

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Martial Frindéthié, PHD

Tunisian Spring / Printemps tunisien (2014)

Raja Amari (1971-)

OVERVIEW

Auteur Raja Amari was born on April 4, 1971 in Tunis. After a master's degree in Literature and French Civilization at the University of Tunis, she attended classes at the FEMIS (European Foundation for Images and Sound), in Paris. After Graduating from the FEMIS, Amari directed two short films, *Avril/April* (1998) and *Un Soir de juillet/An Evening in July* (2000). She then made four features, *Satin rouge/Red Satin* (2002), *Secrets* (2009), *Tunisian Spring* (2014), and *Foreign Body* (2016).

Film Shot in Tunisia in 2013, first under the title *Tunisian Youth*, *Tunisian Spring* (2014) is another film in the series of filmic testimonies of the Tunisian Revolution that heralded the beginning of the Arab Spring and the end of the dictatorial regime of Ben Ali. The particularity of this film is that it was directed by a woman, Raja Amari, who shows us, among other important themes, various faces of Tunisian women.

Background The film is set in the last two weeks leading up to the collapse of dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's regime, amid the protests that had spread widely in the Arab world, and which have come to be known as the Arab Spring. *Tunisian Spring* is thus part of a flurry of films that tell of how ordinary people experienced the Tunisian January 2011 Revolution, but mainly what their living conditions were that favored their uprising.

CHARACTERS

Noura A young Tunisian woman, girlfriend of Fathi
Salwa The First Lady's assistant, who is Walid's lover
Fathi A musician and aspiring teacher, friend of Walid and Mohaddine, and boyfriend of Noura
Walid A musician, friend of Fathi and Mohaddine, and lover of Salma
Mohaddine A musician, friend of Walid and Fathi

SYNOPSIS

Tunisian Spring follows the turbulent lives of four young Tunisians just two weeks before the popular revolt that would sweep away the dictatorial regime of Ben Ali. Fathi, Walid, and Mohaddine are three musician friends struggling to make ends meet. Noura is a middle-class woman who leads subversive underground actions against the regime. Will they survive the Revolution?

SCENES

Three musician friends Three musician friends are hired for a performance at a wedding in a big hotel in Tunis. Mohaddine goes to pick up his friend Fathi in his old yellow Volkswagen minibus. Together, the two friends pick up their friend Walid. Fathi is preparing for the umpteenth time for an exam to qualify as a history teacher. Mohaddine tells him that he will never pass the exam because he is not a rich man's son. Walid says that a history teacher is poorly paid. Walid offers his two friends the opportunity to make money by helping him sell a stock of Italian refrigerators. They tell him that they are not interested.

Police checkpoint

The three friends are stopped at a police checkpoint. A policeman comes towards them, asks for the driver's license and the car's papers, and walks away with the documents to discuss with his colleagues. He returns to the minibus and asks to see the passengers' papers. They hand them to him. The policeman asks Mohaddine what his occupation is and is told that he is a musician, as marked on his identity card. The policeman asks to see the car's trunk and is surprised by all the materials in it. Mohaddine tells him that these are his work instruments. He asks Mohaddine to prove it by playing something for him, right there on the side of the road. Mohaddine plays the *oud* (lute), Fathi plays the *darbouka* (small drum), and Walid sings to convince the police. The policeman stops them after a few minutes. He thinks that their song is sad, and that Walid sings badly. One of the policemen wants to fine them 80 dinars for a missing rear-view mirror. The policeman who has their papers suggests that with 20 dinars, everything can be arranged. Walid tells him that they have no money, that they are just starving performers. Instead, he offers the policeman a cigarette, who is satisfied, gives back their papers, and lets them continue their journey.



Dressing room

The three friends arrive at the hotel where they are scheduled to play, and where the other members of the band are eagerly awaiting them. While a hotel hostess leads the musicians to their dressing room, Fathi is held back and dragged into an isolated room by his girlfriend, Noura, who is also a hostess at the hotel. They let their passions run free. Meanwhile, Walid and the other musicians complain about having to share a cramped dressing room with women entertainers who have also come for the wedding.



