

**When the Truth Becomes Too Hard to Tell: Jocelyne Saab & Dunia
(2005)**

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Published

2018

Book Title

True Event Adaptation Scripting Real Lives

Version

Accepted Manuscript (AM)

DOI

[10.1007/978-3-319-97322-7_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-97322-7_5)

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Chapter 5: When the Truth becomes Too Hard to Tell: Jocelyne Saab & *Dunia* (2005)

Margaret McVeigh

When the truth becomes too hard to tell. Jocylene Saab & *Dunia*, 2005
Margaret McVeigh

This chapter explores how Lebanese former front-line journalist and documentary maker, Jocelyne Saab, explores truth and reality in her 2005 feature film, *Dunia* (Kiss Me Not on the Eyes). It traces how Saab, when faced with the fact that she could no longer face making stories with real images about Middle-Eastern conflict, turns to the fictional world of feature film. *Dunia* explores how a young Egyptian student of dance and poetry in her journey to “free her body and dance with her soul” confronts the traditions of female genital mutilation still practiced on 97% of young Egyptian women. The chapter considers the narrative and aesthetic challenges and decisions Saab faced in making *Dunia*, when she found “the truth became too hard to tell”.

Key words: Jocylene Saab, *Dunia*, Egyptian film, female genital mutilation, female filmmakers, film and metaphor.

Introduction

I spent my life sliding under bombs, and I made a lot of documentaries about war. This is what I do: I make images. At first, they were war images, and then I started to invent them, because when everything was destroyed in front of my eyes, I couldn't collect the real anymore. I had to re-invent everything. That's how I moved into fiction. (Saab *Dunia* Q&A)

In 2016, on the way to the Screenwriting Research Network conference in Leeds, I interviewed Lebanese filmmaker, Jocelyne Saab. I knew about Saab's past as a war correspondent and documentary filmmaker; I planned to interview her about her feature-length fiction film *Dunia* (2005). One of the first questions I asked her was why, after almost 30 years as a reporter and documentary maker, did she switch from documentary filmmaking to feature film making? Her answer was simple. Saab said it was because "the truth was too hard to tell" (McVeigh).

One may think about this answer in terms of the binary of documentary film as the recording of reality versus fiction film as the telling of stories. But the features of each of these modes of storytelling are blurred in their treatment of fact and fiction, truth and the real. The basic premise of documentary as defined by the father of documentary, John Grierson, is the "creative treatment of reality" (Rotha qtd. in Bruzzi 5), whereas the basic premise of a fiction film, that is adapted from "true life" or reality in some way, is to find a story that has dramatic conflict and a clear "beginning, middle, and end" which adheres to Aristotle's notion of dramatic storytelling (Seger 49-51). But what about Saab's answer? What is truth in storytelling? And how does this relate to reality? Specifically, how does Saab explore the truth and reality in her work?

This chapter will consider Saab's cinematic work as it developed from her last documentary *Letter from Beirut* (1979) through to her exploration of reality and its inherent truths in her later feature film, *Dunia*. I will conduct a textual and structural analysis of her narrative and aesthetic choices to consider how Saab interprets reality in her work, including her creative treatment of reality in these films via experimental and metaphoric film techniques, as one way of exploring the 'truth.' I will also discuss Saab's key themes including the treatment of women in Arab society and the lingering emotional and sexual atrocities committed against young women today.

The Creative Treatment of Reality and the Truth

The discussion of reality in film theory is broad ranging and has been addressed by a number of theorists. These include notions of truth in documentary filmmaking, the place of the apparatus in the recording of reality, the techniques of cinematic storytelling including mise-en-scene, editing, sound and cinematography, as well as more philosophical and psychological research around theories of spectatorship (Tredell).

In their introduction to *Docufictions: Essays on the Intersection of Documentary and Fictional Filmmaking* (2006), Gary Rhodes and John Parris Springer concisely address the historical debate around documentary and fiction and the recording of reality. They also provide a definition of documentary and drama paradigms in filmmaking, which is useful in a discussion about the treatment of reality in film:

On the level of content, documentaries can be said to be films about real people, places and events, and their stated aim is to record or document a segment of the real world [...]

On the level of content, fictional narratives involve the use of invented people, places and

events, even when such people and events are depicted as belonging to the real world (Realism). (4)

Considering Rhodes and Springer's comparison, we could postulate that the documentary, as a genre, deals with reality more truthfully than a feature film because it 'records' the real, while fiction 'invents' the real. However, the demarcation between the two is blurred because what may in fact be the 'real' may not be the 'truth.' To better understand this dichotomy, it is useful to consider film theory that includes screenwriting and documentary theory around 'truth' in storytelling.

