

Historicizing *The Sheik*: Comparisons of the British Novel and the American Film

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Abstract: This article begins with a brief discussion of existing scholars' work on *The Sheik* before analyzing the differences between the novel and the film. These arise from Britain's experience of sexuality, violence, and the World War I; understandings of whiteness and imperialism in Britain and the United States; the different historical experiences of gender, race, and ethnicity in the two countries; and finally, the different traditions of popular Orientalist discourse—anchored to a “realist” mode of representing the geopolitical situation of actual colonies in the case of Britain, and arising from fairground and merchandising fantasies of “Arabian Nights” Orientalism in the case of the U.S.A.

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In 1919 a romance novel by a little-known Derbyshire woman was published, featuring the story of an aristocratic but tomboyish English virgin who, in her travels through French colonial Algeria, is kidnapped by an Arab sheik and raped many times. She eventually falls in love with this “brute” of an Oriental “native” (whom her brother would have equated with a “nigger”) but then discovers—much to her surprise—that her beloved Arab rapist sheik is in fact the half-English, half-Spanish son of a peer of the British realm.

As for the sheik himself, the violent and priapic Ahmed Ben Hassan is reduced to repentance and redeemed by his love for Lady Diana Mayo. He reverts to “civilized” standards of patriarchal European gender norms, presumably forsaking rape and promiscuity (though not necessarily his penchant for strangling evil Arab opponents when he deems this justified). The two live happily ever after in the desert, leaving the reader with the final specter of an aristocratic English couple “gone native,” it is true, but reigning imperialistically over the unruly Bedouin tribes of the Sahara in an area which was nominally under French colonial control. Edith Maud Hull’s *The Sheik* thus concluded with a reassertion of reactionary patriarchal gender relations as well as the fantasy of proxy British rule extended over French-colonized “natives”—a subtle display of one-upmanship in British imperial rivalry with the French.

2009 marked the ninetieth anniversary of the publication of *The Sheik*. As is well-known, the publication of the novel and the release of the film starring Rudolph Valentino in the eponymous role unleashed “sheik fever” in the western world. In the U.S.A., the book went through fifty printings alone in 1921, and it was the first novel to appear on the bestseller list for two consecutive years (Leider 153). It was continually reissued in paperback throughout the 1920s to 1960s, while it sold 1,194,000 copies in hardback by 1965 (Blake 67). *The New York Telegraph* estimated that over 125,000 people had seen *The Sheik* within weeks of the film’s opening in 1921. It screened for six months in Sydney, Australia, and ran for a record forty-two weeks in France (Leider 167-8). The word “sheik,” originally a term of respect referring to a Muslim religious leader or an elder of a community or family, suddenly took on new connotations of irresistible, ruthless, masterful, and over-sexualized masculinity in the West—before ending up as a brand of condoms in America by 1931 (Edwards 50). The novel made a dramatic impact on the literary genre of Eastern love stories in Britain, reviving the popularity of the early twentieth century “desert romance” pioneered by novelists such as Robert Hichens and Kathlyn Rhodes, and spawning a series of forgettable imitations in other novels and short stories in women’s magazines. In the United States, the Tin Pan Alley hit “The Sheik of Araby” was composed in response to the film and rapidly became a jazz standard before being reworked by the Beatles in 1962. Hull’s sequel, *The Sons of the Sheik* (1925), and Valentino’s reprisal of his sheik role in the film version of 1926, brought the craze for all things romantically “Oriental” to its zenith in fashion and film.^[1]

Sheik fever died down by the 1930s, but its impact on western popular culture was already indelible, particularly as fodder for spoofs and satires. It did not take long for the first mockery to appear. *The Shriek of Araby* (1923) lampooned the abduction scene in *The Sheik* where Valentino rides across the desert sands and snatches Agnes Ayres from her horse, throwing her over his saddle and snarling, “Lie still, you fool.” In *The Shriek of Araby*, a hapless young theater employee daydreaming about *The Sheik* attempts a comically bungled abduction of a young lady from the back of a mule.



Dick Dorgan, "Giving 'The Sheik' the Once Over from the Ringside", *Photoplay Magazine* 21 (April 1922):90.

The horseback abduction scene was a rich source of mockery, especially for American cartoonists and illustrators such as Dick Dorgan, who wrote a satirical review of *The Sheik* for the film magazine *Photoplay*, accompanied by the above illustration. It sometimes seemed that in some quarters, merely to insert the word "sheik" incongruously into the title was productive of mirth, as was the case with *Ukulele Sheiks* (1926). The spoofs or sly references to *The Sheik* continued long after desert romance as a literary subgenre had petered out. In the midst of the Second World War, Bob Hope, Bing Crosby, Dorothy Lamour and Anthony Quinn were featured in *The Road to Morocco* (1942)—a film which satirized the fantasy of westerners being kidnapped and incarcerated in harems by featuring American men as the abductees, imprisoned in the Moroccan princess's harem. Throughout the mid-twentieth century, a number of Bugs Bunny cartoons made ridiculous references to abductions, harems, and even had the "wascally wabbit" dressed as a belly-dancer in one episode. References to *The Sheik* repeatedly cropped up in numerous comics and television shows as well (Michalak 7, 13-14). In 1984, John Derek's film *Bolero* featured his wife Bo Derek playing a young, 1920s American flapper enamored with Valentino as Sheik Ahmed Ben Hassan. The film begins with Bo Derek gazing up longingly at a poster of *The Sheik*. She travels to the Middle East, determined to lose her virginity to a sheik, but her plan goes awry when the sheik who has agreed to deflower her falls asleep instead.

Satires and spoofs, however, were not the only legacy of *The Sheik* throughout the twentieth century. Although the subgenre of the British-authored "sheik novel" had run out of steam by the late 1930s, the 1970s saw its revival, particularly in the form of the newly emerging erotic historical romance novel, produced primarily in the United States by authors such as Johanna Lindsey (1977) and Bertrice Small (1978). These historical romance novels found their counterparts in films and television shows of the 1980s such as the British television mini-series *Harem* (1986) or the Brooke Shields film *Sahara* (1983). By the last quarter of the twentieth century, the modern-day "sheik novel" was being produced by authors from various parts of the British Commonwealth and the United States. Australian and Canadian romance writers joined the British in producing

contemporary Orientalist romance novels by the mid-1980s, but the subgenre became Americanized after the First Gulf War in 1991, growing steadily in terms of the output of American-authored publications and sales. The Al-Qaeda attacks on September 11, 2001 saw no diminution in the popularity of these novels about love stories between white women and Arab or Muslim men. On the contrary, 2002 saw the peak of publications so far, with at least twenty-two different contemporary sheik romances published that year, and four historical harem romances. In 2005, an estimated fifty-one million Orientalist romance novels were consumed by readers, prompting ironic comment in some newspapers and *Time* magazine, while the years since have seen no abatement in the popularity of this subgenre. Indeed, several websites have been set up that are purely devoted to Orientalist romance novels. E.M. Hull's *The Sheik* has thus had a remarkably far-reaching impact on western popular culture over the last century; an influence that persists to this day.

Since the 1970s, feminist, postcolonial, literary, and film scholars have paid intermittent attention to Hull's novel. Anderson's *The Purple Heart Throbs* (1974) was among the first to describe the rough lineaments of the desert romance novel epitomized by *The Sheik*, while subsequent scholars such as Melman, Ardis, Chow, Blake, and Gargano proceeded to analyze different thematic issues woven throughout the book, often reading it against other types of contemporary texts and cultural phenomena such as the New Woman novels, sex manuals, divorce laws, and the 1920s fascination with T.E. "Lawrence of Arabia." Still others such as Hansen, Raub, Shohat, Caton, Eisele, Studlar and Leider devoted attention to the novel's translation onto the silver screen, exploring the meaning of Valentino's masculinity and his sexual and ethnic status, as well as analyzing the manifestation of a particular American-Orientalist discourse in the film. Such readings of *The Sheik* have insightfully emphasized its sexual and imperial politics, while sketching the historical context for its reception. Apart from Caton's essay, however, none of the previous studies compares the novel and the film at length, and none takes into account the differences between British and American societies that underlie both the production and reception of these texts. It is important to tease out these differences because the silent film version arguably eclipsed the novel in influence and made the story famous world-wide, not just in English-speaking countries, yet the novel and the film differ in significant ways. This essay considers *The Sheik* as a both novel and a film, comparing their similarities and differences of plot and meaning through the particular historical contexts of their production and reception. It begins with a brief discussion of existing scholars' work on the novel and the various historical contexts that they have mapped out before proceeding to look at how World War I shaped the production of E.M. Hull's novel, and how the British context of a white imperial culture and its fear of miscegenation with colonized "natives" influenced both the production and reception of the novel.

To argue for a direct causal relationship between a text and its historical context is never easy at the best of times, and near impossible where extant documentary evidence is so scarce. Hull's papers tell us little about what influenced her to write *The Sheik*, while definitive information about specific readers' responses to the novel is non-existent because of the lack of reader surveys carried out. However, given the prevailing cultural concerns of the First World War and the 1920s, it is possible to infer the contemporary roots of Hull's preoccupations in the novel, as well as readers' likely responses. The same applies to the American reception of Jesse Lasky's film production of *The Sheik*, even though more documentary evidence about the film's production process and its reception

exists in this case, and some comprehensive biographies have been written about Valentino that discuss his role in the film. With these limitations in mind, this essay argues that beyond the obvious differences arising from the changes to the plot or from technological considerations of the media of literature versus film, the differences between the novel and the movie arise from Britain's experience of sexuality, violence, and the First World War; understandings of whiteness and imperialism in both Britain and the United States; the different historical experiences of gender, race, and ethnicity in the two countries—linked to the colonial context in Britain, but to anxieties about immigration, assimilation, and citizenship in the United States; and finally, the different traditions of popular Orientalist discourse in the two countries—anchored to a “realist” mode of representing the geopolitical situation of actual colonies in the case of Britain, and arising from fairground and merchandising fantasies of “Arabian Nights” Orientalism in the case of the U.S.

Feminist responses to the novel

The Sheik elicited a polarized and visceral reaction upon publication in 1919. Billie Melman (90) has claimed that its sales surpassed all other bestsellers at the time; yet while it achieved instant cult status among its mainly female readers, contemporary literary critics and the self-appointed guardians of social morality were appalled, dismissing it as “a typist’s daydream” and condemning it for its overt portrayal of sadomasochistic sexuality—a response that has been repeated by feminists throughout most of the twentieth century (Melman 90). However, the last two decades have seen a growing body of scholarship on *The Sheik* which have revised earlier hostile opinions, and which have grown increasingly sophisticated in analyzing issues of gender, power, race, and imperialism in the novel.

The earliest responses by feminist scholars to *The Sheik* echoed its contemporary reviews which condemned it as a “poisonously salacious” novel, in the words of the *Literary Review* of 1921 (Blake 69). Objections were not made on the grounds of its portrayal of Arabs and the Orient so much as on the grounds of its portrayal of sex and the treatment of white women. In one of the first book-length surveys of the genre of romance fiction, Rachel Anderson declared that:

The Sheik is the most immoral of any of the romances, not because of lewd descriptions of sexual intercourse [...] but because of the distorting view Miss Hull presents of the kind of relationship which leads to perfect love, and the totally unprincipled precept that the reward of rapists is a lovely English heiress with a look of misty yearning in her eyes (188-189).

Melman described *The Sheik* as “a prudishly told tale of masculine dominance and complementary feminine masochism and passivity” (102), while Mary Cadogan argued that the novel was “not only [...] an anti-feminist tract in which rapist behaviour is rewarded but a justification of racism” (131).

