

Love in the Desert: Images of Arab-American Reconciliation in Contemporary Sheikh Romance Novels

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Published online: August 2015

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

Abstract: In the past fourteen years, more than 150 romances set in the Arab world have been published by Harlequin and Silhouette. These sheikh novels provide insight into the political imagination of Americans in the post-9/11 world. Romance is escapist literature premised on fantasy. In a contemporary world weighted by real-life conflicts, however, the fantasy of the desert romance transcends that of "boy meeting girl." Instead, it becomes political, as two people from two distinct and seemingly disparate cultures—ones often presented as being at odds in the real world—learn to respect each other and live in harmony despite their differences. Authors of these novels highlight the vast cultural differences between the Arab hero and the American heroine that will be overcome during the course of the book. In this way, they emphasize an implicit political fantasy that undoubtedly contributes to this genre's popularity in a post-9/11 world.

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Keywords: Barbara McMahon, desert romance, Jane Porter, Karen Richman, Linda Conrad, Linda Winstead Jones, Lynn Raye Harris, Maisey Yates, post-9/11 era, Sandra Marton, Sharon Kendrick, Sheikh romance, Susan Mallery

Dr. Geneva Gray woke to the sound of nomads attacking her archaeological camp, which, though technically in Egypt, bordered all too closely the kingdom of Bah'shar.[1] Taken captive, the American was presented by the desert marauders as a gift to Sheikh Zafir bin Rashid al-Khalifa, leader of this fictional Arab country. Zafir recognizes Dr. Gray, or

Genie, for they had once dated when they both attended the same American college. Ten years ago, Genie had broken off the relationship after Zafir had informed her of his impending arranged marriage and then asked her to return to his kingdom as his mistress. Now a widower, Zafir does not endorse the illegal detention of Americans, but his response to this crisis is dictated by the cultural and political conditions of his Arab kingdom. “The ways of the desert are ancient and cannot be changed overnight,” he says (Harris, “Kept” 121). Bowing to political exigencies in Bah’shar, Zafir forces Genie to return to his palace in Al-Shahar, promising the noted scholar that in return for her captivity he will grant her exclusive rights to excavate the precious temples of the capital city. Thrown together, their simmering attraction threatens to blossom into love, a dangerous situation since Zafir’s people may not be ready to accept a Western queen. After an assassination attempt, the Sheikh sends his lady love back home, stating simply “we are two different people from two different worlds” (Harris, “Kept” 144).

The notion that Arabs and Westerners are “from two different worlds” has a long history in Western high art and popular culture, but its current iteration reflects a historically specific pessimism about Arab-American relations that has shaped cultural production in the post-9/11 world. Although not all Arabs are Muslim, and although the majority of the world’s 1.6 billion Muslims are not Arab, American popular media routinely conflate the two categories, such that news broadcasts, films, television series, and potboilers reify the various peoples of the twenty-two countries of the Middle East and North Africa into a single homogeneous entity that is dark, dangerous, religiously “other,” and dead set against the West (Markovitz; Shaheen; Takacs). American popular culture has thus fused the “Global War on Terror” announced by President Bush after the 9/11 attacks with the “Clash of Civilizations” predicted by Samuel Huntington in the 1990s, presenting conflict between an American-led West and an Arab-led Islamic East as the defining feature of international relations in the early twenty-first century (Huntington).

By my count, Harlequin and Silhouette have published at least eighty sheikh romance novels by twenty-one American authors since 9/11. According to cultural historian and literary scholar Hsu-Ming Teo, these stories of desert love can be read as subversive tracts, for they are presently the only form of American popular culture consistently evoking compassion for Arabs or the Arab world (Teo 216; 301-303). This compassion hinges on a cross-cultural exchange of values: the heroine ultimately embraces the family-oriented culture of the Arab world, while the sheikh adopts the liberal feminist agenda of his Western beloved and her compatriots (Teo 233).

Teo describes sheikh romance novels as “a valuable historical archive showing how ordinary, educated women understand and interpret Arabs, Muslims, citizenship, and belonging, and Western relations with the Middle East” (26). True to form, the ending of Harris’s novella “Kept by the Sheikh” helps scholars to appreciate one author’s political imagination in a post-9/11 world. This story does not end with Zafir and Genie in separate worlds, but rather brings the couple and their cultures together. Zafir changes the law prohibiting Bah’shar’s rulers from marrying foreigners and also holds a special vote to ensure that his people agree with him—which, conveniently, they do (Harris, “Kept” 186). And so, Zafir’s love for the American fosters democratic process, or at least some version of it, in the Arab world.

The ending of “Kept by the Sheik” becomes more significant when contextualized with its author’s life story. Like many Americans, Harris has a deeply vested interest in the

War on Terror now being waged in various areas of the Arab world. The forty-seven year old author not only grew up in a military family—both her mother and father were soldiers—but is also the wife of an officer, a now-retired Technical Sergeant in the Air Force. And Harris is as close to a “blue-blooded” American as found in this national melting pot, for she is a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution, an organization in which descendants of those who fought for American independence actively promote patriotism through various charitable endeavors. On 11 September 2001, she was at the Ramstein Air Base in Germany, and her thoughts turned immediately to the precarious future of her husband and those who served with him. In fact, she had only just returned that very day from a visit to him in Italy, where he was then deployed to Italy supporting Operation Joint Forge, a NATO effort in support of Kosovo (Harris, email, 16 February 2014; Harris, interview, 16 July 2013).

Harris—much like the ten other authors and three editors interviewed for this article—denies an explicit intent to address politics in her romance novels, but both the text of her novels and the transcripts of her interviews belie this unassuming assertion. Indeed, the author reveals a belief that her novels may well contribute to a better American understanding of the Arab world. Analyzing the sheikh, a composite Arab hero that essentializes the region’s political and cultural complexities, she notes that “I think it’s important for romance reader to think of him as a man, to know that he is sexy and desirable as a man from their own culture could be. Maybe that’s naive of me, but I choose to believe having sheikhs populate romance novels makes readers think of them as people, not terrorists or Islamic fundamentalists who hate America” (Harris, email, Follow Up, 11 February 2013).

