

The desert-governess romance: Regency England meets exotic Arabia

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Abstract. In this article we discuss how two types of popular romances – the desert romance and the governess romance – have blended into what we refer to as the desert-governess romance. In the world of romance, the governess and the sheikh may be an odd couple but they do make good bedfellows. Etymologically speaking, the governess (“A woman who holds or exercises authority” (OED)) is the perfect love match for the tribal governor who rules with steely resolve. In this paper we direct our attention to genre blending in order to explore the binary of captivity and escape. We look at a number of texts identified as archetypical desert-governess romances. What emerges from this analysis is that the initially disparate genres of the governess romance and the desert romance share surprising commonalities, not least with regard to the dual forms of escape offered by the fusion of the historical backdrop (typically Regency) and the geographical space of the desert.

1. Introduction

One of the defining features of the popular romance novel in the twenty-first century has been that of transformation. Though the genre might be, as Ramsdell has noted, “more on the literary radar than ever” (3), the romance novel has adapted to meet the demands of an ever-evolving marketplace and readership. Alongside the demise of the traditional “sweet romance” which is increasingly being supplanted by a “racier, more adventurous” form, Ramsdell points explicitly to the fact that romance subgenres are no longer clear cut as “the lines between the various fiction genres and subgenres continue to blur, blend, and change” (3). At the same time that we see this characteristic state of flux in the popular romance novel, current scholarship habitually remarks upon the continued requirement of the form to live up to “certain pre-existing expectations about [...] basic character types and plot elements” (Murphy 5) by “fulfil[ling] a series of obligations” (Schmidt 851). Percec goes so far as to suggest that the very survival of the popular romance is grounded on “the strictness with which authors and publishers (and readers) follow a given set of criteria” (6).

Romance readers can be said to make sense of, and “take pleasure in”, the novels they read through understanding the texts “at once within and against the traditions and possibilities of that system” (Frantz and Selinger 6-7).

This paper is concerned with the dialogue between genres and how they overlap, or blend. Here we investigate the blending together of two popular styles of romance novel – the desert (or sheikh) romance and the governess novel – which we refer to as the desert-governess romance. The impulse of the romance novel to pay homage to various genre conventions should be understood against the competing drive for change that Ramsdell notes. In fact, the significance of the blending of romance subgenres has been observed in the same line of scholarship which also notes its reliance on tradition; romance novels “are not always chastely faithful to a *single* genre” with “[c]ross-genre work [fulfilling] demands of two markets at once” (Schmidt 851). Furthermore, Percec points explicitly to the paradox in which the romance novel requires genre conventions, but continues to be relevant because hybridization, she says, allows for novel narrative spaces to emerge (8-9).

In this article we use the desert-governess blend as one example of such an innovative couple but they do make good bedfellows. Etymologically speaking, the governess (“A woman who holds or exercises authority” (*OED*)) is the perfect match for the tribal governor who rules with steely resolve. Not surprisingly the reciprocal attraction that romance readers expect to find in characters in this blended genre centres around their need for instruction; the sheikh character seeks an Englishwoman to bestow English formal education on his children, whereas the governess heroine, in turn, becomes a student of love in the arms of the “strong, romantic [...] lady-killer” (*OED*) sheikh.

The motivation for examining the intersections between the two sub-genres that we have selected is based on an observation that although the desert romance and the governess romance have emerged as two quite separate forms with their own sets of rules and conventions, there have been, historically speaking, some interesting confluences between the two which have seen governesses venture into the desert, and sheikhs seeking educating. Though there are a vast number of both sheikh romances and governess romances, those novels that contain elements of both genres are far less common, providing us with a manageable number of representative novels.

In what follows, we first present a brief background to the two subgenres, and their points of confluence. We then outline the concept of genre hybridity, or genre blending, which

constitutes the theoretical underpinnings of this paper. The analysis that follows focuses on four of what we identify as archetypical desert-governess romances: Marguerite Kaye's *The Governess and the Sheikh* (2011), Laura Martin's *Governess to the Sheikh* (2016), Lynne Graham's *His Queen by Desert Decree* (2017), and Kate Hewitt's *Desert Prince's Stolen Bride* (2018). The analysis is organised around thematic concerns and explores paratextual elements, setting, characterisation, and plot conventions. What emerges from this analysis is that the seemingly disparate genres of the governess novel and the desert romance share a surprising commonality, and that the governess and the sheikh are not actually worlds apart. In the desert-governess novel we find that opposites do not necessarily attract, but that hero and heroine meet their match.

2. A background to the subgenre: The sheikh and the governess

The desert romance had its heyday in the 1920s with the publication of E.M. Hull's bestselling *The Sheik* (1919) and its 1921 film adaptation starring screen icon Rudolph Valentino (Melman 46). Today, more than a century after its initial publication, Hull's "ur-romance" (Regis 116) needs little by way of introduction, given the copious scholarly attention that it has received over the last decades.¹ Most recently, *The Sheik's* centenary was commemorated by way of a special issue in the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* which brought together scholarly reflections and research on the novel "taking stock of its continuing, and sometimes problematic, legacy for popular romance" (Burge 1). Any discussion of the desert romance genre in its current form inevitably begins with Hull's novel which, despite enormous sales figures for its day – Melman notes that the novel's "sales were to surpass those of all the contemporary best-sellers lumped together" (90) – was widely berated by cultural commentators who epitomised the work as "poisonously salacious" (*Literary Review* qtd. in Melman 90). Defying the almost universal rebukes against the novel, "sheik-fever" spurred on other romance writers in the 1920s to follow suit with their own tales of romance in the desert (Melman 91). The subgenre is very much still with us today and desert romances are to be found on many a romance reader's bookshelf.² Despite the fact that *The Sheik* conveys many of the racist and sexist overtones of its moment of production, its formula is one that

¹ Raub, 1992; Ardis, 1996; Wintle, 1996; Bach, 1997; Chow, 1999; Kaler, 1999; Blake, 2003; Frost, 2006; Gargano, 2006; Hipsky, 2011; Turner, 2011; Garland, 2012; Teo, 2012; Turner, 2014; Deal, 2015; Jarmakani, 2015; Regan, 2017.

