

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **Word of Honor/Parole d'hommes (2003)**

Moez Kamoun

### **OVERVIEW**

This is a tragicomic film about a man who took a childhood promise too seriously and caused it to negatively affect his life and those of his friends. It is also a movie about fragments of Tunisian society, its triumphs and social failures as represented by dissonant characters. The film was shot in Tunisia by Moez Kamoun, who once worked alongside Tunisian directors like Nouri Bouzid and Férid Boughedir as an assistant director. He also collaborated with international directors, such as Anthony Minguella on *The English Patient* and George Lucas on two Star Wars Films, *The Phantom Menace* and *Attack of the Clones*.

### **SYNOPSIS**

Three little friends in the town of Nefta—Sassi, Saad, and Abbes—promise each other that their playmate Khadija must be Sassi's girlfriend. They also bet on buying their own Mercedes cars when they grow up and become rich. Thirty years later, it is Saad who wins the bet of wealth and buys himself a Mercedes. Saad also marries Khadija, who was promised to Sassi. Embittered, Sassi ruminates on his revenge while Abbes tries to capitalize on Sassi's scheme of revenge against Saad.

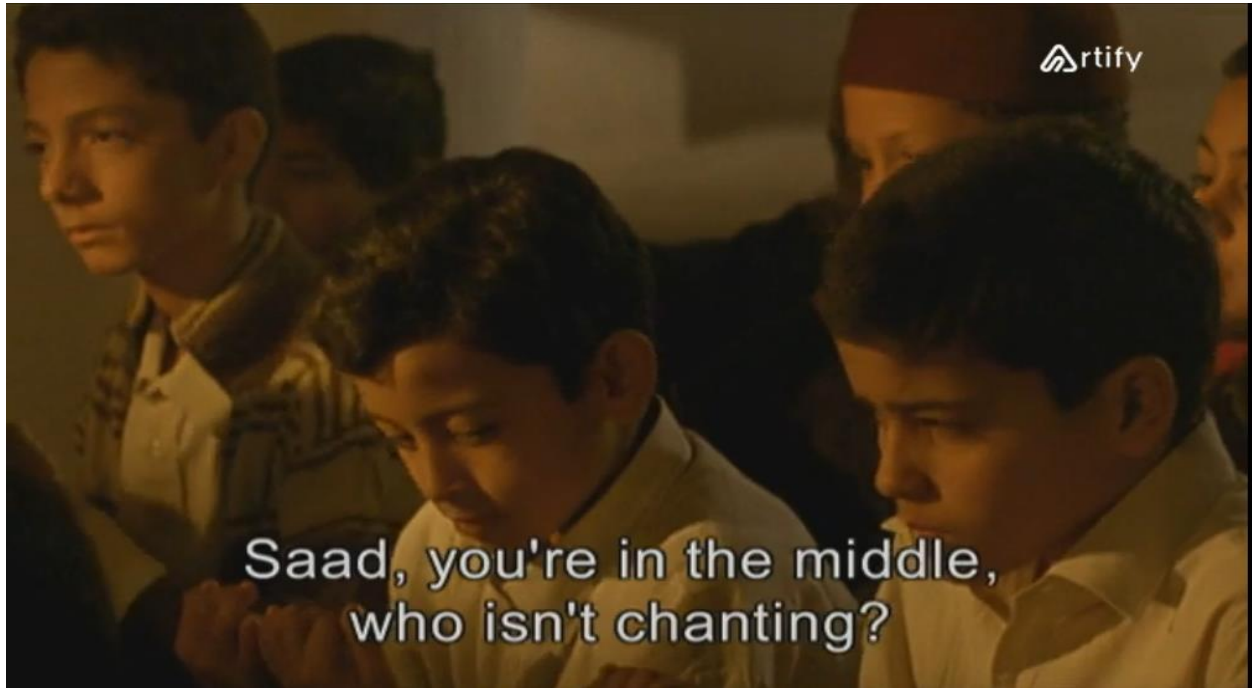
### **MAIN CHARACTERS**

**Abbes** (Jamel Sassi): A struggling writer and childhood friend of Saad and Sassi.  
**Sassi** (Fethi Mselmani): An unemployed university professor and childhood friend of Saad and Abbes  
**Saad** (Ramzi Azaieiz): A successful clothing store owner and childhood friend of Abbes and Sassi  
**Faiza** (Jamila Chihi): Saad's secret second wife  
**Selma** (Najoua Zouhir): Abbes's secretary and secret lover

