

Mattu, Ayesha and Nura Maznavi (eds). *Salaam, Love: American Muslim Men on Love, Sex, and Intimacy*. Pp. 248. Boston: Beacon Press, 2014. US \$16.00 (paper). ISBN: 9780807079751.

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Romantic love and the religion of Islam have often been combined in western popular fiction to create the necessary element of the “exotic.” This is most evident in the ubiquity of desert settings and the sheikh protagonists in category romance novels. Popular romance studies has shown a considerable interest in sheikh romances, exploring the myriad themes of oriental culture, political fantasy, and ethnicity (Teo, 2012; Jarmakani, 2015; Burge, 2016). However, no amount of familiarity with category sheikh romances can prepare a reader for the personalized, love narratives of *Salaam Love*, which are termed as stories of “feelings” in the preface. In Arabic, ‘Salaam’ means ‘peace,’ and acts as a salutation or greeting. Thus, the title suggests that the book is about welcoming love in a peaceful, Islamic way. The word ‘Salaam’ appears to be a careful choice on part of the editors, Ayesha Mattu and Nura Maznavi, to indicate the connections between gender, Islamic cultural values and love. This anthology was preceded by *Love, InshAllah: The Secret Love Lives of American Muslim Women* (2012), which presents a very positive approach towards sexual and matrimonial issues of Muslim women. Both anthologies communicate a distinct variety of Happily Ever After, which is reliant on Islam as a faith and a powerful source of love. Men in *Salaam Love* have expressed their quests of finding ‘true love,’ which, for them, coincides with religion and cultural acceptance. Their happiness, love and a sense of fulfilment are irrevocably dependant on their identity as Muslims. Whether it is a question of finding the right partner, showing your mettle in the face of social and personal rejections or weighing the decision of having an IVF baby, all the stories in this book communicate a fascinating belief in the healing powers of religion that ultimately leads to the achievement of a deep sense of inner peace and love.

Importantly, the editors of *Salaam Love* stress that “this book is not a theological treatise,” but a platform for real Muslim men to open up about the “most intimate aspects of their lives” (viii). This clarification is particularly relevant because the sexual and romantic experiences communicated in these autobiographical narratives connect directly with each protagonist’s identity as a Muslim man in the United States. Nevertheless, *Salaam Love*

frequently feels like a theological, or at best inspirational, collection of stories. For example, in “In the Unlikeliest of Places,” A. Khan learns to synthesize his religious practices and his queer identity after his one-night stand with a successful gay surgeon. Khan writes, “The cliché that God works in mysterious ways becomes real only when you wake up to these mysterious ways in the small moments, in the unexpected and, yes, dark places” (113). What prevents this anthology from being a subtle work of theology is its unorthodox sense of humour. Recounting his break-up with a beautiful, non-Muslim girlfriend, author-narrator Stephen Leeper writes: “By January, she had left me for her white ex-boyfriend, a blow to the Original Blackman’s ego, a carryover sentiment from my Stephen X days” (179). *Salaam Love* provides subtle amusement, the kind that makes one smile inwardly for a few moments. An apt illustration would be Haroon Moghul’s delightful description of his first date in “Prom, InshAllah.” When his crush Carla agrees to be his date for the prom, Haroon narrates that he “stood there like a Punjabi Peter Parker, when he first becomes aware of his super spidery powers.” He felt like “a new man—taller, better, braver, and a cooler shade of brown” (154). Various examples of this wry sense of humour are evident throughout the anthology, especially when the author-narrators talk about their race.

Salaam Love is divided into three sections, “Umma,” “Sirat” and “Sabr,” which, read in order, move from lightly comic to emotionally complex. The author-narrators in “Umma” find their happily-ever-afters within the boundaries of their expatriate or immigrant Muslim cultures. Again, there are moments of genuine hilarity when authors contrive acronyms: “Unrestricted hyperbole is a well-documented effect of Terrified Immigrant Syndrome (TIS). Thus my mother links a bit of religious laxity to wholesale cultural downfall—another friend’s mother has been known to link Jolt Cola to eventual cocaine use” (32). In the “Sirat” section, love is connected, metaphorically, with a journey. In stories like “Springtime Love,” “Finding Mercy” and “Prom, InshAllah,” protagonists go through dramatic and poignant phases of life to find love and/or peace at the end. The “Sabr” section has strong echoes of Paulo Coelho’s earlier work, specifically *The Alchemist*. However, in *Salaam Love*, symbolism of the journey carries explicit Islamic tones, frequently highlighting the role of religion in the lives of immigrant Muslim men. There is an overarching attempt to present the Muslim as a vulnerable, emotional and delightfully positive human being. This portrayal challenges the masculine, patriarchal and dominating image of Muslim men in western popular culture. The protagonists of *Salaam Love*—crying over their break-ups, desperately trying to find eligible partners for matrimony—are very different from the violent and passionate hero of E. M. Hull’s *The Sheikh*. Unlike the wealthy, sexually experienced and overly assertive sheikhs of Anglophonic popular romance, the author-narrators of *Salaam Love* are shy, hesitant and frequently face intimacy issues. Hsu-Ming Teo, in *Desert Passions: Orientalism and Romance Novels*, has argued that category sheikh romances have helped in the formation of stereotypes for uninformed western readers (99-100). It is evident that the author-narrators and editors of *Salaam Love* have painstakingly deconstructed the stereotypical image of Muslim men through the various romance narratives presented, which manifest a common belief in the healing power of love and faith.

The multiple narratives in this collection highlight the ethnic and cultural diversity that is present in the United States of America. This book stands at the crossroads between literature and popular romance fiction. There is an autobiographical element, gendered perspective and a culturally nuanced sense of humour in *Salaam Love*. Still, the way in which these twenty-two narratives link happy endings with Islamic bliss is predominantly

characteristic of romance fiction and paves the path for, perhaps, another subgenre: “Halal Romance.”

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