

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Martial Frindéthié, PhD

Touch/Le Toucher (2022)

Moez Kamoun

OVERVIEW

Auteur Born in 1962, in Tunis, Moez Kamoun studied cinema at the Ecole Supérieure d'Études Cinématographiques de Paris. Kamoun worked alongside Tunisian directors Nouri Bouzid and Férid Boughedir as an assistant director. He also collaborated with international directors like Anthony Minguella on *The English Patient* and George Lucas on two Star Wars films: *The Phantom Menace* and *Attack of the Clones*.

Film With *Touch* (2022), Moez Kamoun, who has led us to expect moralistic cinema with *Word of Honor* (2003), *Late December* (2010), and *The Crow's Siesta* (2010), returns to raising awareness among his fellow countrymen about discrimination. Kamoun's targets are racism, injustice against women, and prejudice against disabled people. *Touch* was shot in Tunisia and has yet to be widely reviewed.

Background Tunisia's dream of becoming a modern nation in synch with the advanced nations of the world is often undermined by conduct that is antithetical to the ideal of modernism. Various forms of social injustice and discrimination (sexism, colorism, ableism, etc.) run deep in Tunisia and are encouraged by the masses as well as the politicians, who are expected to be at the forefront of reform. *Touch* is a critique of some of the societal practices that are likely to keep Tunisia in obscurantism and away from modernism.

CHARACTERS

Hager (Emna Kouki): A young hospital accountant and wife of Yassine
Mahmoud (Ahmed El Ferchich): Hager's former boyfriend, who rapes and impregnates her.
Yassine (Hamza Neji): A visually impaired young man from a rich family, who marries Hager.
Hager's mother (Wahida Dridi): Mother who looks for a husband for her pregnant daughter.

SYNOPSIS

Hager, A young Tunisian hospital accountant, is romantically pursued by Mahmoud, a stretcher bearer in the hospital where they both work. Mahmoud is impatient to sleep with Hager, but she insists that he do things according to tradition—come see her parents, ask for her hand, and marry her—before she can sleep with him. However, Mahmoud rapes Hager, impregnates her, and disappears. To save Hager from disgrace, her mother arranges for her to marry Yassine, a visually impaired young man from a rich family, who accepts Hager's unborn child as his own. Mahmoud then reappears in Hager's life and starts blackmailing her. Will Hager let Mahmoud ruin her newfound happiness?

SCENES

Mahmoud flirts with Hager Mahmoud pushes a gurney with a patient in the hallway of a hospital in Tunis. He leaves his patient waiting and goes to talk to Hager, the hospital's cashier. He tells her that he has just bought her what she needs, a spicy sandwich. He hands her the sandwich. She tells him that she hates spicy food. Mahmoud's patient is getting irritated. Mahmoud returns to pushing the gurney.



Hager wonders about Mahmoud's intentions Hager tells her co-worker and friend, Salwa, about Mahmoud. She tells Salwa that Mahmoud spends the day gazing and smiling at her. She tells her that he even tried to touch her hand today. Salwa asks Hager to stop being difficult and give Mahmoud a chance. She tells her that Mahmoud and she are both government workers with lifetime jobs and could settle together and have a comfortable life. Hager replies that she is not sure about Mahmoud's intentions.



Mahmoud is infatuated with Hager Mahmoud lives with a drug-dealing roommate. As Mahmoud is getting ready to go out, his roommate reminds him that today is his turn to deliver the merchandise (the drug) to their clients. Mahmoud tells his roommate that he will take care of the delivery tomorrow. His roommate remarks that the new cashier at the hospital (Hager) is taking Mahmoud's attention away from business. Mahmoud tells his roommate that he will have Hager at all costs.



Hager's life is boring Hager and Salwa take the hospital bus home after work and talk about how they spend their evenings. Hager thinks that her friend is lucky for watching interesting movies on TV. She tells Salwa that her mother is often glued to the TV watching the news and does not give her a chance to watch movies. Salwa says that sounds boring and Hager agrees. The women on the bus start singing and clapping their hands. Some of them start dancing. Salwa joins in and proposes that Hager do the same. Hager replies that she is not in the mood for singing and dancing. The bus arrives at Hager's stop, and she sees Mahmoud waiting and waving at her. Hager decides to stay on the bus and get off at the next stop.

