

Superwomen, Latte Dads and Feminist Alphas: Negotiations on Feminism in Contemporary Swedish Popular Romance Novels

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Abstract: During the 2010s, popular romance has emerged as a popular genre in Sweden. Popular romance is often criticized on account of its perceived gender conservatism. In Sweden – a country that prides itself on being at the forefront of progressive gender politics – the genre has however become promoted as feminist, and Sweden is represented as an especially beneficial context for the emergence of a (more) feminist popular romance. For this article I analyze a selection of Swedish contemporary romance novels, released between 2014-2019. Taking the feminist critique into account, I analyze how these novels negotiate genre conventions in an effort to produce (more) feminist love stories, and how these local variants of a global genre relate to the feminism of the Swedish context and the Swedish self-image. The novels, I argue, are permeated by a Swedish gender equality discourse; one that focuses on heterosexual couples who fulfill themselves equally in relation to both family and work life. The novels both challenge and uphold gendered inequalities and criticized romance tropes. They further produce different representations of Sweden, sometimes representing Sweden as only superficially equal and other times as a country where equality is already almost in place.

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Popular romance has long existed in Sweden and “romantic pulp” has accounted for a large part of the Swedish paperback market through the second half of the twentieth century (Hemmungs Wirtén). The genre has mostly consisted of translated Anglo-American novels. In recent years however, the term “romance” has come into use in Sweden as a label for romantic popular literature, and a Swedish popular romance genre has emerged, with a growing number of Swedish romance authors, novels and publishers and a growing public interest for and attention to the genre.

In Sweden as elsewhere, there is a longstanding feminist critique against popular romance that opposes the genre on account of its perceived gender conservatism. It is therefore striking that when popular romance is now gaining positive attention in Sweden, it is specifically promoted as feminist. The Swedish promotion of popular romance further invokes a self-image of Sweden as a country at the forefront of progressive gender and equality politics, an idea often referred to as “Swedish exceptionalism” (e.g. Gondouin; Martinsson et al).

In this article I analyze a selection of Swedish contemporary romance novels, released between 2014-2019. Taking the feminist critique into account, the overriding aim of the article is to analyze how these novels negotiate traditional genre conventions in an effort to produce (more) feminist love stories. More specifically, I analyze how the romantic story is shaped in relation to the feminism of the Swedish context and the Swedish feminist self-image.

I argue that the Swedish contemporary romance novels both produce and criticize Swedish exceptionalism. In some of the novels in my selection, Swedish society is represented as only superficially invested in feminism, while other novels represent it as a place where equality is almost already achieved. The analysis will focus on representations of gender and sexuality, and is structured in relation to descriptions of the heroine, the hero and their relationship. These are often in line with a Swedish gender equality discourse, where love is represented as the union of equal and self-fulfilling individuals (cf. Björklund). This romantic ideal of gender equality challenges common perceptions of popular romance as idealizations of masculine domination and female subordination. These contemporary romantic couples, however, also reproduce the relative inequality and the (white, middle-class) heteronormativity of the Swedish gender equality discourse.

My ambition is thus not to determine whether Swedish popular romance is “more feminist” than other romance literature, but rather to analyze what forms of feminism are pervasive in these local variants of a global genre, and how the Swedish context is represented in and informs the love story. With this study, I hope to contribute to the international field of popular romance studies and its growing interest in studying this global genre’s local variations. I place the study in relation to previous feminist cultural studies on popular romance, and further wish to contribute to feminist critical research on gender equality and Swedish exceptionalism by introducing Swedish popular romance as both a producer of exceptionalism and as a feminist critical voice.

Traditional Romance and Feminist Research and Critique

I refer to the feminist critique against popular romance as that almost “common-sensical” dismissal of romance novels as idealizations of passive and naïve heroines who submit themselves to the powers of superior and domineering men. This critique is actually quite complex, emanating as it does from generalizing brush-offs – connected to the historical derogatory view on popular romance – as well as from canonical feminist research and the conventions of the genre itself (e.g. Abrahamsson). In terms of genre conventions, the familiar feminist critique is perhaps best applied to what Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan refer to as the “Old Skool” romances of the late 1970s and 80s, where antagonism, brutal heroes, and much younger and inexperienced heroines were common (10-25).[1] Wendell and Tan argue that a “New Skool” romance, involving gentler heroes and more independent and experienced heroines, has gradually taken over the genre since the late 1980s, but that elements of the “Old Skool”-style romances remain (10-25).

Just like the genre is often associated with these “Old Skool” novels, the feminist critique against it often derives from the academic studies of it. The field of popular romance studies namely began in the late 1970s and early 1980s with, among others, the foundational works by Tania Modleski and Janice Radway.[2] Modleski’s and Radway’s studies can be placed within the field of feminist cultural studies, and both focused on the female romance readers and what desires and dissatisfactions drew them to the genre. While their methods differed, their conclusions concurred: both argued that while romance reading stems from women’s dissatisfaction with their relationship with men and their position in a patriarchal culture, the novels subsume resistance rather than encourage it.

Much like the romance genre has evolved in the last four decades, so has the academic study of it (e.g. Goris). However, these foundational works still arguably constitute the most influential and widespread feminist scholarly popular romance critique. Pamela Regis, for example, criticizes the way simplified understandings of the conclusions from these studies have “entered the public consciousness as descriptors of not just the romance novels that they studied—the ones written in English in the late 1970s and early 1980s—but as characteristics of the romance novel, period.” (“What Do Critics Owe the Romance?”).

