

## Review essay on *The Sheik*

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**Abstract:** This review essay collates and synthesises scholarly work to date on E. M. Hull's *The Sheik*, its film adaptation, and their legacy for popular romance fiction. Starting with contemporary contexts, the popular and critical reception of *The Sheik* is introduced, along with its literary antecedents and film adaptation. The essay then outlines scholarly work in three key areas: gender, race and the postcolonial, and the text's relationship to modernism. Each section highlights key arguments and critical voices. The final section of the essay considers the modern sheikh romance and its development from Hull's novel. The review essay aims to provide a clear, accessible introduction to scholarly work on *The Sheik* for students and researchers.

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**Keywords:** E. M. Hull, gender, modernism, orientalism, postcolonial, Sheikh romance, The Sheik

## Introduction

*The Sheik* is an important text in the sheikh romance tradition. First published in 1919, E. M. Hull's *The Sheik* has been labelled "the ur-romance novel of the twentieth century" (Regis 115) – a novel that has influenced not just subsequent sheikh romance, but all romance throughout the twentieth century (Regis 116-17). Amy Burge defines the sheikh romance as "a love story set in the deserts of North Africa or the Middle East, featuring an erotic relationship between a western heroine and an eastern sheikh or sultan hero" (*Representing Difference* 1; see also "*The Sheik* (1919)"). As Jessica Taylor puts it, "a tall, dark and handsome sheikh meets a white western woman who teaches him how to be ruled by love" (Taylor 1032). The 1921 film adaptation, starring Rudolph Valentino, cemented *The Sheik's* position as one of the most popular cultural artefacts of the early twentieth century. Consequently, there has been a sizeable amount of critical work in the fields of feminism, literature, postcolonial studies, and film on *The Sheik* and its legacy: from early studies focused on gender and genre motifs, to more recent criticism dealing with contemporary sheikh romances and their geopolitical contexts.

This review essay draws together this scholarship, outlining the context, themes, and legacy of *The Sheik* and its film adaptation. Each section summarizes critical arguments, indicating key scholars of focus. In the context section, we discuss historical influences on *The Sheik*, E. M. Hull herself, the novel's release and reception, and the film adaptation. We then move to discuss in detail three key themes in scholarship on *The Sheik*: gender; race and the postcolonial; and the text's relationship to modernism. Finally, in the section on legacy, we focus on the modern sheikh romance genre, reviewing critical work on the hero, heroine, abduction and sexual violence, and the desert setting. The aim of this review essay is to provide a structured introduction to critical work on *The Sheik* since its publication a century ago. By outlining themes and issues discussed by scholars, we want to signpost students and readers to individual scholarly works, and to inspire further exploration of the text and its legacy.

## Context

### *History*

**Key scholars:** Anderson, Bettinotti & Truel, Hipsky, Teo.

Alongside the influence of British imperial interests in the Orient, which became emphasized during WW1 (Teo, "Orientalism" 258; see also Hipsky 287-88, note 50), a number of studies of *The Sheik* and of desert romance have outlined its literary and cultural influences.[1] Most critical works identify the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as a key period for precursors to *The Sheik*. Two notable exceptions are Hsu-Ming Teo (*Desert Passions*) and Burge (*Representing Difference*), both of whom point to medieval romances as premodern forerunners (see also Hipsky 194-95). A range of genres have been cited as influential for *The Sheik*, including: captivity and abduction narratives; travel accounts; Orientalist literature published in the west (e.g. *The Thousand and One Nights*); Victorian pornography (especially the erotic oriental tale); and Gothic romance.

Specific authors and works have been cited as an influence on *The Sheik*. Several critics point to the epistolary novel *The Lustful Turk* (1828), a pornographic text that depicts the rape of virgins and interracial sexual relations (Teo, "Orientalism" 245; see also Frost, *Problem* 108-09). Pauline Suwanban points to connections between *The Sheik* and Charlotte Dacre's 1806 Gothic novel *Zofloya*, including the use of fire imagery, gender fluidity, violent persuasion, and a subjectifying female gaze. A number of women travelers have been cited as potential influences for Hull's Diana, including: Lady Jane Digby, a nineteenth-century aristocrat who travelled to Syria and married a Bedouin leader; Mary Kingsley, author of *Travels in West Africa* (1897); Lady Burton, wife of Sir Richard Burton, who translated the *Arabian Nights* and whose posthumous memoirs, *Romance of Isabel Lady Burton*, introduced key tropes (adventure-seeking, devotion to a romantic partner, and hypermasculine Arab dress) that would later appear in *The Sheik* (Gargano 173-74); Lady Hester Stanhope, who had a long-term relationship with an Arab man (see also Teo, *Desert Passions* 102); and Lady Ann Blunt, a traveler who met Digby in Damascus (see also Bettinotti & Truel 186-88; Teo, *Desert Passions* 101-02). Robert Hitchens' *The Garden of Allah* (1904), which was adapted into a play (1907) and a film (1936), is credited by many with inventing the desert romance "as a distinct sub-genre" (Cadogan 117; see also Anderson 182-83; Teo, "Orientalism" 244; Wintle 297).[2] Hull was also influenced by the works of contemporary romance novelists Ethel M. Dell and Kathlyn Rhodes (Diamond 94-98; see also Anderson 183-84).[3]

In discussing its literary heritage, scholars have indicated ways in which *The Sheik* draws on and deviates from its antecedents highlighting, in particular, its reworking of "male-dominated sexually aggressive culture" (Melman 104; see also Hipsky 196; Raub 124). The key difference, Teo asserts, between Victorian pornography and *The Sheik* is the turn to romantic love ("Orientalism" 246). Ann Ardis connects Hull's novel to 1890s New Woman fiction, suggesting that "Hull borrows from and builds upon [this] tradition of women's subversive writings about 'improper' femininity" (292), arguing for the importance of twentieth-century mass market romance fiction for "continuing the New Woman novel's popularization of 'advanced' views of sexuality" (288; see also Teo, *Desert Passions* 75-79). Ardis maintains that Hull's works legitimised female desire, but also "the female adventure plot" (294); Julia Bettinotti and Marie-Françoise Truel concur that "English women novelists at the beginning of the [twentieth] century were the first to introduce into the romance the element of a heroine who was free, and in search of adventure, and who undertook a voyage" (189). Such changes are attributed to radical shifts in "the English romance" in the first decades of the twentieth century, wherein "exoticism and feminine sexuality make their appearance in texts destined for a female readership" (Bettinotti & Truel 185). As Teo remarks,

the Orientalist desert romance changed from a focus on the menacing and mysterious Orient – the Orient of Corelli, Hitchens, and Rhodes that served as an exotic backdrop to European melodramas – to the Orient as a locus of rape and romance, where the figure of the dangerous Arab was foregrounded alongside the European heroine." (*Desert Passions* 85)

Such changes in literature are reflective of "the postwar boom in popular sexual knowledges," signalled by the publication of "sex manuals such as Marie Stopes's *Married*

*Love* (1918)" (Chow 64): "the book that opened the floodgates for a new discourse on sexual pleasure in the late teens and early 1920s" (Chow 69).

### **About Hull**

**Key scholars:** Anderson, Bloom, Melman, Turner.

Relatively little is known about Ethel Maude Hull. Possibly born in 1880 and living until 1947, Hull has been described as "a respectable Derbyshire lady" (Cadogan 126), "married to a dull pig-breeder called Percy" (Anderson 185). Clive Bloom notes her simultaneous influence on later popular romance and her contemporary obscurity (197); Billie Melman similarly observes that contemporary attention was unusually focused on Hull's novel rather than its author (90). Hull's knowledge of the desert may have derived from a childhood visit to Algeria (Teo, "Historicizing"), described in her later work *Camping in the Sahara* (Turner, "Camping" 130). Emily W. Leider claims Hull accompanied her soldier husband to Algeria for a year (157). It was alleged that Hull preferred to be called Diana, leading Rachel Anderson to comment, "Diana's adventures were possibly a compensation for E. M. Hull's own lack of amorous excitement" (185).

### **Contemporary Reception**

**Key scholars:** Frost, Melman, Teo, Turner.

*The Sheik* was a "transatlantic phenomenon", selling more than all other bestsellers in the interwar years (Teo, "Orientalism" 248). In 108 British editions by 1923 (Melman 46), *The Sheik* had sold 1,194,000 copies in the USA by 1944 (Hackett cited in Braden 169; see also Raub 119-20; Regan 109; Regis 117). *The Sheik* emerged into a changing market in which women were increasingly identified as consumers of popular culture (Bettinotti & Truel 185; Chow 73; Melman 104; Wintle 291). Clare Deal argues that the runaway success of *The Sheik* shows "there was a previously unmet need for a book which sought to provide a sexual thrill for its female readership" (76; see also Chow 81; Diamond 88).