² For a more thorough account of the development of the subgenre into the twenty-first century see Turner 2014.

has endured throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and the history of the genre over the last century has now been comprehensively mapped out (see Teo; Jarmakani).

Taking their cue from Hull's novel, the basic conventions of the desert romance have been variously encapsulated by scholars in the field. Kaler, for instance, provides a crude skeleton which glosses over some of the more intricate plot details of *The Sheik* in just a few sentences: "A girl, wandering into the desert, is swept up by a marauding sheik to his tents, where she is kept captive until she falls in love with him; she is then captured by his villainous enemy and rescued by her sheik, who swears eternal love as they ride off into the desert sunset" (86). Similarly, Bach, encapsulating what she sees as a typical plot of a late-twentieth-century desert romance, Sarah Holland's *Desert Destiny* (1991), explains the typical plotline thus:

We meet the Western heroine whose hair is the colour of the desert sands, and the sheik with the hawk-like face. There is the requisite Englishman, a mild, more or less agreeable, ineffectual character who serves as a foil both for the sheik and the exotic surrounds. There are horses. There is the desert itself and the power of destiny referred to in the title. There is a drama of dominance and submission. Finally, there are fantasies: the fantasy of a desert that we can know like the back of our hand without ever having set foot on a sand dune or oasis; the fantasy of escape, the fantasy of perfect heterosexual love; the fantasies of heroines, readers, novelists and publishers. (11)

In the desert romance, there is something about the magic of the dry desert air and the perfect starry desert nights which unleashes an, as yet hidden, part of the heroine's sexual desire. The horse is also a common trope in that, usually, a stallion functions as metaphor for the sheikh's own virile masculinity and enables him to demonstrate his mastery over the apparently "untameable" heroine. Significantly for our discussion of the revisions to Hull's *ur* desert romance, Hull's heroine Diana is twice kidnapped, once by hero Sheik Ahmed Ben Hassan, and once by her lover-sheik's rival, Ibraheim Omair. For Diana, the "contrast [between these two men] was hideous" (Hull 187). Here the hero sheik is defined in opposition to his rival who "nauseated" Diana: "He reeked of sweat and grease and ill-kept horses, the pungent stench of the native" (Hull 186). This second savage, uneducated Arab is at once marked as the Sheik's other, and also provides a means for the sheik to prove his devotion to his lover by rescuing her from the hands of this "beast".

Though the plots of more contemporary desert romances might have evolved since *The Sheik*, the key components of a (usually white Anglo-American) woman out of her comfort zone in the desert sands who unexpectedly falls for a sheikh (or sheikh-like hero) after declaring herself incapable or unwilling to love, still feature as a central part of the subgenre. In the desert romance, it is the collision between self and other, the European and the exotic, which keeps passion alive. And as Bach notes, resolution in the desert romance is achieved, “as in all formula romances, as a consequence of ultimate matrimony, but within the union, a degree of difference is retained and this carries the potential for continuing desire” (Bach 36).

While we identify the 1920s desert romance as the origin for the desert-governess romance, we can also trace its origin back to the nineteenth-century genre of governess novels. Apart from well-known works featuring governess protagonists, such as Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), a whole genre of novels depicting the situation of middle-class, wage-earning governesses were published between 1830 and 1880.³ Key genre characteristics concerning elements of social marginalisation and education recur in modern-day depictions of governesses in popular romance novels, although it should be pointed out that whereas nineteenth-century governess novels responded to a socio-political and didactic debate on female education and paid work, popular romance governess characters do not serve as tools for didactic or political discussions but rather build on the nineteenth-century governess novel regarding features connected to plot, setting, and inter-character relations.

Nineteenth-century governess heroines display traditionally feminine and maternal characteristics, often causing jealousy and resentment from their mistresses for having gained the affection of their charges. In desert-governess romances, there is, strikingly enough, no mistress in the household. While very few nineteenth-century governess heroines find themselves in the situation of Jane Eyre - who is employed by Mr Rochester, someone Jane believes to be unmarried - the sheikh employer of desert-governess romances is, in fact, a widower or a bachelor, which makes him a likely love interest from the start. Nineteenth-century governess novels generally feature what were considered happy endings in which heroines are relieved of employment and marry a sensible clergyman or someone from their past. That the governess character marries her employer and becomes the mistress of the house in which she has served is thus an exception in

³ For studies on English nineteenth-century governesses and their literary depiction, see, in particular, West, 1949; Peterson, 1972; Poovey, 1988; Hughes, 1993; Wadsö Lecaros, 2001; Gilbert, 2015.

nineteenth-century fiction; the circumstance that the spectacular plot of *Jane Eyre* has greatly influenced governess romance plot lines is symptomatic of the attraction that the governess nowadays holds in romance novels as a strong, female character.

Central plot elements of the nineteenth-century governess novel feature an initial family downfall, which leads the heroine to seek employment as a governess (being one of few options open to nineteenth-century middle-class women). The scene of arrival at her employers' house is marked by a lack of welcome signalling the heroine's new station in life, and later her pedagogical as well as maternal qualities are put to test in the school room. Being an outsider, the governess character, importantly enough, also functions as an observer of social life from which she herself is excluded and, being far away from home, she has to overcome difficult situations that evaluate her resourcefulness as well as her adaptability.