In Sweden, the study of popular romance began around the same time as internationally, in the late 1980s, with, most influentially, Lisbeth Larsson’s dissertation on romantic serials in women’s magazines. The field has remained marginal, although an academic interest for popular romance might have emerged simultaneously with a growing public interest in the 2010s, when an introductory book to the genre was released (Nilson, *Kärlek, passion*), as well as a dissertation on the dismissal of romance reading (Abrahamsson). These studies mainly focus on translated romance fiction rather than domestic. The same can be said of Eva Hemmungs Wirtén’s dissertation, *Global Infatuation* from 1998; only here, it was specifically the process of translation that was of interest. Hemmungs Wirtén studied the case of Harlequin Enterprises and the “transediting” involved in adapting the North American novels for the Swedish market. She demonstrated that content of erotically charged violence, as well as, for example, colonial and racist elements, became toned down or removed in the translations to Swedish.

There is thus little previous research on contemporary Swedish popular romance. Exceptions to this are Maria Nilson's overarching discussions of Simona Ahrnstedt's *Only One* trilogy (*Kärlek, passion; "Kärlek i kyligt"*). Nilson argues that Nordic romance depicts "strong women, equal relationships, and a more nuanced hero" ("*Kärlek i kyligt*" 24)[3] to a higher degree than other romance fiction. As she points out, however, this argument should be treated with caution, and is mostly based on her general perceptions from being a long-time romance reader and scholar. When Jenny Björklund studies the success in Sweden of romance's neighboring genre, chick lit, in the early 2000s, she highlights the paradox that this genre – often accused of representing a "backlash" to feminism – became popular in what is often referred to as one of the most gender-equal countries in the world. Björklund makes comparisons to successful Anglo-American chick lit, and argues that the Swedish novels are transfused by what she refers to as a "Swedish gender equality discourse": one based in a two-parent household where both parties work outside of home and share responsibilities and freedoms equally between them. In line with Björklund's analysis of Swedish chick lit, I argue that a Swedish gender equality discourse informs also Swedish popular romance.

Material and Method

My empirical material consists of three trilogies, i.e. nine interrelated but standalone novels. These are *En enda*-trilogin [the *Only One* trilogy][4] by Simona Ahrnstedt, consisting of the novels *Bara en natt* [*Only One Night*], *Bara en hemlighet* [*Only One Secret*], and *Bara en risk* [*Only One Risk*]; the trilogy *Systrarna och kärleken* [the *Sisters and Love* trilogy] by Sofia Fritzson, consisting of *När drömmen slår in* [*When Dreams Come True*], *När äventyret väntar* [*When Adventure Awaits*], and *När framtiden ljusnar* [*When the Future Brightens*]; and the *Forsberga* series by Christina Schiller, consisting of *Hemligheter små* [*Little Secrets*], *Brutna små regler* [*Broken Little Rules*], and *Små stjärnor i natten* [*Little Stars in the Night*]. The latter two trilogies are published by Harlequin/HarperCollins Nordic, and the first trilogy by Forum.[5]

Only One is an urban trilogy set mostly in the nobility and financial elite of Stockholm (except for the last novel, where large parts of the courtship takes place in the wintery landscape of northernmost Sweden). The *Sisters and Love* trilogy and the *Forsberga* series can instead be described as rural novels, set in small towns, and their protagonists are small business owners or hold artistic professions. Each respective trilogy revolves around a group of siblings and friends, and each respective novel is centered on the courtship and happy ending of one particular couple.

The Swedish popular romances released in the 2010s have mostly been heterosexual contemporary love stories, often published as parts of trilogies, set in both rural and urban settings. I want to study the mainstream currents of these initial stages and the selection of my corpus reflects this. The novels demonstrate, in varying degrees, signs of diversity among supporting characters and storylines. This is arguably a progressive development from the striking lack of diversity that Björklund observed in the precursory Swedish chick lit genre. However, these romance novels are also arguably reproducing the norm by relegating non-normative characters and behaviors to the margins. While I believe

that a deepened analysis of supporting characters could be made, it is not within the scope of this article. For this study I am concentrating my analysis to the central protagonists.

In terms of method, I have combined survey and close reading. For an overarching comparison, I have made use of the model for genre analysis suggested by Regis with the eight central narrative elements that appear in different variations in romance novels: 1) Society Defined, 2) The Meeting, 3) The Barrier, 4) The Attraction, 5) The Declaration, 6) Point of Ritual Death, 7) The Recognition, and 8) The Betrothal (*Natural History* 22-45). Along with this, I have made general notes on how the central lovers are represented – individually and in relation to each other – in terms of, for example, age and class (defined loosely in terms of wealth, profession and level of education) and descriptions of appearance. Besides these general notes, gathered in a common comparative document, I have made elaborate notes on form and content and preliminary analysis of what is at stake in each respective novel. Before moving on to my study of the novels, I will present the context that I analyze the novels in relation to; that is, the Swedish promotion of popular romance and the Swedish feminist politics and self-image.

Promoting Swedish Popular Romance

The Swedish popular romance genre arguably saw the light of day in 2010 with the publication of the first novel in a historical trilogy by Simona Ahrnstedt. The interest in the genre slowly grew during this first part of the decade, only to erupt around 2016, when Nordic Harlequin[6] – established already in 1979 – released their first romance novel ever originally written in Swedish: a historical lesbian romance, called *Kärlek på öppet hav* [*Love at Open Seas*, Olofsdotter]. Following this, Nordic Harlequin has released a number of Swedish romance novels.[7] The established Swedish publishing house Forum in turn started a special romance imprint – Lovereads – in 2018, beginning with translations from English and then moving to original Swedish novels.[8] In addition to this, a growing number of romance writers are introduced by smaller publishing houses, self-publishing, and e- or audio-books.[9]

Popular romance in Sweden has been described as an erotic successor to the more chaste chick lit novels popular in the early 2000s (Nilson, *Kärlek, passion* 115-6).[10] While the genres are closely (inter)related, chick lit tends to focus on women's personal growth and maturation in relation to not only romance but also, for example, body- and self-image, work, friendship, and family (cf. Gill & Herdieckerhoff; Leffler). Common ways of describing "romance" in Sweden instead lean on the Romance Writers of America's often cited definition, that is, novels with a central love story and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending (RWA website).