In this essay, I expand and supplement the textual archive relied on by Teo by adding a new set of documents: interviews with some of the “ordinary, educated women” who write and publish these texts. Methodologically, I am a historian by training—one whose work previously analyzed the political and economic conditions of Morocco and Iraq via oral history and other first-hand accounts—and so I am keenly aware of a need to expand the source base for examining the cultural trends represented by sheikh romances. For this essay, I interviewed eleven authors and three editors. This article was particularly influenced by interviews with six authors and two editors of Harlequin Presents, a category line specializing in stories about “alpha males, decadent glamour and jet-set lifestyles” set in a “sensational, sophisticated world” (Harlequin Presents). Another important resource was Susan Mallery, author of the Desert Rogue Series published by Harlequin in the Silhouette Special Edition line. Mallery and her editor Karen Richman made themselves available on multiple occasions via email and in person.

These interviews suggest authors of sheikh romances consciously and deliberately struggle against the negative stereotypes of Arabs perpetrated by the media and other vehicles of popular culture. They do so by deploying some of the more positive—indeed, one might say exotically upbeat—stereotypes drawn from the long history of Orientalist fiction and film. In a complex negotiation between their own desires, the traditions of the genre, and the expectations of readers and publishers, sheikh romance authors embrace an ideal of Arab-American reconciliation, albeit one in which the happy ending occurs according to Western sensibilities.

The Popularity of Sheikh Romances in the Post-9/11 World

Among the sheikh romance authors whose work straddles the dividing line of the 9/11 attacks, few have been as consistently popular as Susan Mallery, whom Teo identifies as a “master of this genre” (Teo 284). Long before writing a sheikh romance, Mallery had admired the sheikh romance author Barbara Faith, who had been the sole author allowed to pen such novels for the category line Silhouette Special Edition. In 1998, three years after Faith’s death, Mallery’s editor, Karen Richman, invited her to submit a proposal for a sheikh romance novel in that line (Mallery, interview). Richman recalls that Silhouette had identified the author as a rising star and “so our plan was to go out with a three-book series, in three consecutive months to help market the series and profile her writing” (Richman, email). On a road trip through Louisiana with friend and fellow author Christina Dodd, Mallery plotted the trilogy. “I started with three books and really never thought I would do more,” she explained, “but the reader interest was huge and the mail started pouring in. So I kept writing them” (Mallery, interview in Shoemaker).

The popularity of Mallery’s “Desert Rogue Series,” now thirteen volumes strong, may be partly due to the author’s self-consciously idealized version of the Arab world. Each of Mallery’s books takes place in a fictional country located on the Arabian peninsula, and each country is explicitly described in both the text and in interviews as standing slightly apart from that real-world context, a “Switzerland of the Middle East” (Mallery, email; *Kidnapped* 179; *Princess* 11). Mallery does not set her books in real places, she has explained, because:

The real world of the Middle East is complex and difficult. There are religious differences and deadly conflicts. My books are about taking people away from the real world. So I created my own countries where my romantic stories can take place. There’s [sic] no religious issues, no war, no disagreements, except between the hero and heroine (Mallery, interview in Shoemaker).

In this quote, we find Mallery emphasizing a negative stereotype of the Arab world put forth in the nightly news as a lived reality in the Arab world. She is unapologetic in her decision to omit the media representations of disturbing events in real life and the negative stereotypes, thereby sanitizing this place it for consumption by her readers, most of whom are American.

Mallery’s effort to keep “real world” issues outside the borders of her novels was put to the test in 2001. The fourth book in her series was due out in November 2001, two months after 9/11. Since this book, titled *The Sheikh and the Runaway Princess*, had gone into production ten months earlier, the publisher could not change its plans and replace the monthly category romance with, for example, a tale of a fireman, which would have directly reflected American sensibilities after 9/11. The editorial staff at Silhouette worried that the book would not sell. After all, they had witnessed firsthand the trauma of 9/11. The American headquarters of Silhouette is in downtown Manhattan, and its employees saw smoke from the Twin Towers from their office windows as they followed news of the crisis on TV. Richman remembers, “we were a little worried about how readers would react,

especially with the fourth book in the series set to be published right after that terrible tragedy” (Richman, email). With two sheikh books in production, Mallery predicted extremely low sales and believed her career might be over (Mallery, interview). Sharing her concerns, editors at Silhouette re-named the sixth book, which was in production and due to be released in June 2002. Eliminating the Arab term “sheikh,” the editors titled the book *The Prince and the Pregnant Bride*, an ethnically neutral term that sidestepped potential antipathy about the Arab world (Mallery, email).

The fears of the Silhouette editorial staff proved unfounded, and Mallery went on to publish another seven books set in her fictional Arab world. Indeed, Mallery insists that there was “not a blip in sales. Nothing” (Mallery, interview). Since each of her sheikh romances had a press run of 100,000 copies, these culminated in sales of 1.3 million books (Reardon).

The popularity of Mallery’s series is not an anomaly, for other authors have found that 9/11 did not affect continuing interest in the Arab world. When 9/11 occurred, Sandra Marton was under contract to write *The Sheikh’s Convenient Bride*. In this story, an episode in the O’Connell family saga, CPA Megan O’Connell falls for her client, Qasim al Daud al Rashid, the King of Suliyam. As the wife of a retired New York City police officer, Marton was understandably distressed by the 9/11 tragedy (Marton, interview). Two weeks later, she informed her editor that she felt that she could not write the sheikh romance (Marton, email, sheikhs, 5 May 2013). Marton’s editor assuaged her concerns and quickly assured her that the sale of sheikh romance in the category line of Harlequin Presents had not suffered due to the 9/11 attack. The author ultimately decided to write the book for which she was under contract.

