

REVIEW ESSAY

## Sheikhs and Shahrazad

### Transnational Feminist Methods for Reading Diasporic and Popular Literatures of the Middle East

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***Anxiety of Erasure: Trauma, Authorship, and the Diaspora in Arab Women's Writing***

Hanadi Al-Samman

Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2015

294 pages. ISBN 9780815634027

***An Imperialist Love Story: Desert Romances and the War on Terror***

Amira Jarmakani

New York: New York University Press, 2015

267 pages. ISBN 9781479820863

Hanadi Al-Samman's *Anxiety of Erasure: Trauma, Authorship, and the Diaspora in Arab Women's Writing* (2015) and Amira Jarmakani's *An Imperialist Love Story: Desert Romances and the War on Terror* (2015) share an analytic investment in gender as an axis of subject formation in transnational literatures. Al-Samman studies the work of Arab women writers in the diaspora to understand how women navigate authorship in patriarchal contexts and how the writers' social position as diasporic women informs their literary production. For Jarmakani, the American desert romance novel, marked by the use of the desert and the sheikh as tropes, models imperial constructions of gender and sexuality that not only produce heteronormative subjects but echo and justify the logic of the United States' war on terror. *An Imperialist Love Story* looks to the representation of race, gender, and sexuality in desert romances as sites for the production of subjects aligned with the war on terror.

Al-Samman's *Anxiety of Erasure* traces two common references in Arab women's diasporic literature: Shahrazad, the storyteller of *The Thousand and One Nights* and the maw'udah, the buried female infant. Through an exploration of six authors (Ghada Samman, Hanan al-Shaykh, Hamida Na'na', Hoda Barakat, Salwa al-Neimim, and Samar Yazbek) and over a dozen novels, she suggests Arab women writers have developed a poetics of presence that maintains mobility in the face of the traumas of displacement and literary erasure. She uses trauma theory in her reading practice and analyzes how writers move beyond oral traditions to articulate transnational, revolutionary subjectivities that challenge patriarchal constructions of Arab nationalism, particularly in Syria and Lebanon.

The first and second chapters develop Al-Samman's theoretical and methodological frameworks for selecting the texts and elaborate the keywords *diaspora* and *trauma*. Al-Samman positions the diaspora and the many ways one might become diasporic as sites of trauma minority authors must rewrite to recover (23–24). Here recovery denotes both the figurative act of connecting to a lost homeland and the literal act of healing from traumatic wounds. Al-Samman contends that Arab women authors' "rhizomatic belongings . . . are manifested in the constant shuffling between their diasporic sites and their homelands as well as in the insistence of the majority of them on using the Arabic language as their medium of literary expression" (37). Writing in Arabic thus serves as one way that Al-Samman selects her subjects as well as one strategy that her writers employ.

For Al-Samman, the presence of Shahrazad and the maw'udah in Arab women's writing evidences the writers' anxieties about being erased from Arab literature. Arab women writers use those tropes to reflect on their dual erasure and to write their presence back into the literature and the nation. Chapter 2 details the origins of the maw'udah trope and establishes it as a metaphor for Arab women's literary and political suffocation as subjects of often sexist nationalist projects and as subjects of the diaspora. Al-Samman links Arab women's experiences to trauma and cites their repetition of the tropes as the means by which those writers transform "individual traumatic experiences of burial . . . honor killing . . . sexual abuse . . . and bodily harm [into] collective projects of resurrection and survival not just for the characters involved, but rather for their readers and the whole Arab nation" (59). In this way, Al-Samman sites trauma as a part of a collective history or memory. Al-Samman's remaining chapters deal with specific diasporic Arab women authors and their texts. Some chapters are comparative within an author's archive and some are comparative across authors.

Jarmakani's *Imperialist Love Story* is a rich exploration of the fantasies and desires that simultaneously undergird romance novels and the war on terror. Though at the outset an unlikely coupling, the genre of the desert romance novel increased in popularity after 9/11 and employs several ideological tropes that sustain US exceptionalism and thereby authorize its continued imperial efforts. Surveying

over forty contemporary desert romances published by popular trade presses like Harlequin, Jarmakani isolates three technologies of imperialism: security, freedom, and liberal multiculturalism and locates the desert romance as an ideal site for investigating how each technology creates and enables subjects who willingly “submit to power through their own desire for subjugation” (3). Jarmakani names the geographic terrain in which desert romances take place “Arabiastan” to reflect how the war on terror produces Middle Eastern and Arab nations as a singular, torrid, and dangerous desert (11).