So popular were *The Sheik* and its imitators that Laura Frost states, "we can accurately speak of an interwar 'desert romance genre'" (Frost, "Romance of Cliché" 95). The novel encouraged a spate of imitators, mostly British authors, in the 1920s (Teo, "Orientalism" 249). After the success of *The Sheik*, Hull published *Sons of the Sheik* (1925) and *Camping in the Sahara* (1926) following a trip to Algeria (Anderson 189). The popularity of the novel impacted on travel; contemporary accounts indicated a rise in "frustrated women" tourists in North Africa after *The Sheik* was published – "a kind of female sexual tourism" (Frost, "Romance of Cliché" 100) – and Ellen Turner cites a *Daily Express* article from March 1929 that remarks "[t]he sheik season is in full swing, and Biskra and its kindred oases of the Northern French Sahara are packed with visitors in search of sunshine and Romance – with a capital R" (*Daily Express*, 8 March 1929, 10, cited in Turner, "Camping" 131). However, the literary craze was short-lived; Turner notes that by the mid- to late-20s, the "cynical tone of articles" in the media is evidence that "the cultural phenomenon fed in part by Hull and her imitators, was retrospectively viewed with nostalgic incredulity" ("Camping" 129). Teo connects the immediate popularity of

Hull's novel with Lowell Thomas' lecture and slide presentation *With Allenby in Palestine* (shown in London in 1919) which introduced audiences to T. E. Lawrence dressed in Arab robes, solidifying the "subsequent rage for all things Arabic" including Lawrence himself ("Orientalism" 258; see also Diamond 92; Gargano 173; Raub 123, 125). In the US, where the Orient was seen as spectacular and consumable (Teo, *Desert Passions*; see also Caton 99), sheet music, gramophone records and even perfumes were sold in response to the film (Frost, *Problem* 94; Teo, "Historicizing"). The association of the word 'sheikh' with sex appeal (Dixon 138, cited in Taylor 1043; Frost, *Problem* 93; Melman 89; Raub 120; Teo, "Orientalism" 249) culminated in the emergence of "Sheik-brand rubber condoms" in 1931 (Leider 168; see also; Edwards 50, cited in Teo, "Historicizing" n.p.; Teo, *Desert Passions* 1).

While readers loved *The Sheik*, the same cannot be said for Hull's literary peers (Burge, "*The Sheik* (1919)"). The novel was deemed "indecent, immoral and degenerate" in a 1922 article in the New York Tribune (Putnam, cited in Burge, "*The Sheik* (1919)" 328), and labelled a "poisonously salacious piece" by the *Literary Review* in 1919 (Melman 90). Q. D. Leavis referred to *The Sheik* as a "typist's day-dream" (Frost, *Problem* 102) and D. H. Lawrence was one of Hull's most prominent detractors. Critical reviews reflected the widespread moral concern of loose sexuality with articles published warning of the dangers of the desert for European women (Melman 92-93). As Turner writes, "[t]he sheer quantity of contemporary references to the novel's inherent abysmalness is, in itself, striking" ("the Valentino cult" 171).

### ***The film***

**Key scholars:** Leider, Lie, Teo, Turner.

The success of Hull's novel was heightened by the release of the film adaptation in 1921, directed by George Melford and starring Rudolph Valentino (Hipsky 187; Teo, "Orientalism" 248; Turner, "Sheik Returns" 189). The film was a smash hit: "over 125,000 people had seen *The Sheik* within weeks of the film's opening in 1921." (Teo, "Historicizing" n.p.). Teo notes the "Oriental film was one of the most popular genres in the first two decades of the twentieth century" (*Desert Passions* 122), "beginning with George Méliès's *The Palace of A Thousand and One Nights* (1905)" (Teo, "Historicizing" n.p.) and ending with "the sound era and World War II" (Taylor 1037; see also Eisele 78). Alongside *The Sheik*, a number of films established the 'sheikh movie' and the wider category of what John C. Eisele calls the 'Hollywood Eastern' (Teo, *Desert Passions* 136-38; Turner, "Camping" 139).[4] By the mid-1920s, the genre had shifted towards spoofs and comedies, such as F. Richard Jones' *The Shriek of Araby* (1923) (Teo, "Historicizing" n.p.; see also Turner, "Sheik Returns" 186). Differences between novel and film are attributed to "different historical experiences of gender, race, and ethnicity" in Britain and the USA, as well as variations in popular Orientalist discourse – more 'realist' British representations versus "American fancy-dress fantasies of the Orient" (Teo, *Desert Passions* 123).

The film launched Valentino's celebrity (Hipsky 187) with his portrayal of Ben-Hassan credited as the creation of the Latin Lover (Lie 3) with which generations of "American westerners fell in love" (author Jane Porter, cited in Holden 12). The film is equally significant for its "focus on female erotic fantasies" (Teo, "Orientalism" 245), marking the first time "women spectators were perceived as a socially and economically

significant group” (Hansen 6). The film maintains the novel’s themes of women travelling independently, abduction, and sexual violence (Teo, “Orientalism” 244) while displacing brutality onto other Arab characters and offering a more feminist heroine (Teo, *Desert Passions* 128) who triumphs “over a somewhat debilitated sheik at the end.” (Teo, “Historicizing” n.p.). Leider remarks that contemporary critics felt “Hull’s tale had lost its spine” through adaptation due to the film’s toning down of rape (167). Masculinity has been a focus for scholars, in particular the differences between the feminized Valentino and the hypermasculine hero of the novel (Caton 99-100). Suwanban suggests that Valentino’s portrayal of the Sheik created “a new type of masculinity that contradicts and perhaps threatens a conventional western ideal” (7; see also Jarmakani, *Imperialist* 170).

The film gives more emphasis to religion, with Islam represented as “benign, mystical, and romantic” (Teo, *Desert Passions* 123) and Ahmed’s redemption led by Christianity (Caton 114). In addition, Diana’s role in the imperial project of empire is as apparent as that of white men in the novel (Teo *Desert Passions* 123-27). Scholars have identified the film’s treatment of race as particularly interesting. Leider comments that in 1920s America, contending with the rise of the Klu Klux Klan and the popularity of the idea of white purity, filmmakers had to “ensure that color boundaries would not be too openly or brazenly breached” (162), in fear of both censorship and alienating the white audience. Sarah Wintle argues that miscegenation was “the overt problem for the Hollywood establishment” (292). However, while ‘proto-sheikh type’ films often included miscegenetic relationships (Eisele 70), this aspect of the novel was toned down in *The Sheik*; lighting techniques were used to emphasize Diana’s whiteness and, at times, Valentino/Ahmed’s, distancing him from ‘other’, non-white Arabs to play it safe (Leider 159; Teo, “Historicizing”).

Yet, Teo suggests that the American film, in allowing Valentino/Ahmed to ‘become white’ socially and materially through his actions in the film, offers “a message of racial, ethnic, or cultural incorporation that was different from that offered by the British novel” (*Desert Passions* 135). Noting increasing anxiety among white Americans about immigration from southern and Eastern Europe, Teo observes that while in Britain, Arabs were read as “black” until WW2, in the USA, Arabs were officially considered white, and Italian immigrants like Valentino were “in-betweens”: “nonwhite-but-not-black” (*Desert Passions* 131-32). By presenting Valentino as a ‘white’ Arab the film offers, Stephen Caton proposes, a “parable of what is required of the ambiguously ‘white’ other, if he is to join the American polity” (116). The message seems to be that “non-white/not-black people can be assimilated into the body politic as citizens if they distance themselves from blacks” (as Ahmed does with Omair) (Teo, “Historicizing” n.p.). Furthermore, Teo claims, the film version reoriented around Valentino became “about the incorporation of ethnic others into dominant white film identity” rather than the history of European contact with the Middle East (“Orientalism” 249).

## Themes

### Gender

**Key scholars:** Ardis, Deal, Frost, Gargano, Melman.

The relationship of Hull's novel to gender relations and female liberation is complex. Teo notes that early feminist scholarship was scathing about the novel's treatment of women and sexuality (*Desert Passions* 88). Others see the novel as an early example of a text centered on women's pleasure and liberty. Some focus on the role of *The Sheik* in documenting shifting social values, particularly New Woman ideologies. A number of studies have taken an intersectional approach, writing about gender and Orientalism in the text. More recent studies have explored the gender politics of contemporary sheikh romances.

