

Destiny

By Cherine Abou Nasr El-Yafi

of her Own

"Destiny of her Own" is a lavish historical melodrama that has enough suds, sex, and flashes of flesh to appeal to soap opera lovers and enough substance to attract those of a more intellectual bent. It is beautifully filmed, wonderfully acted, and certainly nothing short of entertaining. It deals with themes of forbidden love, religious intolerance, subordination of women, sexual freedom, and the roles of pleasure and sin in a high-cultured society. While the movie does more than pay lip service to themes of female empowerment and religious intolerance, the main focus is hopeless romance.

The film is set in the late 16th Century during the Renaissance, a time when Venice was the pleasure capital of Europe and the central juncture of East-West commerce. The film is told almost entirely from the viewpoint of the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie of Venice, so we rarely get to see how the rest of the society lived. However, there is an abundance of detail concerning the lives and livelihoods of the upper classes, their hedonistic lifestyles, and constant merriment.

In 1583 Venice, women were regarded as little more than possessions. Education and willfulness were negative traits, reserved only for courtesans. Marriage had nothing to do with love; it was a contract based exclusively on considerations of wealth and position. If a girl's family didn't have money, she had no hope of marrying an "important" man, no matter how deeply the two loved each other. In a situation like this, her only hope was to become his mistress. And, if she was truly ambitious and skilled, she could become a courtesan, a mistress to dozens of men, all willing to pay for her services. Such are the circumstances of Veronica Franco who is desperately smitten with Marco Vernier and he with her.

Since women like her are not given a choice, they turn to prostitution whenever they have the chance. Even though she is needy, she is not allowed to work or make use of her education. Since she is beautiful and intelligent, Veronica has a chance to enter Marco's world, though not as his wife. She decides to become a courtesan, a class of women who were as well-educated as they were ravishing, and who sold their sexuality to wealthy men for the privilege of dining and wining with the elite. A courtesan was not a mere prostitute; she was afforded a special place in society and was greatly revered, respected, and often envied. At one point, one character mentions that some rulers obtain more sound political advice from their courtesans than from their lieutenants.

Veronica goes through the transformation with the help of her mother who was once a famed courtesan herself. Once she enters this lifestyle, Veronica finds that it suits her very well. She is allowed to read any book she wants and publish her poetry. In addition to all that she has the richest and most powerful men in the republic throwing themselves at her feet, including the awestruck Marco.

Their relationship develops into playful bantering, with Veronica utilizing her newfound power by constantly rejecting Marco's advances. In many ways, their relationship is saddening because Marco is married to a woman he is unable to love, and Veronica is consumed by multiple relationships with men she is unwilling to love. "Love the love, not the man," as her mother told her.

"Destiny of her Own" contains just enough bare flesh and ribald sex to make it appropriately erotic. It has multiple plot lines including Veronica's adversarial relationship with a court poet who hates her for several reasons, one being that she can compete with him when it comes to poetry, and this embarrasses him. What gets to him more than anything else is that she refused him sexually because he could not afford her. Veronica's role in securing France's military assistance in the battle of Venice against the Turks, emphasizes even further the power a courtesan is capable of achieving. Nevertheless, the dreaded plague caused the church to blame the courtesans and make them seem responsible for God's punishment. The encroachment of the Spanish Inquisition and the threat of the death penalty for her transgressions was eminent, yet the way the people stood up for her is a sign that both men and women were sick and tired of the way they had been living.

Against the backdrop of Veronica and Marco's tumultuous relationship, we catch a glimpse of the injustices visited upon women at a time when they were universally viewed as inferior to men. The obedient wives are presented as timid, uncertain creatures who dream of a better lot for their daughters while secretly envying Veronica's freedom. For her part, although Veronica uses every weapon at her disposal to hold on, she would give everything away for a life with Marco.

Personally, I thought "Destiny of her Own" was a very interesting movie about life, men, women, and relationships. There is a parallel between the love story of Veronica and Marco, and many relationships in our country. In Lebanon, marriage between people of different social, and economical classes, and religious backgrounds are few.