Marton felt at ease doing so in part because she created “a sheikh who was comfortable in Western culture” (Marton, email, sheikhs, 5 May 2013). In this way, she found her own recipe for generating a fictive Arab world that was comfortable for American readers. The sheikh in this post-9/11 novel is ethnically Arab, and yet he is culturally quite Western in his orientation. He is an alumnus of Yale University, and his American mother resides in California. The cover of the book deliberately eschews visual mention of Arab culture, since it features a naked man and woman in bed together. Noting that Arab clothing can be “off-putting,” Marton and her editor “had long ago agreed that my sheikh books would never feature covers in which my character was dressed in Arab garb.” Marton also insists that her stories “deliberately avoided religious discussion or religious rules.” Towards this last, her stories actually upturn the principles of the Islamic majority in the Arab world. She notes that she allows her sheikhs to drink wine, prohibited by Islam, “because I give them a backstory that involves being educated in the West” (Marton, email, sheikhs, 5 May 2-13). Her readers responded to this formula; Marton has since published five more books, each focusing on an Arab hero who is Westernized and an American heroine.[2]

Authorial anecdotes underscore the popularity of the sheikh hero in a post-9/11 world. Barbara McMahon writes for the category line Harlequin Romance. This category line is distinct from Harlequin Presents, because it targets readers who seek a more realistic fantasy, devoid of international glamour. McMahon reports that she “had a sheikh book come out the month after 9/11. I worried it would tank and I’d get no sales from it. However it sold as well as any of the other sheikh books I’ve done—phenomenally well as my editor said about it” (McMahon, email).

Indeed, authors report healthy sales of books premised on stories of sheikh heroes courting American women among desert ergs. Jane Porter, who writes for Harlequin Presents, published seven romance novels set in the Arab world between 2002 and 2009.[3] “My sheikhs,” she asserts, “outsell anything else I write by \$10,000 a book...They’re the highest selling” (Porter, interview, 17 July 2013). And speaking in terms of sales and of creative writing honors, Maisey Yates reports that “some of my most successful books have been sheikh heroes. Both my award nominated books have been sheikh books...My sheikh heroes tend to be reader favorites” (Yates, email).

Underscoring the profits to be earned from the publication of sheikh romances, editors have made concerted efforts to encourage the publication of sheikh romances. Linda Conrad, who writes for the category line Harlequin Romantic Suspense, reports that, “Several years ago my editor asked a few of her authors to consider writing Sheikh heroes for marketing purposes” (Conrad, email). She has since published four novels in which an Arab and an American fall in love as they work together to untangle international intrigue. In a like manner, Linda Winstead Jones, who writes for the category line Silhouette Intimate Moments, was asked to write a continuity series about sheikhs. In a continuity series, as she explains, “a group of editors comes up with the concepts and characters and hands that over to their authors” (Winstead, email). Thus, her books—*The Sheik and I* (2006) and *Secret-Agent Sheik* (2002)—explicitly result from and reflect market demand for Arab heroes in a post-9/11 world. Lynne Raye Harris’s editor requested a sheikh romance in December 2009, and Harris has since published a novella and three novels set in the Arab world. In fact, she identifies *Carrying the Sheikh’s Heir* (2015) as her best-selling novel (Harris, interview, 28 April 2015). Sandra Marton left Harlequin Presents and began to self-publish in 2013, initiating this risky business venture with a sheikh hero, an economically driven decision that underscores the popularity of the Arab fantasy with readers.

Overall, the numbers of sheikh romance novels increased notably after 9/11, even as wars in Afghanistan and Iraq heated up. Teo has compiled a revealing graph that demonstrates the numbers of sheikh romances published in a given year between 1969 and 2007. With numbers hovering around six in 2000, the lines of the graph morphs into a severe incline in 2002, with eighteen sheikh romances published that year (Teo 5). A reporter for the *Chicago Tribune* counted four sheikh romance novels a year published in the 1990s, compared with seventeen—quadrupling that modest tally—in the first six years of the twenty-first century (Reardon).

Forging a Fictional Kingdom

The political fantasy of the sheikh romance lies in the happy union of the two people from vastly different worlds, the United States and a generalized Arab region. Lynn Raye Harris notes that her American readers find the Arab world “so foreign, so Other.” Harris has an MA in English and so is familiar with theoretical Othering in Western imperial texts. She notes that these sheikh romances provide “such an Other experience, and I think Americans are fascinated with that” (Harris, interview, 28 April 2015). One critical tenet of

the novels, then, is that the world of the Arab potentate is differentiated from that of the American heroine.

Authors of sheikh romances universally situate their storylines among desert sands, a terrain abandoned in modern times, in order to underscore the differences between the Arab hero and his American heroine. They do this despite the fact that rates of urbanization in the Arabian peninsula, the heart of the Arab world, hover between 80 and 90 per cent (Barakat 29). Jane Porter notes that, “I don’t think I’ve ever written a Sheikh story that spends more than maybe twenty or thirty pages in North America. My Sheikh stories always take place in the desert” (Porter, interview 1 May 2014). This setting is unfamiliar—and attractive—to Western readers. In this way, the authors forge a fantastical kingdom that draws upon Orientalist notions. “Sand, camel, desert...tent,” recites Harris, who reflects on these heavily charged common nouns and asserts that “readers need the key words, because they create the world in their head” (Harris, interview, 17 July 2013).

Maisey Yates unwittingly broke this unspoken rule as a first time author of sheikh romances. In drafting *The Inherited Bride*, she wrote a story in which Princess Isabella Rossi of Turan seeks out some semblance of a normal life before doing her duty to her country by undertaking an arranged marriage to High Sheikh Hassan al bin Sudar of Umarah. When Hassan’s brother Adham seeks her out in Paris, the two—at least, in the initial draft—embark on a Mediterranean vacation in which the princess engages in “normal” activities, like eating hamburgers or walking in the streets, while the couple fall in love. Mention of the desert came late in the novel, thus being downplayed. After Yates submitted her draft, she notes that her “editor...sent me a revision letter, and she was, like, what is the point of doing a sheikh if you never have them in the desert? That is not what readers want. She said, what they go to it for is for this setting, and you haven’t given them that...You need to, you know, move the desert part forward because you are not fulfilling the fantasy” (Yates, interview). The setting establishes the hero’s credibility as a man from the Arab world, and this sets up the cultural differences between him and his leading lady, which is one inevitably wrought with political overtones.