Screenwriting and Finding the Truth

In screenwriting theory, the idea of truth and reality has largely been the province of the field of adaptation, as outlined in early screenwriting manuals such as the American writer Linda Seger's *The Art of Adaptation: Turning Fact and Fiction into Film* (1992). Seger reminds us that "Film is a story medium [...] There are many stories in one's life [...] but seldom does anyone live his or her life in the right dramatic order" (49-50). The screenwriting manual writer, Robert McKee, urges emerging writers to seek inspiration from reality in order to find the truth by using "your insight and instinct to move us, to express your vision of how and why human beings do the things they do" (25-26). McKee notes:

A story must abstract from life to discover its essences [...] A story must be like life [...] But story is not life in actuality. Mere occurrence brings us nowhere near the truth. What happens is fact, not truth. Truth is what we think about what happens [...] At one end of reality is pure fact; at the other pure imagination. (25-26)

Documentary theorist, Michael Rabiger asks “What does life as it really is (sic) mean? To the literally minded, reality is what we can see, measure and agree upon [...] With ‘reality’ should be included not just the external visible material world but also the interior worlds of those being filmed” (5).

However, to crystallize the parameters of truth and reality in this paper I consider the work of Milcho Manchevski in the extended essay, “Truth and Fiction: Notes on (Exceptional) Faith in Art,” where he proposes:

Every piece of art has to contain the truth. But, not the truth of what happened. It needs to contain the truth of how things are—and the difference between what happened and how things are is what is important. Is it the events (and by extension the facts) of what happened, or is it the emotional and conceptual underpinning and thus understanding of how things are? (14)

Manchevski ruminates on the ways in which both filmmakers and audiences create, experience, and absorb the cinematic narrative with a certain trust and faith in the artwork to render, not the factual truth, per se, but the importantly shared experience of trusting what artist and audience can see and feel together: what feels real becomes the world we inhabit. So, truth and reality are not really the same thing, as we will see in the work of Jocelyne Saab.

When the Truth becomes Too Hard to Tell—Jocelyne Saab

Jocelyne Saab is a Franco-Lebanese film director who has never shied from reality or the truth in her work. A quote on her website is testament to this: “We have to dare to do what the film is doing now. If we hide and switch ourselves off because we do not want to be slapped, we will not be able

to express who we are and what our heritage is. Westerners look at us in a disgusting way, we need to fix this” (Saab Biography).

The reflections of reality that Saab explores in her work include notions of historiographic, memory, and trauma studies that address the interrelationship between filmmaking and history (Khatib). Saab has written and directed more than 30 documentaries, as well as three feature films. She worked as a newsreader and reporter before the Lebanese Civil War started in 1975. This career “really brought her to the front line, in the field, as a war reporter. The physical risks she took to report on the war in Lebanon made her the first woman in the Arab world to bear witness to the horrors of war around the globe, but with an intense focus on Beirut” (Van de Peer 55). As Khatib notes the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) resulted in most Lebanese filmmakers including Saab working abroad and making films in coproduction scenarios (21-22). Most filmmakers who wanted to continue to make films turned to documentary due to reignited social and political consciousness, particularly in the light of the parallel interest in Third Cinema and political realism (Van de Peer 55).

While Saab’s documentary and fiction films deal with the truth, they have always been experimental. Her 1970s and 1980s documentary work is both “journalistic and artistic,” combining reportage and experimental attributes (Van de Peer 55). Here, however, I briefly consider her last documentary, *Letter from Beirut* (1979), and first fiction film, *Once Upon a Time in Beirut* (1991), as illustrations of her work—both fact and fiction—around the city of Beirut, before moving to detail *Dunia*, perhaps her most famous work.

In *Letter from Beirut*, Saab confronts the reality of the city of her youth. The documentary commences with Saab sitting at a cafe table writing letters, which become the voice-over of the first part of the film. “She is writing/reading about the psychosis of violence and her struggle to come to terms with how Beirut looks” (Van der Peer 78). In the latter part, Saab—in self-reflexive

filmmaker mode—rides the buses of Beirut and interviews passengers. This documentary's epistolary narrative reflects both the trauma of life in a war-zone and the 'truth' of the fragmentary nature of life in Beirut during the War. She keeps changing buses and builds a picture of how the war has affected the citizens of the city. In the last part of the documentary she travels the city in a VW Beetle and interviews UN soldiers in reportage style journalism style.

