

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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RED SATIN/Satin Rouge (2002)

Raja Amari (1871-)

OVERVIEW

Auteur Raja Amari was born on April 4, 1971 in Tunis. After a master's degree in Literature and French Civilization at the University of Tunis, she attended classes at the FEMIS (European Foundation for Images and Sound), in Paris. After Graduating from the FEMIS, Amari directed two short films, *Avril/April* (1998) and *Un Soir de juillet/An Evening in July* (2000). She then made four features, *Red Satin* (2002), *Secrets* (2009), *Tunisian Spring* (2014), and *Foreign Body* (2016). In Tunis, Amari also worked as a professional film critic and was a scholar in Romance languages.

Film Shot in Tunisia, *Red Satin* is set against the background of a conservative, religious, moralistic Tunisian society that stifles women's desires. Raja Amari has had formal training as a belly dancer at the Conservatoire de Tunis, but she was prohibited by her conservative family to frequent the neighborhood belly dancing cabaret. She wanted to make a film that would liberate women's desire. So, she made her main female characters, who smoke, drink, dance, and are sexually permissive, both antithetical to tradition and pleasant, and she shot them in the very cabaret she was not allowed to enter. At the same time, Amari turned the mouthpieces of tradition into boring and unpleasant voices. The film won several awards, among them the Best African Film at the 2002 Montreal World Film Festival, The New Director's Showcase Award at the Seattle International Film Festival, and The Holden Award for Best Script - Special Mention, at the 2002 Torino Film Festival,

Background *Red Satin* is a \$1 million co-production between France and Tunisia, with the Tunisian part of the budget funded by the Tunisian government. The post-production of *Red Satin*, as Amari explained, was made in the charged context of September 11, 2001. America had just been attacked by terrorists, and the world's opinion of Arabs was not necessarily sympathetic. The production team was nervous about the reception that the film would get and wondered if it would be rejected. The success of *Red Satin* in America proved otherwise.

CHARACTERS

Lilia: A widowed seamstress, who later becomes a cabaret belly dancer
Salma Lilia's teenage daughter
Folla A cabaret dancer, who befriends Lilia and trains her in belly dancing
Chokri A drummer in a cabaret, who dates Salma and her mother Lilia

SYNOPSIS

Lilia is a widowed seamstress, who spends her time sewing, cleaning her house, and caring for her teenage daughter, Salma. One night, Salma calls her to let her know that she will be spending the night at her friend, Hela's house. Lilia can hear some music in the background. Lilia suspects her daughter of dating Chokri, the drum player from her dance school. So, she goes looking for her at the belly dance cabaret where Chokri performs every night. Lilia's lifestyle changes the moment she enters this unfamiliar and fascinating world.

SCENES

Lilia's routine Lilia dusts her furniture, cleans the windows, fixes the curtains, and makes the beds in her house. She stops in front of a mirror, looks at herself, unties her hair, and starts dancing. She puts her hair back in a chignon and resume her chores. As she dusts her late husband's picture on a chest, she resumes her dancing and performs some sensual dance moves for him.

Salma comes home late Lilia is on a couch knitting and watching TV. She stops what she is doing, walks to the window, and look outside to the street as if she were expecting someone. She returns to the couch and resumes her knitting. Her daughter, Salma, arrives home from school and greets her. Lilia asks Salma why she is so late. Salma tells her mother that she spent some time talking with her friend, Hela. Salma takes one spoonful of her mother's cooking and withdraws into her room.

Lilia eats alone Lilia follows her daughter in her bedroom and offers her the sweater she has knitted for her. Salma gives the sweater back to her mother, pretending that she does not like pink. Lilia wishes her daughter good night and exits her room. Alone at the dinner table, Lilia is overtaken by laughter as she watches a TV show. The next day, Lilia is back at her house-cleaning routine. As she is doing her daughter's bed, she sees some petals of flower on it. She lies on the bed, picks up the flowers, and smells them.



Salma is not happy to see her mother Lilia visits Salma's dance class. Salma smiles at Chokri, the drum player, and he smiles back at her. Salma leaves the group of dancers and comes to give Chokri a kiss. Salma was planning to meet with Chokri at her friend Hela's place, and she is not happy to see that her mother has come to fetch her.



