 Behold, thou art fair, my beloved, yea, pleasant: also our bed is green.
- 17 The beams of our house are cedar, and our rafters of fir.
- II/2 As the lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters.
- 3 As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons. I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste.
- 4 He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love.
- 5 Stay me with flagons, comfort me with apples: for I am sick of love.
- 6 His left hand is under my head, and his right hand doth embrace me.
- 7/1 How beautiful are thy feet with shoes, O prince's daughter! the joints of thy thighs are like jewels, the work of the hands of a cunning workman.
- 2 Thy navel is like a round goblet, which wanteth not liquor: thy belly is like an heap of wheat set about with lilies.
- 3 Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins...
- 6 How fair and how pleasant art thou, O love, for delights!
- 7 This thy stature is like to a palm tree, and thy breasts to clusters of grapes.
- 8 I said, I will go up to the palm tree, I will take hold of the boughs thereof: now also thy breasts shall be as clusters of the vine, and the smell of thy nose like apples.
- 9 And the roof of thy mouth like the best wine for my beloved, that goeth down sweetly, causing the lips of those that are asleep to speak.
- 10 I am my beloved's, and his desire is toward me.
- 11 Come, my beloved, let us go forth into the field; let us lodge in the villages.
- 12 Let us get up early to the vineyards; let us see if the vine flourish, whether the tender grape appear, and the pomegranates bud forth: there will I give thee my loves.

affair... everything is present and expressed in a wonderful way.

Love song of an Eipo woman, Highlands of West-New Guinea

Almost half way around the globe, in a society with a neolithic tool-kit, isolated for tens of thousands of years in the inaccessible mountains of New Guinea members of the Interdisciplinary Research Programme in Irian Jaya recorded and translated (Heeschen 1990, Hiepko & Schiefenhövel 1987, Simon 1993) love songs of a very similar kind than the "shir ba shirim" and "Under der linden". The text presented here was created by

Oleto (Box 3), at the time of our fieldwork a woman in her early thirties, vital, attractive, an elegant dancer, sure of herself, living in Munggona, the central settlement of the southern Eipomek valley. She had a remarkable biography. Her husband, the father of her only child, died early. His kin expected her to marry his brother. Oleto did not go along with this idea. Instead, she had love affairs with a number of important men. One of them was a man from a village of the enemy. Her two brothers, Babyal and Irim, the former being the war leader of Munggona, broke the scandalous liaison and brought her back to Munggona. Her lover and the people in the enemy valley did not tolerate this and started the hitherto dormant hereditary war

Under der linden

Under der linden
an der heide,
dâ unser zweier bette was,
dâ mugt ir vinden
schône beide
gebrochen bluomen unde gras.
vor dem walde in einem tal,
tandaradei,
schône sanc diu nahtegal.

Ich kam gegangen
zuo der ouwe:
dô was min friedel komen ê.
dâ wart ich enpfangen,
hêre frouwe,
daz ich bin saelic iemer mê.
kuster mich? wol tûsentstunt:
tandaradei,
seht wie rôt mir ist der munt.

Dô het er gemachet
alsô rîche
von bluomen eine bettestat.
des wirt noch gelachtet
inneclîche,
kumt iemen an daz selbe pfat.
bî den rôsen er wol mac,
tandaradei,
merken wâ mirz houbet lac.

Daz er bî mir læge,
wessez iemen
(nu enwelle got!), sô schamt ich mich.
wes er mit mir pflæge.
niemer niemen
bevinde daz, wan er unt ich,
und ein kleinez vogellîn:
tandadarei,
daz mac wol getriuwe sin.

Under the linden

Under the linden
at the heath
where our twosome bed then was
there you may find
beautiful both
broken flowers and grass
before the forest in a vale
tandaradei
nicely sang the nightingale

I came walking
to the mead
there was my friend who came before
there I was received
high lady
that I am happy ever more
Did he kiss me? A thousand hours with ease
tandaradei
look how red my mouth still is

There he has made
so very wide
of flowers a real bed
of this was lot's of laughter
dearly and inside
came somebody the same path
by the roses he well could say
tandaradei
where did my head then lay

That he lay by me
if somebody knew
(that God forbid!) being ashamed would I
what he did with me
never nobody
should find than he and I
and the little bird who sung
tandaradei
it will likely keep its tongue

anew – the parallel to Helena eloping with Paris and thus starting the war of Troy is striking. For 11 months fighting continued, several men were killed on both

sides. Then peace was made. Olete emerged out of all this totally unharmed, her status had risen, rather than fallen. A strong, desirable woman, *konobe kelapo* in the

Oleto's song to her lover (Eipo)

Kokiye dam, kokbare dam,
na lebnuke, na nuknuke,
na ning guma, na ning anya,
na lebnuke, na nuknuke.
Kidiknamne, banabnamne.
Na dukiye, na kukaye,
na lebnuke, na nuknuke.
Se, kayape, nay kayape!
Kidiknamne, banabnamne.
Se, fotong o, nay atiye,
na lebnuke, na nuknuke.
Table ya metebum,
like ya kwinebum,
koubuknamne, webuknamne.
Lung aik dam, fan aik dam.

