

Jarmakani, Amira. *An Imperialist Love Story: Desert Romances and the War on Terror*. Pp. 288. New York: NYU Press, 2015. US \$28.00 (paper). ISBN: 9781479820863.

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In recent years, there has been a surge of academic interest in the sheikh romance, or what some call “desert romance.” The term describes a small subgenre that appears primarily as category romance, in which the Western heroine finds herself at the mercy of a domineering Middle-Eastern sheikh; common conventions of the novels include captivity, sand, harems, invented geography, horses, and, ideally, feminist reforms in the sheikh’s sadly backward kingdom. These novels have a long and storied history, but one might have expected the events of September 11, 2001, and contemporary American military involvement in the Middle East, to make the form less popular. Instead, publication nearly quadrupled. Exactly how political events might relate to romance readers’ increased desire to read about sexy alpha sheikhs is open to interpretation, especially since the majority of these novels are expressly free of politics, religion, and even real-world geography. *An Imperialist Love Story: Desert Romances and the War on Terror* (2015), the most recent entry into this discussion, reads these novels not as a response to the war on terror but as part of the necessary cultural work that makes this war possible.

Jarmakani’s book joins other recent analyses by Hsu-Ming Teo, Amy Burge, and Stacy Holden. Teo is a cultural historian who, in *Desert Passions: Orientalism and Romance Novel* (2012), examines the role of “the Orient” in Western cultural texts from the Second Crusade onward. She factors in the national contexts of the U.K, the US, and Australia, and her analysis of popular romance includes types of Orientalist romance less widely studied, such as historicals. Burge, a British medievalist, has a book forthcoming called *Representing Difference in the Medieval and Modern Orientalist Romance* (Palgrave, 2016), which builds on her 2012 doctoral thesis. This is by far the most systematic, precisely designed study of sheikh romance to date; her book analyzes change and continuity in romantic fantasies about the “romance East.” Holden’s article “Love in the Desert” (2015) draws on a series of disarmingly frank interviews she held with editors and authors of sheikh romance and examines their goals and constraints. As a historian specializing in the modern Middle East and North Africa, Holden has a solid grounding in the political context of the novels.

Jarmakani makes a lively contribution to this scholarship. She is primarily a theorist, and her work delves heavily into critical race and gender theory, as well as psychoanalytic theory. As such, her work is in some ways a better fit with the early feminist critics of popular romance, Tania Modleski and Janice Radway, than with the other scholars working on sheikh romance. However, her theoretical approach is not what will make this book most valuable to romance scholars: instead, it is her insistence that we read these books from the perspective of the Arab and/or Middle Eastern and/or Muslim characters. Many analyses of popular romance foreground gender, so this is a welcome addition. Her examples draw our attention to those ubiquitous scenes of silent, indistinguishable women in hijab, scenes not unique to sheikh romance but permeating American media. Because Jarmakani comes to popular romance through her scholarly interest in cultural representations of Arab and Muslim women, she is not particularly interested in the novelists' intentions, or the potential effect of these novels on their readers, or even the texts themselves. Instead, she explores the way in which tropes and motifs in these books fit within a larger context of American ideas about the Middle East.

Two parts of this book were published before: "'The Sheik Who Loved Me': Romancing the War on Terror" (2010) in *Signs*, and "Desiring the Big Bad Blade: Racing the Sheikh in Desert Romances" (2011) in *American Quarterly*. While both are solid stand-alone pieces, this book joins them in an overarching argument using ideas from transnational feminism, critical theory, and psychoanalytic theory via Deleuze and Guattari.

An Imperialist Love Story places sheikh romance firmly in the context of neoliberalism, American political ideology, and liberal multiculturalism. Jarmakani argues that imperialism may look different than it did in earlier centuries, but it is still alive and well, providing real economic benefit to the Western nations that engage in it. Most of us, however, do not like to think of ourselves as intervening in foreign nations for economic or political gain; thus, as a culture we prefer to understand our actions as benevolent, perhaps an effort to rescue oppressed people from merciless regimes or vicious jihadists. We also like to see these interventions as atypical, temporary responses to exceptional circumstances, rather than a characteristic strategy for exploiting other parts of the world for their labor, their natural resources, and geopolitical advantages. Interpreting self-serving military action as aid requires some serious spin, which we can accomplish in a number of ways. For example, by insisting that our own values—self-determination, freedom, democracy, etc.—are universal values, of benefit to everyone, we can interpret many foreign governments or cultures as in urgent need of intervention. The Middle East, with its vast oil reserves and strategic location vis-à-vis Europe and Russia, has historically been an irresistible target for such intervention. If decades of fending off assorted Western militaries should prompt people in the region to hate us and wish us harm, Jarmakani muses, then we have yet another justification for waging war.

