

Female Self-Discovery and Desire in *Dunia*

The film *Dunia: Kiss Me Not on the Eyes* centers on the personal growth of one woman under the oppressive shadow of a sexually censored Egyptian culture. Dunia, the woman after which the film is named, is struggling to know herself and know her body while being hindered by the repercussions of the genital mutilation she endured in her youth. The film also focuses the complex relationships she keeps with other characters within this society that condemns two of her great interests: belly dancing and romantic poetry and literature. Highlighted through heavy symbolism, Dunia undergoes an extensive transformation throughout the film, wherein she finds her agency as her own woman in Egypt.

Most of the symbolism marking Dunia's character development in the film has been criticized by more conservative voices in Egypt. From the phallic symbolism of a woman slowly sliding gold bracelets onto her arm to the genital mutilation of a young female character—representing the spoiling of yet another new generation of women—there are many scenes that would raise alarm for conservative individuals. As a vehicle for social change and awareness, this film is meant to cause discomfort among its viewers. It's meant to challenge their perceptions about women and societal censorship in Egypt. This explains why a vast majority of its scenes and the overall content of the film has raised plenty of opposition from conservative members of Egyptian society, many of whom are enforcing this censorship and actively reinforcing oppression against Egypt's women.

One of the less risqué symbols of the film is when Dunia watches old foreign romance films being shown at a nearby drive-in theater from the window of her apartment. The films

portray couples lying together in bed, professing their love for one another, expressing their desire. Dunia blankly watches these films, watching, in a way, what she wishes she could be. Instead, she is disconnected from her repressed feelings of desire. She is walking through life at a distance and is somewhat removed from her reality. Even when her boyfriend joins her in watching the films and attempts to wrap his arms around her, she rebuffs him. The characters in the films are in touch with their sensuality and desire, while Dunia is left cold.

This coldness is in stark contrast with Dunia's outward appearance. In nearly every scene of the film—all but one—Dunia is pictured wearing the color red. Red is commonly linked to desire; it is the color of love and passion. Dunia is presenting herself, intentional or not, as a passionate person. She can't connect with her desire and her romantic passion, yet she chooses to always wear the color of desire. Therefore, through always wearing deep red dresses, she is projecting a false image of herself to the world, initially. By the end of the film, she has connected with this color and with her desire, fulfilling its true symbolic purpose.

The only scene in which Dunia is not wearing red is during her wedding, in which she wears a white dress made of paper. White, of course, is generally seen as the color of innocence and purity. As a bride, she has a duty to present herself as an innocent, virginal young woman on her wedding day in a quest for societal acceptance. Another intriguing piece of the dress is that it is made of paper. Paper, an unbending and stiff material, is quite the opposite of those flowing red dresses that she wears regularly. Also, Dunia's marriage is never consummated, and after her relationship with her husband begins its disintegration, Dunia is seen writing poetry on this paper. Since Dunia's studies focus on romantic Arab poetry, this can be seen as an attempt to artificially infuse passion and romance into her marriage. This is another example of Dunia's desperate attempts to outwardly change issues that originate internally. Not surprisingly, this

doesn't work, and Dunia uses her paper wedding dress to leave a message for her husband as she leaves him.

After leaving her husband and engaging in a sexual relationship with her passionate thesis mentor, Beshir, we find Dunia dancing atop a hill overlooking Cairo in the final scene of the film. Beshir has helped her to liberate her body and mind from the societal censorship of sexuality and bring them together as one. She is free from her past; her body is now her own, as opposed to the property of Egypt. She sensually sways her body, finally mastering her artistic craft without shame in front of a city full of those who attempted to keep her down. She takes off a scarf she had gotten from her late mother, an accomplished belly dancer, freeing herself also from the memory of her mother and the expectations to be like her mother. The final scene shows that Dunia has discovered her passionate self; she is no longer lost in her own body or hindered in her sense of self.

Dunia's transformation is manifested in the final scene of the film; in this, she is a new woman. From being disconnected with her body and her romantic desire to her sexual liberation, the vast changes Dunia experiences in herself are truly highlighted through the symbolism throughout the film. Initially, one could say that she was lying to herself about her own condition. Attempting to be a belly dancer, dressing in red every day, and watching romantic films were all choices Dunia made to, in a sense, convince herself of her own desire and passion. These choices remained unvalidated until the end of the film after she has embraced her own agency and freed herself from her negative, internalized, societally enforced perceptions of her own body and sexual or romantic desire.