As will be shown, desert-governess romances feature staples from the governess novel, such as the heroine being an outsider and new to her situation. However, being new to the country and its culture, the desert governess faces an altogether different kind of marginalisation than her nineteenth-century predecessor, having to navigate a context unfamiliar to her, often literally so, when she finds herself lost in the desert. Another contrast is the way in which the desert governess is viewed as a teacher. Whereas nineteenth-century governess novels depict employers with a marked lack of interest in their children's education, desert-governess romances sheikhs purposely choose an English governess owing to an interest in the, particularly English, education of their children.

The desert romance and the governess novel have been popular genres in their own right, but when Regency England meets exotic Arabia in the form that we discuss here, the subgenre becomes doubly attractive to readers looking for escapism. In one of the few scholarly articles which deals with the subgenre we here identify, Heiss, who explores Marguerite Kaye's *The Governess and the Sheikh* in relation to teaching regency and desert romance, notes the dual freedoms offered by the fusion of the historical backdrop with that of the geographical space of the desert: "the historical setting [...] provided for an interesting interpretation of the Regency and desert setting as liminal spaces for the negotiation of modern cultural issues" (10). In essence, the freedoms that might be offered by either the historical or geographical domains of either one of the genres independently are combined. Publishers and writers constantly look for new angles, and the synergy effects of merging characteristics from highly popular genres has proved to be a recipe for

success. As we now move on to show, the meeting between the sheikh and the governess has proved fruitful during the last decade, owing to writers combining genre-typical features which, when merged or blended, add escapism in a double dose, both historically and geographically speaking.

As McCracken observes, “bestselling titles are often hybrid genres, combining several elements of popular narrative” (40). He cautions against too rigid a focus on genre categories in accounting for bestsellers, remarking that these are often “misleading because so many bestsellers do not fit neatly into them” (42). Instead, a defining feature of the bestseller might rest in successfully amalgamating elements of more than one genre. It is interesting here to remark upon the fact that it has been argued that Hull’s *The Sheik* is perhaps not the ur-text it is frequently credited with being, but instead a successful hybrid formulation itself. Indeed, Vivanco attributes its success to its particularly hybrid nature (2020).

Various approaches can be taken to study the concept of genre. As is clear from the above, one term often used for overlapping genres is *hybrid*, which originates in the field of biology, where hybridity can be employed with the assumption that it is possible to pin down certain fixed characteristics. The concept of hybridity presupposes mutual exclusivity in the sense that different entities are joined into a static, distinct, hybrid form. A classic example from the animal world is the mule, the hybrid offspring of a male donkey and a female horse. Mules have a specific and stable hybrid genetic profile, in the sense that all mules will have the same hybrid genetic characteristics. Because of the static profile of hybrids, it could be questioned whether the term hybridity is a useful tool when discussing literary genres which do not show such a genetic, hereditary, sequence. Furthermore, the concepts of genre and genre mixing are often linked to Wittgenstein’s notion of *family resemblance* (which also draws on a genetic metaphor), in that several works share enough resemblance to make us want to classify them as belonging to a specific literary genre, although no two texts will contain an identical set of qualities. As Allen (2013) suggests, the concept of *blending* is more fruitful than terms of mixing and hybridity in that it focuses not on static characteristics but on the “communicative dimension of genre ‘mixing’” (11). For the sake of the argument we present in this article, we therefore treat the desert-governess romance as a blended, rather than hybrid, genre.

We have identified a number of novels which exist at the intersection of the desert romance and the governess novel. These include, but are not limited to, Jane Porter’s *The Sheikh’s*

Chosen Queen (2008), Marguerite Kaye's *The Governess and the Sheikh* (2011), Carol Marinelli's *Beholden to the Throne* (2012), Dani Collins' *The Sheikh's Sinful Seduction* (2015), Trish Morey's *Shackled to the Sheikh: Desert Brothers* (2015), Marguerite Kaye's *The Widow and the Sheikh* (2016), Laura Martin's *Governess to the Sheikh* (2016), Lynne Graham's *His Queen by Desert Decree* (2017), Susan Mallery's *The Sheikh and the Christmas Bride* (2017), and Kate Hewitt's *Desert Prince's Stolen Bride* (2018). Although many of these are historical novels often set in the nineteenth century, some buck this trend with present day settings. Of the ten novels we here identify, all published by Harlequin during the ten-year period between 2008 and 2018, four stand out as particularly salient examples of the blended genre that we are investigating: Kaye's *The Governess and the Sheikh* (2011), Martin's *Governess to the Sheikh* (2016), Graham's *His Queen by Desert Decree* (2017), and Hewitt's *Desert Prince's Stolen Bride* (2018). It is these four novels on which our subsequent analysis will be based.

In the ensuing analysis we explore our four examples (Kaye, 2011; Martin, 2016; Graham, 2017; Hewitt, 2018). We begin with a discussion of marketing aspects and paratextual elements, such as cover design and novel titles. This is followed by an analysis of the contents of the novels looking specifically at characterisation, and plot conventions.

3. Stepping into the desert-governess romance

Paratexts, in particular epitexts, such as covers and titles, are central features in romance publishing and marketing. Not surprisingly, then, the "clinch image" so typical for romances (Goris) is found in most desert-governess romance covers. Whereas romance novels traditionally feature generic covers giving the reader an idea of the time period or geographical setting rather than of a specific scene, desert-governess romances appear to be promoted based on erotically charged scenes in which the sheikh is perceived as dominant and the governess an innocent student.