Kidiknamne, banabnamne.
Ya metebum, ya kotobum,
urye ya metebum wilalyam,
dibrenangkin, kwinihangkin,
delebnangkin.
Fin dam sekne, nab dam sekne
cebroblyame, sekdoblyame.
Ape lunge, ape fane,
kwinihangkin, delebnangkin.
Kidikse, se wicape, nay kayape!
Kidiknamne, banabnamne.
Dibrenangkin, mebbehangkin.
Se wicape, nay kayape!
Fin dam sekne, nab dam sekne
Toubuke dablyam, lekuke dablyam.
Sobkor welen, korbik welen,
ati teleb welebamne, yanibnamne.
Ape yane, ape fane.

Oleto's song to her lover (translated)

By ferny-limb, by curly tree,
I heard one say, I heard one say,
What's thine is mine and is not thine.
I heard her say, I heard her say.
Lost will I be and far away.
My curly-limb, my ferny tree.
I heard her say, I heard her say.
Friends and gossips, old companions!
Lost will I be and far away.
Oh curly-heart, oh housey-home.
I heard me say, I heard me say.
With thine axe thou sheared the slim tree,
cut and tore the rooted wild tree.
Tending my garden I would be.
Wild weed by the threshold, wild growth by the
door.
Lost will I be and far away.
Thy clever axe will strike and tear.
Here, come and fell the quick elm tree.
I'd know thy flesh and root it up, pull thee on to
me.
That flesh-bracelet, pulse-fireband,
flame-vine, snap it from thine arm.
Wild heart, weed-grass, wild growth by the door,
I'll twist thee free, I'll pull thee free.
And lost, my sisters, friends, I be.
Lost will I be and far away.
I'll know thy flesh; thou'lt groan for me.
Gossips ans sisters, oh my friends!
The pulse-bracelet, the wrist-vine,
Bite it and burn with alchemy.
And as the fruit-vine climbs the tree,
I'll clamber, my housey-home, and stay,
long legs, wild growth, at home in thee.

Eipo language (*Heeschen & Schiefenhövel 1983*), can have and actually initiate these kind of extraordinary sexual relationships without having to fear any negative reaction by her own group – In 2008 Oleto was still alive, a still beautiful woman, smiling about her formerly rather eventful life.

Oleto addresses her lover in the disguise of two terms (*kokiye, kokbare*) for a treefern (probably genus *Cyathea*),

an archaic sturdy plant with a solid stem and a crown of typical fernleaves fanning out from the top. The stems usually have dark, hairlike appendices which, in this case, form the *tertium comperationis* for the obviously rich body hair of the loved man. Already, the scene is set: wild nature, the forest and the garden land, far away of the regulatory influence of the village with social rules. The refrain of the song is *kidiknamne, banabnamne*: I will go up to my garden and I will get lost.

A clear metaphor; nobody ever gets lost in the wide circle around the village where people have things to do: gardening, gathering, hunting, crossing the central range to visit relatives and trade partners on the southern side of the great divide (the passes are at 3.700 m above sea level). “Getting lost” is meant to express loosing her mind, becoming confused because of the turmoil in her thoughts and feelings. After all, her lover, an obviously very powerful man who effortlessly chops, with his stone adze, trees down and pulls out their deeply anchored roots, belongs to another woman – marriage is a legally binding bond, in the Eipo society just as anywhere else. And married people are not supposed to have sexual affairs – as a matter of fact, extramarital sex is by far the most common cause for armed fight and subsequent death (*Schiefenhövel 2001b*).

