

Of Skin and Men

Julia Nauth

This analysis discusses the sexual objectification of the Tunisian woman in the drama *Of Skin and Men* by director Mehdi Ben Attia. The film deals with the position of women in Tunisian society and offers an insight into the everyday life of the protagonist. In recent years, there have already been some academic discussions on feminist theories and publications on gender-based violence in the MENA

region. For this reason, the portrayal of women as the weaker sex should be considered from a media studies perspective. In this work it is argued that the protagonist is exposed to the sexual objectification, power and violence of the Tunisian man.

Keywords: Gender, Tunisian Film, Sexual Objectification, MENA, Film Analysis

Of Skin and Men

Tunisia, 2017 – The film *Of Skin and Men* has the 25-year-old orphan Amel, following the early death of her husband, discover her passion for erotic photography of the male body. She considers portraits a way of capturing the soul of the men she photographs. Being a young, emancipated, and modern woman in Tunisia, Amel is constantly exposed to sexual harassment, humiliation, and violence in her everyday life as a photographer and artist. The film gives voice to the difficulties of emancipated Tunisian women by documenting their rebellion against male-dominated structures. With the help of her provocative photography, Amel fights against the sexual objectification of women. She thereby reverses gender roles and turns the male body into an object of her photography.

The struggle for the emancipation of Tunisian women is thus still a current theme in Tunisian society in 2017. Criticism of the sexual objectification of Tunisian women and gender-specific violence can be found repeatedly in the film and has to be further discussed. This essay examines three selected scenes in which the woman is portrayed as the weaker sex. The analysis of these film scenes will hopefully provide an insight into the depiction of gender roles. First, an introduction will be

made to the Tunisian and Islamic history of women's rights to understand what causes contribute to the sexual objectification of women. This historical context will be linked to the film's theme to analyze why women's role in a male-dominated society plays such an important part in the film.

The Woman in Tunisia

The role of women in Tunisian society has already been discussed in many academic publications dealing with sexual objectification and gender-based violence. These studies focus not only on Tunisia in particular, but also on the MENA region in general. In particular Moha Ennaji, a leading academic from Morocco, and Fatima Sadiqi have published two anthologies on gender and violence against women in the MENA region. In her edited publication, Zahia Smail Salhi, a Professor of Modern Arab Studies, also deals with gender and violence in the MENA region. Mervat Hatem's academic contributions deal, for example, with gender and politics, the position of Arab women, and theories of Arab feminism. Hatem states that Islam stands in clear contrast to women's rights, since the passages of the Koran originate in men's interpretations (15). However, according to Waletzki, the unequal position of women and men in Tunisia is not due to Islam as a religion, but

to the patriarchal society (27). In the Koran, sexual intercourse is not only a God-given gift, it also serves human pleasure – whereby this pleasure is primarily granted to men; women appear almost only as sexual objects (Waletzki 32).

In contrast to the fundamentalist interpretation of the Koran, President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali has increasingly campaigned for the emancipation of women, improved the education system, and, through this modernization strategy, maintained the image of a democratic government. According to Waletzki, Ben Ali's policy on women served as an effective strategy in the fight against Islamism (110). In her essay on women's bodies in the Egypt revolution, Mona Kasra deals with the self-portrait of the Egyptian Elmahdy, who fought against sexism, oppression, and violence against Egyptian women during the Arab Spring 2011 with her nude photo on social networks (55). For Kasra, the social media are a way of publicizing the rebellion against patriarchal structures beyond the borders of a country. Kasra notes that personal images on digital social networks have a much stronger effect in conveying socio-political opinions than text forms in online communication can (51). Thus, the protagonist of the film *Of Skin and Men* also receives enor-

mous attention through her provocative, erotic photography of men.

The Woman as Sexual Object

Mehdi Ben Attia's French-Tunisian drama of 2017 focuses on a young woman's struggle against the male structures in her country. The protagonist Amel visits her husband's funeral; attended only by traditionally dressed men, she drinks alcohol and begins a love affair. In the wake of her husband's death, she enters a healing process and feels joy again through photography. She takes the expression of her art as a total expression of freedom.

This essay analyzes three scenes from the film *Of Skin and Men* in which men perceive the woman as the weak sex and a sexual object. This applies to one scene in which the protagonist invites a strange man to her remote storage room for a portrait shoot. Only shortly after the start of the shooting, the man begins to harass Amel, who defends herself and intends to end the shooting. When she tries to give him the promised money, he grabs her purse and steals all her money. He then offers to exchange it for sexual favors. When she refuses, he reacts aggressively and strikes out to beat her. Finally, he refrains from violence and arrogantly says that she is missing something. Then he leaves the storage room.

