

EXOTICISMS AND FEMALE REDEFINITIONS: THREE POPULAR WOMEN'S FICTION WORKS OF WORLD WAR 2¹

EXOTISMOS Y REDEFINICIÓN DE PERSONAJES FEMENINOS: TRES NOVELAS POPULARES DE MUJERES DE LA SEGUNDA GUERRA MUNDIAL

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Abstract:

The present article focuses on the analysis of three popular romances by British women authors, with historical settings that range from the 1920s to the 1960s and the present time: Leah Fleming's *The War Widows* (2008) and *Mothers and Daughters* (2009), and Katherine Webb's *The English Girl* (2016). These novels revisit the historical context of World War 2 and its aftermath, a backward glance relished by millions of readers worldwide, who travel in time as participants in an addictive sort of historical exoticism. The appeal however does not end here, for these novels also exploit attractive or mysterious settings, and in common with traditional women's fiction, employ seductive male figures against whose intentions the heroines redefine their identities. As I shall argue throughout this article, the three novels by Fleming and Webb employ a twofold application of the "exotic"—historical and geographic—as background for the presentation of heroines who, after a period of trials, find their renewed identities and life goals.

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Keywords: Exoticism; World War 2; English history; Popular women's fiction; Leah Fleming; Katherine Webb; Female redefinition; Motherhood.

Resumen:

Este artículo analiza tres romances populares de autoras británicas, que se desarrollan en el periodo histórico desde la década de los 1920 hasta la de los 1960 y el momento actual: *The War Widows* (2008) y *Mothers and Daughters* (2009) de Leah Fleming, y *The English Girl* (2016) de Katherine Webb. Estas novelas regresan al contexto histórico de la Segunda Guerra Mundial y su etapa posterior, lo que supone una mirada al pasado apreciada por millones de lectores en todo el mundo, que viajan en el tiempo como participantes de un exotismo histórico que resulta adictivo. El atractivo de esta fórmula sin embargo conlleva también la descripción de localizaciones atractivas o misteriosas; además, siguiendo la tradición de la ficción popular de mujeres, estas novelas incluyen seductores personajes masculinos que contribuyen a que las protagonistas redefinan sus identidades. En mi artículo argumento que las tres novelas de Fleming y Webb emplean una doble aplicación del exotismo —histórico y geográfico— como contexto para la presentación de las heroínas que, tras periodos de dificultades, se definen por medio de nuevas identidades y objetivos vitales.

Palabras clave: Exotismo; Segunda Guerra Mundial; Historia de Inglaterra; Literatura popular de mujeres; Leah Fleming; Katherine Webb; Reformulación femenina; Maternidad.

This article focuses on the analysis of three popular novels by British female authors, with historical settings that range from the 1920s to the 1960s and the present time: Leah Fleming's *The War Widows* (2008) and *Mothers and Daughters* (2009), and Katherine Webb's *The English Girl* (2016). These novels revisit the historical context of World War 2 and its aftermath, a backward glance relished by millions of readers worldwide, who travel in time as participants in an addictive sort of historical exoticism. These novels also exploit attractive or mysterious settings, and in common with much traditional women's fiction, they also employ seductive male figures against whose intentions the heroines redefine their identities. This does not imply that these three novels may be readily categorised as romances. In accordance with the Women's Fiction Writers Association (WFWA) of America, women's fiction works "may include romance, or they may not", and they "can be contemporary or historical and have magical, mystery, thriller, or other elements." Thus Fleming's *The War Widows* and *Mothers and Daughters*, and Webb's *The English Girl* do not use a love story as their "driving force",

but “the protagonist’s journey toward a more fulfilled self”². These women’s fiction works, like many others, reveal their authors’ preoccupation with more urgent, up-to-date issues such as a woman’s definition of her own identity and vocation. For the theoretical framework in support of my theses I shall be referencing the work of Eirini Arvanitaki, Janice Radway et al., while for the interaction with the theme of exoticism I shall refer to Hsu-Ming Teo. What these processes of fulfilment imply in each female’s case will be elucidated in due course, but nevertheless they are inextricably linked to what may be identified as Fleming’s and Webb’s use of a double application of the “exotic” trope—historical and geographic—as background for the presentation of heroines who, after a period of trials, find their renewed identities and life goals. This will be referenced through—among others—Amira Jarmakani, while for the literary use of history and war I will draw from Nick Bentley and Petra Rau.

For the purposes of this article, therefore, we should clarify what constitutes historical exoticism in these fictions. The Second World War and its causes and aftermath represent a special period in British history for the contemporary reader. On the one hand, those events are still in the experiential memory of many individuals, whether directly, or through conversations with parents and grandparents; while on the other, the involvement of those that lived through the War seems to be increasingly distant, offering material for an attractive and yet potentially romanticised historical exoticism. According to Petra Rau, “distancing” is a central feature of novels dealing with war, which become by definition “historical novels” (258). Authors thus review Britain’s participation in WW2, a “site of collective trauma” with a triumphant resolution which “at this particular historical juncture”, the beginning of the twenty-first century, proves fruitful for historical narrative writers (Bentley 139; 155). Fleming’s and Webb’s use of the Austerity Years setting, in other words, is no mere backcloth against which the action unfolds: it permeates the characters’ moods and decisions, and transforms our reading of their novels into a nostalgia fest.