Hager lives with her parents On her way home, Hager stops and makes sure that she has removed all the makeup she put on at work. Hager lives with her parents. She greets her father, who does not look at her or greet her. He complains that she forgot to bring home some groceries. She promises that she will not forget next time. Hager's mother asks her to contribute more to the household expenses and wishes that she would get married soon. Hager tells her mother not to worry, that someday, someone will come for her.



The date The following day, Hager's friend remarks that Mahmoud has not come to wait for her at the bus stop. Hager looks disappointed. She gets off the bus and looks around for Mahmoud, but he is nowhere to be seen. She goes home. In the street and at the doorstep, she stops and looks around to see if Mahmoud has come for her. He has not. When Mahmoud texts Hager an invitation for a date, she responds enthusiastically and makes herself beautiful. They go watch a movie. In the theater, Mahmoud tries to hold Hager's hand. She gently rejects him. After the movie, they eat sandwiches at a beach restaurant. Hager tells Mahmoud that she is not too fond of beaches because she cannot swim. He confides in her that he cannot swim either, that he panics as soon as he is in the water, but that he likes to walk on the beach anyway. It starts to get cold, and Mahmoud and Hager decide to go back. On the way home, Mahmoud pulls Hager into an alley and tries to kiss her. She pushes him back and asks him what he thinks he's doing. He tells her that he cannot resist her. She says that if he is in such a hurry to be with her, he must make it official and ask her parents to marry her. She leaves him, upset.

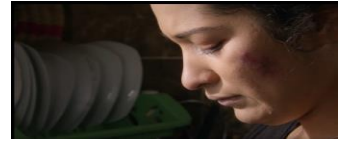


Mahmoud rapes Hager Mahmoud is not pleased with the treatment he received from Hager and confides in his roommate, who tells him that he is pretentious to expect a girl to offer herself to him on a first date. Mahmoud replies that he wants Hager and he will have her one way or another. The next day, Mahmoud ignores Hager at work. Salwa reproaches Hager with being difficult with Mahmoud, saying that her stubbornness will cause her to end up alone. Mahmoud steals some chemicals from the morgue and drinks it to get high. On her way home, Hager stumbles upon Mahmoud in the staircase. He tells her that he wants to speak to her in a quiet place and invites her into the morgue. She tells him that she is scared of the place, but he reassures her. Mahmoud

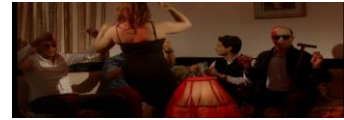


forces himself on Hager in the morgue and rapes her. He leaves her sobbing on the floor and leaves, whistling with satisfaction.

A mother's grief Hager confides in her mother, who laments the lot of women. The mother blames Hager for meeting with Mahmoud. Hager replies that she could not know that Mahmoud was a degenerate. She blames her parents for pressuring her to meet someone and get married quickly. Hager wants to press charges. The mother tells her daughter never to mention what happened to her to anyone, not even to her shadow, unless she wants her life to be one of eternal seclusion. Hager is devastated. The mother resigns herself. She tells her daughter that what is done is done. Now she must think of a solution to save their honor and let time render justice, for she will never get justice from the system. She tells her of several girls in her situation who have pressed charges and ended up having their lives destroyed.



Yassine's night out Yassine, a young visually impaired man, is enjoying a night out with three of his friends. A belly dancer is performing in front of them. She inadvertently bumps into Yassine, and his glass of wine spills on his shirt. One of his friend takes Yassine to the restroom and helps him wipe the wine off his shirt. Yassine's elderly mother and father are anxiously waiting for him to return home. Yassine's friends drop him off at the gate of his parents' villa. His mother comes to help him in. He is drunk and sings loudly. She tells him to be discreet because his father is not sleeping yet.