## PLOT

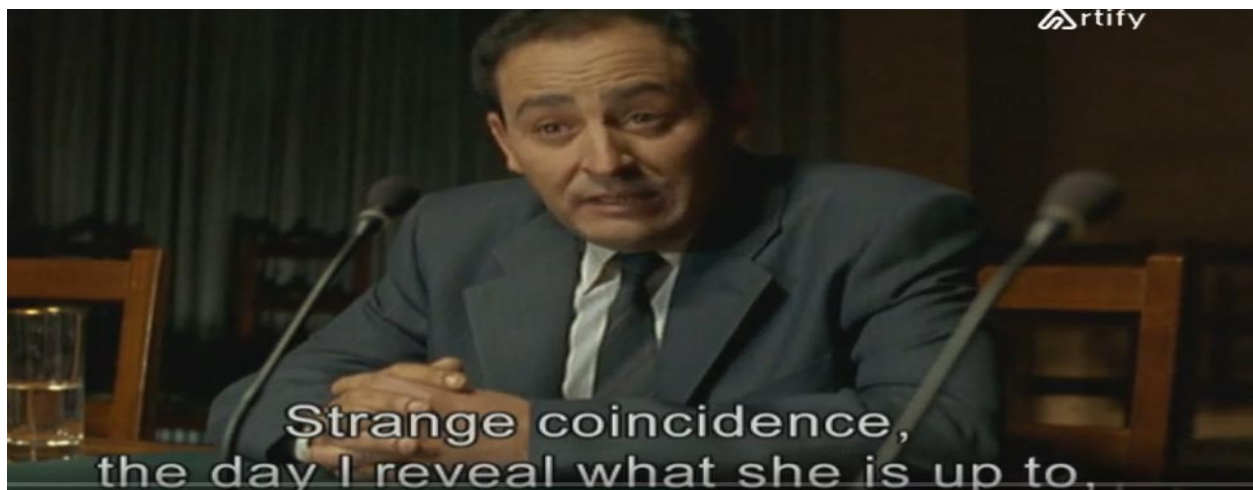
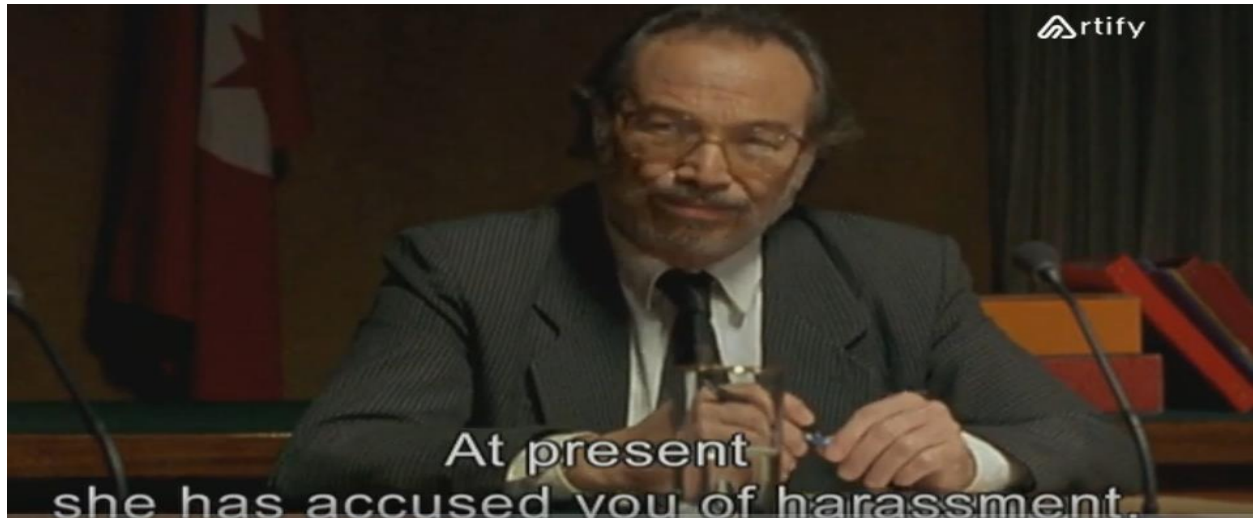
### CHILDREN

**The promise** In the town of Nefta, Tunisia, three young boys of about twelve years old, Saad, Sassi, and Abbas, have just finished their Koranic class for the day. They are joined by Khadija, a girl of the same age. A Mercedes enters the village, and the children look for a good vantage point from which to admire it. Sassi promises Khadija to get her one when he grows up. Sassi is angry with Saad's interest in Khadija. Saad gives him his word of honor that he will no longer seek her attention. The three friends shake hands and run down the sand dunes.