One of the main causes of the Second World War was of course imperial expansionism, and, inevitably, the imperialist theme treated in these popular women’s fiction works serves as geo-political criticism of the masterful role of Britain and USA in the world, both in the aftermath of WW2 and nowadays (Jarmakani 24-25). Numerous late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century popular novels explore the remote, still partly unknown, locales where the action develops as a means to add geographical exoticism to the historical type mentioned above. Destinations like Italy or Crete for British servicemen during the War made those countries familiar for their relatives at home and would later become favourite holiday destinations from the 1960s to our present time. Other distant and lesser known places, such as Burma or

2 The marketing of these novels, however, does reflect a tendency to classify them as romances, for reasons that are more overtly commercial than generic. Both Fleming’s novels include a diagram on the back cover with simple symbols for ease of identification by prospective buyers, and an unmistakable heart is featured in both. As for Webb’s novel, not only does its blurb define it as a “tale of adventure, mystery and love”, but this is also the perception by numerous readers in the popular website *Goodreads*. They are, nevertheless, also classified as “history” and “drama”.

Oman, continue to trigger dreamy connotations, and are therefore used in these novels with the intention of attracting a larger readership. From the chromatic range used in the covers to the jaw-dropping landscapes and never-fully-disclosed persons depicted, the marketing of these fictions plays on the readers' taste for the far-away and enigmatic (Radway 43-45). These readers experience vicariously the heroines' adventures in these outlying geographical locations, which invariably stand in sharp contrast with Britain.

A third type of exoticism may be mentioned although it is present in different degrees in these novels: the alluring glamour of certain male characters, appealing to most heroines in popular women's fiction. These men, however, do not necessarily figure as the romantic ideal of the female protagonists; rather the opposite: frequently these young females need to experience sentimental crises in order to reassess their individuality and life purposes. In such reassessments the family structure frequently collapses under the pressure of challenges or decisions that question traditional values, as we shall see in all three novels. One prolific area that these adventurous women question is motherhood. Many of them become mothers in contexts which implied a social and familial shock, or experience traumatic maternity. In other cases, the mother figure is absent, having died or surrendered their children. A questioning of traditional motherhood leads these female characters to find their renewed identities, which normally involve adopting independent or unusual, at least for their time context, professional or vocational directions.

Leah Fleming's *The War Widows* and *Mothers and Daughters*

Leah Fleming's *The War Widows* (2008) and *Mothers and Daughters* (2009) constitute a saga of one extended family of mostly women, as suggested by both titles. In the first novel, two young widows arrive in post-WW2 England as the mothers of two daughters fathered by the same man, Freddie Winstanley, who has been killed in the front. Freddie can be seen as the embodiment of the sentimental exoticism mentioned above. His almost simultaneous fathering of two babies, although censurable, is never harshly censured in the novel. Rather the opposite, his figure is glamorised, in a reflection of what Petra Rau considers "the hero's moral superiority" that readers take for granted as a consequence of "the historical remoteness of these wars". Such temporal detachment, in addition, "allowed for a retrospective legitimisation of military hegemony" (258) of Britain, over Crete and Burma in this case. Half-Burmese-half-English Sue Brown and Cretan Anastasia Papadaki are complete strangers to each other until their shocking reunion at the local train station. Both expect adoption and acceptance by the Winstanleys, Freddie's relatives, since that would be the honourable thing to do according to them. Esme Winstanley, the matriarch, and herself a widow, must therefore accommodate this new ordering of her own family, while weathering the different reactions from her children and their spouses. The old-fashioned Esme, who still believes in the grandeur of the British Empire, contrasts with the protagonist of the novel, Lily, who will shock her entire family with her views on marriage, which she refuses to see as an imposition from the elders and her husband-

to-be as before the war. *Mothers and Daughters*, the sequel of *The War Widows*, analysed below, focuses on the adult Joy (Sue's daughter) and Connie (Anastasia's) in the late 1950s and 1960s.

The historical exoticism that characterizes Leah Fleming's *The War Widows* addresses the complex times of the so-called Austerity Years (1945-1951), marked by the scarcity of foods and goods in a bankrupted Britain, a situation caused by "winning the war but losing the peace" (Marr, *History of Modern Britain* 10-14). Despite the everyday struggle of most families in those years, the period continues to provide an incessant source of inspiration for authors and proud delight for readers, who perceive in it "a security blanket in a changing world" (Connelly 268), as UK faces daunting challenges in the twenty-first century (racial conflict, hate crime, Brexit, regional tensions, political crises, etc.). Large sectors of the British public may not even remember or recognise certain key moments in the conflict, and yet many contemporary current events are persistently interpreted through "the continual presence of the Second World War in our wider culture, in television dramas, documentaries and sitcoms, in film, popular literature and the heritage industry" (Connelly 269).