Salma wants to sleep at Hela's Salma tells her Mom that she has a lot of studying to do and would like to work with Hela at her place because her parents are away, and it is quieter there. Salma bids her mother good night and leaves. Lilia looks through the window and sees Chokri on a bike.

Lilia follows Chokri The next day, Lilia sees Chokri selling his bike to some youths in the neighborhood. She follows him. He enters a building. She peeks into the building and sees him conversing with some women in a cabaret. A man startles her, and she leaves.

Lilia goes to the cabaret Lilia changes clothes, grabs her bag, and walks to the cabaret where she saw Chokri conversing with some women earlier that day. She is let into the cabaret by the bouncer. The place is packed with men smoking, drinking, and cheering on some female dancers, whom they shower with banknotes. She also sees Chokri on stage playing his drum. The men gaze at her and make lewd comments towards her. Lilia is overwhelmed by the atmosphere, and she faints.



Lilia is impressed by Folla Lilia wakes up in the dressing room of Folla, one of the dancers, who wants to know what she is doing in the cabaret. Lilia tells her that she is looking for her daughter. Lilia wants to leave, but the dancer asks her to wait until she finishes her number. Lilia watches Folla's performance, transfixed. At the end of the night, Lilia decides to walk alone home. The dancers bid her farewell at the entrance of the cabaret.



Lilia slaps Salma Salma comes home in the morning. She greets her mother. Lilia greets her daughter with a slap and immediately apologizes. She tells Salma that she spent the night worrying about her. Salma apologizes but not after she tells her mother that she is no longer a baby.

Lilia meets Folla again Lilia is shopping in a fabric store and Folla happens to be shopping in the same store. Lilia tells Folla that she loved her dance performance. Folla tells her that she is welcome at the cabaret whenever she wants to come. Lilia promises to stop by sometime.



Lilia returns to the cabaret Lilia is having trouble sleeping. She picks up some clothes from her closet, checks on her daughter to make sure that she is sound asleep, and she tiptoes out of the house. She goes to the cabaret and watches the performances from behind the curtains. After a few hours at the cabaret, Lilia tiptoes back into the house.



A visit from the neighbor The next morning, Lilia resumes her house chores after a breakfast with her daughter. Lilia's neighbor and her teenage daughter visit her. Lilia is glad to see her neighbor and tells her that she is a little bored, and that she keeps busy knitting. Lilia offers the sweater she knitted for Salma to her neighbor's daughter. Lilia's friend laments that her young daughter is growing up too fast and thinking already about expensive, imported clothes and makeup.

Lilia eludes Mohammed Lilia tries again to sneak out and go to the cabaret. However, as she is coming down the dark staircase, her neighbor turns on the light and startles her. She wants to know where Lilia is going at this late hour. Lilia lies that her daughter is sick, and that she is running to the pharmacy. The neighbor asks her teenage son Mohammed to walk with Lilia to the pharmacy. Mohammed is worried about missing his football game, so Lilia tells him to go ahead and watch his game, and she goes to the cabaret.

Lilia tries on Folla's outfit Lilia is having Folla try on some stage clothes she has sewn for her. While Folla is on stage performing, Lilia tries some of the dancer's outfit in front of a mirror and does some dance moves. Folla comes back to her dressing room and sees Lilia dancing. She convinces Lilia to come and perform on stage for the cabaret customers.



Lilia's first performance The other female dancers join Lilia on stage to encourage her to dance at the beat of Chokri's drum. Soon, Lilia takes possession of the stage. Her performance mesmerizes the audience. The cabaret's owner comes to watch her dance.



Folla convinces Lilia to continue dancing Lilia goes to the cabaret to return Folla's performance dress. She tells Folla that dancing is not for her. Folla convinces her to stay and calls on the other dancers to come help her dress Lilia up for a performance. Lilia follows Folla's lead and gives a great performance. The audience showers her with banknotes.

Lilia is hired as a dancer The owner of the cabaret decides to hire Lilia on a trial basis until she grasps all the dancing techniques. Folla volunteers to give Lilia some dancing lessons at her place. Folla tells Lilia that she has been dancing for fifteen years and will be out of work soon, for the owner is set to replacing her with younger dancers.