## ADULTHOOD

**Allegations** Thirty years later, Sassi is facing the university faculty council because one of his students he has accused of plagiarizing her thesis is countering with her own claim of sexual harassment against him. Olfa, the student, is from a rich family. Sassi's colleagues want to trust her more than they do him, and they urge him to drop the case of plagiarism or she will make him lose his job.



**The trap** Sassi gets out of the council meeting and is hailed by Olfa, who urges him to get in her car because she wants to talk to him. At first reluctant, he finally accepts to ride with her. She lures him to her luxurious home, puts on a sexy gown, serves him alcohol, and starts flirting with him. As he gets comfortable and goes along, Olfa's guards appear, beat him up, and throw him out. The university fires Sassi. He now works as a public writer in the street.





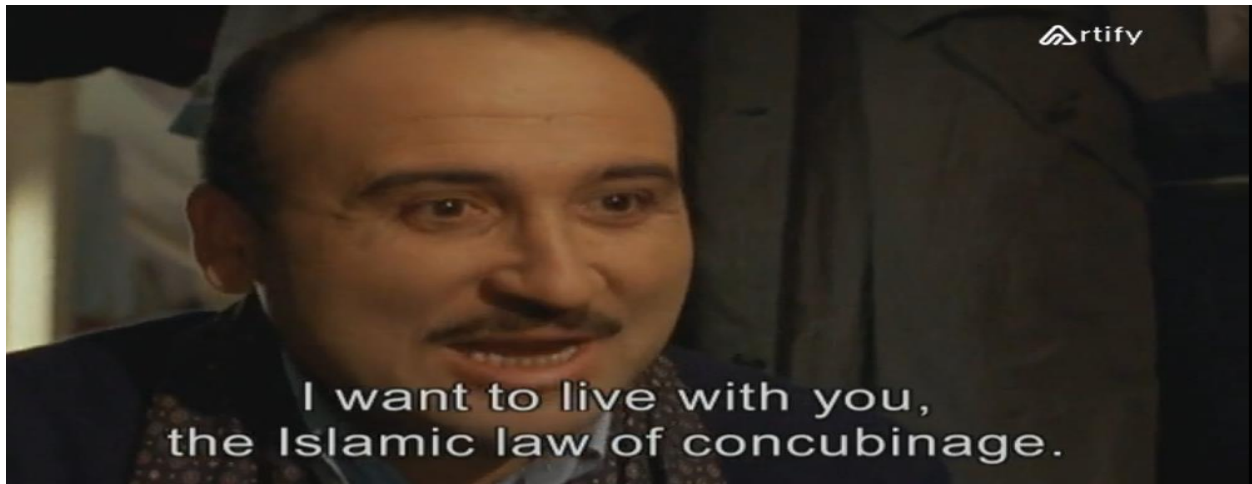
## POLYGAMY

**Abbes and Selma** Abbes has been renting an apartment to secretly meet with Selma, his secretary. However, he owes several months in rent, and his landlady is not pleased with him. Abbes promises to buy Selma an apartment of her own someday. In the meantime, he plays the lottery and keeps losing.



**Saad and Faiza** Saad is in love with one of his customers, Faiza, a widow with two children. He asks her to be his second wife in the Islamic tradition of their ancestors. Faiza is a modern woman, and she is offended by the idea of being a secret wife bound to Islamic rules. However, as she gets home and looks at the difficult life she is living, she has a change of heart and accepts Saad's proposal. She asks him to be a good father to her children. Saad takes Faiza shopping for new appliances, and he shows her his new Mercedes, which he never drives, for fear of the "evil eye." He confides in her that even his wife does not know about the existence of this car. He spends the day with Faiza and her children. After dinner, he helps her do the dishes and is not pleased. He had wished for a calmer day.







