

“AND HE WAS AN ARAB!:" IMPERIAL FEMININITY AND PLEASURE IN
E.M. HULL’S 1919 DESERT ROMANCE, *THE SHEIK*

by

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Abstract

E.M. Hull's sensational novel *The Sheik* thrilled and shocked early twentieth century readers with its tale of a woman's journey into the Sahara desert and her interracial sexual desire for the brooding Arab sheik who captures her. The groundbreaking book made the mysterious and thrilling Arabian desert accessible to working class readership and broke the rules on what was acceptable on the written page. This paper contextualizes *The Sheik* within the "golden age" of women's travel writing by comparing the journey of its heroine, Diana Mayo, to the non-fiction travel accounts of other pioneers of Middle Eastern travel. The memoirs of Gertrude Bell, Lady Mary Montagu, and E.M. Hull reveal an shared imperial identity unique to white women of the British Empire. It is an identity founded in the newly acquired autonomy granted to women through their physical mobility in the desert and their negotiations of gender in the early twentieth century. In exploring this identity, this paper demonstrates Hull's use of fiction to test the bounds of white women's engagement with the Middle East and their participation in the Orientalist fantasies based in sex, desire, and liberation from which they had been historically excluded.

Introduction

If there be a moral in this simple tale it is one of warning to young European ladies not to ride alone into the Sahara.”¹

In 1922 Frazier Hunt drove through the English countryside from London to Derbyshire in hopes of unveiling the mysterious author of *The Sheik*, the best selling romance about a white woman’s penetration into the untouched desert of Algeria. With little to no information about the writer who launched her way into British and American popular culture with her stories of the exhilarating Sahara, Hunt encountered E.M. Hull, a kindly woman of around forty. She appeared to be a “modest” wife and mother and thus “didn’t look like a famous author at all.”² On first arriving, Hunt thought himself in the wrong place. Commenting on Mrs. Hull’s “magnificent” home and its exterior of peace and security, he exclaimed, “Surely no one from this peaceful spot could by any stretch of the imagination have touched the white passions of the desert!”³ He asked how she began writing her novels and inquired about her inspiration for their desert settings. She claimed it was her fascination with “the Arab and his desert” as well as her study of human nature and thrill for adventure that motivated her writing. However, Hunt described the details of her life as anything but thrilling. Photographed in front of her country home, she appeared the picture of British domesticity, leaving Fraizer hunt to end the interview with one word in mind: *old-fashioned*.⁴

This rare interview appeared in the November 1922 issue of *Nash’s and Pall Mall Magazine* as an advertisement for the magazine’s serial publication of Hull’s new novel *The*

¹ “*The Sheik*. New Books and Reprints,” *Times Literary Supplement*, Nov. 1919.

² Frazier Hunt, “The Woman Who Wrote the Sheik,” *Nash’s and Pall Mall Magazine*, 70: 355, 127.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Hunt, “Woman who Wrote the Sheik,” 128.

Desert Healer.⁵ Because the provincial E.M. Hull supposedly never intended to be so successful and often turned away from the spotlight, interviews like this supply what little biographical information is available on her life and motivations for writing.⁶ Yet, the article did more than describe the author's home and demeanor. It painted E.M. Hull as a good, honest Englishwoman; something quite surprising for the author of a novel that shook the publishing world and "[leapt] into fame with the suddenness of a meteor."⁷ Throughout the interview, Hunt emphasized Hull's role as a mother, a wife, and a homemaker. Surely a woman who occupied these roles could not concern herself with stories of sexual and romantic desire in the wilderness of the desert, let alone write them. Though the conclusions drawn from the interview may seem too dull for the woman who left her readers "thirsty for a long draught of refreshing romance," the article plays on what contemporary critics found so indecent and what contemporary readers found so liberating about the author of *The Sheik*: E.M. Hull was an ordinary Englishwoman writing for the mothers, wives, and homemakers of the British Empire about exploring the exotic pleasures the Algerian desert and its Bedouin Arabs had to offer. Her novel built off of the centuries-old stories of Oriental decadence and sexual excess, but in a way that included the domestic women of the British Empire.

Small, Maynard and Company published *The Sheik* in 1919 and, according to E.M. Hull, the publication was more a result of chance rather than her own ambition as a writer.⁸ Within the first nine months of being in the public market, the company reprinted the novel thirty-two, far

⁵ Ibid, pg. 126.

⁶ George Malcolm Johnson, "E.M. Hull (1880-1947)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

⁷ Hunt, "The Woman Who Wrote the Sheik," 126.

⁸ Hunt, "The Woman Who Wrote the Sheik," 128.

surpassing expectations for its potential success, particularly given its controversial plot.⁹ Diana Mayo emerged as the novel's tomboyish and independent heroine, rejecting ideas of marriage and insisting on traveling through the Sahara desert with only a caravan of native guides to protect her. Ignoring the warnings of her peers, she embarks on the adventure but is betrayed by her guides and captured by the savage Arab sheik, Ahmed Ben Hassan. He carries her back to his camp, where she is repeatedly raped and emotionally abused over the course of several months. During that time, as Ahmed attempts to "tame" his captive, Diana falls passionately in love with him. She begins to long for his strong arms to take hold of her under the desert stars. It takes Diana's capture by a rival sheik and Ahmed's near death to bring about their profession of love. Diana pleads with Ahmed to let her stay with him in the desert, threatening to take her own life if he sends her away. In the end, they resolve to spend the rest of their days in the desert, but not before it is revealed that Ahmed is not actually an Arab, but rather the son of aristocratic Englishman.¹⁰

The Sheik launched E.M. Hull into every "good" bookstore and library in England, earning her a place among early twentieth century novelists as "the third 'best seller' throughout the British Empire and in America."¹¹ Its influence in American culture became solidified a mere two years after the initial publication through the 1921 silent film adaptation starring heartthrob Rudolph Valentino as the noble "Arab" hero. The commercial success of *The Sheik* was immediate, but the majority of its literary reviews were left in the hands of elite critics.¹²

⁹ Pamela Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press) 2003, pg. 117.

¹⁰ E.M. Hull, *The Sheik*, (Small, Maynard & Company), 1921.

¹¹ "Shadow of the East," Eveleigh Nash & Grayson, Ltd. *The Times Literary Supplement*, Feb, 23, 1923.

¹² Karen Chow, "Around 1922: Anxiety and "lowbrow" culture in 1920s England," *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*; 1997, pg. 4-6.

These analyses tended to be more negative, either chastising the immorality of the text or defining it as a simple, carnal narrative. The *Bookman's* weekly guide to fiction called the novel, "cave man appeal for bridge playing ladies" with little note of its commercial success or wild popularity.¹³ Such criticisms, neither indicative of popular opinion nor insightful to the text's complexity, often reduced the popular fiction to nothing more than a "sex novel." However, the novel's success revealed something far more threatening to twentieth century readers than women's sexuality alone. It suggested that a white woman's desire for the Arab and his desert was not only something a woman could write about, but also something that readers found thrilling, adventurous, and pleasurable.

On its surface, *The Sheik* reads as a spectacle of women's sexual abuse and racial stereotypes. Yet in its depths, the novel broke barriers of women's sexuality and altered what was acceptable for the written page. To its 1919 readership, it offered a fantasy in which readers could entertain thoughts of power and sexual autonomy in a mysterious place deemed too dangerous and with men deemed too "uncivilized." It both challenged and upheld literary traditions of the Oriental East in popular culture. More importantly, it presented the Algerian desert as a space in which women could engage in the imperial and sexual pleasures of Orientalist fantasies they had historically been denied.

Though her novel broke barriers for white women's engagement with the Orient, E.M. Hull did not transform the Middle East into this imperial and sexual world on her own. Rather, the Middle East historically offered a place where British women travelers and eventually British women readers could exercise imperial power and entertain their own orientalist fantasies. Hull's work therefore lends itself not only to studies of women's sexual liberation, but also to existing

¹³ "The Bookman's Guide to Fiction," *The Bookman*, vol. 55, pg. 295.

scholarship on white women's imperial relationship with the Middle East and their contributions to and engagement with Orientalism.

The study of orientalism and its relationship to culture and empire began with Edward Said's 1978 scholarly work, *Orientalism*, in which he discussed the various ways the West writes about the East and how these literary forms contribute to notions of race and empire. He defined orientalism as "a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience."¹⁴ This relationship is one of Western superiority and control over the imagined East.¹⁵ Equally important is Said's argument that Orientalism does not just occupy and school of intellectual thought, but also exists as an attitude that is deeply embedded in Western society's culture and its literature. However, though his work laid the foundations for studies of Orientalist literature, his study left a large gap in the discussion of Western citizens and their relationship to the Orient. His argument focused primarily on the work and writings of European men with little to no mention of women and their unique relationship to the Orient. This neglect limits the possibility of investigating what twentieth century British women found alluring about E.M. Hull's narrative if it is to be understood as a part of the Orientalist literary tradition. In recent decades, Orientalist and feminist scholars have attempted to fill these gaps.

Far from a simple tale, *The Sheik*'s shocking elements and conflicting themes of repression and liberation have inspired decades of scholarship dedicated to unpacking Hull's controversial novel. These complexities become apparent when looking through the intersection

¹⁴ The Orient refers to regions in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East described in opposition to the Occidental European West. Said recognized that Western accounts of the Orient served as a means of asserting and maintaining their imperial power.

¹⁵ Said describes a binary in which the East is often portrayed as feminized, infantilized, sensual, and regressive in contrast to Western dominance, masculinity, and progress.

of disciplines used to historicize the text in both British and American society. Feminist scholars throughout the 1960s and 1970s focused on Diana as a victim and labeled the work a narrative of “sadistic, patriarchal lust.”¹⁶ However, by the late eighties, historians such as Billie Melman worked to place the novel in its early twentieth century context of women’s sexual expression. Academics managed to study not how the book oppressed its characters, but rather how it offered liberation for women writers and readers.¹⁷¹⁸

Hull’s novel not only built off of Orientalist literary tradition, but also the long-standing and formulaic genre of Western romance. Pamela Regis included Hull’s novel in her book *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* as a part of a long and dignified literary tradition of romantic texts. Regis gives a fierce defense of the romance genre, fitting Hull’s novel into her discussion of form, function, and the impact of romantic literature on society.¹⁹ Yet, understanding the Middle East as an ideal place for romance and fantasy also requires understanding the novel’s role in British imperial and Orientalist discourse. Award winning writer and historian Hsu-Ming Teo brings together all of the discourses mentioned above and places them in front of the backdrop of World War I and the decline of the Ottoman Empire. Teo’s book, *Desert Passions: Orientalism and Romance Novels*, unpacks the centuries old Orientalist literary tradition and explores how it has impacted romantic writers of the Middle

¹⁶ Hsu-Ming Teo, “Historicizing *The Sheik*: Comparisons of the British Novel and the American Film,” *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, 2010.

¹⁷ The physical and sexual abuse Diana suffered in *The Sheik*, made it difficult for feminist scholars to see past the novel’s glorification of rape and women’s submission. Recognizing the problematic nature of sensationalizing sexual violence to a twenty-first century reading audience, this paper analyzes Diana’s rape as evidence for the ways in which the 1919 British public imagined the sexual licentiousness of Arab men and how they thought about white women’s sexuality.

¹⁸ Chow, “Around 1922,” 50.

¹⁹ Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*.

East to the present day.²⁰ However, just as Said's study of Orientalist literature required knowledge of Western men's imperial relationship to the East, uncovering the pleasures offered to white women in the desert calls for analysis of their distinct, physical engagement with imperialism.

What scholars have paid minimal attention to, and what the 1919 *Times Literary Supplement* review ignored, is that by the time Hull was writing, women *had* traveled alone in the desert. Even the provincial E.M. Hull embarked on journeys through Algeria both in her early life and after writing *The Sheik*.²¹ Past work historicizing *The Sheik* has contextualized it within an era of white women's growing physical presence in the Middle East. However, such comparisons have been limited to a brief paragraph, failing to extensively analyze Diana Mayo for who she was: a woman traveling alone in the Middle East. More importantly, no scholars have used direct textual comparisons between the memoirs of women travelers and *The Sheik* to unpack the novel's expression of imperial femininity.

The feminine imperial identity analyzed in this paper refers to the shared expressions of imperialism, gender, and domesticity in the writings of British women abroad.²² An essential

²⁰ Hsu-Ming Teo, *Desert Passions: Orientalism and Romance Novels*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press), 2012.

²¹ The sources used in this paper provide contradictory statements on when exactly E.M. Hull traveled to Algeria. Julia Bettinotti's article "Lust and Dust" claims that Hull had never even left England prior to writing *The Sheik*. Other biographical sources assert that she did travel to Algeria in her youth, though the details of those journeys are practically non-existent. After reading her 1926 memoir, *Camping in the Sahara*, I concluded that her familiarity with the geography and local leaders along with her use of phrases such as "still" and "remembered" provided sufficient evidence that her journey after *The Sheik* was not her first.