The red satin dress Lilia goes shopping in town. She enters a luxury women's boutique. She stops in front of a red satin dress and seems to be mesmerized by it. A bourgeois customer, who seems to be a regular of the place, buys several items and asks that a taxi be sent for her. Lilia decides to indulge herself like the bourgeois woman. She buys herself a pair of shoes and asks for a taxi to take her home. Lilia gets home to realize that her uncle from the village is waiting for her at the door with Salma. Lilia's uncle scolds her for leaving her daughter locked out of the house.



Lilia tries on her new shoes Salma notices her mother's new shoes. Her uncle finds them too flashy. Lilia asks him if he would rather her shoes be invisible. Lilia's daughter and uncle egg her on to try the shoes for them to see. Salma likes the shoes.

Pay day Lilia returns to the cabaret the same day her uncle leaves. It is pay day, and, like the other dancers, Lilia gets her wages from the cabaret owner. Folla confronts the owner for cheating Lilia. She gets him to add twenty more dinars to Lilia's wages.



Chokri is attracted to Lilia Chokri seems to have some particular interest in Lilia, whom he watches intently. He follows her to her dressing room while she is getting ready to go on stage and starts stroking her shoulders. She reminds him that he has a girlfriend. He tells her that he has a girlfriend, indeed, but that she is overly attached to her mother. Chokri tells Lilia that he has been thinking of her since he first saw her dance.



A client's peculiar request Lilia is called on stage to do her routine. Chokri beats his drum with passion, and Lilia brings the audience to its feet. The audience asks for more, but the cabaret owner escorts her backstage. Later, the owner tells Lilia that a client would like her to perform privately for him at his home. She refuses.



Chokri protects Lilia On her way home, Lilia is accosted by the client who wants her to dance for him. She asks him to let her go home. He restrains her and becomes persistent. Chokri, who happens to be passing by, intervenes and gets the man to back off.



Chokri walks Lilia home Chokri walks Lilia home, but she will not let him escort her all the way to her place. He leans over to kiss her goodbye. She blocks him. As he leaves, she crosses the road and walks the opposite direction and goes home.



The moralizing neighbor Lilia is mopping her floor. Her neighbor comes to see her. Lilia's neighbor tells her that she suspects Salma of smoking. She also tells her that she sometimes sees Salma with a tall, thin young man. Lilia tries to avoid the conversation by proposing tea to her neighbor, but the neighbor follows Lilia to the kitchen and insists that she keep a watchful eye on Salma.



Folla visits Lilia The doorbell rings and Lilia goes to open the door. It is Folla visiting her unexpectedly. Lilia tries to tell her to come back later, but Folla forces her way inside the house. She wants to know if Lilia is coming to the cabaret tonight. Folla tells Lilia's neighbor that Lilia has been dancing at the cabaret with her. The neighbor is shocked and offended. She leaves Lilia's house.



Lilia gets a new hairstyle Folla takes Lilia to her hairdresser to get her a new hairdo. Salma loves her mother's new haircut. She thinks that it makes her look younger and suggests that Lilia dress more modern to match her new shoes and hairdo. Lilia tells Salma that she bought herself a new bag and shows it to her. Salma asks her mother if she has met someone. Lilia acts coy. Salma asks if she can study at her friend Hela's tonight. Lilia tells Salma that she can even spend the night there.



Lilia sleeps with Chokri At the cabaret, Lilia seems to be dancing especially for Chokri, and Chokri seems to be beating his drum especially for Lilia. Salma is studying at Hela's, where Chokri was supposed to meet her. She cannot concentrate on her work because Chokri has not come, and he has not called either. After the cabaret, Chokri and Lilia take a train to his beach house, where they make love and spend the night together while Salma is waiting for Chokri.

Salma wants to introduce her boyfriend to Lilia Lilia returns home at dawn. She flips over her husband's picture on the chest, falls fully dressed on her bed, and goes to asleep. The telephone wakes her up. It is Salma calling from Hela's. Salma tells her mother that she is in love with someone she met at her dance class, and she would like to introduce him to her. Lilia is visibly troubled by the announcement.