The fortune teller

Walid convinces one of the female entertainers that he can read her future in coffee grounds. She believes him. While Walid pretends to read the woman's future, they are called to order by a man who introduces himself as the head of presidential security. Fathi shows up after all the instruments are installed and refuses to tell the group leader where he was.



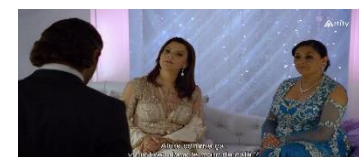
The First Lady is guest of honor

The band that includes the three friends starts to play. The guests arrive and take their seats in the reception hall. The hostesses, who confide that they hate all the glitz and glamour, still try to greet the guests with a smile because, one of them confides, she has an unemployed husband and bills to pay. The Tunisian First Lady arrives with her entourage of women and her security composed of men in black suits. The audience rises to welcome her. She goes to greet the newlyweds and sits with her female assistants in the place of honor reserved for her.



Where did you learn to read the future?

Walid, as the master of ceremony, welcomes the First Lady, wishes the new couple happiness and announces the continuation of the festivities. After Walid's final round of singing, the First Lady's security chief tells Walid that she wants to see him. She asks him his name and where he learned to read the future in coffee grounds, an activity usually reserved to women. Walid replies that the knowledge was passed on to him by his grandfather, who died five years ago and was known for his spiritual powers.



A meager pay

Walid brags to his friends that the First Lady was impressed by his eyes, and that she would like him to come to the presidential palace to read her future. Meanwhile, Fathi, who has returned to romancing with his girlfriend, is still being waited for. The three friends receive their fee of 600 dinars from the bandleader, which they find very meager for all the effort put in, the rented instruments, and the fuel for the trip.



Mohaddine wants to emigrate Fathi has finished taking his teacher's exam and joins Mohaddine in a bar. Mohaddine is brooding. He complains that his life, his head, and his pockets are empty. His music career seems to be going nowhere. Some of the bar's patrons start to quarrel, and Fathi stops Mohaddine from getting involved. Mohaddine confides in Fathi that he has a plan to emigrate to Europe via Lampedusa, Italy. Fathi tries to dissuade him by asking him if he intends to end his life at the bottom of the sea. Instead, Fathi invites him to eat a good chickpea soup.



Mohaddine is arrested By the end of the evening, Mohaddine is so drunk that Fathi has to help him stand on his feet. In the street, Mohaddine attacks passers-by, whom he accuses of looking at him the wrong way. Fathi tries to calm him down. He immediately lashes out at Fathi, insulting his girlfriend, Noura, as well. Fathi gets angry and leaves him in the street. Mohaddine then starts to insult Fathi and Tunisia. Some policemen hear him, seize him, beat him, and take him away.

You will be president Walid is welcomed at the palace by the First Lady and her entourage of women. A maid walks around the palace with a pot of incense to purify the place. Once the purifier leaves, the oldest companion of the First Lady volunteers to have her fortune read first. She hands Walid her cup of coffee under the watchful eye of the First Lady and the other women. The First Lady then hands Walid her coffee cup, and he foretells a path to success, good news, money, power, fame. But he also tells her that there is an enemy lurking, an obstacle in the palace, some dangerous men, and traitors. However, he tells her, she will overcome them. He announces that she will become president.



Do not put yourself down Fathi meets his girlfriend, Noura. He tells her that he cannot wait for them to get married. She asks him to be patient. Fathi tells Noura that he must go to Kasserine to see his mother, but that he cannot go empty-handed. She offers to lend him money. He refuses. She wants to know what his mother is like. He tells her that she is a modest woman. Noura wants to know everything about Fathi. He tells her that he is just a poor fellow. She tells him not to speak of himself in derogatory terms.