In the case of Kaye's *The Governess and the Sheikh*, which is set in the 1820s, three different editions exemplify versions of the threshold - to use Genette's term - that lead the reader into the text. The cover of the Harlequin *Historical Regency* edition (2011) is taken from a scene in a steamy *hammam*, with a seated, undressed, governess looking up at a half-naked sheikh standing in front of her. On the cover of Mills and Boon's *Historical Regency* edition (2011), the couple has been transported into a tent, where they embrace on a bed against a backdrop of Oriental

textiles. On the cover of a third edition, a manga-style Harlequin Comics version (2020), the couple appears fully dressed in Western, rather than Arabic, clothing. This cover, too, depicts an embrace, this time with ornamented lattice windows and textiles in the background. Whereas the first two editions depict a sexual, consensual encounter, the governess heroine in the manga version looks scared, rather than enchanted, by the sheikh's advances. This predatory Dracula style is actually not new; promotion material from the 1921 film adaptation of Hull's *The Sheik* depicts the sheikh hovering over a scared or sleeping heroine.⁴ The Harlequin Historical Regency edition of Kaye's novel invites the, presumably Western, reader, step-by-step, into the far-way land of desert romance. In an "Author note", the desert setting and immediate attraction between her hero and heroine are introduced: "Their encounters are as scorching as the desert sun, as tumultuous as a desert storm", which turns out to be quite the opposite of the author's own situation in Scotland: "Outside my window, the rain is falling steadily, and the sea is iron-grey. Something tells me it won't be long before I am transported back to the desert again" (ii). Thus expressing the escapism that the novel offers to readers, this authorial note provides a sense of recognition that readers can be expected to savour. The back cover, headed "Seduction in the sand..." similarly draws on the exotic setting, featuring an illustration of the palatial surroundings of the novel, and the blurb below introduces the reader to an "unconventional" governess with a "ravishing body and impulsive passion", who has been hired to "instill some much-needed discipline" in the sheikh's daughter. This novel forms part of Kaye's *Princes of the Desert* series, in which "[t]hree innocent Regency Roses prove to be the undoing of three ruthless sheikhs". These novels are thus marketed as stories in which virtuous British women reform brutal men of the exotic desert.

In the Harlequin Presents edition of Graham's *His Queen by Desert Decree*, the cover clinch image is set in a palace courtyard. Fully dressed in luxurious gold and turquoise, the couple on the cover radiate a luxurious setting, and as in *The Governess and the Sheikh*, Arabic architecture and textiles are in focus. Graham's novel, as well as Hewitt's *Desert Prince's Stolen Bride*, are set in modern times and form part of a prolific Harlequin Presents series published under the heading "Conveniently wedded, passionately bedded" in which the cover illustrations are framed by a golden wedding band. Hewitt's novel depicts a bedroom scene with dark red fabric draped in the background - the sheikh in trousers and the governess in a silk slip.

⁴ Incidentally, several Harlequin Comics editions of desert romances have covers with the heroine similarly averting her eyes from a shrewd-looking sheikh (e.g., Trish Morey's *Stolen by the Sheikh* (2015) and Fiona McArthur's *Falling for the Sheikh She Shouldn't* (2017)).

Of the four novels that we explore in this article, only one was published without the traditional clinch image: In Laura Martin's *Governess to the Sheikh*, the heroine is seen on her own, walking down a flight of stairs. This novel forms part of a Harlequin quartet of governess romances labelled "Governess tales", and the covers of all four novels incidentally show heroines on stairs. This imagery, in itself, signals the transitions that governess heroines go through; and on the cover of Martin's novel, the gilded tiles on the walls as well as the purple brocade of the governess's open front gown positions the cover in a desert palace.

The title is another selling point, which sets the tone of a novel. Although desert-governess romances are aimed at female readers, many titles of the novels we have looked at position the male protagonist in a power position. Martin's *Governess to the Sheikh* offers a play on words in that it implies both that the governess is given to the sheikh in a romantic sense, and that she is his educator. In fact, a number of desert-governess romances include such wordplay on designated male power: Graham's *His Queen by Desert Decree* draws on the ancient marriage customs evoked by the hero and the male ownership associated with this, as does Marinelli's *Beholden to the Throne*, whereas the title of Hewitt's *Desert Prince's Stolen Bride* signals the male protagonist's conquering properties, similarly to Porter's *The Sheikh's Chosen Queen* and Morey's *Shackled to the Sheikh*.

4. The sheikh and the governess as akin

Though romance novels often use the principle of "opposites attract" when it comes to creating chemistry between the protagonists, the typical hero and heroine of the governess romance seem to ultimately be drawn together by their remarkable similarities. What emerges throughout our character analysis is that this inherent sameness is driven by the shared set of values concomitant with the role of sheikh, as leader of a tribe, and governess, as educator of her charges. This section of the analysis is broken down into two subsections, the first of which explores how these similarities are driven by the need of both sheikh and governess to occupy an isolated social position, and the latter of which examines the theme of Englishness.

One of the defining features of the desert romance hero is his gravity and seemingly natural authority. In the desert-governess novels we explored, we found this was also a universal feature of the subgenre. Typically, this inherent authority radiates from the hero from the outset.

The hero of Kaye's *The Governess to the Sheikh* is a case in point. He is introduced as "the most powerful sheikh in the eastern reaches of Arabia"; a man who "had been born to reign and raised to rule" (8). Likewise, in Martin's *Governess to the Sheikh*, the hero's command is clear as soon as he steps onto the page: "he strode with purpose and vitality. It was the walk of a man who always got what he wanted" (13). Martin's hero is typical of the sheikh hero in his resolve to be self-sufficient, to transcend the social hierarchy, and to govern his people without assistance: "He had to be unshakeable and alone, a man people could look up to" (175). Hewitt's Zayed in *Desert Prince's Stolen Bride* is presented in remarkably similar terms. He is "raw and primal" and the demeanour he desires to project is one of "a fortress, solid and impenetrable, because everyone was depending on him" (147). In a similar fashion, Graham's King Azrael in *His Queen by Desert Decree* too is introduced as a powerful man. Set in modern times, the hero of this novel is depicted as the antithesis of his cruel predecessor, but nonetheless the "besetting sin" of this "newly enthroned monarch" of a small "oil-rich country" is "a serious nature that [lends] him a forbidding aspect" (7-8).