A father's fears Yassine's father has worries. His business is slowing down because he cannot find fishermen to work on his boats. Most of the fishermen have immigrated to Italy. Also, his only son has taken to going out with his friends and does not seem to worry about finding a wife, settling down, and having children. His wife tells him that today's girls are looking for a husband who can take them out and entertain them, and their son's handicap will make it difficult for him to find a wife.



Inquiring about Hager Yassine's mother notices Hager at a *henna* party (a pre-wedding celebration where the bride's palms and feet are adorned with *henna* dye). She wants to know if Hager is married. She learns that Hager is about thirty, works as an accountant at a hospital, is not married, and has no boyfriend because she is from a conservative family. She also learns that Hager has several suitors. Yassine's mother is advised not to wait too long if she wants Hager for her son because Hager has a steady salary and will not be single for long.



Mahmoud has disappeared Hager's friend, Salwa, finds her tired and wants to know if she is alright. Hager tells her that she has something important to tell Mahmoud but has lost contact with him. Her friend tells her that she has not seen Mahmoud lately either and wants to know if Hager is now interested in going out with him. Hager tells her to forget the whole thing and leaves. In fact, Mahmoud is among a group of Tunisians trying to migrate illegally to Europe.



Hager is pregnant Hager is experiencing signs of pregnancy and tells her mother about it. Hager's mother is devastated. The mother and daughter hug and comfort each other for long minutes. Meanwhile, Yassine is summoned to a family meeting by his parents. His father tells him that it is time for him to find a wife and start his own family. Yassine replies that it is perhaps too early for him to think of marriage. His mother scolds him and tells him to listen to his father. Yassine tells them that he leaves everything to them and will abide by their decision. His mother promises to find him a good wife, one worthy of their family prestige.

A providential husband for Hager Yassine's parents would like Hager as a wife for their son. Hager is hesitant and thinks that Mahmoud might come for her if he knows she is expecting his child. Her mother tells her to get a grip on reality, that Mahmoud has had what he wanted from her and will never come back. Her mother tells her that marrying Yassine is a chance for her to regain her lost honor. Hager's mother suggests that they see who Yassine is. So, they go to the café where Yassine usually meets with his friend, and they watch him from afar. Hager's mother notes that Yassine is tall and handsome with a white complexion. The perfect man. Hager is still not convinced that she should marry a visually impaired man. Her mother tells her that a man is first and foremost how much he has in his bank account, and this man is the only child of a rich family. Hager's mother advises her to seize this opportunity, especially as Yassine's parents are as desperate for him to marry as they are to find Hager a husband. Hager gives in.



Yassine and Hager are ready to get married Yassine and his mother come to visit Hager and her mother. Hager's friend, Salwa, is there, too. Hager's mother tells Yassine's mother that it is a good idea to come and visit, but her son and she ought to make up their minds as soon as possible, for Hager has many suitors. Yassine's mother tells her that they are ready to move forward with the wedding. Yassine wants to hear Hager's opinion. She tells him that she, too, is ready to get married. Hager's mother breathes a long sigh of relief. Salwa takes Yassine's hand and puts it on Hager's face so that he can feel her.



Yassine and Hager get married The women are active cooking for the marriage feast. They express their joy by ululating, singing, and clapping. Hager is being decorated for her wedding, but she looks dejected. One of the women advises Hager to become pregnant as soon as possible or she might find herself in the street because families like Yassine's are keen on having heirs as soon as possible.



Hager confides in Yassine Hager's first night with her husband goes well. They both seem satisfied, but Yassine feels the bedsheets to verify if it is stained with blood. He tells Hager that his mother would like to know because it is part of their tradition. He wants Hager to confirm it for him. She confesses that she is two months pregnant. Yassine wants to know why Hager was single if she was pregnant. He asks if her husband's family did not want her. She tells Yassine that she was raped. He tells her that he wants to know if there was some blood on the sheet or not. She tells him that if that is what he wishes her to say, then, there was some blood. Yassine's mother knocks on his bedroom door. She wants him to bring her the sheet. Hager comes to the door with the bedsheets, but she will not hand it to Yassine's mother. She insists on washing it herself. From the bedroom, Yassine asks his mother to let his wife do her own laundry. He tells his mother not to worry, and that everything is as it should be.



