

Teo, Hsu-Ming. *Desert Passions: Orientalism and Romance Novels*. Pp. 344. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2012. US \$60. ISBN: 978-0-292-73938-3.

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It's been almost a century since E. M. Hull's Sheikh Ahmed ben Hassan made the brooding, hypersexual sheikh a central figure in Anglophone romance, first in the pages of *The Sheik*, a scandalous international bestseller in 1919, and then on screen, as played by Rudolph Valentino in 1921. In contemporary romance novels, this character does not simply survive; he thrives. In the last ten years, Harlequin and Silhouette have published more than 120 mass market paperbacks focused on desert sheikhs who rule over fantastical—and highly fictionalized—desert kingdoms. Often boasting titillating titles like *The Sheik and the Virgin Secretary* (Silhouette, December 2005) and *Sold to the Sheik* (Harlequin, February 2004), these novels ring changes on Hull's narrative model, in which an independent and feisty Western woman is sexually awakened by an imperious Arab sheikh, who, in turn, sets aside his arrogant self-centeredness in favor of a partnership of equals.

Hsu-Ming Teo's *Desert Passions: Orientalism and Romance Novels* rightly identifies such fantastical fare as fair game for both literary and historical analysis. Indeed, her exhaustive scholarly monograph situates the contemporary sheikh romance in a corpus of work dating back to the Crusades: a full six centuries of Orientalist discourse. Why, she asks, has the desert sheikh been such a popular romantic hero, not just over the span of centuries, but particularly in the past two decades, a period during which the relations of the West with the Arab-Islamic world have been so troubled? What narrative and cultural traditions lead up to Ahmed ben Hassan and his heroine, Diana Mayo, and to what extent do the present-day sheikh hero and his lady love share the characteristics of their infamous predecessors? If we read contemporary romance novels (say, those published since 9/11) through a critical, post-colonial lens, must we see them as denigrating their non-Western characters by turning them into stereotypes and placing them in seemingly predetermined plotlines? Or will they—at least some of them, anyway—come into focus instead as subversive tracts that undermine Orientalism by making the reader feel compassion toward Arabs and the world that they inhabit?

There is much to recommend this book, for Teo, a dedicated cultural historian, turns over many stones to understand the popularity of the contemporary sheikh romance. The author is thorough in her historical examination of the Western literature that fostered and advanced the Orientalist stereotypes of today. As early as the twelfth century C.E., she argues, the Arabs had already invented “the culture of romantic love” and passed it to Europeans, perhaps grounding French, Italian, and other European conceptualizations of the Arab world as peculiarly sensual (30-31). After two centuries of Crusading and “stories of cross-cultural, interreligious love” (34) framed by war and battle in the south came an even longer period of literary engagement with the Ottomans, whose empire lasted from the fourteenth century until World War I. Teo distinguishes Western writings on the Orient during the rise of Ottoman power (prior to 1699) from that composed during its slow decline, but even in the early period, Teo finds that certain Orientalist preconceived notions, ones familiar to present-day readers—captivity, violence, mystery, exoticism, the harem, and despotism—had already become dominant (38). “Whether or not modern romance writers are aware of it,” she insists, “the Orientalist motifs that abound in contemporary sheik romance novels derive from a long European literary tradition of imagining and interpreting the Orient” (28).

The historical breadth of Teo’s literary analysis, however, is not the book’s only strength, for the author also provides great depth in examining twentieth-century sheikh romances, as written and read (and sometimes filmed) in England, Australia and the United States. Although trends in the rise and fall in the popularity of this genre are similar in each of these countries, Teo demonstrates that the authors and readers of each nation differ in their expectations and so in their understanding of these novels, anchoring her readings in local historical contexts, social movements, and economic conditions. Consider her analysis of the troubling rape of Diana Mayo, followed by Mayo’s love for Sheik Ahmed. In the postwar British context of 1919, she argues, the novel’s “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” (100). Teo then shows how the Hollywood version of the book eliminated the rape scene and made other changes, in both plot and characterization (especially racial characterization) in deference to the desires and expectations of the American audience. As for the many retellings of Hull’s tale in the 1970s and the 1980s, Teo convincingly demonstrates that beneath their superficial similarities, significant national differences can be seen. British authors created heroines who wanted to escape the economic and social crisis of their time, while the heroines invented by Australian and American authors, by contrast, advanced “an unabashed sense of jingoistic nationalism” (247) quite foreign to their late-century British counterparts.

Although interest in the orientalist romance waned during the 1980s, Teo argues, authors and readers renewed their interest in this genre with the Gulf War of 1991. Unlike their predecessors, most of these late-20th century novels are set in highly exoticized fictional kingdoms of the Middle East and North Africa, a trend which has continued in the post-9/11 period. Where earlier iterations of the sheikh romance often had to find some way to avoid the scandal of an “interracial” coupling, such plots are now readily accepted, and there is no longer any need for authors (like Hull, most famously) to throw in a coup de theatre and make the hero European. And yet the sheikh is not completely off the hook, for he must be an Arab man who is “de-Orientalized and made to look so much like a

reconstituted Western man” (234). First, he must engage in what Teo deems a “cultural conversion,” thereby wholly embracing women’s independence and the rest of the liberal feminist agenda (229). Second, he must also buy into the Western schemes of modernization and development in his fictional kingdom, even though his subjects so often seek to stick to ‘the old ways,’ a justification for his benevolent dictatorial rule (258). Democracy, it seems, need not be a value held dear by our beloved sheik.

This scholarly monograph is chock full of such trenchant observations, and I strongly recommend it not only to scholars of the romance novel, but also to those teaching the literature or history of the Western world and its relationships with—and imaginings of—the Arab-Islamic “east.” Teo gives a fair, nuanced account of these popular mass market romances, indicating the significance—for bad and sometimes for good—of the desert sheik in popular culture. It is true that these novels present inaccurate information about the history, culture and politics of the Arab-Islamic world, while also perpetuating some of the Orientalist stereotypes that have been clouding Western understandings of the East for the past seven centuries. Yet in this era in which the Arab terrorist stands as the mass-media norm, as Teo underscores, that inaccuracy sometimes served as a crucial counter-discourse. “Whatever the representational failings of sheik romance novels,” Teo writes, “no other genre of American popular culture had determinedly and repeatedly attempted to humanize the Arab or Muslim other—even if, out of ignorance or incomprehension, imaginary Orients had to be created in order to do so” (216).