



JEANNIE'S AMERICAN DREAM

THE ASSIMILATION OF A TV ICON

Jeannie sleeps in her genie bottle, where Arabian designs and sparkly jewels line the walls and her bed is made of purple velvet and adorned with satiny yellow pillows. She hears her master, Tony Nelson, dressed in his blue NASA Air Force uniform, walk to the kitchen counter where her bottle resides. She yawns and checks the time on an oversize hourglass. "Four o'clock in the morning?" she exclaims. She stands up and blinks once with a bob of her head. A green cloud of smoke surrounds her and she disappears. She reappears in Tony's living room with a puff of smoke. Roger, Tony's best friend and fellow astronaut, walks into the apartment.

Jeannie becomes cross with Tony when she realizes that he's up early for his launch into space—not to celebrate their anniversary. He doesn't remember that one year ago exactly he had rescued her from her bottle when his shuttle went off course and landed on an abandoned beach. She proposes going back to the beach to reenact their meeting. Tony says that's out of the question because he has to go into orbit on an important mission. "Oh, what's more important?" Jeannie asks, giggling. "Going on some silly ride? Or celebrating our anniversary?" Before Tony can respond, Roger advises him not to.

Roger notices Jeannie looking away mischievously. "If there's anything that makes me nervous it's an angry genie," he says, and the laugh track sounds. In the next scene, Tony's shuttle has a perfect launch but suddenly goes off course in the same spot as it did the

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previous year. When the NASA officials ask what went wrong, Roger responds, bewildered: “I think he stopped off to celebrate his anniversary.”



This year marks the 50th anniversary of the premiere of the sitcom *I Dream of Jeannie*, which ran on NBC from 1965 to 1970. The show is best known for the campy shenanigans that the 2,000-year-old genie named Jeannie would come up with in an attempt to please her astronaut “master,” Tony. The series fit into the “fantastic-family genre” of the

plot point that was risqué and unprecedented at the time. Jeannie’s origins from that nebulous space known as “the Orient” worked for the series—and for viewers. After the premiere of the fourth season in 1968, a *TV Guide* article called *Jeannie* “one of the most daring shows on TV,” stating: “It is the only show, for example, in which an attractive unmarried girl has the free run of a bachelor’s apartment. Jeannie may be a creature of fantasy, live in a bottle and hence be exempt from some of the more rigid social conventions, yet her attitude toward her ‘lover’—if that is what he is—is quite sophisticated. He is her ‘master’ and

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’60s, alongside *Bewitched*, *The Munsters*, *The Addams Family*, and *The Jetsons*, which played with the tensions between magic, science, domesticity, and the space race for comic relief and social criticism. The situation comedy landed on the top-30 list of the Nielsen Ratings only twice, but it is well known throughout the world because during its run, *Jeannie* aired in over 45 countries on six continents and it continues in syndication today.

As a young person growing up in the ’80s, I loved watching *Jeannie* reruns during summer vacation. Its slapstick timing made me laugh, and watching a powerful woman zap people into their place intrigued me. It wasn’t until decades later, when I was studying television criticism in graduate school and looking for Arab characters in U.S. popular culture, that I revisited *Jeannie*. She must have been Arab since genies originate from Arabia, right? Yes, that’s right: Jeannie, dressed in her hot pink “harem costume,” complete with chiffon pants, red bra, pom-pom trimmed bolero jacket, and her chiffon-draped headpiece, is Arab. Highly stereotypical and rooted in Orientalist imaginings, but Arab nonetheless. Barbara Eden, the actress who played her, known for being a 1960s “blonde bombshell,” is not, which lines up consistently with Hollywood’s practice of casting white actors to play characters of color. Still, all of Jeannie’s signifiers—costume, props, language, history, and relationships—locate her in the Middle East.