Yassine and Hager go to their new home Yassine and his wife go to their new home, a beachfront villa. They seem to enjoy each other's company. They joke, laugh, and cook together. They take strolls on the beach and by the marina. They are happy to be alone, just the two of them, away from the two mothers.

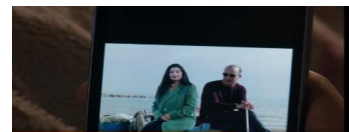


A doctor's visit Yassine and Hager visit the doctor. They tell the doctor that Hager has not been feeling well for the last two months. The doctor tells them that Hager is pregnant and will give birth to a girl in three months. Hager and Yassine are happy to have a little girl. Yassine tells the doctor that his little girl should be delivered early, at seven months, just like his father. Yassine and Hager are standing on the beach. She asks her husband if he wants to talk about the pregnancy. He asks her if there is



anything else in her life he needs to know. He wants to know if she married him because she had no choice. She has no answer for him. She tells him that she can manage to abort the child if he does not want her. He replies that this is his child, who will be born at seven months, and that is the end of the story. Yassine's mother counts the months since her son has known Hager and is dumbfounded by Hager's due date. She confides in her husband, who asks her why this is so important to her when those who are primarily concerned—Yassine and his wife—do not seem worried about it. Hager's father, too, is confused about Hager's due date, but his wife tells him to mind his business and leave Yassine and Hager alone. Yassine is happy and is preparing for the arrival of his newborn daughter.

Mahmoud is back Yassine takes over his father's fishing company and manages things efficiently. Mahmoud is back working at the hospital. He tells Salwa that he tried to enter Italy illegally but was deported to Tunisia. He asks Salwa if she has news of Hager. Salwa tells him that Hager is now happily married to a rich man, is expecting a child, and no longer works at the hospital. Mahmoud wants Hager's contact, but Salwa will not give it to him and asks him to forget Hager. Mahmoud has Hager's pictures on the walls of his room. He searched the internet and finds a picture of her with her husband on Facebook. Mahmoud comes to Yassine's company looking for a job as a fisherman. From her kitchen, Hager sees him being introduced to her husband by the manager. Hager is distressed.



Mahmoud works for Yassine Mahmoud has started his new job at Yassine's company. He spends his evenings smoking, drinking, and gazing pensively at Hager's villa from afar. Hager asks her husband who the new hire is. He tells her that his name is Mahmoud, and that he oversees the freezer. She asks him what he knows about the new employee's history and tells him that he should not employ people without verifying their past. Hager tells her husband that she has bad feelings about the new employee and does not want him around the house. Yassine tells his wife not to worry. Hager again brings up the issue of the new employee. She tells her husband that he makes her nervous and she wants him gone. Yassine gets upset and tells Hager that this new employee is now all she talks about. Yassine tells Hager that soon Mahmoud will be paid and gone, and they will be able to have a normal conversation. Yassine is on a moored boat with Mahmoud. He tries to learn a little more about his new employee's past. Mahmoud tells him that he used to work in a hospital in Tunis. Yassine asks him if he knows his wife, who also used to work at a hospital. Mahmoud says he does not. The weather suddenly changes, and big waves rock the boat and almost throw them overboard. Mahmoud holds Yassine to prevent him from falling.

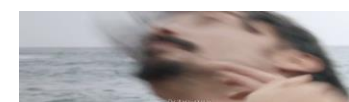


Mahmoud threatens Hager Mahmoud stalks Hager. He surprises her in her kitchen while her husband is away. Mahmoud threatens to tell Yassine that he is not the father of Hager's child. Hager tells him that Yassine already knows. He asks if Yassine also knows who the father of the child is. She tells him that he is not interested in that. Mahmoud tells Hager that he has not finished with her and he leaves.



Hager tells Yassine about Mahmoud Hager has a nightmare about going for a walk on the pier above the agitated waves. Mahmoud joins her there. She asks him what he wants and tells him that she will not meet with him after that. He wants to know if her newborn looks like him. In the morning, Hager tells Yassine that Mahmoud is the man who raped and impregnated her. Yassine tells her to do whatever is necessary to get out of this mess.