Popular romance has also been discussed in relation to the popularity of Scandinavian crime fiction, and romance author Simona Ahrnstedt invokes the comparison, pointing out that no women die in popular romance (Lindehag). Ahrnstedt is herself an early and important public promoter of popular romance in Sweden. Through interviews, an initial blog and later an Instagram account, where Ahrnstedt always refers to herself as a feminist, she has promoted popular romance as a genre for, by and about strong women all through the 2010s.[11] In 2016, for example, Ahrnstedt describes romance as: "Lively,

beloved, and feminist novels where women support themselves, orgasm, stand on their own two feet and don't need a man's validation" ("Universums mest hånade genre").

This view of romance as a feminist genre is frequently repeated in its Swedish promotion. Romance author Christina Schiller, for example, describes it as "groundbreaking", arguing that few other genres can demonstrate "such diversity and acceptance" ("Romance?"). As witnessed in Ahrnstedt's quote, the focus on the feminist qualities of the genre often even overshadow its focus on love. For example, when Nora Roberts' longtime Swedish publisher is asked to explain Roberts' success in Sweden, her answer is: "Her women are always independent" (Nilson, *Kärlek, passion* 44). The Swedish audience's interest in romantic stories is explained by their interest in female independence.

In 2018, Ahrnstedt and two other representatives of the romance industry, along with a scholar in corporate finance and publishing, launched "Romanceakademin" [the Romance Academy], an initiative with the purpose of promoting popular romance in Sweden. In their press release, the Romance Academy focuses on feminism and the genre's depiction of women who get to be "strong, independent AND happy in their relationship". They further highlight the international interest in a popular romance that originates from Swedish society with its "daddy months, diversity, sexual liberation and advanced gender equality" (Romanceakademin). The Swedish promotion of popular romance is thus specifically organized around the concept of feminism. It is not only the genre that is described this way. Sweden is also described as feminist, or at least as an especially favorable environment for the fulfilling of the feminist elements of the genre.

Gender Equality and Swedish Exceptionalism

The view of Sweden as a feminist role model and one of the world's most progressive countries is often referred to as Swedish exceptionalism. Central to this idea, which circulates and is exported internationally but is also upheld in Sweden's self-image, is gender equality (e.g. Jezierska & Towns; Martinsson et al).

The emergence of a Swedish gender equality politics is often located in the 1960s and 70s, when a growing women's movement and the call for women's increased participation in work life inspired the Social Democratic government to launch a political program for gender equality. The gender equality politics established at this time had the double ambition of increasing women's participation in work life and men's participation in household and family life. The term "double emancipation" was used to signal the potential gains to both men and women. Along with reforms in, for example, daycare and regulated working hours for parents, a gender neutral parental leave insurance was introduced in 1974 to encourage men to go on "daddy leave" (Gottzén & Jonsson 11; Egeberg Holmgren 144).[12] The Nordic countries have been relatively successful in their efforts toward enabling the combination of work and family life, and the ambition for both men and women to participate in both spheres equally can be seen as distinctive to them (Aarseth 12-13). Sweden has featured prominently on a number of ranking lists measuring gender equality (Jezierska & Towns 58; Martinsson et al 3-4). Since 2014, the Swedish government refers to itself as the world's first feminist government, meaning gender

equality is to be prioritized in all decisions and distribution of resources (Government Offices of Sweden).

Sweden has thus long been invested in gender equality, but the iterations of its success story can be somewhat problematized. Katarzyna Jezierska and Ann Towns examine the practice of “nation branding” – the building and promotion of a country’s image – and the representation of Sweden as “a country at the forefront of the move towards a better future” (59). Gender equality, they argue, is a “pillar in [this] ‘Progressive Sweden’ brand” (56). Their analysis focuses on the official website *Sweden.se*, managed by the Swedish Institute, where visitors can learn facts about Swedish society. The site features gender equality prominently (59). Some of the first headings include “10 Swedish superwomen”, featuring “[a]n entrepreneur, a princess and the teen who might save the world”. In contrast, images of fathers with kids represent the headings “Family-friendly life the Swedish way” and “The Swedish recycling revolution”. The site further informs readers of the legislated “daddy months”, arguing that “[t]he relatively high number of fathers on ‘daddy leave’ has caused foreign journalists to wonder why there are so many male nannies in Sweden. Others call them ‘latte dads’” (Swedish Institute).[13]

Sweden can take pride in achievements in relation to gender equality, but to repeatedly present Sweden as exceptionally equal – or at least well on its way to be – can also hide inequalities and undermine feminist calls for further change (Jezierska & Towns 62; Martinsson et al 1). For example, while fathers going on daddy leave may be seen as a matter of course in Sweden, women still take out 70% of the parental leave (Försäkringskassan). The “latte dads” of the Swedish progressive brand can then hardly be described as all, or even as typical, Swedish men (cf. Jezierska & Towns; Gottzén & Jonsson 30).

Furthermore, the Swedish gender equality discourse is clearly centered around men and women, or rather, around fertile heterosexual couples in two-parent households. These “modern, Swedish women and men” are created in relation to what they are not: for example, “traditional” or “backwards”, too masculine or feminine, not masculine or feminine enough, or even “un-Swedish”. Scholars from postcolonial, queer, and critical race studies, among other fields, therefore argue that the Swedish gender equality discourse is built upon and produces norms concerning gender and sexuality, as well as, for example, race/ethnicity, class, and age. While the gender-equal couple becomes associated with a good and timely Swedish masculinity and femininity respectively, other people and practices risk being excluded, ignored or rejected (e.g. Dahl; Gottzén & Jonsson; Sandberg; Martinsson et al). While I want to emphasize the importance of the work that is and has been done for increasing gender equality, I also want to stress the need to critically examine the narratives of Swedish equality, what it is, and whom and what it entails.