## WRITING A NOVEL

**Abbes is writing a novel** Abbes is having some difficult time. He has written a children's book for which he cannot get any willing publishers. He has been unsuccessfully soliciting the foreign embassies in Tunis for a subsidy to publish his book, and he is irritated with Zeineb, his wife, who talks about getting new clothes for their son.

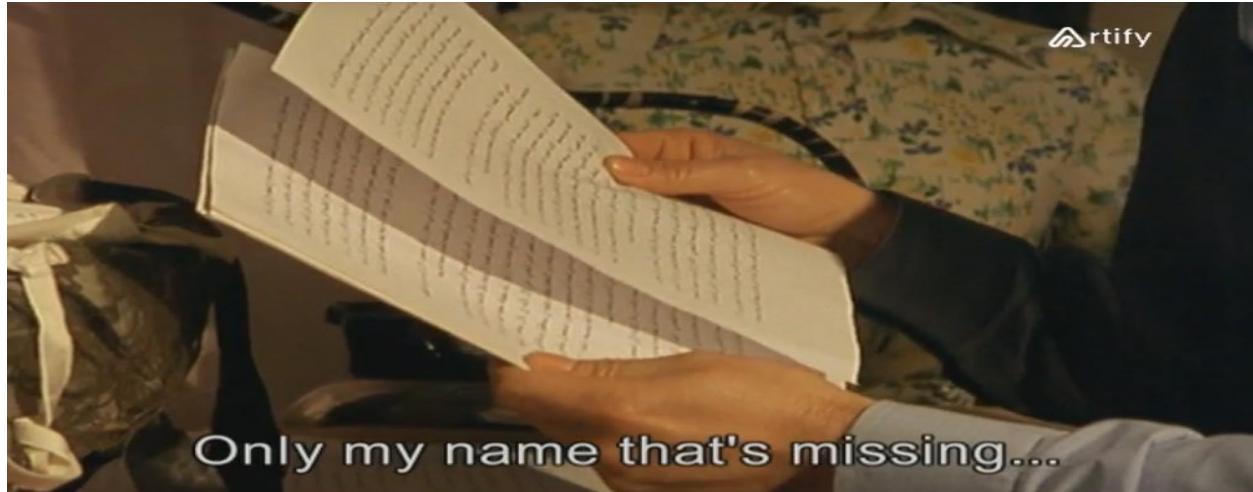
**Sassi is writing a novel too** Sassi, too, is writing a novel for which he needs a sponsor. The main character in the novel is cast in the mold of Saad, a young man who stole his father's money to play the lottery and hit the jackpot. Abbes and Sassi agree that they should ask Saad for the money they need to publish the book.

**A manuscript for Saad** Abbes meets Saad at his clothing store to try to convince him to finance the publishing of a novel by a great writer, whose name he does not reveal. Saad is not interested in this new venture. Abbes insists that he might be interested once he reads the story. Abbes leaves Saad a manuscript of the novel, urging him to read it. Saad tells Abbes that he hates reading and has not read much since he left school.



## BLACKMAIL

**A novel about Saad** Saad finally decides to read the manuscript that Abbes left him. He is shocked to see that the story is all about him with only his name missing. Sassi spies on Saad and discovers his secret marriage. Sassi goes back to his typewriter to add his newfound detail to the manuscript and takes it to Abbes, telling him that he can add more embarrassing details if Saad hesitates to come up with the money.



**The extortion** Abbes takes the new manuscript to Saad. He tells him that the writer is Sassi, but that they can get him to keep compromising details out of it with some money. He tells him to think about what damage a book like this could do to his reputation and urges him to pay Sassi to keep the book out of print. Saad pays an advance to Abbes to have him convince Sassi to cut some details from his manuscript. Abbes shares most of the money with his girlfriend, giving Sassi only a small fraction of it.