Yet like most myths, this glorification of the war and post-war years is founded to some extent on falsehood: British society was racist back then (Beckett 444-45, Padley 30-31), a feature illustrated in *The War Widows* by the small imaginary town called Grimbleton (Lancashire) where the novel is set. Leah Fleming's use of such setting serves to discuss reversed exoticism: the immigrants displaced and dispossessed by the Second World War who arrive in Old England with unrealistic, clichéd expectations must soon learn that their glorified view was a chimera. This northern corner of industrial, provincial England disappoints Sue, who had expected her share of British mystery, founded on childhood myths from "many school books": "This was not how England should be, surely? It should be a beautiful carriage and horses like the picture on the tin[s] of chocolates [...], with castles and great stone palaces in them, wide parks with tall trees, but nothing like this" (*WW* 64)³. Brought up to "know English ways", Sue is now destitute, having "sold everything" for an illusion about "this England [which] was so chilly and dark" (*WW* 77, 79). Unusually, therefore, Britain was seductive to Sue, at least in her imagination. Yet this is not her only shock. Like the rest of the country, Grimbleton must adjust to its post-war shifting racial fabric, but certain neighbours resist change and abuse Sue. Her puzzled reply, "But I am British, like you", does not get her far. Although she has "British manners and a politeness that charmed people", she suspects the reason she is only offered work at a school for special children is "because she too was different", a "darkie" (*WW* 122, 192).

The other "war widow" Anastasia Papadaki illustrates a more immediate idea of what the British public understands by exoticism, as she embodies the object of desire of countless British Tommies who served in the Mediterranean in both World Wars: "[Ana] was not just any

3 Parenthetical references to the novels throughout this article will use abbreviations of their respective titles, as follows: *WW*, *MD*, and *TEG*.

Greek woman; she was from Crete, the home of the gods, the most ancient of all the islands, and the most beautiful, in her eyes [...] where the women were descended from Minoan gods, pale and golden" (*WW* 47). Both Sue and Ana, one with her image of Britain shattered by reality, and the other reminiscing about her homeland in Crete, signal the difficulty of adjustment of so many war casualties that took the form not of physical injury, but dislocation, estrangement, isolation, rootlessness, and homesickness. As Petra Rau argues, "over 90 per cent of the victims of modern war are now civilians" (266). Although she propounds the reformulation of modern war novels, a genre to which *The War Widows* does not belong, the point is still apposite: Fleming writing in 2008 applies a current reality of warfare to a bygone WW2 setting, thereby shifting the focus of narrative conflict in Lyotardian fashion to the several micro-narratives of Grimbleton. To that effect, Fleming uses a set of characters of foreign extraction, whose new lives in Lancashire speak forcibly to readers, three quarters of a century later. Disparagingly dubbed the "Olive Oils", they embrace the moniker as a badge of honour, reflecting their culinary use of the "liquid gold" (*WW* 450) as an alien novelty that reminds several of them of home in the Mediterranean. Their reunions turn them into a veritable sisterhood made up of women from Italy, Crete, Burma, South Africa, the Caribbean and England: "We may not be the United Nations but every time we sit down and talk, share a meal, talk about home, we learn something new" (*WW* 450).

At the centre of the Olive Oil Club, as of the novel, stands Lily Winstanley, Freddie's sister and the woman that introduces change in the family. Lily is characterized by her ambition to travel away from Britain: "In the pictures, airports were scenes of adventure, romance and the promise of far-off places" (*WW* 43). She is also resentful of her own social context in provincial Lancashire, and the fact that she reminisces about "Le Bourget and Paris" (*WW* 43) indicates her fixation with flying and the most glamorous European destination once the end of the war has made it safe. Lily Winstanley is actually the novel's representation of female redefinition, and an example of what Erini Arvanitaki terms "neo-liberal and self-assertive" women (26). Lily however must find the resources to sort out her own maladjustment between pre-war expectations and post-war renewal, as she refuses to click passively into a marriage that is defunct even before it starts. Although all preparations have been carried out in traditional fashion for her wedding, she employs her remaining singlehood in reassessing her own self. First, she performs briefly as a model, which she defines as "a new start", and for which is required a new name: "Lee, to mark this new beginning" (*WW* 322). She then rebels against the general relapse into pre-war societal moulds, using a sartorial referent that signified new levels of freedom for females: factory trousers⁴. As she complains, "everyone was glad enough of women in trousers during the war, shining up buses and factories, aeroplanes and batteries. Why did they want them all back in skirts now it was all over?" (*WW* 345-346). She also delightedly accepts a post as a

4 Women had changed the dynamics of society already during the Great War, by performing jobs vacated by conscripted men. Shorter skirts and trousers became then the preferred, more comfortable apparel, and the trend was repeated during WW2 (Marr, *Making of Modern Britain* 180).

travel agent, as part of her job description entails travelling by bus to France and other European destinations. Yet it is her own (eventually thwarted) wedding that marks her abandonment of restrictions for women. Her refusal to be “given away” since she is a “woman of age” and “not a piece of furniture” (*WW* 339) is a forewarning of her subsequent rejection of Walter, a spoiled husband-to-be that would turn her into a reclusive surrogate mother. Lily “didn’t know whether to laugh or cry”, delighted at a shocking narrative resolution that “was better than any romance from the library” (*WW* 431). This no-wedding-new-job outcome illustrates the rejection by many protagonists of contemporary women’s fiction of traditional happy closures, and a tendency towards “against the grain” or “critical readings [...] skeptical of pat endings, open to ironic undercurrents” (Strehle & Carden xxv). Other reflections on motherhood, matrimony and family relationships, though cryptically formulated in *The War Widows* are left pending for resolution in the saga’s second instalment, *Mothers and Daughters* (2009). At the close of the first novel Sue and Ana, who had initially found themselves relocated in the unfamiliar Grimbleton setting, agree that they “make better friends than enemies” since their “daughters are half-sisters”. Determined though they are to “make the best of a bad job” (*WW* 348), it will be their daughters, however, in the rapidly changing 1960s that will make “bad jobs” of their own lives.

