



STUDIO OCHENTA ORIGINAL TRANSCRIPT

MIJA (ENGLISH) – 305: Mona

[0:05]

Hi, I'm Mija. Or Binty, in Arabic. And this podcast is about my family

Those alive, those long gone, and those who are still dreaming.

So here is what you need to know about Mona:

She is strong,

pensive,

Patient

and loves her family and her culture with all of her heart,

[0:25]

Mona is my mom. So, here it goes: 10 minutes to tell her story.

Imagine a room with a table in the center, colorful fabrics all over the walls, on the floor and on the door.

[1:00]

In this room there's a little girl with green, big eyes, golden brown skin and long dark hair. She's sitting next to the wooden table.

And the girl is untangling a golden thread from her fingers.

A silver ring shines from her hand. It says “Kol a3otho birab el falak” - “I seek refuge with Allah, the Lord of the Daybreak.”

[1:27]

The man beside her is sewing a golden pattern on a long white robe. It’s a hieroglyphic.

And the little girl, well, she tries to stick a needle into the fabric she’s holding. But, instead, she pricks her finger.

The girl is Mona. The man is Marzouk, her dad.

And what Marzouk has in his hands is a galabiya, a traditional dress men use in Egypt.

[1:48]

Mona was born in Alexandria. She is the youngest of two girls born to Marzouk, tailor, and Arbab, a fabric seller.

Since she was little, Mona adored her dad’s work.

Sewing symbols, patterns and hieroglyphics into every single cloth he sold.

[2:08]

Every stitch told a story.

She would ask him:

“Dad, what’s that?”

And Marzouk would answer:

[2:16]

“A symbol to avoid *hasad*, *habibty*.”

“Tell me more! ”

Mona is very curious. She knows that her dad tells tales just to inspire her. He was in love with his heritage and wanted to be certain she is too.

[2:40]

So everytime she asks Marzouk something, Mona tries to research every answer he gives.

That's why she was nicknamed Monna, which means "Something to be saved for the future."

Besides being really curious, Mona also loved painting. She learned that from Marzouk as well.

Since Mona learned to paint patterns as beautiful as her dad's, everyone always admired her art.

[3:01]

Her best friend Abdou also loved art, well the art of music anyway ;)

Anyway, they used to play together often around the neighborhood and Mona always beat him at everything.

One time, when they were 11 years old, they raced down the street.

[3:20]

And Mona won, with grace.

Abdou reached the corner of the street seconds later, hand on his chest, breathing hard.

Mona jumped joyfully, raising her arms to the sky.

[3:31]

Abdou swore that he would beat her next time. But that never actually happened.

Abdou's father passes away, and they don't see each other much after that.

One day, after school, Mona goes to Marzouk's workshop

[3:50]

But she freezes - the workshop was completely empty.

Mona thought the worst. "MOM, DAD GOT HASAD!"

Remember, the hasad is the evil eye. The envious eye.

[4:07]

She remembers some neighbors had stopped by the other day and admired his work.

But Marzouk arrives quickly and calms Mona down.

He had just received a French tourist who bought all of his fabric and clothes!

[4:23]

After that big sale, the whole family moves to another neighborhood closer to Cairo.

Marzouk hopes this will attract more business from tourists.

The day Mona leaves the neighborhood, holding back tears, she writes a note to Abdou to say goodbye.

[4:46]

"La illah ila Allah", it said. Which meant "There is no God but Allah"

He slips her a note back

to say goodbye as well.

It says "Mohammed rasoul Allah" which meant "Mohammed is the messenger of God"

[4:59]

This was the hope that they'd be reunited again.

In their new town, things don't really change. Mona continues to spend her afternoons listening to Marzouk.

Mona falls in love with Egyptian culture.

[5:21]

So she studies Egyptology at the University of Alexandria.

Now it's the end of the 80s, just a few days before her graduation.

She's having lunch when she sees something that surprises her - two young women, just like her, in their first year of university, are walking up some stairs, wearing hijabs

[5:40]

Outside of mosque or prayer.

That image would stay with her for a long, long time.

[5:52]

That summer, Mona is hanging out with her sister and some boys start bothering them,

Mona looks up at the boy that intervenes and recognizes him.

"Abdou, is that you?"