Another typical feature of the hero of the desert-governess novel, and one that distinguishes him from his pure desert romance counterpart, is that his proud or fierce exterior is in most cases softened by his role as a father. As a rule, the hero is deep down "just like a man, just like an ordinary father struggling with a difficult child" (Martin 47). Frequently, the sheikh is torn between his official role as leader of his people, and his personal role of father, and then lover. Notwithstanding this softer side, what we found particularly striking about the hero profile in these desert-governesses, is that many of his qualities are mirrored in the heroine. "Unshakeable", "alone" "a fortress", "solid", "impenetrable" are the kinds of qualities that might equally apply to the governess, a woman who is neither part of the social world of her employers, nor of the other household servants.

The figure of the governess is, in the novels we explore here, frequently depicted as alone in the world, and this is both the driving force in her path to becoming a governess, and a defining feature of occupying the governess role. In Martin's novel, for instance, the heroine is "the neglected daughter of a baron" (70-71), whose parents were absent in her own childhood. It is her own childhood neglect which has driven her desire to become a governess knowing that she could furnish children who had "experienced the same benign neglects she had" with the affection they deserved (65). Hewitt's heroine too, is an orphan, a "nobody" (106), who was offered the

position of governess seemingly as an act of charity and taken “under [her employer’s] protection” (62). Until she is kidnapped (a plot feature we will return to below), she is more or less at the mercy of her employer. Frequently, the desert-governess heroine is a Cinderella figure, and oftentimes the fairytale is explicitly alluded to. For instance, Hewitt’s heroine “feel[s] like Cinderella”, waiting for it “to turn midnight on her very soon” (153), and Graham’s heroine too has a Cinderella-like upbringing featuring a nasty step-mother who entered the scene following her father’s remarriage after her mother’s death. In a more contemporary take on the governess theme, the heroine here is compelled to take on EFL teaching abroad in order to support herself.

Crucially, it is not just the governess heroine who is the victim of a neglected upbringing. In Graham’s novel the hero is physically marked by the abuse he suffered at the hands of his step father. He is, quite literally, a scarred man with “paler slashes of scarring that marred his perfection” from when he was whipped age seventeen” (175). A similar pattern is visible in Kaye’s novel, where the sheikh has in a literal sense rejected his childhood by closing off the wing of the palace in which he was brought up. One day, he finds the door open, realising that the governess has entered this taboo area: he “stepped in, back [...] into the dark recesses of his childhood” (106). She has just found “a riding crop” on the wall when the sheikh steps into the room. Seeing her employer’s childhood schoolroom, the governess immediately understands that “here lay the key to his relationship - or lack of it - with his daughter” (107). This schoolroom scene encapsulates key aspects of the desert-governess romance. The governess’s instincts as a teacher and woman help her understand the sheikh’s childhood trauma, and she resolutely breaks the whip he had been beaten with by his father. However, the governess’s almost maternal attempts at comforting her employer at this point are coupled with “her own body respond[ing] alarmingly”; the governess and the sheikh kiss passionately, but “[i]t was a kiss meant to punish, she knew that”, and the scene ends with the sheikh accusing the governess of having “intrude[d] on matters that do not concern [her]” (116-117). The governess, as genre conventions dictate, is situated in an intimate position in the household in which she is employed, and yet is viewed not as an equal.

One recurring characteristic of the governess heroine of the desert-governess romance is that either she has sworn off men, or is otherwise determined not to marry, or has found herself romantically overlooked in the past as a consequence of her governess profession. In Martin’s regency-era *Governess to the Sheikh*, Rachel is an English governess educated at “Madame Dubois’s School for Young Ladies.” Upon her graduation, Rachel is not content with a

future life of domesticity as a wife, but instead craves adventure and “the exotic” (11). She is very pointed about her “determination never to marry” (11) much like the heroine of the conventional desert romance and some adventurous governess romance heroines, but in stark contrast to nineteenth-century governess characters who for natural reasons would have no option other than work as governess or find themselves a husband.

Whilst the typical desert romance heroine has sworn off men so that she can enjoy her freedom unshackled, the conventional governess eschews men (and more particularly, sex) because she is supposed to be morally upstanding and a suitable role model to her charges. In Martin’s novel, Rachel sees her position as governess as one in which she can be surrounded by children without having to have an intimate relationship with a man:

Rachel felt a pang of sadness that she would never have children of her own. The life of a governess could be quite a lonely one. Not quite a servant, not quite part of the family, Rachel had been warned many times she might feel isolated in her new job. [...] Governesses were not expected to marry or have their own families. They looked after other people’s children, never their own. (165)

Rachel’s sentiments about marriage are echoed by the heroines of the other novels we explore. Graham’s governess too is determined never to marry; she has had virtually no boyfriends and she knows she will have to fend for herself, and Hewitt’s heroine had spent her years of governessing “in the shadows, half pretending to be invisible” (23). While some of the governesses we explored had never experienced the attention of a man before, others had had prior negative experiences. For instance, after a failed engagement, Kaye’s governess heroine has sworn “not to fall in love ever again” (21) vowing to never “give [her] heart rein again” (59).