So, what she does is dangerous and, probably just because of that, very exciting. The climax of the poem is in line 24, when the first future of *kidinamme* changes to past tense: *kidikese* = I have lost my way, meaning: I have entered this relationship, I have slept with him who is like nature: wild, strong, untamed. The most daring part (lines 20, 21) is when she talks about using the fire-making liana (*Calamus* sp., rattan), which, in the old days before matches and lighters, was worn as wrist-band. With one’s teeth, one would splice off a thin section of the liana, about 1 m long, and pull it, rhythmically and with increasing force, around a piece of dry wood, kept in place by the feet. Through the heat produced by this strong friction, the liana breaks into two, its two glowing points will then be carefully blown against tinder... a flaring flame will rise from it. This is the metaphor for the sexual act, performed rhythmically and energetically, and for two orgasms uniting in one powerful flame. – I am sure, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, had he thought of a love scene like this and found a similar sexual symbolism to describe its very essence and strength, would have been happy for a whole day.

The poem does not limit itself to words of passion, wilderness and vital love, it addresses and expresses, too, the tender feelings Oleto has for her lover. The last lines picture her as a vine, finding hold and support when winding around a strong tree, i.e. this man. She longs to be with him, also in the village. And that is the moment where the opposition and tension of nature versus settlement, of rules and norms versus unruly feelings and actions, of which the text has benefitted so far, is dissolved and fused into one image: that of a woman in love who longs to have a home with this man. – Oleto actually became his second wife.

Two issues are noteworthy in this “stone-age” love song. The codified verbal expressions used, including the universally gripping metaphors, especially for the actual sexual act on the one hand and the fact, on the other, that a person from a culture so radically different from our own would express her deep emotions, sparked off by falling in love, in artistic form, creating a powerful poem – which was, not surprisingly, highly valued also by the people in the village and the whole area, old and young. It was actually recorded by Artur Simon (1993) as sung, seemingly innocently, by small girls doing some work at the riverside.

The Trobriand Islands and the Pacific as canvas for the projection of non-romantic, trouble-free sex

For the ethnological/anthropological position which has and had a particularly important role in the discussions pro and contra universal romantic love Bronislaw Malinowski’s “The sexual life of savages” is particularly important (*Malinowski 1929*). In this post-victorian best seller (no wonder with that title and topic) the author, a leading ethnologist of his time and ground breaking fieldworker who learned the language (Kilivila) of the Trobriand Islanders and described many facets of their world in ways which are still fitting today, made some statements which were already disputed in his time and have since become refuted by most specialists dealing with this culture and the adjacent region of Melanesia. His most extreme claims are that 1) the Trobriand Islanders do not know that sexual intercourse leads to pregnancy, 2) young people don’t feel jealousy when their partners have sex with others and 3) children have “real” sex.

With regard to romantic love he makes the following statement:

“All the customs, arrangements, and codes of behaviour dictate simple, direct approaches, as we shall see...”. In a later section of his book he withdraws this stand somewhat when he observes: “Though the social code does not favour romance, romantic elements and imaginative personal attachments are not altogether absent in Trobriand courtship and marriage...”.

Concerning the Amphlett Islands and the island of Dobu Malinowski writes of: “... arrangements which allow (...) a prolonged courtship and which are symptomatic of a love not specifically directed towards sexual intercourse. I was told that both districts have love songs and that the boys court by playing pan-pipes or on a jew’s harp...”. Malinowski knew very well that

Trobriand and Dobu culture have very many aspects in common, it is surprising that he did not pursue the topic of “romance” in Trobriand any further.

One important reason for this lapsus of the great ethnographer may have been that he was, like others, on the search for an alternative society which would, specifically, arrange and structure sexuality and reproduction in very different ways than European society of his days (cp. *Thurnwald 1921* about the Bánaro in the basin of the Sepik River of Papua New Guinea, formerly “Kaiser-Wilhelmsland”). From the times of James Cook, the Pacific was a welcomed canvas for projections of (male) sexual phantasies – until our times, when travel agencies advertise the Trobriand Islands as “Islands of Love”... much to the anger of the local people.

Other ethnologists have found a very different Trobriand “code” than that described by Malinowski. Bell-Krannhals, who carried out in-depth fieldwork on Kaileuna, one of the Trobriand Islands (*Bell-Krannhals 1984. Was sich liebt, versteckt sich. Interaktionsmuster zwischen Liebenden auf Kaileuna/Trobriand Inseln*. Unpublished Manuscript of a presentation at a conference in Seewiesen on “Verbale Interaktion” of the German Research Foundation (DFG)), writes that the Trobrianders have a very indirect, circumspect form of courtship, e.g. they write (today) little love letters, mainly young men to young women, by which they try to make their feelings known – without losing (in case of a negative reaction) their face by too direct an approach.

