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On Eligible Princes: The medieval modernity of sheikh romance

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About the Author: Amira Jarmakani is a professor of women's, gender, and sexuality studies at San Diego State University where she works on questions of race, gender, ethnicity and representation in U.S. popular culture as well as comparative orientalisms in the transnational Americas. Her most recent book, *An Imperialist Love Story: Desert Romances and the War on Terror* (NYU Press, 2015), demonstrates how desire animates contemporary U.S. imperialism. Investigating the increased popularity of desert romances concurrent with the war on terror, the book demonstrates love to be a salient lens through which to understand how the war on terror works and how it perseveres.

Keywords: imperialism, orientalism, Sheikh romance, war on terror

Introduction

In my interview with Linda Conrad, a U.S.-based desert romance author, she revealed that as a little girl she was most compelled by the classic *Arabian Nights* stories, and named Ali Baba as an example. She further intimated that, "[a]s a teenager, [my] first dreams of being with a man were of the dark, mysterious guy who rides in on a horse from exotic lands and carries you off" (interview with author, 2012). While quick to assert that she has since moved on to other types of hero that mostly capture her imagination, Conrad avers that the sheikh is nevertheless "way buried in [her] psyche."**[1]** In fact, considering the influence of E. M. Hull's *The Sheik* on the romance genre as a whole, it is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that the figure of the sheikh is "way buried" in the psyche of the romance industry. As a classic alpha-male hero, one of the sheikh's main draws seems to be associations with honor, chivalry, and royalty. Yet these same associations can simultaneously invoke a darker side to the sheikh that moves beyond the realm of sexy and romantic; in fact, in my research on desert romances many online comments from readers signaled their inability to desire a sheikh hero precisely because they overwhelmingly associated him with cultural backwardness and misogyny (Jarmakani, *Imperialist Love Story*).

Confirming Amy Burge's observation that "the touching points between medieval and modern romance audiences are closer than we might think" (Burge 180), contemporary

desert romances and the political contexts that latently inform them demonstrate the conflation of the medieval and contemporary contexts when it comes to imagining the Middle East, hereafter called SWANA,**[2]** particularly since the term "medieval" is often used colloquially to signify barbaric. At the same time, quainter associations with medieval contexts, like the ideas of chivalry and tradition, can play a role in romanticizing cultural contexts understood to atavistically maintain elements of chivalry, honor, and tradition. Mainstream public fascination with royalty is a good example of such a dynamic.

The romanticization of the medieval within modern and contemporary eras that is interwoven into popular contemporary news stories detailing which "eligible princes" remain now that both the UK princes (Princes William and Harry) have wed. Arguably, these remaining eligible princes – chief among them Dubai's Sheikh Hamdan and Jordan's Prince Hussein – are also models for the sheikh-heroes in desert romances ("14 of the Most Eligible Royal Bachelors"; see also Jarmakani, *Imperialist Love Story* 9). The list of eligible princes emphasizes characteristics – like wealth, social status, and elite schooling – that are also prominent in descriptions of sheikh-heroes in desert romances.

Described primarily as Western-educated, Jordan's Prince Hussein, for example, is cast as a military-groomed leader who is in touch with his youthful generation (the flip side of which is sometimes referenced in alarmist ways as a "youth bulge" in the Middle East). Educated at the same military school as Prince Hussein — Sandhurst, in the UK— Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum of Dubai is commonly portrayed as a poetic and grounded natural leader, whose soft side is balanced by his allegiance to extreme sports, and his love for cultural traditions like falconry and equestrian sports/activities (Fitzgerald). Even in stories that are not centered around the search for remaining "eligible" princes, both Hamdan and Hussein are regularly compared to Princes William and Harry ("Why Bachelor Prince Hussein"; Ward), a fact that seems to mimic the legacy within desert romances – and stretching all the way back to E.M. Hull's *The Sheik* (1919) – of certifying their connection to European civilization through association with European royalty.