And so, nearly without exception, authors of sheikh romances set their fictional countries in the desert. Mallery, for example, has created a network of desert states in the Middle East proper, including Bahania, El Bahar and the hidden city-state the City of Thieves.[4] These countries are rentier states. Thus, oil production largely accounts for the personal fortune of \$14 billion of the royal family of El Bahania (Mallery, *Prince and Pregnant* 14). Her books are illustrated with a map of the Middle East that inserts these countries into the existing state system. Bahania is squeezed next to the United Arab Emirates, while El Bahar is contiguous with the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen and Saudi Arabia. In some sense, Mallery is counting on her readership’s vague knowledge of this region, for “Oman,” she notes, “is just gone, and I apologize to the people” (Mallery, interview). The author is quite conscious of her use of the desert setting as a genre trope, one whose familiarity is critical to the success of these romances. “The oasis,” she thus notes, “speaks to the traditional and stereotypical view of the desert. But it’s fun, and if they can have sex at the oasis, all the better” (Mallery, email).

Indeed, desert terrain exists for Mallery even in places where it would actually be a near impossibility for it to be present. Thus, the arid climate of Mallery’s desert setting dominates fictive Lucia-Serrat, which is an island country purported to be in the Indian Ocean, where, presumably, tropical terrain and sultry beaches would prevail. But even

natives of Lucia-Serrat, like ruler Prince Rafiq, though American on his mother's side and educated in the West, feel the tug of the desert. Much of the novel takes place in California, where Rafiq has set up an office. And yet, when informed of his heroine's virginity, he feels "the ancient blood of his heritage, of those long-gone desert warriors" (Mallery, *Virgin* 125). In a like manner, Kiley, his love interest, finds that Rafiq, like all princes of tropical Lucia-Serrat, has "the desert blood that flowed through their bodies [and] made them loyal unto death" (Mallery, *Virgin* 229). The desert defines the sheikh romance even when it is not directly set in the desert, not least because the desert influences the personality of the hero.

Mallery's Rafiq is not the only protagonist for whom the environment determines personality. Maisey Yates has published three sheikh romances for the category line Harlequin Presents. In *Forged in Desert Heat*, her readers find that hero Zafar Nejem of fictive Al Sabah "wasn't just from the desert; the desert was in him" (64). As he informs his love interest Ana, "The desert can make you feel strong and free, but it also makes you very conscious of the fact that you are mortal" (28). According to Yates, "My personal vision of a sheikh is a man steeped in tradition, and also honor. A man who is perhaps out of step with the modern world, because of how 'apart' he is in his desert kingdom. Deserts are harsh, so in my mind this creates the image of a man born to withstand the harshness of the world" (Yates, email).

Lynne Raye Harris is also fascinated with the desert and admits her choice of setting for her sheikh romances has been influenced by her reading of *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, the memoir of T.E. Lawrence—Lawrence of Arabia—in a graduate class on the Middle East. Focused on the Arab Revolt of 1916 in the area that is now the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula, this British memoir was published three years after E.M. Hull's novel *The Sheik* (1919), a book often identified as the forebear of today's sheikh romance. An abridged version of that novel, *Revolt in the Desert*, came out five years later, its title speaking to the Western fascination with this seemingly deadly foreign terrain. Much like E.M. Hull's novel, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* takes place in an untamed desert in which, ultimately, a Westerner "gone native" brings order and civilization to Arab society. Harris fabricates desert kingdoms for her sheikh based partly on Lawrence's descriptions. "I know there are problems with Lawrence's interpretation," she admits, "and yet *Pillars* is so poetic that it does capture the imagination completely" (Harris, email 16 December 2011).

Like Mallery and Yates, Harris links the physical setting to the personality of her main character. The fictive kingdom of Jahfar, for example, is ruled by Adan Najib Al Dhakir. Here, the desert looms as an ominous force, for it seems—mistakenly—that his wife Isabella Maro had killed herself by walking into its shifting sands. Adan finds his amnesiac wife very much alive—and singing in a bar in Hawaii (another highly exoticized area populated by non-white people). The moment that he finds her, he "had the look of the desert, that hawklike intensity of a man who lived life on the edge of civilization" (*Strangers* 12). It is no surprise that Harris contends that "the desert is wild and untamable in many ways and, presumably, a man who comes from that wildness is also a bit wilder than any other type of contemporary romance hero" (Harris, email, "Follow Up," 11 February 2013).

Culture Clash

Emphasizing difference, Harris asserts of Arabs that “their country, their land, their customs—everything is so foreign to us as Westerners” (Harris, interview, 16 July 2013). Romance authors take pains to introduce a mysterious and somewhat colorful setting to their readers in order to establish that their sheikhs comes from a foreign culture. Reflecting and refracting common American beliefs, the authors portray a standardized Arab culture that is distinct from that of the United States. In doing so, they recycle common Orientalist conceits—patriarchy, despotism, and exoticism—that have littered American literature since the colonial age. In relying on stereotypes that have been perpetuated for 300 years, the “foreignness” of the Arab place is in fact quite familiar to Western readers; authors are not unaware of this paradox. “It’s a tad embarrassing to realize I’m playing into Western stereotypes,” notes Harris, “and yet I also have to say that I couldn’t write the story any other way.” As she delves into the reasons for this necessity, Harris shifts from the language of political critique—“playing into Western stereotypes” — to what she calls “the literary side.” “Taking it to the literary side of things,” she explains, “the story plays into underlying myths...that speak to the collective unconscious of the romance reader” (Harris, email 16 December 2011).

Many authors highlight their heroes in the text—not in the cover art—as an Arab Other by depicting them as wearing native costume. The hero may look good in an Armani suit, but he is far better-suited to desert robes, which his American heroine finds striking and sexy. Sabrina Johnson, for example, is a princess of El Bahania, but she also meets the criteria of an ordinary Western career woman, a must in modern-day American romances (Teo 222). She was, after all, raised in Los Angeles by her American mother and is a historian by training. Sabrina is in the desert looking for the fabled City of Thieves when its mysterious ruler Kardal rescues her from a deadly sandstorm. He is “dressed traditionally in burnoose and djellaba” (Mallery, *Runaway* 11). Despite being held captive, Sabrina is increasingly captivated by Kardal. “Desert sand,” she asserts, again highlighting his Arab Other-ness, “flowed through his veins” (Mallery, *Runaway* 119). This non-Western facet of Kardal makes her heart beat faster, as evidenced by Sabrina’s sartorial musing that, “Today he wore Western garb—a well-tailored suit in dark gray with a white shirt and red tie. She wasn’t used to seeing him dressed like a businessman. In some ways she found that she preferred Kardal in more traditional clothing” (Mallery, *Runaway* 159).