Superwomen Seeking Work-Life Balance

As argued above, the promotion of Swedish popular romance is wrapped up in and made through an image of Sweden as one of the world’s most progressive countries. This image of Sweden is especially tied to questions of gender equality, as witnessed in, for

example, the nation branding of Sweden as home to “superwomen” and “latte dads”, the “doubly emancipated” heterosexual couple, equal in relation to both work and household. As will be discussed, the novels in my corpus do not always agree with this representation of Sweden. What they do seem to agree on, however, is that this version of gender equality is desirable, even necessary, for a happy romantic union to occur.

The interrelation between personal and professional fulfillment is central to the resolution of the novels in my corpus. In the urban *Only One* trilogy, all three heroines have higher education and hold challenging jobs and – tied up with their respective happy endings – two of them advance their careers through big promotions. In the rural *Forsberga* series, heroines Alexandra and Agnes express themselves through their artistic professions. In these novels it is the heroines’ feelings of fear and self-doubt that stand in the way of their respective union with the hero; they need to love themselves and let love in, and their climactic self-embrace is manifested through their art. In the rural *Sisters and Love* trilogy, the aimless heroine Fanny’s new career as a horse stable attendant may not be as prestigious as some of the other heroines’ promotions, but it is upheld as crucial to Fanny finding her own way. This self-fulfillment precedes the happy ending and makes her union with the hero one between two autonomous and independent individuals.

That the romance heroine is represented as successful in and devoted to her job is neither a new nor specifically Swedish trait (Hemmungs Wirtén 167-169). What is specific to the local context of these novels, however, is the explicitness with which the Swedish gender equality discourse is sometimes promoted. In the *Sisters and Love* trilogy, Anton and Melinda’s love story is premised on their respective professional ambitions: her dream of opening a Bed and Breakfast and his hope of a more challenging acting career. They need to fulfill themselves professionally in order to realize that there is more to life than work. In Anton’s climactic declaration of love, he visits Melinda at her now thriving hotel business – declaring that he is willing to commute from there to future acting jobs – arguing that he is confident that they can combine their respective careers with a life together. In *Only One Night*, the importance of gender equality and work-life balance to the achievement of a happy ending is explicitly connected to the Swedish context of the novel. The now pregnant, wealthy and newly promoted heroine Natalia is about to marry her even wealthier hero, and the novel practically closes with her declaration that the parental leave will be split equally between them. “How very crown princess couple-like of you” (486), her friend Åsa responds, referring to the headlines following the birth of the Swedish crown princess’ first child in 2012, announcing that she and her husband would do just that (e.g. Håkansson). While neither Natalia, the crown princess, or their respective husbands are dependent on paid parental leave, they are invested in and promote the gender equality politics associated with the Swedish welfare state and the Swedish nation brand.

An alignment with feminism is made also in those cases when the heroine makes choices that could be seen as contrary to the Swedish gender politics’ ambition to increase women’s participation in work life; namely, when she cuts back on work. In *Only One Secret*, Isobel is a medic doing humanitarian work in war zones. She is a legend within her field, being both exceptionally skilled and extraordinarily hard-working. By the end of the novel, Isobel decides to leave her job for a research position at the medical university in Stockholm. In *Little Stars in the Night*, the talented ballet dancer Venus is initially on a leave of absence from her employment at the Royal Swedish Opera. Venus has dedicated her life to fulfilling the dream of becoming a prima ballerina and is at the cusp of succeeding when

she suddenly loses her hearing. At the beginning of the novel Venus is recovering from a depression set on by the sudden deafness. By the end, she returns to the Royal Opera and dances the lead in the premiere performance of *Romeo and Juliet*, only to discover that her dreams have changed. Venus therefore leaves her professional ballet company to teach ballet to a group of teenage girls and launch a business with her own dress designs.

In both these novels, the heroines trade their demanding careers for a profession that affords them more private life and enables them to work closer to home. While these decisions tie in to the happy ending of the novels, they are not represented as stemming from the relationship with the hero. Rather, the romantic relationships bring to the surface a dissatisfaction that has been eating at the respective heroines for a while. When Liam asks Venus to accompany him on a working trip, Venus declares that she will not sacrifice her career for a man. By demonstrating that Venus is capable of privileging professional fulfillment over romantic love, and her own desires over those of the hero, she is also represented as acting in her own best interest when she steps back from her demanding career.[14] In the case of Isobel, her legendary status within her field is represented as coming from a self-destructive need to please others. While Isobel is represented as courageous, competent and genuinely caring, her self-sacrificing career is also seen as limiting to her and the novel insists on the need for balance between caring for others and for oneself. When Isobel leaves her job in the field for a research position, this is therefore represented as a “feminist refusal” to exist only for others, rather than as an “unfeminist” decision to give up your own career for love and family life.[15]

What these latter heroines share with their career-climbing sisters is the need to find a greater work-life balance. In her study of Swedish chick lit, Björklund observes that the Swedish heroines, more than their Anglo-American counterparts, need a relationship where both parties can invest in their careers and take equal responsibility for family and household (82). While this investment in gender equality is a shared trait with Swedish popular romance, the representation of it differs. In the examples given by Björklund, the heroine ventures out from the home to pursue challenges outside it. Her struggle for a greater balance between family and career is in ways a struggle against her partner, when she educates him into taking a greater load of the household responsibilities. In Swedish popular romance, the heroine instead runs the risk of being stuck in professional life. The Swedish romance heroines start off as (rather than become) “superwomen”, [16] and they are often independent at the brink of isolation. The romance heroes help the heroine to achieve a balance, opening her up to intimacy, dependency and pleasure. These novels are thereby in a sense reversing the traditional romance plot of passionate heroines and emotionally unavailable heroes.