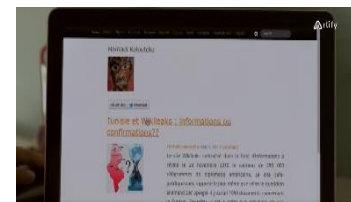
Mohaddine beaten While the band is performing in a cabaret, Mohaddine arrives, late, with a swollen face, and wordlessly takes his place on stage with his *oud*. Mohaddine sets the tone with a tune that provokes protests from the audience, who find the song too depressing.



4500 dinars to cross the Mediterranean Mohaddine has an appointment with smugglers in a café. His run-in with the police convinced him of the need to emigrate. The fare he thought was 3000 dinars has now risen to 4500 dinars. Mohaddine protests, but the head of the smugglers remains adamant. Mohaddine wants to know if there are any risks. The smuggler replies that nothing is without risks in life.



Noura's underground activities Noura is with her mother and a friend. The two girls retreat to a room and go online to read Wikileaks documents about Tunisia. The presidential family and the First Lady's brothers are cited as leaders of a corrupt organization. The girls close the computer as soon as Noura's mother arrives. To distract her, Noura shows her a picture of her boyfriend, Fathi. Walid has a girlfriend, whom he meets in secret at her employer's house where she works as a maid.



Nepotism At the hotel where Noura works, the concierge suspects a young couple with cameras of being journalists. He asks Noura to keep an eye on them. She tells him that watching the hotel guests is not part of her job. He threatens to fire her. Noura confides in Fathi that she is no longer interested in her job. She tells him that the supervisor, who is threatening her, is not up to the job, and that he got the position because he is the nephew of the hotel manager. Fathi wishes he had connections, too. Fathi receives a phone call from Walid. Noura thinks that Walid is an artist to pass himself off as a psychic to the First Lady. Fathi gets angry and Noura apologizes. Noura invites Fathi to her house for the evening because her mother is away. She takes Fathi to her room. She gets undressed, then she undresses him. They make love.



Bend to the wind Walid arrives at the palace because he has been summoned by the First Lady. One of her companions, Mrs. Salwa, tells him that he had better not upset the First Lady and should hurry up when she needs him. After the session, left alone in the First Lady's living room, Walid starts inspecting art objects. Salwa comes to tell him that the women in the palace are impressed with him. Salwa tells him, however, that the atmosphere in the palace is very volatile, and she advises him to do as she does and bend to the wind. Salwa gives him her business card and asks him to call her the next day.



2000 dinars for a teacher's position Fathi passes his exam. He is among the best and awaits his assignment as a history teacher. However, the administrator who receives him informs him that there is a problem. There is no position available for him because there were more graduates than posts. He is therefore a teacher without students, whom the state cannot pay. In other words, he is still unemployed. The administrator tells him that he can solve this complicated case with a small envelope of 2000 dinars as a reward. Fathi tells him that he is penniless. The administrator then tells him to forget about his case. Fathi goes to explain his situation to Walid and Mohaddine.

Walid sees Salwa Walid now lounges, cigar in mouth, in the bath and in the bed of Salwa, the First Lady's assistant, whom he has been seeing. She asks him to move into her apartment. He claims that it is far from the city center, where he has his commitments. She asks him if he loves her. He says yes in a not very enthusiastic way. She tells him that she can make him an important man. He tells her that he would like that and that he is hers. As he is about to leave, she gives him an envelope full of money. With this money, Walid buys a necklace for his girlfriend.



Police abuse At the city market, two policemen come to help themselves to the vegetable cart of a street vendor without paying, under the pretext that he does not pay taxes. They then threaten him and order him to leave the place immediately.



Bouazizi sets himself on fire Despite the threat of the police officers, the vegetable seller, who had been asked to leave, returns with his cart to sell his goods. He is spotted by the police, who once again order him to vacate. Later, the corrupt officers are sitting in their vehicle, raving about the calm of the day. The young vegetable seller comes and stands in front of their vehicle, and, staring defiantly at them, sets himself on fire. The film of the incident makes the rounds of social networks and makes the population very angry.