The treatment of reality via this documentary's epistolary and fragmentary narrative is emblematic of the fragmentary nature of life in Beirut during the Civil War. In a semblance of the documentary reality device of voice-over speaking over the letters Saab writes to a friend, we learn of Saab's feelings upon her return to the city of her youth which is now destroyed but captured via memories of the past. As Van der Peer notes, Saab's treatment of reality in this film is poetic rather than factual; she "finds it hard to re-adjust to life in a war zone, and admits it would be easier not to remember [...] Saab confronts reality at the start of the film by returning to older times, referring to a Beirut before the war [...] a home that was not yet destroyed" (76-78).

In the final part of the film after the reportage interview style, Saab returns to voice-over and reflects "if we continue calling this war an event, it is precisely because memory does not function anymore. Disaster follows disaster like the waves of the sea" (Van der Peer 81). The final images of the documentary are poetic engendered by the images of the renown Lebanese painter, Aref el Rayess, whom she visits and whose images juxtapose the beauty of the Lebanese landscape with the machinery of war. As Van der Peer notes of this, Saab's final documentary, there is a distance between Saab and her work "she is speaking about and looking at Beirut through the eyes of an exile, who embodies the lived experience of the Lebanese as well as the distance of the foreigner" (81).

Saab's *Once Upon a Time in Beirut*, although still inspired by Beirut, is fiction. Of her change from documentary and reportage to fiction, Saab notes the way confronting reality became too hard to face. She reflects upon how war almost destroyed the way she perceived reality and her own insight into its truths and repercussions - including the violence and danger to both herself and those involved.

After covering war for 10 years I didn't know how to tell a story anymore. I felt as though my system was destroyed. I couldn't perceive reality anymore. It was too hard to perceive. War had destroyed me. It had destroyed all my insight system. I didn't want to stop. So the other way was to go into fiction and so I tried to write a scenario as I wanted to tell stories about my country, Lebanon. And I wanted to tell also insight which was war was so abrupt and violent that I didn't know how to tell about feelings of people who have lived war. So I decided to go into fiction because the work I was doing was dangerous. I was going inside war zones on the front and I was taking many risks and I decided to stop the situation. So I went into fiction to tell story and at the same time I was implicated into it. After covering war for 10 years I didn't know how to tell a story anymore. (McVeigh)

For Saab it is therefore evident that the only way to relate the reality of war without destroying herself or being destroyed, was to turn to fiction.

Once Upon a Time in Beirut is a collage of clips of different eras shown through British, American, Egyptian, Lebanese and French films and newsreels that Saab researched and sourced. These are intercut with the commentary and experience of two girls, Leila and Yasmine, who have been abroad and who view and comment on the clips in voice-over narration over a pastiche of images of Beirut's past during different eras. These portray the media's representation of Beirut via an almost haphazard but poetic merger of factual newsreel footage and old fiction films.

The legacy of documentary technique is also seen in this work in the filming on the streets, the opening sequences, the use of untrained actors and the voice over commentary. Saab notes that her unorthodox treatment of fiction via the legacy of documentary style in her work, as well as her experimental drama techniques, are also functions of her difficulty in facing what war has done to her ability to reflect on reality via storytelling:

Even in my first film I did something which was anti-classical drama feature because I did of (made) my city an actor. A city cannot be an actor. It's a set. But no I change it. I was so impressed by war that I said no you don't decide for yourself in a city, in drama, in a love story. The actors don't decide what will happen to them or what they want. So I tried something. When you don't come from academic you try things that you would not try if you come from academic background. I tried this in my first feature film and there's a sort of a start of a documentary in the feature and that's the reason that's how I passed from documentary to feature. I would have liked to pass in a different way but war did this (McVeigh).

In discussing the making of this, her first feature, Saab also reflects on the way the reality of war and its legacy in the city of Beirut, shaped the film's characters, the dramatic scenario, and the themes:

In a way I wanted to tell the world I wasn't anymore an adolescent. I had lost my adolescence between childhood and maturity. I had lost one thing and I wanted to talk about it and I wanted to talk also about a new generation who had lived war and knew nothing else. So I throw myself, my own experience into those two characters I created and I did my first feature. So that is how I passed [from documentary to feature film]. But

when you come from documentary you always have to look to reality: it always stays in your films in the images you show. (McVeigh)

Perhaps most importantly it shows how Saab draws on her own lived experiences in creating her fictional characters, as well as how as a filmmaker she matures and creates a distance between herself and the rawness of the reality she is exploring, by moving into fiction.

Feature Film: Truth and the Real

Saab's first fiction feature film, *Dunia*, is a "re-invention" and exploration of many real issues facing Arab women in life today. Saab's work is connected by the overarching theme of "identity-formation and coming of age experiences of urban women" and has is a reflection of the Middle East's violent past and present as well as the situation of women and children (Van de Peer 57).