From the late 1980s onwards, however, scholars began reading the novel within its historical context, paying closer attention to issues of gender and sexuality. Melman’s

comprehensive chapter on the “desert romance” in *Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties* was among the first to pay sustained scholarly attention to the novel and, along with Michael Diamond’s detailed discussion in *“Lesser Breeds”: Racial Attitudes in Popular British Culture, 1890-1940* (2006), it is still one of the most useful delineations of this subgenre. Melman pointed out that in addition to the “rape-cum-redemption” story, what caused the greatest outrage in the 1920s was not so much the “prurience” or “obscenity” of *The Sheik* and similar “sex novels,” but the fact that they were for *women*. These novels were regarded as “pornographic literature, manufactured by female writers for the consumption of a sex-starved mass female audience,” whose work experiences in the First World War and its aftermath had seen an increase in spending-power and leisure opportunities (Melman 92-93, 104). Underlying the outrage was a deep anxiety that traditional gender, sexual, and social mores were being subverted. The happy ending of the novel—such as it is—ultimately championed the idea that “the modern sexually emancipated woman can pursue pleasure without being punished for her presumption”; for unlike traditional novels, Diana does not die and is not destroyed by her rape or her subsequent enjoyment of sex (Melman 93, 102-3). In Melman’s eyes, despite whatever other crimes *The Sheik* might have been guilty of, it placed discussion of women’s sexual desires and sexual autonomy at the center of popular culture, thus contributing to a modern understanding and conversation about sex in the 1920s.

The exact historical period when women’s sexual desires were legitimated has been a subject of some debate. For Ann Ardis, *The Sheik* did not so much herald the radical legitimization of female sexual desire in the 1920s as perpetuate an “advanced” view of sexuality that dated back to the New Woman novels of the 1890s (287-296). Ardis focused particularly on the androgynous figure of Diana Mayo. Whereas Melman interpreted Diana as an interwar flapper, Ardis argued that Diana was actually a New Woman and, like so many other New Women in novels of the 1890s, she initially rejects heterosexuality, marriage, and domesticity. The periodization of the novel has received little attention apart from Ardis’s work. As it turns out, however, Melman’s and Ardis’s views are both plausible. Ardis has reason to date the work as an early-twentieth century novel, but this is only made clear in Hull’s sequel, *The Sons of the Sheik*, where references are made to German espionage in French North Africa and the implications for the coming Great War. In the film of *The Sheik*, however, the setting, clothing, and hairstyles date it as a contemporary 1920s story. Both authors nevertheless agree on the importance of *The Sheik* in legitimizing female desire in the 1920s as well as

legitimizing the female adventure plot [...] for the operant fantasy here is not just about having an erotically satisfying relationship with an early twentieth-century version of a New Age sensitive and virile man; it is about galloping with him across the desert or hunting wild apes with him in the Sub-Saharan jungles. In the context of post-war efforts to redomesticate women, Hull’s romances insist upon women’s continued access to the public sphere, albeit in an extremely privileged way (Ardis 294).

Feminist critics in the 1990s thus began to move away from reading *The Sheik* as a reactionary narrative of sadistic patriarchal lust visited upon a masochistic, victimized woman suffering Stockholm Syndrome. Instead, they looked at the radical and potentially

liberating aspects of sexual representations and attempted to descry Diana's empowerment. Although Patricia Raub acknowledged that "in some respects, *The Sheik* can be read as an object lesson to young women who attempt to be too independent and self-reliant," she agreed that "Hull was the first to celebrate sex from the perspective of the female partner" and she went on to argue that the novel demonstrates Diana's access to power (120 and 122). Drawing on Jan Cohn's Marxist-feminist thesis in *Romance and the Erotics of Property* (1988), Raub argued that Diana achieves wealth, status, and power over the sheik's tribesmen via her relationship with Ahmed, while the sheik's exercise of power over Diana is overturned by the novel's end: "Almost against his will, the hero is himself captured by the heroine; he acknowledges his love for her. The heroine has been able to 'remake male sexuality, to subordinate it [...] to love'" (Raub 126).

Such an argument is not without its problems. As Karen Chow has noted, although the sheik repents of his earlier autocratic treatment of Diana, he is equally dictatorial and disregarding of her wishes when he decides to send her away in order to make amends. Her attempts to seduce him fail, and it is only when she takes the drastic step of trying to shoot herself that he relents and gives way to her desire to stay with him. Diana may be empowered by forcing Ahmed to love her tenderly, against his will and prejudices, but this is a limited transformation. As he himself admits, and as his actions and the few instances of her fear of him in *The Sons of the Sheik* demonstrate, he cannot change what he is; indeed, he warns her that "you will have a devil for a husband" (296). For Chow, however, the novel fulfilled its function of empowering women readers and filmgoers, if not Diana herself. Chow argued that "ultimately, it is not Diana the character but the woman reader, writer, and filmgoer in the material world who is liberated by reading these steamy passages and creating a sex symbol in the figure of Rudolph Valentino" (73).

Although these scholars recognized the imperialistic background to *The Sheik* and mentioned Hull's seemingly radical transgression of racial boundaries in the sheik's rape of Diana and her love for an Arab, little was made of these aspects of the novel beyond passing comment. As Melman read it, the revelation of Ahmed's "real" identity as a European, followed by Diana's insistence that she cannot think of him as other than an Arab, are "gratuitous" since they occur so late in the novel (102). The work of Susan Blake and Elizabeth Gargano over the last few years, however, has focused more attention on the racial and imperial themes of the novel through postcolonial readings of the plot. Gargano argued that "*The Sheik* enacts an apparently transgressive erotic daydream, which first questions and then ultimately reaffirms the Englishman's capacity for domination" (175). For her, the novel explores the crisis of masculinity that beset British culture in the wake of the First World War. Significantly, none of the European or American men are able to woo Diana successfully because they "embody a demoralized post-war passivity" in the face of the masculinized modern woman (176). The hypermasculine, violent, primitive, sexually potent sheik succeeds where "civilized" but emasculated modern western men have failed. But the sheik is of course a European, and Gargano compares his disguise with that of the famous "white sheik" of the war years and its aftermath: Colonel T.E. Lawrence. Both Englishmen are presented as "'better' Arabs than the Arabs," and this serves to underline the fact that "an Englishman, raised under the same conditions of unimpeded freedom, absolute power over his subordinates, and constant physical activity, is still superior," thus reaffirming Britain's imperial mission and providing a suggested cure to enervated postwar British masculinity (Gargano 182).

Where Gargano argued that *The Sheik* was indeed an example of Orientalist colonial discourse perpetuating racial stereotypes, Susan Blake allowed for more heteroglossic and contrapuntal interpretations. Blake's innovative and sophisticated reading of *The Sheik* against contemporary issues of race and divorce led her to conclude that the novel presents two competing stories about imperialism, gender, race, and miscegenation—told respectively by Raoul de Saint Hubert (the French novelist who is the sheik's best friend) and Diana. What readers conclude about these issues at the novel's end ultimately depends on whose voice they choose to listen to (Blake 75). For Blake, the central puzzle to be solved in the text is how:

[I]n a culture that divided humanity into biologically fixed and hierarchically ranged races, *The Sheik* creates a character who "is" both Arab and English. In a culture terrified of miscegenation, it permits an English lady not only to fall in love with a man she believes to be Arab, but to continue to think of him as Arab after his "real" identity is revealed and to settle into implied marriage with him in an Arab environment. As a popular novel, *The Sheik* necessarily supports the prevailing ideology of its time, but the nonconforming facts raise the question of what else it is doing (70).

Blake contended that in Saint Hubert's story—a story by no means without its own internal contradictions—the understanding of race is biological. Saint Hubert tells the tale of the sheik's European parentage that permits Diana to love and remain with Ahmed without the taint of miscegenation. This story thus supports conventional ideas about class, gender, imperialism, and race, because at its close an aristocratic British couple, both performing traditional gender roles, rule over a tribe of Arab "natives". In Diana's story, however, the sheik remains an Arab and she loves him for being an Arab. Blake suggested that Diana's understanding of race is cultural rather than biological, which is why she is able to continue regarding Ahmed as Arab (75-78). Diana needs Ahmed to be Arab rather than English because in this novel, violence is twice associated with the English: first with the sheik's father, the Earl of Glencaryll, whose abuse led his wife to flee their marriage; and then with the sheik himself, who wreaks vengeance on the English because of his father's domestic violence. Diana's story thus subverts two interconnected and strongly-held imperial and patriarchal tenets about race, gender, and sexuality at that time: namely, "that sexual threat comes from the Other and protection from the English," particularly within the shelter of the family and the domestic sphere (Blake 79). The novel, Blake argued, is "double-voiced" in every way, hinging on the "race" and subsequent identity of the sheik. "Raoul's identification of the Sheik yields to the pressure of imperialist discourse to identify any Other as inferior [...] Diana's insistence that the man she loves is 'Arab'—Other and equal, if not superior—resists that pressure and thus functions as a counter discourse" (Blake 78). However, I would argue that Orientalist discourse and the very text of *The Sheik* itself pose limits to the effectiveness of this counter discourse. Being Arab does not save Diana from domestic violence, for the novel confirms in one incident after another that Arabs are a brutal, cruel people who show a "callous indifference to suffering" (Hull 137).

Nevertheless, this body of insightful scholarship has illuminated *The Sheik* in many ways and explained both its popularity as well as its widespread appeal. It is particularly

important to recognize that readers—both then and now—do not simply respond to a straightforward, univocal, monolithic story whose meaning is predetermined and closed-off to varying interpretations. Different or changing ideas about acceptable gender behavior, sexual curiosity and titillation, fantasies and fears about race and miscegenation, and differing attitudes towards imperialism, can all be accommodated within this text—albeit some more easily than others. Thus far, however, this body of scholarship has focused principally on the reception and cultural impact of the novel in the 1920s. Little consideration has been given to its actual moment of composition. Moreover, there has also been a conflation of British and American attitudes towards *The Sheik*, and towards imperialism, race, and miscegenation. In what follows, I want to explore more carefully the specific imperial, national and racial histories of Britain and the United States in the first quarter of the twentieth century, and then to compare the British novels with the American films in order to tease out variations in the plots and characters that created different meanings in the British novels and the American films of *The Sheik* and *The Sons of the Sheik*.

E.M. Hull's *The Sheik* and World War I

Edith Maude Henderson was born in 1880, the daughter of a New York shipowner and his Canadian wife. As a child she traveled widely with her parents, even visiting Algeria—the setting of her sheik novels. In 1899 she married Percy Winstanley Hull in London, and the couple moved to Derbyshire in the early 1900s where Percy Hull became an agriculturalist. After the publication of *The Sheik*, the press would run descriptions of Hull as “the shy wife of a Derbyshire pig farmer,” because the image seemed so incongruous with the shocking sex and exotic setting of the novel. Percy Hull did indeed breed prize-winning pigs, among his other agricultural pursuits, but he had begun his professional life as a civil engineer. During the First World War he served in the armed forces. It was this absence that prompted Edith Hull to begin her literary career. She began writing *The Sheik* “not with any idea of it being published, but rather as a means of distraction at a time when I felt very much alone” (Hull papers). The particular circumstances of the novel's composition—probably in the later years of the war since it was published in London in 1919—are significant in shedding light on certain features of the novel: namely, its focus on sex, violence, and the Middle East.