Amira Jarmakani has analyzed descriptions of clothing in sheikh romances and found that these texts “covertly racialize” the Arab Other (Jarmakani 919). In the United States, Arabs struggled within the court system to be recognized as “Caucasian” in the early-twentieth century (Beydoun). Jarmakani, however, argues that descriptions of Arabs in sheikh romances do more than attend neutrally to ethnic differentiation, thereby belying American legal understandings of whiteness. Instead, she warns of an ominous racial logic underpinning the desert fantasy. Admitting that “overt references to race or racialization are hard to find,” Jarmakani argues that “covert articulations of race, sometimes coded through the tropes of ethnicity or region, play a vital role in exoticizing and eroticizing the hero” (Jarmakani 906). She hypothesizes that “the most obvious or salient way in which sheikhs are covertly racialized through cultural markers are in what amounts to a fetishization of ‘Arabian’ forms of cultural dress” (Jarmakani 919).

Indeed, conversations with romance authors suggest that the promoting of an interracial romance is part and parcel of the fantasy that they want to create for their readers. Yates, a European-American married to an African-American man, deals

comfortably with issues of race and interracial relationships, which, for her, can be part of a romantic fantasy. Thus, she penned *The Highest Price to Pay*, which centered on a white fashion designer who falls for an investor from sub-Saharan Africa. Yates admits that she looks for elements of interracial romance, even in sheikh novels. And yet, in a conversation between Yates and Sharon Kendrick, it becomes clear that these are not easy to find. The latter shares that her editor took out a scene where the heroine looked down and found that sheikh's "hand looked so very dark against her white skin" (Kendrick, interview). The evidence from these conversations does not detract from the differentiation through clothing identified by Jarmakani. Rather, it supports Jarmakani's contention of a "covert" and "coded" language of racial difference. The romance industry may not want to racialize the sheikh, at least not in any explicit way, but romance authors themselves do often assert that they seek to promote fantasies in which people who belong to different races can find love, and if that desire cannot be expressed in discussions of skin color it remains legible elsewhere.

To facilitate their interracial/intercultural romance plots, the American authors interviewed for this article drew upon a variety of sources to forge a composite Arab world that often belies the region's political and cultural particulars and complexities. This process is exemplified in the composite setting of Sandra Marton's *The Sheikh's Defiant Bride*. Marton's romance is set in the fictional kingdom of Dubaac, which she invents as a state in northwest Africa on the border of the Sahara desert and seemingly in close proximity to Mauritania, a poor country whose GDP relies on fishing and some minerals, like copper and iron. Despite the logistics of the fictive country's placement, however, Dubaac is modeled loosely on Saudi Arabia, for it is an oil-producing state, which is a rarity on the African continent. (Only two African nations are known for oil production: Algeria in North Africa, and Nigeria in West Africa.)

Marton superimposes not only the economic system of Saudi Arabia on Dubaac, but also its culture. In the opening of the book, Sheikh Tariq al Sayf engages in an "ancient custom" as a rite of mourning. Reflecting on his lost brother, he carries a hawk on his arm into the "endless silence of the desert" (Marton, *Defiant* 7). Chanting his brother's name, Tariq unlaces the hood of the hawk and sets him free, hoping this action helps his brother's spirit find peace.

Marton's inspiration for this scene came from an exhibit on Saudi Arabian culture that she visited in London. There, the curator had arranged for a goshawk and his keeper to be maintained as part of the cultural experience for foreign visitors. Marton was allowed to put on a glove and hold the traditional bird of prey treasured and conserved on the Arabian peninsula. She notes that, "when I wrote that first chapter where he's burying his brother and he sets his brother's hawk free, that's what I went back to, was that moment...I wrote that from my own feelings of what I felt that bird on my wrist wanted, which was to remain with me, but to be free to fly, which was a wonderful moment and I was able to use it" (Marton, interview). In this way, Marton clearly attends to the emotional impact of an American engaging Saudi culture, but she standardizes it so that the particularities of different countries merge into a single Arab world.

In this instance, the author anchored the culture of her fictive Arab kingdom in the real traditions of one country in the Arab world, but that is not always the case. Mallery, for example, draws inspiration for a fantastical Arab culture from a variety of literary and cinematic sources, many of which scholars would deem part and parcel of the Orientalist

canon. For example, she distinctly remembers purchasing Georgia Elizabeth Taylor's 1978 historical romance *The Infidel* at a yard sale while in high school. Set in eleventh century Spain, when Arabs ruled Al Andalus, this book recounts the story of the fictional first wife of El Cid, who fought the ruling Moors. Violet Winspear's *Palace of the Pomegranate* was the first sheikh romance that she ever read, and this, too, has been an inspiration in her perpetuation of sheikh romances set in the desert. An early Harlequin Presents, it tells the tale of socialite Grace Wilde, who falls in love with Kharim Khan while on an expedition in the Persian desert. Clearly drawn to Orientalist romance, Mallery also attributes inspiration to a 1986 TV movie called "The Harem" with Art Malik and Nancy Travis, in which the British heroine is taken captive by an Arab hero with whom she falls in love (Mallery, interview).

And so, the Arab world constructed by Mallery is an amalgam of these highly exoticized presentations (and a real hoot for those of us who have done hard traveling in an actual desert). Given the economic wealth of the protagonists in Mallery's novels, she can "do some research on art or architecture and then just, you know, put sequins on it, metaphorically" (Mallery, interview). Thus, there are not only opulent palaces in Mallery's work that date back to the eleventh century, but also fantastical desert encampments in which tents the size of small condos are provisioned with plush carpets, generators flushing in cool air, and tubs of steaming water (*Bride Who Said No* 208). In this way, Mallery grounds her works in a fantasy that eschews discussion of any factual differences between the US and specific countries of the Middle East and North Africa, instead celebrating an exoticized fantasy about a glamorous Arab culture.