Chokri breaks up with Lilia The next day, Chokri returns to his beach house and finds Lilia there, in his bed. Uninvited, she picked up his key from its hiding place, tidied up his place, and is waiting for him in bed. He tells her that they should stop seeing each other. Lilia leaves.

Chokri marries Salma From her window, Lilia sees Salma and Chokri walking hand in hand towards the house. The young couple get in the house. Chokri is shocked to see that Lilia is Salma's mother. However, neither he nor Lilia act as if they know each other. As Salma goes to the kitchen to make some tea, Lilia sits by Chokri and tells him to relax. She tells him in an ominous tone that he will not find a better mother-in-law than her, and that he must remember how they were attracted to each other at the cabaret. Chokri and Salma are getting married. Lilia seems happy and dances for them.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

LILIA Lilia is an emotional, shy, malleable, and secretive character. She has lived a life of solitude since her husband's death, avoiding any contact with the outside world. When she decides to give free reins to her desires, she does so secretly, with no intention of shocking society.

Shy Lilia seldom goes out and has no other acquaintance but her conservative and talkative neighbor. She spends her days sewing, cleaning, watching soap opera and waiting for her daughter Salma to return home from school. When she enters the belly dance cabaret for the first time in search of her daughter, the crowded, loud, and smoky atmosphere is so overwhelming to her, so different to her introverted lifestyle, that she faints.

Malleable Lilia faints in the cabaret, and when she comes to, she decides to go back home. However, Folla, the lead belly dancer, convinces her to stay and watch the spectacle. Lilia hardly utters any opposition to remaining. The next day, while she curiously checks Folla's outfits, the dancer pulls her on stage against her will and has her perform for the audience. Later, Folla persuades her to become a belly dancer, and Lilia finds herself entering a world that is different to the world she has known until then. But she adjusts quickly and makes it her own.

Secretive Lilia lives a double life. In the daytime, to her neighbor, daughter, and uncle, she is a conservative widow still mourning her husband, who spends her time doing house chores and watching soap opera. In the nighttime, however, Lilia is a mesmerizing belly dancer, who enchants the neighborhood cabaret's customers. Lilia keeps her nighttime activity secret, unknown to her relatives and neighbor, because her goal is to find self-fulfillment and not to rebel against societal norms.

SALMA Salma is a sociable and independent character. She is young and outgoing, and she likes to be out with her friends and her boyfriend. To do so without hurting her mother, she makes up stories about needing to study at her friend.

Sociable Unlike her mother, Salma is an extrovert. Her life is spent between her school friends and her boyfriend Chokri. She loves her mother, but she believes that there is more to make of life outside, socializing, than staying home with her.

Independent Salma would rather be out with her friends and her boyfriend Chokri than spend time with her mother at home. To get out, she often lies that she has homework to do and needs to be studying with Hela. These lies are meant to protect her mother's feelings, but mostly they give herself some independence from her.

Folla Folla is a liberated, extroverted woman and a supportive friend to Lilia. She infuses strength in the reclusive widow and helps her take control of her life instead of feeding off memories of her late husband.

Supportive When Lilia faints at the cabaret the first time she enters the premise, she is taken to Folla's dressing room, where the veteran dancer revives her and later walks her home. When the greedy cabaret owner tries to cheat Lilia on her first wages, it is again Folla that stands up for Lilia and makes him pay her more. It is thanks to Folla's encouragement that Lilia gathers her strength to step out of her reclusive life, enter the world of belly dancing, and transform herself.

Liberated If Raja Amari wanted to create a character set against the religious, conservative Tunisian society, then she has succeeded with Folla. Contrary to Lilia, who intends to fulfill her desires in a non-confrontational way, without upsetting societal order, Folla has chosen confrontation against orthodoxy.

She speaks her mind loudly, her dressing room is a treasure trove of liquor bottles, she smokes, and she dresses provocatively. To Lilia's prudish neighbor, who feigns not to know what a cabaret dancer is, Folla suggests that she ask her husband, who she says, might be a *habitué* of the place.