Mohaddine overdoses Walid finds Mohaddine reeking of alcohol, unconscious, on the ground in his messy apartment, his *oud* broken. He has trouble reviving him. He takes him to the sink and forces him to vomit and puts him under a cold shower. Mohaddine asks Walid, who is trying to repair his instrument, to find him some money so that he can go into exile because



his heart is no longer in music nor in Tunisia. Fathi also arrives and tries to console Mohaddine. Walid and Fathi are busy taking care of their friend and trying to make him smile again.

Noura quarrels with Fathi The radio announces that Bouazizi survived his injuries and received a visit from President Ben Ali. Fathi announces that he would like to set fire to a ministry of the interior and throw himself under a train. Fathi's girlfriend calls to ask about the result of his exam. He lies to her, saying that he has received an appointment as a teacher. She decides to tell him about her activism. She shows him a video of her defying the government and asking President Ben Ali to resign. Fathi gets agitated. He asks her if she has decided to get arrested. She calls him a coward. He gets angry and leaves. He later sends her a text message to mend things.



Noura is fired Noura's boss fires her for her revolutionary ideas. The streets of Tunis start to erupt with protests. The First Lady wants to see Walid. Salwa advises Walid to tell the First Lady what she wants to hear. After foretelling moments of unrest and appeasement, Walid announces that the coffee grinds are becoming difficult to read, leaving the First Lady distressed.



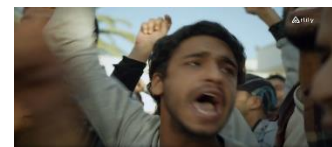
Noura is captured While she is at her computer, in the middle of the night, Noura hears violent knocks at her door. She tells her mother that she will contact her later. She runs through the back door. Some threatening men burst into the house and question Noura's mother, who tells them she does not know the whereabouts of her daughter. They brutalize the mother, turn the house upside down, and leave with Noura's computer. Noura manages to get in touch with Fathi. The three friends go to her rescue. They see her being kidnapped by the regime's men as she leaves a cybercafé. Fathi wants to intervene, but his friends prevent him from doing so.



Political Chaos The country sinks into chaos. Fathi runs to see his mother, who has called him, frightened. Salwa comes to see Walid to tell him that she is going to leave town for a few days until the situation calms down. Walid advises her not to come back, because the situation will get worse. She gives him an envelope of banknotes. He kisses her reluctantly, and she leaves, sad. President Ben Ali appears on television with a conciliatory speech to try to calm the situation. However, the people do not want to let go, and the violence escalates. After having advised Salwa to flee, Walid makes love with his girlfriend in Salwa's bed. Noura is freed and returns home to her mother. Mohaddine's smuggler tells him that the crossings will happen tonight, taking advantage of the chaos.



Fathi is killed From the province where he had gone to visit his mother, Fathi watches the local youth gather in protests against the regime, unmoved. His mother looks at him reproachfully, and he decides to join the demonstrations. The regime's snipers take up position and shoot at the crowd of protesters. Fathi, who has climbed onto his brother's shoulders to harangue the crowd, is shot in the neck. He collapses. Taken to the hospital, he dies of his wounds. Noura, who does not suspect anything, calls Fathi and leaves him a message of love and hope on his phone. The crowd invades the ministries and the presidential palace and ransacks them.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Noura Noura is an outspoken, liberated, and courageous young woman. She does not wait, passively, for her life to be shaped by unexpected events. She creates the conditions that will lead to the results she seeks. She is a woman who knows how to take initiative.

Outspoken Noura does not hide her dislike for the regime of Ben Ali and for all those who gravitate in the sphere of the president and the First Lady. On the day of the wedding reception of a couple of the First Lady's protégés, she refuses to play the game of insincere smile and remains impassive to the entourage of the First Lady while the other employees of the hotel show off their false niceties. To her boss, who asks her to spy on the hotel's guests, she says that she was not hired to be a spy for the regime. She openly tells her boyfriend, Fathi, at the risk of angering him, that his friend Walid is nothing more than a swindler to make the First Lady believe that he has divination powers. And when she reveals her underground activities to Fathi and he panics, she tells him that he is a coward.