### ***New Woman***

A key strand of scholarly work on gender and *The Sheik* has considered the extent to which Diana can be read as a New Woman. For Patricia Raub, *The Sheik* provides a positive representation of a post-war New Woman who is able to enjoy sex and succumb to male advances without meeting a tragic end (and, indeed, being rewarded with a happy marriage) (122). Anderson, Hilary P. Dannenberg and Pamela Regis point to Diana's determination, skill in hunting, and 'affective individualism', arguing that "[t]he novel appears, at the outset, to be in favour of the liberation of women" (Anderson 187).[5] Ardis ultimately declares "early twentieth-century popular romance novelists [including Hull] were continuing the work of the *fin-de-siecle* New Woman writers" (288-89), while stopping short of endorsing its "most subversive and controversial aspects" (294).[6]

Ardis, Elizabeth Gargano and Turner ("Camping") agree that Diana embodies "the stereotype of the masculinized or sexually ambiguous 'new woman'" androgyne (Gargano 176): what Deal calls "liminal" (89). Karen Chow suggests that "Diana's changes of clothing give her the power of transgression through masquerade: in men's clothing she is able to take on the 'male' privilege of independence" (79). Deal considers Diana's "boyish femininity" to reflect shifting post-war perceptions of gender (77), yet Anderson argues Diana's "early strength of character ... is short-lived ... [and] shown to be the unfeminine failings of sheer obstinacy and arrogance" (187). Similarly, Deal points out, "the female appropriation of the masculine did not constitute a complete liberty; it remained fundamentally a performance, restricted to clothes and hairstyles" (78).

Frost, on the other hand, critiques the idea that Diana is a New Woman, claiming that she "has none of the political concerns of the typical New Woman" and her "privilege is more a matter of spoiled will than political consciousness" (*Problem* 94). Christine Grandy reasons that Diana's "willing abandonment of her past social and economic status" (499) in the film adaptation of *The Sheik* is more about representing women's sacrifices for love, in alignment with other contemporary popular films. Deal questions Diana's portrayal as a 'flapper', citing Diana's lack of libido (at least at the novel's outset) (85). Equally, Turner remarks that in *The Sheik* "androgyne is more about fashion than it is about power" as "[r]ather than reimagining any radical change Hull places, to an extent, the women in the conventional male roles preserving prevailing and oppressive systems of thought" ("the Valentino cult" 177).

### ***Sexual violence***

Many have focused on sexual violence in *The Sheik*. Juliet Flesch terms *The Sheik* “a novel of shocking brutality” (183). While acknowledging the happy “in its own terms” ending, Flesch observes that “the violence which is so integral a part of their relationship is never repudiated” (185). Teo connects *The Sheik*’s sexual politics, particularly rape and abduction, with the “social and sexual context of wartime and post-war Britain,” namely the sexualisation of soldiers and simultaneous fears about violent male soldiers returning to Britain, reflected in widely circulated rape stories (*Desert Passions* 95-101). Regis contends that rape was prevalent in romances like *The Sheik* because publishers believed that coercion was necessary to make extra-marital sexual relations acceptable (116); Deal agrees that Diana is distanced from sexual impropriety through lack of choice (85). Others have claimed that the novel attempts to minimise the impact of its sexual violence. Anderson conducts a close reading of the rape scenes in *The Sheik* advancing that the use of past historic tense, adverbs and repeated words (kiss, crush, fire, lips, fierce) minimise the violence of the acts (186). Focusing on the film, Hipsky posits that the rape is “doubly removed from realist representation” by not being described in the narrative, but occurring ‘off-screen’ and in a distant geographical space (188-89). The revelation of Ahmed’s Europeanness “further serves the purpose of fashioning the sexual violation into an acceptable topos of romance fantasy” (Hipsky 189).

Caton and Dannenberg connect Diana’s gender transformation from boyish to “purely womanly” (Hull 243) with her sexual assault arguing, “her initial characterisation can therefore be seen not so much as emancipatory in spirit but simply as a strategic ingredient in the orchestration of her character within the narrative trajectory of heterosexual romance” (Dannenberg 73; Caton 108-09; see also Raub 120-22). As Flesch writes, “Diana’s rape is her initiation into womanhood and the delights of the flesh” (185). Focusing on Diana’s “awakened libido and ability to experience sexual pleasure reclaim[s] her body from the masculine value system” – in which she has been raped – “and recast[s] it for her own purposes and desires” (Deal 91). Ultimately, Deal proposes that “the interlinked nature between mind and matter suggests that her physical pleasure gestures towards a coming together for Diana as a complete corporeal subject with the power to direct her body to satisfy her own desires” (92). Diana’s transformation indicates thus both a forced subordination to a feminised role *and* sexual liberation (Deal 81; see also Hofstadter 114).

### ***Woman-centred pleasure and sexual desire***

While disagreeing about its progressiveness, critics agree that texts such as *The Sheik* “helped to bring women’s sexuality into public discourse” (Chow 81; see also Deal 77). Just as Ann Barr Snitow mused decades later, *The Sheik* has been labelled as ‘pornography for women’: and “one of the earliest examples of mass, commercialised erotic literature” (Melman 104; see also Frost, *Problem* 108-09). As outlined above, critics have argued for the central role of sexual awareness in Diana’s transformation; for Frost, “Hull represents pleasure as simultaneously outrage and thrill, and a final surrender to everything Diana initially resisted” (*Problem* 96). Furthermore, Hull’s novel is narrated “exclusively from the point of view of the female protagonist” (Hipsky 6). Some connect this



with wider literary trends exploring “questions of gender in relation to sexuality,” notably the notion of authentic gender identity (Wintle 294). Others point to the role of *The Sheik* in presenting an erotic fantasy aimed at women; Frost suggests that this “may well account not only for the tremendous popularity of Hull’s novel but also for the unusual attention that an unlikely modernist audience gave to *The Sheik*” (*Problem* 99).

### **Gender and Orientalism**

Some critics have taken a more intersectional approach, considering gender alongside Orientalism. Caton draws a link between Diana’s desire to submit to Ahmed and her perception of subservient local women, remarking, “Orientalism thus has everything to do with the sadomasochistic nature of her feminine desire” (109). This chimes with what Amira Jarmakani and others have observed in later sheikh romances in which “the white heroines ‘try on’ submission by going native” (*Imperialist* 101). Burge and Taylor examine sheikh romance’s apparent reversal of Orientalism’s construction of the east as the feminised ‘other’ to the west (see also Bach 12). The Orientalist association between Arab men and effeminacy, often insinuated through traditional Arab clothing, became a widespread concern in the decades following the publication of *The Sheik* (Burge, *Representing Difference* 83; see also Melman 91; Garber 304-11). But in *The Sheik* and later sheikh romances, we are presented with “a masculine Orient” (Taylor 1042); in modern sheikh romances, attributes associated with the west – education, tolerance and humility – are explicitly feminized. For Taylor, the “displacement of the patriarchy and maleness onto the Oriental society allows for both a conservative return to definitions of femininity and an apparent solution to the patriarchy through modernization” (1047). Frost agrees, writing: “[d]esert romance inverts the gender positions in conventional orientalism by imagining an eroticized masculine “foreigner” and casting the fantasy from a woman’s perspective” (*Problem* 98). For readers of *The Sheik*, anxieties around masculinity tapped into fears of “female qualities” (Gargano 177) in European men post-WW1. Gargano reads in the novel reference to the legacy of “enervation and despair” in young men post-WW1 in which Diana “appears more ‘virile,’ more energetic and passionate, than the men who surround her,” in particular her languid, lazy brother (175-76). Teo presents a different reading, of the “embittered and violent veteran ... who could not control his passions,” arguing that this is “why passion is intermeshed with violence” in the novel (“Historicizing” n.p.). Valentino’s androgynous portrayal of Ahmed in the film adaptation sustained the novel’s focus on anxious masculinities, funnelling it into “a powerful challenge to myths of masculinity in American culture between the wars” (Hansen 23; see also Studlar 52; Turner, “the Valentino cult” 173).

### **Feminist Orientalism**

Critics have considered *The Sheik* in relation to imperialism. Bettinotti and Truel contend that in their desert travel narratives, women “identify more with the conquered people than with their conquerors, since at home they belong as much to a colonized group as the indigenous people they come into contact with” (191). Deal concurs, reasoning “E. M. Hull’s position was not synonymous with the unequivocal power of the colonizing male” due to the fact that “the nineteenth-century woman was, in a sense, surveyed and claimed

under British male rule” (81). Drawing on scholarship by Reina Lewis, Lisa Lowe and Melman, Teo suggests *The Sheik* and its film adaptation “placed women at the center of Orientalist discourse as both producers and consumers ... thereby making them complicit in its legacy throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries” (“Historicizing” n.p.). While acknowledging Diana’s placement as a victim throughout the novel, her “imperial identity” is well-established through her reported opinions on local people and customs, insistent emphasis on her whiteness, and her aristocratic privilege (Teo, *Desert Passions* 103-04). Ella Shohat, discussing the film adaptation, writes that “the western woman character, largely the passive object of male gaze in Hollywood cinema, is granted in the East an active (colonial) gaze, insofar as she represents western civilization” (41).