Many scholars have pointed to *The Sheik's* literary heritage of abduction and rape motifs from Richardson's *Clarissa*, to Gothic novels and Victorian melodramas. The “Indian Mutiny” of 1857 had also given rise to a spate of rape novels within the British colonial context, as Jenny Sharpe and Nancy Paxton have shown. As Sharpe argued, however, “rape is not a consistent and stable signifier” in either British colonial or metropolitan discourse, “but one that surfaces at strategic moments” of cultural or political tensions (3). In the case of Anglo-Indian writing, as Paxton noted, the rise and circulation of “rape scripts” after 1857 served to consolidate British explanations and justifications for increasing imperial control in the colonies, especially India, as well as to attempt a remasculinization of British domestic politics at a time of increasing female independence (112). Novels featuring violence against women—especially middle- or upper-class women—were few and far

between in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The New Woman novels and other sensationalist pre-war “sex novels” such as Elinor Glyn’s *Three Weeks* (1907) were more concerned with establishing women’s sexual desires and sexual identities, or debating the merits of sex outside marriage when ennobled by love—“the one motive which makes a union moral in ethics,” as Glyn explained in the introduction to the American version of her novel. Glyn’s Slavic “Lady” in *Three Weeks* certainly articulated the idea of sadomasochistic sexual love found in *The Sheik*, telling her young lover Paul Verdayne:

[A] man can always keep a woman loving him if he kiss her enough, and make her feel that there is no use struggling because he is too strong to resist. A woman will stand almost anything from a passionate lover. He may beat her and pain her soft flesh; he may shut her up and deprive her of all other friends—while the motive is raging love and interest in herself on his part, it only makes her love him the more [...]

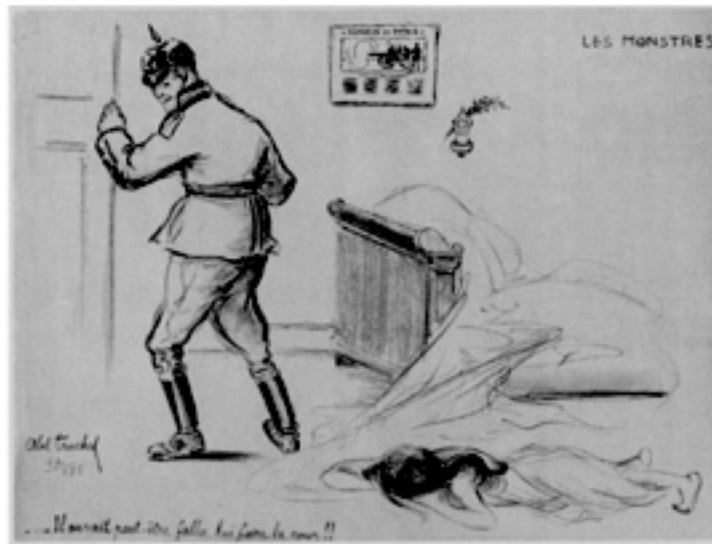
However, the lovers in *Three Weeks* did not actually enact such a scenario, because what the Lady loved about Paul was—in Glyn’s own explanation of the novel—his “straight and true” manhood, while their love influenced him toward “vast aims and noble desires for future greatness” (Glyn “Introduction”).

It was during the First World War that sex, violence, and rape came to the forefront of British culture and consciousness in a most dramatic way. A number of wartime developments was responsible for this: the onset of “khaki fever” among young women at the start of the war; tales of German atrocities in occupied Belgium and France that were used by the British government for propaganda purposes; and the return of war-traumatized veterans which was not only attended by mental illnesses and physical disability, but also by an increase in public and domestic violence.

The first of these occurrences problematized young women’s overt display of sexual desire in British society. As Angela Woollacott has shown, the outbreak of war in Britain was accompanied by an “epidemic of khaki fever” whereby, according to the press, adolescent girls and young working women flocked to military camps, sexually propositioning and harassing soldiers in towns and cities (325). In the nineteenth century, the open display of sexual desire or sexual behavior was associated with prostitutes. When the “amateurs” or “free-lance” girls succumbed to khaki fever in 1914, they were perceived to be sexually aggressive and shameless in their pursuit of soldiers, just like prostitutes. Even more shamefully than prostitutes, however, the “amateurs” did not do it out of a need to make a living. Furthermore, they displayed an independence of mind and spirit that was much deplored. As such, they “threatened a subversion of the gender as well as the moral order” (Woollacott 326). In response to this, the middle-class Women Patrols Committee and the Women Police Service were established to patrol gender and sexual behavior in public spheres. Middle-class women patrolling the streets took it upon themselves to censure and separate “couples thought to be embracing too closely, following those they suspected might be about to embark on unsavory courses of behavior, and warning youngsters of the dangers of overly casual behavior” (Levine 45). Khaki fever died down by mid-1915 when women were co-opted into war work and other forms of patriotic contribution to the war effort, but concern over women’s sexual behavior and the spread of

venereal diseases meant that middle-class women continued to police working women's sexuality in public places throughout the war (Woollacott 331).

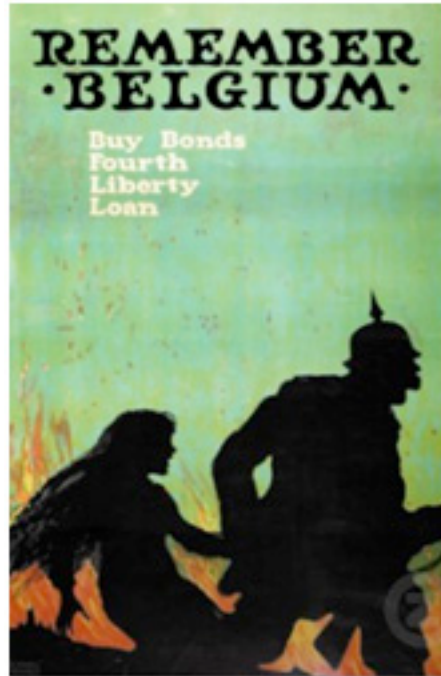
If khaki fever brought to public consciousness an uneasy awareness of young women's dangerous sexual desire and autonomy, then tales of German atrocities trickling back from the continent introduced rape and sexual violence into public discourse. The German invasion of neutral Belgium on August 4, 1918 had been Britain's ostensible *casus belli* to declare war on the Central Powers. In making the case for war to the British public, complex legal arguments about obligations incurred by Britain under the 1839 Treaty of London were soon replaced by simpler, sensationalist accounts in newspapers, war pamphlets, and posters of German atrocities—particularly the rape, abuse, and torture of women and children. The raped Belgian woman came to symbolize the violated borders of Belgium itself in many propaganda posters. Artwork in these posters graphically portrayed the “innocent, virtuous Belgian or Frenchwoman violated. Belgium became a frail and ravished *jeune fille*, weeping and broken on the floor as the *uhlan*, the helmeted German cavalryman, leaves the bedroom” (Harris 180).



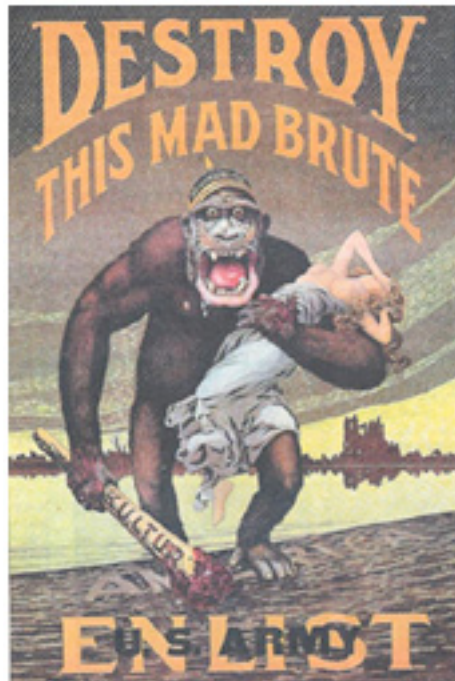
A. Truchel, *Les Monstres*, “He might at least have courted her...” poster. Source: Harris (1993), 171.

Other artists depicted a female Belgium stripped, bound, and raped. These images acquired more force as stories of rape and violence were amassed in Lord Bryce's official *Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages*, and they were widely repeated and believed at the time (Gullace 714, and Ward 29). By 1916, the British were compiling documents about the abduction of women and children for forced labor—including sexual labor—in *The Deportation of Women and Girls from Lille*. The bishop of Lille appealed emotively to a British and American audience, telling them that “promiscuity [...] inevitably accompanies removals *en masse*, involving mixture of the sexes, or, at all events, of persons of very unequal standing. Young girls of irreproachable life [...] have been carried off” (Gullace 742).

Even as stories of German sexual atrocities circulated in Britain, the “rape of Belgium” was also used as propaganda to try to persuade the United States to enter the war. When it did in 1917, at least two US war posters (below) referred to the raped Belgian woman, demonstrating just how widely this image had spread in popular culture.



American World War I Liberty Bonds poster



American World War I recruitment poster

In all these accounts, violence towards women and children was depicted as typifying the behavior of the German "Other." The behavior of English soldiers, by contrast, was supposedly characterized by "honour, decency, rightness, and fair play" (Harris 29). This notion of honorable English or British masculinity and the chivalric treatment of women and children became more problematic in the later years of the war and its aftermath because of increases in domestic violence in all belligerent nations (Thébaud 68).

As is well known, the Great War had a traumatic effect on a whole generation of young men. Literature on the war and demobilized soldiers have usually portrayed these men as either shattered, shell-shocked neurasthenics or angry young men nursing bitter grudges against those who sent them to war (Adams 1990 and Fussell 1975). Demobilization was always going to be a difficult experience for men. If soldiers were discharged during the war, it was probably because of physical or psychological injuries. After the war, men had to face the problems of “finding a job, resuming family life, and curbing aggression” that they had been encouraged to develop and display during the war (Nye 430). The effects of the war on men’s lives were visible not only through the large number of amputees in public spaces after the war, but also in the behavior of demobilized soldiers. Men suffering from “shell shock” displayed their trauma through a “shivering, shuddering, fainting, halting, ‘mincing gait’” that distressed those who witnessed these symptoms (Leed 99). Such behavior undermined the “manliness” of shell-shock victims because of the prevailing belief in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe that a “true man” was one who was in control of his passions and his body (Mosse 101). If the “shivering” neurasthenic veteran symbolized the trauma of war, so too did the embittered and violent veteran—often said to be of working-class origins—who could not control his passions.

As soon as the guns fell silent in November 1918, members of the ruling classes and the British press began to express fears of “brutalized” working-class soldiers turning to violence and theft. According to *The Times* in May 1919, the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police “feared that a battle-hardened husband might now murder his wife rather than, as before the war, administering ‘just a clip under the ear’” (Emsley 175). Meanwhile, as Clive Emsley has noted, the British war correspondent Philip Gibbs

believed that a significant minority of front-line soldiers had returned seriously altered by their experiences: They were subject to queer moods, queer tempers, fits of profound depression with a restless desire for pleasure. Many of them were easily moved to passion when they lost control of themselves. Many were bitter in their speech, violent in opinion, frightening. They had gone through “an intensive culture of brutality”. Equally, and this he implied had prompted sexual assaults, “sexually they were starved. For months they had lived out of the sight and presence of women” (Emsley 175).

Emsley has argued that by and large, these moral panics about the return of a whole generation of psychologically-scarred, brutalized men failed to materialize, and that the statistics for indictable assaults show no significant increase in the postwar years. It is probably true that the majority of soldiers returned to the private life of what Alison Light has termed “Little Englanders” who eschewed imperial masculinity and politics for the quiet pleasures of tending their gardens, smoking a pipe, and doing crossword puzzles (Light 1991). There is currently insufficient research into the First World War and domestic violence in Britain to warrant any detailed or conclusive statements about the rate of increase in wife and child abuse, and it is certainly worth noting that nations on the losing side experienced the greatest political, social, and domestic violence (Nye 431). However, Susan Kingsley Kent’s work on the increase of violence against British women

during the war and Elizabeth Nelson's work on the First World War and domestic violence in Australia both suggest a correlation between war trauma and increased rates of wife abuse; while Simona Sharoni's study of gender and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has likewise documented an increase in male violence against women and children during military conflicts which legitimize the brutalization of society. The fact that divorce rates in Britain rose after the war suggests increases in both adultery as well as "cruelty," or wife abuse, because while men could petition for divorce solely on the grounds of adultery, until 1923 women had also to prove abuse in addition to adultery (Blake 81). An increase in male domestic violence would be unsurprising because as Nye has observed, returned soldiers felt "resentment at those who had stayed behind, including their wives, and the traditional patriarchal obligation to control one's wife was a particularly exigent aspect of militarized masculinity" (430).