Of the novels we explore here, it is Martin’s which is most faithful to fictional depictions of governesses, and it is also the most explicit in signposting governess tropes, possibly because it forms part of a Harlequin mini series of governess romances.⁵ Martin clearly exploits such tropes as is evidenced in the following example: “It was [Rachel’s] first golden rule of being a governess: don’t fall for your employer” (63). Rachel is obviously immediately attracted to her employer but, as she reminds herself, “that was no reason to start behaving like one of the airheaded

⁵ The other three novels of the “Governess Tales” mini series are *The Cinderella Governess* by Georgie Lee, *The Runaway Governess* by Liz Tyner, and *The Governess’s Secret Baby* by Janice Preston, all published by Harlequin in 2016.

heroines in the novels her friend Isabel liked to read” (17). Here, she is very much the governess heroine who sees sex as a distraction from her vocation, rather than the desert romance heroine who has hitherto been uninterested in sex (or at least settling down) because she has better and more exciting things to do. Though Rachel is the archetypical governess in this sense, it is the Sheikh’s distinctly exotic charm which wins her over. Indeed, as is typical of the desert-romance genre, Rachel feels powerless against the Sheikh as she is carried away by her own desire: “with the Sheikh’s body so close to hers Rachel was beginning to wonder if she had much choice in the matter” (99). Rachel “chastise[s] herself” for entertaining inappropriate thoughts about her employer: “she should be focusing on his children, not how much she wanted him to look at her semi-nude with those smouldering eyes of his” (101).

5. England vs the desert

Although they have much in common, in other respects, the sheikh and governess are worlds apart. Their initial differences are framed by their cultural backgrounds, but the apparent contrast between them is, ultimately, what brings them together and what leads to change and development in both. At the outset, the desert setting is perceived as threatening for the young Englishwoman; before the heroine of Kaye’s *The Governess and the Sheikh* sets off, an aunt warns her of the risks of the warm climate: “once a female has abandoned her corsets, there is no saying what else she will abandon” (39). Metaphorically speaking, in desert-governess novels, unlacing the English governess opens up for the modernisation of highly traditional desert kingdoms; as a result, English pedagogical ideas are transferred on to the sheikh who reforms his country.

Introducing new ideas to her employer as well as to her pupils, the governess negotiates conflicts at the intersection of her own idealised and sought after Englishness and the employer’s traditional and reactionary values. Discussing the depiction of harem culture in the writing of Swedish early-twentieth-century writer Elsa Lindberg-Dovlette, Bodin uses the term *cultural broker* for the role of Western governesses in the Ottoman empire (257). While desert-governess romances are not set in harems, we nonetheless find a similar enclosed domestic setting in desert-governess romances, which is marked by a dichotomy between introducing new values and upholding traditions.

Facing adversity or in scenes of transitioning, the unknown is contrasted to the governess's home country, which is referred to in terms of tranquillity and stability, but also as lacking attraction and desire. For instance, Cassie in Kaye's *The Governess and the Sheikh* gazes in awe at the desert's night sky "which looked so vast compared to England", and she sees the desert as "so exotic in its fierceness, and so very different from England that she felt as if she were on a different planet" (70-71). The sheikh is likened to his desert context, and exists in stark contrast to the Englishmen the governess has turned down or has reason to avoid. Jamal in Kaye's *The Governess and the Sheikh*, for instance, is not "some weak, foppish excuse of a poet [who] expressed his emotions in sentimental doggerel", like Cassie's former fiancé, "but a man of the desert, whose desires were as raw and fiery and elemental as the landscape he inhabited" (137). Kaye's governess heroine travels across the desert for several days to reach her employer's house. The strenuous journey is described in terms of heat, which makes "her throat [ache] from the dust" and discomfort, in that the wooden camel saddle "feel[s] like an instrument of torture" (32), thus picking up on some metaphors used in traditional governess novels to depict scenes of transition. In a British context, it will not be heat, but rain and cold, of course, and instead of a camel saddle, heroines in nineteenth-century governess novels travel long distances by coach, arriving at their destination numbed by cold.

Clothes are used in the novels to underline the heroines' gradual adaptation to desert customs; arriving in English clothing, they soon dress in flowing gowns more suitable to the desert climate. In Kaye's *The Governess and the Sheikh*, Cassie's aunt's fears are confirmed as the young governess, one warm night, decides to give up her English stays and stockings for harem pants and a silk caftan and for the first time, steps into the hammam where she finds erotic mosaic pictures. The way in which dress functions as a way of bridging cultural differences recurs at the end of the novel, as Cassie's wedding clothes are referred to "a mixture of east and west" (278), whereas the sheikh himself appears to be dressed in a traditional way, wearing the scimitar associated with his warrior traits.

Although manifested as antitheses to Englishmen, sheikhs nonetheless harbour characteristics that the governess appreciates as similar to her inherent English or European values. In cases where the sheikh has himself received an English education, this is presented as a mitigating factor, serving to temper his desert ways. Martin's *Governess to the Sheikh* and Hewitt's *Desert Prince's Stolen Bride* both feature sheikhs with an English educational background. When

Martin's hero first speaks, the early nineteenth-century governess Rachel is "surprised to find he spoke English with only the mildest hint of an accent" (14). Of course, there is no such thing as a neutral accent, what Rachel means is that he speaks like her. He is an Arab man, but his foreignness is counterbalanced by what is for Rachel a reassuring familiarity. Despite the fact that he has one foot in Rachel's homeland of England, it is clear that "he truly loved his country" (13). In a similar way, Hewitt's romance, which is set in modern times, features a sheikh who is Cambridge educated and speaks flawless English. In fact, when the governess Olivia admits she only knows a small amount of Arabic and prefers English, he switches languages seamlessly. Furthermore, he has other Western preferences: "When not among the tribes of the desert, he tended to wear western clothes, a preference he'd said was from his Cambridge days. He preferred coffee rather than tea, and he listened to jazz. He had glasses for reading, and a partiality for Agatha Christie" (149). Sheikh Jamil too, in Kaye's novel, understands Cassie's appreciation of England and Englishness. At the end of the novel, when the horrors of his childhood years have been revealed and as his childhood quarters have been redecorated, he creates an English garden with lavender, honeysuckle, and jasmine (271).