²² Melissa Lee Miller, "The Imperial Feminine: Victorian Women Travelers in Late Nineteenth-Century Egypt," dissertation, Bell Howell Information and Learning Company, 2000, pg. 3. Melissa Miller's dissertation "The Imperial Feminine" explores the ways in which Victorian women saw themselves in terms of race, gender, and class while traveling in the Middle East through comparative analysis. This paper uses a similar methodology of identifying common

element of women's imperial identity abroad relied on the narrative construction of their experiences. Their imperial presence increased exponentially in the nineteenth century, as did their decision to write down their experiences.²³ This drastic rise created an entire genre dedicated to women's imperial experiences, and with genre comes conventions and limitations. Therefore, to fully unpack white women's imperial and orientalist relationship to the Middle East, it is important to examine not only what they experienced, but also how they wrote about it. Using a cross-genre analysis, this paper dissects Hull's fiction and non-fiction works along with the letters of two of the most famed British women travelers to the Middle East: Lady Montagu and Gertrude Bell. It argues that Hull used *The Sheik* to push women's engagement with the Orient to its absolute limits, creating a space for the women of the British Empire to engage with the imperial and sexual pleasures of their imaginations.

A lack of reader responses makes it difficult to assess popular opinion in regards to Hull's novel. However, it is possible to analyze the ways in which *The Sheik* both fulfilled and challenged the British public's Orientalist expectations. To the growing reading public of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, shared ideas of British patriotism and Oriental fantasies were not limited to elite, intellectual literary spheres. Rather, Britons engaged with imperialism through widely circulated mediums like magazines and cheap fiction.²⁴ The travel narratives used for this analysis and *The Sheik* both demonstrate women travelers' awareness of the

threads in the fiction and non-fiction narratives of women travelers to define women's imperial identity and how it manifests in *The Sheik*.

²³ Ibid.

Between the years 1500 and 1821, European women travelers published a total of four books about their experiences in the Middle East. In the hundred years following 1821, over two hundred and forty-one books were written on the Middle East by one hundred and eighty-seven women travelers

²⁴ *Imperialism and Popular Culture*, ed. John M. Mackenzie, (London: Manchester University Press, 1986), 8-9.

objectives and concerns of the British public during the time in which they were writing.

Therefore, understanding these concerns becomes essential in accurately assessing the bold work Hull's desert romance does with regards to representations of white women in the Orient.

In order to effectively contextualize and analyze the significance of Hull's novel, this paper is divided into three chapters. Chapter one examines the imperial engagement of the early twentieth century reading public through popularized literary forms. Using *Nash's and Pall Mall Magazine's* inter and post-war publication, it demonstrates the ways in which Hull's potential readers shared larger cultural anxieties over masculinity and empire through exposure to advertisements and fiction. The chapter also provides a history of the public's engagement with Orientalist literature, laying the groundwork for understanding how the narratives of women travelers and Hull's novel were truly unique. Chapter two examines Diana Mayo as a traveler and compares her experiences to those of Gertrude Bell, Lady Montagu, and E.M. Hull herself. Though these women traveled for different purposes, their journeys share common themes and incidents that help define the feminine imperial identity of British women. They each found ways to assert their autonomy in the desert, helping to identify what made it so desirable. The final chapter looks at the restrictions faced by women travel writers and how *The Sheik* rids itself of those restrictions while easing post-war imperial anxieties. It also analyzes Hull's use of sex and miscegenation to push the bounds of imperial femininity while upholding notions of British imperial superiority

Imperial femininity was historically ignored in the Orientalist fiction of the British imagination. However, women's travel narratives revealed the power and pleasure they derived from their negotiation of their imperial, gendered, and domestic identities while in the Middle East. Hull, a woman who did travel to the passionate sands of the Algerian desert, inserted this

identity into her controversial and wildly popular novel of a white woman's sexual engagement in the Orient. The novel exposes that there is something pleasurable for women about partaking in an imperial identity. It is a pleasure that is uniquely feminine and one that women took active roles in as travelers, as writers, and as readers.

Chapter One: The Last Imperial Frontier

E.M. Hull's story of "the white passions of the desert" certainly sells itself as a romance fiction fit for the dark corners of local bookstores. Diana's love for her savage Arab captor is further sensualized through the passionate language used to describe their encounters:

She writhed in his arms as he crushed her to him in a sudden access of possessive passion. His head bent slowly down to her, his eyes burned deeper, and held immovable, she endured the first kiss she had ever received. And the touch of his scorching lips, the clasp of his arms, the close union with his warm, strong body robbed her of all strength, of all power and resistance.²⁵

Passages such as this make it difficult to resist the temptation of reducing *The Sheik* to what one *Bookman* reviewer described as "cave man appeal for bridge playing ladies."²⁶ However, E.M. Hull's work proved to be more than just a sex novel for her twentieth century reading audiences. Hull crafted a novel that both upheld and challenged the British public's imagination of the Orient. She also embraced the domestic and imperial anxieties of post-war Britain that permeated to all classes of society. This chapter discusses those anxieties by examining their presence in the inter and post-war publications of one of the main distributors of Hull's work, and the publisher of her 1922 interview with Frazier Hunt: *Nash's and Pall Mall Magazine*. It then explores the history of British engagement with stories of the Orient and how the landscape of the desert became the ideal space for reasserting British imperial dominance. By analyzing the commercial and literary engagement of Hull's readers in creating shared narratives of patriotism and Orientalist fantasies, *The Sheik's* contributions to the study of imperialism, particularly white women's participation in it, become all the more apparent.

The significance of *Nash's and Pall Mall Magazine* in this thesis comes from both its connection to E.M. Hull's work and also its role as a widely circulated serial publication; a

²⁵ Hull, *The Sheik*, 54.

²⁶ "The Bookman's Guide to Fiction," *The Bookman*, vol. 55, 295.

medium that reflected the rapidly growing reading public of the British Empire. The publication began in the late nineteenth century when reading and education became more accessible to a wide variety of readers. Legislation like the Education Act of 1870 worked to create a standard, compulsory education across England.²⁷ This established some of the first, widespread reading publics with basic literacy training. In addition, the increase standards of living meant that the British working class had more leisure time than ever before, combined with a growing disposable income to spend on things like books or magazine publications. Fiction subsequently became a widely popular genre because, as J.S. Bratton explains, “[it] had the advantage of a much more nearly universal availability: anyone educated to the level of basic literacy was accessible through a story.”²⁸ Such an increase in literacy and participation in British literature made the landscape of the fantastical Middle East available to an entirely new class of readers. *The Sheik*, accessible in language and affordable at prices as low as one shilling, thus had the potential for great success among middle and working classes who had already been introduced to the literature of the Orient.²⁹ Similarly, publications like *Nash’s and Pall Mall Magazine* catered to this new and diverse audience, striving to produce materials that would interest the general public.

From its beginning, *Nash’s* recognized and appealed to their audience by offering a wide range of content. An editor’s preface in the first issue in 1893 claimed, “the Magazine was started in the belief that there was a large and influential section of the reading public, who

²⁷ Chow, “Around 1922,” 4.

²⁸ J.S. Bratton, “Of England, Home and Duty: the Image of England in Victorian and Edwardian Juvenile Fiction” in *Imperialism and Popular Culture*, ed. John M. Mackenzie, (Manchester University Press: Manchester, England), 1986, 76.

²⁹ Chow, “Around 1922,” 51. The original price of *The Sheik* was 3 shillings and sixpence. As its popularity grew rapidly, booksellers lowered the price to 2 shillings and sixpence and eventually down to 1 shilling. This indicated that booksellers were not only aware of its popularity among working class readers, but that they also catered to that popularity.

would cordially welcome and heartily support a periodical that aimed at securing and maintaining a high and refined literary and artistic standard.”³⁰ The preface then attested for the magazine’s appeal to readers “who prefer a lighter form of literary food” and ability to gain “the approval and support of the intellectual public.”³¹ *Nash’s* recognized the varied interests of an increasingly educated reading audience and their desire for literary consumption. Ambitious in its beginning, the periodical featured a wide range of poetry, illustrations, short stories, and essays on the imperial and social concerns of the British public. This type of content persisted as the magazine entered the twentieth century. However, as time wore on, the number of pieces in each volume decreased, photographs replaced hand drawn illustrations, and by World War I advertisements had taken up more and more of the magazine’s pages. Though more commercial in its production, the intention of *Nash’s and Pall Mall* endured as it continued to thrive “by virtue of its individuality and of its merit.”³² It also remained accessible to reading audiences, instituting the policy of “the best, and the best only, at any price.”³³ Most notably, the magazine’s interwar and postwar publications illustrated Britons’ interests and anxieties concerning empire, gender, sex, and the Orient at the time Hull was writing.

The First World War made its way into *Nash’s* special interests section and advertisements, targeting both female and male reading audiences. For example, “Ovaltine” featured frequently as a tonic for repairing nerve tissues and curing neurasthenia.³⁴ This came at a time in which men returning from the front lines experienced shell shock and other psychological traumas. The magazine also featured articles calling for domestic mobilization and

³⁰ Lord Frederic Hamilton and Sir Douglas Straight, “Editor’s Preface,” *The Pall Mall Magazine*, 1893, iv-vii.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² “Notice to Our Readers,” *Nash’s and Pall Mall Magazine*, 1917, 435.

³³ “Why ‘Nash’s’ Wins,” *Nash’s and Pall Mall Magazine*, 1916, 503.

³⁴ “Ovaltine Feeds the Nerves,” *Nash’s and Pall Mall Magazine*, 1915, vi.

participation from its “patriotic” female readership. One article, “Some Axioms of War-Work,” chastised women who did not actively seek out war-relief work and included an illustration of women in various occupations such as nurses, secretaries, and community organizers.³⁵ *Nash’s* also issued its own advertisements, claiming that the magazine was a favorite on the front lines, “not only are the stories greatly enjoyed, but that the pictures—especially in the theatrical section—are highly prized, and always in demand for decorating dug-outs.”³⁶ Each issue contained portraits of beautiful women in costumes titled “Harrison Fisher Beauty Pictures,” which *Nash’s* encouraged young women to send to their “soldier friends” on the front lines.³⁷ The call for women’s participation in the war effort asked for domestic work while images of the front lines reminded them of why they were needed. Like all corners of British Society, the war had its impact on the publication along with the rising anxieties among Britons that persisted long after the war’s end.

In 1919, the British Empire was at its very largest following the awarded mandates in the Middle East by the League of Nations. However, these gains were accompanied by a growing unease about the Empire’s supremacy that had been engrained in the British national identity during the previous century.³⁸ *Nash’s and Pall Mall Magazine* published pieces that not only expressed this fear of a declining empire, but also a strong push to maintain patriotism and assert British superiority.

³⁵ “Axioms of War Work” *Nash’s and Pall Mall Magazine*, 1916, 25-26.

³⁶ “Why *Nash’s* Wins,” *Nash’s and Pall Mall Magazine*, 1916, v.

³⁷ “Harrison Fisher Beauty Pictures,” *Nash’s and Pall Mall Magazine*, 1916, vi.

³⁸ Philippa Levine, *The British Empire: Sunrise to Sunset*, (Pearson Education Limited, 2007) 103, 168.

British imperial relations destabilized after the war largely due to Britain’s heavy reliance on colonial forces. The extended length of the war along with the toll it took on soldiers led to dissension in settler and dependent colonies. Combined with rising forms of nationalism strengthened anti-imperial sentiments, many of these colonies pushed for more autonomy and sometimes complete independence.

The threat of imperial decline is best demonstrated by an advertisement for H.B. Gray and Samuel Turner's book *Eclipse or Empire (?)* that questions Britain's global prowess. It insists that the work of the British people cannot end after the war and encourages the "Mothers of our Empire's sons to see that their children get their rightful heritage."³⁹ This not only suggests that Empire's future was in question during the war, it also insists the imperial supremacy of Britain was rightfully earned and that all members had roles in its preservation. Like the call to women's war work, it emphasized women's role in protecting the Empire but through an exclusively domestic and maternal position. In contrast, the imperial men had a much more adventurous and stimulating call to action.

Though British superiority was a trademark of imperial identity, national publications like *Nash's* portrayed themes of expansion as a shared desire of all Britons. A poem titled "The Western Men" published in 1922 detailed a romantic ideal of imperial conquest:

The west wind sings in their tranced ears
The song of the far Beyond,
The sea's breath lures their souls to sail
On the tracks no man has coned
So they seek adventure, not knowing why
They follow those snitting gleams
For that is the weird of the Western men
Who are the Dreamers of Dreams.⁴⁰

The poem implies that destiny compels Western men, in this case British men, to explore and conquer lands untouched by civilization. It is a romantic notion, justifying colonial expansion while categorizing adventure as an exclusively male enterprise. However, in maintaining its reputation as a magazine for all reading tastes and interests, *Nash's a Pall Mall Magazine* also recognized the changing role of British women in the empire.