Independent Noura's financial and moral independence intimidates Fathi. It is she who takes the initiative to invite him to her house. It is she who takes him to her bedroom, who first undresses herself, then undresses him, and who initiates their sexual intercourse. The filmmaker shows clearly through the position of the couple in bed that it is Noura who is dominant. Noura's sexual independence is coupled with financial independence. And Fathi is daunted by this, asking Noura if she is used to having men come to her room, and feeling a little diminished in front of her. But she does everything to reassure him that he is the one who counts and that he is the one she would like to marry.

Courageous Noura is fed up with the injustice of Ben Ali's regime. Unlike most women and men in the country, she will not accept the dictatorship of Ben Ali with her arms crossed. She, therefore, leads subversive actions against the regime on social networks. She calls for the fall of the dictatorship. This earns her the anger of Fathi, who thinks she takes unnecessary risks, and the wrath of the regime's bloodhounds, who track her down, arrest her, and torture her in the regime's jails. The actions of Noura and many other courageous people like her eventually contribute to the dictator's fall and the end of his rule.

Salwa Salwa is a paradoxically protective and vulnerable woman. The support, which she offers to the First Lady and to Walid, she cannot offer herself when she falls under the spell of this young con man who abuses her feelings towards him.

Protective Salwa is an advisor and protector to the First Lady. She shields her from strong emotions by hiding the negative aspects of what people think of her when she advises Walid to tell the First Lady what she wants to hear. She shields the First Lady using lies, but she protects her all the same. She is also an advisor to Walid, to whom she suggests the best ways to overcome the First Lady's anger.

Vulnerable Salwa's love for Walid makes her vulnerable to the young man's manipulation. This influential woman, swirling in the circle of friends of the First Lady of Tunisia, loses all her effectiveness in front of Walid, who uses her as he pleases, extracts money from her, and offers her only an insincere love in return. She flees Tunis, leaving Walid and begging him for a kiss, which he reluctantly gives her.

Walid Walid is a complex character, who can inspire both admiration and disgust. To his friends, he is supportive man. However, his opportunism and fraud are reprehensible.

Opportunistic To solve his financial difficulties, Walid has chosen the path of prostitution, that of sleeping with Salwa, the First Lady's advisor. Walid has no sexual attraction toward Salwa. He loves another woman, a younger woman of modest means. However, Salwa has a well-stocked wallet and offers him money whenever he visits her. Walid accepts, despite himself, to be Salwa's gigolo. And with the money that he earns from his prostitution activity he offers jewels to his girlfriend.

Insincere When Salwa asks Walid if he loves her, he answers yes. And she believes him and offers him money, more because she knows he is destitute than because she wants to bribe him. However, Walid is not sincere. He denigrates Salwa in front of his friends, grimaces when she wants to kiss him, and uses the money she gives him to support a younger woman. And as soon as Salwa leaves Tunis to get away from the demonstrations, Walid invites his young girlfriend into Salwa's apartment and bed.

Fathi Fathi is an emotional and proud young man. He acts more often according to his moods than in a calm and reasoned way. Incidentally, it is his emotive disposition that will lead to his death. He was not

going to protest, but he joins the protesters to please his mother when she gave him a judgmental look, and he died whipping up the crowd.

Emotional When Fathi decides to help Mohaddine get home from a bar, it is because he knows that his friend has had too much to drink and that he no longer has control over his movements and emotions. And yet, he gets angry and abandons Mohaddine in the street as soon as Mohaddine says something indiscreet against his girlfriend, Noura. When Noura gives him her opinion on Walid's scam, he gets angry and turns his back on her. And when she reveals her underground activities as an activist, he panics, gets carried away and leaves her house. And yet, in his hometown, while visiting his mother, all it takes is one look of disapproval from her for him to join the demonstrations in which he did not want to participate and, in the euphoria of the moment, to turn into a loud haranguer and prime target of the riot police.