Gendered Orientalism is also present in modern sheikh romances. Arab women are deemed “second-class citizens” (Teo, “Orientalism” 253), presented as an amorphous group rather than individuals, and are often replaced by white western women (Teo, *Desert Passions* 223). Hipsky notes the absence of the “dark” or “non-European woman” in interwar desert romance (153-54), showing this trope was established at the time of *The Sheik*. Teo argues that modern sheikh romances draw on Joyce Zonana’s concept of ‘feminist orientalism’, in which gender inequalities in the west are associated with the Orient and rejected, “to insist on women’s equality with men and on women’s right to a fulfilling career outside the domestic realm” (“Orientalism” 253). For Teo, “British imperialism’s Christianising and civilising mission of the nineteenth century lives on” in contemporary sheikh romance (“Orientalism” 259). Furthermore, the sheikh’s taming by the western heroine incorporates him into liberal multiculturalism, through “the rubric of women’s liberation” by which the “good sheik” hero is figured as ally to US imperial power (Jarmakani, *Imperialist* 47-48).

### ***Race / post-colonial***

**Key scholars:** Blake, Burge, Dannenberg, Jarmakani, Teo, Taylor.

While many studies have focused on themes of sex and gender in *The Sheik*, Susan Blake comments it “is equally, and relatedly, a story about race” (69); Taylor notes that the modern sheikh romance is something of a rarity as “one of the few occasions where the color line is broken in [...] category romance” (1036). Putting it bluntly, *The Sheik* is racist, says Regis (115). As Teo indicates, “the British context of a white imperial culture and its fear of miscegenation with colonized ‘natives’ influenced both the production and reception of the novel” (“Historicizing” n.p.). Dannenberg terms *The Sheik* an example of a “colonial desert romance” (69) that “can be read as a double embodiment of the cultural and historical contexts of the period – not only of the last phase of empire, but of the early twentieth century as a period of awakening female emancipation” (72).[7]

### ***The Sheik and Orientalism***

Said’s concept of Orientalism has proven useful for a number of critical works on sheikh romance (Burge, Taylor, Teo) from a number of perspectives, whether this is examining the role women have played in imperialist discourse (Taylor), connecting it to the subjugation of women (Caton), or noting the imprecise deployment of Orientalist

markers (Gargano). Evelyn Bach says the settings of sheikh romance emphasise “western fantasies of opulence, barbarism and sensuality” (12), often using the *Arabian Nights* as “shorthand” or “cultural quotation” (13). Taylor points out that “the Orient present in the Orientalist work is less a reference to an ‘actual’ Orient, than to the Orient that has been constructed in other Orientalist works” (1038). This may account for the “vague Orientalism” evident in the text: Gargano sees Ahmed’s singing of an Indian love song as an attempt not to produce “cultural specificity, but rather ... an undefined ‘otherness’ that contrasts with prosaic English conventions” (177). Stacy E. Holden explains that the desire to provide “such an Other experience” is part of the contemporary appeal of sheikh romance for authors and readers (interview with Lynne Rae Harris, 6). Teo argues for the importance of noting different contexts for Orientalism in Britain – where Orientalist discourse was rooted in the realities of colonial rule and concerned with “historical accuracy, ‘authenticity,’ naturalism, and verisimilitude” (“Historicizing” n.p.) – and the “American tradition of fairground and department-store Orientalism” (“Historicizing” n.p.).

### ***The sheikh hero***

The sheikh hero – in Hull’s novel and in subsequent genre novels – is a hybrid. Judith Wilt identifies Ahmed as a “doubled/unified hero” (87), both the “action hero, Ahmed Ben Hassan,” yet also “someone else” (88). Once Ahmed’s ethnicity is revealed, he removes his Arab clothing and re-embodies his civilised “European” values (Hipsky 190), although he must retain some vestige of exoticism in order to retain Diana (and the reader’s) erotic interest (Hipsky 190-91). Jarmakani signals Ahmed’s Spanish ancestry, connecting this to “the ghostly presence of the Moor” or “shadowy connection to Spanish Muslim ancestry” (*Imperialist* 144), indicative of an amalgamation of religion and race (“Blade” 915-16). Dannenberg postulates that *The Sheik* “establishes the figure of the British male and with it British colonial power as the dominant force in the novel’s cultural mapping of the North African landscape” (72; see also Regan 115; Teo, “Historicizing”). Dannenberg reads *The Sheik* as a “traditional colonial romance” (75) in which the “culturally hybrid [...] British cosmopolitan imperial male” can move “with ease and natural superiority amongst the indigenous peoples of other countries” (76; see also Eisele 75; Gargano 182-85). Blake concurs, noting “[t]he ‘Arab’ qualities approved in the English hero – imperiousness and complete freedom – reflect an Orientalist discourse that serves the interests of an English aristocracy that claims these privileges for itself” (69). The dual perspective in which the Sheik is both Arab *and* English offers a chance to explore “a series of racial positions” (Blake 75). Blake submits that “Diana’s insistence that the man she loves is ‘Arab’ – Other and equal, if not superior – resists ... the pressure of imperialist discourse to identify any Other as inferior ... and thus functions as a counter discourse” (Blake 78). However, Teo maintains that “the effectiveness of this counter discourse” is limited “for the novel confirms in one incident after another that Arabs are a brutal, cruel people” (“Historicizing” n.p.).

Hipsky suggests that the revelation of Ahmed’s European identity constructs a whitewashed fantasy in which “the fear of rape by the ‘native’ male is balanced, as on a knife-edge, with the libidinality of the encounter with a romanticized, ‘primitive’ masculinity” (153). Blake also discusses how *The Sheik* undercuts “the construction of ‘native’ as sexual threat to, and white man as protector of, white woman” by twice

associating sexual violence with the English (the Sheik's father and the Sheik himself) (Blake 79). Blake further claims that in this moment, the text offers a critique of Englishness. Gargano reads this slightly differently, arguing that this revelation associates "passion and ferocity" with "the English temperament" and makes these actions "sanctioned by their associations with an aristocratic bloodline" (182). Bach takes this further, drawing on Homi Bhabha's colonial stereotypes research, to propose that the motifs of sheikh romance "draw attention to the object of anxiety while at the same time substituting a familiar cliché which renders it safe to look at" (16). Wintle remarks that Ahmed's "inherited male violence and priapic excess is initially mapped on to racial exoticism and then, at the end of the novel, partly reabsorbed into categories of race and class more acceptable to the conventional and social expectations of the day" (296; see also Chow 76; Gargano 182). Beatrice Hofstadter notes, importantly, that Ahmed's revealed identity as son of a Scottish lord means "Diana can marry him not only without the disgrace of miscegenation, but even without the inconvenience of declassing herself" (114). Race is thus represented, in *The Sheik*, with a "double movement of attraction and repulsion" (Frost, "Romance of Cliche" 100) – what Jarmakani calls the "proximity of desire and disgust" (drawing on Bhabha's idea of "colonial ambivalence") (*Imperialist* 14). Hipsky submits that ideologies of race – or "allegories of empire" (154) (from Jenny Sharpe) – fuel the text's "combustible discourses of desire" (153); sheikh romance is "a form of socio-political erotica" (Holden 17). This is most clearly expressed in the text's attitude towards miscegenation.

### **Miscegenation**

Teo writes, "the white woman's irresistible and insatiable desire for the black or brown-skinned native was European colonial culture's darkest fantasy and fear, exceeded only by the horror of her hybrid progeny" ("Orientalism" 247). Miscegenation was a key aspect of early sheikh romances, including *The Sheik* (see also Caton 111; Turner, "the Valentino cult" 176). Teo says that *The Sheik* was unusual in permitting a white woman to have sex with an Arab man, arguing that this makes the novel "bold and subversive ... for its time" ("Historicizing" n.p.); even though none of the heroes of these early sheikh romances are ethnically Arab, "it is still significant that the white women ... find themselves irresistibly attracted to the Arab persona" (*Desert Passions* 85). Teo traces the anxiety about miscegenation that occurred around the time of *The Sheik's* publication, pointing to wider political and historical shifts – anticolonial protests in the Middle East, race riots in Britain in 1919 – to highlight the historical specificity of the novel (see *Desert Passions* 85-86; 101-08). Caton notes similarly fraught race-relations in the USA at the time of the novel's publication; he marks it as significant that at the end of the book, Diana does not return to Britain but stays "permanently 'out there,' where their outrageous coupling cannot threaten the society at large" (Caton 112). Teo and Burge have both considered the legacy of miscegenation in contemporary sheikh romances, coming to different conclusions. Teo explains that miscegenation is no longer an issue in modern sheikh romances of the 1990s published in Australia ("Orientalism"). Burge, on the other hand, counters that demonstrable fears of a loss of patrilineage are evident in some twenty-first-century sheikh romances, indicating an anxiety rooted in the production of a child drawn between two cultures (*Representing Difference* 131).