Mahmoud Dies After a long reflection on what to do, Hager texts Mahmoud, inviting him to meet her at the pier the next day. Hager waits for Mahmoud on the pier. The sea is very agitated. Mahmoud joins her. She tells him that she has told her husband that he is the father of her child. Mahmoud tells her that she will have to buy his silence on that. She tells him that she will pay his price. As she tries to leave, Mahmoud grabs Hager. She pushes him away. He falls in the sea and sinks immediately.



without her making any effort to seek help.

A happy family It has been several years since Mahmoud's death. Yassine is a proud father playing with his daughter. Yassine, Hager, and their daughter now form a happy family.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

HAGER Hager is a traditional and emotional woman. She strove to conform to her parents' standards by not straying away and by asking her boyfriend to court her with respect for tradition. When he betrays her and attempts to blackmail her, she makes a decision that defies her conventional upbringing.

Traditional Hager is a traditional young woman. She lives with her parents, complies with their rules, does not put on makeup in their presence, and insists that her boyfriend come see her parents before their relationship can progress beyond mere friendship. Her friend, Salwa, thinks that she is too uptight.

Emotional Hager blames her parents for her rape. She tells her mother that their pressuring her into meeting someone and getting married quickly threw her into the arms of Mahmoud, whom she trusted too easily, and who raped her. Despite Mahmoud's forfeiture, Hager is still emotionally attached to him and hesitates to bind herself to someone else, hoping that Mahmoud will come for her.

Assertive Beyond her conservative and fragile appearance, Hager is an assertive woman. When she realizes that Mahmoud is back to make her life miserable by blackmailing her and her husband, she invites him on the dangerous pier and uses one of his weaknesses against him. She remembers that Mahmoud cannot swim, and she boldly pushes him off the pier. He falls and dies. She is thus able to save her happy marriage with Yassine.

HAGER'S MOTHER Hager's mother is also an emotional, traditional Tunisian woman respectful of her husband. To save her daughter from being defiled, Hager cooks up a deceptive scheme. And when her husband becomes a little too curious and wants to understand what is going on, this conniving mother tells him to mind his own business and leave the women to deal with women's issues.

Emotional Hager's mother hugs her daughter and cries with her when Hager tells her that she is pregnant as a result of Mahmoud's rape. She asks what fault women committed to be at the receiving end of society's mischievousness and God's wrath. When Hager tells her that she will press charges against Mahmoud, She emotively appeals to a higher supernatural power rather than the justice of humans. She advises her daughter against it and tells her to let God bring her justice.

Conniving When her daughter is raped and impregnated by Mahmoud and risks society's shunning, Hager's mother decides to find a solution to save her daughter from humiliation and to preserve her husband's reputation. She lies to Yassine's mother that her daughter is a virtuous girl courted by many suitors and causes Yassine's family to precipitously consent to a marriage between Hager and their son. To her husband, who wants to understand the discrepancy in Hager's due date, Hager's mother advises that he stick to his dream of becoming a political figure someday and stay away from women's affairs. Her cunningness saves her family's honor and gets her daughter a comfortable social situation.

YASSINE Despite his disability, Yassine is an industrious and understanding man. His resourcefulness saves his father's fishing company from bankruptcy. His love for Hager makes him overlook her past and adopt the child that she carries as his own.

Industrious When Yassine took over his father's fishing company, it was going through financial difficulties. The company's output was meager and Yassine's father was worried for its future. Upon taking over the company, Yassine turned its losses into profits and found it new international markets. This is the filmmaker's way of saying that given equal opportunities, disabled workers can perform as well—or sometimes better than—able workers.

Progressive Yassine's mother wants to make sure that her son's new bride has remained pure until marriage. She wants proof of it on the bedsheet in which the newly wed spent their first night. Yassine protects his wife and tells his mother to let Hager wash her own sheets. Also, whereas most people in the community would look at Hager, a victim of rape, as a sinner and an untouchable, Yassine accepts Hager's pregnancy and goes as far as justifying to others the discrepancy in her due date as a fact of premature birth. Yassine's views are antithetical to his parents' conservatism.

