ISCTE IUL REPOSITÓRIO
INSTITUTO UNIVERSITÁRIO DE LISBOA

Repositório ISCTE-IUL

The Best Loved Story of All Time:
Overcoming All Obstacles to Be Reunited,
Evoking Kama Muta[*]

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Why are some stories more popular than others – more eagerly heard, read, retold, and remembered? In particular, there is one plot that is more appreciated and more often told than all the others: the protagonists who are bound by love but separated by challenging obstacles that they struggle to overcome, before finally reuniting in the end. The protagonists are often lovers or spouses, but (in the main or subsidiary plots) the characters may be family members, blood brothers, or a leader and his or her community. So the "love" may be romantic, familial, affiliative, band, or patriotic; but it always consists of a feeling of union, or, more precisely, communal sharing (Fiske 1991). This is the story that people are most eager to tell and to hear, to gather and listen to together, and to retell countless times even when they know just how it will turn out. Why?

While the central narrative is consistent, this story has various elaborations. Hogan (2003) identified four narrative prototypes that are the most widely shared, highly esteemed, and enduring in their literary traditions around the world. The most salient and prevalent of the four is the *romantic tragi-comedy* in which lovers are separated, and often in conflict with their family or community. There may be a rival for the affections of one or both of the lovers. There are uncertainties and confusion, until finally she, they overcome all obstacles to reunite in blissful love, while also reconciled with their families and community. In the *heroic* narrative a leader loses his position in the community, is exiled or imprisoned, risks death to face and defeat an enemy or monster that threatens the community, defeats a usurper, and thereby regains his rightful place in the community (including his family), acclaimed by all, and often paired with the mate he desired all along. Two other universal but less prevalent and less culturally important prototypes are the *famine* and *natural disaster* narratives, in which a threat to the very existence of the community is finally overcome, restoring its social integrity. Independently, Booker (2004) found seven basic plots in Western literature, popular books, and movies. One is the *comedy*; it corresponds pretty closely with Hogan's romantic tragi-comedy. This contrasts with *tragedy,* which

Booker says consists of anticipation, dream, frustration, nightmare, and destruction. The third basic plot is *overcoming the monster,* which is similar to Hogan's heroic narrative in that the hero risks death to save the community from the threatening monster, thereby becoming the central member of the community and, often, returns safely to his love. In the *rags to riches* plot, a hero or heroine is disdained and rejected by the community, has a series of adventures in which he or she demonstrates his or her virtue, thereby gains the esteem and acceptance of the community, wins the hand of a beautiful princess or prince, so that at last, the couple are "united, a man and woman brought together in perfect love" (Booker 2004, 56). In the *quest* and *voyage and return* plots, the protagonist has to leave his or her love and succeed in difficult ventures in order to be reunited with his or her true love and reintegrated into the community. In *rebirth,* the hero is overcome by black magic that totally isolates him, but then rescued by the power of love and "at last united with his missing 'other half' to make him whole" (Booker 2004, 213). "The supreme symbol of completion in story telling is the union of two people, hero and heroine, masculine and feminine, to make a whole . . . [and] finally become one" (Booker 2004, 235). This is the essence of all of the basic Western plots except tragedy, in which the ardently hoped-for reunification and restoration fails to occur, and the protagonists typically die. Yet in their dying they often assert and confirm their love more profoundly than anyone could in life.

All of the narrative lines that Hogan and Booker identify as prototypical and basic have a common core: separation, overcoming obstacles, and reuniting. The protagonists are separated from their lover, their family, and their community, then reunited with all. This evokes a pleasant, sought-after, and memorable emotion: *kama muta* (Fiske, Schubert, and Seibt 2017). Kama muta doesn't precisely correspond to any of the vague and variably-used emotion terms in any language, but it is approximately what people often mean when they say they are *moved, touched, stirred, enraptured, nostalgic, smitten, infatuated,* have a *heart-warming* experience or *the feels,* shed *tears of joy,* or see something cute that makes them feel *tenderness.* In Mandarin, Japanese, and Korean it's often labelled 感动 (respectively, *gǎn dòng, kando, gam dong*), in German *bewegt sein* or *gerührt sein,* in Hungarian *megérintett,* in Tamil *santosham,* in Malayan-Indonesian *terharu.* We give this emotion the scientific name kama muta (Sanskrit, "moved by love") in order to define the construct precisely and consistently, independently of the diverse and context-dependent meanings of any vernacular term.