³⁹ "Eclipse or Empire?" *Nash's and Pall Mall Magazine*, 1916, vi-vii.

⁴⁰ "The Western Men," *Nash's and Pall Mall Magazine*, 1916, 14.

E.M. Hull's publication came at a time in which women were increasingly present in the public sphere, a phenomenon apparent in national publications. It its call for amateur writers and photographers, *Nash's* appealed to women, treating them as equal contributors for the "demand for stories" and for "freelance journalism."⁴¹ The magazine also featured articles like Elbert Hubbard's "Co-Education," which demanded young boys and girls be educated alongside one another. It claimed, "Since each live in this world, in this age of invention, where the drudgery of responsibilities of home, school, government and the business world is shared by women and men, each should have the same preparation which a school gives."⁴² Not only did this article recognize the changing roles of women, it also suggested that society needed to adjust and accommodate the growing mutuality of gender relations. The special interest section also kept its readers informed on the progress of women's suffrage.⁴³ However, far from radical, the magazine featured many articles about the perceived dangers of feminism. A short story titled "The Feminist" by Richard Washburn Child mocked its main character, Hester, in her attempt to reject all dependence on men. In this case, feminism was taken "too far" because "man had never made any such assertion about 'masculinism.'"⁴⁴ Masculinism was described as men's compulsory reaction to feminism, which they saw as a threat to "the rights and functions of manhood."⁴⁵

Though the significance of Hull's work rests in its expression of imperial femininity, it is important to discuss this heightened crisis of masculinity as it relates to British imperial interests and fantasies in the Middle East. The visibility of British anxieties over manhood surfaced in

⁴¹ "If You have any Aptitude for Writing," *Nash's and Pall Mall Magazine*, 1919, 312, pg iii.

⁴² "Co-Education," Elbert Hubbard," *Nash's and Pall Mall Magazine*, 1917, 513.

⁴³ "A Symposium on Woman Suffrage," *Nash's and Pall Mall Magazine*, 1913, 305.

⁴⁴ "The Feminist," *Nash's and Pall Mall Magazine*, 1919, 291.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

these national publications not only as a result of shifting gender relations, but also in the aftermath of a demoralizing and destructive conflict. Just as the brutality of the First World War damaged Britain's imperial ties, so too did it damage men's bodies and self-image.

Returning soldiers suffered psychological and physical injuries, some quite literally missing pieces of their former selves as more men survived severe war wounds. In the years following World War I, *Nash's* featured essays and advertisements highlighting the concern of masculinity in its most visible form; as an issue intrinsically tied to men's physical strength and appearance. The most frequent of these were advertisements for Lionel Strongfort's health regiment claiming to have "restored the Manhood [men] thought was lost for ever, and given them renewed vitality, ambition and power."⁴⁶ One ad insisted that all men could fix their flat-chests and flabby stomachs as well as other ailments like weakness, nervousness, rheumatism, and impotence.⁴⁷ This suggests that in addition to appearance, a tenant of masculinity included health and sexual performance. Virility as a signifier of manhood was not new to the post-war era. However, *Nash's* repeated running of these types of ads reflected the public anxiety surrounding it and its visibility to male and female readers. Another ad for the same service titled "When Marriage in a Crime" boldly claimed, "the man who marries a good, pure woman, knowing that he is not physically fit, commits the worst crime know to civilisation."⁴⁸ Ads like this described true manhood as something desired by men and pleasing to women, treating those without it as physically, mentally, and sexually inadequate.

The very visible concerns over preserving imperial power and English manhood, as illustrated by their prevalence in publications like *Nash's Magazine*, shaped the public and

⁴⁶ "Man, What's the Matter With You?," *Nash's and Pall Mall Magazine*, 1922, xxxv.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ "When Marriage is a Crime!" *Nash's and Pall Mall Magazine*, 1922, xxxii.

literary interests of Hull's potential readers. Though highlighted in articles and advertisements, many of these anxieties played out in the magazine's serial fiction sections. Though most stories featured funny and lighthearted accounts of domestic life others contained feats of love, adventure, and tales of British excellence. And no setting offered a better landscape for asserting notions of Western superiority and virility than the mysterious and exotic Oriental desert.

Those who subscribed to *Nash's and Pall Mall Magazine* had extensive exposure to and a desire for stories of the Orient as British presence in the Middle East steadily grew through the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The shift in imperial power between the West and the East was reflected in the changing characterization of the Middle East in the British imagination during the decline of the Ottoman Empire. This is best analyzed in the representations of Arab and Turkish men in orientalist literature. At the height of Ottoman power in the seventeenth century, the "Turks" were depicted as heretic and violent, often threatening white travelers as Barbary pirates or savage vagabonds. As British influence in the region increased and Turkish imperial power declined, eighteenth and nineteenth century Oriental men were imagined as childlike, uncivilized, and grotesquely sensual.⁴⁹ The anxious contempt that British writers had once expressed towards the Ottomans turned into a sensationalized fascination with the Orient.⁵⁰ Said began his work at this crucial shift, examining orientalist literature as a way of creating a patronizing and feminized image of the Middle East in order to reaffirm imperial power. With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and awarded mandates to the British and other European powers after World War I, the Middle East transformed into "the last imperial frontier."⁵¹ This increasing European presence combined with a longstanding history of

⁴⁹ Teo, *Desert Passions*, 38.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Laird *The History of British Women writers*, pg 170

literature fashioning the Orient as a space of decadence presented the perfect landscape for the British public to assert their imperial fantasies. One of the best ways to examine the British imagination of the Orient is to look at the most popular and widely read work of Oriental mythmaking.

Arabian Nights Entertainments, also known as *A Thousand and One Nights*, became one of the most popular and must-have books of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Each year produced countless replications and translations into nearly every European language.⁵² These editions assured readers that the entertainments gave the truest representation of the life and character of what one 1865 edition called, “a people once powerful enough to carry its civilization and its conquests into three of the greatest divisions of the globe.”⁵³ *Arabian Nights* presented readers with fantastical stories, enchantments and forbidden love while simultaneously asserting that these fables offered the most accurate depictions of life in the Middle East. Yet, the history of these stories in Europe, one that dates back centuries, complicates this claim of authenticity.

The first edition of *Arabian Nights* to make its way into Europe arrived after Frenchman Antione Galland’s travels through North Africa. The “authentic” folklore he collected, *Alf Layla wa-Layla*, dated back to the fourteenth century as his collection attempted to reveal a rich oral tradition of the Arabian storyteller.⁵⁴ Galland combined the folklore he collected with tales of his own invention that he believed helped to characterize Arab life as he saw it. Such stories like *Aladdin* and *Sinbad* actually became the most referenced and beloved tales in European popular

⁵² H.W. Dulcken, *Dalziels’ Illustrated Arabian Nights’ Entertainments*, (London: Ward, Lock, and Tyler), 1865, vol. II, pg. v.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Carrieanne Simonini Deloach, “Exploring Transient Identities: Deconstructing Depictions of Gender and Imperial Ideology in the Oriental Travel Narratives of Englishwomen, 1831-1915,” MA thesis, University of Central Florida, 2006, pg. 52.

culture.⁵⁵ The very origins of these widely read stories thus manifested from of what CarrieAnne Deloach describes as a double layer of fantasy, for not only did these instructional stories come from fables, but also an imperial imagination of fabricated fables. No two publications of these tales were equally alike, though all insisted to be true representations of the Arab way of life. Edward Lane published his English edition after his residence in Egypt for the duration of the 1830s. As one of the most well-read editions, his came with a travel guide that claimed the centuries-old stories of the Middle East and his “scientifically” recorded accounts of Arab life were one in the same.⁵⁶ The use of *Arabian Nights* as an authority on the Orient perpetuated the image of a timeless landscape, separate from the world of progress and modernization. Such an image, though fabricated by European writers, became imagined reality of the East in which British readers could project their imperial and Orientalist fantasies, even those based in sex.

Often times, stories of the Arabian desert perpetuated notions of Oriental sensuality and lust. The most notorious of these editions came from Richard Burton in 1850 in which the images of the “lustful Turk” and his harem of concubines that circulated in the nineteenth century came to life in vivid passages of “beautiful handmaids” and “high-breasted virgins.”⁵⁷ The stories of Burton’s edition involved adulterous wives, cross-dressing, and mixed race orgies. One particular scene in the frame narrative, in which the Shah witnesses his brother’s wife’s sexual encounter with a black slave, demonstrates the British fascination and disgust with miscegenation as an act of sexual excess and the suggestion of moral depravity in Arabs:

And then sprang with a drop leap from one of the trees a big slobbering blackamoor with rolling eyes which showed the whites, a truly hideous sight. He walked boldly up to her and threw his arms round her neck while she embraced him warmly. Then he bussed her and winding his legs round hers, as a button loop

⁵⁵ Deloach, “Exploring Transient Identities, pg. 52.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Richard Burton, *The Arabian Nights*, (Informations Inc, 2000), 2.

clasps a button, he threw her and enjoyed her...till day began to wane... and the blackamoor slave dismounted from the Queen's breast.⁵⁸

In Burton's "plain and literal translation" of *Arabian Nights*, the Orient and its inhabitants are reduced props for sexual debauchery and spectacle. Nevertheless, the legacy of *Arabian Nights Entertainments* provided a shared, imagined vision of the Orient for British readers on which they could project their imperial fantasies. That legacy was present both commercially and literarily in *Nash's* publication.

Orientalist ideas of decadence were presented to *Nash's* readers through various advertisements. Most prominent were ads for White City Cigarettes and Wana-Ranee Perfume featuring Oriental décor and the romantic, desert landscape untouched by civilization.⁵⁹⁶⁰ The Wana-Ranee advert in particular played off of the British imagination of fantasy and decadence, praising the "mystic" qualities in their "dream of Oriental Fragrance" while also including illustrations of beautiful women in exotic and revealing clothing. The imagined, luxurious version of the Orient not only reached *Nash's* British public through commodities of mass consumption like rugs or perfumes.⁶¹ It also presented itself in stories of white men using the sexual excess and mysteries of the Orient to reaffirm imperial and masculine power.

Nash's and Pall Mall Magazine featured a series of romantic fiction by American author and screenwriter, Achmed Abdullah, between the year 1921 and 1922. His three short stories "Most Just Among Moslems," "Decadence," and "The Tale the Drum Told," all shared similar

⁵⁸ Ibid, 4

⁵⁹ "White City Cigarettes," *Nash's and Pall Mall Magazine*, 1919, 39.

⁶⁰ "Wana-Ranee," *Nash's and Pall Mall Magazine*, 1919, xv.

⁶¹ Sarah Garland, "Ornamentalism: Desire, disavowal, and displacement in E.M. Hull's *The Sheik*," *Must Read: Rediscovering American Bestsellers*, 2012, 1989.

plots of white men's sexual and imperial exploits in the desert.⁶²⁶³⁶⁴ Each American or European hero found himself entranced by the sensuousness of Africa and its beautiful Arab women. One of the men, an artist, described his feelings for the Orient its mysterious female inhabitant as such:

Horizons, crowds, somnolence, tranquility, then a sudden blazing and glaring, there in a nutshell, was Arab Africa as he had seen and felt it...And it was all expressed in this woman, veiled, enigmatic, who had glanced at him over her shoulder.⁶⁵

In these stories, native women served as symbols of the desert's erotic and untouched pleasures, while becoming the sole fixation of the white traveler's imperial desires. The desire to see these women unveiled comes through in many of the narratives as metaphor for their desire to uncover the hidden mysteries of the untouched desert landscape. In describing his first encounter with a woman named Janina, one man claimed, "her kaftan, caught by the tail end of the desert breeze, slid to one side, exposing a soft shoulder."⁶⁶ Another man peered over the rooftops below him in hopes of seeing his own fixation, Fathouma, remove her veil and expose her "rich, dark beauty."⁶⁷ However, Achmed Abdullah's stories revealed more than white men's eroticization of Arab women. They also presented an opportunity for the heroes, embodiments of Western masculinity, to prove their imperial superiority.

The central conflict of these short stories presented itself once the hero discovered that the dream woman of his Orientalist fantasy already belonged to the harem of a prominent Arab leader. This allowed *Nash's* readers to entertain thoughts, not only of Arab primitiveness, but

⁶² Achmed Abdullah, "Most Just Among Moslems," *Nash's and Pall Mall Magazine*, 1921, 386-403.

⁶³ Achmed Abdullah, "Decadence," *Nash's and Pall Mall Magazine*, 1922, 224-251.

⁶⁴ Achmed Abdullah, "The Tale the Drum Told," *Nash's and Pall Mall Magazine*, 1922, 2-25.