Principled Fathi was never able to put his academic knowledge into practice because he never wanted to participate in the corrupting behaviour of his country. With 2000 dinars, he could have bribed an employee of the Ministry of Education and been assigned a position. Walid also offered to intercede on his behalf with Salwa, his lover who has access to the presidential palace. But Fathi remained firm in his belief that his work alone should be enough to get him a job, and that he did not want any other form of intervention on his behalf.

Mohaddine He seems to be the most affected of the three friends by the precarious conditions they face. His pessimism is such that it leads him to depression and suicidal behaviors.

Pessimistic For Mohaddine, Tunisia no longer offers any viable opportunities. He thinks that Fathi is wasting his time chasing a teaching job that will never materialize. He has decided that the future is to be found elsewhere, and that elsewhere, for him, is Europe. His smugglers demand 4500 dinars for the crossing. He steals this money from Walid on the day of the revolution because he wants to take advantage of the chaos to leave the country.

Depressed Mohaddine is a character on the verge of depression, who drowns his pain in alcohol to the point of overdosing, who cries out his dismay to anyone who will listen to him to the point of being arrested by the police of Ben Ali, and who fills his songs with melancholy, to the great displeasure of his audience.

THEMES

SOCIETY (class, womanhood, corruption, nepotism, unemployment)

Class Ben Ali's Tunisia is a society of classes, that is, of two social groups separated by an insurmountable gap. At the top of the pyramid is the presidential family—President Ben Ali, the First Lady, and the First Lady's brothers—and all those who gravitate around this family, and whom the presidential circle strives to place in a position of influence regardless of their competence. At the bottom of the pyramid are the ordinary people, made up of corrupt officials, such as the police, the civil servants, and the working class, a small group of people who are out to get the crumbs thrown to them by those at the top. The middle class, of which teachers should be a part, does not exist because they are poorly paid or unemployed. Thus, for example, Walid points out to Fathi that he is struggling to pass a competitive examination for a job as a history teacher, which will only pay him 600 dinars at most, a miserable salary. And, although being among the best admitted to the competition, Fathi will never get this job because of a system plagued by corruption; the same corruption that will lead the young fruit-seller to the desperate gesture of self-immolation. It is finally from the lower class, fed up with its condition of poverty, that the fall of the Ben Ali regime will come.

Womanhood *Tunisian Spring* is a showcasing of the diversity of Tunisian women. The First Lady is the image of the ambitious woman, who in the shadow of her husband, in the antechamber of power, patiently cherishes the dream of one day being at the helm of the country that her husband leads with the hand of a dictator. When Walid, in his false divinations, tells her that one day she will be the head of Tunisia, her pleasure is poorly hidden. It is rumored in Tunisia that it is the excessive ambition of the First Lady,

who, with her brothers, has woven around the president an opaque web, which prevented him from seeing and hearing the pleas of his people, and which contributed the most to his fall. Around the First Lady there are those women of influence, such as Salwa, who can offer themselves material pleasures and moments of sexual satisfaction with men much younger than themselves. And then next to these women of influence, there are the domestic servants, who toil in the shadows to keep the lives of the influential women clean. Finally, there are women like Noura, independent, educated, liberated, and multilingual, who, supported by their elders and by their mothers, take the risk to front the revolution.

Corruption Corruption is apparent from the very first scenes of the film when the three friends, on their way to their gig, are stopped by policemen. The policemen do not hide their intention to extort money from Mohaddine: one of them points out that his minibus is missing a rear-view mirror, which will cost him 80 dinars in fines; then another proposes that Mohaddine quickly solve the problem with 20 dinars. The three friends either do not have 20 dinars or pretend not to have them, so the matter is finally resolved with a cigarette offered by Walid. Another instance of corruption is the employee of the Ministry of Education who demands 2000 dinars from Fathi to further his dossier and find him an assignment as a teacher, even though Fathi is among those who scored the highest on the teachers' exam. Refusing to be involved in corruption, Fathi will die from a police bullet during the demonstration against Ben Ali without having worked as a teacher.

