The Dove’s Lost Necklace:  
An Interpretation of Love 

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The Dove’s Lost Necklace tells the story of Hassan, as he searches for the many meanings of love found hidden within 60 words that describe love and lovers, in order to resolve his own feelings within himself as well as to complete his calligraphy apprenticeship. In his search he obsessively seeks the Princess of Samarkand, who he encounters in a single page of a book, in the hopes that her story will lead to an end to his troubles. However, the mythical nature of Samarkand and the fragmented nature of the story combine to lead Hassan in a wild chase across the desert, where he ends up just as lost as he was when he first started out on his search for the meaning of love. The plot follows many of the same patterns as those of classical folk stories: many of the actions of Hassan and Aziz have been acted out again and again, and can compared to the many different Arabic renditions of Cinderella.

Samarkand in itself is a city on the trade route dubbed the Silk Road, one of the many stops spanning the fragmented route between China and Rome. Like many other cities along the trade route, it has become almost mythical in its renown. The very title of “Princess of Samarkand,” revealed through Hassan’s discovery of the damaged page, only serves to emphasize this mythical status, illuminated in bright jewel-tone colours on the dull yellow paper. The path to the Princess of Samarkand is not elaborated on in the film, and is left as a vague evocation of travel. The events that lie between the abrupt cut when Hassan is thrown off his horse and when he is brought to the garden are unknown, and it is unknown how much time he has spent wandering. Just like the lack of proper documentation of the historical path between the city of Samarkand and the Mediterranean (Rezakhani 425), Hassan’s search for the Princess is locked in a
timeless, unknown space. The uncertainty brought on by this wandering path leads to a question of what exactly happened to him and how exactly he managed to escape the mob of riders who should have easily been able to kill him.

*The Dove’s Lost Necklace* can be related to Arabic literary modernism, "in which Arab writers tried to express in Arabic their consciousness of themselves and their place in the modern world. One of the main concerns of the new literature was the Arabic language itself" (Hourani 305). Hassan pursues the idea of love through the lens of language, searching for answers to his questions about his feelings for Leila. He is restricted in his search as he dares not disturb his equilibrium with his master, in whose graces he must stay until the end of his apprenticeship. His every move, his every word is watched in his world; he must maintain his dignity (Cachia 119). If he wishes ever to have a chance with Leila, he must first get his master’s approval, and in order to do that he must prove his skill and dedication to their shared craft.

Hassan starts off the film by looking for the many different words for love found in the Arabic language, as part of the end of his calligraphy apprenticeship. (He appears, upon initial viewing, to be in his mid-twenties; however, contextually, he should be in his late teens.) One of the first words for love that is introduced to the viewer is *Huyem*, or ‘a love that leads one astray to death’ (*The Dove’s Lost Necklace*). This type of love, presented so early on in the film, sets up a prophetic yet ominous tone for the rest of the film. The pause of the shot on Hassan’s face and his unchanging expression during the explanation of this love overemphasizes the significance of the fatal portent. Like most shots of Hassan in the film, this melodramatic shot is centered square on his face and does not attempt anything ambitious with its framing. The frame itself is similar to that of a theater play, and the old dusty yellow city is its set, which lends a quaint storybook feel to the entire film. Just like a set, however, everything looks stiff and fake, with safe,
familiar spaces evoking a general sense of Middle Eastern culture, and the same can be said for the love portrayed within the story.

Hassan pursues his studies with a vigorous, almost desperate energy as he races against an unknown deadline. This energy contrasts greatly with that of his much older master, who works slowly and methodically to finish a copy of the Qur'an commissioned by his prince. As Hassan searches for his words of love, his thoughts are also occupied by his master’s daughter, Leila, who he watches from above in the pigeon coop. He gazes upon her through a narrow opening provided by a missing brick, in itself a common convention used to depict voyeuristic behaviour. His voyeurism is amusingly exacerbated by the fact that he never once speaks a single word to her, nor she to him, throughout the film. Thus, Leila is known only through the gaze of Hassan, the lead male character. These actions appear rather creepy, uncomfortable and disconcerting without much prior context for the culture involved and brings up several questions: Is there perhaps additional context in which these actions are actually an appropriate form of courtship in the setting of the film? Is this merely an accurate description of Hassan’s naivety in blindly pining after Leila? Or is it actually considered a culturally appropriate form of interaction between young men and women?

In contrast, in the earlier appearances of Aziz—the Princess's male disguise—she rides in mysteriously atop her painted horse, seated forward with a straight back, a falcon upon her gauntleted hand. Aziz is presented as a male character, yet the femininity of the character is not disguised by her masculine costume; therefore I discuss her as a female character. She exudes power, herself and her horse directly confronting the viewer and occupying space in a three-quarters pose, the falcon an additional symbol of her privileged upbringing and connections to money. Her control over these two symbols is seemingly effortless, only requiring one hand each to command them. Cloaked head to toe, the shape of her body is erased. She is closed off, wrapped in a
cloak of black and challenging Hassan’s gaze with her own unflinchingly direct one. Her
colour scheme is interesting, as red, white and black all contain connotations of violence
and death through passion and blood, the death shroud, the coffin, and funeral wear.
Upon his first sight of her, Hassan is entranced by this mysterious man/woman, who is
so different from the only other woman we have seen him interacting with regularly. In
this moment, the unknowns of Aziz become much more desirable than Leila, of whom
Hassan already knows much through the many times he has watched her from afar.