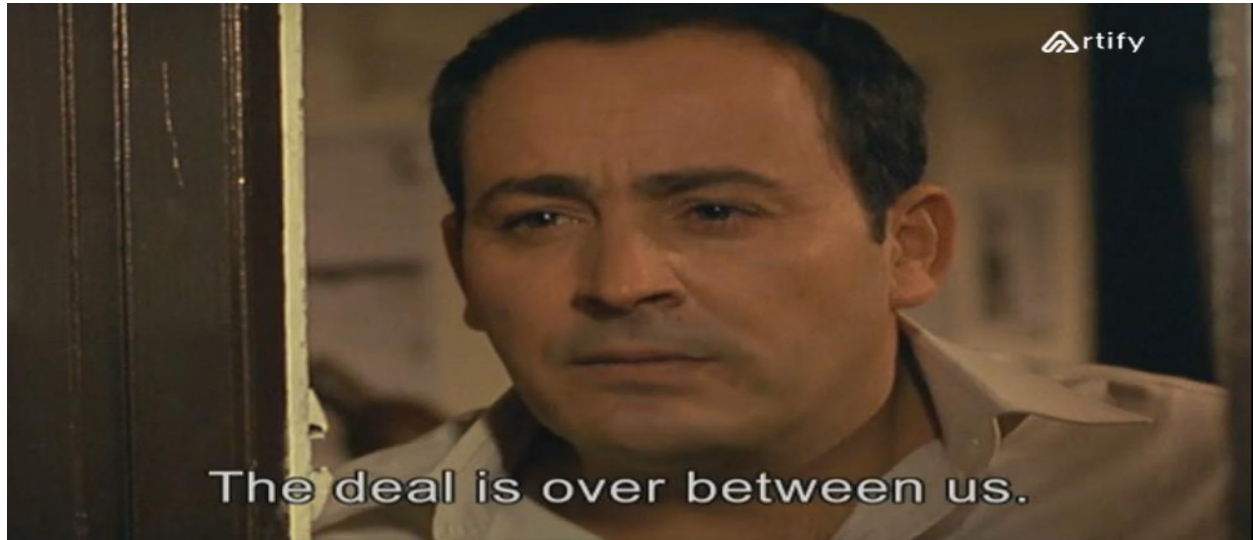




**Superstition and panic** Saad is in bed with Faiza. He wakes up gasping for air after having a nightmare about Sassi haunting him and opening his car garage. He goes down to the garage to make sure that his car is safe. He gets in the car and turns on the ignition. The engine will not fire. Saad starts to panic. Faiza wants to call a mechanic. He tells her that no one must see his car, not even a mechanic.



**Revenge** Sassi discreetly follows Khadija and her children in the park, full of bitterness. He tells Abbes that their deal is off, and that he will take care of Saad himself. He tells him that it breaks his heart to see how Saad treats his wife, Khadija. Abbes unsuccessfully tries to persuade Sassi to edit his novel. Sassi wants nothing more to do with him. Sassi sets fire to Saad's shop and to his new Mercedes. A big crowd of onlookers gather to watch the disaster. Sassi, too, is among them. He locks eyes with Saad. They look at each other intently without saying a word. Sassi leaves.



**Loneliness: Selma and Zeineb are gone** Abbas returns to his secret apartment, but the landlady will not give him the key. Selma has left without paying the rent, and the landlady is creating a scandal. He goes home to find out that Zeineb, too, has left him, taking their child with her.





## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### **SASSI** (Emotional)

Sassi is an unprincipled, naïve, bitter, and vindictive character. He seems to blame his failure in life on Saad marrying the girl he loves. He spends much of his time and energy thinking of how to make Saad pay for what he considers a betrayal.

*Unprincipled* Sassi alleges that his student Olfa plagiarized her thesis and that his ethics as a professor forbid him to accept work based on plagiarism. He maintains that he has evidence of his allegations, which he will submit to the disciplinary board in the coming days. However, only a few minutes after insisting that he would not bend, he is invited to the student's house and tells her that he is ready to forget his accusations and to tell the disciplinary board that he made a mistake. He proposes that she, too, drop her claim of sexual harassment against him. Whether he did it to save his job or for the student's charms, Sassi's easy flip-flop shows that he is a corrupt man.

*Naïve* The naivety with which Sassi lets himself be lured in by his student is disconcerting. Even as she accuses him of sexual harassment, and an investigation is underway, he agrees to get into her car and be alone with her at her house. Moreover, the compliments he pays to Olfa as soon as he is in her car already incriminate him and give credibility to the allegations of sexual harassment levelled against him by her. For a professor, Sassi does not act very intelligently or morally in this situation.

*Bitter* Sassi is a man consumed by the bitterness of having lost Khadija to his childhood friend Saad. He seems to make the loss of Khadija the beginning of his failure in life, and he blames Saad for it without asking himself whether Khadija could have been his wife anyway, whether Khadija's feelings towards him were strong enough to keep her faithful to him, whether she would not have gone with someone else, if it were not Saad. He does not consider the question of Khadija's choice.