One difference from the Swedish chick lit described by Björklund is that the popular romance novels depict a different stage in the life of the heroine. The romance heroines are in the phase of courtship. Rather than having to break free from a stifling family life, love allows them to break free from an all-consuming career. Another reason could be that of genre. If the end goal of the chick lit heroine is to gain autonomy, and perhaps inspire the reader to do the same, the promise of romance reading has rather been described as the joys of passivity (e.g. Snitow, Radway). And while the romance heroines of my selection are described as continuously driven and ambitious, the novels insist on making greater room for intimacy, pleasure, and relaxation. Yvonne Leffler describes chick lit as stories that “begin where the Cinderella story ends” (28). The chick lit heroine, Leffler argues, needs to

discern the difference between fantasy and realizable dreams, and rework herself and her life situation by her own powers. The Swedish romance heroines, to the contrary, have become too cynical – they need to learn to accept help and dependency, and they need to start believing in enchantment.

In this frequent representation of the heroine as emotionally stunted, I would argue, lies also an implicit critique against the gender politics of Swedish society: the heroines have become too independent and thereby too isolated. The solution to this problem – as echoed in the vision of the Romance Academy of a society in which women can be “strong, independent AND happy in their relationship” – becomes “more equality”. These novels depict a Swedish society in which women can be successful independent from a man. And while they are decidedly endorsing women’s self-fulfillment outside of the home, they are also representing the horrors of straying too far from it. The Swedish romance novels are then consistently promoting an ideal of gender equality, representing the problems with both too little and too much independence.

Relative Equality and Gendered Difference

Equality, then, seems to be both solution and precondition for a happy ending. One common pattern in traditional popular romance that has attracted feminist critique is that the hero is physically and socially superior to the heroine, being both bigger and stronger, older and richer. In my selection of Swedish romance novels, most couples are relatively equal in age, wealth, and social status. However, while the heroines are between the ages of 24-31, the heroes are between 25-36. And while most heroines are found in the lower and upper middle classes, the heroes are mostly upper middle-class, with a few more heroes in the upper classes than among the heroines. The critiqued trope of the superior hero is thus evened out in my corpus, and the couples seem rather equal in terms of age and wealth. However, while a “traditional” gender asymmetry is evened out to create more equal couplings, it is simultaneously re-inscribed through the ever so slight superiority of the hero.

This pattern in Swedish contemporary popular romance echoes an often-invoked observation made by Hanne Haavind in 1985. Haavind discusses how the social changes made in the Nordic countries in regards to gender equality have created new conditions for the relationship between women and men. In the mid-1980s, she argues, gendered power inequalities were seen as outdated and illegitimate. Statistics, however, demonstrate that gendered inequalities remain. Haavind turns to the heterosexual romantic relationship to explain this. This relationship is namely built on the parties confirming each other as *men* or *women*, and while male and female stereotypes are no longer regarded as attractive, neither are men and women who stray too far from them. Rather, Haavind argues, a “modern woman” can do anything she wants as long as she does it relatively subordinate to the men she relates to; that is, as long as she finds a partner who is slightly more successful. The shared project between modern women and men, Haavind argues, is to mask their relative inequality as motivated by personality; that is, that difference is the result of personal choice.

In my selection of Swedish romance novels, the individual couples seem rather equal, while a survey reading reveals the slight superiority of the heroes. In some cases, the individual couples somewhat challenge a traditionally gendered hierarchy: one heroine (Jennifer) is financially superior to her hero, another one (Isobel) is older than hers, and two of them (Agnes and Fanny) seem more sexually experienced. He is, however, always physically larger. Almost all heroes are explicitly described as tall and most of them are described as muscular and broad-shouldered. In those cases where the heroine is tall, he is always taller, and if she is described as heavier than the petite heroines of traditional romance, then he is muscular enough to handle her as though she were light-weight.

While Haavind positions the relative inequality in the Nordic countries in relation to heterosexual desire, Ulrika Dahl furthers the discussion by specifically addressing heteronormativity and ideals of gendered difference. Heterosexuality, Dahl argues, is at the center of the Swedish discourse on gender equality, as norm, goal, and problem: on the one hand, it is assumed that women and men always desire and choose to be with each other, while on the other hand, they seem unable to work and live together. Sexuality is at the heart of this, as central to pleasure, reproduction, and family-making. But (hetero)sexuality is also presented as troubling, as something that can become threatening to women through, for example, sexual violence and objectification. Gender equality politics, Dahl argues, is therefore about “reconstructing men and women and their relationship, without questioning or undermining the rules of heterosexual attraction” (49).

Central to this heterosexual attraction is the idea of gendered difference – something that the Swedish gender equality politics uphold while seeking to change perceptions of what men and women can do. Dahl exemplifies this with promotional images of women with tools next to men with vacuum cleaners. Women are represented as smaller with feminine attributes such as long hair and makeup, while men are presented with short hair, masculine attires and a larger physique. The images present clearly identifiable men and women, organize them in relation to each other, and uphold heteronormative dynamics for sexual attraction.

All couples in my selection of Swedish popular romance are heterosexual and their Happily Ever After is in eight out of nine cases manifested in marriage and/or children. By idealizing straight, fertile, monogamous, long-term commitment, and by presenting few alternatives, the novels invest in heteronormativity. But they further invest in a heteronormative gender equality discourse that simultaneously upholds and seeks to challenge ideas of gendered difference. While the novels somewhat even out gendered inequality, they also impose it by the slight superiority of the hero. And while they often counter perceptions of difference in what men and women can do, they also impose and eroticize gendered difference by the unwavering dominance, strength and superiority of the hero’s physique.

Latte Dads in an Already Equal Society

In their guide to romance novels, Wendell and Tan describe three types of romance heroes: alphas, betas, and rogues. The alpha hero is the one most often associated with popular romance: a strong, dominant, confident, but often isolated and tortured man (77).