Not only was Jeannie Arab, her Arabness was a site of great contention. Her character had started out as an over-the-top stereotype of an Arab woman, but she became an assimilated housewife in white suburbia due to pressure from network executives over the series’ five-year, 139-episode run. Having a sexy protagonist from Arabia allowed the show’s creators to get away with things that they otherwise wouldn’t have been able to at the time. For one, Jeannie and her master live together but are not married, a

she his ‘slave,’ a relationship which, comic as it is, seems better suited to the Marquis de Sade than all those folks back in the Midwest who, the ratings tell us, constitute some of Jeannie’s most enthusiastic fans.”

The media often focused on Eden’s physical beauty and highlighted the show’s special effects, which were highly innovative at the time. However, there was a great deal of societal influence and social commentary present in the show’s text: Themes such as Orientalism, assimilation, and sexism run through the series, illuminating the dominant ideologies of the time. The first season of the show never went into syndication because it was the only one filmed in black and white, so most viewers have never seen the episodes wherein Jeannie’s Arabic roots were the most pronounced—and the most controversial. Jeannie reminisces about belly dancing for the sultan and riding camels, speaks gibberish Arabic under her breath, and hosts her parents when they visit—from Baghdad. Also, she regularly tries to seduce her master. In the pilot episode, Tony (Larry Hagman) was engaged to marry a general’s daughter, but Jeannie did everything she could to get between them, including distracting Tony by coming out of his shower wearing nothing but his shirt and later forcing him to kiss her.

The show’s writer and creator, Sidney Sheldon, penned in his autobiography that once “the network had awakened to the fact that in those closely censored days, they had bought a show that was about a nubile, half-naked young woman, living alone with a bachelor, constantly asking, ‘What can I do for you, Master?’ they had panicked. The [first] memo was 18 pages long.”

The network implemented “strict controls” for Jeannie. For example, at the beginning or end of the show, she needed to come out of her bottle in the morning or go into it at night, demonstrating that Jeannie’s sexuality was

constrained, and that although the couple resided under the same roof, they lived in a hanky panky-free household. The executives wanted Jeannie to become “less aggressive” and more “likeable.” As a result, they cut out her temptress leanings. The second season brought with it not only color but an upbeat theme song and an animated intro, along with a peppier, more naive Jeannie. Instead of trying to seduce her master, she starts focusing on aiding him in his mission to get the United States into space, even if her capricious ways sometimes hinder her best intentions.

Sheldon intentionally made Tony an astronaut in order to capitalize on the media hype surrounding the race to the moon. At the time, the U.S. government overemphasized the “New Frontier” in part to distract people from the burgeoning civil rights movement. The media represented astronauts as normal men, neighbors who would come over for a barbecue on Sunday afternoon. Sheldon worked closely with NASA to ensure the series showed the agency in a demilitarized, positive light.

“I don’t want anything else in the world but to be an astronaut,” Tony often told Jeannie, reminding her that even though she could grant him any wish, his devotion to the space program was total because he wanted to live an ethical life and to serve his country.

It’d be easy to write off *I Dream of Jeannie* as sexist: Jeannie calls Tony “Master,” she goes to great lengths to obey him, and her main impetus is to please him, reiterating patriarchal norms and invoking the stereotype that third-world servants want nothing but to serve. Yet it’s more complicated than that. The show does have transgressive moments that break gender norms and reveal that Jeannie is more powerful than her male counterpart could ever dream of being.

