

## INTERCULTURAL ROMANCE - TRISTAN & HESI

“I love you.” Think of how many times you have said it and had it said to you – or not. In some cultures, these three words are not as widely spoken as in Western cultures. For many, if not most of us in Western cultures, romance plays a large part in our lives and so those three words are typically spoken numerous times to a number of *amants* or *amantes* in a lifetime. Within our own culture, saying “I Love You” means different things to different people at different times and in different situations. For example, the momentous first I Love You in the life of a romantic relationship might actually mean I Am *In Love* with you. For many of us in the West, the veil of infatuation and the drive of hormones can prevent us from understanding the difference between the two. Late in life, a friend asked Marlon Brando what else in life he would like to experience before the final scene. He wistfully responded, “I’d like to fall in love one more time.....but don’t tell my wife, OK?” Other times, a quick I Love You and peck on the cheek as you are going out the door can be more of an after-thought, or force of habit, than anything else.

The romantic communication process is complicated enough within one’s own culture. A whole array of factors is involved when we give and/or receive messages. We know that in addition to the actual words which we utter; body language, voice inflection, timing, history of the relationship, and the emotional baggage that has been accumulated all influence the way in which a message is interpreted. This process of interpretation is sometimes, as it is in this article, referred to as decoding. The story of Tristan and Hesi deals with cultural decoding that happens - or not - in an intercultural romantic relationship.

### THE BUS RIDE: ONE SCENE IN THE LIFE OF TRISTAN & HESI

As you look into the scene, try thinking about how you might, if you were their friend, help Tristan and Hesi understand the decoding process and the specific impact of culture on their relationship. The following societal dynamics may be relevant – individuality/collectivism, self-disclosure, the myth of Western romantic love, family roles, courtship, sex and marriage, and the priorities of happiness vs. duty and obligation.

#### Tristan

Tristan is a 28-year-old American. He resides in New York City and works for an international voluntary agency. He lived and worked in Japan for two years.

#### Hesi

Hesi is 25. She is a Coptic Egyptian who grew up in Alexandria. She came to the USA about one year ago and is enrolled in a graduate program at Columbia University. Previously, she spent one year as a university student in Germany.

#### Scenario

Tristan and Hesi met ten months ago shortly after Hesi arrived in the USA. They quickly fell in love and have been dating each other exclusively since then. Tristan has just met up with Hesi at Columbia. They have just boarded a bus and are on their way to Tristan's apartment.

**TRISTAN:** (chuckling to himself) He finally broke down. My dad called me at work today and says he's coming out for a visit next month. I didn't think he would ever make the plunge and head out here. Oh, “take the plunge” means make the big decision.

**HESI:** Great! How long will he stay?

**TRISTAN:** A week.

**HESI:** I'm happy and glad but also nervous to meet him.

**TRISTAN:** Ah, don't worry. (puts his arm around Hesi) He's been looking forward to meeting you for a long time now. He'll like you because you're you. Anyway, we'll talk more about it later. I want to hear about that physics class of yours.

**HESI:** Ecch! My English is bad. Today we had a pop quiz. The professor interviewed us rather than take a test in writing. When he said that, I didn't know what was I gonna do!

**TRISTAN:** Yeah, I can give you some help later tonight. I tried to call you at the graduate office today. I thought I might catch you on your break but they said you were out. I wanted to tell you about my dad coming out.

**HESI:** I was having a coffee with a guy in my class. His name is Eric.

**TRISTAN:** Eric? (suddenly alert)

**HESI:** Haven't I told you about him? (laughs to herself) Today he was trying to speak Arabic and he sounds so funny.

**TRISTAN:** Is he studying Arabic?

**HESI:** No, but he stayed in Alexandria for a few months last year.

**TRISTAN:** Oh yeah?

**HESI:** Yes, he's really nice. Whenever we have coffee together we talk about what's going on there.

**TRISTAN:** Which class is he in?

**HESI:** Oh, he's in two of my classes; global business and that cultural communication class that my advisor, Mitch, is teaching. Eric asked me to come over to his house for dinner this Friday. He wants to cook Middle Eastern food for me.

**TRISTAN:** Are you going?

**HESI:** I told him I was already busy, but I feel bad because this is the third time he's asked me.

**TRISTAN:** (takes his arm off of Hesi's shoulder) Hmm. (looks distractedly out the window)

**HESI:** (looks hard at Tristan and sees something is bothering him so tries small talk) When do you want to help me with my schoolwork?