Jarmakani's argument thus far is familiar. Her next step takes us into the terrain of psychoanalytic theory, but at the level of culture rather than the individual. Our relationship with the Middle East is all about desire, she argues, but in the sheikh romance, we reimagine our political and economic desires as other kinds of desire: to mate, to affiliate, to help. In this regard, the "romantic sheikh is contemporary US imperialism personified" (xix). He is a companion figure to the terrorist, both of whom spur us to intervene in the region. While the terrorist motivates through fear, the sheikh motivates through desire, and in his contemporary incarnation he is not only a romance hero but also

the ideal political ally, willing to cooperate with the US and representing views on human rights and strategic economic interests that “Anglo-American powers” want to foster. While other scholars have interpreted the sheikh romance as working *against* popular rhetoric about Islamic extremism, Jarmakani suggests that the reconciliation we see in these books serves our national political agenda and expresses the same imperialist tendencies, albeit in a more benevolent guise. Her analysis of the heroine also has a political framework, drawing our attention to the feminist imperialist fantasies (of rescuing our helpless foreign sisters) played out in these novels.

My single favorite concept in this book arises from Jarmakani’s discussion of the setting of sheikh romance. The twenty-first century sheikh romance usually takes place in an imaginary land, in which authors invent kingdoms and customs with a freewheeling disregard for the real world, even while a number of conventional features (such as sand, harems, horses, and exotic dress) create a recognizable if fictitious landscape for readers. To scholars struggling to describe this setting, Jarmakani offers the term “Arabiastan.”[1] Use of the term nods towards the Orientalist fantasy yet draws our attention to the geo-political implications of this space. Additionally, Arabiastan cleverly mirrors the convention in contemporary sheikh romance of inventing one’s own country.

To return to the issue of feminism, Jarmakani criticizes scholarship on romance for relying on “empowerment” or “choice” feminism. This popular version of feminism rests on the idea that anything a woman does to make herself feel good and powerful is inherently a feminist act, merely because she is a woman exercising her choice. While choice may well be a necessary condition to feminist action, it is not a sufficient one—just consider J.K. Rowling’s memorable Dolores Umbridge, who is quite empowered by her choices.

Has scholarship on popular romance relied on this facile definition of feminism? If so, Jarmakani’s analysis does not demonstrate it. She asserts that “one of the key debates in both scholarly and industry online conversations about romance novels is about the extent to which the books can be considered feminist cultural productions focused positively on female sexual pleasure as opposed to oppressive ‘trash’ books that inure the mostly female readerships to the evils of patriarchy” (82-83). This startling claim can be attributed to the fact that this section of her argument has not been updated since it first appeared in the 2010 Signs article. One of her main sources is Sally Goade’s edited collection of essays, *Empowerment versus Oppression* (2007). Not surprisingly, Jarmakani finds plentiful discussion of empowerment in Goade’s book, but this cannot support a broader argument about the direction of the field in general. Other examples are even older, and nothing is more recent than 2007. That said, I agree with Jarmakani that associating personal empowerment with feminism is problematic in a scholarly context. Given that American popular culture, media, and advertising today still pitch empowerment as feminism, it can come as no surprise that romance novelists and their readers might embrace the same definition. We might be tempted to read all romance novels as inherently feminist, merely because, as Pamela Regis notes, their narrative structure empowers fictional heroines (15), or because women choose to write them. Jackie Horne, however, recommends a more productive and reflective response, urging scholars/readers to ask themselves, “Can this particular book be considered feminist, and if so, in what ways?” (Horne, n.p.).