MAHMOUD Mahmoud is a dishonest and violent man. He took advantage of Hager's naivety to rape and impregnated her. He only returned to her to blackmail her and her new husband.

Dishonest Mahmoud made Hager believe that he was in love with her. This caused her to let down her guard and trust that he would not harm her. He invited her into the cold room of the morgue and raped her. He then disappeared, leaving her to deal with the consequences of his misdeed. Later, he reappeared to extort money from her when he learned that she was married to a rich man and expecting a child, the result of his rape.

Violent Mahmoud is also a violent man. He forced himself on Hager and raped her. He left her crying on the cold floor of the hospital morgue and left whistling as if he had done nothing reprehensible. Later, he attacked her in her kitchen and threatened to expose her as an indecent woman. When he tried a third time to be violent with Hager on the pier, she pushed him into the sea, and he drowned.

THEMES

SOCIETY (patriarchy, Society's views on *women as objects, women's sexuality, shame, beauty*)

Patriarchy Yassine's father worries that his son's handicap will make it difficult for him to find a suitable wife and start a family. This worry keeps him up at night, monitoring the comings and goings of his son. He tells his wife that time is running on them, and Yassine should have given them grandchildren by now, especially as he is their only child. The father's biggest fear is that his bloodline will stop with Yassine instead of continuing through him. Therefore, the father sits his son down and gives him a talk about starting a family of his own. Yassine's mother takes it upon herself to search and find him a wife deserving of their family status. Here, Yassine's parents frantic search for a wife for their son is the symptom of patriarchy's anxiety, of a yearning to preserve and extend ones patriline through time and the fear that that one could, after all, leave no trace at all. Once Yassine has found a wife, his father's anxiety subsides. The new bride, Hager, is pregnant and will ensure his continuance. This is what matters to him, not his wife's inquisitiveness about the timing of Hager's pregnancy. As for Hager's father, his anxiety is whether the calculations regarding Hager's due date are right, that is, whether she has been disgraced and sullied the name of her father. He therefore counts the months and sees a discrepancy between the time his daughter married Yassine and the time her baby is due. His wife, who knows the truth, tells him to stop snooping and to leave this worry to Yassine and Hager.

Society's views (*women as objects, women's sexuality, shame, beauty*)

Women (as objects) Kamoun denounces several aspects of objectification in *Touch*. The most obvious form of objectification in the film is that of women considered as mere commodities whose bodies serve the maintenance of the myth of patriarchy's magnificence. Hager's mother worries that her daughter has sullied the family honor by firstly having sex before marriage and secondly expecting a child while a single woman. In fact, what the mother is most concerned about is how Hager's condition, if divulged, will ruin the father's reputation in society. To avoid that from happening, she frantically looks for a man who would take Hager for his wife and cover her shame. Here, Hager's sentiments are not relevant. She is just a vessel for the father's glory. In her search for a man to salvage the father's status, the man that Hager's mother finds is Yassine. Yassine's parents are as desperate as Hager's mother to marry away their visually impaired son, who has little chance of finding a bride in prejudiced Tunisian society. And when Hager hesitates to be Yassine's wife—either for his handicap or because she is still expecting Mahmoud to come and claim her—her mother rejoins that a man is his bank account. Hence, Kamoun's film denounces a second instance of

objectification, that of men. The simplification of Yassine to his bank account reduces him to a mere abstraction, to purchasing power devoid of feeling and emotion. This idea dehumanizes Yassine.