The very same.

Abdou, her best friend from childhood.

[6:08]

As the sun sets on the reunited teens,

They imagine a future together.

[6:18]

Weeks later, they get engaged.

And then as soon as Mona finishes college, they get married.

Abdou opens his restaurant in their old neighbourhood,

While Mona works as a research assistant at the local university until....

[6:37]

She is offered the job of her dreams - to work at a museum studying Ancient Egyptian heritage.

The only hitch is that ... well, the museum is abroad.

In London, England.

[6:51]

Mona recalls the exact moment she brings up the news to Abdou.

It feels weird to be asking her husband to follow her for her job.

They sit on the beach. She tells him about the job. She knows how much he loves Alexandria and Egypt. She does too.

[7:06]

She tells him: "Abdou, whatever you decide. I'll always be with you."

Abdou is visibly sad.

He doesn't say anything at that time.

[7:16]

He watches the waves crash against the sand.

He tells her to give him some time.

The next couple of days, he prays hard.

[7:26]

So does she, her silver ring in hand. *Salat istakhara*, a prayer of guidance.

Then, Abdou dreams a dream that gives him peace.

And finally he says yes.

The day they move to England, Mona makes sure that the moving goes unnoticed.

[7:48]

Mona doesn't want anyone to give them *hasad*

Gidda Arbab, Mona's mom, lights up an incense, blows it over Mona and Abdou's heads while praying for them.

They sneak out of their house late at night with their luggage,

Tiptoeing so nobody can hear or see them.

[8:11]

They are leaving behind their endless night sky.

In that moment, they feel real longing, but they're excited.

In the cab on the way to the airport, Mona and Abdou look at each other's eyes.

And say "I love you".

[8:34]

That first week, Mona goes to the British Museum for the first time,

And sees the real Rosetta Stone in person.

It's a magnificent artifact

[8:45]

That helped decipher hieroglyphics during the 19th century.

Mona stands before it, alone in the museum before closing.

She had to come all this way to see the stone with her own eyes,

Which fill with tears at the sight of it.

[9:05]

I've asked Mona many times why she decided to preserve the history of her own culture in another country, especially a country that had colonized her own.

She always answers:

"Well these are OUR things, so if anyone is going to describe it, explain it, uplift it, it should be an Egyptian!"

[9:25]

Mona wanted to learn.

And even though it sometimes felt like a betrayal to be in that space,

It was important to her to be the one to preserve our history.

[9:42]

And that wasn't the only thing Mona learned about herself in London.

She also learned what it meant to be a Muslim, a North African, a woman in Europe.

One day, while she was going to a meeting at the museum, a man asked Mona about the silver ring she had on.

[9:59]

He calls it “exotic.”

Mona hates this word.

She explains that it has Quran verses printed on it.

He replies: “That’s curious, you are not like other Muslim women... I mean you don’t even keep your head covered. You’re so modern.”

[10:18]

This scene plays a lot in her head. Mona *is* a Muslim woman. She is a Muslim woman like any other Muslim woman in Egypt and elsewhere. What did this man mean?

When she prays at work, wearing her turquoise veil for each prayer, she quickly takes it off before someone sees her with it.

[10:36]

She feels uneasy. She feels shame.

Then one day, Mona’s praying at her office.

And she doesn’t notice that a coworker has walked in

[10:49]

Her coworker apologies, but Mona’s startled,

her heart is racing as she hides her veil as fast as she can.

She says sorry, over and over, as she steps out of her office.

[11:03]

While she’s having lunch that same day outside the Museum, she thinks about this.

Why is she embarrassed? Embarrassed of feeling safe, of honouring who she was?

She stares at her food a minute, finishes up her meal.

[11:18]

There, among the Londoners, Mona understands something.

So that same evening, Mona calls her mother Arbab.

And tells her she wants to start wearing her veil full time.

To this day, Mona insists that when she chose her first full time hijab, she felt something being born inside of her.

[11:43]

Days later, she receives Arbab's package with loads of colorful hijabs - a maroon one, a cream one, a mustard one, a green one...

All with Marzouk's tiny hieroglyphics embroidered in them.

Mona smiles.

That very evening,

She finds out she was blessed with her first child, Omar.

FINAL DEL EPISODIO