

Kamblé, Jayashree. *Making Meaning in Popular Romance Fiction: An Epistemology*. Pp. 191. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. US \$85.00 (paper). ISBN: 9781137395054.

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Criticism and analysis within the field of popular romance studies have frequently been performed from a feminist or sociological point of view, primarily focusing on the heroine as the central and determining figure for examination – often read as a means to enable the female reader to “satisfy vicariously those psychological needs created in her by a patriarchal culture unable to fulfill them” (Radway 66; see also Roach n.pag., Cohn 6, Makinen 23). Jayashree Kamblé, however, takes a quite different, and therefore refreshingly interesting approach not just to the function of the romance genre, but to how the meaning that makes this genre function as a “sociological record” (22) is semiotically generated and constructed within the romance text. She further explores how far this construction of meaning and its change over the twentieth and twenty-first century are concurrent with larger social transformations in the West, especially the US, the UK, and Canada. This demonstration is achieved by a focus on the figure of the romance novel hero, which has to date not been covered in a book-length study. Even though the title of Kamblé’s text does not hint at this tight focus of her approach – she claims the analysis of the construction of meaning in popular romance fiction in general as its goal – it becomes quite clear in the introductory pages how the frame for the analysis was achieved.

Approach and Definitions

Working with Marxist and Semiotic theory, as can be deduced when Kamblé draws heavily on Weber, Jameson, Marcuse and Bakhtin for central definitions, the first vital element of understanding her claim that “the genre is in the thick of twentieth-century counter-hegemonic movements, from ones contesting capitalism and its wars to ones advocating gay rights and coping with white Protestantism’s cultural influence” (21), is Foucault’s idea of the episteme (xiii/xiv). This concept refers to a temporal unit that contains specific approaches and ways of making sense of the world and is used to show

“how romance fiction works in this period of history and how the period’s ‘norms and postulates’ function in the genre to create meaning” (xiv). Kamblé isolates four such ways of constructing meaning and traces them through popular romantic fiction by using an organic metaphor and reading the genre as an evolving organism whose DNA-like double helix structure contains novelistic and romantic traits and thus adapts to and also negotiates social transformation within the episteme. Within the context of this genetics analogy, the first fundamental contribution to the discussion of popular romance fiction is an exploration of the implications of the term ‘romance novel’ by understanding the novelistic side of the term through a combination of Bakhtin’s notions of the chronotope and polyglossia (3) and Cohn’s ‘narrated monologue’ as a specific novel trait. The latter allows for “multiple modes of representing consciousness” (8), thus incorporating specific “devices to express interiority” (10) and resulting in “the novel trait of perspectival fluidity inherited by the romance novel genre” (14).

The ‘romance’ in the romance novel is then conceptualized not only in terms of the genealogical generic tradition as it has been, for example in Pamela Regis’ *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (2003), but in its implications of ‘romantic’, “which codes for the traits of the erotic, the desirable, the pleasurable – for what is ‘romantic’ to the reader/apprehender under modernity and postmodernity” (15). Thus, the function of the novel to adapt and express interiority abets the development and incorporation of changing notions of the romantic (i.e. acceptable as desirable) as specific to the figure of the romance hero in the genre. This allows Kamblé to focus on “the set of conditions that allow the story to be ‘romantic’” (20) and those conditions are wont to change historically and geographically. Consequently, they are the ones she then sets about tracing in her analyses. Her project is “[s]urveying developments in romance fiction alongside selected historical changes in political and economic policy and in social norms in the West [...] [to perform a] political interpretation of romance fiction, which neither denies the current relevance of these novels to gender struggle nor overlooks the historical developments that have shaped the ‘formula’” (22).

In examining the romance hero in conjunction with major transformations regarding multinational capitalism, changing perspectives on war, developments of gay rights and the connection between whiteness as an ideology and religious ethos, the study takes into account the diverse but sometimes overlapping judicial and political developments and their discursive effects on the construction of the hero in the three nations mentioned above. This distinction also governs the micro-structure of the chapters, alongside the distinction between publishing houses/format and subgenres. However, when it comes to the analyses that support Kamblé’s claims, two questions that are not addressed arise. The first is in how far it actually makes an interpretive difference to examine category novels side by side with single-title ones. The second would be an inquiry into the criteria on which the “major authors” (23) chosen for examination in the single-title category have been selected (namely J.D. Robb (Nora Roberts), Judith McNaught, Lindsey McKenna, Johanna Lindsey, Lisa Kleypas, Sherrilyn Kenyon, Gaelen Foley, Suzanne Brockmann, and Linda Howard). Moreover, the jump between subgenres surely supports the argument of the text, however, the implications of the changing settings and subgeneric literary and narrative traditions are left unexplored or at least unaccounted for, since it could be argued that the hero appearing in these diverse settings also imposes limits on the possibilities of representing him and on the meanings that can be generated.

Structurally, the text is clearly divided – chronological recapitulation of social transformation in the aforementioned nations is followed by detailed (close) readings (again, chronologically ordered with regard to their year of publication) of a wide variety of romance novels, in order to drive home the point of the complex relationship between ideological movements and popular romantic constructions of the hero.