Sexuality (women's) Women's sexuality in the traditional Arab world is generally considered normal only to that degree that it takes place within the institution of marriage. Outside of marriage, women who are open about their sex lives are viewed as promiscuous and dishonorable. From this perspective, women are expected to remain virgin until their marriage, and on the day following their nuptial night, the groom's mother and aunts seek proof of the honorability of the bride by verifying that the nuptial bedsheet is stained with the blood her defloration. Hager wanted to conform to the traditional ideal of womanhood. She rejected Mahmoud's impatient pressures and asked him to first marry her before she could offer herself to him. However, Mahmoud raped Hager and left town. Hager's loss of her virginity outside of marriage, if divulged in the community, would put her on the margin of society, in the company of the sexually deviant, disgraced, and unworthy of society's respect. She had three options: firstly, to run out of town, far away from her community and live incognito in a distant place; secondly to be rescued by her rapist, who would marry her and restore her from "damaged good" to honorable woman; and thirdly, marry someone from the marginalized lot of society. The third solution is the one her mother was able to find her when she managed to marry her to Yassine, the visually impaired young man, who was himself a pariah of society due to his disability. In another Tunisian film, *Clay Dolls* (2002), Rabeh, the main character, is raped and impregnated by her employer. Like Hager, Rabeh considers exile in a Gulf country, away from her community, for she knows that in Tunisia she will be an outcast. To save her from damnation, her protector, Omrane, proposes to Rabeh that she marry Kaaboura, an indigent man haunting the streets of the neighborhood. Rabeh's and Hager's cases are two illustrations of the societal expectations placed on women's sexuality in the Arab world as not belonging in the order of desire, pleasure, and eroticism but in the order of strict procreation.

Shame The traditional Arab society is a patriarchal society that has immense reverence for the father figure. The father is the foundational referent whose honor must be scrupulously shielded from humiliation and shame. The primary vessels of the father's pride are the women of his family, and his assets are their honorable behaviors. Hager's father, who has political aspirations in Tunisia, wants to ensure that his pride assets, preserved in his daughter in the form of her decent behavior and purity until marriage, have not been damaged. Therefore, he scolds his daughter when she comes home late from work, and he reprimands her for not contributing to the household's expenses as an honorable daughter would. When Hager gets married and moves out of her parents' house and is expecting a newborn, the father continues to probe her life. He wants to understand the discrepancy in her pregnancy due date. He is aware that any dishonorable behavior by his daughter that took place before her marriage can still retroactively sully him and damage his reputation, stopping his political ambition. So, he wants to make sure that this is not the case. Hager's mother, too, is devastated less by the injustice that her daughter has endured than by the shame that her rape is likely to bring onto the family. Hence, she dissuades her daughter from seeking justice as it will divulge her condition of impurity. She asks Hager to hush her "shame" and suffer in silence, and she endeavors to find her daughter a husband who will cover her disgrace. She finally finds that man in Yassine, who, either by empathy or to hide his own embarrassment of having been tricked into marrying a disgraced woman, covers up Hager's shame and, by so doing, conceal his own humiliation, too, when his mother comes to inquire about Hager's purity. The rape of an Arab woman brings shame to the family and the community because it is perceived as the defilement of the foundational pillar on which the authority of patriarchy rests.

Beauty (Lookism/colorism) Tunisian society, as most human societies, has established a set of preferred physical traits that make up a beautiful person. Among the traits that make up an attractive man, as we learn from Hager's mother, are his height and his skin complexion. An attractive man must be tall (whatever that means) and her mother tells her that she should look at the man who might marry her. The mother and daughter watch Yassine from afar, and to persuade her daughter that Yassine is a good package, Hager's mother tells her that he might be blind, but he is nonetheless tall. For Hager's mother, Yassine has passed the test of height. An attractive man must also be fair skinned. The discrimination among people of the same cultural group based on the level of melanin in their skin, Arab films have taught us, is a recurrent judgment among North Africans. We have seen this motif developed in, among other films, Bouzid's *Bezness* and *Bent Familia*, Tlatli's *The Season of Men*, and Boughedir's *A Summer in La*

Goulette. In Tunisia, the obsession with whiteness, the desire for whitening the race, turned into xenophobia at the highest level of power when on February 21, 2023, speaking against sub-Saharan immigrants in his country, Tunisian president Kais Saied qualified their migration as an “unnatural” movement designed to “change the demographic makeup” of Tunisia and “turn it into just another African country.” Thus, for Hager’s mother, as President Saied would have said, Yassine is “natural,” that is tall and white, and thus, archetypal of Tunisia despite what is considered another flaw, his visual impairment.