Dunia took Writer/Director/Producer Saab seven years to make, was filmed in Egypt and produced in Egypt, France, Libya and Morocco, and was selected in competition for the Sundance Film Festival.

Saab notes of her desire to make *Dunia*, that even though it had been a dream of hers to make a feature film in Egypt, as these were the first films she saw as a child, she also needed to make a film that was at a distance from war and the reality that she had explored in her documentary work.

However she also notes that an implicit part of her work is the need to make a comment on social reality just like she had observed in early Egyptian films with their Neo-Realist style:

At the same time there was a dream anyway of making a feature because I, let's say I was raised with Egyptian films on TV. There was only television, the beginning of television when I was a child and there was only the Black and White Egyptian films. Not American

films. We just had Egyptian films which were given for free. Egypt was doing a political campaign this way so I saw these films which were in a way imitating Italian Neo Realism films. So it was a dream for me to go there and make a feature. But in war we were doing features and we were still in war. Until now a filmmaker makes film and we are still in war and it changes you. You don't have enough distance to talk about everything. That's my story. (McVeigh)

'Dunia' is the Arab word for 'life' or 'world' and is the name of the main character, Dunia, played by Egyptian actress Hanan Turk (Mostafa qtd. in Gugler 46). While Saab's stylistic and narrative work in *Dunia* displays vestiges of a neo realist style and a documentary treatment of reality, in its roving intimate camera work as we are party to Dunia and her female friends and relative's conversations as she weaves her way through life in streets, public institutions and apartments in Cairo, it is deeply symbolic and metaphorical in its treatment of reality. Dunia is a student of belly dance and Sufi poetry who wishes to become a professional dancer like her famous mother. The opening images of *Dunia* introduce stylistic and symbolic elements which will be embroidered into the narrative tapestry of the film. In handheld documentary-realist style we first follow a young woman as she weaves through the busy streets of Cairo. This is Dunia. We also see the unexpected but delightful image of a bright red heart-shaped taxi light atop a taxi. We learn later that this taxi belongs to Dunia's seemingly independent working-woman aunt, Arwa. We then see the title sequence.

We follow Dunia's journey via a number of interweaving narrative strands. All of these strands reflect the constraints of a traditional past, the promise of a liberated future, and the failure of institutions of society to liberate women. As Stefanie Van der Peer notes, Saab's work is connected by the overarching theme of "identity-formation and coming-of-age experiences of urban women"

(57). *Dunia* exposes perhaps the most confronting of the realities facing Egyptian women today: that of female genital mutilation.

There is little critical discussion of *Dunia* in English and none regarding the narrative structure of the film that I could source at this time. Van der Peer, in her discussion of Saab's documentary work, notes that "Saab's earliest experimental documentaries [...] deal with an enfolded historiography as they are unfolding their matryoshka doll structure, and reveal a preoccupation with the future" (82). In *Dunia* the multi-strand narrative structure is akin to that of a tapestry with independent colored strands of metaphor and meaning. The film has at its core Dunia's quest to be both an educated woman and the daughter of her mother, a belly dancer, a profession regarded by her culture as akin to being a whore. One of the key themes of the film is Dunia's driven struggle to find her identity reflected in how she searches to express desire through both her study of dance and in classic Arabic poetry, which becomes the subject of her Master's thesis. While on one level these key narrative threads appear to trace the reality of her quest to become a dancer and be a student, the potential pathways of her life are actually reflected by her relationship with the adults in her life.

I categorize—and will discuss—these strands as being:

- the quest for freedom of expression through Sufi poetry and learning
- the quest for love via traditional marriage or true partnership
- the quest for freedom of expression/self-identity through dance
- the pathways of tradition as reflected by the roles of women in her life

The Quest for Freedom of Expression through Sufi Poetry and Learning &

The Quest for Love via Traditional Marriage or True Partnership

As we follow the narrative strand that traces Dunia's quest to educate herself, Saab's elliptical narrative presents key story moments, rather than a complex plot-driven narrative. First, we learn that Dr Bechir, Dunia's thesis supervisor, wishes to publish an uncensored version of the erotic Arabian story Scheherazade's *One Thousand and One Nights*—and in one of the tragedies of the film—is blinded by unknown authorities in retaliation for this insurrection. In Dunia's encounters with her professor, much of the multifaceted and beautiful symbolism and metaphor around seeing reality and divining the truth is developed. Dunia's thesis is on "Love in Arab Poetry," ironically the poetry of erotic desire, which women like Dunia (whom we later learn has been circumcised) are unable to experience sexually. In an early sequence, we see Dunia listening to a lecture given by Dr Bechir, one where Dunia is heckled for noting that "A kiss is forbidden." In a following sequence Dunia advises the now-blinded Bechir that "when I first met you I was scared of your eyes." The obvious irony is that now he literally can't see.