David and Tom in the *Only One* trilogy are variations of this type of hero, being authoritative and physically domineering, letting no one but the heroine see their vulnerable side. As will be discussed, Alexander turns in to an alpha at the end of *Only One Secret*. For the larger part of the book, though, Alexander can be described as a rogue, a type of hero less commanding than the alphas. The charismatic Alexander is charming but guarded and has, up until meeting the morally superior heroine, cared only for his own pleasure.

While both Anton and Liam from the rural trilogies share some traits with this rogue type of hero, and while Marcus exhibits some alpha traits, I would describe all heroes of the rural trilogies of my selection as variations of the beta hero. The beta hero, Wendell and Tan explain, is “the buddy hero, the best friend” (79). He is a gentler, softer and nicer guy, most illustratively described as “every character ever played by Bill Pullman” (79). Liam in the *Forsberga* series may be a successful movie star with plenty of sexual experience, but he is also highly sensitive and communicative. Liam loves romcoms, hates horror films, and scares easily. In the *Sisters and Love* trilogy, Christopher is a responsible accountant and single dad who (like the proper Marcus in the *Forsberga* series) needs a heroine to help him loosen his collar, and Sebastian (very much like Daniel, the hero in the first novel in the *Forsberga* series) is the high school sweetheart and former best friend, who was left behind pining in the small home town while the heroine travelled the world.

The dominant, assertive and hypermasculinized alpha male in popular romance is often described as an example of hegemonic masculinity (e.g. Allan). Lucas Gottzén and Rickard Jonsson explain how the term hegemonic masculinity in Sweden is sometimes used to describe a masculinity seen as the opposite of the “Swedish gender-equal man”. The term has in fact been used for describing “problematic men” as “more masculine” (22). Hegemonic masculinity has thereby been associated with men from the working class and from ethnic minorities, and has been constructed as traditional and backwards; that is, as the “Other” of white, Swedish, “gender-equal”, middle-class masculinity. As Klara Goedecke observes, it might seem strange to use the adjective “gender-equal” for a group of men, since the word describes a relationship. In Sweden, however, the term *jämställd* is often used in this way about individuals and groups of men. Goedecke argues that this paradoxical use of the word connects gender equality to “specific persons who can then be distinguished from people who are deemed less gender-equal, less associated with the Swedish gender equality project” (17). Further, this use of the word becomes a way of fixing its meaning, “making it possible to be already equal, thus without need to adjust or answer to [feminist] demands” (17). It is this “modern gender-equal masculinity” – described by Gottzén and Jonsson as “somewhat” invested in gender equality, and as “less authoritarian, less violent and more emotional than other masculinities” (23) – that holds the hegemonic position and is granted access to institutional and ideological power in a Swedish gender equality discourse (22-23).

The beta heroes of my corpus correspond well to this, and their gentle and grounded qualities make them accessible as already equal life partners. These are the “latte dads” of Swedish popular romance: “gender-equal” middle-class men who are often represented as already responsible for family and household commitments. Considering the associations to “whiteness” in this hegemonic Swedish masculinity, it should be mentioned that the only protagonists of color in my selection can be found among these beta heroes: Christopher has a Greek father and Liam’s father is Jamaican. Both of them are

brought up in Sweden by a Swedish mother. Liam and Christopher both embody the modern, Swedish, gender-equal, middle-class masculinity norm, and the novels do not exclude them from it on account of either ancestry or color of skin. Rather, Christopher's and Liam's heroic masculinities are built upon their incorporation into an "exceptional Swedishness", as illustrated by how Christopher's mother, despite initial objections from his Greek dad, insisted on teaching Christopher to cook like his sisters and on "treating all the children equally" (*När äventyret väntar* 25).

The beta heroes of the rural trilogies can then be described as representing a hegemonic Swedish masculinity. They feature in novels where Swedish society is represented as (at least close to) equal, and problems such as sexism, racism, and homophobia rarely figure. Rather, I argue, these rural novels align themselves with what Jezierska and Towns describe as the enticing "Progressive Sweden" narrative "of a dynamic yet harmonious society of individuals sharing liberal values and moving towards a common and even better future" (60). Christopher's Greek ancestry is represented only as a flavorful spice (in the form of his parent's successful restaurant that specialize in fusions of Swedish and Greek cuisine). Liam, in turn, is made to feel welcome by everyone in Forsberga, and small-town Sweden is represented as a welcoming haven composed of a motley crew of original and open-hearted citizens. When inequalities are acknowledged (mostly in relation to the more diverse gallery of supporting characters) they are often represented as outdated remnants of a past that Sweden is thankfully moving further and further away from.

Feminist Alphas Among Sexist Men

When sexism occurs in the Swedish society of the *Forsberga* series, it highlights the anti-sexist qualities of the hero. In *Broken Little Rules*, Marcus is early on described as looking for a woman who can challenge him. The reader is introduced to Marcus when he is attending an upper-class party in Stockholm. Marcus is confronted with a sexist remark by another man who urges him to take advantage of a woman he perceives as easy. "I'm not in the habit of using people" (12), Marcus firmly answers back. And while this specific woman turns out to be less than entertaining company, Marcus is convinced that the women at the party are simply acting dumb, while in reality probably being far more intelligent than the men they're accompanying. Marcus thus differs from other men, and he also stands up to them, in both minor and more serious matters. Marcus corrects a waiter for presuming that he should taste the wine rather than his knowledgeable heroine, and he repeatedly corrects Bengt – the older upper-class villain of the novel – when he insists on referring to his female business partner as his secretary. As these examples demonstrate, sexist presumptions are made by a waiter, and overt sexism and intolerance are attached to older men and the upper class. Sexism is thereby signaled to be "outdated" (attached as it is to older men) but it also highlights the middle-classness of the gender-equal hero (cf. Sandberg; Gottzén & Jonsson; Goedecke). Most often Marcus is content with calmly correcting the sexist assumptions of men around him. Only when Bengt insults the heroine with sexual innuendo does Marcus let go of his "businesslike facade" and gives Bengt "a taste of the old Marcus, the one brought up in the concrete suburbs" (294).