The scene depicts the Tunisian man's arrogance and portrays Amel as the weaker sex in relation to the man, who reacts aggressively and violently when he is rejected. This scene illustrates the position of women in an authoritarian and male-dominated society. The balance of power between woman and man in Tunisia is depicted here - a woman rejects a man and must fear physical and verbal violence. This view is shared by David Ghanim, who emphasizes in his study that

[e]ven in Tunisia where women have benefited from the most progressive legislations and enjoy highest status in the Arab world, a study reveals that 20-40 per cent of Tunisian women experience physical violence and 50 per cent experience verbal violence. (46)

Another scene deals generally with the sanctity of the Tunisian man. One evening, on a dark street, three boys harass the photographer Amel with sexist comments. She manages to flee to a friend who lives nearby. Instead of talking to the boys about their behavior and outlining the consequences, the friend tells Amel that the harassment is no big deal and plays down her fear. The scene proves that the sexual objectification of women is a social problem caused by patriarchal structures.

The image of women is already conveyed and stabilized in childhood. Sexual harassment thus does not originate from the children, but is/was adopted from their parents and their traditional environment. The police play no role in this scene, nor in the whole film. Amel's friend does not intervene in the situation, nor are the police called in to help, because only a few women in Tunisia decide to report sexual violence to the police. Ghanim also notes that acts of violence are rarely recorded by the police and attract little public attention (44). There is no need for Tunisian men to be afraid of legal consequences for sexual harassment or violence against women. The safety of Tunisian women in everyday life is therefore in the hands of a patriarchal society, which restricts them to the close spaces of home and marriage. The last scene of the analysis underlines that Tunisian women not only have to fear sexual objectification and harassment in the public sphere, but also that even the private sphere does not cater to their safety. In the relevant scene, the protagonist learns first-hand that Sidi Taïeb is not merely a loving father-in-law. Drunk, he harasses her and begins to kiss her on the neck against her will. Zahia Smail Salhi, also emphasizes:

Gender-based violence occurs in both

the private and the public spheres and is perpetrated by intimate partners, family members such as fathers and brothers in patriarchal structures and male strangers. (17)

Sexual violence therefore takes place both at home and in public. Amel is exposed to sexual objectification several times in her daily life and thus to sexual harassment and violence and is not even safe from this at home.

Conclusion

The film clearly documents that, because of her gender and as a member of a patriarchal society, Amel has to fear not only sexual objectification but also gender-specific and sexual violence in everyday life. Although she fights against social pressure, the end of the film nevertheless voices a failure of the self-determined Tunisian woman. Although Amel does not allow herself to be restricted in her artistic development, she is subjected to the patriarchal social pressure of Tunisian society. Her love affair has failed and neither her father-in-law, nor the three boys, nor the male model had to fear any consequences for sexual harassment. Due to the open end of the film, it remains unclear how Amel's life story continues and

Julia Nauth

is a Master's student of the course *Media and Cultural Practice* at the Philipps University of Marburg and graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Cultural Anthropology from the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz. Her research interests include Gender Studies; especially the role of women in the MENA region and the representation of women in media formats.

email: Nauth@students.uni-marburg.de

whether she goes on to rebel against the patriarchal structures in her country.

The three scenes showed all forms of sexual objectification of women by men. In the first scene examined, the man injured in his pride is shown; he reacts to a woman's rejection only with incomprehension, contempt, and violence. The scene depicts the image of women as the weak sex and the Tunisian man's understanding of power. In the second scene, there is a direct representation of women as the object of desire. In this scene, sexual objectification does not show the man as an individual case, but presents men in the form of three boys in the street as a patriarchal and social problem. In the last scene, the sexual objectification of the protagonist culminates in the private sphere. While the first two scenes embodied the male-dominated society, the third scene shows that Tunisian women cannot even expect protection in their own home, but are considered and treated as the weaker sex.

Works Cited

Attia, Mehdi Ben, director. *Of Skin and Men* (L'amour des hommes). Epicentre Films Editions, 2017.

Ghanim, David. "Gender-based Violence in the Middle East and North Africa: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon". *Gender and Violence in Islamic Societies: Patriarchy, Islamism and Politics in the Middle East and North Africa*, edited by Zahia Smail Salhi, Tauris, 2013, pp. 43-61.

Hatem, Mervat. "What do women want? A critical mapping of future directions for Arab Feminisms". *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2013, pp. 91-101.

Kasra, Mona. "Digital-Networked Images as Personal Acts of Political Expression: New Categories for Meaning Formation". *Media and Communication*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2017, pp. 51-64.

Sadiqi, Fatima, and Moha Ennaji, editors. *Women in the Middle East and North Africa: Agents of Change*. Routledge, 2010.

Sadiqi, Fatima, and Moha Ennaji, editors. *Gender and Violence in the Middle East*. Routledge, 2011.

Salhi, Zahia Smail, editor. *Gender and Violence in Islamic Societies: Patriarchy, Islamism and Politics in the Middle East and North Africa*. Tauris, 2013.

Waletzki, Stephanie. *Ehe und Ehescheidung in Tunesien: Zur Stellung der Frau in Recht und Gesellschaft (Marriage and divorce in Tunisia: The position of women in law and society)*. Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2001.

 creative commons
(CC BY 4.0)

ISSN: 2196-629X
[https://doi.org/10.17192/
meta.2020.14.8274](https://doi.org/10.17192/meta.2020.14.8274)