Marton and Mallery are not the only authors to enunciate a standardized—and perhaps misleadingly colorful—Arab culture that is deliberately distinct from that of the American heroine. Jane Porter created the fictive sheikh kingdom of Ouaha in North Africa. *The Sheikh's Disobedient Bride* takes place among the foothills of the Atlas Mountains, which run along the northern Sahara Desert. Porter had not yet traveled to Morocco when she wrote these romance novels, the actual site of this mountain range, but she enjoyed doing research on this country. A constitutional monarchy, Morocco claims an urban population of 57 per cent.[5] The author, however, does not set her tale among the bright lights and tall buildings of densely populated Essaouira or Agadir, coastal cities near the Atlas Mountains. Instead, the plot takes place in a barren region where the American photographer Tally is kidnapped by Ouahan rebels while on assignment in Baraka. She is then held captive by their leader Tair. It comes as no surprise that Porter emphasizes how distinct her Arab hero is from American men; Tally finds he is a "man wedded to the desert" (Porter, *Disobedient* 56).

Porter's construction of Sheikh Tair fits an autocratic, "archetypal" mold promoted by authors of desert romances. Speaking in general of sheikh heroes, Sharon Kendrick, the one British author interviewed for this study, insists that the sheikh is "the archetypal match-up man because he's powerful, he has that kind of cruel side that women fantasize about and find very attractive, and he's usually autocratic because he owns a very great, oil rich country" (Kendrick, interview). And, indeed, the political culture of Ouaha's rebels is premised on notions of despotism, albeit benevolently implemented. "My word here," Tair tells Tally, "is law. Anything I want, I get" (Porter, *Disobedient* 60). Tair himself notes the contrast between his culture and that of his American captive. "The American didn't understand his world," he reflects. "His world was primitive and it fit him...In the desert,

justice was meted out by a fierce and unwavering hand. If not nature's, than his" (Porter, *Disobedient* 75). Thus, the desert setting renders Tair an Oriental despot, and his power over life and death sets the sheikh apart from his Western counterparts.

The establishment of seemingly incompatible lifestyles and values between the two protagonists is of primary importance to Porter, who takes pains to highlight the cultural differences that Tally and Tair must overcome in order to be together: differences marked not simply as those between East and West, but between a pre-modern, patriarchal past and a postmodern, egalitarian present. "Sheikh romances," the author asserts, "don't have to be politically correct. In fact, usually they aren't" (Porter, email 5 December 2014). Porter thus has her hero call his lady love "woman" for most of *The Sheikh's Disobedient Bride*, while Tally can't believe that she would "fall for a Berber sheikh? For a man that would rather kidnap women than meet them on an online dating service?" (Porter, *Disobedient* 141). The book's plot pays clear homage to the silent film *The Sheik*, as does its emphasis on the erotic appeal of the sheikh romance tradition. "There's an intensely sensual element in the desert romance," states Porter, highlighting the Arab world as distinct and different, "with the powerful, mysterious sheikh as lover, that you don't find in any other culture, and the appeal has been Valentino" (Porter, email 5 December 2014). Much like its cinematic predecessor, this particular romance provides a captivity narrative in which Tally falls in love with her captor. The tangles of the plot also nod at this Orientalist classic, for Tair saves Tally from a deadly sandstorm after she tries to escape his encampment. "The whole Valentino myth," Porter states eighty-one years after the release of *The Sheik*, "you know, that's kind of what American Westerners fell in love with." The readers, she continues, musing on the expectations of her audience, "don't compare me to history, they don't compare me to facts, they compare me to the other writers who do the genre...So, you play with archetypes, reader expectations, and then what you as a writer kind of bring to that book" (Porter, interview 1 May 2014).

Ultimately, Porter's plotline—like that of other sheikh romance authors—deliberately emphasizes the differences between an Arab sheikh and his American love interest. Porter identifies this distinction as part of her "personal fantasy" (Porter, interview 18 July 2013). Tally, for example, pushes Tair to see that "we're completely different culturally. Our values clash, our interests don't align" (Porter, *Disobedient* 151). Even upon realizing her feelings for Tair, Tally will admit, "Yes, she loved him but she didn't understand him or his culture" (Porter, *Disobedient* 155). Porter may not have yet visited Morocco or North Africa, but her trips to other non-Western places, such as Japan and Turkey, have influenced her writing of sheikh romances. She finds that, "I like the culture clash, and I've always used that" (Porter, interview 18 July 2013). In this way, Porter sets up a plotline in which protagonists of dissimilar cultures are thrown together in the desert, an isolated setting that inescapably forces them to confront their differences.

Spoiler Alert! Cultural Tensions Resolved

Ultimately, the hero and heroine fall in love, for a Happily Ever After ending is a must in any romance novel, but this action is complicated by the need for an Arab sheikh and his American love interest to overcome a host of cultural differences. "You're

fascinated by the history and the culture and the differences, which are fascinating differences,” notes Sandra Marton, enunciating a common premise among authors of sheikh romances, but, she continues:

the one feeling I do get, is that I can say something positive. I do agree there that I can say, in effect, to the reader: it’s not as cut and dry as you think it is. These people are not one stereotypical individual. There are differences, just as there are among westerners. And I think that’s a very valid part of what we do, which is to remind readers that not everyone is a newspaper headline (Marton, interview 18 July 2013).

It is clear that Marton consciously perceives her work as playing a “positive” role, however modest, in how American readers conceptualize a troubled and often demonized area of the world. Yet like other authors, she is caught between the desire to explore differences *among* her Arab and Western characters—“these people are not one stereotypical individual”; “not everyone is a newspaper headline”—and her desire to promote a fantasy of reconciliation that is not just between two individuals, but more broadly between their two disparate cultures: a reconciliation which often does rely on stereotypes, if only as a genre-defining shorthand.

The complexity of this task is visible in what authors say about their intentions concerning sheikh romance novels. For example, many clearly intend for their Arab hero to stand out not only as a foreign potentate but also as a man with individual and universal characteristics that transcend any one ethnic identity. Maisey Yates explains that “it’s important to me that all of my characters are treated with respect and treated as individuals, regardless of their backgrounds.” She continues:

Not to say culture doesn’t inform certain elements of character, but I feel like depending too much on what you ‘think’ an Arab hero would do is a danger. What would *this* hero do? That’s the most important question. He’s a human being like any other hero from any other race/culture (Yates, email 26 March 2013).