Demonstrating the ever-present fear of the dark and barbaric side of the "medieval" SWANA, both eligible princes are also framed in terms of their fathers' and their countries' desire to maintain strong relationships to "the West." As one article asserts: "Sheik [sic] Mohammed [the leader of Dubai and father of Prince Hamdan] has done everything he can to ingratiate himself into western society" (judging by the accompanying photo, this includes donning an Abraham Lincoln-style top hat) ("Death of Dubai's Sheikh Rashid"). Indeed, much like their fictional romantic counterparts, real-world Arab leaders are often cast as modern rulers who have to negotiate the backward, regressive, and violent forces within their societies. For example, an article discussing Prince Hussein specifies that "Jordan's rulers have traditionally trodden a careful path, maintaining a strong alliance with the West, while negotiating the minefield of Middle Eastern geopolitics" (Hattar). The articles also hasten to assure readers that these eligible princes value modernity, even as they harness the quaint chivalry of their medieval backgrounds. In relation to Sheikh Hamdan, for example, one article indicates that "the [Maktoum family] used modernity to build the glitter and the glamour of Dubai" ("Death of Dubai's Sheikh Rashid").

Using medieval as a touchstone keyword

Touching on the colloquial themes of fantasy and backwardness that often frame desert romances as associated with medievality, in his entry for the *Transgender Studies Quarterly* special issue on keywords, Karl Whittington explains that: "Medieval conjures multiple meanings for contemporary readers: an outmoded or unenlightened viewpoint, a realm of fantasy fairytales, or the medieval S/M aesthetic of torture, dungeons, and chains." He further defines medieval culture as "Europe between 500 and 1400 CE" and notes that the period is also defined by its association with "otherness" (Whittington 125). Such "otherness" can be figured through associations with monstrosity, as the figure of the monster has "long served as the embodiment of the medieval itself" (Cohen 5), or it can be understood in terms of atemporality, where "medieval" becomes a shorthand way of referring to geographical regions considered to be backward.

For example, though not technically a desert romance, Craig Thompson's graphic novel *Habibi* (2011) mimics some of the same conventions of desert romances, and it particularly draws on the thematic binary of medieval and modern. One key similarity between desert romances and *Habibi* is the use of a fictionalized and vaguely orientalized setting; Thompson achieves a messy melding of these issues together through the invocation of Wanatolia as timeless. Virtually every review of *Habibi* comments on the "ancient yet modern" nature of the fictionalized Middle Eastern setting (Mechanic).**[3]** Such characterizations are, in fact, more delicate and thoughtful than Thompson's own characterizations of the region. In an interview about the process of writing *Habibi*, for example, he proclaims that "[his] experience is that being in the Global South, as they call it, you can see people living in a very medieval way – alongside Western development and globalization" (Armstrong). The meaning of medieval here totters between a reference to an actual historical time period and its colloquial usage, which implies general barbarity. Typical of the kind of slippage found throughout the graphic novel, the neo-orientalism of *Habibi* includes its use of distinct temporalities; the medieval is both a historical time period and a metaphor for contemporary barbarities, where the timelessness of faraway places draws on the classic colonialist tradition of simultaneously romanticizing and ravaging the global South.

Insofar as "medieval" is often used as imprecise shorthand to signal an othered and/or backward past, even if it is atavistically situated in the contemporaneous moment (as with popular narratives about the Arab and Muslim "worlds"), it takes part in developmentalist constructions of contemporary geopolitics that construe history through the lens of a linear progress narrative. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues in his introduction to *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, it might make more sense to think past the oppositional framework of the medieval and modern and instead use the term "midcolonial" to understand how the "medieval 'meridian' or 'middle' becomes an instrument useful for rethinking what postcolonial might signify" (3). Historicizing the term in this way could, among other benefits, gesture to the irony of the use of "medieval" now to refer to purportedly backwards Arab countries, when during the Middle Ages, Europe was the "backward" region looking upon Andalusia and the SWANA region as more technologically, scientifically, and culturally advanced.