This social and sexual context of wartime and postwar Britain is important to *The Sheik* in obvious ways. It explains why female sexuality is so fraught with confusion and contradiction in this novel, and why passion is intermeshed with violence. In the New Woman novels of the 1890s and 1900s, the heroines exploring their sexual identities are middle class. In *The Sheik*, the aristocratic Lady Diana Mayo has an obviously passionate, sexual nature, but for her to be aware of this at the start of the novel would be to degrade her in terms of class as well as sexual morality, since wartime anxieties about young women's sexual behavior were directed towards working-class and lower-middle-class women. Middle- and upper-middle-class women were the ones who patrolled and tried to regulate young women's behavior, just as in the novel *Lady Conway* tried to uphold the rules that governed acceptable British behavior—like the stereotype of the imperial memsahib abroad. As others have pointed out, rape performs the function of permitting Diana to experience sex while absolving her from all responsibility, thus maintaining her status as a virtuous and virginal heroine. Not only does Diana endure rape, she actually comes to enjoy sex and to participate in it, thus transforming rape into consensual sex and even the suggestion of a modern, companionate relationship with the Sheik. As her months of captivity wear on, and despite the Sheik's occasional reversion to cruelty, she comes to treasure the late nights when Ahmed "told her all the incidents of the day's visit to one of the other camps, and from his men and his horses drifted almost insensibly into details connected with his own plans for the future, which were really the intimate confidences of a husband to a wife who is also a comrade" (Hull 283). The confused attempt to reconcile romantic, companionate love with sexual passion and violence within the home must have resonated with readers whose male family members had returned from the frontlines traumatized and, unable to cope with the transition to domesticity, sometimes prone to violence.

That Hull should have conceived of abduction and rape as a central plot device in the novel is therefore scarcely surprising, since rape stories were in wide circulation in British society at that time. The problem, of course, was that rape was associated with German wartime atrocities and there was no way that rape in a European context could possibly be anything but horrifying. Not until American troops began arriving at the Western Front in huge numbers after April 1918 did the tide of the war begin to change decisively in favor of the Allies. In fact, it is possible that when Hull was writing the novel, the outcome of the war was still undecided, with Germany tipped to win after the collapse of the Eastern Front following the Bolshevik Revolution of November 1917. Hull side-stepped these problems to

a large extent because she formulated her plot within the subgenre of the desert romance novel, and this solved many of the dilemmas created by the war.

The Middle East was the only arena where fighting during the First World War in any way resembled glamorized ideas of noble heroes testing themselves on the field of blood. Where the static war on the Western Front diminished soldiers and often left men in the “feminine” position of cowering passively in the trenches, helpless in the face of heavy bombardment before being mowed down by an enemy they could not see, the war in the Middle East—particularly the Sinai and Palestine Campaign, and the Arab Revolt—was active and mobile, and featured cavalry charges that conjured pre-modern images of chivalric warfare. In particular, the Arab Revolt initiated by Sherif Hussein ibn Ali in mid-1916 brought Lieutenant Colonel T.E. Lawrence to prominence as a result of the sensationalist reportage of the American journalist Lowell Thomas. Thomas’s dramatic war film *With Allenby in Palestine and Lawrence in Arabia*—in which Lawrence featured famously as the “white sheik” who, together with Sherif Hussein’s sons Feisal and Abdullah, led the Arab uprising against the Ottoman empire—debuted in London in 1917 and ran for six months. It is impossible to know whether Hull ever saw this film, or whether the “white sheik” in all his ambiguously-gendered, quasi-feudal, Orientalist glory inspired Hull’s English aristocratic white sheik, but the parallel is certainly there: the Englishman masquerading as an Arab, who alone is capable of uniting and leading the unruly tribes of the desert.

Gender, whiteness, and imperialism in the Middle East

The Middle East not only invoked the plethora of ideas about the Orient that had been circulating in Britain for the last few centuries; in Britain, the North African desert also conjured ideas about noble Bedouin as “true” Arabs (in contrast to their much-derided town counterparts) as well as memories of European women who had found in the desert a space to be free from European conventions and sexual and social behavior. In the scholarship on women’s travel writing, much has been written about the constraints of nineteenth-century femininity upon women’s travel writing and their behavior abroad (Foster, 3-25, and Mills 1991). Despite these well-documented constraints, however, European women traveling abroad were certainly aware of the possibility of sexual liaisons with “Oriental” men. A few women even acted upon their sexual desires and entered into long-term relationships with non-western men.^[2] These were not technically illegal relationships. At no time did the British government actually pass legislation forbidding interracial unions within the United Kingdom or in its colonies. This distinguishes interracial relations in Britain from those in the postbellum United States, where miscegenation was prohibited in various states and only gradually repealed state-by-state, until the US Supreme Court ruled such laws unconstitutional in *Loving v. Virginia* in 1967. Yet perhaps it was because of the porousness of these racial boundaries that British popular literature at the turn of the twentieth century became obsessed with interracial sex, the mysterious and fatal attraction “Oriental” men had for British women, and the horror of miscegenation. Without legislative barriers against interracial unions between white women and non-white men (unions between white men and non-white concubines

were tacitly accepted), the full weight of social opprobrium was brought down upon the practice in popular culture. In *The Sheik*, if Diana will not or cannot save herself and embrace her traditional literary fate—death—resulting from rape, let alone interracial rape, then Hull the author must save her through the timely revelation of the Sheik's English and Spanish parentage (albeit with an uneasy hint of Moorish blood in his heritage), thus shoring up the boundaries of white racial identity to appease her readers and potential critics.

From the start of *The Sheik*, readers are reminded that this is both an Oriental and an imperial tale. Diana is a representative of the white race and of British imperial prestige; her gendered behavior is a reflection upon the rival merits of the British and French *mission civilisatrice* that accompanied and justified colonial expansion in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Intermittently throughout the novel, then, British and French culture and colonial successes are subtly compared. French colonial control over Algeria is shown to be sadly wanting when Diana's desert party is ambushed by Arab raiders. Moments before she realizes the seriousness of her situation, just before she is swept off her saddle and abducted by the Sheik, "Diana's first feeling was one of contempt for an administration that made possible such an attempt so near civilisation" (48). It is precisely the feebleness of such an administration that permits the fantastical ending: the British aristocratic couple extending feudal rule over warrior-like Bedouin tribes in French colonial Algeria. In this novel, it seems that the French are mainly lauded for their loyalty to the British protagonists: the Sheik's faithful valet, Gaston, is French, as is his best friend Raoul de Saint Hubert, who helps the romantic couple realize their love for each other (a fitting role for the Frenchman in the British imagination!), and who chivalrously sacrifices his own love for Diana in order to facilitate her relationship with the English Ahmed Ben Hassan.

Because Diana is cast as a victim through much of this novel, there is limited opportunity for her to undertake the usual role of imperial women in the colonies: as the memsahib organizing expatriate domestic life and policing the boundaries of sex and race (Stoler 2002); as the maternal missionary or social reformer shouldering what Antoinette Burton has called the "white woman's burden," rescuing helpless, downtrodden native women from their Oriental plight (Burton 1994); or as the intrepid woman traveler traipsing insouciantly into villages where no white woman has ever been, the amused cynosure of all eyes and the compassionate dispenser of medication and cheap trinkets (Teo 1998). Nevertheless, Diana's imperial identity is established through the fact that as a white British woman, she has traveled widely throughout the world and even gone tiger-hunting in India. Imperial prestige (and behind it, the threat of imperial violence) enables her to embark on a journey into the desert by herself, unaccompanied by any other European and dressed in "manly" riding clothes without any regard to local custom or sensibilities. Diana's powerful imperial identity is further emphasized through her intimidating use of her "imperial eye" to subjugate cowering natives—their eyes waver and fall before her haughty gaze (Hull 36 and 212), whether in India or in the North African desert. In fact, Hull is at pains to tell us that there was only one "native" whose gaze did not fall beneath hers—the Sheik, who is of course English. When Diana first stands before Sheik Ahmed Ben Hassan—a figure formed in the image of the Gothic villain with "the handsomest and cruellest face that she had ever seen"—his "fierce burning eyes [...] swept her until she felt that the boyish clothes that covered her slender limbs were stripped from

her, leaving the beautiful white body bare under his passionate stare” (pp.56-57). Since she (and the reader) believes him to be Arab at this point, a clichéd trope of colonial relations is inverted here: the all-seeing, all-commanding gaze of the imperial eye gives way to the predatory, penetrating gaze of the supposed “native,” whose hungry stare consumes her whiteness—here transformed into a sign of her gendered vulnerability.

There are repeated references to Diana’s whiteness throughout the novel: the sheik’s lascivious glances at her “beautiful white body” (Hull 57), for instance, or the villain’s awareness of the “white woman who was Ahmed Ben Hassan’s latest toy” (196). Whiteness scarcely matters to Diana at first, yet although she is careless of this at the outset, her experiences in the novel teach her racial solidarity. Facing a greater danger from the bandit sheik Ibrahim Omair later in the novel, with only the French valet Gaston at her side, Diana becomes aware of the overriding importance of white identity against the stratifications of class. At the moment when she and the French servant had faced possible death together, “all inequality of rank had been swept away [...] they had been only a white man and a white woman together in their extremity” (211). While Diana’s aristocratic British imperial identity is important, therefore, it can also be subsumed within a broader white European identity, within the context of colonization and resistance or danger from non-white “natives.”

If Diana’s whiteness establishes her sexual desirability to all men—white and non-white—it also confirms the significance of her rape, since the only rape which counted in western imperial culture was the rape of a white woman by a non-white man; the far more common historical scenario of non-white women’s rape by white men received little comment throughout this period. If rape has broken her down, it is Diana’s interaction with social and racial inferiors within the colonial context which restores her sense of identity. It is her “childish” Bedouin maid Zilah who “in some indefinable way gave back to Diana the self-control that had slipped from her” (Hull 62). It is the French valet, Gaston, who serves her as devotedly as he serves the sheik, who returns to her a sense of what is due to her as an aristocratic Englishwoman (277). Yet any such sense of recovered status fluctuates. Over the next month of constant rape, she comes to realize that “her life was in [the sheik’s] hands, that he could break her with his lean brown fingers like a toy is broken [...] She was utterly in his power and at his mercy—the mercy of an Arab who was merciless” (78).

To understand the full impact of the depiction of interracial desire and miscegenation in this novel, we need to remember that the nineteenth-century British Orientalist writings of men such as James Cowles Prichard and Richard Burton conflated Arabs, Africans, and animals as savage “creature[s] of instinct, controlled by sexual passions, incapable of the refinement to which the white races had evolved” (Kabbani 63). As Michael Diamond has shown, novel after novel from the 1890s to the First World War raised the specter of an Arab man attempting to “compromise” a white woman, only to be strongly rebuffed. In William Le Queux’s *The Hand of Allah* (1914), those English who “knew Africa, who knew the Arab” hated “the taint of black blood. To such men the sight of their own women introducing their daughters to that oily Egyptian sickened them” (Diamond 77). The heroine in Robert Hichens’s *Barbary Sheep* (1909) nearly succumbs to an Arab spahi while her husband is engrossed in game hunting, but she realizes in time that the Arab cavalryman is purely mercenary and “the peculiar disgust which so many white-skinned people feel towards the dark races of the earth suddenly rose up in her” (Diamond 78). A.J. Dawson’s *Hidden Manna* (1902) ends with the heartfelt exclamation: “God save us

all from mixed marriages, I say!" (Diamond 78). In some cases British men, rather than God, save their women from mixed marriages; in many other cases women save themselves by drawing back from crossing racial boundaries.