### **Race and the modern sheikh romance**

A number of scholars have discussed race and the postcolonial in relation to more recent sheikh romance. Jarmakani posits that the fictional countries inhabited by romantic sheikhs model the neoliberal capitalist ideologies of modern nation states in the Persian Gulf and echo twenty-first-century neoliberal multiculturalism and imperialism (*Imperialist* xv; 118-19; 77). She writes that “romance novels serve as a localized example of some of the mainstream U.S. emotive engagements with the war on terror” (*Imperialist* 180) offering radiation as a metaphor for the way race works in sheikh romance: it is silent, pervasive, deadly, and has material effects (“Blade” 898; see also *Imperialist* chapter 1). Burge outlines how post-2000 sheikh romances exploit current political rhetoric that labels the Middle East as ‘medieval’, meaning backwards or barbaric (61-68; see also Jarmakani, *Imperialist* 137). This rhetoric is deployed to show how the fictional state requires modernisation – as Taylor points out, “modernizing always means westernizing” (1042) – but it is also eroticised in some novels. Ultimately, Burge puts forward that modern sheikh romances sustain the ideology of ‘sameness rather than difference’ that is present in older examples of Orientalist romance.

### **Modernism**

**Key scholars:** Frost, Hipsky.

As noted by Ellen Turner in her contribution to this special issue, *The Sheik*, with its formulaic, genre character, stands somewhat at odds to modernism’s effort to ‘make it New.’ Indeed, Frost considers it curious that “the desert romance, among the most deliberately derivative of popular fiction genres, peaked at the same moment that modernist fiction was pursuing originality” (*Problem* 94). D. H. Lawrence wrote publically about Hull’s novel – in “Surgery for the Novel – or a Bomb” (1923), and “Pornography and Obscenity” (1929) – labelling the novel a “smirking, rather plausible hussy” (Frost, *Problem* 105). Yet, for Deal, the sexual explicitness of Hull’s work “marks it out as a political and social departure” (93) and Lawrence’s criticisms indicate his refusal to accept that a woman could write explicit sexual content and that women would be interested in reading it. Ardis suggests that literary modernism’s dismissal has prevented “serious consideration” of works like *The Sheik* (288).

Scholars have stated that Hull’s novel has “a surprisingly prominent place in significant formulations of British modernism” (Frost, *Problem* 90). Hipsky claims that “primitivist tropes” found in works by Woolf, Lawrence and Mansfield “are drawn from the same continuum of discursive resources that also charge the imperial erotic romances with anxiety and desire” (216). Frost finds that modernist writers, primarily Lawrence, “criticized but also borrowed from the formulaic language of popular romance” (*Problem* 30) using tropes of *The Sheik* but to different ends, writing, to borrow Lawrence’s own words, “*The Sheik II*” (*Problem* 107). Lawrence riffed on *The Sheik* in “The Woman Who Rode Away” (1924) and *The Plumed Serpent* (1926) (see Frost, *Problem* 111-18), and borrows from “Hull’s narrative of female eroticism” (Frost, *Problem* 118) in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, drawing in particular on Diana’s sexual awakening (see also Hipsky 204-09 for a discussion of Lawrence, Hull and primitivism). Frost concludes “that ‘bad’ fictions

such as *The Sheik* underpin many of the most ostensibly ‘innovative’ modernist sexual representations” (“Romance of Cliche” 115). Ultimately, Frost argues for a paradox of novelty and familiarity intrinsic to both modernism and pleasure. She surmises that *The Sheik* was popular with readers because it was novel (the desert setting, explicit portrayal of women’s desire, an erotic hero) but also anti-novelty (a formulaic and clichéd genre, stereotyped, conventional) (“Romance of Cliche” 114).

### **Legacy**

As Turner points out, Hull’s novel “has stubbornly refused to pass into obscurity” (“Sheik Returns” 185). Reissued in paperback three times by the 1960s (Blake 67), selected as the first of Barbara Cartland’s ‘condensed’ Library of Romance titles in 1977, and reissued by Virago in 1996, *The Sheik* has reached a wide and varied audience since its original publication. Regis foregrounds *The Sheik* as influential for genre romance (117). Perhaps its greatest influence has been on subsequent sheikh romances, many of which take Hull’s novel as a source text (see Turner, “Sheik Returns” for imitations and parodies of *The Sheik*).[8] Following *The Sheik*’s success in the interwar years, Teo contends that desert and sheikh romances were not widely published until the “Orientalist harem historical romance” revived the Orientalist romance in the late 1970s (*Desert Passions* 143; see Burge, *Representing Difference* 30 for a similar trend in the UK in the 1980s and early 1990s). However, Burge identifies 300 sheikh and desert romances published by Mills & Boon in the UK from 1909 to 2009, with 79 of these published before 1980 (*Representing Difference* 29). All scholars have observed an exponential increase post-2000. Irreverently, Suleikha Snyder comments: “Neither rain nor snow nor 9/11 nor the Iraq war have killed this plot”; Holden’s interviewed editors and authors concur, noting an expected downturn did not occur (5). How to account for this? Jarmakani attributes the rise in the number of sheikh romances published after 9/11 to their contrast to political reality (*Imperialist* 4), maintaining that part of their appeal for readers is attributable to a wider cultural focus on the ‘difference’ of Muslims and Arab post-9/11 (*Imperialist* 7-8). Teo argues that the subgenre’s revival owes more to western domestic culture and the existing subgenre of sheikh romance than any direct relationship with the Middle East (*Desert Passions* 204, 212-13).

A number of scholars have considered the contemporary sheikh romance and several approaches are evident. Some trace the history of the sheikh genre, reading *The Sheik* as originator of the later desert and sheikh romance (Anderson; Bach; Bettinotti & Truel; Regis; Teo, “Orientalism”). This scholarship outlines persistent structures and motifs, such as “the plot of a western woman who reluctantly falls in love with an Arab sheikh” (Teo, “Orientalism” 241), abduction, the harem, slavery, the sensual east, an autocratic and sexually potent sheikh hero (Anderson 189). Others firmly situate sheikh romance within literary Orientalism (Bach; Holden; Teo, “Orientalism” and *Desert Passions*), or connect the genre to specific conflicts (e.g. the War on Terror, the Arab Spring) (Jarmakani, *Imperialist* and “Sheik”). Some studies focus on readers and authors; Holden interviewed editors and authors in her 2015 article, and Teo and Jarmakani both draw on online reader reviews and forums (Teo, *Desert Passions*; Jarmakani, *Imperialist*).

Scholars differ on the extent to which sheikh romance engages with contemporary discourse on the Middle East. Teo asserts that contemporary sheikh romances tend not to

dwell on geopolitical reality, suggesting that readers are interested in learning about the Middle East and its history and culture within familiar genre structures (*Desert Passions* 182-92), transforming “the tried and true titillations of Orientalist pornographic motifs into a new form of female-authored erotica for women” (*Desert Passions* 146). Holden concurs, writing that the authors she interviewed “consciously and deliberately struggle against the negative stereotypes of Arabs perpetrated by the media and other vehicles of popular culture” by “deploying some of the more positive – indeed, one might say exotically upbeat – stereotypes drawn from the long history of Orientalist fiction and film” (3).

Jarmakani takes a different approach, arguing that it is precisely *because* romance novels are engaged in a fantasy of the Middle East that they can “be more direct than other kinds of materials” (*Imperialist* xviii) and counter what the reader “thinks she already knows” about the Middle East (*Imperialist* 15). For Jarmakani, sheikh romance novels reflect wider perceptions of the Middle East through their engagement “with mainstream discourses of global feminism and with dominant narratives of neoliberal globalization” which imagine, through romantic fantasy, resolution between west and east (“Sheik” 995). Jarmakani states that “‘new’ contemporary US imperialism” is on display in sheikh romance through “technologies” of “security, freedom, and liberal multiculturalism” (*Imperialist* 24) concluding that sheikh romances “organize (and, in doing so, colonize) desire away from revolutionary possibilities and toward a reproduction of the dominant social registers of power” (*Imperialist* 88).[9] Teo is more magnanimous, proposing that the sheikh romance’s presentation of sheikh heroes as lovers rather than terrorists stands as a significant outlier in contemporary social and cultural attitudes towards Muslims and the Middle East (*Desert Passions* 295-305). Similarly, Flesch claims that Australian sheikh romances in particular showcase political and religious difference and insist on tolerance (218), and Holden says that sheikh romances present an “ideal of Arab-American reconciliation, albeit one in which the happy ending occurs according to western sensibilities” (3).

In what follows, we review critical work on the hero, the heroine, abduction and sexual violence, and the desert setting.