In Aziz’s last appearance she is drastically change: her previous closed-off,
mysterious demeanour is replaced with much more open and inviting one. Parallels can
be drawn to the figure of the Arabic Cinderella, which involves “covering up of the
woman’s body in a garment that makes of her a strange creature and ends with an
uncovering that leads to discovery” (Muhawi 278). She is afforded a certain type of
anonymity through her initial dress, although not to the extremes of Sackcloth or
Allerleirauh’s disguises, which transform them into something “animal-like, freakish and
masculine, or lowly and unworthy of attention” (Muhawi 278). She is instead given
symbols of masculinity, the horse and the falcon, which are transformed by her very
identity as a woman to symbols of feminine power through associations with the Earth
and Mother Nature, and it is this power that becomes the repelling force. Here she is
instead the transforming element, and she becomes the disguise as much as she wears
it.

The discovery of Aziz’s name and the meaning of it, “person whom one loves”
(The Dove’s Lost Necklace), immediately solidifies Hassan’s hunch that she is indeed
the Princess of Samarkand, as she has become the very essence and personification of
the love that he has been searching for all this time. In her personification she is also
made generic: as Deguilhem and Marin note, “By using false names, the poet
transferred real personalities to an ideal world where generic features (beauty, modesty,
reserve) were perpetuated and depersonalized” (Deguilhem and Marin 36). Aziz’s name is used in the same manner. She becomes the very personification of her love, and becomes one who must be loved. As a personification, Aziz would contain all the answers to Hassan's questions about love. Being with her, he would be able to resolve his feelings for Leila. Thus, Hassan is even more driven to obtain Aziz's company.

Yet we see Aziz leaving the area Hassan occupies time and time again, and it is here that we can see parallels between the behaviour of Aziz and Leila, and the story of Cinderella. The characters in question escape again and again from the male character, either through circumstance or reluctance to interact with him. Like Cinderella, Leila only allows mere glimpses of her self before she runs off, leaving Hassan with the allure of something which he wishes to possess—although unlike the prince of the Cinderella tale, he cannot yet, due to his existing relationship with his master and his studies of calligraphy.

The strength of Aziz, however, comes from forcing Hassan to follow after her instead of staying open to his gaze. She takes control of the situation and makes him meet with her in the space that she has chosen. It is only after he has proven himself able to keep up with her that she accepts his company, and joins him on his journey. Here, the story is more like that of the Sudanese version of Cinderella, where “the woman has to be taken on her own terms, and the tale leaves us guessing as to whether she actually lost or only allowed her partner to win” (Muhawi 277-278). Her agency in this area is very interesting as it contrasts heavily with the passivity of Leila, who waits for Hassan to make a move. If he wishes to obtain her presence, he has to work for it, by hunting for her across the desert.

When Hassan finally catches up with Aziz, she has disrobed and removed her previous signs of power, throwing off a portion of her disguise in exchange for clothes that reveal more of her body. Disguise serves the plot, as Muhawi describes the “vertical
extension of disguise into the plot as a narrative trope whose function is to lead to
discovery” (Muhawi 278). Now that she has reeled in Hassan with her trappings and he
knows who she is, she no longer needs them and discards them for another set of
clothes that show her more accepting stance of him and allow him more access to her
person. Her words and actions are more open, if not friendly, than her terse and abrupt
words with him earlier.

Aziz’s abrupt changes in demeanour between closed off and open in her
appearances beg a question. Why does she show barely any outward sign of interest in
Hassan until he hunts her down, and then displays a willingness to follow him in his
quest for love? This can be explained, however, if one considers that the film is shot in
Hassan’s perspective. In his naiveté and confusion over love, Hassan has yet to fully
grasp the nuances and subtleties in Aziz’s actions. He only notices the instances in
which she is either in total confrontation with him or completely interested in him. His
fixation on searching for the words of love only emphasizes that he cannot help but
reduce love to abstractions. In a way, he is just as unstable and ungrounded as the
crippled man being carried round and round the fountain. He does not appear to be
searching merely for love as sexual attraction, but it is clear that he does not understand
love and its relation to his feelings, and stumbles around looking for an explanation.

The Dove’s Lost Necklace uses many conventional plot points present in
common stories of love in which the male character searches for the love of the female.
In Hassan’s attempt to understand love he meets and clashes with the mysterious Aziz,
warring with her over a chance at her affections. She is at first reluctant to deal with him,
and tests him with disguises and trappings of power in order to ascertain his worthiness
to be by her side. By dragging him along after her, she forces him to follow her to a place
and time of her choosing to engage with him, giving her the upper ground. Her agency
and decisiveness when Hassan is confused and lost in her play of signs and subtleties
are endearing, and most importantly force both characters onto an even ground where both can engage with each other on equal terms.
Works Cited