⁶⁵ Abdullah, "Decadence," 226.

⁶⁶ Abdullah, "The Tale the Drum Told," 8.

⁶⁷ Abdullah, "Most Just Among Moslems," 392.

also white men's physical ability to rescue the Arab women from their morally depraved and savage husbands. One man professed, "he only had just enough resolution to resist the mad impulse to rush to Sidi Mahmoud's house, to batter in the gates, to take Fathouma by force."⁶⁸ These stories were littered with illustrations of the white traveler embracing the dark, bare-shouldered, and unveiled desert damsel against the vast and primitive Oriental landscape. They told stories of lust, desire, savagery, and Western imperial power that also permeated throughout Hull's various desert romances. But where were the images of white women in the embrace of the noble Bedouin Arab? Where were the Diana Mayos who brazenly traversed the desert as representatives of empire?

Just as the advertisements and the fictional stories of *Nash's and Pall Mall Magazine* demonstrate the British public's awareness of postwar imperial, sexual, and gender anxieties, equally important is its lack of representations of British women as agents of empire. Their role is prescribed as solely domestic with no recognition that women had been traveling to the Middle East for centuries. In her 1922 interview, E.M. Hull was photographed in the domestic realm of her own home, ordinary and provincial. Meanwhile, images of a man named Dean Cornwell during his journey to the Algerian desert littered the pages of Hull's interview. It even concluded with a statement on how Cornwell, an illustrator for Hull's work, "lived with the Arabs, ate their food, slept in their caravans" and made sketches of the "desert damsel."⁶⁹ Absent are the boyishly dressed Diana Mayos and the strong, independent Bedouin Arabs that captivated women readers across the Western literary world. Because of this glaring absence, this thesis must unpack those captivating elements of Hull's work by analyzing women's unique experiences of empire abroad and what they found so captivating about the Orient.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 395.

⁶⁹ Hunt, "The Woman Who Wrote *The Sheik*," 126.

Chapter Two: Penetrating the Desert

*“This thrilling and dramatic story, by a writer who has penetrated farther into the Algerian desert than any other woman explorer, will, by the glamour of its incidents and scenes, hold the reader in its spell from the first page to the last.”*⁷⁰

The *Times* published this quote as a part of an advertisement for E.M. Hull’s “thrilling” new sequel *The Sons of the Sheik*. In contrast to the domestic, matronly Mrs. Hull from her 1922 interview, this ad presents E.M. Hull as a writer and an explorer worthy of comparison to other famed travelers. Aside from its sexual implications, her “penetration” into Algeria becomes her authority on both the desert and its narrative construction. It is unclear whether the review refers to E.M. Hull’s actual encounters in Algeria or is made simply in reference to her vivid prose. Either way, the review intends to paint Hull as a pioneer, a woman traveler and an authority on the life and nature of the desert. Therefore, her accounts of the Orient deserve to be compared to those of the women who have long been recognized as pioneers of travel. Furthermore, to demonstrate *The Sheik*’s expression of a feminine imperial identity for women readers, Diana Mayo must also have a place in this comparison, for she too had penetrated farther than any woman traveler into the unknown and exotic Oriental desert.

What defines the experience of white women in the Middle East? How do the narratives of these women differ from the writings of their male counterparts? In answering these questions, this chapter explores the characteristics of imperial femininity and more importantly, how women abroad found pleasure in it. E.M. Hull’s book was published on the tail end of what many scholars have called “a golden age of women’s travel writing.” The number of women able to journey east increased exponentially in the mid-nineteenth century as they gained more

⁷⁰ “Eveleigh Nash & Grayson, Ltd.,” *The Times* (London, England), Friday, Jan. 22, 1926; pg. 17; Issue 44176.

financial independence and as centralization efforts in the Middle East and European interference deemed the region safer for travel.⁷¹ What was once a rare opportunity for the wives of ambassadors and missionaries became a more accessible chance for the wealthy women of Europe to travel for the purpose of pleasure, adventure, and even employment.⁷² Though absent from national publications such as *Nash's and Pall Mall Magazine*, by the end of World War I women had not only traveled beyond the domestic boundaries of the Empire but also provided written accounts of their experiences and the what exactly they found so desirable about the Orient.

Past scholarship on *The Sheik* has often neglected critical analysis of how women wrote about their experiences in the Middle East. Though they have contextualized Diana Mayo within the age of women travelers, the absence of comparative textual analysis leaves a gap in understanding the distinctiveness of Hull's novel. More importantly, it minimizes Diana's role as an imperial woman. The lack of attention paid to the non-fiction accounts of women travelers in relation to *The Sheik* becomes even more surprising considering its author actually traveled to Algeria.⁷³ It is therefore important to establish that E.M. Hull did not write *The Sheik* based off invention alone; she had real life experiences as an imperial woman in the Middle East that informed her desert fantasy.

Mysteriously enough, Hull's travels to Algeria remain largely absent from discourse on her writing, partly due to the fact that her only documented travels occurred after her launch into

⁷¹ Susan L. Blake, "A Woman's Trek: What difference does gender make?" in *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, ed. Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel, (Indiana University Press, 1992), 27.

⁷² Bettinotti, "Lust and Dust," pg. 188

⁷³ George Malcolm Johnson, "Hull [*née* Henderson], Edith Maude (1880-1947), 2014.

literary stardom.⁷⁴ Little is known about her journeys to the region as a young woman.

Fortunately, Hull embarked on another trek in 1926 using the lucrative commission from her novel. Her daughter, Cecil, accompanied her and as they traveled, Hull wrote her own travel memoir, *Camping in the Sahara* to document their encounters.⁷⁵ Hull and her daughter roamed the desert, taking notes and photographs of their experiences while being led by their own Arab caravan. The memoir gives a nonfiction account of Hull's fascination with the "Arab and his desert" and yet, little scholarship has been dedicated to analysis of Hull's memoirs and whether it lived up to her thrilling desert fantasies.

None of Hull's publications ever rivaled the success of *The Sheik*, and through its omission from scholarship, it can be assumed that *Camping in the Sahara* had little effect on her reputation as an authority of the desert.⁷⁶ Ellen Turner challenged this in her article "Desert Romance Meets Desert Reality," arguing that Hull's memoirs served as more of a backdrop on which she could "bring to life" her fictitious ideas of the Orient. In her analysis, Turner draws attention to *Camping in the Sahara*'s contribution in constructing the myth of the desert, acknowledging the travelogue as an important indicator of orientalist fantasies and insisting, "the setting of *Camping in the Sahara* is no more real than the desert of Hull's novels."⁷⁷ This article, though exhibiting travel literature as a form of cultural mythmaking, makes the comparison of texts through the connection of the author and her specific construction of characters and setting. Turner ignores the historically shaped cultural and imperial threads that run through both texts. This chapter will work to establish a connection between Hull's fictional works to her travel

⁷⁴ Ellen Turner, "E.M. Hull's *Camping in the Sahara*: desert romance meets desert reality," *Studies in Travel Writing*, 19.2, 2015, pg. 127.

⁷⁵ Johnson, "Hull, Edith Maude."

⁷⁶ Turner, "E.M. Hull's *Camping in the Sahara*," pg. 128.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, pg. 142.

narrative while also using the writings of other famed women travelers, making the connection not of authorship, but of a shared imperial identity these women participated in while physically present in the Middle East. If *The Sheik* suggests that there is something desirable for Western women in the deserts of Algeria, then unpacking that desire requires a study of women who traveled to the Orient and engaged with the freedoms it had to offer.

The other pioneers that are analyzed in this chapter include two of the most well-known British travelers to the Middle East: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762) and Gertrude Bell (1868-1926). These women, along with E.M. Hull, embodied separate generations of British women who traveled during varying stages of British imperial relations with the Middle East. Lady Wortley Montagu, daughter of the first duke of Kingston, traveled to the Ottoman Empire from August of 1716 to July of 1718 while accompanying her husband on his ambassadorship to Constantinople.⁷⁸ The letters Lady Mary wrote during her time in Turkey serve as one of the few written accounts of women travelers in the Middle East prior to the nineteenth century. More importantly, her letters provide one of the first historical examples of British women contradicting the written accounts of male travelers.⁷⁹

Gertrude Bell's travels to the Middle East were frequent in what began as touristic interest in the region and soon turned into expeditions of archeological and diplomatic study for

⁷⁸ Isobel Grundy. "Montagu, Lady Mary Wortley [*née* Lady Mary Pierrepont] (bap. 1689, d. 1762)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (2004).

⁷⁹ This paper uses an edition of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's letters edited by her grandson. The late eighteenth century edition includes footnotes either confirming or invalidating the legitimacy of various claims made by Montagu. Without access to the original publication of her letters, it is difficult to assess if this edition altered its contents. However, her most famous and controversial claims remain intact, as do her detailed passages on the pleasures she observed during her travels. For the purposes of this paper, I believe the edited edition serves as a reliable primary source.

the British Empire.⁸⁰ Born into wealth with an educated upbringing, she traveled to Constantinople, Jerusalem, Damascus, Aleppo, Mesopotamia, and Arabia during her lifetime. Her multiple explorations spanned before and after the First World War while acting on behalf of British interests.⁸¹ Her descriptions of the desert and its inhabitants reveal her travels not only as acts of duty, but also of intrigue and adventure. The biographical information of E.M. Hull's life is much more vague, specifically concerning her time abroad prior to *Camping in the Sahara*. Though certainly wealthy enough to afford travel as the wife of a gentleman farmer, Hull came from more humble means than Bell and Montagu.⁸² Also unlike her predecessors and more like her fictional heroine, Hull traveled for the purposes of pleasure and adventure alone.

This paper studies the fictional Diana Mayo as another traveler, looking at her use of language, her actions, and the ways in which she embodies imperial femininity. In comparing her experience of a white woman in the desert to the not-as-erotic, but equally fantastical, narratives of women travelers, it reveals what made the desert landscape ideal for women to live out their imperial fantasies. Not only did women travel beyond the borders of Britain, they also had their own ways of exerting imperial superiority and claiming the desert as a space in which they could do so.

Montagu, Bell, and Hull's narrative constructions of imperial femininity depends on three factors: a shared awareness of their active roles as participants and beneficiaries of empire, their ability to claim power and pleasure via their gender, and the tension between condemning and desiring the savage spectacle of the Orient. Their writing both upheld and subverted traditional

⁸⁰ Liora Lukitz, "Bell, Gertrude Margaret Lowthian (1868-1922)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (2008).

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² George Malcolm Johnson, "Hull [*née* Hendsen], Edith Maude (1880-1947)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (2014).

Orientalist and imperialist narratives. It situated itself between the civilized world of the West and the barbarous, adventurous landscape of the East. And by the twentieth century, it claimed autonomy and pleasure in a space largely imagined as a frontier for men's imperial desires. However, the ways in which these four women acted on or expressed imperial concerns directly depended on the British Empire's relationship to the Orient during their time abroad.

Like the orientalist literature of Said's study, the experiences of women travelers and their imperial objectives while traveling were directly impacted by the shifting relationship between the British Empire and the Middle East. Lady Mary Montagu journeyed to the Ottoman Empire when it encompassed parts of North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and stretched so far west as to threaten Austrian borders. This meant that the imperial concerns and attitudes of the British Empire were drastically different from that of the post World War I era of Bell, Hull, and Mayo's travels. Though still imagined as a space of decadence and sexual excess, European travelers relied more on demonizing the backwardness of Oriental life rather than asserting imperial dominance. Meanwhile, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century British Empire sought to prove its superiority and maintain imperial influence. Women travelers were not only aware of British imperial interests, but they also acted on their behalf. The very presence of these women abroad subverted the notion that their role in the Empire was purely domestic. However, they also acted on behalf of their Englishness, astutely aware of the imperial desires and anxieties shared by the public back home.

Gertrude Bell's journeys to the Middle East represent the most direct instance of women's awareness of empire. Not only did she collect geographical and archeological data for British interference in Arabia, she also was accredited for aiding in the creation of modern Iraq. Bell's participation in British interference is best exhibited through her close friendship with

King Faysal of Iraq, Britain's selected pawn for maintaining imperial control in the region. She even compared the methods of British intervention in the Middle East to their colonial rule in India, demonstrating her knowledge of colonial policy.⁸³ Her role as an employed, political agent of empire was as rare as it was impactful. However, a woman traveler did not need to be a direct agent of the British Empire in order to act on or express her Englishness.