Mothers and Daughters progresses thematically and chronologically into the 1960s, a decade of inconformity and transgression. It concerns precisely what is expressed in the closing note of *War Widows*: family secrets regarding parenthood and Freddie’s absent figure, and the inexorable evolution of these children’s lives into a future (the 1960s) characterized by massive change in the social and moral paradigms. Unlike the earlier novel, *Mothers and Daughters* stretches to a present-time resolution in a series of flash-forward vignettes. This resolution is advanced like a refrain throughout the novel in short chapters entitled “Crete 2007” and concerns Connie’s motherhood crisis. The 1950s and 60s historical setting of the novel addresses a number of societal changes that transformed the country. The “60s” have acquired a mantle of freedom fighting, equal rights, and the shunning of tradition, in areas such as marriage, the Church, deference, or conscientious objection; among the demographic groups that saw their rights enhanced were women, racial minorities, or immigrant communities. The 1960s are not as appealing to the general public as the time around World War 2 (there are actually not many popular novels set in that decade); their interest lies, however, in their counterpoint value when offset against the conservatism of the years leading up to the war. This constitutes the reason *Mothers and Daughters* works successfully against the conflicts of *The War Widows*.

For the Winstanleys, the anchor to the previous generation is still Esme, the matriarch, but her role is now reduced to that of a beacon of benighted conservatism. Her staunch belief in “Family First and Foremost” (*MD* 11) in fact provokes several crises with different characters, who suffer from her immobilism regarding single motherhood, homosexuality, or divorce. Customs and public attitudes to all these were changing but still generally condemnatory (Marr, *History of Modern Britain* 57-58). Leah Fleming includes also an element of inter-faith

relationships, which of course Esme opposes. When she disparages Connie's first love interest because his family are "left-footers" or "Catholics, and we don't mix, as a rule", Connie reflects the contemporary rejection of those structures: "This is the sixties; no one bothers about that now" (MD 222, 223). Connie however overestimates the liberality of the 1960s, for it is not only Esme that objects to the new morality, as she will painfully realise. At the opening of the novel she is secluded in her ivory tower at the Waverley, the family home in Grimbleton: reading in the attic, "she could be Jane Eyre, Elizabeth Bennet, Natasha in *War and Peace*, living their lives over and over again in dreams" (MD 101). However, her emotional journey starts with a wake-up call to the reality of life, as opposed to romance-reading. She soon becomes pregnant, and her ivory tower vanishes: "*Her room was let and she was sent to live with Gran [Esme] as her nursemaid. Every rebellion has its price*" (MD 285-286; italics in the original). Yet Connie's Gran has worse levies in mind for her.

Esme suggests that Connie marry her first cousin Neville, who is also immersed in a moral and personal crisis of his own: he faces criminal charges for being caught in acts of "gross indecency", i.e. homosexuality, a manner of life tolerated in Britain at the time, as long as it was conducted privately (Marr, *History of Modern Britain* 134-39). Esme's patch-up solution is meant to sort out "a fallen woman and a nancy boy" (MD 339) all at once, but both Connie and Neville refuse. The matriarch's "stand for Christian morality and respectability in this godless age"⁵, refusing "[to put] a roof over a bastard's head" (MD 346, 360) may seem excessively callous to twenty-first-century readers; however, it befits the accepted impression that Connie's sexual behavior does not sit well with popular women's fiction. According to Janice Radway, even after the sexual liberation movements of the 1960s, the "change in sexual mores was and still is tolerable only within very strict limits" (73-74). At this point, the historical exoticism of Leah Fleming's novel adopts its darkest mantle.

Remarkably, motherhood is presented as an ordeal for most women in Leah Fleming's saga: Joy (Sue's daughter by Freddie) suffers from post-natal depression (MD 357), partly brought about by her husband's brutal treatment of her, which includes racial abuse and physical violence. And Connie, after a lonely confinement and labour, decides that the best course of action is to give up her baby daughter for adoption. Present-day Connie remembers her parting from Anastasia and the forms she signed, abstaining from any contact with her for thirty years: "*The flame at the heart of her never went out, not even in the darkest hour*" (MD 396-97; italics in the original). Connie's sombre life trajectory illustrates Strehle and Carden's assertion that much women's fiction, steeped as it is in the cultural contexts that originate them,

5 Esme's tirade is actually justified: in the early 1960s only about 10% of the British population attended church regularly, a sign of the declining role of religion in society after the crises of the Second World War (Padley 40-42).

expresses a compound and contradictory impulse: on the one hand, the narrative ventriloquizes cultural values, perpetuating and naturalizing patriarchal models of gender that project women's destined and desirable end in the family; on the other hand, the narrative talks back, revealing women's frustration, dissent, and potentially subversive responses to those patriarchal constructions (Strehle and Carden xii).

As an example, Joy eventually divorces husband Denny, becomes a successful home saleswoman, learns to drive and in general starts a new free life. Connie's trajectory will be sadder, but in the end partially rewarding.