## **Hero**

**Key scholars:** Burge, Jarmakani, Taylor, Teo.

All scholars agree that the contemporary sheikh hero owes his articulation to Hull’s hero Ahmed and to his screen portrayal (Jarmakani, *Imperialist* 4; Regis 115, 119; Teo, *Desert Passions* 160), as well as to other hero-types, namely: the Byronic hero (Teo, *Desert Passions* 160), Gothic hero (Suwanban 6; Teo, *Desert Passions* 160), and Latin lover (Jarmakani, *Imperialist* 7; Lie; Teo, *Desert Passions* 204). Jarmakani observes a continuing association of the romance sheikh with T. E. Lawrence, the similar figure of Omar Sharif, and the *Arabian Nights* for readers of contemporary sheikh novels (*Imperialist* 148-49, 167-77) in a way that continually indicates “the whiteness of the hero underneath it all” (*Imperialist* 151).

Descriptions of the sheikh hero center on his physical appearance, autocratic behaviour, connection to the desert through clothing and animalism, and hybridity. Many of these aspects are traceable directly back to Hull’s Ahmed (Anderson 189). The sheikh hero is “tall and broad-shouldered” (Anderson 189), “physically imposing”, “ruggedly

handsome" (Burge, *Representing Difference* 80), "dark" (Teo, *Desert Passions* 160), "healthy" and "physically skilled" (Regis 120). He is "haughty, arrogant, dominating, authoritative, a law unto himself" (Regis 120; see also Flesch 213; Jarmakani, "Sheik" 998; Teo, *Desert Passions* 160). In short, he "possesses to the extreme the characteristics typical of alpha male heroes in twentieth-century popular romance novels" (Regis 120). He "wears a heavy cloak and white flowing robes" (Anderson 189) which "serve as exotic [and racial] markers while simultaneously operating as key signifiers of erotic sexuality" (Jarmakani, *Imperialist* 147; see also 150-51). Bach notes the sheikh hero is "almost without exception, described at some point in terms of a bird of prey" (29), or likened to "the predatory big cats – lions, tigers, panthers or leopards" (Flesch 213), conflating the "erotic and the animalistic" (Gargano 180-81). Jarmakani draws on Donna Haraway and Michel Foucault to argue that the sheikh's animalism connects him to terrorism and constructs him as a "monster *par excellence*" (*Imperialist* 71-72; see also "Sheik" 1007-11). The sheikh's ethnic and racial identity impacts on his gender. Jarmakani identifies a simultaneous characterising of the sheikh hero as hypermasculine and soft and feminine (*Imperialist* 169). Burge, on the other hand, posits that the association of the sheikh with certain aspects of the desert setting – its landscape, culture (especially the harem), and Orientalist assumptions about the animalism of Arab men – are deployed to bolster his hypermasculinity, while others – the perceived effeminacy of eastern clothing – fail to challenge his characterisation as supremely masculine (*Representing Difference* 80-84).

Discussion of the race of contemporary sheikh heroes follows similar lines to Hull's Ahmed (hybridity, clothing, association with the desert).[10] However, the emergence of heroes with Arab ethnic heritage in the 1970s (Burge, *Representing Difference* 31) and changing discourses of Arab/Muslim/Middle Eastern racial identity (Jarmakani, *Imperialist* 127-28) have further developed scholarly discussion. The sheikh's hybridity and distinction from other Arabs is key to his articulation, just as for Ahmed. This is achieved through "trope[s] of civilisation" (Jarmakani, *Imperialist* 144). Ahmed is meticulously clean, cultured (signalled by his French books and command of English), and, finally, is not really an Arab at all (at least not completely) (Bach 29-34; see also Jarmakani, *Imperialist* 144). This distinctiveness persists for modern sheikh heroes, who often have European heritage (Bach 36-37; Jarmakani, *Imperialist* 119) and who are described as different to 'bad Arabs' (to borrow Jack Shaheen's term) (Burge *Representing Difference* 108; see also Flesch 215-16), but also as distinct from European men, who appear "gallant [and] passionless" by contrast (Bach 18). The contemporary sheikh hero is rarely homogenous in his ethnic identity; he is "culturally, linguistically, educationally, or politically hybrid in some way" (Burge *Representing Difference* 105) – a "liminal, in-between [figure]" (Taylor 1034) who straddles "traditional and modern worlds" (Jarmakani, "Sheik" 995).[11] Jarmakani reads the sheikh hero alongside US "racial logics," arguing that "his characterization mimics the conflation and confusion of ethnic (Arab), religious (Muslim), and geographic (Middle Eastern) markers" ("Blade" 897).

Nevertheless, some shifts in the hero's representation are evident. The eroticisation of the contrasting skin colour between hero and heroine descends directly from *The Sheik* (Teo, "Orientalism" 246; see also Taylor 1043), yet such a contrast is less visible than it once was, especially on book covers. In earlier examples, heroes would often be shown with dark skin (Teo, "Orientalism" 250) wearing traditional Arab garb. Post-9/11, the hero is dissociated from such markers (Jarmakani, "Blade" 920; Burge, *Representing Difference*



106-07), appearing “abstractly Mediterranean” (Jarmakani, “Blade” 898). The erasure of ethnic and racial markers extends to the story; Snyder notes that the sheikh is “stripped of all true cultural markers — namely practicing Islam” to the extent that “the minority experience” is erased in favour of “a white, largely Christian, woman’s fantasy” (Snyder). Teo concurs, noting that “modern sheiks” (*Desert Passions* 237) are “Americanized and assimilated, indistinguishable in features – and sometimes in dress – from other types of heroes of category romance” (*Desert Passions* 238).

Scholars have argued that the modern sheikh’s articulation is about avoiding negative representations of Arab men: to “protect readers from too much reality” (Jarmakani, “Blade” 900) and “clearly distinguish... the sheikh-hero from ... the fanatically violent Middle Eastern terrorist” (Jarmakani, *Imperialist* xi). Jarmakani submits that markers of race are submerged and subordinated to ethnicity to sustain readers’ fantasies – although she observes that this is not always considered successful (*Imperialist* 130). Holden’s authors confirm that creating a western, non-Islamic hero was a strategy “for generating a fictive Arab world ... comfortable for American readers” (5). Others have suggested that it is about transformation, through which the hero shifts from “an original position of alien Islamic otherness” to become “de-Orientalized, westernized or Americanized, and incorporated into the western body politic” (Teo, *Desert Passions* 234). Presenting the sheikh as “an individual to be corrected” (Jarmakani, *Imperialist* 70) through a transformative civilising process allays “contemporary fears and anxieties about the unknowable, mystifying, and pathological figure of the (Arab/Muslim/sheikh) terrorist” (Jarmakani, “Sheik” 1013).

Scholars are split over the implications of this representation of the sheikh. Teo puts forward the sheikh hero as an interesting counterpoint to predominantly negative stereotyping of Arab characters (“Orientalism” 259), presenting examples of “good sheiks” (representatives of “contemporary (benevolent) imperialism” (Jarmakani, *Imperialist* 20)) in a wider popular culture environment concerned with “bad sheiks” (*Desert Passions*, 302). Burge similarly identifies the sheikh romance’s presentation of Arab men as romantic heroes as unique in contemporary western popular culture (*Representing Difference* 27). However, Jarmakani contends that sheikh romances ultimately uphold exceptionalist logic and “stereotypes are strengthened – not weakened – by the binary structure of negative and positive representation” (*Imperialist* 20). Teo further indicates that “the hybridity of the sheik ultimately guarantees his socialization and incorporation into western culture” (*Desert Passions* 235), resolving his “cultural schizophrenia” (*Desert Passions* 235-36) in a “distinct reversal of the resolution to Hull’s novel” (“Orientalism” 251) whereby the sheikh is “broken and domesticated” rather than the heroine (“Orientalism” 254). Burge similarly identifies “anxious hybridity” but proposes that while the specific hero and heroine in a sheikh romance use their hybridity to create a partnership – “sameness in hybridity” (*Representing Difference* 135) – this does not disrupt the “fundamental, overarching difference between east and west”, meaning “these sheikh romances are not all that different from the racist attitudes of Hull’s novel” (*Representing Difference* 136).

### **Abduction, sexual violence and the harem**

**Key scholars:** Burge, Haddad, Jarmakani, Kaler, Taylor, Teo.

Abduction is a persistent and, some allege, exclusive motif in contemporary sheikh romance (see Flesch, Kaler). In 1970s and 1980s harem historicals, abduction is “the most popular leitmotif” (Teo, *Desert Passions* 161). Burge notes that 70% of sheikh romances published between 2000-2009 in the UK *Modern Romance* series feature abduction or captivity (*Representing Difference* 138). The motif is a selling point; Emily Haddad highlights Harlequin’s active promotion of abduction in sheikh romance through book descriptions and blurbs (45). The contemporary articulation of abduction owes much to *The Sheik*; Anne K. Kaler and Flesch both use Hull’s novel to identify the motif. The conflation of abduction, rape, and violence in *The Sheik*, discussed above, imbues the motif in contemporary sheikh romance with latent sexual threat – while the threat of rape is still present, actual rapes are rare in contemporary sheikh romance (Anderson 192, Flesch 186; Kaler 96; Teo, *Desert Passions* 218-19).