Shortly after we see Dunia and Bechir in a pivotal scene in a music shop, where the background soundtrack to their interaction is the song, "Kiss me not on the eyes," by the famous Egyptian singer and composer, Abdel Wahab, who was noted for his passionate love songs (Mostafa qtd. in Gugler 46). This song became the title, "Kiss me not on the eyes," for the film when released in English. Dunia and Bechir sing the song together: "Kiss me not on the eyes/A kiss on the eyes means parting/Leave our goodbyes without kisses/Leave me hope." Dunia tells Bechir "Our songs speak only of sad tears and suffering" and Bechir replies "This is what I wanted to tell you. We are afraid of love and of pleasure, we steal them. But you can't dissociate pleasure from Arab literature." In her relationship with Bechir, we see the potential for Dunia's life, through the observations he makes to her. As Saab notes, the themes of *Dunia* are emblematic of what she as a Director hopes for modern Arab women: "She had better things to do than marriage [...] why hide behind the veil of traditions to get her freedom?" (McVeigh).

On another level, we follow Dunia's relationship with her boyfriend, Mamdouh, whom she initially resists and eventually marries. In this storyline, Saab directly explores the patriarchal strictures and impositions placed on women in society. While Dunia and Mamdouh are boyfriend and girlfriend, Dunia is able to express her personality and have an equal footing in the relationship. She resists his pushing her for intimacy and potentially compromising her reputation. Eventually she gives in and we see a happy Dunia marry in a beautiful white wedding dress. Scenes of Dunia and Mamdouh in their bedroom were challenging to film, as in Egyptian films male and female actors are not permitted to touch. However, more pertinent to seeking the truth is the research and inspiration Saab found in reality for the pivotal scene where Dunia declares her need for independent thought to her husband. Ultimately as Dunia faces the attempts of her husband to control her by demanding that she put her hair up and stop learning to dance, Dunia confronts him with who she is and why she needs to be herself in one of the most compelling scenes of the film. Dunia says the dreaded words: "We have to talk." She continues:

You want my body take it. But I can't kiss you. From here to here it's mine alone. I'll look for pleasure in there. My head is my kingdom. I won't share it. Anybody can fill this bed. But here. No.

In discussing the inspiration for this scene Saab notes its basis in reality. In her research Saab approached and interviewed students who attended the Academie de Beaux-Arts in Cairo, near where she was doing her research for the film, as she felt these students may have been more liberal in discussing their approach to contemporary sexual reality but in effect Saab was shocked by how much their lives were affected by the dictates of society and tradition. She notes:

This scene—imagine it where I find it. Where in a documentary this scene is real [...] I had a made lot of interviews [...] I had questions [...] I gave them to [...] Beaux Arts students [...]

they were more free [...] what came back to me answers at the limit of pornography their sexuality was totally broken upside down because most of the girls were mutilated and the men didn't know how to act with the girls [...] the codes of this society plus the mutilation. [...] one of the interviews interested me [...] the girl was speaking on a more private level [...] she was having boyfriends, she'd hidden, she was living normally her sexuality [...] she was an actress of theatre [...] so we met [...] and she talked to me much more franchement (frankly) about her life and at one moment she said: 'I had a relation with a boy and he didn't understand what were my feelings and I explain to him that this was mine,' and she did this gesture. I thought 'My God, I got my scene at the moment she did!' [Jocelyne frames the space between the top of her head and her chin with her hands, as does Dunia in the movie scene]. So, I was watching every detail of life and so when she said that I understood that [...] some people say no in a European film you shouldn't have done so [...] so I say: 'This is not a European film this is an Arab-Egyptian-Lebanese film' [...] But this is reality, this is a documentary scene [...] there is a physical real problem that mutilation creates [...] and there she is not good with him and she says wait I can't go on [...] all the sexual scenes are related to reality. (McVeigh)

It is evident that while *Dunia* may be classed as a fiction film, the interrelationship between fact and fiction is a major element of the film. Saab's documentary style research and background as a reporter strongly inform the elements of her fiction and as a filmmaker she is relentless in her quest for fiction to reveal the truth of a situation.

The Quest for Freedom of Expression/Self-Identity through Dance

The narrative strand that deals with Dunia 'the dancer' is perhaps the final enveloping 'matryoshka doll,' if we are to use Van der Peer's narrative structure analogy. In this strand, we follow Dunia

from an initial dance competition scene as she sets out to dance like her dead mother. Dunia is confronted by the judges and, in response, assumes a fetal sitting position where she wraps her hands around her knees and declares that she has never seen her body, as mirrors for women aren't allowed in her society. It is this position her niece will assume when she resists circumcision later in the movie. Saab says that *Dunia* is the "story of a girl who buys a mirror to watch herself. She needed to see her body" (McVeigh).