THEMES

SOCIETY (gender)

Gender Lilia wants to sneak out of her apartment and go to the cabaret. However, she stumbles upon her neighbor who enquires about her being out that late at night. Lilia lies, saying that she is going to the pharmacy to buy some medicine for her daughter Salma, who is sick. The neighbor believes that she should be accompanied and asks her teenage boy Mohammed to walk Lilia to the pharmacy. The boy does not want to miss his football game on TV, and to get rid of him, Lilia tells him that he can watch his game with a crowd of men gathered in front of a TV outside. The suggestion here is that from a conservative perspective it is acceptable for a boy of Mohammed's age to be alone in the street at night but unacceptable for a middle-age woman like Lilia to walk alone at night. Thus, a minor boy seems to be given more autonomy than a grown woman. With this scene, Amari denounces a discrimination based on gender, a perception, prevalent not just in conservative Arab cultures but in many cultures across the world, which places women in the category of minor, dependent persons, below men and even below boys.

Movement In North African cinema, movement by women has often been symbolic of emancipation and liberation from patriarchy. Lilia's existence, which was confined to the memory of her late husband, her sewing and house-cleaning routine and the caring of her daughter, and the judgmental world of her neighbor and her uncle from the village, gradually opens and expands when she starts dancing at the cabaret. By dancing, Lilia, hitherto so timid and withdrawn, so conservatively covered, suddenly takes full possession of her body, undresses it, unlocks her shoulders, arms, and hands, frees her chest and hips, moves, spreads her body vertically and horizontally, and marks her presence in the space that she occupies. The men that so intimidated her before, now become the objects of her tease. Their gazes on her are no longer threatening. On the contrary, it is she now who directs those gazes where she wants them to be. As the filmmakers said of cabaret dancers in Tunis, "Women who dance, they exhibit their bodies, but not at all the way you would in strip tease. They are in control of the situation and they are imposing themselves as they are." Chokri the drummer, who once daunted Lilia, becomes now her plaything. It is now she who baits him, who pursues him, who intimidates him, and who tells him emphatically, as he takes her daughter Salma for his wife, that from now on, things will be done by her terms, as in the cabaret, where she toyed with him.

Ageism/sexism Amari addresses the issue of negative bias against people based on their age, namely the perception that women of a certain age are no longer fit for certain professions because they are no longer attractive. Folla is the best dancer of the cabaret, and her performances always draw a huge audience. Despite her undeniable competence, the cabaret owner has decided that younger, blond dancers must replace her, firstly because they are perceived as more attractive and therefore more likely to guarantee the survival of the cabaret, and secondly because their lack of seniority makes it more economically sensible for the greedy cabaret owner to hire them. Amari proposes instead a contrapuntal perspective that shows that middle-age women, such as Folla and Lilia, need the cabaret for their psychological and financial fulfillments, and that the cabaret owner cannot survive without them since it is their longevity, their understanding of men's emotions, and their experience and the shape of their mature bodies propitious to belly dancing that ensure the survival of the cabaret. Folla and Lilia are allegories for what some unsophisticated employers, like the cabaret owner, usually do not grasp: the mutual beneficial relationship that they have with their older employees.

PSYCHOLOGY (loneliness)

Loneliness Lilia tells her neighbor that she is bored. Indeed, since her husband's death, Lilia has confined herself to her house, spending her time between sewing and cleaning her house, eating alone, and laughing alone in front of her soap opera TV shows. Busy with school and her hidden romance with Chokri, Lilia's daughter Salma has little time for her protective and, as far as she is concerned, overbearing mother. Chokri, who does not know yet that the woman who has been dancing to the beat of his drum in the cabaret is Salma's mother, suggests, as a remedy for her loneliness and boredom, that she remarry. In

other words, bored men can go kill their boredom at the cabaret cheering on dancing women. Bored women must get married to cure their loneliness and boredom, since only within the institution of marriage are they supposed to be fulfilled. This is a depressing opinion, as Tunisian cinema has repeatedly shown that, for many women, marriage in the conservative Tunisian society has more often been an institution of incarceration than one of contentment.