Capitalism

Firstly, the analysis of the representation of capitalism in the figure of the hero traces the developments of “faults [...] [and] attractions of capitalism [...] represented by the corresponding off-putting or seductive traits of the lover” (32) and the function of the capitalist as romantic hero who serves to “personaliz[e] the abstract economic force of the free market” (32).[1] From the 1950s onwards, Mills and Boon contemporary category romances incorporate more and more heroes who are financially superior to the heroine, effectively setting up a connection between hero and businessman and, starting in the 1960s, the plot motif of the hostile takeover in Mills and Boon is introduced, in which the heroine is in an economically disadvantaged position in comparison to the hero (be it due to, for example, her being his employee or him taking over her family firm). Class interests are thus not only expressed in the difference between the owner of capital (hero as bourgeois) and the working population (heroine as petit bourgeois/proletariat), but also in gendered terms (39). Kamblé convincingly argues that Mills and Boon “novels [...] represent a socioeconomic drama of the way British national firms and the people in the workforce faced Britain’s changing economic landscape” (40). The romance genre in particular deals with this threat of capitalism by positing the hero as less powerful in another arena, as can be seen when his declaration of love endorses “the romantic relationship [that] neutralizes the threat of the all-powerful capitalist” (35).

Concerning the American romance, Kamblé examines how single-title historical romances negotiate the wealthy hero and his capitalist tendencies, arguing that historical romance “heroes, especially after the eighties, are actually capitalists in aristocrats’ clothing” (42). Here, the main focus is the “nagging apprehension of the capitalist’s dark side, ranging from the suspicion of [the hero’s] underhanded business deals to fears of his propensity for violence and crime” (49). Thus, the hero is often introduced as ruthless and dangerous in his capitalist dealings, but found to be benevolent by the heroine later-on in the narrative, thus at least partially allaying the genre’s anxiety about the nature of capitalist ventures. Kamblé therefore successfully proves her point and demonstrates how the “genre has adapted itself to match the rhetoric that idealizes capitalistic individualism and accumulation of private property as well as the consumer capitalist ability to create and manipulate desire” (59), while still detecting the representation of a critical stance in the genre (here especially in J.D. Robb’s *In Death* series) by the continual depiction of the possibility “that capitalism’s alter ego is composed of equal parts of robbery, deception, and homicide” (55).

War

Secondly, economic capitalist and military issues are shown to be intimately intertwined in the figure of the hero, since through the “hero as warrior [...] romance novels encapsulate the impact of a curious feature of post-modernity – the constant intrusion of international conflict onto the public consciousness” (61). Early Mills and Boon romances that represent the imperial soldier in his colonial quest are located and briefly analysed, but the main focus is on the American romance in this section. Documenting the influence of Cold War ideology and rhetoric in novels from the 1970s-1990s and the reaction to the first Gulf War and 9/11, it becomes clear that the romance hero moves from a concentration on “bravery and strategic thinking” (64) to additionally exhibiting “self-critique and self-doubt” (64). Therefore, the war is personalized, offering the possibility of a compassionate evaluation of the impact of war on the individual who fights it, for example through the representation of PTSD.

In a second move, the American popular romance points towards “the amorality that jingoistic policy breeds in its enforcers” (64). It is shown how the courtship and romance plot suggests but at the same time complicates solutions for the effect of war and patriotism on characters and their ethical behaviour. The draw towards loyalty to the nation and the drive towards the achievement of the romance’s happy ending work at cross-purposes, as Kamblé demonstrates using the example of Linda Howard’s *Diamond Bay* (1987): “The novel is thus conservative in terms of its conviction in the wedded state as the highest good, but its allegiance to the genre actually overrides the claims of the patriotic imperative and thus makes it politically subversive” (69). The historical and paranormal romance of the 2000s is then called upon in order to analyze the changing notion of what constitutes an ‘enemy’ of the nation, finding the examined novels rejecting a stable notion of the term and thus “recasting the debate on war” (83). Current romance texts also often feature the figure of the mercenary or private soldier, whose function, according to Kamblé, is to permit “twin desires to be reconciled to some degree; the narrative can symbolically attain the goal of American security but without admitting the potential sacrifice of moral stature on the part of actual US armed forces, that is, the nation itself” (79).

What would have generated a deeper understanding of the issue at hand in this chapter, but also in the whole study in general, is an additional examination of the different types of masculinities. Analysing the meaning that is constructed by an affiliation of the representations with stereotypical masculinities (especially with regard to character traditions and literary stereotypes) and, for example, looking at the difference between the representation of the hero as warrior, mercenary, and soldier (three terms with various implications for the type of masculinity they represent as well as the history of those (stereo)types) would have broadened the analysis and at the same time lent even more depth to the argument.