Much like the hero of Hull's *The Sheik* who is revealed to be European and not actually an Arab at all in the novel's conclusion, the cultural divide between the twenty-first century counterparts is moderated by the mutual connection of hero and heroine to England and Englishness. There is no question that Hull's novel is racist in its representation of racial difference and fear of miscegenation, and there seems to be an element of this too in twenty-first century examples. Though in the novels that form the basis of the present study, the hero is actually an Arab, not merely masquerading as one, it is interesting to note that he is often explicitly equated with Rudolph Valentino (incidentally an Italian based in the US) who starred as the sheik in the 1921 adaptation of Hull's novel. For instance, in Graham's novel, when Molly first sees Azrael, she recognizes "Mr Gorgeous" from a portrait at the embassy: "There he stood, in his pristine white robes and red chequered head cloth, those stunning features even more arresting in the flesh. It was as if a famous actor had stepped out of a movie screen into her presence" (21). Despite the fact that he is trying to deal with the embarrassment of having a kidnapped British woman in his castle, he is perceived as essentially decent, in part facilitated by his education and ability to speak English. In the nod to Valentino, Graham draws on the romance reader's presumed cultural awareness in a move which serves to downplay Azrael's Arabness and accentuate his Europeaness. In the novels

we have explored here, the figure of the governess is synonymous with Englishness and the fact the sheikh hero too often has a deep-rooted connection to England helps the governess and the sheikh to bridge their cultural differences.

6. The captivity plot

Nowhere is the connection back to Hull's *The Sheik* more apparent than in the replication of the captivity plot most often involving the kidnap of the heroine by the sheikh hero, and then also sometimes a subsequent kidnap by a rival of the hero. By employing typical desert romance plot conventions, such as the kidnap of the heroine - a plot move which itself draws on pre-Islamic notions of marriage capture - the contemporary desert-governess novels we explored here once again conform to reader expectations. As mentioned above, these expectations are further consolidated in the novel titles, most notably in Hewitt's *Desert Prince's Stolen Bride* and Graham's *His Queen by Desert Decree* which both explicitly invoke kidnap conventions.

In Graham's *His Queen by Desert Decree*, the governess is kidnapped from London by her pupil and taken to the desert kingdom of Djalia, where his half-brother rules. Here it is thus not the sheikh himself who is the abductor, but he is left to solve the problem. He first attempts, unsuccessfully, to pay off the heroine, Molly, for her silence and later, unbeknown to her, follows his right-hand man's advice by declaring her his wife according to traditional law: "Marriage by declaration has been on our statute books for hundreds of years" (104). Similarly, Hewitt's *Desert Prince's Stolen Bride* begins in perhaps the most archetypically desert romance way possible, with the kidnap of the governess-heroine, Olivia Taylor, by the Arab Prince, Zayed al bin. The novel's opening line, "He came in through the window" (7), is decidedly reminiscent of a scene from the 1921 Melford adaptation of *The Sheik* which sees Valentino enter the bedroom of the sleeping Diana (Agnes Ayres) the night before he kidnaps her. The remainder of the kidnap scene is also seemingly derivative of Hull's novel as Zayed "heave[s] [the heroine] up on a horse" and "swing[s] up to straddle the horse behind her so she was nestled closely between his hard-packed thighs" (12). In Hewitt's version of events though, Olivia's abductor paradoxically *does not* want to frighten her: "He didn't want her to be scared - and yet he was *abducting* her" (9). Right from the start the reader is led to understand that Zayed is not the "kidnapping kind"; this however, "made no sense. He was her *kidnapper*" (12). At least on the surface, the reason why the kidnap makes no

sense to Olivia is revealed in the next chapter when it emerges she is not the betrothed princess that Zayed had intended to abduct. Below the surface, however, this sense of perversity appears to rest as much in the notion that one might fall in love with one's abductor, as it does with the more surface level meaning. After she weds Zayed in a case of mistaken identity, she is trapped in married life with the Prince and feels as a consequence of this "a noose [...] tightening about her neck" (174). This scenario embodies an inherent paradox in the desert-governess romance; the hero is a kidnapper, and yet he is still a suitable love interest, and the heroine is held captive, and yet she still desires a life with him.

We also see a version of the conventional kidnap plot play out in Martin's novel. Sheikh Malik takes the heroine Rachel, and the children under her supervision, on a horseback expedition into the desert (Malik, of course, rides a "huge black stallion" (81)). Soon it becomes clear that they are in the vicinity of bandits. The sheikh decides to end the expedition early for fear he will not be able to protect the children and the governess if they are attacked. As genre convention would dictate, Malik's fears, however, are realised before they can make a safe return to the palace. In accordance with the conventional desert romance plot, they are set upon by the bandits. As Rachel acquiesces to the bandits' demand that they hand over their valuables, the classic desert romance plot is partially allowed to play out on the page, as the sheikh's protective urges take over: "He wanted to protect her, to sweep her up on to his horse and never let any harm come to her" (113).