In accompanying her husband on a mission of diplomacy and negotiation rather than expansion, Lady Mary Montagu's Turkish Embassy Letters appeared more observational than critical. In spite of her husband's role as an ambassador, Montagu's narrative often strayed away from political discussion in favor of the pleasures she experienced abroad. However, she still found ways to assert her role as an imperial woman. She recorded her discussion over religion with an effendi named Achmet Beg, specifying the difference between Catholic Rome and Protestant England. She noted, "The ridicule of transubstantiation appeared very strong to him.—Upon comparing our creeds together, I am convinced that...it would be very easy to persuade the generality to Christianity."⁸⁴ Montagu expressed a desire for the spread of Anglo-Christian ideology even though she did not directly engage in missionary work. She even engaged in intellectual trade while in Turkey. She observed the practice of inoculation for the smallpox virus and had her own children undergo the procedure. She also worked with a local surgeon to bring the practice back to England, sparking a countrywide controversy over its safety

⁸³ *A Woman in Arabia: the Writings of the Queen of the Desert*, ed. Georgina Howell, (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2015), 23.

⁸⁴ *Letters and Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, The*, ed. James Stuart Wortley Mackenzie and W. Moy Thomas, (London: George Bell and Sons, 1887), 165.

for children.⁸⁵ These instances demonstrated how Montagu acted on behalf of the empire and expressed a loyalty to her Englishness in spite of her fascination with the Orient.

Like Lady Montagu, E.M. Hull and Diana Mayo's travels to Algeria served as a means for adventure and pleasure. And yet, their narratives revealed even more awareness of the state of the British Empire. The division of the Middle East into various mandates following World War I allowed countries like Britain and France to reap the benefits of an imperial presence without the cost of asserting direct control. However, Hull chose Algeria as her setting in both her real life and in her fictional novel, a region colonized by the French Government. This further distanced Hull and Mayo from any direct imperial expectations. That distance allowed them to express British excellence in a way that criticized other European powers.

Hull also found herself discussing the state of the British Empire and its positive imperial effects with the local Arab leaders during her travels. In one instance, a local Caid, Mohammed Seghir, asked her if Australia had gained independence from Britain. Hull felt compelled to correct him, "Politely but firmly we claimed the great southern continent as part of the British Empire."⁸⁶ The Caid then exclaimed, "you English, you own the world!"⁸⁷ Hull also wrote that he asked her the question many Arabs had posed to her, "How does the French administration of Algeria compare with the British rule in India?" Though she claimed to have approached the subject delicately, her memoirs contain repetitive statements on the ineffectiveness of French control in the region.⁸⁸ In a single conversation, Hull managed to reaffirm the expansiveness of the British Empire and also argue its ability to better manage

⁸⁵ Grundy, "Montagu, Lady Mary Wortley."

⁸⁶ E.M. Hull, *Camping in the Sahara*, (London: Eveleigh Nash & Grayson, 1926), 48.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Hull, *Camping in the Sahara*, 65-66.

imperial and colonial projects. The same themes appear in her fictional heroine's role as an imperial woman.

Diana Mayo undermined French colonial authority as a way of bolstering British superiority. As Ahmed's tribe rides furiously across the desert to capture her, Diana described her first emotion as "one of contempt for an administration that made possible such an attempt so near civilisation."⁸⁹ This depicted the French Government as not only ineffective, but also submissive to the wild Bedouins of the desert. Before entering Algeria, Diana's role as a woman of empire allowed her to adventure into all types of places and yet she claimed to have, "wanted the desert more than any of them."⁹⁰ She romantically described the desert landscape as something she had dreamed of seeing, its feathery outline and infinite horizon filling her "with a feeling of gladness that was fuller and deeper than anything that she had been conscious of before."⁹¹ Her language echoes the words used to describe Western men and their desire for adventure and expansion in *Nash's and Pall Mall Magazine*. In addition, by describing the desert as the ultimate destination for her travels, Diana reaffirms the role of the Middle East as the last imperial frontier.

Diana, like her fellow female travelers, openly embraced the imperial part of her identity abroad, aware of the rank afforded to her by her skin color and national origins. When examining her caravan, Diana judged the men by their mouths because, "eyes were untrustworthy evidences of character in an Oriental, for they usually wavered under a European's."⁹² She took pride in and embraced the imperial part of her identity abroad, as did the women travelers before her.

⁸⁹ Hull, *The Sheik*, 48.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 15.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 33-34.

⁹² *Sheik*, 36.

Though Montagu, Bell, Hull, and Mayo all used their imperial roles to claim authority in the Middle East, the ways in which they expressed and used their gender provide the most vivid example of how these women understood their identity in the Orient. This is best illustrated in their observations of Turkish and Arab women, more specifically, their clothing.

Lady Mary Montagu wielded the power of her gender by gaining access to the most elusive and exotic element of the Orient for British readers during the eighteenth century: the harem.⁹³ Her accounts of this mysterious enclosure are arguably what made her Turkish Embassy Letters famous through her explicit descriptions of the soft sofas covered with embroidered cushions and the naked bodies of the women who sat on them. Though she emphasized the sensuality and decadence of the harem, she also challenged the myths of degeneracy and sexual violence by praising the politeness and modesty of the harem women and their servants.⁹⁴ She took great pride in her intellectual authority on a subject previously dictated by men, telling her reader, “You will perhaps be surprised at an account so different from what you have been entertained with by the common voyage-writers, who are very fond of speaking of what they don’t know.”⁹⁵ In this instance, it was not her imperial status, but rather her position as a woman that allowed her to have this special access to both the harem and the

Montagu’s boldest claim came from her descriptions of Turkish women’s freedom in the Ottoman Empire, writing “’tis very easy to see they have more liberty than we [the women of the

⁹³ European men were not granted access to harems, leaving them to speculate and invent stories about what happened inside. This led to tales of sexual slavery, sexual excess, violence, and jealousy that imprinted on Western imaginations for centuries. This also helped create the narrative trope of white men rescuing enslaved women from their master’s harem, the trope of choice for Achmed Abdullah in *Nash’s and Pall Mall Magazine*.

⁹⁴ *Letters and Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, 162-163.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 189

English court] have.”⁹⁶ In fact, she pointed to their required dress in which they are completely covered, something typically interpreted as a sign of Eastern women’s oppression, and saw it as a means of freedom in the Ottoman Empire. She claimed the coverings made it “impossible for the most jealous husband to know his wife when he meets her; and no man dare either touch or follow a woman in the street.”⁹⁷ Their anonymity protected them in public, according to Montagu, who made a point of using her own dress as a way of comparison to Turkish women. She wrote that her riding habit befuddled the women she met and that they assumed her husband forced her to wear the restrictive fabric and metal contraptions.⁹⁸ In this way, Montagu used the discussion of women’s clothing to distinguish her from the women of the Turkish court, while describing the harem attire as not only erotic, but also liberating.

As women travelers of the twentieth century, Bell, Hull, and Mayo understood their position as Englishwomen in the desert quite differently than Lady Montagu. Not only had their imperial relations with the Middle East changed, but also their positions as women within the Empire. They traveled during a time in which white women actively sought participation in public spaces and when words like “feminism” circulated in national publications. Though certainly aware of the domestic constraints on women back home, their descriptions of Arab women served as an opportunity to both critique the regressive nature of the Orient and to further emphasize the freedoms that the desert had to offer Western women.

Where Montagu’s testimony subverted traditional orientalist notions of harem women’s sexual oppression and primitive lifestyles, the twentieth century woman traveler repeatedly used the seclusion of women as markers for Eastern backwardness. Their statements were often ones

⁹⁶ Ibid. 162.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 175

⁹⁸ Ibid, 162.

of pity or speculation over how repressed and lowly the local women must have felt as slaves to the will of Arab men. For example, during her travels through Baghdad in 1918, Gertrude Bell wrote, “The poor thing never leaves the house or sees anyone. There are many families where the women are entirely secluded. I’m bound to say they hate it, and my heart aches with boredom when I think of them.”⁹⁹ Similarly, Diana Mayo used the seclusion of local women to further emphasize her own independence as she wondered “if they ever rebelled against the drudgery and restrictions that were imposed upon them, if they ever longed for the freedom that she was reveling in.”¹⁰⁰ In fact, the only physical representations of Arab women in Diana’s travels were the shapeless mounds of fabric on camelback and the jealous harem woman senselessly murdered on the whim of her grotesque husband. For women travelers, the covered and secluded Arab woman became the ultimate sign of the Orient’s primitive and regressive ways, particularly when directly compared to white women’s physical freedom in the desert.

Bell, Hull, and Mayo hardly conversed or interacted with Arab women during their journeys, suggesting their statements of Eastern women’s oppression were based off of their own assumptions. They consistently distinguished themselves from the women of the desert, even transcending traditional binaries of masculinity and femininity to do so. In 1920, Gertrude Bell wrote, “It isn’t any good trying to make friends through the women—if the women were allowed to see me they would veil before me if I were a man. So you see I appear to be too female for one sex and too male for the other.”¹⁰¹ Bell took great pleasure in her desert attire and often

⁹⁹ *A Woman in Arabia*, 24.

¹⁰⁰ Hull, *The Sheik*, 35.

¹⁰¹ *A Woman in Arabia*, 22.

described her appearance and actions in the Middle East as “masculine.”¹⁰² In her earlier travels, she quickly took note of the privileges and comforts her clothing afforded her:

The chief comfort of this journey is my masculine saddle, both to me and my horse. Never, never again will I travel on anything else; I haven't known real ease in riding till now. Till I speak the people always think I'm a man and address me as Effendim! You mustn't think I haven't got a most elegant and decent divided skirt, however, but as all men wear skirts of sorts too, that doesn't serve to distinguish me. [Deraa, April 30, 1900].¹⁰³

Though she assured readers her skirt kept her feminine decency intact, Bell exemplified her style of dress as a means of asserting superiority through her gender and claimed elements of masculinity. She even wrote that if she were to follow local expressions of gender and veil, it would be a “tacit admission of inferiority” that would deny her the access to public space and important Arab leaders she enjoyed so liberally.¹⁰⁴ Unlike Lady Montagu, Bell used her gender to distance herself from local women and emphasize her own superiority as an imperial woman.

Diana accentuated her rejection of femininity, love, and marriage through her boyish riding clothes as she ventured off into the unknown desert. Throughout her time as Ahmed's captive, her riding attire continued to serve as a source of strength. For example, in the morning after her capture and rape, she chose to put back on her boots and trousers because “in them she felt more able to face what might be before her...in them she would feel herself again—Diana the boy, not the shivering piece of womanhood that had been born with tears and agony last night.” Her change of dress throughout *The Sheik* reflected her oscillation between masculinity and femininity. She wore her riding clothes in her most defiant moments against Ahmed, during

¹⁰² For the purposes of comfort and practicality, desert travels called for women to dress in loose fitted clothing, riding boots, and riding skirts or trousers. Some scholars have described this style of dress as epitomizing notions of the “New Woman,” trading traditional ideas of femininity for clothes that were more masculine in appearance.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 64

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 22

her horseback rides across the desert, and in her encounter with the horrific Ibraheim Omair.¹⁰⁵ In contrast, she wore “womanly” clothing when she submitted to the passions of Ahmed and fully indulged in the pleasures only the most untouched parts of the desert had to offer.

The travel narratives of Bell, and Hull reveal that the Orient had more pleasures to afford them than a chance to wear riding boots and exert imperial and gendered superiority. They had the opportunity to see the desert of the British imagination, uncivilized and wild. For the women who assuredly grew up reading *Arabian Night's Entertainments*, the spectacle of the untouched desert and its inhabitants proved too enticing to ignore. Their writings reveal the pleasure they reaped from witnessing what they perceived to be the “unadulterated East.” And yet their role as imperial women insisted on their condemnation of it. The result was a tension between asserting their superiority as Englishwomen abroad and their desire to witness the timeless, primitive, and pleasurable East of their own orientalist fantasies.

Lady Mary Montagu also expressed the tension of imperial femininity in her bold claims that challenged Western customs and her commitment to her identity as an Englishwoman. She praised the Ottomans for their privileging of the senses through decadent music, drink, poetry, and food, suggesting Western custom should follow suit. She also committed to learning Arabic so she could fully immerse herself in the romance of the language.¹⁰⁶ However, she soon curbed her lessons for fear of “losing [her] English.”¹⁰⁷ She also claimed to have refused the harem women’s request that she wear their clothes and join them in the Turkish baths. Montagu

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. 220.

While riding in the desert near the end of the novel, Diana is once again captured but this time by a rival sheik, Ibraheim Omair. Ahmed then saves her, defeating his enemy and nearly dying himself. Ibraheim embodies all that is repulsive about the Orient, a stark opposite to Ahmed’s strength and virility.

¹⁰⁶ *Letters and Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, 156-157.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 227.

expressed her admiration for and desire to participate in the decadent and sensual Orient she described; to live according to life's pleasures rather than restrict them. However, she continually undermined those desires in favor of her English identity.