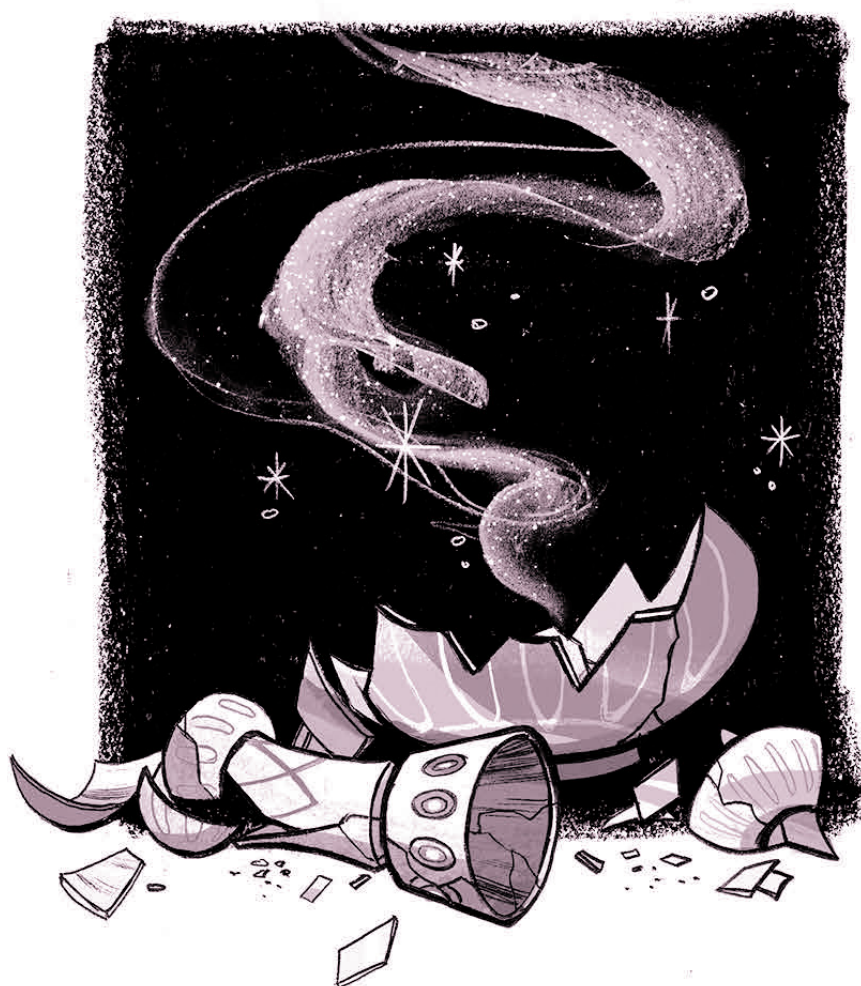
Take an episode from the second season: Tony and Roger are in space. Tony carefully leaves their ship to wander out into the “wild blue yonder.” He floats in space

dressed in a bulky, silver spacesuit with a tether cord that anchors him and supplies oxygen. The laugh track sounds when Jeannie floats freely into frame—without a helmet, suit, or cord, wearing only her harem costume. The first thing Jeannie does is make a wish upon a star; she then kisses Tony’s helmet.

Her kiss suggests Orientalist and sexist thinking that while Tony, the white male, is focusing on “serious” questions, like expansionism, Jeannie dreams of affection and love. Yet, it would minimize the moment to overlook the representation of a female accomplishing in a blink of an eye what cost the boys at NASA millions to achieve. The “poke” at societal sexism and the sexist practices in the space program, which were well documented at the time, makes the scene funny. Thus, the show answered the question “Should a girl be first in space?” with the answer: “Yes—and she should be a genie.”

In the third season, Jeannie becomes more U.S.-identified when her outlandish twin sister appears from Baghdad, also named Jeannie and played by Eden in a brown wig and a green harem outfit. Identical characters played by the same actor were not uncommon in Sitcomland at the time: Sheldon’s other hit, *The Patty Duke Show*, also had them. Jeannie II’s debut in the series, however, swiftly followed the Arab-Israeli War of 1967, which many scholars cite as a pivotal moment in the representation of Arabs in the U.S. media. From then on, Arabs were increasingly depicted in roles that framed them as violent, anti-American, and dangerous.

Although the two characters are twin sisters, great differences make it seem like they are from disparate worlds. Jeannie strives to be the ultimate loyal servant and wants to wed Major Nelson, but she no longer strives to seduce him. Jeannie II thinks her sister is a boring square—she herself has married 47 times and lives to “swing,” manipulate, and enjoy. Jeannie is portrayed as virginal, while Jeannie II is sexualized. Both represent archaic Orientalist stereotypes—each woman is stuck in a different box categorized by racist imaginings of Arabian archetypes: the oppressed, innocent, loyal servant and the oversexualized, erotic harem dancer. These extreme opposites are rooted in the traditional Judeo-Christian outlook that frames women within a virgin/whore dichotomy, bringing home the notion that Western perceptions of Arab women often have more to do with the anxieties of the Westerners perceiving the women than with the realities of the women perceived.