Jarmakani’s first and third chapters offer an exciting analysis of a significantly understudied figure in the war on terror — namely, the Arabiastani ruler who has many values aligned with the West and attempts, through relationships with the West, to progress his country into modernity. This figure is embodied in the sheikh who corresponds to the technologies of security and liberal multiculturalism and thus functions as a counterpoint to the terrorist. The threat of terror produces fear and enables a state of exception and the prioritization of security by the sheikh, who becomes a political ally of the United States, and makes security sexy for consumers of the novel (65). Security is then not only under constant threat from terrorists and made necessary in the war on terror but is desirable through the figure of the sheikh. Chapter 3 details further the sheikh’s racialization and the means by which his desirability is enabled — both processes occur within the frame of liberal multiculturalism. The threat of miscegenation that haunts both historical and contemporary models of the genre is now quieted through the sheikh’s proximity to whiteness, evidenced in his liberal values and investments in a neoliberal global economy. Historically, this threat was mitigated by revealing the character as mixed race. Jarmakani then shifts to the visual rhetoric of the sheikh, and the means by which his body and adornment are raced and gendered, with particular attention to the sheikh’s robes and the fantasies that surround them (147–51).

Jarmakani’s second chapter focuses on the heroine in romance novels whose journey to love and acceptance reworks the imperial technology of freedom. Freedom is a liberal formation of love (81): When the heroine practices her freedom within the novel — a faintly feminist freedom of choice and the freedom from judgment or guilt around that choice (87) — she chooses love and love helps reform the sheikh on the individual level and spills over to benefit the Arabiastani women on the community level. In this chapter Jarmakani also visits the geographic location of the desert as a site for freedom and lovemaking. The desert is the scene in which the heroine submits to love and to freedom as a kind of love. In the final chapter Jarmakani argues that the narrative arc of such novels, wherein characters seek and achieve wholeness through heteronormative coupling, offers a plot for how subjects under empire come to desire subjugation.

The advantages of Al-Samman’s study are her adaptations of trauma theory for transnational feminist methodology. In this regard, the introductory chapters

are more productive, while the latter chapters function as analytic examples. Indeed, the text could have developed a more robust analytic frame in this regard, rather than the sometimes mechanical analysis in each chapter. The study, at the same time, often struggles to maintain a consistent engagement with its two central tropes. For example, in chapter 3, "Mosaic Autobiography," Al-Samman writes on Hanan al-Shayk's *Locust and the Bird* and mentions Shahrazad in a singular sentence. If Al-Samman is committed to "locating the dilemma of Arab female authorship in the anxiety generated by the double-jeopardy of Shahrazad's orality and the wa'd trauma of erasure," then surely these metaphors must be clearly articulated and analyzed in each instance (14). Rather, the text's focus is on recovery and exultation, and the tropes sometimes function as loose gathering tools for the literatures discussed.

Jarmakani's framework is rich with analytic tools for considering transnational subject formation in imperial and neoliberal global frames. The positioning of security, freedom, and multiculturalism as technologies of empire enables us to think more concretely about the transnational ramifications of US national discourses. Particularly, in the last chapter her analysis of the heteronormative love story as a metaphor for imperial conquest is a stellar example of how feminist theory can successfully employ queer of color critique on a transnational scale. Jarmakani's analysis of how sheikhs collaborate with the West to affect their Arabiastani homelands can direct us toward a more rigorous critique of Middle Eastern politics that collude with imperialism. *An Imperialist Love Story* could benefit from a more consistent engagement with the metaphor of radiation that appears periodically within the text, as it sometimes distracts from other central arguments. When applied, the metaphor was productive and provocative, especially with regard to the impact of the war on terror on the Middle East.

Each text participates in two kinds of transnational feminist analysis: in *Anxiety* transnational itself is a subject position; in *An Imperialist Love Story* the transnational more accurately describes a series of relationships that create particular subjectivities. Both investigate femininity in some capacity, though Jarmakani's chapters on sheikhs attend more to the construction of masculinity. Meanwhile, Al-Samman studies how tropes around Arab femininity are visited and revised in Arab women's writing. Each text situates close readings within discourses of trauma and imperialism respectively. Both offer new theories for thinking transnational cultural texts, and both offer compelling examples of these analyses for students and scholars of transnational feminist theory.

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