Nepotism Walid advises his friend, Fathi, to stop struggling to pass exams in the hope of getting a job in Tunisia because that is not the solution. The solution is to have good connections within the network of the first family, which he lacks. And it is true that opportunities are granted by nepotism under the regime of Ben Ali. Ben Ali's family has invaded all sectors of activity and only employs his trusted men and women. Thus, for example, the manager of the hotel where Noura works, although having skills below those required by the job, got his job because he is the nephew of the hotel director. And Noura, who speaks five languages and is more suited to the position of manager, works under this incompetent man, who ends up firing her for her anti-regime stance. Walid, who has managed to gain access to the First Lady's circle by posing as a fortune teller, proposes to Fathi to intercede on his behalf. However, proud and defiant, Fathi refuses to have his position given to him through nepotism. Although he was among the best candidates selected, Fathi never got his teaching assignment. He would have gotten it if he had accepted the patronage scheme.

Unemployment "Work is a right" is one of the slogans that the youth of the city of Kesserine shouted against President Ben Ali, who was harangued by Fathi before he was gunned down by the riot squad. Indeed, the unemployment of Tunisian youth is one of the plagues of the regime of Ben Ali. The three friends, Fathi, Walid, and Mohaddine, have lost all hope in the possibility of ever getting a stable job. To Fathi, who is studying for a teacher's exam, Walid says that he is wasting his time, and that even if he were to get a job as a teacher, it would only help him to scrape by. The friends are reduced to doing small gigs in Tunis cabarets or at weddings to support themselves, and Walid even goes so far as to prostitute himself to Salwa, the First Lady's companion. As for Mohaddine, dejected by the lack of prospects in his country, he has decided to emigrate. And he nourished this decision in his head, until the day the country falls into chaos and he puts it into action by stealing Walid's savings, while Fathi dies without his right to work materializing.

POLITICS (power abuse, suspicion)

Abuse of power When a government ignores the individual freedoms of its citizens, the abuse of power by those in authority becomes a pernicious evil. *Tunisian Spring* puts the Ben Ali government on trial by showing how its arrogance and abuse of power pushes Tunisians to take to the streets and ultimately cause the government to fall. It is the frustration of a young fruit and vegetable vendor, harassed and tormented every day by corrupt police officers, that leads him to immolate himself. And this gesture of despair of the young Bouazizi, felt by the Tunisian youth as a rallying cry against the abuses of the regime, makes the anger rise to a crescendo, from the city of Tunis to the hamlets of the countryside, until the fall of the dictator is complete. The irony of the situation is that while the cries of protest against the abusive regime are rising, Noura's manager, unaware of the abuses of the regime he supports, accentuates the anger by firing her, abusing his privileged relationship with the dictatorial power that is about to fall.

Suspicion Like most dictatorial powers in Africa, Ben Ali's regime is skittish, suspicious of its people and foreign visitors. It sees in each individual a potential destabilizer to be contained, a critic to be silenced, and it floods the streets, the cybercafés and the public services with spies and informers. Thus, at the hotel, Noura's supervisor, who holds his position only because of his family relationship with the director of the complex, is suspicious of two clients only because they are holding a camera. He suspects them of being journalists who have come to investigate the political situation and asks Noura to keep an eye on them, which she refuses to do. Thus, also, Mohaddine is arrested by the police when, drunk, he makes the slightest criticism against the regime. And the internet activities of Noura and the country's youth are followed and spied on by the regime's bloodhounds.

