

Finding Love Offshore in the Select Novels of Amitav Ghosh

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Abstract

One of the greatest legends of Cornwall is the tragic tale of Tristram and Isolde – also known as Tristan and Iseult - retold in numerous sources with many variations since the 12th century. The fateful love story is between Tristram, the nephew of King Mark of Cornwall, and Isolde, the princess of Ireland who later became the Queen of Cornwall. Amitav Ghosh mentions the story in his novel *The Shadow Lines* where the unnamed narrator fiercely identified himself with the protagonist Tridib. The narrator carries his uncle Tridib within him, and relives his life, fantasies and perceptions. He is an extension of Tridib's desires and dreams, so that he finally must have had Tridib's girl too. When Tridib was a boy he received 'Tristan - Iseult' story as a birthday gift. In the story Tristan, the hero is "a man without a country, who fell in love with a woman-across-the seas". Symbolically Tridib, a Bengali Indian is associated with Tristan; he fell in love with May, a woman-across-the seas i.e. England. Tridib had told the story to the narrator before his death. Interestingly, Tristan was a knight who fell in love with Iseult, his uncle's bride. The narrator too secured a kind of bonding with his uncle's beloved May. Finding one's love across the sea is repeatedly found in Ghosh's novels. The protagonist of his novel *The Glass Palace* Rajkumar, a eleven-year old Indian orphan boy fell in love the ten-year old Dolly Sein, a faithful maid of the Burmese Queen Supayalat and fulfilled his promise of winning her hand after becoming an adult; only this time he came from Burma and found her in India. Another similar love story is found in Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* where an American scientist Piya found her soul mate in an illiterate fisherman Fokir when she visited the Sundarbans. An interesting fact about the Bengal-born author Amitav Ghosh is that he too found his love Deborah Baker when he went offshore to the United States. The paper intends to analyse the irresistible attraction between strangers across the seas that leads to cross-cultural influences in the select novels of Amitav Ghosh.

KEYWORDS: Tristan and Iseult, cross-culture, love, union of aliens.

The fateful love between Tristram, the nephew of King Mark of Cornwall, and Isolde, the princess of Ireland who later became the Queen of Cornwall, also known as -Tristan and Iseult - is retold with many variations since the 12th century. The tale of love is sacred yet forbidden, healing yet destructive and fulfilling yet frustrating. There are two main traditions of the Tristan legend. The early tradition comprised of the romances from two French poets in the second half of the twelfth century – Thomas and Beroul. Their sources could be traced back to the original Celtic romance. Tristan's father, a lord lost his life in the war fighting his enemies and his mother died immediately after giving birth to him. The orphaned Tristan was adopted by his maternal uncle King Mark of Cornwall. Once he was heavily wounded in a battle and was healed by Queen Isolde the Elder of Ireland. Having slain a dragon that was devastating Ireland, the young Tristan asked the

hand of the princess Isolde for his uncle. On the homeward journey Tristan and Isolde accidentally drank the love potion prepared by the queen for her daughter and King Mark. Henceforward, the two became bound to each other by an imperishable love that dared all dangers. Since he did not want to destroy their loyalty to the king, he went to Brittany and married Isolde of the White Hands, the daughter of a duke. Wounded by a poisoned weapon, he sent for the other Isolde, who alone could heal him. If she agreed to come, the ship was to have a white sail; if she refused, a black sail. On seeing the ship, his jealous wife told him that it carried a black sail. Tristan died broken-hearted, and Isolde, arriving too late to save her love, yielded up her life in a final embrace. This tragic love story is mentioned by Amitav Ghosh in his famous work *The Shadow Lines*. Love affairs and marriages of couples across countries and cultures frequently occur in the novels of Ghosh. The paper intends to explore how the characters in Ghosh's novels from across the seas try to bond themselves through various relationships such as love, friendship and marriage in spite of the differences among them.

The Shadow Lines portrays love affairs across countries. Tridib, the protagonist of the novel *The Shadow Lines* is the uncle of the unnamed narrator. The narrator has no name, no personality and no mark of his own. Since childhood, he had attempted a conscious identification with Tridib. When he tried to define Tridib's looks, he subsequently came to identify himself with Tridib: "I had decided that he had looked like me" (SL 3). Hence he aspired not to be like Tridib, but Tridib himself. When Tridib was a boy he received 'Tristan - Iseult' story from Snipe, Mrs. Price's husband as a birthday gift. In the story Tristan, the hero is "a man without a country, who fell in love with a woman-across-the seas" (SL 183). Symbolically Tridib is associated with Tristan; he fell in love with May, a woman-across-the seas.

Tridib-May relationship marks the thematic framework of the novel. The romantic love best exemplified by Tridib and May Price is intense despite the distance that separates them. Their love had blossomed transcending the shadow lines of nationality and cultural boundary. Ghosh explores the mysterious pull between Tridib and May when their two nations – India and England – were against each other. He questions the validity of geographical boundaries and celebrates the union of aliens pulled together by love. In his article "The Shadow Lines: A Quest for Indivisible Sanity", Murari Prasad comments, "Ghosh who passionately searches for strategies for survival in a violent, hate-filled world of narrow divisions finds in love the enabling and productive action to tide over separatist propensities of communities and nationality groups" (91).