Scholars agree that abduction remains a prominent trope, but diverge on the extent and intensity of the motif. Haddad argues that sheikh romances downplay abduction in response to the renewed reality of the kidnap of western women in the Middle East by replacing abducted western women with ethnically Arab characters, moving away from the Arab world as a setting, and minimising the role of abduction in the plot (56-60). Kaler submits that genre competence and the insertion of love into the motif (the heroine falling in love with her hero captor) is vital to protect readers “from identifying with any realistic aspects of the capture” (94). Burge agrees that recent sheikh novels have tried to distance themselves from the reality of kidnap but suggests instead that the motif has transformed into what she terms “romance abduction”: a non-political abduction carried out by the hero for the purposes of desire, not money, aiming to facilitate a marriage or sexual interaction between hero and heroine (*Representing Difference* 142-43; see also Kaler 87).

The abduction motif draws on Orientalist discourse; it is presented as endemic to the desert setting in which particular items and practices – harems, veiling, polygamy, bathing, purdah, jewellery – reinforce themes of bondage (Haddad 42; Kaler 89-92; Teo, *Desert Passions* 162-65). Burge claims that this association is how abduction becomes reworked as an eroticised cultural practice, or as protection or rescue (*Representing Difference* 143-70; see also Jarmakani, “Sheik” 1005). Connecting the motif to wider Orientalist discourse, Jarmakani argues captivity is particularly effective at outlining the good sheikh / bad Arabiastani dichotomy (*Imperialist* 68-69), while for Haddad, sheikh romance plays on fears of white slavery, offering a way for the heroine (and reader) “to sort out and come to terms with racially inspired fears of Arabs” (54).

Due to the prevalence of abduction as a motif, the harem remains a common trope in sheikh romance (Haddad 50; Jarmakani, *Imperialist* 17; Teo, *Desert Passions* 219). Drawing on longstanding Orientalist motifs (Taylor) and more recent association of the harem with Arab patriarchy and oppression (Jarmakani, “Blade” 918; *Imperialist* 146), the harem is presented almost exclusively in the context of polygamy and sexualised captivity (Burge, *Representing Difference* 145).[12] The harem is often used as a shorthand for gender relations – specifically the perceived backwardness of the sheikh’s country (see also Taylor 1041) – and bolsters the heteropatriarchal image of the sheikh hero (Burge, *Representing Difference* 81; see also Haddad 53). The harem also serves to occasionally demonstrate the western heroine’s misunderstandings about the modern Middle East as heroines are corrected in their assumptions about the harem (Teo, *Desert Passions* 220, 179). The harem is equally an indicator of the way white, western women are implicated in Orientalism.

Most contemporary sheikh romances present harems as historical “holding grounds for the silent masses of Arabiastani women” (Jarmakani, *Imperialist* 105), that now stand empty, “waiting for the white Anglo woman to enter” (Taylor 1040; see also Burge, *Representing Difference* 88; Teo, *Desert Passions* 240). The harem can thus “be read as a neo-imperialistic western female fantasy” through the western heroine’s domination of the harem at the expense of her Oriental sister (Teo, *Desert Passions* 220).

Abduction has a structural function in the plot as both a barrier (Regis 122) and as a device to facilitate the developing romantic relationship (Haddad 42). Haddad suggests that captivity also “precipitates an ideological shift,” dissipating “the heroine’s feminist dedication to the ideals of personal liberty” as “bondage gives way to bonding” (44). Where abduction is undertaken by the hero himself, it facilitates the relationship between hero and heroine (Haddad 42; Burge, *Representing Difference* 139), ‘transmogrifying’ it into marriage, thereby allowing heroines to celebrate enslavement as choice (Haddad 49-50), “even if marriage is functionally a continuation of captivity: literally, wedlock” (Haddad 50). Burge contends that transformative “romance abduction” is uniquely available to the western heroine, whose “relative liberty is ... defined in contrast to her eastern sister’s lack of freedom” (*Representing Difference* 176). Abduction thus acts as a metaphor for colonization as “it offers power to the [...] western heroine over [...] eastern women ...who ... must wait to be rescued by the western woman” (Burge, *Representing Difference* 139, 176).

### ***Desert setting***

**Key scholars:** Bach, Bettinotti & Truel, Burge, Dannenberg, Deal, Holden, Jarmakani, Teo.

Bettinotti and Truel, writing in 1997, note “[t]he desert ... is one of the most pervasive fabulae in the romance genre”, pinning its origin to *The Sheik* (184); this is “a space made exotic by Orientalist literature, historical myth, and Hollywood film” (Teo, *Desert Passions* 245). Yet, while “‘the desert’ and ‘the east’” remain “synonymous” (Anderson 181), “twenty-first century novels are ... no longer the desert romances of rolling dunes, oppressed women, and the threat of rape in goat-hair dunes”: “[t]his is the modern Middle East” (Teo, *Desert Passions* 240).

The relationship of the desert setting to reality has shifted over time. Contemporary “desert kingdoms are invariably fictional although explicitly named”, “vaguely located” (Burge, *Representing Difference* 54), “hovering anywhere between the Spanish Sahara and the Caspian Sea” (Anderson 180). Scholars have variously termed this space Arabiastan (Jarmakani, *Imperialist*); the Romance East (Burge, *Representing Difference*); and “Fakesheikhistan” (Solace Ames, cited in Snyder). These spaces share “common defining features” (Burge, *Representing Difference* 54) drawn from Orientalist imagery, literary and cinematic influences (Burge, “E. M. Hull” 329; Holden 10). Tropes persist from *The Sheik* – tents, a lack of civilisation, journeying (Bettinotti & Truel 188-89; Melman 96-98) – supplemented with key signifiers and props like sand, camels, cushions, oil burners, perfumes, food and drink which simultaneously signal exoticism and authenticity (Olivier Richon, cited in Bach 15; Harris, cited in Holden 7). In contrast to western individualism and heroines’ dysfunctional families (Diana is a prototype here), the desert setting

foregrounds “idealized Middle Eastern families and close-knit communities” (Teo, *Desert Passions* 240) where much desired family bonds are forged (Teo, “Orientalism” 256).

Scholars have observed the blurring of cultural specificity in contemporary sheikh romance; Jarmakani highlights the blending of Persian, Arab and Turkish influences (see introduction, *Imperialist*; see also Burge). The desert setting is “undifferentiated and homogeneous” (Teo, *Desert Passions* 252) as “the particularities of different countries merge into a single Arab world” (Holden 10). Teo labels this a “‘Disneyfication’ of Orientalism” (*Desert Passions* 251) in which specific geopolitics fade into the background. Burge, however, argues that sheikh romance exploits existing characteristics of the real Middle East, specifically the UAE, to emphasise the luxury and artifice of its imagined desert setting (*Representing Difference* 55-59; see also Teo, “Orientalism” 241-43). Burge identifies a shift in the geography of sheikh romances – from real colonial or ex-colonial locations in North Africa up to the 1980s, to fictionalised, tourist-friendly settings in the Arabian Peninsula in the 1980s and 1990s – that is indicative of “wider political changes in the west’s relation to these countries” (*Representing Difference* 56). Similarly, Jarmakani points to a specific US interest in the region, especially relations with Saudi Arabia, and states that this is evident in the settings of fictional sheikh romances (*Imperialist* 49-52).

Associating the desert with tropes of freedom and transformation (often attributed to “fate, destiny, kismet or mektoub” (Bach 35)) connects contemporary sheikh romance with *The Sheik* and late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century travel narratives in which “European women ... had found in the desert a space to be free from European conventions and sexual and social behaviour” (Teo, “Historicizing”; see Bach 20; Hipsky 196-97; Jarmakani, *Imperialist* 129-30). As Bach writes, “the allure of the desert lies in the opportunity it offers to escape from the trappings of civilisation” (19) and to transgress (Chow 79) in an “über-escape fantasy” (Jarmakani, *Imperialist* 133). Indeed, as Bach (21) and Burge (*Representing Difference* 174-75) note, in the sheikh romance the west is often presented as a space of relative lack of liberty, contrary to much discourse about the Middle East. Jarmakani explains that the desert functions as freedom in two ways; micropolitically, as “a space through which the dramatic trajectory of the heroine’s journey of self-exploration plays out”; and macropolitically, drawing on “the mythology of the frontier to serve as a space through which the imperialist gift of freedom can unfold” (*Imperialist* 93).