In none of these pre-war novels did an Arab man actually have sex with a white woman. This was why *The Sheik* was such a bold and subversive novel for its time, despite its reactionary conclusion. Pre-war novels set in the Orient required white women to police their own sexual desires and uphold the imperial, racial, and bodily integrity of the white race. However, *The Sheik* broke with this convention to depict "proud Diana Mayo who had the history of her race at her fingers' ends" (Hull 275) refusing this duty of the white race, choosing instead to abase herself before her love and sexual desire for the Arab man she believed the sheik to be. Fortunately for her, then, the sheik is actually European, a British peer of the realm. This racial legerdemain was an important plot maneuver for it excused Diana's inexplicable attraction to the supposed "native," dissipated the horrible specter of miscegenation, and provided the means of Ahmed's repentance and redemption and consequently, the novel's happy ending. Moreover, it meant that Diana would remain British in nationality, for the 1914 British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act stated that "the wife of an alien shall be deemed to be an alien," losing the rights and privileges of British nationality. Not until 1948 could women from the United Kingdom retain their own nationality regardless of whom they married (Baldwin 522).

Hull returned to the themes of miscegenation, imperialism, love, and rape in the sequel *The Sons of the Sheik* (1925); but this time, the strictures against miscegenation were more pronounced, uttered by the sheik himself when he discovers that his son Ahmed has raped a Moroccan woman (who of course turns out to be the daughter of a French aristocratic family). The truly radical moment in *The Sons of the Sheik* occurs at the end of the novel after the heroine (by that stage pregnant with young Ahmed's child) is abducted and savagely raped by the German villain. In the final pages of this novel, Ahmed decides that the heroine's rape does not matter to him because his love for her is worth more than the fact that she has been violated by another man. This must surely be one of the first such episodes for a mainstream novel, whereby the rape of a woman by a man other than the hero is not punished by her death, and which still concludes in the union of raped heroine and hero. Significantly, at the end of *The Sons of the Sheik*, Hull finally presented readers with the rapist Hun of British wartime propaganda, whose brutality makes that of young Ahmed's pale by comparison. Yasmin is in fact presented in the typical posture of the raped Belgian woman: "Crouched half naked on the ground, bearing all the marks of a desperate struggle, with her unbound hair streaming over her bare shoulders, she lay moaning and writhing in agony, her face hidden against the crumbling wall" (Hull, *Sons of the Sheik*, 358).

While Hull flirted with the specter of interracial sex between a white woman and an Oriental man in *The Sheik*, she would recoil strongly from the suggestion of miscegenation in *The Sons of the Sheik* and her subsequent novels. What had happened in the interim? If Arabs and other colonized peoples were "noble savage" allies during the war, their cause personified and glamorized by T.E. Lawrence, things changed rapidly after the ceasefire. In 1919—the year Hull's novel was published in Britain—the Amritsar massacre, in which nearly four hundred anti-colonial protesters in the Punjab were gunned down by the British Indian Army, exacerbated colonial anxieties about race relations in the Indian subcontinent and revived Mutiny-era narratives of Indian rape of English women (Sharpe 123). After the Paris Peace Talks, the Treaty of Sèvres (1920), and the subsequent Treaty of

Lausanne (1923) which replaced it, saw much of the Ottoman empire in the Middle East carved up and placed under British and French control as League of Nations mandatory states. Egypt had been a British protectorate since 1914. To Britain's growing empire in the Middle East was added Palestine, the Transjordan, and Iraq. From the start, the assertion of British power in place of Ottoman suzerainty was strongly resisted in its newly acquired Middle Eastern territories. In 1920, fourteen thousand British and Indian troops stationed in Iraq put down an Arab uprising at the cost of four hundred fatalities. In Somaliland in 1920, the British bombed Muslim encampments when a Muslim leader rose up against British rule. In Iraq, where the British had installed Sherif Hussein's son Feisal as a puppet king, revolts broke out sporadically throughout the 1920s and were met by Royal Air Force bombings before the British mandate was ended in 1932. Anti-colonial sentiment throughout the 1920s must have reverberated uncomfortably through the Orientalist romantic fantasies of novelists and readers, probably leading to its decline by the 1930s when it was replaced by the growing popularity of adventure stories about the French Foreign Legion inspired by P.C. Wren's *Beau Geste* trilogy.

Meanwhile, domestic events in Britain brought home fears about "reverse colonization" and interracial unions. A sizable "black" (including Arabs and South Asians as well as Africans) population had lived in London and other British port cities such as Liverpool and Cardiff for a few hundred years, but these numbers increased during World War I, when colonial workers and seamen were recruited to make up shortfalls in British manpower (Tabili 9). Just as women's contribution to the British war effort saw them gradually enfranchised after the war,[\[3\]](#) so did colonized men's contribution lead to a demand for citizenship rights, and a sense of entitlement as subjects who had sacrificed for the British during the war. In such an environment, interracial boundaries began to be breached. The postwar years saw incidents of black men marrying white women. As Lucy Bland has argued, for white Britons this was a case of returned servicemen finding black men in their jobs, housing, and beds, partially contributing to the outbreak of race riots in Cardiff, Liverpool and London in the first half of 1919 (34). Newspapers screamed of "The Black Peril" (indeed, they had been doing so since 1917) and blamed black men for taking white men's jobs and white men's women (Bland 35 and 37). In response, the British parliament passed the Aliens Order in 1920, restricting non-white immigration (Caton 111).

Arab men then became a specific focus of concern in 1923 during the murder trial of Madame Fahmy, a thirty-two year old Frenchwoman who had married a wealthy Egyptian prince ten years her junior, and who subsequently murdered him. A connection was made between the trial and the immense popularity of "sheik" romances, as the *Daily Mirror's* editorialized regarding the Fahmy case:

Too many of our women novelists, apparently under the spell of the East, have encouraged the belief that there is something especially romantic in such unions. They are not romantic, they are ridiculous and unseemly; and the sensational revelations of the trial [...] will not be without their use if they bring that fact home to the sentimental, unsophisticated girl (Bland 47).

Indeed, Fahmy's defense barrister argued in his summation: "Her greatest mistake—possibly the greatest mistake any woman could make—was as a woman of the

West in marrying an Oriental” (Bland 46). Therefore, although Britain had no legislation against interracial unions, public sentiment regarding miscegenation was abundantly clear.

These events, both domestic and foreign, undoubtedly had an impact on both the production and reception of Hull’s output in the 1920s. Her subsequent novels such as *The Sons of the Sheik* (1925) and *Captive of the Sahara* (1931)—like those of her fellow desert romance novelist Kathlyn Rhodes—insisted on the impossibility and outright danger of interracial unions between Europeans and Orientals. Prolonged intercourse of any sort was detrimental to one or the other—usually the Oriental. The most dangerous figure in these later stories was the hybrid male: the Arab or Egyptian who was half-white, or who was culturally white. Occupying the status of both hero and eventual villain, the sheik who affected whiteness would inevitably reveal his dark desires and his degenerate Oriental self. According to novelists such as Hull and Rhodes, despite the sheik’s desire for racial and cultural whiteness, he was helpless to control the baser instincts resulting from his biological race. Relinquishing his desire for the white woman, or even sacrificing his life for her, ultimately constituted his one heroic act. In Hull’s *Captive of the Sahara*, the Bedouin sheik—who falls in love with the English heroine and who invites her to his desert stronghold, the City of Stones, only to imprison her there when she refuses to marry him—ends up dying to protect her. This, and the fact that he (an actual Arab, unlike Sheik Ahmed Ben Hassan) never forces himself upon her, are his only virtues in a tragic tale of unrequited love and misguided anti-colonial ambition. The “native’s” love for the white woman threatens her reputation and destroys him. Whatever timorous gestures *The Sheik* had made towards breaching the boundaries of the white imperial race through the body of the white woman, therefore, the vast majority of English novels in this subgenre during the 1920s and 1930s reverted to the argument that it was the white woman’s responsibility to uphold this boundary and to police ruthlessly her own dark desires for the sake of all “races.” Interestingly enough, however, none of these storylines was ever as popular as the prospect of the taboo interracial union initially played out in *The Sheik*.

The specific historical circumstances of E.M. Hull’s novels thus shaped the contours of her plot and changed the social taboos she was willing to test or break. Where she was prepared to challenge social attitudes towards women’s sexual desire and the significance of rape for women in *The Sheik* and *The Sons of the Sheik*, miscegenation was not a boundary she was ultimately willing to breach. However, when her story of *The Sheik* was translated into an American film, the permeability of white boundaries—gendered, corporeal, social, and political—was once again challenged, as was the meaning of whiteness itself. Across the Atlantic, on the far side of the American continent, Hollywood began to develop an alternative understanding of whiteness in the desert romance, and of white women’s relationship to non-white, but not-black, men. Through Hollywood, and particularly through Rudolph Valentino’s role as Sheik Ahmed Ben Hassan, “ethnic” Americans, who occupied a precarious position within the polity, vaulted over the bodies of Africans and Arabs to consolidate their position as white American citizens.

***The Sheik* in America**

Even before the publication of Hull's *The Sheik* in the United States, American popular culture was already well-acquainted with a commodified, consumable Orient that was paradoxically modern in its love of exotic primitivism. As Holly Edwards has shown, American artists began to incorporate Middle Eastern themes into their paintings from the late nineteenth century onwards. Many were no doubt influenced by the French school of Orientalist painting, but in the United States Orientalism served two different purposes in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. It connected American Protestant narratives of a Chosen People in a Promised Land to the biblical landscapes of the Middle East; and it also expressed nostalgia for a pastoral or frontier ideal that was vanishing, replaced instead by an increasingly urban society characterized by the commodification of consumer goods, sexuality, physicality, and the exotic Orient (Edwards 17). The 1893 Columbian World Exposition in Chicago was especially significant in this transition. Not only did the Fair align and affirm American visions of the Orient with European imperial hierarchies of ethnographic difference and cultural inferiority through the condescending display of Oriental villages from Egypt and Algeria, for example, but it also situated the Orient within the modern idiom of salacious sexuality through Sol Bloom's concoction of the scandalous but popular "hoochy-coochy" Oriental belly dance (Edwards 39).

From the turn of the century onwards, Oriental material culture served as department store and advertising backdrops for selling sensuous luxury items, cigarettes (Mecca, Medina and Omar, and the famous Camel brand), home furnishings, fashion, and film. This was the paradox of Orientalism: exotically primitive and inferior, Orientalism was also a playful discourse through which modern Americans could indulge the pleasure of the senses and experiment with alternative forms of sexuality, gender relations, and mystical rituals. Orientalism was used to explore and transform how Americans related to each other, and this explains the popularity of masquerade balls and the use of Oriental motifs in freemason and other occult male societies at this time. These Oriental role-plays offered "the opportunity to try on surrogate identities and taste illicit pleasures while protected by disguise. People moved across class and ethnic boundaries to dabble in what were perceived to be risqué behaviors" (Edwards 40). Because the United States had no formal sustained imperial relationship with "the Orient" at this time, and because British and French interests successfully blocked the expansion of American oil interests in the region until after World War I (Little 2002), American Orientalism in the early twentieth century was not so much about the justification and extension of imperial power as about the Orient as an imaginary space for American "pleasures, fantasy, and escapism, in the mode of the *Arabian Nights*." For Americans, "the Orient represented the option of luxury and self-indulgence, far from the rigors of a humdrum desk job" (Edwards 23). Therefore American Orientalism, as William Leach has argued, "was symptomatic of changes taking place within western society—and especially in cities—that had little to do with imperialism or with the desire to appropriate somebody else's property, but that

symbolized a feeling of something missing from western culture itself, a longing for a 'sensual' life more 'satisfying' than traditional Christianity could endorse" (105).

