

The Depiction of Masculinity and Nationality in *The Sheik*

jay Dixon

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About the Author: jay Dixon is an independent scholar of contemporary romance and historical fiction. Her book *The Romance Fiction of Mills & Boon 1909-1990s* was published in 1999 (UCL Press). She contributed a chapter on the 'History of English Romance Novels, 1621-1975' to *The Routledge Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, edited by Jayashree Kamblé, Eric Murphy Selinger, and Hsu-Ming Teo (Routledge, 2021) and an entry on 'Mills & Boon' in the *Encyclopaedia of Romance Fiction*, edited by Kristin Ramsdell (Greenwood, 2018). She has written various articles on Georgette Heyer and is currently researching the Regency novel. She is also a freelance proofreader and editor of both fiction and non-fiction.

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When *The Sheik* was first published in 1919 it became notorious for its sexual content. While it still holds an important place in the history of the English 'rape novel', there are other interesting aspects of the story: its imperialism, obviously, but also its take on masculinity and nationality. Elsewhere in this special issue, Diana's cross-gender boyish masculinity is discussed (see Jessica Taylor's article "*Garçon Manqué: A Queer Rereading (of) The Sheik*"), so what I want to concentrate on in this article is how Ahmed's masculinity is described and how it is linked to his nationality. I argue that the depiction of his masculinity draws on a blend of Arab, French, English and Scottish cultural ideas to contrast with popular perceptions of post-World War I British masculinities.

There was a perceived crisis of masculinity in post-First World War Britain. After the traumas of the trenches, men returned to Britain shell-shocked, worn out, on edge or physically disabled: 'Returning soldiers suffered psychological and physical injuries, some quite literally missing pieces of their former selves as more men survived severe war wounds, [i]n the years following World War I' (Glennemeir 17). According to Teo: 'shell-shocked soldiers walked with a shuddering, halting gait' (98), and so were very visible in society, as were the injured. Glennemeir argues that the war damaged 'men's bodies and self-image' (17) and that this is emphasised in the advertisements carried by many national publications. She adds:

The most frequent of these were advertisements for Lionel Strongfort's health regimen claiming to have 'restored the Manhood [men] thought was lost for ever, and given them renewed vitality, ambition and power.' One advertisement insisted that all men could fix their flat-chests and flabby stomachs as well as other ailments like weakness, nervousness, rheumatism, and impotence. This suggests that in addition to appearance, a tenet of masculinity included health and sexual performance. (17-19)

Another aspect of this crisis of masculinity was that during the war itself, British men were bogged down in the trenches – static, and not active, as a supposedly virile man would be – which led to men seeing themselves as impotent (Dixon 67). Notably, none of this physical or mental disability is present in the character of Ahmed Ben Hassan, the sheik himself. Indeed, the only men who seemed to have been visibly physically active during the war were the Arabs, led by T. E. Lawrence (Teo 101). This was the background against which E M Hull's *The Sheik* became a bestseller, depicting, as it does, a virile Arab sheik who can roam the desert at will, unimpeded.

As Regis says, the sheik is a 'splendid, healthy animal' (117), not subject to the laws of others. This is emphasised in Chapter 3 of *The Sheik* when the hero says: 'The French Government has no jurisdiction over me. I am not subject to it. I am an independent Chief, my own master. I recognise no government. My tribe obey me and only me' (66). Many critics assume T. E. Lawrence is the prototype for the Sheik, but he cannot have been the prototype for Ahmed Ben Hassan, as Lawrence was unknown to the British public before its publication. It was not until 14 August 1919 that Lowell Thomas' film *With Allenby in Palestine*, showing Lawrence dressed as a Bedouin, opened in London. According to Lawrence's biographer, '[b]y the end of the summer of 1919, *having been previously unknown to the British public*, T. E. Lawrence was firmly established as a national hero' (Yardley 149, my emphasis).

A more likely candidate for the prototype of the sheik would be the Victorian explorer Richard Burton, who disguised himself as a Muslim in Arab robes in order to make the Hajj, and who published an account of this in *A Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah* in 1855. He was, according to Elizabeth Gargano, 'for his contemporaries, a highly romantic figure' (174) and was a more virile and macho-looking figure than Lawrence, and a man capable of violence. His prototype is reflected in adventure stories for boys of the period 1870-1914 by A. E. W. Mason, G. A. Henty, and Rudyard Kipling where there are 'increasingly common examples of English men whose heroic glamour was expressed through cultural cross-dressing; that is, through their assumption of foreign clothing as a means of appropriating signs of exotic manliness' (Deane 17). The sheik is an example of this, but in a story of romance for women, not adventure novels for boys.

The sheik is presented to Diana and the reader as a virile Arab:

tall and broad-shouldered, dressed in white flowing robes, a waistcloth embroidered in black and silver wound several times about him, and from the top of which showed a revolver that was thrust into the folds...brown, clean-shaven face, surmounted by crisp, close-cut brown hair. It was the handsomest and the cruellest face that she had ever seen... [with] fierce, burning eyes.... . (51-52, ch 2)

As Burge argues '[t]he particular appeal of "traditional" white Arab robes here is that they make the sheikh [sic] not only look "exotic" and "mysterious" but "*supremely masculine*"' (Burge 83, her italics). Thus Hull's portrait of the Sheik is the complete opposite of the traumatised men on the street her readers were surrounded by.