The tensions riddled throughout Bell and Hull's memoirs are even more apparent, given that their status as twentieth century Western women compelled them to criticize the backwardness of Oriental life. E.M. Hull attributed the uneducated and savage nature of the Algerian Arab to the rapid spread of Islam in the region. She wrote, "if [Islam] is to continue, [it] must continue along more modern and progressive lines" and "promote intellectualism and foster individual independence of thought."¹⁰⁸ She also blamed the French Government for their lack of direct and effective influence, advocating for the spread of Westernized progress. Similarly, Bell expressed her delight when several Arab leaders brought their wives to dinner, citing it as "a great step forward" in the progression of the people.¹⁰⁹ Both women strongly condemned the regressive cultural practices they observed, a tool often used to justify imperial intervention. However, their travels also gave them a chance to project their Orientalist fantasies of adventure and spectacle onto the desert landscape.

Bell and Hull's memoirs both reveal a desire for the Orient to remain untouched, wild, and free from their own civilizing influence. As E.M. Hull and her daughter began their journey in 1926, she claimed they had been warned that "progress and civilization were advancing into the desert by leaps and bounds" and exclaimed "it was cheering to find that the town was still unaltered and unspoiled."¹¹⁰ Bell echoed this language during her time in Arabia, "I imagine that there are few place left wherein you can see the unadulterated East in its habit as it has lived for

¹⁰⁸ Hull, *Camping in Sahara*, 40.

¹⁰⁹ *A Woman in Arabia*, 24.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 9.

centuries and centuries.”¹¹¹ This desire for encountering visual representations of the unchanging East extended to their descriptions of the people and customs. One vignette in *Camping in the Sahara* captured this imperial and orientalist tension as E.M. Hull recalled coming across *les plongeurs* early in their journey.¹¹² These men dove to the bottom of wells in order to clear out the mud and other substances from obstructing the flow of water. She described their skeleton-like bodies, explaining that the men starved themselves in order to fit into the small enclosure. She even witnessed a young man perform the task and wrote about the physical toll it took on his body.¹¹³ Simultaneously, as she detailed its dangers, she lamented that improved irrigation systems had left only twelve divers in Algeria, thanking fortune for allowing her to witness a custom she had believed to be just a “pleasant myth” of the desert.¹¹⁴ This demonstrates a disconnect between Hull’s call for Western influence and her undeniable pleasure and fascination in witnessing what she considered to be the authentic nature of Algerian life.

The infantilized image of Arab men that pervaded Orientalist literature of the nineteenth century is riddled throughout the texts of Bell, Hull, and even Diana’s travels. And yet equally prominent is their fascination with the spectacle of the strong, barbaric, and uncivilized Bedouin Arab. Hull continually referred to Algerians as childlike, impatient, and unenlightened, while claiming they could be “absolutely devoted once they have given their affection.”¹¹⁵ Her pet-like description of the men in her caravan suggests that she believed Arabs were easily malleable to imperial designs, but she also held admiration for those free from all Western influences:

These are the genuine nomads, the true wanderers of the desert who live always in the open, knowing no other home than the low felt tents in

¹¹¹ *A Woman in Arabia*, 129.

¹¹² Hull, *Camping in the Sahara*, 17.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

which they are born and live and die...Untouched by civilization, primitive, hardy and independent, they are the best type of Arab and, physically, the finest specimens of their race.¹¹⁶

Not only did these “wild-eyed desert men” serve as a romanticized vision of the desert, but they also were physical marvels that embodied freedom and masculine power. In Bell’s description of Arabic dialects, she expressed her joy in hearing the “virile and splendid speech of the Bedouin.”¹¹⁷ In terms of these men, twentieth century women travelers expressed a desire not to tame their wildness and savagery, but to witness it against the backdrop of the unaltered Middle Eastern landscape.

The physical spectacle of the Bedouin Arab stands as a stark contrast to the mysterious desert damsels of Abdullah’s romantic fiction. Rather than serve as a symbol of the mysterious and unconquered desert, he was the unconquerable, strong, primitive, and virile hero of *The Sheik* and of women travelers’ Orientalist fantasies. The women who expressed this admiration for the primitive desert and its men faced restrictions in their narrative constructions that male travelers to Middle East did not. In their writings on the Orient, both in fiction and in non-fiction, men felt free to assert their imperial authority while also engaging in the erotic pleasures they imagined. For example, the French novelist Gustave Flaubert famously recorded his travels to Egypt in 1849. Unrestrained by domestic expectations, he fully immersed himself in his own dreamt-up vision of Oriental sensuality, writing explicit details on his sexual liaisons with Egyptian prostitutes.¹¹⁸ Meanwhile, women travelers’ experience of imperial femininity had to include reconciliation with the restraints of British society. As the prescribed “domestic” gatekeepers of empire, their very presence abroad posed a much greater threat to anxieties over

¹¹⁶ Hull, *Camping in the Sahara*, 144.

¹¹⁷ Gertrude Bell, 201.

¹¹⁸ Gustave Flaubert, *Flaubert in Egypt: A Sensibility on Tour*, ed. Francis Steegmuller, (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1972), 21.

British imperial prowess and masculinity. This reconciliation manifested both in the narrative tension examined above, but also in the historical exclusion of white women from participation in the Orientalist fantasy of British imaginations.

E.M. Hull managed to free Diana Mayo from the tensions and restrictions of her feminine imperial identity by immersing her heroine into the primitive desert “as few could expect to see it.”¹¹⁹ After her initial capture, Diana found herself caught between her disgust for Ahmed’s barbarism and her fascination with his primitive strength and wildness. After realizing her love for him, Diana felt the complete liberation of participating in the British Oriental fantasy that male travelers and writers experienced so freely. Any tension of in her identity as an imperial woman was broken as she described her newly found freedom:

The Eastern luxury of the tent and its appointments no longer seemed theatrical... The beauties and attractions of the desert had multiplied a hundred times. The wild tribesman, with their primitive ways and savagery, had ceased to disgust her, and the free life with its constant exercise and simple routine was becoming indefinitely dear to her.¹²⁰

The breaking of these tensions allowed E.M. Hull to fully immerse Diana into the Orientalist desert of her and Bell’s fantasies. However, it was her deliberate use of the romance genre that allowed Hull to write about a white woman’s engagement in the sexual excess and decadence of the Orientalist literary tradition.

¹¹⁹ Hull, *The Sheik*, 69.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, 144.

Chapter 3: A Bold Novelist

*“I am not afraid of the loneliness of the desert, it is the loneliness of the world outside the shelter of your arms that I am afraid of. I am not afraid of what you are or what you have been. I am not afraid of what you might do to me. I never lived until you taught me what life was, here in the desert.”*¹²¹

-E.M. Hull’s *The Sheik*

As Diana Mayo plead with Ahmed to let her stay with him at the end of the novel, her words echoed E.M. Hull’s “fascination with the Arab and his desert,” a fascination shared by the British public and the other women travelers who dared penetrate the desert.¹²² However, the climactic final scene suggests something far more controversial than a woman’s mere interest in the Middle East. Diana’s transition from confident traveler to desert bride insinuates that there is something desirable and, perhaps, preferable about the desert compared to life back in Europe. Even in her captivity and submission, Diana found liberation, a type of liberation unknown to her adventurous spirit before the noble “Arab” sheik taught her what living really meant. Hull’s fictional narrative freed her from many of the tensions and restrictions of British domesticity that plagued the memoirs of the real travelers to the Middle East. While they experienced liberation, women travelers had to reconcile their freedom as imperial agents with their identity as British ladies. Diana Mayo, on the other hand, had the luxury of rejecting her old civilized life in favor of a passionate, primitive existence in Sahara. Her active participation and enjoyment in sex and miscegenation violated not only standards of British propriety, but also the genre of romance that E.M. Hull was engaging with. And yet, aware of domestic and imperial anxieties after the war, Hull managed to give white women a chance to penetrate the erotic, fantastical, and primitive desert while easing the public concerns over empire and masculinity.

¹²¹ Hull, *The Sheik*, 291.

¹²² Hunt, “The Woman Who Wrote the Sheik,” 127.

The women writers of Orientalist literature, both fiction and non-fiction, faced limitations on what was acceptable for the written page in a way male writers did not. As contributors to the legends of *Arabian Nights*, Galland, Lane, and Burton were able to write unchallenged in their affirmation of their authority of Oriental life both in their “scientifically” recorded travels and their invented fables. Novelist Gustave Flaubert spared no erotic or degrading details in his letters of sexual exploits and primitive encounters in the Orient. Achmed Abdullah wrote his strong, white travelers as the heroes of Orientalist romance, eroticizing veiled Arab women and emphasizing Western men’s virility and sexual prowess. Yet no matter what century, the women who dared write about their encounters in the Middle East did so with astute consideration of their own domestic limitations. Though Hull managed to maneuver these restrictions in fiction, women’s travel narratives had to weigh their unique experiences abroad against the gendered and imperial politics back home, reassuring their readers of their patriotism and femininity.

Using increased European presence and women’s role in the changing print culture as explanations for the sudden surge in women’s travel writings suggests that changing circumstances permitted women to publish their narratives. However, it is clear that these women exercised autonomy in both their decision to travel and their even riskier decision to publish their experiences. Despite their charge into the wild and unpredictable East, the women travelers of the nineteenth century did not emerge unchallenged by Victorian norms. Married women often faced a different kind of scrutiny, encouraged to travel but only in aid to their husbands.¹²³ In these instances, women’s travel writing was reduced to mere pass times absent of intent or thoughtful observations. Scholar Jane Robinson claimed that many in the British Empire believed, “that is all the lady traveller is fit for: to wander along in her husband’s

¹²³ Jane Robinson, *Unsuitable for ladies: An Anthology of Women Travellers*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press), 1994, xii.

footsteps scribbling down whatever fancy happen to flit into her homely little head.”¹²⁴ Though Lady Montagu did in fact travel with her husband prior to the golden age of women travelers, her testimonies on the harem and her attempt to introduce inoculation to the Empire gave her intellectual authority on Oriental life and customs. Similarly, Gertrude Bell worked as an employee for the British Government, collecting anthropological and geographical data. Yet for many who read Gertrude Bell and Lady Mary Montague’s travel memoirs, a woman could not be a traveler and a lady, let alone an author of her own experience. Both of these women illustrated the constraints of women’s narrative construction in the ways they reaffirmed their positions as ladies in domestic society while also recounting their feminine imperial experiences in their writing.

Gertrude Bell and Lady Mary Montagu wrote their narratives in an epistolary style that they later transformed into comprehensive works of travel writing.¹²⁵ They sent these letters to family members, close friends, and others with vested interest in their journeys and observations. While the writing reveals their awareness of their own positions as white women in the Orient, it also reveals their knowledge of their domestic, feminine roles back home. For example, Lady Montagu suggests that the women of the Turkish court have more freedom than those of the English court and even flaunts the unique opportunity she has, as a woman, to enter the elusive harem. Repeatedly, she makes observations comparing the lifestyle of the elite East and of the aristocratic West, “I know European court where the ladies would have never behaved

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Epistolary style refers to the type of writing in which exposition is provided by series of letters or diary entries from one, or multiple sources. This writing style is popular for novel writing and has been used in classic English literary work’s such as Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* and Stoker Braum’s *Dracula*.

themselves in so polite a manner to a stranger.”¹²⁶ And yet, the final lines of her Turkish Embassy letters subverted her suggestions that the pleasures of the Orient may be preferable to life in England:

And, after having seen part of Asia and Africa, and almost made the tour of Europe, I think the honest English squire more happy, who verily believes the Greek wines less delicious than March beer; that the African fruits have not so fine a flavor as golden-pippins; and the becafiguas of Italy are not so well tasted as a rump of beef; and that, in short, there is no perfect enjoyment of this life out of Old England. I pray God I may think so for the rest of my life; and, since I must be contented with our scanty allowance of daylight, that I may forget the enlivening sun of Constantinople.¹²⁷

This statement assures the reader that the liberties of Turkish women, the medical advancements, and the ability to indulge in pleasures were still not worth the surrender of her English patriotism and domesticity. She also referred to her journey as a “distant insignificant conquest,” reaffirming the idea that her observations were meant for the entertainment of her readers and not for any serious political or cultural consideration.¹²⁸ Furthermore, she deferred discussions of Turkish politics to Sir Paul Rycaut, whose book *The Present State of the Ottoman Empire* predated her travels by nearly fifty years.¹²⁹¹³⁰ She claimed she did not need to restate what had already been so expertly written on in spite of her close encounters and conversations with important political figures. This self-framing of women’s travel writings as insignificant or as entertainment is further exemplified in the study of Gertrude Bell and her fellow Victorian travelers.

¹²⁶ *Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, 162.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 277.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 227

¹²⁹ *Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, 243.

¹³⁰ Sonia P. Anderson, “Rycaut, Sir Paul (1629-1700),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (2008).