Neomedievalism and Ineligible Princes

Amy Burge notes that desert romances use "neomedievalist rhetoric that identifies the contemporary East as 'medieval,' meaning primitive and barbaric" (1). Indeed, in contemporary and mainstream political discourse surrounding the war on terror, terrorists are framed as out-of-time, medieval enemies, which, as argued above, is an imprecise application of the appellation "medieval." One clear example of this type of sloppy allusion can be found in former President Bush's "unguarded reference to pursuing a 'crusade'" in his early statements following the events of 9/11 (Mamdani 15). In the ensuing binary rhetoric, Bush exhorted all nations and people to "stand with the civilized world, or stand with the terrorists," where "the terrorists" were consistently aligned with barbarism and colloquial notions of the medieval (US Government). As Bruce Holsinger argues: "One of the more obvious rhetorical effects of 9/11, in fact, has been to reenergize the enduring interplay of medievalism and Orientalism" (10).**[4]** And yet the term "neomedievalism" also has a somewhat precise definition as:

> a fairly recent school of thought in current International Relations theory whose emergence is closely tied to the rise of non-state global actors – NGOs, transnational corporations, organizations like al Qaeda, corporate militias, and so on – as dominant forces in the international political sphere. (Holsinger v)

This definition serves to shield (imperialist) states from accusations of barbarity despite the violence they inflict on other states as well as on their own citizens; for example, in the U.S.-backed, Saudi-led coalition responsible for civilian deaths and massive infrastructural damage in Yemen (Walsh; Bazzi).

When he "leapfrogged" (Filkins) his next-in-line competition to become the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman was initially met with the same sorts of accolades as the "eligible princes" named above. Though he was technically never considered to be an eligible prince because he is already married, he is perhaps more clearly not recognized as an eligible prince in US media because of the association of Saudi Arabia with barbarity and misogyny. Though Salman has made overtures to overcome this narrative through his move early on to associate himself with lifting the ban on female drivers in Saudi (Filkins), more recently "the focus [has shifted] towards the darker side of Salman's record, one that includes the imprisonment of critics and human rights activists, thousands of civilian deaths in Yemen and a rapid rise of the number of executions since his ascent to power" ("Mohammed bin Salman"). Because Salman – and Saudi Arabia as a long-time ally of the US – frame themselves as allies in part through the shared goal of defeating terrorists, this dark side to Salman and to Saudi Arabia have yet to jeopardize formal relations with the US. On the contrary, he is often described as charming US officials (for example, by playing the "Moonlight Sonata" in former Secretary of State John Kerry's home) and – perhaps more importantly – in the hint of a bromance between M.B.S. and Jared Kushner (son-in-law of and Senior Advisor to Trump) with reports of "the two men stay[ing] up nearly until dawn, discussing the future of their countries" (Filkins).

Indeed, that which sustains and upholds the amicable relationship between Saudi Arabia and the US – military and arms sales to Saudi as a way of recycling petrodollars back to the US (Mitchell) – is fueled precisely by a fear of the rise of terrorism through non-state and failed state actors. These would include, for example, Al-Qaeda and similar organizations as well as the Taliban, when framed in relation to the "failed state" of Afghanistan.**[5]** In this respect, the International Relations framework of neomedievalism works to legitimate Saudi Arabia as a viable ally that is also fighting the decline of the nation-state itself with the idea that "the sovereign state threatens to be submerged by 'group identities' and fragmented sovereignties embodied in the 'barbarity of the past'" (Holsinger 78).

Interestingly – and ironically – the framework of romance is also colloquially applied to non-state actors widely understood to be terrorists. For example, in February 2015 readers were captivated by reports of so-called "jihadi brides," female western recruits to ISIS-controlled areas (Halliday et al), and reports of "jihadi girl-power" (Richey), focusing on western women who migrated to ISIS-controlled territory. Reports often attribute the phenomenon to a savvy social media campaign to lure young girls by promising a glorified life in the newly declared caliphate (for more on this, see Jarmakani, "Shiny Happy Imperialism"). As the moniker "jihadi bride" implies, the structure of the love story provides a lot of explanatory power, even if it doesn't fit the usual stereotype of a happily-ever-after ending. Yet even those sources that – to their credit – complicate the jihadi bride narrative can't resist the power of the love story (Saltman & Smith). They attribute the women's motivations for migrating to ISIS-controlled territories to the "pull" factor of having a sense of belonging and protection, implying that they have been duped by the fantasy of living happily ever after. Indeed, an article about the literary-poetic culture of ISIS puts it quite overtly:

> The culture of jihad is a culture of romance. It promises adventure and asserts that the codes of medieval heroism and chivalry are still relevant. Having renounced their nationalities, the militants must invent an identity of their own. They are eager to convince themselves that this identity is not really new but extremely old. The knights of jihad style themselves as the only true Muslims, and, while they may be tilting at windmills, the romance seems to be working. (Creswell & Haykel)

Whether or not the romance is working is up for debate, but if – by "working" – the authors mean that the story is compelling enough to convince people to act in ways that align with the romance narrative, the analogy could certainly be applied to US foreign policy and the romance with Gulf states as well.