Ability/Disability (Ableism) Yassine is an industrious man. The sole heir in line to take over his father’s fishing business, Yassine started managing the firm immediately after his marriage with Hager and made it successful. Yet, in the Tunisian conception of worthiness, Yassine’s handicap, the fact that he is visually impaired, makes him less of a man. For this, his parents are worried that he might not find himself a decent wife, and this apprehension causes Yassine’s mother to succumb to the pressure of Hager’s mother, who presents her daughter as a stroke of luck for Yassine. Yassine’s merits, his perseverance at work and his managerial acumen, are brushed aside by society. He is a visually impaired man, and that is what matters. Hager’s cunning mother is aware of this societal bias, and she uses it to her advantage to find a husband for her pregnant daughter. Yassine, too, is aware of how much the odds are stacked against him. When Hager confides in him her misadventure with Mahmoud, he asks her if this is the reason she chose to marry him, a blind man, one of the lowest ranking among his fellow human beings.

JUSTICE

Justice / Injustice Hager has been raped by Mahmoud. She tells her mother that she will press charges against her rapist. Hager’s mother advises her to not do it for it will only backfire against her. The mother cites examples of other girls who have sought justice against their victimizers only to regret it. Their actions exposed them as impure, and the judgment of the population on them caused them to run out of town and seek refuge in far-away places. As for the men who raped them, they were never pursued by the justice system and went on with their lives. In fact, Hager’s mother seems to blame her own daughter for putting herself in a situation that made her rape possible. She tells Hager that she did not have to be with Mahmoud that night at that place where he raped her. Here, the filmmaker puts on trial a social attitude that turns women victims into guilty parties and absolves their male assailants of any wrongdoing. This attitude is so pernicious that women seem to accept it as natural. Hager still hopes that Mahmoud, who had left town after his crime, will have a change of heart, come back, marry her and accept her pregnancy. The victim hopes to be saved by her victimizer.

PSYCHOLOGY

Longing Longing is the psychological state of several characters in *Touch*. Mahmoud’s most ardent desire, as he confides in his roommate, is to sexually possess Hager. He nourishes this yearning in his head until the day he tricks and rapes Hager. Mahmoud also has another dream, that of migrating to Europe. He reaches Italy illegally but is caught and returned to Tunisia. He does not give up, though. He intends to try the passage again, this time by paying his way with money he wants to extort from Hager and her husband. Hager, too, has a burning yearning. She wants to find a man and begin a family, and this desire becomes intense under the pressure of her impatient parents. Hager’s longing for a husband meets Yassine’s mother’s longing for a wife for her visually impaired son.

APPEARANCE

Deception Hager’s mother pressures Yassine’s mother into taking her daughter as a bride for Yassine. She lies that her daughter has many suitors waiting in line, and that Yassine’s parents must make up their mind quickly before Hager is snatched by someone else. In fact, Hager’s situation makes her unmarriageable by traditional Tunisian standards, and Hager and her mother are in a difficult position. They will undoubtedly be shunned by society when Hager’s pregnancy becomes visible. Yet, they present themselves as a dream opportunity to Yassine’s family. Yassine’s handicap is apparent, and the stigma placed on him by society because of his visual impairment is known. He cannot disguise his loss of sight,

and he lives honestly with it. As for Hager and her family, because Hager's pregnancy is not yet apparent, they dishonestly present themselves as honorable people doing Yassine a favor. Hager ultimately confides in Yassine that she is carrying a baby from another man. And this time, it is Yassine who lies to his parents and the people around him to protect his wife, pressuring Hager's doctor to officially declare Hager's baby a premature infant to cover the two-month discrepancy in Hager's due date.

Questions

1. Explain the title ("Touch") of this film.
2. Why was it important to Hager's father and Yassine's mother to know the exact timing of Hager's pregnancy while Yassine's father did not seem to view it as important?
3. What do you think Hager's father reaction would be if he knew that his daughter's pregnancy was not caused by her husband?
4. Did Hager ask Mahmoud to meet her at the pier with the intention of killing him, or was Mahmoud's death a pure accident? Justify your answer.
5. Is it essential that one be biologically linked to one's child? Elaborate and explain your answer.