This understanding of the Orient as an exotic commodity that could satisfy a more sensuous age was further strengthened by the spectacular use of Oriental imagery in the Broadway production of Hichens' *The Garden of Allah*, which premiered in 1907. That the play opened in New York, popularly known as "Baghdad on the Hudson" for its commerce and seedy immigrant life, was particularly apt. *The Garden of Allah* featured live camels, technological feats producing whirling sandstorms on stage, and meticulously researched recreations of Algerian scenery (Edwards 44). The visual spectacle of the Orient soon overshadowed the play's narrative content, which was confusing and soon forgotten. It ushered in a pre-war vogue for *Garden of Allah* tie-ins, with hotels and restaurants being decked out in furnishings reminiscent of the stage play, while all manner of consumables were associated with the phrase "Garden of Allah"—from women's perfumes to table lamps. As Edwards observed, the "migration of Garden of Allah imagery from story to product epitomizes the process whereby the Orient was constructed and then disseminated in forms that conformed with American dreams and patterns of consumption" (45).

This is distinctly different from Orientalist discourse in Britain at the same time, which was more artistic, literary, and anchored in travel narratives or scholarly treatises on the Orient. This is not to suggest that the British Orientalist discourse was more "authentic" or "true" to "the Orient" than the American variant. As Said has argued persuasively, the discourse of Orientalism was never simply a more or less accurate representation of "the Orient;" it was a discourse which actively "Orientalized" the Orient, investing it with the qualities that made it seem inevitably "Oriental" to Europeans. In any case, as Timothy Mitchell has shown with regard to Egypt, European colonial authorities sometimes restructured the physical space of Orient so as to render it comprehensible within the pre-existing discourse of Orientalism. Villages, army barracks, and towns were reorganized along the lines of the replicas constructed for world fairs or exhibitions, exemplary of certain "political truths" about the colonized (Mitchell 1988). The discourse of European Orientalism was thus not necessarily more "authentic" or "true" than the discourse of American Orientalism.

Nevertheless, despite this active "Orientalizing" of North Africa, the British (and French) relationship with the Orient was still constrained by the geopolitical realities of colonialism: different types of political relations with local rulers; the lucrative provision of financial services; trade, investment, and the building of infrastructure; administration of the civil service; control over the military and containment of anti-colonial activities; and the existence of sizable expatriate European populations in key colonial towns and cities (as well as tourists traveling through lands rendered safe by the assertion of political dominance and military power). To this extent, then, British Orientalism differed from the extravagant and glamorous Orientalist fantasies peddled by American business and the entertainment industry to whet consumer appetite for new fashions, furnishings, and a new, more sensuous "national dream life for men and women" (Leach 107).

It was little wonder, then, that the novel should have enjoyed the same success in America as in Britain, although perhaps for different reasons. Indeed, its fame spread even further afield when the secretary of an entrepreneurial Hollywood mogul, Jesse Lasky (of Famous Players-Lasky, later Paramount), urged her boss to cast Rudolph Valentino in the

eponymous role of the film (Leider 152). Hollywood had shown an early fascination with the East, and the Oriental film was one of the most popular genres in the first two decades of the twentieth century, beginning with George Méliès's *The Palace of A Thousand and One Nights* (1905). The filtering of the East through the Arabian Nights meant that from the start, Hollywood productions of desert romances differed from their British counterparts in terms of the attempts to recreate the "authentic" Saharan desert—something on which British filmmakers often prided themselves. It may have been that British cultural familiarity with the region through the writings of its novelists, travelers, Orientalist scholars, and the realism characteristic of the paintings of artists such as Ludwig Deutsch and John Frederick Lewis, laid a greater expectation of "naturalism" and "authenticity" on British filmmakers.

Famous Players-Lasky was bound by no such considerations. Neither George Melford, the director, nor Lasky were much interested in historical or geographical verisimilitude. Melford certainly took advantage of the setting and the story to film some dramatic long shots of Arabs riding en masse across the rolling desert dunes, while Pathé Company footage of actual Algerian town scenes were spliced into the film for exterior crowd scenes (Leider 155). However, the interior shots made no attempts at realism. They were often staged within arched doorways or framed by opulent draperies and awnings, creating a proscenium-like effect throughout the film that distanced the audience from the action on-screen, forcibly reminding audiences they were watching the elaborately staged realm of Hollywood Oriental fantasy (Caton 116). This was the "Arabian Nights" Orient of advertisements and hotel, restaurant, or department store designs. Melford's habit of using a "keyhole" effect to frame certain sequences within a black circle reinforced this fantasy, and was also reminiscent of the French artist Gérôme's *tondo* of his Orientalist harem fantasy, *Le Bain Turc*. Again, no attempts at "authenticity" were made with Valentino's sheik costume or the interiors of the sheik's tent. Rather, they were the fashionable confections of his partner, Natacha Rambova (Leider 156-158). This, then, was never an attempt to represent the "real Orient" (or what westerners perceived it to be), but to indulge what were clearly American fancy-dress fantasies of the Orient, and the story was filmed in a way to emphasize this (Leider 155-156).

The film of *The Sheik* differs from the novel in many significant ways, perhaps the most crucial being the characters of Diana (played by Agnes Ayres) and Ahmed Ben Hassan, and the initial encounter between them. In the film, Diana's first encounter with the sheik is at a hotel casino where the sheik is allowed to display a chivalrous, gentlemanly side to his nature (in the novel, of course, Diana's first encounter with the sheik is his abduction and rape). The sheik spots Diana as he is entering the casino, which has been closed to other western guests. Diana, angry at being kept out of any public place by "a savage desert bandit" is told by a French officer that the sheik is a "rich tribal prince who was educated in Paris" and in Biskra, "his slightest wish is law." Like the novel, then, the film downgrades the authority of the French in colonial Algeria. The French permit colonial relations to be overturned, so that Arabs are able to keep Europeans out of a space within a hotel owned and inhabited by Europeans. Diana veils herself, masquerades as a dancer, and gatecrashes the sheik's party, but her white skin gives her away. In their exchange, Diana is shown to be haughtily rude while the sheik displays an ironic courtesy towards her. She is positioned as an arrogant imperialist, telling the sheik that she intruded because "I wanted to see the savage who could bar me from this Casino." Unlike the novel where Diana is a passive

victim of the sheik's lust, unwittingly drawing his attention because of her beauty, in the film it is Diana's own discourteous action in failing to respect social and racial boundaries at the hotel that brings her to the attention of the sheik. She is not without power or agency in their initial encounter either. When he un.masks her in the casino, exclaiming "The pale hands and golden hair of a white woman," she draws a revolver on him. Her act mimics in miniature the conquest and colonization of the Middle East—at the barrel of a gun, a gun that she loses in the desert at the moment of her abduction and the loss of her power as an imperial subject. The man who abducts her, however, is not a complete stranger to her but one whose attention she has deliberately courted. This is important in ameliorating the shock of the abduction.

The abduction scene proceeds according to the novel, but the rape scene is again different. For one thing, rape is deferred a number of times. The sheik forces Diana to change out of her riding clothes and dress for dinner, then she tries to escape by running out into a sandstorm. She is brought back by the sheik who then kisses her. This kiss, which leads to the rape in the novel, is interrupted in the film when the sheik himself has to head out into the sandstorm to rescue the men's horses. When he returns, he sees Diana on her knees beside the divan, her hands clasped in desperate prayer and a jeweled cross displayed prominently on her chest (in the novel there are no references to Diana's Christian religion). He approaches her stealthily, one hand outstretched and ready to debauch her, but he is conscience-stricken at the sight of her weeping prayers. Head bowed in dejection and perhaps in remorse or pity, the sheik then leaves the bedroom and sends the Arab maid Zilah to comfort and tend to Diana. What happens next is open to interpretation. Those who were familiar with the novel inferred the rape because the following caption, "Through the dull slumber of despair—until morning tempts back a desire to live" seemed to suggest the same plot as the novel, as did Diana's subsequent costume as a subdued Arab woman. In Kansas City, the widespread understanding that Diana had been deflowered led to the film's ban locally (Leider 166). However, other audiences concluded that Diana was not raped.

This ambiguity in interpretation was very much due to the fact that Lasky wanted the film to evade the censors so that it would be as "mainstream" and popular as possible (Leider 162, 167). As Steven Caton has argued, the film can be interpreted as a shift from rape to romantic courtship. Caton noted that the scene where the sheik leaves Diana sobbing in the maid's arms is in fact full of symbols of phallic detumescence: the sheik's upraised right hand drops in dejection as he leaves, and the lit pipe or cigarette that the sheik habitually holds in his hands are nowhere to be seen. Moreover, both the sheik and Diana are fully clothed the following morning, Diana wakes alone, and the sheik places a rose on Diana's breakfast tray, signaling an intent to court her in the traditional western manner. Leider noted that:

Many of the original reviewers of *The Sheik* complained that the movie, in toning down the rape, changed what had originally been the story of a woman overpowered by a man into one about a woman having her way with a compliant male. They argued that Hull's tale had lost its spine in the process of being adapted from book to screen. [...] Woundingly, they used the language of castration, speaking of the movie version as "mealy, emasculated" (167).

A review in a film magazine, for example, castigated the censors for “patting ‘The Sheik’ into a decorous mood mild enough for the most tender mind. His fierceness—which so delighted the gentle spinster readers—is all gone [...] and his attitude toward the kidnapped heroine is that of a considerate and platonic friend rather than the passionate, ruthless lover” (*Pictureplay* 1922).

The sheik’s emasculation is complete at the film’s conclusion. Where the novel ends with the sheik wresting a pistol away from Diana’s grasp before she shoots herself, the film ends with the wounded sheik waking from a coma to hear Diana offering her life to God in return for his recovery. The two are reconciled in a way which emphasizes the vulnerability of the sheik. While Diana is upright, watching over him and playing nurse, the sheik is weak and bedridden. It is a final image not dissimilar to a World War I Red Cross poster featuring a nurse as “the greatest mother in the world,” cradling a wounded soldier whose head is bandaged. By the film’s end, the sheik’s turban—symbol of his Oriental Otherness—has been replaced by a stark white bandage around his forehead, while the clothes he wears seem no different from a European man’s. The transformation that his love for Diana effects in him—from savage Bedouin sheik to wounded white European man—is encapsulated in his final words: “the darkness has passed and now the sunshine.”

Under Melford’s direction, Diana reprises the role of the white woman in the imperial mission, bringing Christianity and European civilization to the Orient, and rescuing Ahmed from his racial and cultural apostasy at the film’s end: “Pray God, dear friend, to save his life,” she says, “Oh, if He would only accept my life in exchange for his!” Even prior to this, she brings civilizational “light” to the Oriental tents of the sheik: dressing for dinner, reading books, and engaging in “cultured” behavior, especially when the French novelist Raoul de Saint Hubert visits. These activities—the upholding of ruling-class European standards of behavior—are by no means insignificant. From the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century, any white woman who immigrated to the colonies and married a white man was deemed to have fulfilled her duty to the empire. This was because white women—especially middle-class women—were seen as civilizing influences who would prevent white men from “going native,” taking indigenous concubines, and undermining the hierarchical racial structure on which British colonialism was based. As Adele Perry has shown with the case of British Columbia in the 1870s, for example, the population was considered to be lacking in white women’s influence of culture, gentility, morality, and piety. Without white women’s presence, white Canadian men were dangerously exposed to the temptations of “all the evils of heathendom” and “risked becoming a disgrace to the English race itself” (Perry 501). English literature set in the colonies around this time similarly emphasized that the role of an Englishwoman was to marry and be a helpmeet to an earnest Englishman whose life was dedicated to the service of the empire—whether in the form of involvement in the colonial bureaucracy, the army, or in public works such as building railways or dams. After marriage, a wife’s service to the empire took the form of creating a pleasant home environment for her husband and serving him (Teo 2004).