**TRISTAN:** What, oh anytime is okay (still preoccupied.)

**HESI:** (a bit exasperated) What's wrong Tristan?

**TRISTAN:** (glances at her and then back out the window) Nothing.

**HESI:** Come on, you were happy when we got on the bus and now you seem strange.

**TRISTAN:** (irritably) It's nothing... who is this guy Eric? Why didn't you tell me about him before?

**HESI:** (looks surprised by his reaction) Well, it never came up before.

**TRISTAN:** (incredulously) Some guy is inviting you to his house for dinner and it's never come up before? What do you tell him when he invites you over?

**HESI:** I just say I can't.

**TRISTAN:** Have you told him about me?

**HESI:** No!

**TRISTAN:** (getting more upset) You're leading him on whether you think so or not. Why don't you tell him about me? Whenever I think that a woman is interested in me as more than a friend I somehow work into the conversation something about you. Then she knows I'm not interested in her romantically.

**HESI:** (defensively) Do you think I'm flirting with him? Do you think I want to go out with him?

**TRISTAN:** Well.... no..... not exactly.

**HESI:** Thank you!

**TRISTAN:** (still upset) Why don't you tell him about me?

**HESI:** Only my best friend knows about you. It's too personal to tell others.

**TRISTAN:** I always get this feeling like you want to keep our relationship a big secret. (looks her in the eye and speaks passionately) I love you. I've never been happier with anyone and I want to share it with the world (raises his voice and addresses the rest of the passengers) I love this woman. She's the love of my life and... (Hesi interrupts)

**HESI:** (embarrassingly, *sotto voce*) Shhh... you're embarrassing me. Be quiet.

(two minutes of silence)

**TRISTAN:** And what about those Arab guys at school? We can't even hold hands around those guys. If you told them all about me you would not have them looking at you the way they do.

**HESI:** (exasperation has set in) Don't you understand?! If those guys knew you were my boyfriend it would be terrible. If they knew I was with an American guy they would think that I am a slut. Going out with an American means to them that you automatically have sex. My reputation would be gone and they would feel free to try to flirt with me. Besides, it's possible that my family back home might found out about us through some connection with them.

**TRISTAN:** (sarcastically) Oh, that would be just terrible!

**HESI:** Sure, I could tell them that I'm in love with you. Then they would say, "okay you're in love - what are you going to do about it?" We don't have dating. You know that.

**TRISTAN:** Well, are you going to let them run your life forever? You're a 25-year-old woman.

**HESI:** It isn't so easy.

**TRISTAN:** I'm tired of this! Let's call them tomorrow and tell them. Then we can let the whole world know about our love.

**HESI:** The only way I can do that is if we plan to get married. Is that what you want Tristan?

(Tristan is dumbfounded as he calms down and looks out the window of the bus).

THE END

## REFLECTIONS ON TRISTAN & HESI

### **Perception is Everything.**

Tristan and Hesi both experienced conflicting emotions throughout this entire scene. Their communication was rife with interference due to differing cultural values. When Hesi first told Tristan about Eric inviting her over to dinner, her message was, "I have made a new friend and he is very nice." When Tristan heard it, he may have perceived the message to mean, "There's a guy in her class who is interested in dating her and she hasn't told him about me and that she's not interested in a date...I might not really be the only guy in Hesi's life." Cultural values concerning dating came into play here. In the United States dating is a common part of life. The assumption is that if a man invites a woman to his house for dinner he may very well be interested in her romantically.

Hesi's reluctance to tell others of her and Tristan's relationship was also interpreted differently by Tristan and Hesi. For Hesi, the message she was sending was, "I love you deeply and because this is such an intensely personal matter I can only disclose it to the closest of my friends." Tristan interpreted the message to mean, "If you don't want to tell people about us you must not be proud of our relationship or you want to leave an opening for dating other men." Being open and honest is a positive value in Tristan's culture. Tristan's apparent ease in telling other people about their relationship could have been decoded by Hesi to mean, "Our relationship must not be very deep if you can casually relate it to any acquaintance." In addition, when Tristan says, "why don't you tell Eric about us?" Hesi could be interpreting it to mean, "Tristan doesn't trust me."

### **Relationships Are Hard Enough Already.**

Similar types of problems occur in intercultural relationships with differing cultural values providing an additional complication. Tristan's uninhibited behavior on the bus was positive for him. He saw it as romantic and full of pride. Hesi did not see the romantic side, and could only feel embarrassed by his eccentric outburst.

Tristan had difficulty understanding why Hesi held back from telling her parents about their relationship. Independence from parents is valued in his culture and he couldn't (or didn't want to) see why a 25-year-old woman should have to depend upon her parents' approval in order to carry out a relationship. Tristan had obviously told his father about Hesi long ago. The courtship and sexual values of Hesi's culture are obviously conservative.