It is worth noticing that a more physically domineering and protective masculinity – one that temporarily associates the cultured middle-class hero with his poorer upbringings – is used to describe Marcus specifically when overt sexism is directed towards his heroine. The alpha heroes that appear in my corpus, otherwise exclusively featured in the *Only One* trilogy, are also the heroes most invested in feminism. The authoritative venture capitalist David forcefully lashes out against homophobic behaviors. The military men, Tom and Mattias, take it upon themselves to track down and physically threaten sexist and racist internet trolls.

In this urban trilogy, one of the greatest obstacles the heroine is facing in life is sexism, and her challenge is to discern the difference between the good men and the bad. One of the barriers to the union of Tom and Ambra is in fact her distrust towards men and her inability to see through Tom's violently masculine exterior. In their first meeting, Ambra thinks of Tom as a macho cliché of rural masculinity. Tom is unknowingly wearing a t-shirt with a sexist print on it (one that his housekeeper's son has left behind) and Ambra is revolted by him. In their second meeting, Ambra has just been pushed from the sidewalk by two middle-aged costume-clad men who have refused to move out of their way. When Tom shows up and fails to notice her, she defiantly refuses to step out of the way and they crash in to each other. In both these initial meetings, Ambra is mistaking Tom for a sexist on account of other men's sexist behavior.[17] In a similar vein, David teasingly upsets Natalia in their first meeting by pretending that he is against gender quotas in the finance industry. Natalia instinctively reacts antagonistically only to realize that David employs fifty-one percent women, and that he, unlike most men she meets, is comfortable with and respectful towards women. In *Only One Risk*, Ambra's failure to recognize Tom's difference from other men comes to a climax when she mistakenly fears him. Ambra and Tom are trapped in his secluded house, arguing, while a snowstorm is raging outside. Tom has every right to be angry, but his overpowering physique scares her. Ambra escapes and ventures out into the snowstorm, crashes her scooter and is left unconscious and half frozen to death, before Tom finds her, saves her and nurtures her back to health.

In their early and seminal work on popular romance, Modleski and Radway argued that the many female romance readers are attracted to the genre in part due to their fear and rage towards men. They argued that the initial bad behavior of the hero and his harsh treatment of the heroine in much traditional popular romance provided an outlet for these feelings of discontent, only to restore the female readers' faith in heterosexuality through his transformation into a nurturing and caring romantic partner. In these urban contemporary Swedish romance novels, the fear and rage that readers may feel towards men is indeed provided with an outlet. Bad behavior is, however, not attached to the hero but to other men. In the *Only One* trilogy, the older upper-class villain Gustaf is described as keeping up the appearance of being in favor of equality – “anything else would be media suicide” (*natt* 60) – while in reality being fiercely sexist and racist. The anonymous internet hater Oliver, Ambra's colleague at the newspaper, is acting as a model example of a “latte dad” when sharing equal custody of his baby boy. In fact, at Ambra's workplace “all men were feminists these days, at least officially, they wouldn't survive otherwise” (*risk* 317). In contrast to the rural trilogies, Swedish society in these novels is described as only superficially equal, while sexism lurks among men who are outwardly presenting themselves as feminist. These Swedish contemporary alpha heroes, then, do not need the heroine to bring to the surface those caring qualities simmering in the alpha heroes of the

past – they need the heroine to recognize that they differ from other men by already having them. It is not the hero's hidden softness that needs to be brought to light, but the “actual feminists” hidden among the fake ones in Swedish society.

Catherine Roach discusses the happy ending in popular romance as a female-centered fantasy of the end of patriarchy. Romance reading and writing, she argues, should be understood as a communal reparational practice, where women find strength and support in “the imaginative play of repairing the alpha male and of restoring gender relations” (179). The fantasy of the happy ending is then that patriarchy, through the reformed alpha hero, will end. While the alpha heroes of the Swedish romance novels are already feminist, their function in a reparational fantasy seems to correlate to that suggested by Roach, namely to challenge, but simultaneously uphold, a patriarchal system. While the alpha remains an alpha and his powers within a patriarchal system remain intact, the system's power over the heroine is diminished since she has the powers of the alpha hero to serve and protect her (166-188).

As mentioned, both David and Tom act out forcefully against all types of injustice, using their dominant physique to overpower their opponents. When their heroines are being bullied by racist and sexist online haters, the military man Tom and his friend Mattias make illicit use of their professional access to hacking expertise, as well as their own expertise in physical combat, to hunt down and physically threaten the anonymous haters into silence. Tom's heroine Ambra is thereby free to continue her work of preventing social injustice through journalism. Similarly, when the courageous field-medical Isobel is abducted, Alexander organizes and partakes in her rescue. The charismatic rogue thereby proves himself as morally high-standing, but also as physically able and useful. Again, his dominant physicality is highlighted and represented as a good and deserving masculinity when he saves the life of the woman he loves. While both Isobel and Ambra are in a sense represented as the “true heroes”, they are dependent on their physically and financially superior heroes to defend their right to practice their heroic work. While the alpha heroes of the *Only One* trilogy are self-proclaimed feminists who fiercely protect the rights of women and of their heroines, their use of masculine violence and domination to protect women from masculine violence and domination creates a rather traditional gender asymmetry where men are still masters and commanders of the lives of “women and children”. [18]

Conclusion

I have argued that the mainstream Swedish contemporary popular romance of the 2010s emanates from and is permeated by a Swedish gender equality discourse. The romance novels of my selection even out the power asymmetries and stereotypical representations of gendered difference often criticized in traditional popular romance, and the happy ending is represented as an equal union of two autonomous and self-fulfilling parties. The novels do, however, invest in the relative gender equality distinctive of the Swedish and Nordic contexts, and uphold heteronormativity and gendered difference through eroticizing the dominance, strength and virility of the hero's physique.