Anastasia, Connie's illegitimate daughter, is born in 1965, that seminal year of Martin Luther King's activism and Malcolm X's assassination, the Beatles' and the Rolling Stones' music hits, the death of Winston Churchill, the Vietnam War, the Second Vatican Council, the first ever spacewalk, and Mary Quant's mini-skirt⁶. All these social, political and cultural breakthroughs are however lost on Connie, immersed in a process of nullification that virtually destroys her: "She looked in the cracked mirror at her reflection. [...] Her once-beautiful breasts had shrunk to nothing. She could pass for a boy" (*MD* 405-406). Her outward de-gendering is merely the step prior to the ultimate end: she attempts suicide, but not even that reverts the tide of social condemnation. The matron charges her with "burden[ing her] baby with the stigma of being illegitimate" (*MD* 375); the doctor laments her waste of her intellectual capacity and the "sorry end for [her] life" (*MD* 364); and her own family condemn her to ostracism: "The baby who never came home was a subject no one wanted to address" (*MD* 408). Yet that same low point helps her bounce back.

Her recovery starts when she identifies her vocation, which in keeping with numerous similar women's fiction novels, redefines her as a woman: she becomes a social worker, a profession which forces her to face "the realities of dealing with broken homes, violence and abuse, incest and unimaginable child neglect [...]; the dark side of the 1960s, but this was what she'd chosen to do in reparation for her own betrayal" (*MD* 475). With the new decade, Connie has fallen into the mould that she had so painfully rejected in her freedom years. She has married medical doctor Paul Jarviss, whom she knew as the staid boy of her school (*MD* 343). It is Paul who rather coincidentally supervises Connie's delivery of her daughter, to her mortification; yet as a married couple "they were expected to [...] be careful with patients socially, to conform to a standard of living, and above all to be seen to be paragons of virtue in public behavior" (*MD* 505). Vocational relocation and social—and moral—integration run parallel in Connie's life trajectory, and yet her most vital transformation is a geographical journey with a personal agenda.

6 The crises affecting both Connie and Neville, however, would not be legally resolved until 1967, when abortion was legalised and homosexuality decriminalised (Padley 45, 197).

For Connie redefines herself in terms of her Cretan ascendancy: “It was like the first day of her new life as Konstandina Eleni Papadaki. [...] Yesterday she was plain Connie. Today she was someone quite different” (*MD* 120). By means of the four present-time vignettes that introduce each of the novel parts, it is revealed eventually that Connie has flown to Crete to seek out her own daughter Anastasia, given up in adoption at birth. At this point the novel’s focus shifts from historical exoticism to geographical one, as Crete continues to feature prominently in the saga’s second novel. Connie’s mother Ana had enjoined her, as a dying wish, to visit the island and honour her family in her stead: “You must go back for me, see the island for yourself, say a prayer by my mother’s grave... for my sister, Elenni” (*MD* 126). Mediterranean glamour, evident in *The War Widows*, is pursued here as well, as Crete is presented as a country distant in all cultural and geographic respects from Britain. To Connie, however, it is also the key to resolve her twofold familial estrangement: not only is she trying to locate her daughter, but also make sense of her origin as a result of the liaison between her mother and her ever-absent father. This, however, she cannot do; Freddie Winstanley only exists, apart from a few old photographs, in her birth certificates, “old papers in foreign writing”, whose meaning she is “unable to translate” (*MD* 103). This case of interpretive aporia is however redressed with another set of documents which do elucidate her first traumatic motherhood: eventually the charity Barnardos finds Anastasia, who had lived as an adopted child, for Connie: “*There are no words, only tears. One journey has ended and another wonderful journey is beginning*” (*MD* 542; italics in the original).

Family roots and personal identity thus become intertwined, and when Connie finally arrives in Crete, she closes her mother’s vital circle by looking out the Papadakis relatives, with whom she leaves “her mother’s nursing badge to show she was an SRN [State Registered Nurse]. Now she was back with her family where she belonged” (*MD* 502). As she shows them a photo of mother Ana, she explains how she had been “with the *Andartes* in the hills” (*MD* 497). Leah Fleming here resorts to a part of Crete’s involvement in the war that features repeatedly in contemporary British fiction of WW2: the *andartes*, or guerrilla fighters who were for years assisted by Churchill’s government during the conflict⁷. But the author blends with this historical nostalgia geographic exoticism, a mixture that in the case of Crete her readers find both familiar and appealing: not only is food there “the true heart of everything” (*MD* 497), but more relevantly, the Mediterranean island is diametrically different from Britain: “Grimbleton, with its cold, damp, smutty red brick seemed a million miles away from the brightness of this landscape” (*MD* 495).

Such geographic and historical chasm with Britain is similarly heightened in Katherine Webb’s *The English Girl*, also characterized by a double chronological line, and whose setting in Oman, lushly described, multiplies its alien component.

7 Churchill’s assistance to Greece was due to a historical tradition of friendly relations between both countries, but also in Britain’s own interest, given Greece’s strategic geographical position. The Greek people for their part felt a combination of centuries-old admiration for Britain mixed with incredulity and resentment once British troops were evacuated from Greece, in a shameful echo of Dunkirk (Clogg 136-138).