Carrieanne Deloach's *Exploring Transient Identities* argues that the Englishwomen who traveled during the Victorian era "projected gendered identities in their writings, which were both 'imperial' masculine and 'domestically' feminine" and that these identities were intentionally crafted by women to gain limited authority in their publications.¹³¹ Deloach identifies the preface of these travel narratives as a key element in fashioning women's observations within the domestic realm. To justify their decision to write their experiences, and to publish them, women offered apologies for weaknesses in their writing as a means of further denying academic ambition.¹³² As a direct affiliate of British interests in the Middle East, Bell's observations earned her prophetic names such as "Queen of the Desert" and "The Mother of Modern Iraq."¹³³ She was even granted entrance into the British Geographical Society, a prestige typically only given to men of intellectual circles.¹³⁴ And yet her writings still exude her awareness of her own presumed feminine insignificance in referencing her work as "cheap and nasty."¹³⁵ She continually pointed to the limitations of her sex while continuing to assert the masculine role she took on while traveling the desert.

This framing of women's travel writing as mere observational entertainment is exemplified in the epistolary format of their publications. Unlike Sir Paul Rycaut and Edward Lane who released book length treatises on the nature and politics of the East, women's narratives appeared in the forms of letters or journal entries, further reinforcing the notions that their recordings were simply observational with no intention of formulating intellectual arguments for publication. In fact, many of the volumes used for this study present the letters of

¹³¹ Deloach, "Exploring Transient Identities," iii.

¹³² Ibid, 41.

¹³³ Lukitz, "Bell, Gertrude Margaret Lowthian," (2008).

¹³⁴ Ibid,

¹³⁵ Deloach, "Exploring Transient Identities," 41-42.

Bell and Lady Montagu along with entries written throughout their lifetime such as letters to lovers and to family. This presents their writing on the Middle East as continuations of their diaries, meant for the documentation of their life and rather than for academic study. During this “golden age” of women’s travel writing, women demonstrated their own autonomy through physical movement and by publishing their experiences. However, as this section has demonstrated, the realm of non-fiction presented challenges and limitations to that autonomy.

Other women found their authorial voices in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Just as an upsurge in women’s travel writing signaled an age of women’s adventure narratives, this period witnessed women’s “intrusion” into a wide variety of publications. Women like Gertrude Bell contributed to “scientific” understandings of the Middle East and even wrote for *The Times*. Others capitalized on the women’s suffrage movement and published articles, political cartoons, and pamphlets to push their cause. However, as women writers found their work muted by male audiences, many chose to publish within a genre already scorned as “lowbrow.”¹³⁶ Fiction offered many opportunities for women to express themselves and, in the case of E.M. Hull, to push the boundaries of the domestic sphere in the world of popular literature. Specifically, Hull used the formulaic genre of romance and Orientalist myth of the wild desert to exhibit imperial femininity in ways Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Gertrude Bell simply could not.

In a 1919 *Times* advertisement, one reviewer claimed, “It is a bold novelist who takes his heroine into the Garden of Allah...as heroes are so hard to find there who comply alike with the requirements of the proper local colour and the conventions of romance as written for Western

¹³⁶ Laird, Holly A, Introduction to *The History of British Women’s Writing: 1880-1920*, Edited by Holly A. Laird (London: Macmillan Publishers, Ltd., 2016).

people.”¹³⁷ Though the Oriental landscape, specifically the desert, served as an ideal location for women’s imperial fantasies, the formula of the early twentieth century romance novel did not necessarily translate as easily. How could the good Englishwomen readers of British romance fantasize about sex with the Bedouin Arab and a life in the “society-less” desert? In a literary tradition previously dictated by society and attraction to stable and stoic Englishmen, Hull’s novel pushed romance beyond its nineteenth century limits, forever transforming the genre. It is this genre that permitted E.M. Hull to “penetrate” deeper into the desert than any woman traveler.¹³⁸ If writing down and publishing one’s travel accounts acted as the ultimate expression of autonomy for women travelers, this paper argues that writing a romance fiction influenced by those travels was just as liberating. Pamela Regis’ *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* illustrates the very structured and formulaic nature of nineteenth century romance. E.M. Hull both upheld and violated this formula in *The Sheik*, crafting a novel as conscious of the possibilities for liberation in the desert and the limitations of domestic expectations as the women travelers before her. In romance, she found a genre that allowed her to push the imperial fantasies of women travelers to their limits for an almost exclusively female reading audience. Though it will require literary analysis, analyzing *The Sheik* in the context of women’s writing verifies how truly “bold” the provincial E.M. Hull was.

Past scholarship has already established *The Sheik* as a turning point in literature, as it popularized the “desert romance” that persisted through the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. However, E.M. Hull did not invent an entirely new genre on her own. In *Desert Passions*, Teo demonstrates how the writers of desert romances, including Hull, are part of a

¹³⁷ “List of New Books and Reprints,” *The Times Literary Supplement*, (London, England), Issue 929, November 6, 1919, 632.

¹³⁸ “Eveleigh Nash & Grayson, Ltd.” *The Times* (London, England), Jan. 22, 1926, 17.

literary tradition of white women's engagement with the Orient. What this neglects is a closer look at *The Sheik* within the longstanding literary tradition of British romance. Just as the scathing literary reviews of Hull's work suggests, romance did not often receive high literary praise. The nineteenth century saw sweeping anxiety over the corrupt and frivolous nature of romance novels and the effects they had on the minds of impressionable readers. Such assumptions about the genre still persist today, as many view romances as inherently oppressive and "silly." Regis' work pushes against this notion, arguing that the genre, particularly as it existed at the time of *The Sheik*'s publication, could be both serious and liberating.¹³⁹

Regis identifies eight essential elements of romance fiction: the society defined, the meeting, the barrier, the attraction, the declaration, the point of ritual death, the recognition, and the betrothal. Though the order of the elements and specific plot points may experience variation, nineteenth century romance novels adhered strictly to these elements. *The Sheik* was no exception. After the initial "meeting," Diana's hatred for her kidnapper and contempt for his race created a barrier between the two lovers. She then found herself more and more intrigued and seduced by the brutish Arab before eventually surrendering to her love for him. The point of ritual death, or instance in which Diana and Ahmed's love endure its greatest threat, comes quite literally when Ahmed nearly dies trying to save her. And finally, like nearly all romances before and after 1919, the novel ends with a mutual declaration of love and the success of the "marriage plot." While this in itself may seem regressive, throughout the nineteenth century the marriage plot served as one of the few times in a woman's life in which she had the power to make a choice.¹⁴⁰ The ability to reject and accept proposals therefore became a point of autonomy and liberation. Diana's own marriageability is established within the novel's first ten pages, as she

¹³⁹ Regis, 7.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

rejects the proposal of her friend as well as any future proposals that may come along. In the end she chose to remain in the desert with Ahmed, liberating her from the constraints of the world and putting a shocking twist on romantic tradition. Though *The Sheik* follows Regis' elements in a general sense, it is ultimately Hull's choice of "society defined" that allowed her to violate the traditional romance formula.

As *The Times* review explained, the conventions of Western Romance as it existed in 1919 did not fit into the landscape of the Middle Eastern desert. This is for two distinct reasons. First, until the time of Hull's publication the ordered and hierarchical British or European society strictly dictated the bounds of romance fiction. Marriage plots produced anxiety over a heroine's potential rise or fall in social stature in selecting a husband. Moreover, the point of ritual death often included a character's fall from social graces from which women could never recover.¹⁴¹ The uncivilized and unchanging desert of the travel memoirs and Orientalist fiction had no such social structure, making it a landscape in which Hull could push the bounds of romance and British propriety. *The Times* reviewer pointed to Hull's second broken convention of Western romance, claiming it is difficult to create a hero that both complies with "the proper local *colour*" and the "conventions of romance as written for a Western people."¹⁴² Meaning, the perceived characteristics and behaviors of Arabs were not designed to be desirable for romance readers. Ahmed Ben Hassan's place as the novel's hero certainly serves as a stark contrast between the stoic and well-groomed Englishmen of nineteenth century romance. Ahmed is cruel, ruthless, strong, passionate, untethered, and wild like the desert of Hull and Bell's memoirs. These differences between Hull's novel and the traditional romance, the desert and the passionate

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁴² "List of New Books and Reprints," *The Times Literary Supplement*, (London, England), Issue 929, November 6, 1919, 632.

“Arab” lover, allowed her to express imperial femininity while writing about a white woman’s participation in the most exotic parts of the Orient: sex and miscegenation.

Before E.M. Hull’s novel, no British romance heroine had ever lost her virtue and received a happy ending. A woman’s engagement, even a forced engagement, in sexual acts led to her inevitable downfall. In many cases, like in Samuel Richardson’s classic novella *Clarissa*, the raped heroine could only restore her virtue in death, relieving the character from her shame while keeping the fabric of British society intact.¹⁴³ And yet, as the genre of Western romance shielded its readers from the pleasures of sex, writers of orientalist literature made sex an integral part of the West’s fascination with the East. The sexual excess of the Ottoman Empire had been represented by images of the harem and the “lustful Turk” in the British imperial imagination. By the nineteenth century, that image shifted from secluded walls filled with beautiful women and erect sultans to the untamable desert filled with barbaric, polygynous Bedouins.¹⁴⁴ For British writers on the Orient, sex had always been a fact of life, as something inextricably tied to Islamic society and its primitive inhabitants. Part of what made *The Sheik* so groundbreaking was Hull’s decision to allow her heroine, another white woman of status, to partake in and desire the sensual world of the Orient male British writers had been constructing for centuries. Hull used a fictional landscape of the desert to not only explore notions of British women’s sexuality, but also to suggest there was something sexually and romantically desirable for British women about Arab men.

In a society dictated by class-based hierarchies, representations of women’s sexual promiscuity threatened more than Victorian notions of feminine propriety. Sexual liberation also suggested the possibility for crossing the economic, social, and racial lines that supported British

¹⁴³ Teo, *Desert Passions*, 48.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

imperial and domestic power structures. Miscegenation, therefore, became a very real and visible source of white European anxiety. It also became another marker of the Orient's sexual excess and the barbarity of its people both in the licentious stories of *Arabian Nights* and in European travel narratives.

Lady Mary Montagu revealed a higher level of interest in sex and pleasure than her twentieth century counterparts, paying particular attention to the complete fascination with the Oriental "mixing of races." In commenting on the appearances of racially ambiguous Ottomans she wrote, "this mixture produces creatures more extraordinary than you can imagine."¹⁴⁵ She even compared the intermixing of peoples to the interbreeding of dogs by writing, "Now as the various intermixing of these latter animals causes mongrels, so mankind have their mongrels too, divided and subdivided into endless sorts."¹⁴⁶ In her canine analogy, Montagu appealed to British notions on the primitive qualities of Oriental people. Her rhetoric depicted miscegenation, what she called the mixing of "species," as an animalistic practice that produced aesthetically fascinating, but ultimately inferior specimens.

British interest in the sexual "looseness" of the Orient, both in fiction and non-fiction, historically excluded white women as participants. The erotic possibilities that awaited men like Flaubert in the Middle East were seen as threats of sexual danger for white women, an anxiety only heightened by their growing presence in the Empire during the nineteenth century. The idea that brown or black men would be unable to control their sexual desires for European women fueled British colonial policy well in the 1950s.¹⁴⁷ Ordinances in British controlled India and

¹⁴⁵ *Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, 249.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Levine, *The British Empire*, 159-160.

British officials attempted to restrict interactions between white women and men of color as much as possible for fear of the threat those encounters posed to white men's sexuality. In

Africa not only outlawed the sexual assault of white women by colonial men, but also explicitly outlawed any consensual sexual engagement between the two parties.¹⁴⁸ In many ways, the idea that white women might willingly seek to participate in the sexually stimulating Oriental space proved to be more anxiety inducing than the prospect of Arab men committing acts of sexual violence. Prior to World War I, British literature did not dare cross the boundary of white women's sexual purity, for the lustful Arabs of Oriental novels never had sex with white women just as the white heroines of British romance never desired men outside their race or social class. Diana's fictional journey into the unspoiled desert broke through these literary barriers with the subtlety of an Arab caravan. However, real European women were having sexual and romantic relationships with the men of the Orient long before her erotic adventure.

As mentioned before, Lady Mary Montagu was aware of the British fascination with "mongrels" of the Orient as products of unchecked promiscuity, but she also knew of the anxieties that sexual looseness produced among British readers concerning women. Though she refrained from fully immersing herself in the pleasures available to her, Montagu's letters contained the shocking story of a Spanish woman she met while traveling. The account of this woman's experiences loosely parallels Diana's in that she was raped by a Turkish admiral and soon married him. Montagu's description of the events illustrated exactly what made Britons so anxious about white women's encounters with men of color:

Britain during World War I, injured Indian soldiers who fought alongside the British were not allowed to leave the hospital grounds for fear they would seduce young girls. In parts of Southern Africa and Papua New Guinea, native men could face execution for the sexual assault of or sexual encounter with a white woman. New Guinea's laws were named the White Women's Protection Ordinance and remained in place until 1958.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

The outlawing of sexual assault extended exclusively to white women in regions of British colonial control. No such laws existed for the protection of native women in the regions further suggesting that the threat was not rape, but rather white women's participation in miscegenation.

