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The Amina Profile

Abstract

This is a film review of *The Amina Profile* (2014) directed by Sophie Deraspe.

Author Notes

Rubina (Ruby) Ramji is an Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Cape Breton University. After serving as a Chair of the Religion, Film and Visual Culture Group for the American Academy of Religion and then on the steering committee, Rubina continues to serve on the Executive Committee for the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion as President and is the Film Editor of the *Journal of Religion and Film*. Her research activities focus on the areas of religion, media and identity, religion in Canada, and religion and immigration.



The Amina Profile
(2014)
Directed by Sophie Deraspe

The Amina Profile is a documentary film about an online relationship that blossoms in the midst of a revolution taking place in Syria. Amina Arraf is a Syrian-American and Sandra Bagaria is a Montrealer (Canada) who begin a sexual relationship online that evolves into one encapsulated by uprising, death threats and missing persons. Amina lives in Syria where homosexuality is banned, and she gains international recognition by creating an online blog entitled *A Gay Girl in Damascus* and providing a voice to an underrepresented and persecuted identity group in the Arab world.

Sandra and Amina's relationship becomes more and more intimate over a six month period so when Amina is abducted, Sandra sets out to find out the fate of her online lover. The documentary interviews people who were affected by Amina, and who searched for her. In the

end, the truth is sadder than expected; Amina is not in prison, she is instead an online persona of Tom McMasters, a graduate student from America – a heterosexual male who decided to create a persona of a lesbian Middle Eastern woman struggling for independence amidst a social and religious revolution.

Sandra Bagaria, in an interview with Emily Yoshida for *The Verge* explained why the Western world was so enthralled with the story of Amina; her story shows “us our weaknesses for cliché. The media, myself, and other people were fooled because it was such a perfect formula. We were like, ‘Oh, this seems beautiful, let's follow this story.’ It's really about how we in Western countries perceive the Middle East, and stereotypes that we all have that we should totally revise.”

In a way, Tom McMasters provided a heroic and rebellious voice for the many people who were suffering under the Syrian regime: a strong voice for women told to remain silent, a fighting voice for gays and lesbians struggling to stay out of jail because of religious intolerance and a tiny but significant voice for Syrian youth fighting for freedom. But McMasters created a fantasy, a wish for something to hold on to during a revolution that tarnished the struggle in some ways, and broke the hearts of many who stood behind Amina Arraf. Not only did McMasters belittle the Arab Spring taking place in Syria, but his actions call into question the ethics of his behavior – both online and offline.

The anonymity provided through social media has also changed the way we interact with other individuals, and the construction of identities needs to be better examined: are our identities more real because of our bodies or are we more free to be ourselves online, unencumbered by sexuality, gender and religious ideology?