While all novels align themselves with the ideals of gender equality, their representations of Swedish society differ: gender equality is sometimes represented as almost achieved, while these ideals are, at other times, represented as mere window-dressing, a mandatory lip service that covers deep seated sexism, violence, and injustice. These different representations of Swedish society seem to call for different types of romance heroes. By and large, the rural trilogies present beta heroes in a Swedish society that is represented as rather harmonious and equal, while the urban trilogy presents fiercely feminist alpha heroes in a Swedish society represented as only superficially equal. Tellingly, the beta hero at times becomes an alpha when confronted with overt sexism.

The masculinity of the beta heroes can be described as a hegemonic form of Swedish masculinity, the “latte dad”, associated with whiteness, straightness and middle-classness. In these novels, beta heroes who digress from the white, middle-class norm become incorporated into it, thereby expanding the norm, but also arguably upholding Swedish exceptionalism. When Sweden is represented as a progressive, dynamic, yet harmonious society, equal romantic unions are represented as already possible; the heroine needs simply to let go of her excessive autonomy and trust the beta hero.

In a sexist society on the other hand, feminist alpha heroes seem needed, and masculine violence and domination is used to counter masculine violence and domination. The alpha hero in these Swedish romance novels differs from that described in previous feminist research by being decidedly feminist from the start. These heroes do not need transformation, but the jaded heroines need to realize that they differ from other men. These alpha heroes do, however, seem to hold the same function as that previously argued in feminist research, namely to simultaneously challenge and uphold a patriarchal order.

While the Swedish heroines are represented as continuously driven and ambitious, the happy endings of the Swedish romance novels do promise relaxation. The heroines' previous busy life is gradually transformed into a greater work-life balance and (unlike the heroines of Swedish chick lit) they are somewhat released from the pressures of autonomy, independence, and of fighting every battle alone. This is achieved by uniting with the hero in monogamous, long-term commitment – often manifested in marriage and children – and the Swedish gender equality model is presented as a solution to an otherwise isolated and unbalanced life. The novels present few alternatives to heterosexual coupledness, but neither do they present the option of settling for anything less than an “already equal” or even forcefully feminist hero.

[1] See also, for example, Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdieckerhoff's description of the basic plot of “traditional” popular romances.

[2] See also, for example, Snitow.

[3] All translations from Swedish to English in this article are made by me. This includes titles and quotes from both primary and secondary sources.

[4] Ahrnstedt's *Only One* trilogy has been translated to English with the title *High Stakes*. I work with the original Swedish versions of the novels. I work consistently in relation to all the novels of my corpus, meaning I make translations of titles as well as content myself, keeping the translations as literal as possible.

[5] I have worked with the paperback issues of the *Only One* trilogy, published by Månipocket in agreement with Forum.

[6] In 2014, Harlequin became a part of HarperCollins Publishers and in 2015 the Nordic branch changed its name to HarperCollins Nordic AB. The publisher's name Harlequin is, however, still in use (HarperCollins Nordic).

[7] Between 2016 and 2020, HarperCollins Nordic released around twenty original Swedish romance novels, including four contemporary trilogies.

[8] In 2019, Forum and Lovereads became a part of Bokförlaget Ester Bonnier. An example of Swedish romance published by Lovereads is the urban contemporary trilogy *Svärdh & Partners* by Heléne Holmström (to be completed in 2021).

[9] For example, Veronika Almer and Sara Dalengren, and publishers such as Lavender Lit.

[10] Most contemporary Swedish popular romance contains explicit sex scenes. This interest in romantic erotica can also be related to the success of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy, which dominated the Swedish market for literary fiction from 2012 to 2013 (Abrahamsson 28).

[11] Ahrnstedt's Instagram refers to her as: "Writer, teenage mom and trans-allied feminist" (Ahrnstedt, Instagram).

[12] Today, parents are entitled to 480 days of parental insurance and, since 2016, 90 days are reserved for each parent (SCB).

[13] The term is the male equivalent to "latte mom" and refers to urban dads on parental leave hanging out daytime at cafés.

[14] The insistence on free choice could be understood in relation to the concept of "postfeminism" (e.g. Gill & Herdieckerhoff). An analysis of Swedish popular romance in relation to a postfeminist field of study is, however, not within the scope of this article.

[15] In the end, however, the novel does not seem completely comfortable with letting Isobel choose herself over others. When she informs her boss of her career change, she responds: "Knowing you, you're gonna make a bigger difference for the world that way" (506).

[16] My use of this term is inspired by the highly accomplished "Swedish superwomen" featured on *Sweden.se*. In the 1980s, the term "superwomen" was also used by Margaretha Fahlgren to describe the heroines of popular novels by Shirley Conran and Jackie Collins. These heroines actively chose their lives and became successful in all spheres by adopting what she described as a male pattern of behavior. Fahlgren argued that the romantic novels of the 1980s failed to problematize the heroines' inner conflict between active and passive elements. In the contemporary Swedish romance novels, however, such problematization is prominent, and the heroine's success depends on her ability to find a balance between active and passive elements, between remaining in control and letting go.

[17] The housekeeper's son and the middle-aged costume-wearers might again signal that these "other men" are representing an "other" masculinity through, as in this case, class and age. It should be noted, however, that the *Only One* trilogy argues that sexism exists in all parts of the world and in all parts of Swedish society. While the representation of the hero is not especially diverse, the representation of sexist villains is, and it includes men of most ages, classes, colors, occupations and locations.

[18] The military alpha hero (and the role of Alexander's military training in his transformation from a rogue to an alpha) could be further analyzed in relation to issues of patriotism, masculinity and warfare. See, for example, Kamblé.

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