In a like manner, Lynne Raye Harris does not deny the political implications of an Arab hero and an American heroine finding their Happily Ever After, but she, too, wants to ensure that her readers see beyond the particularities of his ethnic identity. “As my editor always tells me,” she explains, “he is a character with the same problems and wants and needs as anyone else. Where he comes from is secondary—and yet it does play into who he is, especially when coupled with a Western heroine” (Harris, email 16 December 2011). The careful negotiation between sameness and difference that Harris describes as playing out in editorial discussions—ultimately, sameness is primary, though difference must be there—can also be found in any given sheikh romance’s denouement, and in the political fantasy offered in it.

Sheikh romance authors often see themselves as putting forward an alternative fantasy of the Middle East: one that emphasizes attraction, rather than fear, and one that implicitly contradicts Huntington’s contention of a perpetual Clash of Civilizations. “I would

love to think that we are in some way getting people to look at other people and other places, and saying it doesn't all have to be, you know, American Velveeta cheese on white bread; there's something else out there," Sandra Marton insists (Marton, interview). Marton and other authors express the desire to break free from the negative stereotypes of Arabs put forth in other media via the vehicle of romance, a worthy intention indeed. In order to accomplish this goal, however, authors sometimes suppress certain aspects of Arab culture and contribute inadvertently to Orientalist discourse. Islam, for example, is the principal religion of the Middle East and North Africa, and highly misunderstood by many Americans. This religion is not necessarily off limits in romance novels, though the treatment of it by authors exists on a spectrum, one that ranges from complete omission of it to oblique or (occasionally) direct interaction with it.

In Mallery's romances, for example, the reader experiences the complete elision of Islam as a religious force in her fictive Arab world. "I never discuss their religion at all," notes Mallery, and then she jokingly adds of the people there that "I assume they're all Lutheran" (Mallery, interview). Certainly, a not-so-close examination of her texts suggests that Christianity, not Islam, may be the dominant religion of the Middle East. As'ad, for example, the sheikh prince in *The Sheikh and the Christmas Bride*, is Western in his practices, drinking wine with dinner or when he needs to reflect (Mallery, *Christmas* 132, 197). What's more, he marries a very devout Catholic, Kayleen James. Kayleen not only grew up in a convent, but she is considering a lifelong commitment to it when they meet. Thus, her only jewelry, besides a watch, is a pair of cross earrings and a cross necklace (Mallery, *Christmas* 118, 248). She insists—and As'ad allows—that Christmas is celebrated at the palace (Mallery, *Christmas* 143). Eventually, they will be married in a seventeenth-century cathedral in El Deharia (Mallery, *Pregnant* 182).

This is not the only occasion on which Mallery has "Christianized" her fictive Arab world, arguably putting many readers at ease with the idea of traveling—even imaginatively—to the Middle East. In *The Sheikh and the Virgin Secretary*, Kiley Hendrick and Prince Rafiq of Lucia-Serrat will marry in a church (Mallery, *Virgin* 181). In Bahania, Prince Jeffri of *The Sheik & the Princess Bride* describes the utopian interfaith religious community that defines his country, stating "Our people celebrate many faiths, and respect all." This leads his lady love Billie, a fighter pilot, to muse that, "While the rest of the Middle East couldn't seem to get it together, Bahania, and their neighbor El Bahar, offered religious freedom to all" (Mallery, *Princess Bride* 22). In a like manner, King Hassan of Bahania tells his daughter-in-law Cleo, a former night manager of a copy shop in Seattle, that "We celebrate many faiths in our country, and each is given its due" (Mallery, *Pregnant* 220). The text, however, strongly implies that the royal family is Christian, for the palace grounds are endowed with a fourteenth-century church, and this is where King Hassan's daughter Zara will marry Rafe, an American soldier who earned the title of sheikh by saving the life of one of Bahania's princes (Mallery, *Pregnant* 83). Readers are clearly directed to see the royal family as Christian.

Other authors of romance novels invite their readers to feel more at ease with Islamic cultures and practices. In *Carrying the Sheikh's Heir*, for example, Lynn Raye Harris constructs the fictive Kyr, which is ruled by Rashid bin Zaid al Hassan. Harris never explicitly identifies Islam as the dominant religion of Kyr. And yet, her descriptions of Kyr incorporate Islamic elements into its narrative and settings. The cityscape of the capital has minarets (Harris, *Carrying* 72), Rashid notes early on that he had "missed the call to prayer

ringing from the mosque in the dawn hour” (Harris, *Carrying* 9), and most clearly, the name of Allah is invoked twice in the text, once by a servant and once by Rashid himself (Harris, *Carrying* 67, 179). None of this is to say that the novel does not draw on the Orientalist tropes of the genre. When he learns that American Sheridan Sloane has been accidentally impregnated with his royal sperm, for example, Rashid forcibly takes her to his kingdom, which he rules as a dictator, albeit a benevolent one. He tells the mother of his heir that “I am a king, and I must be harsh at times. But I am not a tyrant” (Harris, *Carrying* 126). Rashid exercises his power over nomadic tribes who live in the desert (Harris, *Carrying* 76, 151). From his palace, he deals with “national problems, including one between two desert tribes arguing over who owned a water well” (67).

Yet even as Harris’s plot and setting are consistent with some preconceived Orientalist notions of backwardness and despotism in the Arab-Islamic world, she uses that familiarity to undermine other stereotypes held by her readers. During a verbal sparring match with Sheridan, Rashid challenges the American to reconsider her conceptions of the Arab world: “I am a desert king. Of course I’m a barbarian. Isn’t that what you believe? Because I speak Arabic and come from a nation where the men wear robes and the women are veiled, that I must surely be less civilized than you?” (42) Harris asserts that “I love that particular line,” and then she notes that:

you can’t beat the readers over the head with this stuff, and you can’t change a reader’s mind by preaching to them. But maybe that line will make someone think, ‘Huh, I did kinda think that, but he’s just a man, yeah, a rich man and a king, but a man with feelings and just a person.’ In that sense, I hope that I’m undermining the stereotypes as much as I can. Some readers won’t get that, and they’ll skim right over it. But I take very seriously the charge to make my Arab-Islamic people...people. I think that’s important (Harris, interview 28 April 2015).

Harris’s comments confirm the assertion of Teo that “whatever the representational failings of sheikh romance novels, 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 Orientals had to be created in order to do so” (216). And it is noteworthy that in pursuit of this “humanizing” project, Harris has Rashid mention not only the costume element that typically signals Arab male difference in the romance genre, the “robes,” but also an iconic signifier of Islam to many Americans, the veil.