Perhaps the most aesthetically beautiful and metaphorically constructed scenes of the film are those of the dance sequences where we see Dunia learning the art of Sufi dance. Her Dance Master continually challenges Dunia to express her body and free herself. Saab discusses the way she developed the dance narrative in tandem with the truths she wished to explore in the film:

Then also I had approached a woman in a documentary film about dancers because I was fascinated already by dancers [...] A documentary here is like a preparation for your feature because it was in my head and so I studied all dancers and then when we had to make Dunia because dancing was a sort of bad thing for women, I had to work on codes. So I had to invent an Arabic dancing that was related to classical dance because classical dance is accepted from the bourgeoisie [...] so I had to invent a dance between oriental dance Sufi dance classical dance [...] So as to upgrade the dancing so people couldn't say about my hero Dunia that she was a belly dancing girl. Let's say in a perjorative way. So there was a lot of things to work on. You have to be from the region to understand them. This is very interesting because this is what makes a film very rich. If you know about all these details. Why is she studying Sufi? Because Sufi liberates the body. It allows you to pass through your body. (McVeigh).

The intricacy of the hybrid classical-traditional dance with which the character, Dunia, the daughter of a lower class yet famous belly masters, is both narrative and symbolic. Yet again it stands as testimony to the intricacy of Saab's fictional filmmaking and the ways in which she deploys her documentary research skills in her relentless drive to tell a metaphorical story which comments on life as it is.

The Pathways of Tradition as Reflected by the Roles of Women in her Life

Saab's carefully orchestrated color palette is one of the striking features of *Dunia*. It underlines the truths and themes she is developing across all the narrative strands. The color red is set up from the start as a significant metaphor. We first see Dunia's aunt, an outspoken taxi driver with a red heart as the light on the top of her taxi. Dunia is always dressed in red, the color of desire, passion, and love. Her female friends and family are dressed in colors that symbolize their status as females in Egyptian life and represent the potential pathways through which Dunia could live out her life. Saab notes that Dunia was dressed in red because:

She was determined [...] She is in red because she has already been genitally mutilated.

Red is the color of blood, red is the color of desire. There are many meanings for the color of red. The popular woman was green. Green is the color of the country. Of Islam. Life. Of hope. She is hope; she was going to be protecting her daughter. The intellectual was in blue. It was a soft color to say she thinks. That she has been saved by mutilation?

(McVeigh)

The color of red is also inspiration in the closing scenes of the film where Dunia appears to be liberated—she is dancing dream-like on a plateau with the city behind her. As Anny Gaul notes “The film achieves its resolution not with a relationship or on a stage, but in a performance through

which Dunia finally embodies the ideas she has struggled with, unties her mother's scarf from her wrist and sends it to the wind" (5). The closing song reverberates with hope: "You are Dunia. You are the world. You are Dunia. You are life." Saab notes:

You see when you get into gender problems and women, the gender problems are deep—that the way to treat them, it took me seven years, it was long and hard voila [...] but *Dunia* is a sort of turning point film in the Arab world. Nobody treated a subject like this and went so far [...] it's the first film that talks so clearly about a young woman without treating the cliché image of the relation with the man [...] Here the woman is totally liberated and this had to come from a liberated filmmaker and that is why it took me so much time. (McVeigh)

The pivotal circumcision scene also features the color red, both as metaphor and in reality. The scene is only obliquely developed in the narrative. In the first part of the film we witness, through Dunia's eyes, the first conversation around the proposed circumcision where Dunia's Grandmother is urging her daughter, Arwa, to have her granddaughter Yasmin's clitoris cut. The next narrative sequence of this plot element is again seen through Dunia's eyes. Here we witness the Grandmother preparing Yasmin for the circumcision. She is bathing the girl whilst advising, "It's just a small wound. To be clean. You'll be a real woman. Be respectable. What do you say?" The final sequence of this strand is the actual circumcision, again witnessed by Dunia as a sort of voyeur. Yasmin is hunched in the exact position Dunia assumes at the beginning of the film when she declares she has not seen her body. It is ironic—it seems no matter what Dunia is doing to liberate herself, the reality is that the tradition of female mutilation continues a generation later. The Grandmother advises: "Come on, my pretty. What are you afraid of? We are about to remove a small good for nothing piece of skin so you grow up to be beautiful," Again, in stark neorealist style, we are confronted with the razor used to perform the circumcision and the blood that is the result of the operation. As

if we were Dunia, we hear the tortured screams of Yasmin as the operation is performed on the kitchen table.