When people feel mild kama muta, they typically have no physical sensations, but when they feel it strongly, they usually have many or all of these characteristic symptoms: a warm or other feeling in the center of the chest, goosebumps, tears, and being choked up or having a lump in the throat (Schubert, Zickfeld, Seibt, and Fiske 2017). People may take a deep breath, say something like *awww,* and place one or both hands over the heart. When the feeling is very strong, it may be followed by a feeling of buoyancy (floating) and exhilaration. When it is exceptionally strong, it is one of the peak experiences of

life. It's an experience that people like to give to those they are fond of and experience together with them: people want to share it.

People feel kama muta when a communal sharing relationship suddenly intensifies (Seibt, Schubert, Zickfeld, and Fiske 2017; Fiske et al 2017; Schubert et al. 2017). Communal sharing (CS) is the perception of being equivalent in some essential respect—being the same kind, identifying with one another, belonging together, inclusion (Fiske 1991). In short, it's love, in the broadest sense. If we take the themes that are common to Hogan's (2003) narrative prototypes and Booker's (2004) basic plots, they constitute the best loved story of all time: A tale in which the protagonists belong together, desperately want to be together, but are separated by great obstacles, and then in the end suddenly reunite, or, in tragedy, show their total devotion to the CS relationship above all else). That is, their CS relationship suddenly intensifies. The protagonists feel kama muta, and the audience feels it with them. It is a wonderful feeling. So people are eager to hear stories that make them feel kama muta, they bring others with them to hear them, they remember them, and they avidly retell them over and over.

Kama muta has a definite adaptive function (in both senses of the word "function"): it maps propitious opportunities for new benefits from CS relationships onto motives to devote, commit to, and cultivate those CS relationships. Kama muta is culturally attuned to the particular indices of intensification of the CS relationships that are adaptively important in one's specific community. And it is culturally tuned to motivate the exact actions that are locally fruitful for cultivating these particular CS relationships (Fiske et al. 2017). Thus, like other socio-moral emotions, kama muta has evolved to motivate people to adopt fruitful tactics to regulate their relationships beneficially (Fiske 2002, 2010).

The best loved story of all time has culturally evolved under selection by the evolved psychology of the kama muta emotion. That is, the more a story evokes kama muta, the more people like it, the more they admire people who tell it, the better they remember it, the more they call others to listen to it with them, and the more they retell it. Kama muta-evoking stories resonate with this evolved emotion so as to survive and replicate, enduring over time and diffusing across communities. We can see this happening in real time today in social media, where the more content evokes kama muta, the more likely people are to post it and share it.

The selective effects of kama muta on the cultural evolution of stories are certainly not limited to their plots. Techniques of voice, rhythm, diction, and syntax that are especially evocative are favored. Kama muta has most likely shaped the cultural evolution of lyric poetry. Moreover, music can strongly evoke kama muta when it makes players or audience feel one with each other and with the music itself; and accompanying a CS-intensification narrative with appropriate music enhances the evocation of kama muta (Strick, de Bruin, Ruiter, and Jonkers 2015). Think of opera, or the lyrics of blues, country and western, and many forms of popular music.

It is not just the stories themselves that culturally evolve under selection by our innate disposition to kama muta. We posit that kama muta favors the development of the technologies for conveying the stories (e.g., YouTube) and evoking it most effectively (e.g., animated movies). We suppose that theater, musical instruments, printed media, audio recording, radio, cinema, television, digital recording, and social media platforms that more readily evoke kama muta have competitive advantages over media that less readily do so.

When one's own CS relationship suddenly intensifies, feeling kama muta confers biological fitness because it motivates one to devote and commit to the newly propitious relationship, enabling one to benefit from the enhanced opportunities for mutualism. But does feeling kama muta when listening to a story confer any direct benefits for biological fitness? Perhaps it does, because it is likely to galvanize the listener to make fruitful efforts to seek, cultivate, maintain, restore, and enhance CS relationships they need in their particular culture. Kama muta-evoking stories are prototypes and precedents for how the listener should devote and commit to the CS relationships that are most valued in their community. Furthermore, people like to transmit kama muta to others and, above all, experience it together with others, in this case, by listening together. This sharing of kama muta creates solidarity among the listeners. That is, listening together sometimes evokes further kama muta that enhances a potentially beneficial CS relationship uniting the audience.

In short, the best loved story of all time enhances the CS relationships that all humans depend on. And one thing is for sure: overcoming all obstacles and finally getting back together is the best love story of all time.

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