RELATIONSHIP (sexuality, desire)

Sexuality in *Red Satin*, Raja Amari has beautifully shown how intergenerational sexualities can be equally powerful and penetrating. Lilia's sexuality is as good as—if not better than—her daughter's. In fact, Amari offers the viewers a steamier sex scene between Lilia and Chokri than she does between Lilia's daughter Salma and Chokri. If Salma's body is only furtively revealed in the movie, the bodies of Folla and Lilia, two older women, as well as those of other middle-age dancers, are explicitly and repeatedly showcased, and their sensualities emphatically exhibited. Here, the message seems to be that when it comes to sex and attraction, women's age is not an obstacle. On the contrary, it is the older dancers who draw the biggest audiences in the cabaret, even if, for economic reasons the owner is set on replacing them with younger, cheaper, and more malleable dancers. This is the filmmaker's response to a sexist perception that wants women's sexuality to reach its peak around the age of thirty.

Desire Amari once said that desire "is an essential element in emancipation or frustration in the Arab world today, especially when it's related to women." Thus, to be able to desire freely is to be emancipated. Lilia's emancipation takes place against the background of a society with moralistic views such as expressed by her uncle and her neighbor. Lilia's neighbor believes that she is too permissive with her daughter, Salma, whom she sees with a young man, and whom she suspects of smoking. Similarly, Lilia's uncle thinks that Lilia's desire to wear shining heels amounts to an indecent modernism. For Lilia, giving free rein to her desire to dance and to love is the expression of liberation that needs no permission. Thus, little by little, Lilia's body unfolds in the electric and opaque atmosphere of the cabaret, and her sexuality, repressed since the death of her husband, becomes alive again in the embrace of Chokri, the cabaret drummer. Lilia is only a trope for female emancipation. Beyond her, there is her daughter, suspected by her neighbor of loose behavior. Beyond her, there are Folla and the whole band of the cabaret dancers whose desire for movement and individual liberties go against the grain of Tunisian conservatism with its catalogue of stigmatizations.

Friendship-Sisterhood Amari tackles the issue of female bondage and solidarity in *Red Satin*. Women find support in each other. Nevertheless, Amari seems to be cautioning that sisterhood is constantly under the threat of men's destructive influence. In her isolation, Lilia finds solace with her daughter and her neighbor. However, Salma is constantly pulled away by her lover, Chokri, who, at one point, becomes the lover of Lilia, too, and endangers the mother-daughter relationship. Lilia also comes out of her life of boredom and confinement when she meets Folla and her group of dancers. Folla becomes her friend and dance mentor, protecting her against her unscrupulous and greedy employer. However, Lilia hides her friendship with Folla from her moralistic neighbor, who, immersed in a world governed by masculinist family values that impose a code of behavior on women, would not approve of her new lifestyle. The neighbor eventually learns of Folla's profession and of Lilia's nightly excursion, and she decides to cut her ties with Lilia, who she now sees as indecent.

FLAWS (greed)

Greed the cabaret owner is so greedy that he does not realize that his cupidity puts his business at risk. Folla and the older dancers have built up a solid mass of faithful customers who come to the cabaret just to see them dance. The older dancers' experience, their interactive approach with the customers, and their cheerfulness—Folla tells Lilia that she has to interact with each customer as if she were dancing for him only—have made the success of the cabaret. Yet, the owner is convinced that he can make more money by replacing the senior dancers with younger dancers whom he can pay less. Blinded by greed, the owner is set to shoot himself in the foot by letting go of his most efficient workers. This attitude is illustrative of the business world's failure to make the most of older, more skilled workers. Some developing countries have started to see the importance of senior employees as assets. This is certainly Amari's call, urging her country to follow this lead.

QUESTIONS

1. Are there physical places in your cultures that women are not allowed to go alone? Explain.
2. In your cultures, are there practices, either institutionalized or spontaneous, that relegate women to the status of minors?
3. Although Lilia's uncle from the village only appears fleetingly in the film on two occasions, his presence seems to have a critical purpose. What do you think it is?
4. How would a cabaret dancer be perceived in your own culture?
5. Should Chokri tell Salma about his relationship with Lilia? Justify your answer.
6. What do you think Lilia and Chokri's relationship will be from now on?