RELATIONSHIP (love)

Love The film features several manifestations of the theme of love. First, there is the relationship between the three friends, which makes them support each other in difficult situations. When Mohaddine sinks into depression and alcoholism, Walid and Fathi are by his side to comfort and nurture him. When the corrupt official at the Ministry of Education wants to extort money from Fathi before finding him an assignment, Walid offers to talk to Salwa, his lover and the First Lady's companion. Then there is the romantic love between Fathi and Noura, which is sincere and reciprocal, and which seems to transcend social differences. Fathi thinks that he does not deserve Noura because of his rural and humble background, but she asks him not to underestimate himself. There is also the insincere love, paid for with banknotes, between Salwa and Walid, whom she retains only through the money she provides and the gifts she gives him. And then there is filial love that Fathi feels for his mother, which brings him to brave the dangerous roads leading to Kesserine on the day of the revolution to join her. And finally, there is maternal love, which leads Noura's mother to act as a shield between her fugitive daughter and the regime's henchmen who beat her for protecting her daughter.

PSYCHOLOGY (pessimism, alcoholism)

Pessimism Before the revolution that led to the fall of Ben Ali, Tunisia was a country of deep melancholy and pessimism. Fathi has taken the teacher's exam several times without succeeding, and Walid tells him to stop fooling himself, and that his success at the exam depends less on his intellectual abilities than on his network of relations. Walid is right because, although he passed the exam, Fathi will never be given a teaching position. Similarly, the injustice and the iniquity of the system made Mohaddine lose all hope, and he sees his salvation only in exile. Shouting his annoyance at the regime, Mohaddine is arrested and beaten by the police, which pushes the young man to sink even deeper into alcohol. For the young vegetable seller harassed every day by the corrupt police, the despair is such that he decides to kill himself by immolating himself. Having learned the news of the death of the young man on television the same day Mohaddine had almost died of an overdose of alcohol, Fathi confesses that his anger is such that he would like to blow up the Ministry of the Interior. Fathi will not have that opportunity. Instead, he will die from a bullet from the Ministry of the Interior during demonstrations against the regime.

Alcoholism Ben Ali's Tunisia is a society with a predominantly Muslim component, for which the consumption of alcohol is considered a sin, yet which, because of the idleness and depression it causes, sinks into alcoholism. Mohaddine is thus representative of Tunisian youth, who, abandoned by the decision-makers, drowns their misery in alcohol, for lack of being able to exile themselves in a European country. This escape, rather than alleviating the sufferings of Mohaddine, makes him, on the contrary, a victim of the violence of the regime, when, drunk, he launches invectives against the political power. Alcoholism prevents the people from identifying their real tormentors. Thus, in the bar, the customers vent their anger by fighting, and in the street Mohaddine assaults two passers-by for no justifiable reason.

APPEARANCE (deception)

Deception The hostesses of the hotel where the wedding is being held hate the First Lady and her entourage. However, they must smile at their passage if they want to keep their jobs. Noura refuses to play this game of simulation and insincere smiles as the hotel guests approach, but her colleague says that she

has an unemployed husband and bills to pay, and that she is therefore ready to offer the guests all the smiles and bows necessary to keep her job. Similarly, Salwa, the First Lady's counselor, who is not fooled by Walid's fake divinatory abilities, asks him to keep telling the First Lady what she wants to hear because she knows that her position in the palace depends on her boss's good mood. And when the winds of change begin to blow, and Walid asks one of the palace maids what she would like to see happen to her masters, the gleeful demeanor of the latter leaves no doubt that she only wishes the downfall of the presidential family she serves. Playing to deceive, pretending, passing for what one is not, hiding one's game from the other, is sometimes the essential ingredient of survival in Ben Ali's Tunisia.

QUESTIONS

1. Explain in what sense Raja Amari's film can be considered a feminist project.
2. Is Walid's behavior with Salwa a cowardly act or a fair retribution against the regime? Justify your answer.
3. Why was it important for Fathi's mother that her son join the local youth in protesting against Ben Ali's regime?
4. Would you (have you) ever done anything to please your parents even though it is against your conviction? Explain.
5. Mohaddine confides in Walid that he wants to emigrate to Lampedusa, Italy. This place was the site of a tragedy in April 2015. Research and explain it in a few sentences.
6. In a few lines, imagine Mohaddine's exilic adventure.