It is, however, the children who intervene as a narrative device. The only thing that stops Malik sweeping Rachel up are the children to whom he is also entirely devoted. The head bandit evokes the conventional desert romance plot when he says, "Pretty ladies should know better than to wander through the desert with such a paltry escort" (114). Rachel takes matters into her own hands, though, and demonstrates she is able to take care of herself by using the bandit's own dagger to stab him. The sheikh then uses this opportunity to land an assault on the rest of the bandits. Rachel, though, is injured in the attack, and Malik finds her "lying on the ground, not moving" with an "unnatural pallor" to her face (115). This is just one way in which the conventional desert romance plot is thwarted by the children: "In an ideal world Malik would scoop the unconscious governess into his arms and gallop at full speed back to the palace, but he had the children to think about" (116). The romantic ideal of the desert romance is softened through the governess plot whereby the children are of equal importance to the sheikh as the heroine.

Likewise, in Kaye's *The Governess and the Sheikh*, the governess is kidnapped by brigands, tied up, and taken to a cave (249). She wonders what they will do:

Were they going to stake her out in the heat and the sun and leave her to the predators? Or maybe they would first ravish her. Maybe they intended not death, but life as some sort of slave. She recalled the hungry look in their eyes and shivered so hard her bonds dug into her wrists. If only she had not read all those tales in *One Thousand and One Nights*. To think that she used to believe them romantic, even the most bloodthirsty. She did not want to die like a heroine (250)

Jamil (who is away negotiating the annulment of his engagement) receives information about the kidnap and immediately sets out to find her. Following desert romance convention, it is this kidnap scenario which brings to Jamil the realisation of love and devotion (253).

In Hewitt's *Desert Prince's Stolen Bride* we also see a version of this double-kidnap plot line, which is prefigured in the narrative as Prince Zayed takes Olivia on a visit to a local village where there has been unrest. A reader familiar with the conventional desert romance plot would, at this point, be expecting some rival of the prince to abduct Olivia, giving Zayed the opportunity to realise and prove his love for the heroine. However, in this instance, the threat does not come from the uncivilised, savage, even beastly rival of the hero, but from a snake bite: "Out of the corner of his eye he saw a movement and he jerked around to see the sinuous, black shape of a desert cobra slither across the darkened floor" (178). Here the rival has been substituted for an actual beast, but what is notable is that the description of the snake is not far removed from a description that might be given to the hero's rival in the conventional plotline.

There is another sense too in which the desert-governess romance functions to impose a dual-captivity on the heroine. The governess's position in the home of her employer also represents a site of confinement. In Martin's novel, Rachel is not a conventional desert romance heroine who is captured and held hostage by the man she later comes to love, but she is a governess superimposed onto a desert romance backdrop. Though it is remarked upon that Rachel is decidedly *not* "a prisoner" at the palace, for all intents and purposes she is trapped as outside of the palace walls, her Western appearance would make her "easy prey" (182). On one particular occasion when Rachel tries to slip out of the palace confines in secret, Malik secretly stalks her justifying his behaviour as fear for her own safety: "He felt an unnatural stab of panic, knowing that any one of those times she could have been attacked by a thief or lured into a deserted alleyway by less than

scrupulous men” (183). When Rachel does eventually spot Malik, her status as *not* a prisoner is once again referred to: “You’re not a prisoner, you’re a governess” (185). However, in certain situations, being a governess could be tantamount to being a prisoner. Conceived in this way, the kind of captivity that Rachel encounters comes largely from her position as employee where the power balance is always going to be in favour of the man who pays her. In Hewitt’s *Desert Prince’s Stolen Bride*, there is the sense too that the heroine, Olivia, “rescued” by her abductor who takes her from one form of captivity where as a governess she “blended into the background” “making sure she was quietly useful” (26). The realisation of “how dull it had always been” (26) came with the thrill of being carried away on this desert prince’s horse. So capture is a complex and multifaceted feature of the desert-governess romance. On the one hand, the capture of the governess by her future lover functions as a kind of rescue from her dull existence, and on the other hand, kidnap by a rival is also used as a device to allow the hero to rescue her once again.

7. Conclusion

In exploring the small but certainly not insignificant subgenre that we designate as the desert-governess romance, we were struck by how neatly the marriage of sheikh fantasy and governess novel conventions tessellated. We began by exploring how paratextual elements of desert-governess romances grapple with the juxtaposition of the very English governess and the “exotic” sheikh and found that the cover art offered clues as to the nature of the relationship between hero and heroine. One particularly interesting finding was that the titles of these desert-governess romances often anticipated the central trope of captivity which is manifested variously in the novels we explored. We recognised in the desert-governess a dual nature to the captivity narrative which encompasses the conventional desert romance kidnap convention, and the more metaphorical captivity of the governess in the home of her employer.

We were initially surprised to find such striking similarities between the hero and the heroine in this subgenre, but looking at the etymology of *sheikh* and *governess* respectively helped us to demystify their kinship. Both governess and sheikh are rulers in their own domains, the sheikh governing his tribe, and the governess her charges. Both governess and sheikh are predisposed to their ruling roles by their inherent character traits of stubbornness and resolve, but these are the very characteristics that at first serve as obstacles to their own love story. What also

emerged from our analysis is that though the sheikh and the governess come from different and sometimes conflicting cultural backgrounds, it is the notion of Englishness that unites them with the governess being the very embodiment of Regency England, and the sheikh a man with a fondness for all things English.

Related to this deep appreciation for Englishness is the theme of education. Though it was beyond the scope of this present article to explore this theme, this would be a fruitful area for further research and in the course of our analysis we noticed that the reason sheikhs in these novels hire an English governess for their children is that they appreciate what they think will be the value of a strict English education. However, when the governess steps into the classroom, she does not bring harsh discipline, but a teaching philosophy aimed at educating open-minded responsible individuals. And interestingly enough, her teaching soon concerns not only her pupil but also her employer. Her ideas clash with what the sheikh believes he will find in an English governess, especially since she shows him ways of resolving ancient conflicts and restores hope for future democratic development in the desert kingdoms. The theme of education in these novels is multifaceted, complicated, and worthy of further discussion.

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