Katherine Webb's *The English Girl*

The twofold historical setting of this novel in the 1920s and 1958 allows us to revisit both the aftermath of the Second World War in imperialistic terms, and the contrast that historical moment implies with the interwar period, in particular in a setting such as Oman, almost virtually untouched until that point by the European visitors—with the exception, that is, of Britain. The sultan of Oman had been, since the 19th century, controlled by Britain in order to prevent any other European power from making colonial claims of their own. It would not be until 1967, when Oman started running its own oil resources, that the sultanate acquired financial independence from Britain. Then started the British army's involvement in a series of lesser publicized wars against Omani insurgents (Cobain), one of which is the Jebel War of 1958-59 depicted in the novel, suppressed with brutality by the British troops. Thus we see *The English Girl* as part of a long literary tradition, for as Petra Rau contends, “after Scott's historical novels, war was popularised through a different genre: the adventure novel, often set in exotic or colonial spaces” (259).

Protagonist Joan Seabrook's brother is posted in Oman as a member of those anti-insurgency troops, a placement that serves Joan and her fiancé Rory as an excuse to visit the sultanate, under the auspices of the British administrators and army officers. While there, Joan fulfills a childhood dream of meeting famed desert explorer Maude Vickery, now in her secluded advanced years, and who uses Joan to settle old scores. In particular, to exert her revenge on Nathaniel Eliot, the childhood friend and later object of a romantic fixation, and a fellow explorer who betrayed her despicably, on all possible grounds, as we shall see. Katherine Webb offers her readers a glimpse into a lesser known episode of British imperialism, since as Maude cynically affirms, “Oman is still a British protectorate”, even if “they don't exactly call it that any more—not now everyone's so embarrassed about appearing colonial” (*TEG* 15)⁸. In everything but name, that is exactly what Oman was to Britain. The imperialist theme is further complicated by the conflicting ambitions of the United States, Saudi Arabia and UK, for the domination of Oman and indirectly of its oil resources, while maintaining an officially disengaged position. As the narrator informs us (releasing some of the author's all-too-evident research) the *wazir* or foreign minister of Oman was little more than a yes-man compliant to both the sultan and Britain: “ever since the first treaties had been signed between Britain and the sultan at the turn of the nineteenth century [the wazir's] job was to guide the sultan in all matters of foreign relations and trade [... a]nd, of course, to keep the British government apprised of it all” (*TEG* 25-26).

Oman was closely tied to the UK by a treaty signed in 1939, although oil deposits would not be exploited for commercial purposes until 1964, when it became evident to the British governments that the Strait of Hormuz, the route for the area's oil to reach Europe's market, had to be safeguarded by British troops. By comparison with the settings described

8 The setting of the “later” temporal line in 1958 doubtless strikes a chord with British readers, alert as they would be to the date's proximity to the embarrassing Suez Canal crisis (*TEG* 195).

in Leah Fleming's novels above, Katherine Webb's timeframe, the 1950s, is perceived as quite subdued in terms of historical events. The same applies to the 1920s, understood as a period of reconstruction and recovery from the watershed of the Great War. Therefore, the exoticism exploited by *The English Girl* is more geographic than historical: its setting in Oman for most of the narrative, in particular its deserts, plays upon the readership's appetite for far-away, dangerous allure. Its two protagonists, explorer Maude Vickery and rebellious Joan Seabrook, both perform phenomenal, daring deeds (inevitably the implication is "for a woman"), in their respective times. Maude crosses Rub el Khali or Empty Quarter, the forbidding Omani desert; and Joan goes up into the Jebel Akhdar mountains in the company of Salim, a freedom fighter she has helped break out of prison, who is revealed eventually to be Maude Vickery's own son by Nathaniel Eliot.

The novel opens with a conventional enough moment of clash with all things British: family, tradition, weather, clothes. The heroine's break with her past provides a parallel with the so-called Regency romance, a genre in which often, according to Hsu-Ming Teo, "the landed estate in England provides safe haven and financial security" for the heroine (160). To Joan Seabrook, eager to escape England and her family, "Arabia had to be every bit as wonderful as she'd ever imagined it" (*TEG* 28). Before she actually visits it, her imagination is filled with clichés: "It was a place where you galloped towards a shimmering horizon [...]; where you wore silk next to your skin instead of a damp, itchy jumper; where there was no mud, no rain, no slumped grey skies or snoozing suburban streets. Clean, warm, beautiful; entirely wholly *other* than life as she knew it" (*TEG* 28). This mythification of Arabia as contrasted with Britain is used by Katherine Webb as an evident pull on her prospective readers. The author paints an eloquent image of a grey Britain in the drab post-war years, and the liberating contrast afforded to a woman like Joan by an Arabian adventure that she lives at the level of travel, independence, rebellion, and political and armed conflict. Wishing to break with the rigid British social and familial systems, she accepts Salim's invitation to go up the Jebel Akhdar mountains with him: "Now you are truly one of us", he says, "one of the imam's soldiers" (*TEG* 303). She had helped him break out of prison, even though that meant that he would return to his freedom fighting against America and Britain: against, that is, her own country and brother Daniel.

For all the exoticism and adventure Joan is experiencing in Oman, she paints a sombre future picture of a country overrun by the oil extraction companies, as it started to be once oil was discovered in 1964: "it will never be the same again", Salim regrets: "there'll be roads, and new towns, and aeroplanes crossing, and cars everywhere, and foreigners. The desert will be settled—it will be destroyed" (*TEG* 228). Salim concedes it will constitute one further example of "the rape of the wild", but having a more practical and political outlook, he admits that Oman "needs wealth; it needs progress" (*TEG* 234). In his practical admission, Salim reflects Amira Jarmakani's view of the "sheik-hero" (more on this figure below) "often portrayed as battling regressive elements in his own country in order to bring it in line with the new global economy [and] aligning his country with the new world order" (16). Thus Webb's appeal to exoticism has evident political and economic relevance for her twenty-first century readers.