Heterosexuality

Thirdly, the hero also “embodies the sexual norms underlying the bourgeois family and the problematic nature of heterosexism” (87) and thus refracts how the rise in “gay visibility” garners “a response that can be glimpsed in romance novels in the hero’s own heterosexuality, his relationship with other men, and through an acknowledgment or denial of homoerotic desire” (87). Kamblé includes the proliferation of the ethnically exoticized hero in the UK and Canada after the sixties who is persuasively demonstrated to be “culled from the Orientalist myth of Eastern heterosexual excess, of one man servicing a harem of wives and concubines, of an inexhaustible masculinity – a myth both repulsive and reassuring because at least this is a man who won’t stray from the female sex” (100). At this stage in the analysis, one of the most important points for contemporary scholarship on romance might be, in my opinion, the introduction of a new angle on the interpretation of scenes of rape or ‘forced seduction’ in the romance novel of the seventies and eighties – a plot device that has long been a major point of criticism of the genre as a whole. Kamblé argues that “the timing of the motif’s appearance in the eighties, unprecedented in the genre’s nearly 70-year history, suggests that the focus on forceful male desire for a woman is a reaffirmation of heterosexuality” (109). Thus, instead of reading the rape scenes as a power imbalance that reinforces patriarchal structures even as they are criticized (a point which nevertheless holds true in such a reading), Kamblé suggests that it is also central in another power struggle – the one between heterosexuality and homosexuality, in which “masculinity [...] expresses its heterosexual identity through the rape of the heroine” (108).

Additionally, the development of the cross-dressing heroine in the nineties and the motif’s underlying homoerotics that introduce a “secondary queer narrative” (114) is examined (a similar interpretation has been made by Fletcher in her chapter on the Cross-Dressed heroine in *Historical Romance Fiction* (58-72), but focusing on the novels of Georgette Heyer, who, interestingly enough, uses the motif much earlier than the novels Kamblé suggests). Kamblé also explores the twenty-first century dual plot trend that incorporates a homosexual love story as subplot in a heterosexual one. Here, however, the implications of the fact that it is male homosexual relationships that are primarily added rather than female homosexual relationships would perhaps have warranted further exploration.

Whiteness

The fourth element of the episteme is located as an inherent Western-ness and thus whiteness in the representation of the romance hero and especially his relationship to the white heroine. Their connection is shown to be rooted in a spiritual notion of whiteness. By going back to Whiteness Studies’ foundational text *White* (1997) by Richard Dyer, Kamblé claims that “mass-market romance fiction’s episteme includes whiteness as the norm for the romantic experience and not because its protagonists are largely Caucasian; it is because the genre functions via the particular confluence of Protestant and capitalist ethos that Richard Dyer and Weber have noted” (133). According to this approach, “the exercise of white female sexuality is limited by white male self-control” (139) and explains the

dialectic of ascribing features of 'darkness' to the romance hero who nevertheless is redeemed by subscribing to a Protestant ethos of controlling his sexual impulses (134) and working towards a bourgeois understanding of (re)production. In this chapter, the most interesting point concerns the paranormal romance, identifying it in a Bakhtinian sense as "the genre's turn toward the carnivalesque (with its connotations of challenging the socially regulated everyday world)" (148). Reading Nalini Singh's *Psy-Changeling* series as representative of the subgenre's potential for "paving the way for the genre's transformation into a racially diverse form" (148), it is demonstrated how an author with non-Western roots discursively incorporates elements of non-Western understandings of the romance hero and his representation with regard to social structures and social functions, thus also turning the paranormal romance and this specific example into a "commentary on colonial history and its racist legacies" (156).

Overall, the approach of analyzing the ideology that informs the depiction of the popular romance hero in a book-length study is a highly valuable contribution to the field. Kamblé's text on occasion oscillates between being accessible to a more general interested audience and a peer group of scholars in that it sometimes gives no precise definitions of central terms – such as ideology, normativity or desire – terms that a peer group is probably familiar with, but that should nonetheless be clearly delineated in order to prevent points of criticism and obfuscation of the argument. These comments notwithstanding, Kamblé certainly makes a compelling argument for her reading of the romance hero within a Marxist frame that demonstrates the versatility of the popular romance novel as an arena for negotiation in which historically and culturally specific discourses are commented upon, reworked and sometimes subverted by the combination of the courtship/marriage plot and the novelistic traits and subplots which adapt upon incitement by social change. Therefore, the book is definitely a significant contribution to the research on popular romance, but also to the study of popular culture in general, since it does not exclusively engage with previous publications on the popular romance but rather with the theoretical and socio-cultural background needed to "evaluate the dynamic that the hero introduces into the genre on many ideological fronts" (157). It represents a thought-provoking analysis that will, no doubt, inspire appreciative and critical responses as well as more work on the romance hero and his textual transformations.

[1] Jan Cohn makes a similar argument, only her focus is firmly on the resulting impact of bourgeois patriarchal society and its economic power imbalance on women. Cohn also reads the popular romance as a narrative space for the negotiation of actual social and economic decisions: "The fantasy provided by popular romance exists to redress the real social and economic conditions of women in the world of the present; but the strategies and codes through which romance constructs and communicates fantasy have their roots in history, in the development of bourgeois society. [...] [T]he social contradictions that inform such novels are buried deep in romance stories, charging them with subversive energy" (3).

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