*Vindictive* Sassi is a vindictive character. For years, he brooded over his revenge on Saad. He first thought of exposing Saad in a novel he was writing. However, when he sees Abbas taking advantage of his manuscript to extract money from Saad at the expense of himself, who was suffering from Saad's betrayal, he decides to abandon the idea of the novel and act more directly. He sets fire to Saad's shop and car and shows up on the crime scene the next day to taunt him.

### **SAAD** (Closed)

Saad is a secretive, hypocritical, and disloyal man haunted by the fear of being exposed. He made his fortune by playing the lottery, a fact that, if known, will affect his standing in the community.

*Secretive* Saad's life is shrouded in secrecy because it does not conform to the image that he wants to project of himself. An ex-imam, he is nevertheless a gambler, which is considered a sin. He hides the Mercedes he bought and never takes it out of his garage because it might raise questions about the origin of his fortune. Even his wife Khadija is unaware of the existence of this car. He marries a second wife in secret, in an underground ceremony, which, therefore, does not meet Islamic ritual standards, and he has a second home that he hides from his legitimate wife. Saad lives in fear that his life, which is a big secret, will be exposed someday.

*Hypocritical* Saad made his fortune in hypocrisy, doing the opposite of what he preaches. Indeed, a man of faith and ex-imam, Saad preached more than once that gambling is against the law of Allah. However, it was by winning the lottery jackpot that he made his fortune. Moreover, his marriage to Faiza did not respect the ritual imposed by the Islamic religion that he invokes to justify polygamy. This marriage took place without witnesses, and his wife never knew about it.

*Disloyal* Saad is considered by his two friends as disloyal for having married Khadija, the girl Sassi coveted. And Saad himself is convinced of his disloyalty, which he tries to justify. However, Saad's most obvious disloyalty is his unfaithfulness to his wife Khadija when he secretly marries Faiza.

**ABBES** (Disagreeable)

Abbes is a duplicitous and greedy character, whose selfishness pushed Sassi to a radical act against Saad. He also took the women around him for granted and ended up being lonely.

*Duplicitous* Abbes' game between his two childhood friends was one of duplicity. While he made Saad believe that he was trying to dissuade Sassi, in fact he was encouraging Sassi to add compromising details of Saad's life to his manuscript. And, while he made Saad believe that he was on his side, in fact Abbes was capitalizing on Sassi's anger towards Saad as one does in a lucrative business.

*Greedy* Abbes is a greedy man. Perhaps Sassi's revenge against Saad would have been less violent if Abbes had been less greedy. Perhaps Sassi would even have erased any reference to Saad in his manuscript if Abbes had not kept for himself most of the money Saad gave him, for it was the feeling of having been cheated by Abbes that pushed Sassi to abandon the completion of his novel and to choose the radical solution of burning down Saad's shop.

*Isolated* Abbes always thought he was indispensable to the women around him. He neglected his wife to spend time with his secretary in an apartment he secretly rented. And he was convinced that his secretary would never leave him no matter what. In the end, the women he took for granted left him. His secretary left with his money, and his wife left with their son. Abbes found himself alone and miserable.

**THEMES****SOCIETY** (gender)

*Gender* Already as children, Sassi, Saad, and Abbes had defined the future of Khadija. They had betrothed her to Sassi. One could say that this was a child's game or fantasy, but this fantasy certainly mimicked a tradition in which they grew up, which made women objects of exchange. This game, if it were one, could have ended years later, when they all grew up and moved to Tunis. But they continued to believe in the transaction that they had made many years before, and which did not consider Khadija's choice or feelings. Presumptuous, the three friends had felt that their children's contract that assigned Khadija to Sassi was what was right for the girl. And when she followed her heart and chose to marry Saad, the friends did not understand it as the free choice of a free woman, but rather as the betrayal of a disloyal friend. Even Saad felt the guilt of betrayal.