The film thus follows the novel’s imperial agenda, as did many other Hollywood films of the interwar years. So many Hollywood films were based on British imperial adventure novels, that in 1939 *The Daily Express* praised Hollywood for “glorifying Britain’s empire” and noted that “the British empire need not worry for propaganda while Hollywood does its imperial publicity” (Webster 63). Where the novel of *The Sheik*

emphasized the role of white men in extending and controlling the empire in the Middle East, however, the film gives equal emphasis to Diana's role as a white woman within this imperial project. Moreover, because of the film's ending, Diana retains her spirit and sense of agency—tempered by love and tenderness—whereas in the novel she is crushed and driven to self-destruction. Where the British novel condemns and destroys the New Woman, replacing her with a more traditional “womanly” woman—passive, submissive, helpless, and even suicidal—the American film applauds modern, feminist-influenced femininity. Indeed, a few years earlier Jesse Lasky had requested Cecil B. De Mille and Jeannie Macpherson to “write something typically American that would portray a girl in the sort of role that the feminists in this country are now interested in [...] the kind of girl that dominates [...] who jumps in and does a man's work” (Leider 165).

The imperial civilizing mission, and the role of the white woman as enlightened as well as enlightening in every sense of the word, is visually expressed through the aesthetic use of film lighting technology to “privilege and construct an idea of the white person” (Dyer 84). Diana's whiteness is first emphasized when she enters the sexualized space of the Oriental casino where the sheik and the other Arabs are engaged in the “marriage gamble where brides are won on the turn of a [roulette] wheel.” She stands out from the other veiled women and is unmasked because of her whiteness. When the sheik takes her hand, his hands are colored and shown to be much darker than hers. Film is of course a technology of light, and in these films light is literally used to convey stark messages about the civilizational light brought by western women into the benighted lands of the East. As Dyer has explained, early film stock tended to show white people as dark-skinned unless lighting was used strategically to highlight skin and to eliminate shadows. During the 1920s, Hollywood developed a convention of using the key light, the fill, and backlight to keep the white figure “separate from the background as well as creating, when wanted, the rim and halo effects of heroic and glamour lighting” (Dyer 87). In *The Sheik*, the whiteness of the heroine's skin, and the effect of light on her, around her, or flowing from her to the hero, is carefully created. Although Agnes Ayres—like Diana in the novel—is not blonde in this film, her clothing often reflects the light, and her hair is backlit in such a way that she is radiant with light. This accorded with the developing traditions of cinema lighting, whereby “idealized white women are bathed in and permeated by light. It streams through them and falls onto them from above. In short, they glow” (Dyer 122).



In the era of black and white silent films, colors and clothing were crudely symbolic. The villains in American Westerns wore dark clothes and a dark hat, whereas the Western hero was symbolized by his white hat. The same symbolism can be seen in *The Sheik*. When Diana is abducted, she wears light-colored riding clothes and a topee—the costume of European imperial authority that is also worn by Raoul de Saint Hubert. Forced by the sheik to change into a dark evening dress, the symbol of her white European, Christian identity then rests in the large cross that is seen prominently around her neck. However, clothing is more ambiguous for Arab men, particularly the sheik. In the opening scenes, he and the other Arab men are dressed in white robes. By the time he has Diana in his power, however, his white robes have given way to darker, multi-layered, richly textured striped or patterned garments of white, black, and other shades. In the final sickbed scene, when the sheik, through Diana, reclaims his whiteness and literally sees the light, he is simply dressed in a nondescript pale shirt and breeches. Without his characteristic turban, he is indistinguishable from a European man.

The scenes of conflict between Ayres and Valentino in *The Sheik* emphasize the contrast between his darkness and her light. Valentino's hands were artificially darkened so that they would stand out against her skin and her clothing whenever he held her. Although his face is darker than hers—as was the tradition for all white men juxtaposed against white women in film at the time—his face nevertheless appears white when he is not in close proximity to Ayres. Leider noted that as a southern Italian, “Valentino's dark complexion might have been highlighted as an asset, since he was playing a hot-blooded, charismatic Arab chieftain.” However, given widespread racial fears of miscegenation and nativist sentiment about white purity, and given the fact that the Ku Klux Klan was on the rise in the 1920s, “the producers played it safe: only in the posters and lobby cards, especially those in color, does Rudy's skin look tan or even black. On-screen, his face appears white, but his hands show darker” (Leider 159). This schizophrenia of lighting and coloring reflects the ambivalence of Americans towards racial and ethnic others, and towards citizenship and even whiteness itself.



The Sheik was produced in a context of increasing white American concern over immigration from southern and eastern Europe that eventually resulted in the Immigration Act of 1924—the Johnson-Reed Act—which included a “national origins quota” system for Europeans, limiting immigrant numbers to 2% of the existing population group in the 1890 census. As Matthew Frye Jacobson has argued, the period of mass European immigration from the 1840s to 1924 “witnessed a fracturing of whiteness into a hierarchy of plural and scientifically determined white races,” dominated by Anglo-Saxons. The response of newly arrived European immigrants—Irish, Italians, Poles, and Slavs—or their descendants was to scramble for inclusion into and consolidation of a catch-all white “Caucasian” identity, constructed at the expense of black Americans then migrating from the agrarian South to the urban and industrial North and West (Jacobson 7-8). The crucial test for belonging was, of course, naturalization and citizenship, restricted since 1790 to “free white persons,” and later amended in 1870 to include “aliens of African nativity and to persons of African descent.” Rather than challenging the racial basis of citizenship, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries instead saw a raft of legal attempts to have certain marginal groups declared “white” (Gualtieri 52-53).

Significantly, in contrast to Britain—where Arabs were associated with “blacks” until the Second World War—in the United States, Arabs, Syrians, Lebanese, and Turks

were declared a “white” race under the landmark 1915 *Dow v. United States* ruling by the Circuit Court of Appeals. The “fact” of Levantine whiteness was established in a series of naturalization cases heard in federal courts between 1909 and 1915. Syrians such as George Dow and his supporters deliberately constructed themselves as white, appealing to a shared sense of Christian entitlement, their ancient civilization, and the Semitic roots they shared with Jews who were considered racially white (Gualtieri 42-46). For the new immigrant groups, however, whiteness was unstable and precarious. To southern Americans, the Mediterranean, Eastern European, Jewish, and Levantine immigrants were “in-betweens,” occupying a status between true whites and blacks. Inclusion into white identity and white society was provisional, dependent upon their occupations, associations, and behavior. They were only white as long as they upheld the “white man’s code.” It was possible for these groups to slip into blackness if, like Italians in Louisiana, they worked alongside blacks, maintained business relations, or even intermarried with them—in which case they would be treated as blacks (Jacobson 57). In New Orleans, eleven Italians were lynched by the White League in 1891 while in Tallulah, Louisiana, five Sicilian storekeepers were lynched in 1899 (Jacobson 56-58). Levantine immigrants were not exempt either. Syrians were the targets of the Ku Klux Klan in Georgia, while in Florida, the lynching of Nicholas Romey shocked the Syrian community, who were not only outraged but “bewildered” that he had not been recognized as a white man. In the words of the Syrian-American newspaper *ash-Shaab*:

The Syrian is not a negro whom Southerners feel they are justified in lynching when he is suspected of an attack on a white woman. The Syrian is a civilized white man who has excellent traditions and a glorious historical background and should be treated as among the best elements of the American nation (Gualtieri 47).

Valentino’s role as the pseudo-Arab Ahmed Ben Hassan in *The Sheik* must be contextualized within this history of competing versions of whiteness and citizenship in the United States, as well as within discourses of American Orientalism. Rudolph Valentino, born Rodolfo Guglielmi, emigrated from southern Italy to New York in 1913, where he worked at a number of odd-jobs and made a living as a “taxi dancer”—a professional dance partner in popular dance halls—before heading west to Hollywood in 1917. As Leider has observed:

He didn’t set his sights on romantic or heroic roles. Physical traits determined casting choices and he knew he looked foreign, which meant he would be typed as a villain. Ethnic and racial stereotypes were still rigidly fixed, and moral qualities attached to skin tone and hair color, as well as nationality. Blonde women tended to be cast as virgins, brunettes as vamps. To American directors and producers, and much of the audience, dark skin implied contamination. The most popular leading men of the moment were all clean-cut, square-jawed, all-Americans [...] like Douglas Fairbanks, Harold Lockwood, and Wallace Reid. (87)

Films featuring Italians—such as *The Criminals* (1913), which focused on the Mafia kidnapping of a child, or D.W. Griffiths' *Italian Blood* (1911)—pathologized them and called their whiteness into question (Leider 50). Griffiths dismissed Valentino as “too foreign looking” for anything but villainous roles, and Valentino, accepting the inevitable, advertized himself in *Motion Picture Studio Directory* as “a New Style of Heavy.” In the end, it was white American women—actresses like Dorothy Gish and Carmel Myers, or screenwriter and Metro executive June Mathis—who persuaded male directors to cast Valentino in leading roles. Through these women's assistance, Valentino became Hollywood's first swarthy romantic hero, helping to “redefine and broaden American masculine ideals. Only after Valentino could a blonde leading lady accept and return the ardent kisses of a screen lover with dark coloring” (Leider 4). Even so, he did his best to stay out of the sun, recognizing that he had a propensity to tan and fearing that he would become “like a Negro” and “too black for pictures” (Leider 162).

In *The Sheik*, then, the spectacle of Valentino the Italian immigrant representing Ahmed Ben Hassan the Arab raised questions about white identity, civic belonging, and social acceptance—represented by the right to marry a white woman. In the context of contemporary debates over whiteness, immigration, and citizenship, Caton has argued, the revelation of Ahmed's mixed parentage “has a precise correlate in the contested notions of whiteness and non-whiteness [...] Could Italians in America (Valentino, for example) claim to be white?” (Caton 114). Could, then, the Jewish Americans who flocked to and dominated Hollywood's burgeoning film industry? Caton contended that the “immigrant who is neither white nor black but confusingly in-between could become a ‘bourgeois’ citizen of the country with the helping hand of the patronizing white woman. [...] Libidinal attraction to a dangerous type is justified and legitimated for the sake of a national melting pot, paid for by the exclusion of the black man” (116).

Originally non-white-but-not-black, Valentino/Ahmed Ben Hassan can become white through his love of a white woman, who tames and redeems him through Christian courtship and marriage. This process of conversion and redemption is in direct contrast to the novel, where it is Diana's feminist-inflected, modern femininity which is tamed and crushed by Oriental rape. In the film, Diana's second abduction and attempted rape by the evil robber Sheik Omair takes place after Ahmed Ben Hassan, under the Frenchman Saint Hubert's influence, has reluctantly agreed that because he loves Diana, he must send her back to her own people. From this point on, Valentino/Ahmed's transformation into a white man takes place at the expense of darker others. His initial “otherness” is now displaced onto the villainous Omair, who is not only much darker in complexion but who also associates with Africans, in contrast to the Frenchmen with whom Ahmed surrounds himself. Sheik Omair is guarded by a giant Nubian and surrounded by the classic Hollywood iconography of African otherness: nearly-nude dancing girls and tom-toms. In the act of rescuing Diana, Valentino/Ahmed survives a near-fatal attempt on his life, whereas black-affiliated Omair and his Nubian guards die. Valentino/Ahmed's transformation into a white man thus takes place at the expense of villainous black men. In the final scene, as I have mentioned before, he is stripped of the outward symbols of Oriental otherness—his *thobe* and his turban—and left only with his shirt and breeches, while Diana kneels by his side and lays her head on his wounded breast. As Caton remarked, this is “allegorically significant in the context of American race relations,” for “it offers the dream of a partnership between white and ethnic other, implied by the

handclasp of Diana and Ahmed before the final fade-out” (Caton 116). To American women, the film thus offered a potentially different message of racial, ethnic, or cultural incorporation than did the British novel.