The adolescent infatuation of the narrator for his cousin Ila, grows into adult passion. It is her exotic appeal, the striking foreignness, her western ways and easy informality that hooks the narrator on to Ila. She turns him crazy and he is helpless before her. The love of the narrator remained unfulfilled. But Ila, on her part, is enthralled by Nick, Mrs. Price's son. So in a sense, Ila's condition in relation to Nick is the same as that of the narrator's to Ila. Her marriage to Nick is the second example of her futile attraction for the alien land. For it is a marriage of convenience where the jobless Nick gets support from Ila's father and Ila migrates to London. Consequently it leads to futility as Nick continues to have affairs with many women.

Tridib had told the 'Tristan - Iseult' story to the narrator before he left for Dhaka where he met with his cruel death. Just as Tristan fell in love with Iseult, his uncle's bride, the narrator too secured a kind of bonding with his uncle's beloved May. The final

interpretation of the death of Tridib by May as a 'sacrifice' unites the narrator with her. It is only at the very end of the novel, she realizes the meaning of Tridib's sacrifice: "He gave himself up; it was a sacrifice. I know I can't understand it, I know I mustn't try, for any real sacrifice is a mystery" (SL 251-252). At the end of the novel, "... when we [the narrator and May] lay in each other's arms quietly" (SL 252).

In the novel *The Glass Palace*, Rajkumar, an Indian orphan settled down in Burma went to India in search of the love of his life and later married Dolly, a Burmese attendant who accompanied the royal captives of Burma to India. When Rajkumar was a eleven-year old boy sets his eyes on the ten-year old Dolly Sein, and promised her of winning her hand after becoming an adult. Two days after the fall of Burma, the royal family was planned to be exiled to Ratnagiri in India. Dolly too had to leave her homeland together with the royal family. When the people of Mandalay looted the unguarded palace, Rajkumar was among the intruders. Rajkumar offered her a jeweled ivory box, his loot and parted with her by making a gesture at Dolly which was "... more a sign than a wave. 'I will see you again' " (GP 36).

Rajkumar rose from an orphan Indian boy to a successful timber merchant of Burma. He thought that it was time to look for Dolly. His friendship with D.P. Roy enabled him to visit Ratnagiri for he hoped that it was the first place to start searching for Dolly. His love for Dolly is such that he cannot forget her. He was surprised that he had found her so easily. With Uma's help, after much hesitation, Dolly is convinced of Rajkumar's love. They got married and went to Burma. Rajkumar's son Dinu is infatuated with Saya John's granddaughter Alison who in turn is attracted to Uma Dey's nephew Arjun. But their affairs are ill-fated and they are not united in marriage. They are separated from one another because of the Second World War that takes away the lives of Alison and Arjun. Dinu in the end marries a Burmese writer Ma Thin Thin Aye. After the King's death, the Queen and the Princesses were allowed to return to Burma. The two Princesses who were born in Burma married ordinary Indians and the other two Princesses who were born in exile in India married Burmese men and settled down in Burma.

The Hungry Tide portrays the romantic triangle between the three principal characters – Kanai, Piya and Fokir. The novel opens with the chance meeting of Kanai, a Delhi-based translator and Piya, a US brought up scientist. The romantic possibility in their relationship gets complicated after the introduction of Fokir. The low class fisherman Fokir is an anti-thesis to the urbane Piya and the sophisticated Delhi-based businessman Kanai. Their relationship gets complicated when they went together for an expedition in search of river dolphins.

Piya does not understand Bengali and Fokir does not know English. But they had no communication barrier. They were drawn towards each other by their love of nature. The harmony of their communion did not require verbal communication. They share a silent bond that goes beyond language. The two of them did their work without disrupting each other's work:

It was surprising enough that their jobs had not proved to be utterly incompatible – especially considering that one of the tasks required the input of geostationary satellites while the other depended on bits of shark – bone and broken tile. But that it had proved possible for two such different people to pursue their own ends simultaneously – people who

could not exchange a word with each other and had no idea of what was going on in one another's heads – was far more than surprising: it seemed almost miraculous. (HT 141)

Piya intuitively understood that Fokir found solace only in the company of his son and in his silent fishing expeditions. Fokir too seemed to be very understanding towards Piya. Even her simplest needs like privacy and warmth were provided to her by him. When Fokir's boat came across a cluster of fishing boats that were anchored in a canal, Fokir steered the boat away from them. In order to avoid answering the questions regarding Piya, he anchored it in a lonely place. While she was shivering during the night due to the cold weather, he lied down near her to warm her. In spite of their physical intimacy, nothing wrong happened between them and she felt happy about that. The two days and the two nights she spent with Fokir and Tutul in Fokir's boat remain an unforgettable part of her life. Piya who was not attracted by the urbane, educated Kanai was drawn towards the illiterate fisherman Fokir. Love is an irresistible force that had consumed both Fokir and Piya, even though they were kept apart by language, class, literacy and by the social institution of marriage. Beyond the stereotyped spoken romance, Ghosh displays the bond between Piya and Fokir that does not require speech or language.

Love and human bonding between two individuals can never be dictated; it can take place between people from entirely dissimilar backgrounds. Though the initial attraction between the strangers is due to their respective foreignness, they try to bond themselves in new relationships across social, class, caste, cultural and national divides with adaptive approach. Hence being prompted by cross-cultural influences, most of the characters of Ghosh find the love of their life offshore.

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