Deal draws on the work of Deleuze and Guattari to connect the desert’s association with freedom to “ideas surrounding female sexuality, power structures and control” (78). Deal suggests that the liminal desert in *The Sheik* echoes Diana’s own rootlessness and blurring of gendered public and private spheres to characterise “female sexuality ... as a taboo subject which could only be explored outside the striated spaces of contemporary twentieth-century Britain” (84, 89).[13] The presentation of the desert “as a space of specifically female sexual fantasies” (Teo, “Orientalism” 243) in contemporary sheikh romance is thus drawn directly from Hull’s novel, itself part of “the feminizing of a western imaginary realm of oriental eroticism” (Wintle 294). Part of this eroticism derives from the association of the hero with the desert. Dannenberg argues that, in *The Sheik*, Diana’s longing for the desert – what Hipsky terms “the “desert-cathexis” of her desire” (193) – can be reinterpreted later in the text, as “the heroine’s hidden longing for love” (Dannenberg 74).[14] The hero “becomes almost synonymous with the desert” (Dannenberg 84) which metaphorically represents him; this association persists in modern sheikh romance, where “the desert influences the personality of the hero” (Holden 8).

## **Heroine**

**Key scholars:** Bach, Burge, Jarmakani, Taylor, Teo.

Diana Mayo has been labelled the “prototypical desert romance heroine” (Bach 17) whose independence and outward rejection of submissive femininity remain visible in contemporary sheikh romance heroines (Bach 16-18; Teo, “Orientalism” 251, *Desert Passions* 154-60). Like Diana, heroines long to see the desert and undergo a feminisation process, but they are no longer required to give up their career and financial independence (Teo, “Orientalism” 252).

The desert settings of post-2000 sheikh romances offer a space in which western heroines can discover “true femininity” (Burge, *Representing Difference* 85-86), modelled on Orientalised images of sexualised eastern women, presented analogously to the taming of animals, and reinforced by the sheikh’s “ultimate masculinity” (Jarmakani, *Imperialist* 172; see also Bach 24-26). The feminising effect of the Orient also emphasises the western heroine’s privilege and individuality, contrasted with the oppression and erasure of the Arab woman (Bach 22-23; Jarmakani, *Imperialist* 103-04). Burge asserts that by adopting markers of eastern femininity – clothing, language, names – western heroines can perform a hybridity similar to the hero’s, thus generating “sameness in hybridity” (*Representing Difference* 122). Jarmakani underscores the authenticity of this performance in which “the white heroine is more authentically Arabiastani than the Arabiastani woman herself” (*Imperialist* 114). This is most clearly demonstrated through clothing; whereas wearing hijab is deemed oppressive for Arab women, its signification is transformed when worn tactically by the western heroine, for whom it affords particular freedoms (Jarmakani, *Imperialist* 103-04) – freedoms which are not available to Arab women. Indeed, via a conventional and longstanding Orientalist trope, the western heroine displaces Arab woman, who are “erased from their own space and stories and replaced instead with the white western heroine” (Teo, *Desert Passions* 223; see also Flesch 214; Taylor 1041).

It has been argued that the western heroine’s assimilation of Arab culture represents “an imperialist form of global feminism” (Jarmakani, “Sheik” 1001) or “female Orientalism” (to use Reina Lewis’ term) (Burge, *Representing Difference* 176; Jarmakani, *Imperialist* 80-115, “Sheik” 1001-04; Taylor 1034-35; Teo, “Orientalism” 253, 259-60); a way of “de-Orientalizing” sheikh heroes and removing undesirable aspects of the east from western culture (especially repression of women) (Teo, *Desert Passions* 232-33). The western heroines of sheikh romance often desire “to bring the feminist crusade to the Oriental world and liberate their unenlightened Muslim sisters” (Teo, *Desert Passions* 229). Jarmakani views this perceived liberation as a “gift” which “obscures both the ongoing state of indebtedness such a gift inscribes and the violence it deploys in its own deliverance” (*Imperialist* 81). She writes, “[i]n order to be free ... Arabiastani women must ‘turn White or disappear’”; “the fantasy of feminist liberation obliterates Arabiastani women in the name of saving them” (*Imperialist* 114).

## **Conclusion**

This review essay has indicated that there is a lively and active scholarly discourse around *The Sheik*, focused on articulations of gender, race and the postcolonial, and the

position of the novel in relation to other literary traditions. But what might be next for scholarship on *The Sheik*?

The contributions to this special issue exhibit some of the ways scholars are building on this body of criticism. Francesca Pierini and Jay Dixon's contributions consider the implications of Hull's text for discourses of European national identity and masculinity, expanding the scholarship outlined above on race and the sheikh hero. Pauline Suwanban proposes new historical influences for *The Sheik* and its gender relations, while Laura Vivanco's reflection intervenes in considerations of its contemporary reception and analogues. Elisabetta Girelli expands on critical work on the film adaptation, presenting a reading of the gaze. Jessica Taylor develops a new argument for queering *The Sheik*, expanding on research on Diana's boyish gender performativity. Amira Jarmakani builds on work on the legacy of *The Sheik* to explore the collision of romance, politics and fantasy in contemporary media narratives about the Middle East. Finally, Eric Selinger's contribution on teaching *The Sheik* show how critical interest in this text is being shared with a new generation of students. While it may be more than 100 years since *The Sheik* was published, its themes remain relevant today.

Furthermore, romance publishing and readership is changing. Authors are more likely to incorporate Arab women as heroines, and to challenge some of the stereotyping articulated in this review essay. At the same time, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of romance and chick lit novels authored by Arab and/or Muslim women. Not all of these novels are consciously 'writing back' to the sheikh romance tradition, but they are a sign that the publishing landscape is shifting.

Whatever shape future scholarship takes, we hope that this review essay will encourage wider reflection on what popular historical texts can tell us and, with reference to scholarship on the legacy of *The Sheik*, what we still need to learn or take into account when considering racism and Orientalism in the present-day. At a time when many in the western world are thinking deeply and differently about our histories and their meanings, we hope that this review essay will be able to play its small part.

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[1] For an overview of the development of the desert romance in the early twentieth century, see Teo, *Desert Passions* 68-86.

[2] See Clive Bloom 179-81 for a description of Hitchens' text.

[3] Martin Hipsky discusses Dell's bestseller *The Way of an Eagle* (1912) alongside *The Sheik* (170-75). For discussion of Hull's contemporaries see Anderson 180-84, Bach 11, Cadogan 127 and Melman 90-91; see Bloom 193-94 for more on Dell.

[4] Specific films cited by scholars include Cecil B. DeMille's *The Arab* (1915), Reginald Barker's *The Flame of the Desert* (1919), George Melford's *Love in the Desert* (1920) and Jacques Feyder's *L'Atlantide* (1921).

[5] Dannenberg writes: "her naming after the Roman goddess associated both with the active sport of hunting, but also with femininity, is probably not accidental" (72).

[6] Ardis lists "for example, endorsements of homoeroticism and/or socialist activism, radical reconceptualizations of both class relations and the relation between public and private spheres" (294).

[7] Dannenberg connects *The Sheik* directly to later postcolonial fiction that inverts and reworks the "paradigms of [this] earlier narrative tradition[...]" (71). Yousef Awad

observes a similar strategy of 'writing back' in Arab-American author Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* (2003).

[8] For example: Jane Porter's *The Sheikh's Disobedient Bride* (2005) (see Holden 12); Violet Winspear's *Blue Jasmine* (1969), "the book that marked the revival of the contemporary sheik romance novel" (Teo, *Desert Passions* 195) and treats *The Sheik* with "reverence" (Turner, "Sheik Returns" 192); and Trish Morey's *The Sheikh's Convenient Virgin* (2008) (Burge, *Representing Difference* 60).

[9] Jarmakani offers a reflection on the modern sheikh romance and contemporary discourse elsewhere in this special issue.

[10] Fabric is often prominently used to indicate identity or to perform cultural identity, as characters put on and take off veils, robes, suits, and silks (see Burge, *Representing Difference* 113-22).

[11] In a rare exploration of the legacy of *The Sheik* beyond Anglophone literature, Hayley Rabanal argues that 1940s Spanish *orientalismo rosa* – "an Orientalist subgenre of the ... Spanish romance novel" – borrowed from *The Sheik* to comment on ideas of "hybridity as constituting the Spanish race" (341).

[12] For analysis of the harem in 1970s and 1980s historical romance see Teo, *Desert Passions* 164-74 and Jarmakani, "Sheik" 997.

[13] Deal further connects Diana's transformation to gender, arguing, "Diana's desert trip is initially planned to last a month; the symbolic significance of the lunar cycle, associated with a woman's menstrual cycle and sexual maturation, echoes the sexual awakening Diana will experience" (87).

[14] Hipsky identifies the desert setting of *The Sheik* and Diana's obsessive, transcendent desire for it as a remnant of older romance modes, including the "spatiotemporal transcendence" of high Romanticism and Northrop Frye's romance tropes ("the journey into adventure, and a sentient natural environment") (Hipsky 193-94).

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