Conclusion

If one of the goals of refiguring the Middle Ages through a postcolonial framework is to give sexuality "the uncertain, open future it deserves" (Cohen 7), analyzing how the tropes of medievalism appear in contemporary narratives about the political contexts of terrorism and war can also offer the benefit of disrupting common associations of barbarity with Southwest Asia and North Africa. Those of us who study romance understand them to be

much more than escapist fantasies. In my research on desert romances in particular, I have argued that they tell an interesting story about how desire shapes the war on terror, and it turns out that the story is about us (Jarmakani, *Imperialist Love Story*).

Romance novels often follow a classic set of themes, emphasizing, above all, the desire for protection and security. They heighten the suspense by demonstrating that the characters will risk everything, seeking to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles, in order to achieve these goals. Another well-known, and often denigrated, element of romance novels is their reliance on a happily-ever-after ending (HEA), as critics are quick to point out that the promise of enduring happiness is fleeting. But the HEA ending is the lie – or, more appropriately, the fantasy – that keeps the story going, and it motivates news stories well beyond the romance genre.

In relation to sensationalized new stories about "jihadi brides" or the romantic "culture of jihad," readers' stunned desire to know what propels women to leave comfortable lives in the West and migrate to war-ravaged areas threatens to obscure recognition of the way that U.S. involvement in the war on terror operates according to its own set of fantasies. Perhaps the most powerful and dangerous of these is the fantasy that extralegal policies – like torture, secretive drone strikes, and unchecked surveillance of U.S. citizens (and beyond) – will keep us safe. In many instances, these extralegal policies have been justified by figuring their victim-subjects as ineligible for protection from international law by labeling them as barbaric, medieval, non-state actors. They have been figured as outside of the law by constructing them as outside of contemporary times. On the contrary, there is reason to believe that these policies make us considerably less secure through unwarranted data collection and by giving violent groups like ISIS compelling ways of convincing would-be followers that the U.S. is unjustly killing civilians in Muslim countries with which the US is not even at war. Flipping the script of that common denigration of romance readers, I would suggest that the real dupes are those of us who buy in to the fantasy that militarized security will make us safer. We would do well to think more about the quotidian romance narratives that animate the imperialist policies described above. We might find that the romanticized and orientalized sheikhs "way buried" in our psyches are neither allies nor enemies: they are the story that imperialism tells about itself.

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[1] I discuss this detail from my interview with Conrad in my chapter in the *Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction* (Jarmakani, "Explorations").

[2] SWANA stands for Southwest Asia and North Africa, and refers to the geopolitical region usually named by the orientalist construction "the Middle East," which is problematic because it inscribes a reference ("middle") in relation to western European colonizing countries.

[3] This particular phrasing comes from *Mother Jones*, though most reviews share some version of this logic. NPR's Glen Weldon, for example, explains that *Habibi* is "set in a

modern yet resolutely mythical Middle East" while Michel Faber of *The Guardian* describes the setting as "a timeless Middle East" (cf. Mechanic; Weldon; Faber).

[4] Though, as Burge and others point out, Said's *Orientalism* overlooks the rich context of the Middle Ages (3).

[5] In fact, torture – refigured through the euphemism of "enhanced interrogation" – was justified during the George W. Bush administration through precisely this sort of argument. John Yoo, Deputy Assistant Attorney General, and Robert J. Delahunty, Special Counsel to the Department of Justice, argued that Afghanistan could be considered a failed state and that the Taliban could be understood as a non-state actor like al-Qaeda and, as such, neither were bound to the Geneva Conventions since Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions "'was prepared during a period in which the traditional, State-centered view of international law was still dominant'" (Holsinger 75).

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