Jeannie II serves to distance Jeannie from her exotic past. She could not have been introduced in the first season because her character traits were too similar to Jeannie's at that time; there would not have been enough tension between them. Jeannie had to become "Americanized" for the juxtaposition to be possible and for her to be framed as the good immigrant, striving to fit into the melting pot.

What do I mean by Jeannie's Americanization? Take, for example, the fact that Jeannie doesn't know her birthday. Tony is shocked that she has never celebrated her birthday and, although it had never occurred to her before, she becomes ashamed that she doesn't know. This shame spurs

Whereas Jeannie was initially exoticized, network executives and social critics perceived her sexuality as too dangerous, so she became infantilized, a cheerleader ecstatic to use her power for the good of the U.S. space program. This change coincided with a shift in her national allegiance; as each season aired she became less aligned with the Middle East and her family and more identified with and loyal to her master and his American lifestyle.

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her desire to assimilate. She suddenly cannot go on living without knowing the date of her birth. Tony sends her home to ask her family while he and Roger get to work on ERIC, a NASA computer with the "greatest mechanical brain in the world." Jeannie comes back from home with no news about her birth date and becomes so depressed that her magic abilities weaken and she begins to disappear—special effects show her standing up without any feet.

Although Jeannie regains her power in the next episode, she does not find out when her birthday is because a contest in which viewers guessed the date stretched out over four weeks, which proved to be a great success in terms of ratings. Colgate, the sponsor, planned huge in-store promotions involving most major supermarket chains. In the contest's developmental stages, a Screen Gems executive commented, "This is fast developing into the biggest contest we or even NBC has ever been a part of." Tony and Roger successfully get Jeannie's birthday out of ERIC—April Fool's Day. Jeannie is thrilled and declares, "From now on I am going to have a birthday—just like everybody else." This emphasizes her great desire to fit in and be "normal" like the Americans with whom she lives.

Along with this shift toward Americanization came the purging of almost all of Jeannie's Arabian signifiers, most blatantly in the fifth season when she marries Tony. The creators wanted to market a clothing line modeled after Jeannie (as happened with *Bewitched*) but knew that middle-class housewives would not want to wear an Arabian nightie, so Jeannie starts to wear three modern outfits per episode. In the beginning of the series, Jeannie openly adored her parents, but by the end she expressed relief that her mother did not come to her wedding. She even loses her home away from home when her Arabian bottle crashed to the ground and shattered. Her scream indicated the loss that she felt, but Tony consoled her, saying that she no longer needed it thanks to their nuptials. Apparently, since she has become a "legitimate" housewife instead of a live-in servant, the executives no longer felt that she needed a space of her own or a link to her past.

Critics suggested that the wedding had killed the series, and while it may have dampened an ongoing tension, the real issue was that the creators had assimilated their protagonist so completely that their basic plot and comedic formula no longer worked. How could a genie from Baghdad get in trouble working her magic in Florida if she had become an assimilated Floridian?



To my knowledge, *I Dream of Jeannie* is the only U.S. television show that has revolved around a female Arab character, which is quite sad given that she's a make-believe caricature. Truthfully, though, I don't think Jeannie could be a prime-time diva today because of how social tensions have changed. Now, if Arabs appear onscreen at all, it's as evil male terrorists or oppressed, silent women, stereotypes that not only strip West Asian and North African people of their humanity but also strip out dynamism from entertainment. Everyone would benefit if these confining boxes could open up, making room for multiple stories to flourish.

Rumors have circulated for years that the series will be turned into a blockbuster film à la *Bewitched* with Nicole Kidman. Jeannie might be just the girl to modernize these archaic representations for the new millennium—unassimilated Jeannie, that is. Imagine the magic she could work in a two-hour feature. Heck, she'd only need a second: just long enough to cross her arms, bob her head, and blink. ①

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