Jarmakani’s argument should provoke productive discussion. If we compare Teo’s conclusions in *Desert Passions* to Jarmakani’s, we find that Teo notes similar problems to the ones Jarmakani identifies—the novels’ inaccuracy, heroes who are “White men

performing in ‘Arab-face’” (Teo 303), passive, speechless Arab women who can only achieve personhood through the American heroine’s efforts—but these two scholars approach the same material in dramatically different ways. Teo argues that “however misguided or inaccurate” these novels may be, “surely [the] humanizing [of Arab and Muslim males]—their representation as attractive and intelligent potential lovers, partners, husbands, and fathers. . . .—represents the ability of this particular form of women’s popular culture to temper negative stereotypes that seem ubiquitous today” (303). Jarmakani dismisses Teo’s interpretation as a fantasy of liberal multiculturalism, in which “positive representations” are seen as a useful response to negative representations (20). Instead, she argues, this kind of binary opposition only strengthens stereotypes (20).

Holden maintains that these two stances are a choice point:

Read skeptically, against the grain, these novels present a fantasy in which autocratic leaders of the Arab world—those sheikhly heroes who love American women—embrace the values of their Western fiancées and wives, reconciling their two cultures in a way that secures and privileges American interests. But read more generously, in the light of their authors’ intentions, the sheikh romance novel does present a hopeful vision of the world, one in which . . . individuals from two worlds, now at odds, . . . [can] fall in love, resolve their differences, and live harmoniously together (17).

I would have to agree with Holden; both interpretations have merit and can be substantiated with compelling evidence. However, I would add that close reading offers a different perspective from broad observation. Because Jarmakani examines these novels piecemeal, it is hard to see the distinctions that might challenge or complicate her argument. Consider Brenda Jackson’s novel *Delaney’s Desert Sheikh*, which Jarmakani notes is the only mainstream sheikh romance written by an African-American novelist. Broadly speaking, *Delaney’s Desert Sheikh* follows the typical fantasy of feminist Orientalism, with a Tahrani sheikh marrying a foreign woman who then introduces women’s rights into his country. A closer reading reveals an interesting spin: the feminist reformer is not the heroine, nor is she American. Queen Fatimah, originally from Egypt, is the hero’s stepmother and an important character in the book. Indeed, her progressive reform was initiated during our hero’s childhood and shaped his perspective on the world. The narrative thus significantly changes the fantasy by putting Tahrani’s political and social change in the hands of a woman from the Middle East, in sharp contrast to what Jarmakani notes is the more typical “assumption of Arabiastani women’s ignorance and helplessness” (104). Indeed, Jarmakani points to a scene early in the novel when the sheikh jokes that the heroine might start “a women’s rights revolution” in his home country, yet she asserts that Jackson “backs away from [this] idea” of revolution because it “seems to come too close to readers’ fears about the region” (108). Closer attention to the narrative makes it clear that the sheikh’s joke was amusing because that revolution had occurred a decade or so earlier.

Delaney’s Desert Sheikh shares the fantasy of feminist liberation but does not imagine that Anglo-American women must be the ones to instigate it. Brenda Jackson was born in 1953 and came of age during the Black Power era, when the Nation of Islam was a salient model of Muslim identity and black pride. She called her sheikh Jamal, a popular

Arabic name choice for African-American boys in the United States since the 1970s. Prince Jamal's mother was originally from Africa, as was his stepmother, giving him a shared racial ancestry with the heroine. This sheikh is less exotic, less alien, more familiar, than the sheikhs who woo white heroines. In fact, the heroine learns more about Jamal's country from her brother, who has met Jamal's father. And we should note that this book is ranked by Goodreads readers as one of their favorite sheikh romances.

This brings me to the conclusion of Jarmakani's book, where she plays with "the possibility of reading the story—whatever story one has been reading or telling about the war on terror—in a different way" (191). This compelling recommendation invites us to look back at *An Imperialist Love Story* as an elegant model of how such rereading might be undertaken. She reminds us that it is important to look at the ideological work of certain genres, both within romance but also outside of it. Remarkably, this book's most significant contribution to the field is simultaneously its major limit: examining sheikh romances in this larger context gives us insight into their appeal but also obscures the ways that some of these novels and their authors push at genre boundaries and blurs the complexity of readers' responses. It's worth considering a possibility that her book seems to dismiss: that some readers and writers are already reading this story in a different way.

[1] I also quite like Amy Burge's term, the "romance East," which foregrounds generic considerations and the continuities of this Orientalist landscape over time.

Works Cited

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