I have (*Schiefenhövel 2001a*) published a critique of some of Malinowski’s claims and video-documented samples of the nocturnal music and dance sessions in which young men play (sometimes self-made) string instruments and sing texts telling of the longing, the joy and, especially, of the sorrow of romantic love (cp. the song “*kvetala bogi*” (*Roberts 1996*)).

Further ethnographic data on romantic love

Karl-Heinz Kohl, German anthropologist and director of Frankfurt University’s Frobenius Institut, is one of the few representatives of his discipline who sees romantic love as a universal. In his chapter “Gelenkte Gefühle. Vorschriftsheirat, romantische Liebe und Determinanten der Partnerwahl” (*Kohl 2001*) he states that “numerous ethnographic studies suggested similar conclusions...” (that there is no romantic love in non-western societies) and contradicts Malinowski. He quotes Donald Marshall, an American anthropologist who wrote the book “Island of Passion” (*Marshall*

1962), based on his study of the inhabitants of the Polynesian island of Mangaia, of whom he claims that the most important issue is coitus, that the men actually are sexually obsessed... (high coitus frequency as proof)... “the feelings of romantic love were totally unknown to the Mangaians”.

This finding was disproved by Helen Harris (*1995*) who, after careful fieldwork, demonstrated that the indigenous people of Mangaia have a love-life in which romance plays an important role. Harris states that Marshall’s informants had just boasted. Yet, remarks K.-H. Kohl (*2001*): “The dogma (of missing romantic love outside modern western societies, W.Sch.) has generally remained unchallenged until now”. He also draws attention to the paper of Jankowiak & Fischer (*1992*) who showed, on the basis of a study using the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF), that among 160 societies included in the sample, the existence of feelings and behaviours (namely romantic love) of which one had, for a long time, believed that they are a product of the refined western civilization, is present in 148 of them. Jankowiak has also edited a volume (*1997*) in which he raises the issue of romantic love being a possible universal.

Marjorie Shostak (*1981*) in her ground breaking biography of Nisa, a Kalahari !kung woman, describes Nisa’s feelings during one of her several love affairs: “We look into each others eyes and our hearts burn. Then I think, oh my beloved, we have to behave this way because there are so many people around and because we are afraid of Bo and Bey (their respective spouses)...”. Longing, desire and its conscious reflection, often part of romantic love, are expressed here. Economic gain is another aspect of secret love which Nisa talks about: She is happy, when her lovers give her presents... a sign of their male involvement and investment.

One argument against the universal existence of romantic love is that for the longest period of human existence marriages were arranged and that there would be, therefore, no role for falling in love and finding one’s partner in this biopsychologically driven way. It is an interesting question whether this assumption is unlikely for the hominid and early Homo sapiens periods of our ancestors. We have, as species, traits which indicate a certain tendency to polygyny (some physical sexual dimorphism, testes much smaller, in ratio to body weight, than in the polygynandrous, “promiscuous” chimpanzees, cp. *Vogel & Sommer 1994*), but our biology does not tell us whether marriages, in the dawn of humankind, might have been arranged or not. The biopsychology of falling in love is an argument

against the position that all marriages in the past were arranged by parents or other persons. This is, historically, probably quite a late institution, which may have come about with the economic changes induced by the agricultural mode of subsistence, i.e. with the neolithic “revolution”.

Among the Eipo, Highlands of West-New Guinea, love marriages were common (Schiefenhövel 1991), despite the fact that parents tended to influence their children’s choice towards cross-cousin marriages. Yet, young people usually followed their own preferences when choosing a partner to have children with. A number of unhappy love affairs were witnessed which sometimes took quite dramatic form (elopement, which was considered very romantic and desirable, separation from a non-loved partner etc.).

Conclusion

Why do we humans “fall” in love and then become entangled in longer, but not everlasting romantic love? Why do we, not all of our species, but quite a large number of us, tend to express very deep emotions like that of grief and, especially, erotic sexual, i.e. romantic love in symbolic language? Why not tell the others, if at all, in everyday prose, about one’s extraordinary psychological experience of becoming “bewitched” by a loved person or of “falling” (again this word expressing uncontrollable fate) into deep despair? Obviously, prose is not good enough a vessel to hold the most precious feelings, may they be of despair and grief or of elation, erotic tenderness and sexual satisfaction or of mystical experience. *Homo symbolicus* must express him/herself in special ways, in forms which lend themselves to increase the might of one’s experience, which draw others into a spell, gasping at the beauty of the daring metaphors and the unheard-of happenings.