Ultimately Dunia has been unable to change the relentless course of tradition. She confronts her Grandmother and her Aunt with the truth: “You’ve done it. Made her just like you. You think you are protecting her but you put her out [...] You wanted to make her a lady but, in the end, you butchered her.” Saab does not dwell on the scene. But the final image of the film is prose text, noting the stark facts of genital mutilation of young girls in Egypt: “According to Amnesty International and the UNDP, 97% of Egyptian women are genitally mutilated.”

This pivotal circumcision scene which informs the freedom celebrated in the closing image is treated in a confronting neo realist style but at the same time its narrative placement is poetic and suggestive rather than confronting. Ultimately as Saab notes it was born of her desire to expose a confronting truth in Egyptian society and how this grew out of her documentary work and her desire to make films about women in society as a reflection of elements of herself.

During the war in my documentary films in the Sahara and when I used to work in French television [...] I was sent to Egypt. I was sent to Libya. I was sent to Syria. I was always giving an attention to women as if it were my own image reflected in a mirror. Some way to identify them in the region? There was no identification. After talking a lot about war and after being in Vietnam filming a woman like Mme Duong Duinh Hoa [La Dame de Saigon 1967] She impressed me a lot. She has been a minister in the South Vietnam Government and spent seven years in the forest [...] I decided it was enough to talk about war and I was at a moment of my life I should speak about gender. And in fact reality as I felt in my own country that I couldn’t, even in my family, that I

couldn't express myself as I wished. And there was a sort of mental excision and I needed a subject to write this subject. (McVeigh)

Saab also discusses the inspiration and development of the mutilation metaphor as the climax of the fictional narrative of *Dunia* and its connection to the ultimate truths she explores in the film:

I needed a drama point very strong to talk about this intellectual mutilation and I thought the gender mutilation was a good drama point. A point d'orgue as you say in French for a film. So I went to Cairo which was a dream place for me to make a film. So I began to study the subject. I did first an enquete, a study, and slowly slowly through the different interviews I had [...] I could constitute a character of my person the main character of *Dunia*. And there is the reflect of my own problems and my own sensibility through the theme. But I didn't know I wasn't conscious you know. Figures are something and image something else. It has a strength that figures doesn't have. The majority non educated people plus the fact that I mean I was treating a subject where in a country there was around 93% [sic] women genitally mulitaded. (McVeigh)

Saab's narrative placement of the mutilation scene was not without incident and once again her unequivocal determination to make films that investigate reality and expose confronting truths is evidenced in her fight to make the film the way she wished. Saab discusses the disagreement she had with producers who wanted a more Hollywood-style shock-value placement of the scene, rather than Saab's more suggestive and contemplative placement. "You have to fight for your own way of doing [...] I didn't want to tell about the mutilation in the beginning but they wanted the shocking scene to be in the beginning" (McVeigh). Saab was attacked in Egypt for her treatment of female genital mutilation and a newspaper article called for her death (Karena).

However, while female genital mutilation is a reality explored in the film, it is not the focus of the film. Saab notes: “The drama is built from within the psychology of these young circumcised women [...] it is a disturbed sexuality. The whole movie is a projection of what we can be because it shows an image of a young woman who chose herself, and who could be free. This is what they didn’t tolerate also in the movie” (Saab *Dunia* Q&A). This was the truth of the film—Saab’s observation in *Dunia*’s resolution to be herself and to confront tradition in order to free herself. This growth was equally confronting—both to authorities and audiences—as any specific, ‘shocking’ scene.

Perhaps the ultimate irony and tragedy is how the creation of the mutilation scene played out in real life. Saab has noted that it was difficult to find actors for the film. “It was a long and hard process as all were concerned about their reputation and also their safety” (Saab Biography). As Saab discusses in her interview with this author, the witnessing of the circumcision scene was also a difficult scene for the actress who played *Dunia*. Saab notes the fundamentalist change that occurred in the actor’s real life, “[as] being the last unveiled appearance by lead actress Hanan Turk before she shocked Egyptian audiences and industry figures [...] with her decision to don the Islamic headdress of the *hijab*” (Jaafar). Although in the film she played the character of *Dunia*, who is ultimately liberated, in her real life the effect of going against the expectations of her society caused Turk to take on a more restrictive role than she had previously lived in her life. As Saab notes:

What is terrible when the film finished—she was liberated while doing the film. And she understood the film, she understood that this was about being free and choosing herself. She understood something the others didn’t understand [...] She was mutilated. It was terrible to shoot it; she was remembering her own story. She understood it was in the head; it was intellectual [...]. There was pressure on her later on. After the film it—and was a

drama for me [...] she covered herself and she became a fundamentalist [...] preacher, going to talk to the people, she was wearing black clothes, she is on [the] internet everywhere, something crazy, and they took her. But it, for me, it was like she was playing another role, the black one [...]; then in reality she didn't play-act anymore, she played the black role [...] from Hell. (McVeigh)

Although Saab has explored and exposed many truths in her film, the reality of the treatment of women in Egypt is still as shocking as in the past. Saab notes the controversy she faced in exposing this reality and this truth. She says:

It is me? Why can't I do this? Why can't I go to the end? There's a questioning it's a metaphysical thing. It's like having one eye. Having one hand. I remember also on TV they were attacking me and I asked the woman who was interviewing me: 'Do you have a child?' and she said: 'Yes'. 'How old? Seven? So I said it's like you take a gilette (razor) and you put it in the eye of your child'. And the broadcast closed on this and I thought she was going to kill me, first because I took her place closing and then this was reality. 'This is what you are doing to your children. Come on, you are fucking up a whole a society'. (McVeigh)

Conclusion—Truth and Reality: Plot, Poetics and Passion in Storytelling by and about Women

In *Dunia* Saab presents a complex tapestry of interweaving story strands around the central story conceit of *Dunia*'s search for an identity that stands outside the control of a patriarchal society.

Dunia's potential future is juxtaposed in the restrictions of the traditional roles expected of a woman as wife, versus the freedom of an independent entity who has the possibility of education, career,

and independent thought. While *Dunia* is a fiction film in which Saab has the ability to stage the action rather than record what is the reality on the streets, like her earlier documentaries, the making of the film was not without its challenges, as noted in this paper.

In making *Dunia*, while exploring reality via fiction throughout the film and offering many truths, it is still the stark fact of female genital mutilation that is juxtaposed with the glorious images of Dunia dancing her freedom. In the film, as has been discussed, this horrific and real fact is explored in a number of ways that are underlined by irony. On one level, we learn in the latter part of the film, that Dunia herself has been genitally mutilated. A central metaphor in the film is that of the razor—the razor being a much more powerful ‘point d’orgue’ than Saab could ever imagine, as opposed to conveying this idea as a documentary reality:

I wasn't conscious of the impact I was going to have with images and [...] in trying to shape the image of a young woman who is just trying to find herself, to decide what she wants to be [...] I was shaping the image of a woman, a young Arab free modern woman [...] I wanted it that when she faces her reality [...] she then can become a dancer, so we know very late that she is genitally mutilated. But what's incredible is that for the Egyptians they didn't see the drama, they didn't see the way I wrote the film, they just saw the problem—the genital mutilation. Somebody took in his hand [...] a huge problem which is there since 4,000 years [...] and talks about it very easily and even shows the scene of genital mutilation in a very smooth way—not at all pornographic way. Nor to show shock. And this made them crazy and the whole society was against me. (McVeigh)

In her brave and relentless metaphorical and literal work in *Dunia*, Saab has managed to recover the concrete reality that can go unobserved, as McKee, Rabiger, and Manchevski suggest, but at a great price. Saab notes:

I received many threats of death already when I was shooting and when the film went out [...] because [...] the image was strong and I think they didn't realize that it was strong because I didn't tackle with the problem in a direct way [...] but, in fact, I was talking about something much larger. In fact, it was about forbidding us to work to express ideas and I didn't decide, because you can't decide, how your film is received but I can say after being insulted, it was a very good result. (McVeigh)

However there have been rewards and validation for uncompromising stance in seeking to confront and reveal the truth. On being told that *Dunia* was in competition at the prestigious international Sundance Film Festival, Saab recalls:

My excitement was beyond words. I was being fought by everyone for daring to dream and realizing this film, and all of a sudden, the best thing that could ever happen to me, happened—professional recognition by the beacon festival of independent cinema[Sundance Film Festival] (Saab Biography).

In her lifetime, Jocelyne Saab has not been afraid to seek the truth in the reality of life as she observes it. Indeed, in her work, Saab uses both reality and fiction, the poetic and the philosophical, to uncover new truths. And she is not afraid to face these truths. “For me coming from documentary you must observe very well reality because from this reality you will invent new things [...] this is cinema to invent a new language” (McVeigh).

Perhaps the most important legacy Saab gives the world through her work is her passion for seeking the truth in the real, no matter how hard it is to tell. When I asked her the question: “What advice do you give to young filmmakers? Saab replied: “This is a difficult question [...] The most difficult question [...] Everyone is an entity and has to express themselves in the most authentic way and not be afraid of stories you have to tell” (McVeigh).

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