However, Valentino’s—and, hence, other ethnic heroes’—acceptance as a white man was gendered and conditional. While many women idolized him as the “perfect lover,” for some others, as for a *Photoplay* reader, he looked “wicked [...] maybe because he is not an American” (Studlar 299). In point of fact, Valentino never became naturalized as an American citizen because he was torn between his roots as an Italian and the country which had made him famous but which also consistently questioned his masculinity and his racial heritage. He was famously reviled by American men who “feared that American women, duped by immigrants—especially those, like tango pirates, who achieved a masquerade of good breeding—would bear offspring who would inherit the ancestry of their dark foreign fathers, an ancestry that was considered to be tainted” (Studlar 299). Just as Arabs could be represented and displaced by a more acceptable “white ethnic” like Valentino, in time, swarthy but romantic ethnic heroes in Hollywood would be represented and displaced by “Anglo-Saxon” actors such as Ronald Colman (*The Night of Love*), John Gilbert (*The Cossacks*), Douglas Fairbanks (*The Thief of Baghdad* and *The Gaucho*), and Richard Barthelmes (*The White Black Sheep*). As Studlar has noted, “such stars could temporarily satisfy female desire for erotic exoticism without threatening either American men or the nation’s Nordic/Anglo-Saxon purity” (Studlar 301). This sequence of the colonization and displacement of the exotic ethnic/Arab figure by an indisputably “white” man echoed uncannily the displacement of the Arab Ahmed Ben Hassan by the white Earl of Glencaryll in *The Sheik*, but it also served to emphasize that these white heroes were at their most erotically charged when masquerading as non-white men. This is of course the paradox of Orientalism: a discourse which creates and propagates images of inferior “others,” it simultaneously expresses the consciousness of a lack on the part of the western self/culture, and a yearning for the exotic other.

Conclusion

The Sheik was one of the most important popular cultural artifacts produced in the twentieth century, a text whose influence is still evident today in countless songs, romance novels, films, television series, comics, cartoons, and in the very transformation of the connotations associated with the word “sheik” itself. Today, however, what remains of the text in popular memory is the image of a white woman abducted by a swarthy Arab man in flowing robes, perched on a galloping steed thundering over desert dunes. Meanwhile, the Arab-turned-English sheik himself has become inextricably intertwined with, and perhaps even lost in, the image of the Italian-turned-Arab-turned-American matinee idol Rudolph Valentino, whose death soon after the completion of *The Son of the Sheik* denied him any opportunity to sever his eternal association with the sheik by playing other subsequent roles. Both images—the horseback abduction and Valentino as the sheik—simultaneously evoke fun and fantasy, ridicule and romance; and perhaps that is why relatively little attention has been paid to both the novel and the film in comparison to other popular novels and films throughout the twentieth century.

Scholars in film and literary studies have certainly redressed this neglect over the last two decades, but apart from Caton's work, discussions of the film and the novel do not generally overlap. Furthermore, although Hull's novel, in particular, has been read within a plethora of different historical contexts pertaining to the 1920s, the circumstances of its production in the midst of World War I and its subsequent reception arising from the different imperial, ethnic, racial, and Orientalist contexts of Britain and the US have received little mention. This is not to suggest that the film and novel did not overlap, or were radically different in meaning and reception in Britain and America respectively. This is clearly not the case. The foregrounding of Diana's desire for adventure, passion, and the exotic Orient is shared by both novel and film; as is her arrogant confidence arising from her position as a white imperial subject who has the power, ultimately, to rescue the European male "gone native," and restore him to his white self. Where the novel crushes her and reduces her to submissive passivity to the sheik, however, the film celebrates her spirit and shows her triumphant over a somewhat debilitated sheik at the end. Still, the Hollywood film shares the novel's imperial assumptions and obligingly confirms the novel's insinuation that the French are weak colonizers who are best cast as adjuncts to the plot and to the British protagonists, even though the setting is in French colonial Algeria. Both novel and film condone the role of violence in romance—even though the film subsequently cloaks the novel's rape scene in coy ambiguity—and, of course, both exalt the figure of the sheik as a menacing, mesmerizing, sexually potent, Oriental romantic hero. These things, and many other lesser details, the two texts have in common.

Yet the differences are equally significant. The first point of differentiation between Hull's novel and Lasky's film is the tradition of Orientalist discourse incorporated into each text. Like many of her fellow "desert romance" novelists in the first quarter of the twentieth century, Hull drew from a tradition of Orientalist literature concerned with historical accuracy, "authenticity," naturalism, and verisimilitude, seemingly conscious about how well her descriptions of notable tourist destinations—Biskra or the North African desert—matched the descriptions in British travel accounts. Indeed, she herself would go on to write a travel book, *Camping in the Sahara* (1926). Moreover, British Orientalist discourse in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was grounded in concerns about colonial matters in the East. Said is surely correct in arguing that during this time, Orientalism served to justify European domination of its colonies. Hull commented on, or wrestled with, actual or potential colonial or racial problems in *The Sheik* and her subsequent desert romances. The justification and extension of British imperialism, especially in contrast to the French, is a significant part of the novel.

However, coming from a specifically American tradition of fairground and department-store Orientalism, Lasky's film was less concerned with verisimilitude or the depiction of actual geopolitical regions, and more absorbed in creating a fantasy "Arabian Nights" space which emphasized the visual, spectacular, commoditized exotic: Oriental curtains, rugs, draperies, cushions, lamps, furniture, clothing, headwear and cigarettes. In this and subsequent sheik or desert romance films, Orientalism and "Arab-face" offered American men a way of experimenting with alternative masculinities that indulged the senses and reveled in "feminine" commodities such as exotic clothing, while combining this with a dangerous and violent ideal of the heroic lover. This ideal, first propagated by the British novel, had a very particular and poignant resonance for British audiences in the 1920s.

Hull's novel was produced during a period of trauma: the constant reports of defeats, stalemates, and heavy casualties arising from the First World War—a war in which her own husband was involved; the stories of German atrocities trickling back from Belgium and amplified by the British government; the upheaval of social and sexual mores on the home front; the trauma of returned soldiers—often shell-shocked, neurasthenic, or embittered—trying to adapt to civilian life; and the domestic violence meted out against both strangers and loved ones that sometimes ensued. This must have influenced Hull to conceive the violent rapist hero whom the heroine could still fall in love with, because his Oriental otherness, brute strength, arrogance, confidence, and sexual prowess—part of his hyper-masculinity—were no doubt attractive in an age dominated domestically by what Sonya Rose has called the “temperate hero” (2003).

The Sheik was then received within a context of backlash against women. Although women over thirty received the vote in 1918, this limited victory for female suffrage was offset by the retrenchment of women from the workforce to make way for returned soldiers, and by hostility against young working-class women for taking men's jobs or, in large port cities, for consorting with other men, especially “black” men. Women were certainly not passive in the face of this backlash. Many young women defiantly celebrated what gains were left to them after the war: access to the public sphere and to the new forms of consumerism and public entertainment that swept Britain in the 1920s—shopping, dancing, and movie-going, where they consumed Hollywood fare such as *The Sheik*. These were entertainments which celebrated and gave expression to female sexual desire, including the desire—fulfilled in fantasy if not reality—for dangerous “black” men, among whom Arabs and South Asians were included. In the end, Hull indulged women's sexual desire but firmly reined in their interracial fantasies, diverting them instead to the figure of the heroic British man in “Arab-face.”

In many ways, the United States shared the same historical memories as the British; after all, Lasky's film was released merely two years after the publication of Hull's novel. However, the historical circumstances, and therefore the meaning, of these events differed in small but significant ways for Americans. For example, the American experience of the war was signally different from the British. The same motif of German atrocities in Belgium was used as American propaganda after the US declaration of war against Germany in April 1917, but the American public had not been bombarded with such stories for years as had the British public. For the Americans, the war was of a far shorter duration and lesser impact in terms of the war-wounded and the dead. Four million men were immediately mobilized but the first troops only made it to France a year later, at the end of March 1918, and these troops only experienced one victory after another from then until November 1918. The casualty rate for mobilized American soldiers was eight per cent, compared with forty-four per cent for the British. Whatever the war traumas experienced by individual soldiers, American society as a whole was not traumatized by World War I. Consciousness of the war was not part of the context in which the film was either produced or received.

The same broadly shared attitude towards race which nonetheless masked significant variations can also be seen in Britain and the US, which were both hostile to interracial relations between white women and non-white men. Despite the lack of any legal prohibition against interracial relations in Britain and its colonies, such unions between white women and non-white men were treated with deep revulsion and condemnation, because the boundaries of the imperial race and its inferior colonized

subjects were being breached—something that British society strongly objected to especially after the 1857 Indian “Mutiny.” Arabs were generally placed on the same footing as Africans in this imperial hierarchy of race. In the US, however, anti-miscegenation laws were aimed squarely at African Americans and sustained by the myth of the black man raping the white woman (while ignoring the actual reality of white men raping black women). Arabs, while not quite securely “white,” were nevertheless differentiated from African Americans, and in the early 1910s, consolidated their citizenship rights as Americans on the basis of not being “black.” Here, the history of immigration plays into the construction of racial and white identity. For the British, racial questions held their greatest significance in the empire; within Britain itself, apart from the pockets of non-white populations in port cities, subjects were white precisely because they were British. In the US, however, European immigration from the postbellum era onwards raised the question of who could be considered white and, therefore, a potential citizen. The boundaries of “whiteness” were gradually extended to include the Irish, eastern and southern Europeans, Jews, and eventually Arabs—all of whom combined to form a “Caucasian” race which again differentiated itself against black Americans.

When George Melford directed *The Sheik*, the same process of incorporating the Italian/Arab Valentino into white society can be seen. Arabs are “white” enough to be played by Italians who, in turn, have become “white” enough to represent Englishmen (albeit with a hint of Spanish-Moorish blood). “White” Arabs associate with white people like the French. Unlike the degenerate bandit Omair, the white sheik distances and differentiates himself from indisputably “black” people like Nubian slaves. The racial and white ethnic logic of this film only makes sense within the context of the history of American racial, immigration, and citizenship policies of the early twentieth century: a history in which black people are constantly represented in servitude of some sort, but where non-white/not-black people can be assimilated into the body politic as citizens if they distance themselves from blacks.

In the end, we cannot determine how many readers and film-goers were attentive to the various nuances and differences between Hull’s novel and Lasky’s film. Contemporary reviews of the film in magazines such as *Photoplay* or *Pictureplay* seemed to latch on to one overwhelming difference: the emasculation of Ahmed Ben Hassan in the film. This they blamed, not so much on Valentino for his portrayal of the sheik, as on the producer and director for choosing a film that would inevitably “give the censor’s knife full play” (*Pictureplay* 1922). Regardless of how cognizant audiences were of these differences, they are important because they show the various ways the Orient became “Orientalized” for two different audiences in the early twentieth century, and they indicate the different purposes that a heteroglossic Orientalist discourse could serve: as escapist entertainment, certainly, but also as an intervention by a previously unknown woman writer into British imperial matters as well as into the wartime and postwar debate about women’s sexual desire, and as a medium of exploring American racial identity and inclusion into full citizenship. Finally, whatever else *The Sheik* did or did not do, it placed women at the center of Orientalist discourse as both producers and consumers of the novel and the film, thereby making them complicit in its legacy throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

[1] This essay assumes that “the Orient” is a Western discursive construct rather than existing geopolitical reality but, for ease of reading, will omit scare quotes from the terms “Orient” or “Oriental” in subsequent references.

[2] For example, Lady Jane Digby and Margaret Fountaine.

[3] Women over thirty were given the vote in 1918. It would be another decade before they were enfranchised on the same terms as men.

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