Salim provides Joan with the male charm that his fiancé Rory lacks, because he is too British, too tame, and a homosexual. He may love Joan, but he does so chastely, whereas he kisses Joan's brother Daniel with "passion, and nothing more mysterious than that" (*TEG* 144), as Joan realizes when she sees them embrace. Although the novel's front cover describes it as "a compelling and beautifully written tale of adventure, mystery and love", romance is not at the centre of the narrative conflict, and is used in the blurb for its evident marketing appeal (the romance conflict that does affect the narrative concerns Maude, not Joan, and will be dealt with below). Joan's Omani sentimental adventure, however, is relevant for its perpetuation of the by now canonical "sheik" figure. Established as a literary cliché with the publication of E. M. Hull's novel *The Sheik* in 1919, and the subsequent release of the film adaptation, this character type must not be understood literally in the case of *The English Girl*, but in an approximate way. Indeed, if we follow Jamira Aramakani's definition of the sheik "as a noble desert leader, as an oil-rich powerful man, and as a savage and potentially dangerous figure" (4-5), we realise that both of Joan's sentimental interests, Salim Shahin and Charles Eliot, together make up a combination of these traits. Since Salim is, as mentioned above, Maud's son by Nathaniel Eliot, he is also revealed at the end of the novel to be the actual half-brother of Charles Eliot, a comrade-at-arms of both Rory and Daniel. Both Salim and Charles conform to British stereotypes of adventure and sophistication: the Arab is enigmatic, dark-skinned, courageous but well-mannered, and the respected leader of a guerrilla faction against the tyrannical sultan. Charles Eliot is a SAS (Special Air Service) soldier, specializing in risk operations, the son of a pioneering celebrity, and belonging in high society. However, Webb subverts our expectations.

The freedom fighter Salim is initially deployed as the quintessential Arab seducer, when in fact he is later revealed to be the son of British parents: Maud Vickery and Nathaniel Elliot. Salim's dark complexion is merely the result of sun exposure, and his traditional Omani outlook results from having been brought up there, far from the influence of his father. Joan and Salim's interaction reflects Hsu-Ming Teo's thesis that "the hygienic hero signals to the Western heroine his European racial or cultural heritage—the thing that makes him a suitable mate for her" (221), even if only potentially. Salim's confusing ethnic background may also be seen to reflect, in Amira Jarmakani's words, "the complex associations people have with the (fantasy) figure of the sheikh and with his counterpart, the (real) figure of the terrorist" (xvii). Salim is sufficiently mysterious to exert an initial attraction on Joan, who follows him into the formidable Jebel Akhdar mountain range, a moment that signals her break "away from her past life [...] going beyond normal life" (*TEG* 253) and beyond her British self: "As she [...] looked back down at the city and the sea, she felt so distant from that other life that she wondered if there were two of her" (*TEG* 254). In this physical and symbolic journey Joan adopts the female Omani costume, and although she expects that "dressed the way she was" she "could have been anybody, and she could choose", ironically the result is invisibility to the fortress guards and indifference from the local females. Even though she dons their attire, it is evident she does not fit: "She knew from the way she was watched that her own mask and veil

gave her no anonymity there” (*TEG* 292), confirming that “becoming ‘one of them’ is, ironically, the move that most distinguishes the white heroine” from the local women (Jarmakani 106).

Once up in the mountain village, however, the attraction vanishes, and Joan soon realizes she is misplaced: Salim has left her behind to join other rebels; she, unlike Maude, cannot speak Arabic; and she is mistrusted by both the male and female population. Such passages confirm also Hsu-Ming Teo’s assertion that these “desert romances” do not normally focus on the Muslim women: “Where fleetingly present, [they] are a collective, undifferentiated mass against which the white woman’s individuality, modernity, liberation, and control over her self and her destiny can be seen more clearly” (223). Although Joan fantasises about remaining in the mountains, becoming “a complete person” (a shocking notion!) by marrying Salim and giving him “a scatter of coffee-coloured children”, she also “[realises] just how out of time Oman truly was” (*TEG* 292), through observation of the womenfolk’s tedious lives up in the mountains.

In sharp contrast to the submission shown by the Muslim women, whose life Joan briefly contemplates, stands Maude’s free spirit. This is actually referenced by the nickname “Shahin” given her by the Bedouins: “peregrine” (*TEG* 322). She is given that name after she falls on one of their attackers in the desert like a falcon. Yet, as an adjective it means “wandering” or “travelling”. It is indeed Maude Vickery’s desert-crossing saga in the 1920s timeline that imparts the most tension to the narrative. Conceived by Webb as a tribute to Gertrude Bell (*TEG* 447-48)⁹, her groundbreaking achievement consists in traversing the Omani desert from south to north, a feat up to that point beyond the reach of both male and female explorers. Nathaniel Elliot, Maude’s lifelong closest friend, had also ambioned being the first white person to manage the passage, but gets lost and is on the brink of death on the dunes. At this point Maude saves his life, and he summons enough decency to admit that “few men could have done what you have. Few men and no women” (*TEG* 367). Rather unexpectedly and unrealistically, he “marries” (for the sake of appearances before the Bedouins) a besotted Maude in a sham desert ceremony, and makes her pregnant—as it eventually transpires—on their “wedding” night. Then, in an unspeakable act of betrayal, he sneaks away before dawn with Maude’s maps, water and any other necessary equipment to complete the expedition, claiming before the world the feat to his name. A broken Maude is left with barely enough water and camels to reach the next well.