**RELATIONSHIP** (friendship, marriage, loyalty-love, incompatibility)

*Friendship* In this film, childhood friendships hardly survive the test of time and personal ambitions. Sassi, Saad, and Abbes are three childhood friends who seem to be looking in the same direction: They are all students at the same Koranic school in Nefta, all three play on the desert dunes, bicker, and make up. When Saad starts to develop an attraction for their friend Khadija, whom Sassi considers his girlfriend, the two friends fight. They reconcile thanks to the mediation of Abbes, but to avoid further quarrels, they agree that Saad will no longer try to take Khadija away from Sassi. Thirty years later, however, the friendship of the three companions is spoiled when Saad, who has become rich through the lottery, takes advantage of a trip to France by Sassi to marry Khadija. Dismissed from his job at the university and embittered by Saad's success, Sassi decides to destroy his childhood friend by publishing his secret life in a book. Abbes, who has not had much luck in life either, decides to make Sassi's hatred of Saad his business, promising Saad, for a price, to convince Sassi to alter his book. Time, ambition, and bitterness have destroyed this childhood friendship that seemed indestructible.

*Marriage* Polygamy has been illegal in Tunisia since 1956. Men find, however, ways to get around the Tunisian marriage law by invoking religion. Saad is married to Khadija, but he also has his eye on the widow Faiza and promises her marriage under the Muslim cohabitation regime. When she takes offense, saying that she does not intend to be taken advantage of, he promises her that she will be treated as his wife, and that the marriage will be done properly. So, he organizes a wedding, or at least what looks like one, where only he and Faiza are present, without any witnesses. It is clear that the relationship between Saad and Faiza is no different from that between Abbes and his secretary Selma. Saad's marriage to Faiza is a pure act of theatricality, of insincerity, because the conditions necessary for this marriage to be sincere are not met. For example, Faiza asks Saad where the two witnesses are, because a marriage is only valid

when it is performed before at least two witnesses. Saad replies that they are old enough to marry without witnesses. Another missing requirement is the signing of a certificate by an authority who has the power to do so. A marriage is not simply decreed, it is a performative act. This performative aspect is missing for Faiza, for whom marriage is a state of mind (a lived feeling) and not a state of thing (an administrative formality).

*Loyalty-love* In the conception of marriage as a lived feeling, not a perfunctory gesture, what matters most is the love shared between the partners and their mutual loyalty. Saad does not seem to love Khadija, whom we see only once in the film, as he loves Faiza, and he is not faithful to her. Moreover, there are aspects of his life, which Saad has shared with Faiza from the very first days of their "marriage," that his legal wife is unaware of. Khadija never knew that her husband's fortune came from the lottery. Nor does she know that he bought himself a Mercedes, which he jealously guards in a garage in a second home, and which he never drives, for fear of arousing curiosity about his life. Khadija does not know either that Sassi has a big grudge against her husband, and that he is working on the publication of a book that will expose his life. Saad does not feel enough loyalty and love towards his legal wife to tell her everything about his life.

*Incompatibility* In this film, most relationships between men and women end in failure. First there is the failed relationship between Sassi and Olaf, where the professor accuses the student of plagiarism, and she counters with her own accusations of sexual harassment. Believing that the matter will be resolved by a one-on-one meeting with Olaf, in fact, Sassi sinks deeper and is expelled from the university. Then there is Sassi's hope of marrying Khadija, which never materializes when his friend Saad robs him of his childhood sweetheart. However, Saad is not making Khadija happy either. He makes her a recluse and takes a second wife in the person of Faiza, who, busy with Saad's laundry, finds that her life was much less hectic when she lived alone. Like Saad, Abbas pays very little attention to his wife Zeineb and spends more time with Selma his secretary in a secret apartment. Neither Zeineb nor Selma are happy with their life with Abbas, and the two women leave him, the first leaving with their son Sami and the second leaving with all the money he had been able to extort from Saad.

## **PSYCHOLOGY** (self-delusion, loss)

*Self-delusion* Sassi is self-deluded. It is incomprehensible that, after so many years, Sassi continues to believe that a word of honor given by playmates, on a playground, during the fantastical years of childhood, stands as a contract, and that Khadija was betrothed to him. It is even more astonishing that Sassi continues to believe that such a contract, which disregarded the opinion, feelings, and consent of the person concerned, that is, Khadija herself, is applicable. And it's amazing that Sassi doesn't want to consider for a moment that Khadija's marriage to Saad could be an act of free choice, that Khadija simply chose to go where her heart told her to go, and that she was comfortable in her marriage. Sassi lives under the illusion that Khadija would necessarily have stayed with him if Saad had not seduced her. He considers her as a vessel empty of emotion that would have given herself to the first man to come. If it is true that she is devoid of feelings, what, then, makes Sassi think that she loved him, or would have loved him, if not self-delusion?