Ahmed's masculinity is both connected with and distanced from his national identity. Ahmed, although brought up as an Arab by an Arab sheik, is actually the son of a Spanish mother who is dealt with sympathetically in the text – her Moorish blood only mentioned as an aside – and 'English' father. Throughout *The Sheik*, Ahmed adopts some markers of Arab masculinity – flowing robes and tents – but is distanced from others. Apart from Ahmed's second in command, the depiction of other Arabs is negative. They may be shown as physically active, but the men of the tribe the Sheik rules are also shown as childish: 'they were merely showing off with the childish love of display which she knew was characteristic' (45); and later, '[t]hey are like children, excitable, passionate and headstrong' (220). These 'other Arabs' are referred to as superstitious (211) and as having the 'true native tendency to avoid responsibility' (210). Other beliefs of the time about Arabs are shown in the portrayal of Ibraheim Omair, the Arab man who kidnaps Diana. He is described as reeking of 'sweat and grease and ill-kept horses, the pungent stench of the native' (190). His tent is intensely hot, and has 'a close, pungent smell that was eminently *native* that she had never experienced in the cool airiness and scrupulous cleanliness of Ahmed Ben Hassan's tents' (181, emphasis in original).

Ahmed's civilised comportment, on the other hand, is instead connected with his French education. He speaks fluent French, conversing with the heroine in 'the soft slow voice that seemed habitual to him, and which contrasted oddly with the neat, clipping French that he spoke' (70). In the same chapter, Diana notices that his books are in French, with Arabic marginal notes: 'She could not reconcile him and the barbaric display in which he lived with the evidence of refinement and education that the well-worn books in the tent evidenced' (70). Although the sheik denies any allegiance to France, he lives in French-governed Algeria, albeit in the desert, not under their direct rule in the town. So on two levels – Arab and French – he is connected to Britain's allies and to selected markers of national ideas of masculinity.

However, it is Ahmed's 'English' nationality that is of most interest to me – and in particular, the fact that he is not 'English' at all. Ever since the union in 1707 of Scotland and England, the English have often referred to all natives of the British Isles as English, regardless of their actual nationality. As James Bryce wrote in 1887: 'An Englishman has but one patriotism, because England and the United Kingdom are to him practically the same thing' (Colley 15). Thomas Carlyle in *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841) constantly refers to the 'English' as including, amongst other Anglo-Saxon nationalities, the Scots. In an article of 1885, celebrating Victoria's jubilee, *The Times* used England and Great Britain interchangeably (Martin 37). In *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), Conan Doyle (himself a Scottish man) had Holmes refer to the 'English army', and in 'The Adventure of the Naval Treaty' (1893), he had a character, said to be employed by the Foreign Office, refer to a 'treaty between England and Italy'. A poem of 1882 addresses this:

England stole Great Britain's name –
Tries to hide auld Scotland's fame –

What she does is burning shame!
Anglo-Saxon guile!
(G. Bruce, 'The Battle of Tel-el-Kebir')

As Martin says 'English is the default nationality' (10). However, I would suggest that the Sheik's biological father is a Scottish, not English, earl, with Jacobite ancestry. Although referred to in the novel as 'English' his father bears a Scottish title – Glencaryll – which, when broken down, gives the Scottish words 'glen' ('A mountain-valley' (Online Oxford English Dictionary)) and 'Caryll', a Jacobite title that died out in 1788 when the third baron died. While most critics refer to Ahmed as English, others, including Trodd, who refers to the sheik as 'the son of a sadistic Scottish Earl' (124), and Blake, who refers to the Sheik's father as having a Scottish title (76), see him as a Scot. Furthermore, as the breakdown of his title would indicate, he is a Highlander, as many Jacobites were. It is likely, therefore, that Hull is using 'English' with this all-inclusive meaning. If so, it throws a new light on the Sheik's nationality, and thus his masculinity.

According to Martin, 'the construct of Scotland as a timeless heartland of primal masculinity maintained its popular sway at least until World War One' (131), where the primal masculinity of the Highlander is defined as 'a wild and primitive male spirit, [and] violent and rugged behaviour' (165, n 3, following Rosen 183). Martin adds:

Many of the most popular nineteenth-century cultural representations of Scotland suggest that it has a savage essence... Literature and art suggest ... that a heart of dark masculinity animates Scotland's landscape and wildlife, its history and culture, its men ... an undying heart that, because Scotland is part of Britain, can beat for Britain as a whole. This is not the masculinity of civilization and restraint, but a more primal kind of masculinity, identified with fierce passions and dangerous force. (2)

Thus, despite Diamond's argument that the implication in *The Sheik* that the hero's brutality is due to his Arab upbringing (93), the Sheik's temper may well have been inherited from his Scottish father, who is 'a fiend of cruelty' when drinking (213), and who abused his wife – the Sheik's mother – to such an extent that she ran away from him into the desert. Due to the belief in English chivalry, it was not possible for authors to depict *Englishmen* as misogynistic, however. As Blake argues, 'Diana needs her lover to be un-English' (81), thus distancing the sheik – who is part Spanish and part Scottish – from any hint of abuse taking place in English households by Englishmen. But he cannot be totally non-Anglo Saxon, given the fear of miscegenation in the period. So his brutality towards Diana is displaced onto the inherited 'primal masculinity' of his Scottish father. According to Martin, the 'ability to locate the source of primal masculinity inside Britain but outside England is crucial to understanding nineteenth-century English masculinity' (7) which, I would argue is still the case in the early part of the twentieth century.

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