In a group interview I conducted with several sheikh romance authors, the veil was a particularly lively topic, taking up more than ten minutes of the conversation. The wearing of Islamic dress means many things and takes many forms in different countries in which Islam is a presence. Sometimes, it can appear as a result of state-sponsored dress codes, as in Iran; elsewhere it emerges as a result of grassroots activism *against* the government, as in Egypt or Tunisia.[6] American romance authors are likewise divided—sometimes self-divided—when they discuss the topic. Some authors do not like the idea of women wearing what they see as an uncomfortable piece of clothing in order to achieve what they consider to be an outdated form of modesty. Others are more conflicted. Marton, for example, lives in a northeastern university town where she is increasingly seeing

women wearing “something approximating full burqa.” (This term refers to the costume of Afghan women.) “Part of me says, this is the way it is, this is their culture, they’re entitled to it,” Marton explains. “And that’s the rational part. The other part of me says it’s awful, I’m judging it, I shouldn’t judge it, I am, I’m judging it as a woman, and I’m judging it as a writer” (Marton, interview).

Unlike Marton, Porter sees defending women’s right to dress as they see fit as an unambiguously “feminist” stance (Porter, interview 18 July 2013). It seems fitting, then, that in her fiction, Porter also seems comfortable representing Islamic beliefs and practices. She credits this creative choice to the fact that she often traveled overseas with her late father, who legated to her a curiosity about foreign cultures and “the gift...of being told the world is beautiful and interesting” (Porter, interview 18 July 2013). She explains that she highlights cultural differences, because readers like the distinction and the concomitant idea that such distinctions can be overcome:

We like something that isn’t our neighbor next door because you can suspend your disbelief. It’s almost like Disney for adults because at the end of the story the foreign and the exotic and the frightening aspects are rendered, you know the toxic poisonous aspects, are rendered tame. You know the things that might be evil or bad just become good and accepting. You know the East and the West collide and ultimately, you know, in my books it’s not that the East is subjugated but that the East and the West find peace and that both cultures are respected and that we are drawn to the opposite. So for me personally, I think that is the fantasy element... (Porter, interview 18 July 2013).

In equating the Middle East with the adjectives “frightening” or “toxic,” this quote reflects an American conception of Islam as a catalyst for many of the ills in the Middle East, a conception actively promoted in the media. However, Porter then invites her readers to imagine a resolution premised on a mutual respect in which both protagonists manage to maintain their culture.

In her books, Porter embraces the challenge of creating a recognizably Islamic setting. In *The Sheikh’s Chosen Queen*, for example, she imagines a place—the fictive Sarq, located next to the United Arab Emirates—where 90 per cent of the population is Muslim (Porter, *Chosen* 65). There, Sharif Fehr rules. He is an autocrat described as “one of the most powerful leaders in the Middle East” (Porter, *Chosen* 13). Sharif, however, is confounded by his new role as guardian to his deceased cousin’s children, so he invites schoolteacher Jesslyn Heaton to take charge of them. The two had once dated in England, but Jesslyn finds now that “his baggy sweatshirts were gone, and the faded, torn jeans were replaced by a *dishdashah* or a *thoub*, as more commonly known in the Arabian Gulf, a cool, long, one-piece white dress and the traditional head gear comprised of a *gutrah*, a white scarflike cloth, and the *ogal*, the black circular band that held everything together” (Porter, *Chosen* 10). Sharif harbors anger towards Jesslyn for breaking up with him without explanation many years ago, but Jesslyn refuses, until the very end, to admit that her infertility made her feel unworthy of wedding the crown prince. Ultimately, the explicitly Muslim sheikh marries the explicitly Christian commoner, and Jesslyn is happy to learn that “Sharif had incorporated elements from both their faiths in the service.” A similar

“incorporation” of East and West is implied for the future of the country, as Jesslyn afterward assists in setting up an American School in Sarq. “Education,” this main character notes, “was one of the best ways to touch and improve the world” (Porter, *Chosen* 173-174).

Conclusion

With its explicit images and arousing fantasies in which Arabs and Americans ultimately live together in peace, the sheikh romance novel can be read as a form of socio-political erotica. By the end of each book, the American heroine always decides to live in the Arab world, while the sheikh unswervingly embraces the political and social values of his Western bride. Read skeptically, against the grain, these novels present a fantasy in which autocratic leaders of the Arab world—those sheikhly heroes who love American women—embrace the values of their Western fiancées and wives, reconciling their two cultures in a way that secures and privileges American interests. But read more generously, in light of their authors’ intentions, the sheikh romance novel does present a hopeful vision of the world, one which exchanges Huntington’s vision of a Clash of Civilizations for a world in which the clash between individuals from two worlds, now at odds, is ultimately an *erotic* clash: one which leads them to fall in love, resolve their differences, and live harmoniously together. For many of the authors interviewed for this study, reconciliation offered through romantic love is a microcosm of the broader attitudinal change they would like to foster. “I think it would be lovely for us as a culture to begin to stop being so afraid of North Africa and all the people and the men and the women and the children,” Porter says, speaking for many of her colleagues. “It’s hard with the current political situation, which is why I think that the fantasies of the stories are important and allow us still to have a relationship with a part of the world that the media can make very frightening to us” (Porter, interview 1 May 2014). Set in fictional kingdoms, filled with romance and politics, sheikh romances serve as the perfect vehicle to assuage American fears—anxieties found both in readers and in authors—regarding Arabs and their world.

[1] I would like to thank Mary Bly for her invaluable assistance in getting this project off the ground. I would also like to acknowledge the support of the Romance Writers of America, which provided an Academic Research Grant (2012) that allowed me to travel to Atlanta and carry out many interviews with authors.

[2] See Marton, Sandra: books post-2006.

[3] See Porter, Jane. “Bookshelf.” for a bibliography. Porter will have a new sheikh book published in 2015.

[4] For a complete list, see <http://www.fictiondb.com/author/susan-mallery~series~desert-rogues~3502.htm>, accessed 5 July 2015.

[5] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Urbanization_by_country, accessed 13 December 2014.

[6] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hijab_by_country, accessed 14 December 2014.

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