I can imagine anyone sitting near Tristan and Hesi on the bus may have been fairly confused as to what was going on between them. I am reminded of a passage from E.L. Doctorow's book, *Waterworks*; "Who knows? Even if you're sitting right there listening, you can never tell what lovers are arguing about. They don't know themselves." I would say that putting cultural differences into the mix only amplifies this passage.

### **Romantic Relationships: Cultural Due Diligence Needed?**

Questioning our cultural values and learning about the other's values is a valid exercise to engage in before and during all intercultural relationships, including those of an intimate nature. We first need to become aware of our own values and assumptions before we can realize how others are different. Once we gain an understanding of our own and our counterparts' values and the resultant behaviors, we can begin to adapt our behavior in order to experience more positive and in-depth intercultural experiences. This critical examination of our values requires a commitment to go through some emotional turmoil. Effectively working through intercultural value and adaptation ambiguities results in a higher-level ability to understand ourselves and subsequently develop stronger relationships.

Listening to Jackson Browne while I write:

Don't let the uncertainty turn you around  
The world keeps turning around and around  
Go on and make a joyful sound

- "For a Dancer" on *Late for the Sky*

Ambiguity is one of the defining characteristics of almost any intercultural interaction. A mistake that people often make is to put all their efforts into eliminating ambiguity, which is impossible. One of the skills that interculturally competent people develop is “dealing with ambiguity and lack of interaction closure.” That’s a tricky one to translate into actionable behavior. In the past I have advised people to do something physical when faced with uncomfortable ambiguity. I wiggle my toes inside my shoes and focus on that. Some people focus on their breathing. I have found that singing inside my head (I would never think to expose people to my inability to carry a tune out loud) also helps. I often sing the Jackson Browne verse because of the lyric’s explicit reference to uncertainty. I imagine that some of you are thinking about the difference between uncertainty and ambiguity, but please indulge my not getting into that here. I don’t think this omission will affect the gist and spirit of this passage.

In my experience, intercultural marriages and/or intimate relationships are often characterized by the same dynamics that happen within organizational intercultural relationships. In particular, the minimization and even total ignoring of cultural differences often exists. I once asked a female American workshop participant if her Indian husband was Hindu or Muslim. She said she didn’t know. I was floored and thought she was joking, but probed to find out that she really didn’t know. This is extreme but nonetheless, ignorance of cultural difference exists within these relationships. Intercultural intimate relationships need to be paid with the attention of cultural difference recognition and explanation.

### **Intercultural Interaction Skills Workshop Anecdote**

During the course of conducting intercultural competence development workshops, I’ve experienced a number of times when a participant involved in an intercultural marriage or relationship exclaimed something like, “so that’s why my wife didn’t understand me,” or “I can see now that my husband and I have a cultural difference in how we are raising our kids. I thought it was just an individual personality difference.”

At the conclusion of facilitating an Intercultural Interaction Skills Workshop (now known as the Talaria Intercultural Interaction Skills (TIIS) Workshop), one participant remained in the room and was completing his evaluation. I approached him to ask for some feedback on a particular aspect of the workshop. As I approached him, I noticed he was weeping. I receive a lot of intense reactions from participants of this workshop, but I don’t think I had ever had a guy crying afterward. When I handed him a tissue and asked if he was all right, the weeping turned into uncontrollable sobs. Once he caught his breath he said the following:

I realize now that I’ve been such a jerk to my wife. She grew up in [he cites a foreign country] and in the 14 years we have been married, I’ve not one time really included her culture as a part of our relationship. She has been accommodating to my culture all along. Also, I went to [names a university known for its large foreign student population and study abroad programming] and almost all of my friends were from other countries. I felt then, as I did before doing this workshop, that they were just like me. I see now that they were just assimilating into the dominant white American culture and I never recognized or included their cultures.

I have the same recommendation for intercultural intimate relationship partners that I have for organizational intercultural counterparts – to proactively and openly recognize cultural differences and work together to reconcile the differences toward strengthening relationships and achieving your joint goals. I have to admit though, at the same time a large part of me is reluctant to entrust this kind of relationship to logic and rational thinking. Perhaps intercultural intimate relationships are better left to the language of poetry. The following verses were written by Rumi, the 13<sup>th</sup> century Persian poet.

Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.

The minute I heard my first love story,  
I started looking for you, not knowing  
how blind that was.  
Lovers don't finally meet somewhere.  
They're in each other all along.