Maude’s story provides evidence that these and similar works “[reflect] both the patriarchal oppression of women and women’s strength in resisting, in forging appropriate forms of heroism” (Strehle and Carden xviii). From this moment onwards, Maude vindicates herself as totally independent, to the point that it is only made clear at the end

9 Gertrude Bell’s (and thus Maude Vickery’s) feat may be seen within the new mode of exploration carried out by British pioneers in the first decades of the twentieth century. According to historian Andrew Marr, in the past “the British had climbed or slogged with a flag, to take territory and make fortunes; in the years before the First World War they were more often climbing and slogging for the sake of it” (*Making of Modern Britain* 98).

that far from supporting politically the sultan and his British sponsors, she had all along financed the insurgents, i.e. her son Salim (*TEG* 243). Such fierce self-reliance defines her love-hate dynamic with Nathaniel Eliot, an illustration that “these women are all financially self-supporting and are in no need of a husband. It is precisely their independent streak, however, that flings them headlong into heated battles with the [...] hero”, who soon learns she will acknowledge no master over her (*Teo* 223). This is so true of Maude that she actually offers Nathaniel the same arrangement that dependent wives have been hearing for centuries, in all cultures: “You needn’t work another day, if you don’t want” (*TEG* 375).

Some of the most poignant passages in the novel are devoted to the beauty of the desert: its absolute silence, its oases, or its impassiveness to life or death (*TEG* 98, 286, 321, 368). The landscape descriptions are actually one of the novel’s most solid strengths, both for their evocative power and how the desert impacts characterisation: it transforms both Maude and Joan, irrevocably. When Nathaniel is rescued by Maude, he says “she looked like a Bedouin boy”, and she “realised she must have lost all femininity” (*TEG* 365-66). That is not her only break with her past, as Maude admits “I couldn’t go back to England. The desert changed me” (*TEG* 133). The novel’s open ending suggests she has avoided political persecution by hiding amidst Oman’s forbidding landscape. For her part, and in keeping with numerous popular women’s fiction works, Joan is offered a new life direction, if she will accept a secretarial job at the British consulate in Aden, Yemen (*TEG* 426). Although she will be starting at the very low, it reads as her first step in a diplomatic career. Yet a consular post is not the only novelty for Joan. Also in keeping with popular women’s fiction, she redefines her strained family relations by challenging her mother to accept Daniel’s homosexuality (their father had also been a homosexual, although of a more traditional, marriage-of-appearances type). More relevantly, she plans to vindicate Maude’s pioneering achievements before public opinion. Maude’s story had illustrated the overwriting of women (in her case both literal and metaphorical) throughout history by male competitors: “They wouldn’t have believed me. [Nathaniel Eliot] redrew my map, rewrote my journal in his own hand. And he was a *man*. Back then, people didn’t have the first clue what a woman was capable of” (*TEG* 416; emphasis in the original). But Eliot’s return of her maps, even though they had been hailed decades ago as chronicling *his* desert crossing, will rectify the record, which will also incorporate Joan’s own encounter with Maude: “she might write her own part in as an afterword—how the truth had been brought to light” (*TEG* 432).

All the major life changes in Fleming’s *The War Widows* and *Mothers and Daughters* and Webb’s *The English Girl* therefore culminate on glowingly positive notes: Lily’s glamorous job as a travel agent and her disengagement from a dreadful fiancé; Connie’s double reconnection, of her late mother to her Cretan ancestors, and her own reunion with her long-lost daughter; and Joan’s incipient diplomatic career in unfamiliar Yemen, together with her own freedom from an engagement doomed to failure. Far from serving as mere colourful topographical backgrounds, the remoteness and exoticism of the geographical settings in

these novels allow the protagonists to embark on journeys of recognition. Their displacement from Britain is formulated in terms of a questioning of its values and customs, characterized as traditional and in need of revision, while their temporary homes in faraway locations are liberating and often a departure point for renewal. In no lesser way, Britain is also offset to Crete, Burma, Italy or Oman through references to cultural aspects such as landscape, weather, tradition or cuisine. Leah Fleming and Katherine Webb both target their novels at readers avid for vicarious experience of mystery and adventure. Frequently, these novels are also characterized by the presence of a beguiling male character who functions as metonymic fascination for a heroine lacking in excitement. The cultural distance from this foreign male, together with his emotional and physical attractiveness, set him out as desirable in traditional romance terms, but as I have attempted to show above, much contemporary popular fiction by female writers rather than focus a thrilling love affair emphasise the heroine's individuality and identification of new life vocations. The female protagonist may find herself courted by Tommies, sheiks or ordinarily charming men, but the exotic pull is actually exercised by faraway locations that often reverberate with the readers for historical reasons. The romance in these novels, therefore, is frequently not of the heart, but with the remote, enigmatic settings where these heroines of the twenty-first century discover their new life directions and identities.

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