Possibly then, this transformation of emotions to an artistically shaped metalevel is also a biologically efficient enhancement mechanism: One may live one’s highs and peaks again and repeatedly by creating a poem or song capturing them. One’s feelings will, thus, become even more powerful. This could have been a base for its becoming an evolved trait.

Modern neurobiology, neurochemistry and evolutionary biology/psychology have been concerned with universal mechanisms, preferences and behaviours governing or accompanying human sexuality. In recent years, romantic love has come in the focus as well. H. Fisher’s writings have found a wide readership (Fisher 2001), the work of Esch & Stefano (2005) has

shown how complex the neurobiology of love is and how similar, especially with regard to its main cerebral reward pathways, it is to other very positively experienced feelings and situations and how all this enhances wellbeing and health: a “... complex neurobiological phenomenon, relying on trust, belief, pleasure and reward activities within the brain, i.e. limbic processes... oxytocin, vasopressin, dopamine, serotonergic signaling... endorphin and endogenous morphinergic mechanisms, coupled to nitric oxide autoregulatory pathways... beneficial neurobiological features... combining physiological aspects related to maternal, romantic or sexual love and attachment with other healthy activities or neurobiological states... stress-reducing, health promoting...”. This latter idea has found its way, not surprisingly, into the channels of the popular press: “Sex is good for body and soul” and other slogans have been created to transmit some of the main messages concerning erotic and sexual love to a wider public. One will have to see, whether this can reverse the trend for a reduction in libido (Csef 1997), which, quite dramatically, has occurred in the last decades. Could it be that spam-sex to which we are all exposed to on a day to day basis, is ruining our biopsychological drives, desires, negatively interferes with lived love? This may very well be so. A pity for us who are, by virtue of evolutionary forces, equipped with so well-tested mechanisms of falling in love, feeling it and consuming it.

The more we know about the underlying biology of our erotic, sexual and social feelings the more it becomes evident that the corresponding perceptions, feelings, and behaviours are common human heritage, basically part of all people, not likely to be dramatically altered by culture. I am sure that the universality of romantic love will be increasingly demonstrated by future cross-cultural and other research. In Donald Brown’s classic book on human universals, romantic love is not mentioned (Brown 1991). When I talked to him about this issue he nodded and said that romantic love was also a classic universal but that it was not yet included in the text (personal communication).

Why would evolution have brought about a complex, often bewildering set of feelings connected to romantic love? Why not just have sexual desire, passion, “one-night stands” and not get involved in all the time consuming courtship, its emotional roller-coaster-upheavals and often enough bittersweet failures? The functionality of courtship and the partly sexually motivated bond between (in the classic case) woman and man have been well discussed (e.g., Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1972). What could be the adaptive value of the set of

feelings and behaviours driven by and bringing about this specific element: romantic love?

My hypothesis is that the psychic condition of being involved in romantic love functions as honest signal (Zahavi & Zahavi 1997). There are, interestingly and not surprisingly, some other honest signals at work in human sexuality: erection (until recently, i.e. the advent of Viagra and similar drugs), ejaculation, vaginal lubrication, sexual flush, pheromone production, localised sweat patterns, vaginal and uterus contraction and others.

Becoming romantically involved, i.e. becoming subject to very powerful biopsychic motivational mechanisms bringing about a whole array of perceptual and behavioural changes could have evolved as a signal system of one's deep erotic, sexual and social bond to the other person inducing her/him to engage in a longer lasting partnership which would, in the normal case, lead to staying and having children together. Of course, such signals can be cleverly faked: the victims of Mr. Sgarbi were no fools, but the power of their relationship to this criminal pretending romantic love blinded their mind. Yet, in normal cases, we can assume, the system has worked well enough in the hominid or human past.

To have a powerful, convincing love song made by somebody, to receive other signs of his/her deep involvement, must have always exercised a strong attraction. As women are the one's who choose partners for reproduction and men the ones who present themselves with a potpourri of their best characteristics and capacities, it is likely that expressing romantic love, e.g. in poetry, song or otherwise, should be a male form of courtship behaviour (for the role of singing cp. Lehmann et al. 2008). I wonder whether crosscultural research could prove this general prediction... in a time when specifically western types of sexuality and related behaviours are spreading around the globe.

The philosopher Heinrich Meier has expressed (2001, p. 336, translated by WS) the very nature of the kind of love this chapter has dealt with in convincing words: "... the genuine force, from which love draws its power of resisting society, culture and history; this might, which comes from far and roots deeper than anything else which obeys human discretion, is capable of opening realms of happiness in the midst of the most adverse conditions".

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