Her infidel lover was very handsome, very tender, fond of her, and lavished at her feet with all the Turkish magnificence. She answered him very resolutely that her liberty was not so precious to her as her honour: that he could no way restore that but by marrying her. I am afraid that you will think my friend fell in love with her ravisher; but I am willing to take her word for it, that she acted wholly on principles of honour.¹⁴⁹

The way in which Montagu described the Turkish admiral, “tender” and “handsome,” suggests the moral integrity of the Spanish woman’s rapist was not the primary concern of readers, but rather the woman’s and decision to marry a man of a different race. Montagu insisted that her friend did not love the man, or take pleasure in his sexual advances, and married him only to restore her lost honor, for certainly no respectable European woman could love a man of such inferior race and creed. Yet, the very language Montagu used to describe the “infidel lover” painted a man of amiable qualities that women could be expected to desire. This contradiction mimics that of E.M. Hull and Gertrude Bell’s memoirs in which they asserted the inferiority of Arabs while praising the virility and strength of the independent desert men. Hull breaks that tension using *The Sheik*’s fictional desert and pseudo-Arab hero to boldly suggest that white women could find more than just physical liberation and oriental fascination in their engagement with the Middle East. She proposed that there was something romantically and sexually enticing about noble Bedouin Arab of her own memoirs.

Hull violated the traditions of Orientalist literature and Western romance by writing a story of a white woman’s sexual and romantic desires for an “Arab” sheik. However, her work also embraced British anxiety over women’s sexuality and miscegenation. After attempting to escape the camp, Diana reconciled with her feelings for Ahmed:

But she knew now—a love of such complete surrender that she had never conceived. Her heart was given for all time to the fierce desert man who was so different from all other men whom she had met, a lawless savage who had taken her to satisfy a passing fancy and who had treated her with merciless cruelty. He

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 239-240.

was a brute, but she loved him, loved him for his very brutality and superb animal strength. And he was an Arab! A man of different race and colour, a native; Aubrey would indiscriminately class him as a “damned nigger.”¹⁵⁰

Diana loved Ahmed not in spite of his Arab savagery, but because of it, playing into the fears of white women’s desire for the sexual excess of Middle Eastern fantasy. She even recognized that in her old life she never thought she would willingly love a man and “she would have shuddered with repulsion at the bare idea, the thought that a native could even touch her.” No longer a victim of his primitive passions, Diana derived pleasure from her active role as a “primeval woman” in the spectacle of the untouched desert that European women, both as travelers and readers, had limited access to. *The Sheik* established E.M. Hull’s reputation as a bold novelist, yet even her fiction was not immune to the restrictions of Western propriety and her own commitment to British patriotism.

Hull’s adherence to the restrictions of British society is evident throughout *The Sheik* in her creative use of the desert seemingly untouched by imperial or “Western” influences. For example, Diana’s sexual liberties only occur in the uncivilized and wild landscape, absent of any social structures. Rather than the imperial woman she once was, Diana becomes a “primeval” woman whose heart “[burns] and [throbs] with a passion that was consuming her.”¹⁵¹ In attempting to convince her to return to England, Ahmed assured Diana that, “no one need ever know. There can be now fear for your—reputation. Things are forgotten in the silence of the desert.”¹⁵² The desert is then presented as an escape, where one can indulge all of their Orientalist desires. However, by inserting her work into the formulaic genre of romance, Hull understood that Diana could not return to England. Outside of the desert, she would be disgraced

¹⁵⁰ Hull, *The Sheik*, 133-134.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, 181.

¹⁵² *Ibid*, 290.

and ostracized, turning the white-hot sands of the Sahara into barrier between pleasure and shame.

In her most daring move as an author of romance, Hull managed to create a hero that could entertain white women's sexual fascination with masculine, desert Arab while also easing British anxieties about the threats of miscegenation and European weakness. In readers' first encounter with Ahmed Ben Hassan, Hull established that he was truly a man who stood "outside the prescribed conventions that applied to ordinary men."¹⁵³ He embodied all of the primitive savagery and sexual licentiousness of Oriental men in the British imagination along with the independence, virility, and masculinity of the Bedouin Arab in women's travel memoirs. Even in the initial months of her captivity, Diana expressed conflict between her hatred and fascination with Ahmed. She claimed he did not fit the image in her head of "fat old men" who spent their days "under the influence of narcotics, lethargic with sensual indulgence."¹⁵⁴ Instead, his fierce independence from imperial influence, his fearless and hardworking leadership, and his "graceful, muscular body" fascinated her until she inevitably gave into her desires. His Oriental savagery no longer disgusted her. Instead it became the sole source of her pleasure in the desert. His Oriental savagery no longer disgusted her. Instead it became the sole source of her pleasure in the desert. Diana's professed love for a man she believes to be of an inferior race pushes imperial femininity beyond its previously acceptable limits. However, the reveal of Ahmed's true origins demonstrates Hull's unwillingness to actually cross the boundaries of racial purity.

Ahmed and Diana's union ultimately upholds traditional Western romantic notions of socially compatible marriages while also easing British concerns of imperial decline and emasculation. Not only do the two desert lovers turn out to be of the same race, they also were of

¹⁵³ Ibid, 290.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 92-93.

the same economic class in the strict hierarchies of British society. Furthermore, Ahmed's identity as a man unlike other men manifests in his hybridity of Arab strength and English superiority. Though Diana claimed she could never think of him as anything other than an Arab, Hull points to Ahmed's Englishness throughout the novel in his superior distinctiveness from the Arabs of his caravan. After the trauma of their first night together, Diana looked at the books in Ahmed's library, expecting to find contemptible and decadent literature. Instead, she found French volumes on sports, travel, and veterinary medicine.¹⁵⁵ She contemplated her findings, "It was an unexpected glimpse into the personality of the Arab that had captured her was vaguely disquieting, for it suggested possibilities that would not have existed in a raw native, or one only superficially coated with a veneer of civilisation."¹⁵⁶ Diana also learned throughout the course of the novel that Ahmed did not devote himself to Islam like the rest of his caravan who performed superstitious rituals "with the sublime lack of self-consciousness of the Mohammedan devotee."¹⁵⁷ Most importantly, Ahmed did not have a harem, making Diana his only lover in the novel.

Hull is able to successfully include an Arab hero in her romantic fiction because Ahmed rejects all of the objectionable Arab qualities that Hull and Bell outlined in their memoirs: ignorance, Islam, and polygamy. Characteristics exemplified by his archrival Ibraheim, in whom, Diana saw the "Arab of her imaginings, this gross unwieldy figure lying among the tawdry cushions."¹⁵⁸ Instead he exhibits his Englishness while embodying all of the desirable traits of women's oriental fantasies: strength, leadership, and virility. Ahmed represents the epitome of masculinity for the twentieth century British readers. Therefore his English identity soothes any

¹⁵⁵ Hull, *The Sheik*, 67-68.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 180.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 220.

concern over British emasculation by Oriental men. Diana and Ahmed's decision to live out their days together in the Algerian sun demonstrates another way Hull creatively uses desert landscape. In this world, two English lovers of equal status can continue participating in the decadence, the primitiveness, and the adventurous pleasures of Oriental fantasies, all the while dominating over the devoted and childlike Arabs of the Middle East.

Conclusion

*“Here are all the expected glories—sands of the desert as white as snow; bedecked chargers that prance with adventurous joy when Mr. Valentino jumps on them and throws of all lesser beings who make the attempt; a dancing-girl who tries to hate him and can’t; knives and kisses, sandstorms and tortures—all the paraphernalia of the South Algerian romance.”*¹⁵⁹

The Times published a review for the highly anticipated cinematic feature, *The Son of the Sheik*, based on E.M. Hull’s second novel and starring the big screen heartthrob, Rudolph Valentino. Not only did Hull successfully write a romance in the wilderness of the desert, she also created a narrative so captivating to the British public it demanded not one, but two silent films in the 1920s. *The Times*’ review goes on to say, “How closely the picture follows the novel from which it is derived we do not pretend to know, but the Hullites who visit the New Gallery and are, no doubt, like other literary devotees, careful for the text of their prophet, appear to be pleased.”¹⁶⁰ Whether or not the term “Hullites” was used as a slight against fans of *The Sheik*, it implies that E.M. Hull managed to create a fan base of devoted readers through her daring stories of passion in the desert. She did so by exploring women’s imperial relationship to the Middle East and using romance to carve out a space for white women to imagine themselves in the sexual excess and primitiveness of the Algerian Desert. Writing for a rapidly emerging female reading audience, Hull helped sensationalize the imperial femininity of white women’s engagement with the Orient. Unrestricted by the tensions of women’s travel narratives, Hull used her novel to push women’s imperial desert fantasies to their limits in a way that was both controversial and publically acceptable.

Other historians studying *The Sheik* have either neglected or offered rudimentary comparisons of E.M. Hull’s desert romance and the travel narratives of British women. This type

¹⁵⁹ “The Son of the Sheik,” *The Times* (London, England), Wednesday, Sept. 22, 1926, Issue 44383.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

of neglect threatens to diminish E.M. Hull's significant contribution to the study of white women's engagement with the Orient, specifically in uncovering what they found so desirable about the Bedouin sheik and his untouched desert. That is not to say that Teo and other scholars have left a gap in their cultural analysis. On the contrary, this project has built off of the valuable work done by historians and literary scholars concerning the history and significance of the text in its expression of women's fiction and Orientalism. This thesis has, however, provided a different lens through which to study *The Sheik*, a lens that focuses on Hull's role as an imperial woman and her bold narrative construction. The significance of this novel goes far beyond its expression of sexual liberation and forbidden romance. *The Sheik* offered a way for the women of the British Empire not to escape from their real world, but rather to linger in the desert and indulge in their Orientalist fantasies without surrendering the imperial superiority. Women could fantasize about the virile strength of the Bedouin Arab without completely violating British ideas of sexual propriety. By analyzing the fictional Diana Mayo and her provincial authoress as travelers and in turn, studying the women travelers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as writers, women's dynamic role in constructing and desiring the Arabian desert becomes all the more apparent.

Though this specific analysis has paid more attention to the centuries leading up to and the moment of Hull's publications, it is important to note that her success transcended the pleasure of women readers during the 1920s. In a single novel, the old-fashioned E.M. Hull managed to reenergize the Oriental romance novel and boldly bring the Algerian desert to a "lowbrow" readership. Two of her works became American films and created a phenomenon in the Western world that Teo calls "sheik fever."¹⁶¹ Images of the noble Arab sheik permeated into

¹⁶¹ Teo, *Desert Passions*, 1.

all corners of popular culture. Songs like “The Sheik of Araby” further romanticized the Arab while heartthrob Rudolph Valentino gave the image a distinct and dreamy face in his portrayal of Ahmed Ben Hassan.¹⁶² The fever broke in the 1930’s, but the tradition of sheik romances emerged several times throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, inspired by Hull’s demonstration as the desert as an ideal place for sexual discretion.¹⁶³ Her work also challenged the formulaic genre of romance and changed it for the coming century in her allowance for an unmarried white woman to engage in sexual relations and still find love and happiness.¹⁶⁴ Therefore, even though a specific emphasis has been placed on Hull’s contribution to constructing an imperial identity for the average Englishwomen, her work’s influence has withstood shifts in that identity over the course of nearly a century. This suggests that the unattainable and forever fantastical elements of the Arab and his desert were and still are ideal for white women’s imperial desires and Orientalist fantasies.

The woman who wrote *The Sheik* remains an elusive figure to historians who study women’s engagement with the Orient. Her aversion to publicity has left researchers to extrapolate what they can from her personal letters and rare interviews. Critically, the 1922 *Nash’s and Pall Mall Magazine* interview with Hull misses the mark in its analysis. Despite her homely appearance and traditional English country home, her writings changed what was considered successful authorship and drastically altered women’s expression and literary engagement with the Orient. Her indisputable contributions to the legacy of women writers and daring narrative strategy make her anything but “old-fashioned.” Furthermore, E.M Hull did in fact penetrate deeper into the desert than any other women traveler and establish herself as a

¹⁶² Ibid, 2.

¹⁶³ Bettinotti, “Lust and Dust,” 185.

¹⁶⁴ Regis, *Natural History of the Romance Novel*, 123.

rather unorthodox authority on the Middle East. Through this analytical lens, *The Sheik* serves as a groundbreaking intersection between the active roles of women readers, travelers, and writers in constructing a feminine Oriental fantasy, but also partaking in the pleasure that fantasy had to offer.

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