*Loss* The film explores the theme of loss on several levels. Sassi considers the loss of Khadija the greatest damage done to his life, greater even than the loss of his job at the University of Tunis. He, therefore, holds his childhood friend Saad responsible for this loss and works to make him pay for it. Faiza, who had believed that her marriage to Saad would make her life easier and give her children a more stable life, finds herself washing and ironing the second-hand clothes that Saad goes to buy every Wednesday for his shop. She also finds herself dealing with the fears and apprehensions of Saad, who, haunted by the anxiety that Sassi will harm him, wakes up at night in a panic and runs to his garage to make sure his Mercedes is safe. Faiza regrets this marriage, which made her lose her previous calmer, though not financially comfortable, life. As for Abbas, having believed himself indispensable to his wife and his secretary, he took them for granted until the day when they left leaving him alone to consider what he had just lost: love, family stability, and his son.



*Jealousy/anger* Of the three friends who, as children, dreamed of buying a Mercedes when they grew up, only Saad was able to realize this dream. Winning the lottery jackpot, Saad bought a second-hand clothing store and a Mercedes. Saad also married the girl whom Sassi considered to be his private preserve. Saad's success in business and love stirred Sassi's jealousy and anger. Sassi's jealousy towards his successful friend, mixed with the anger he felt towards Saad for having taken away the woman of his dreams, pushed him to concoct formulas for revenge. First, he decided to write a book to tell the world that Saad, this ex-imam, was a great hypocrite, that he did the opposite of what he preached, that he got rich gambling, and that he also hid in a second home a wife married in an illegal ceremony. When Sassi realized that Abbes was using his manuscript to blackmail Saad and make money for himself, leaving him destitute, he broke all ties with Abbes, and decided to precipitate his revenge. He set fire to Saad's car and store.

#### **APPEARANCE** (dishonesty, betrayal, jealousy/anger)

*Dishonesty* Dishonesty is a flaw that is common in varying degrees in the characters. Sassi's downfall begins with the dishonesty of his student Olfa, who plagiarized a book for her thesis. Olfa, seeing herself caught, reverses the situation by accusing her professor of sexual harassment. And to give more weight to her accusation, she lures Sassi to her house, who is caught in a compromising position and beaten by Olfa's guards. Then there is Abbes, Sassi and Saad's childhood friend, who decides to make money by exploiting Sassi's hatred of Saad, who married Khadija, the woman he was in love with. Indeed, to make Saad pay for what he considers a betrayal, Sassi decides to write a book that will expose his childhood friend. Saad is a man of faith and an ex-imam who, against the teachings of his religion, has made his fortune gambling, bought himself a Mercedes, which he keeps secretly, and took a second wife in an illegal marriage and hides her in a second home. This dishonesty of Saad, Sassi wants to expose in a book. And Abbes extorts money from Saad, promising to bribe Sassi to alter his book so that he is not recognized in it. But Abbes doesn't give Sassi all the money he gets from Saad. He shares it with Selma, his secretary lover, who also runs away without paying the rent of the apartment in which they meet. Thus, Olfa, Saad, Sassi, Abbes, and Selma are all dishonest characters who deceive one another.

*Betrayal* Betrayal is another common flaw in the characters. Saad betrays his word and Sassi's trust by marrying Khadija, his friend's lover, while the latter is on a trip to France. Then, he betrays Khadija's trust by taking a second wife whom he hides in a second home. He also betrays her by hiding from her that he has made a fortune by winning the lottery. Abbes betrays his wife Zeineb by dating his secretary, and he betrays his two friends by extorting money from Saad and promises to give it to Sassi but only hands him a small portion. Finally, Abbes' secretary betrays him by walking away with his money, leaving him in debt with his landlady.

#### **QUESTIONS**

1. Olfa's case is evidence that social class is a factor influencing social mobility in Tunisia. Is this the case in your country? Give details how it works.
2. What do you make of the reactions of Sassi's colleagues at the disciplinary board?
3. To what extent is a childhood promise important to you? Do you have an example where you strove to fulfill a promise you made as a child?
4. Is Sassi's "revenge" justifiable under any circumstances? Elaborate.
5. Zeineb, Abbes's wife, toiled on her sewing machine to support her family while her husband gambled his money away or spent it on his secretary. How will Zeineb's leaving affect Abbes's life?
6. Are there any aspects of the film's narrative that need better development by the filmmaker to make it more accessible to you as a viewer?