

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Martial Frindéthié, PhD



## Moufida Tlatli (1947-2021)

### LIFE

Moufida Tlatli was born Moufida Ben Slimane, in 1947, in the comfortable Tunis suburb of Sidi Bou Said. She was one of six children by a well-known decorative painter father and of a homemaker mother. Her interest in cinema started early as a teenager, when she spent hours watching Indian films at local theaters and in high school, where she attended the activities of the film club that her philosophy teacher ran. In 1965, she won a scholarship to study film editing and screenplay at the *Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinématographiques de Paris*. She returned to Tunisia in 1972 to work as a film editor. She made her name as the leading film editor in the Arab world by collaborating on some of the most acclaimed productions in Arab cinema for more than twenty years, before directing her first film, *The Silences of the Palace*. After the 2011 political upheaval in Tunisia that occasioned the fall of dictator Ben Ali, Tlatli briefly served as the interim government's minister of culture. Tlatli died of Covid-19 on February 7, 2021, in Tunisia. Tlatli was survived by her husband, Mohamed Tlatli, her daughter Selima Chaffai, her son Walid, and five grandchildren.

### ACHIEVEMENTS

Moufida Tlatli's first feature film, *The Silences of the Palace*, brought her international acclaim as the first international hit for a female filmmaker from the Arab world. Time magazine placed *The Silences of the Palace* on its list of 1994 ten best movies. Tlatli became the first Arab woman to win an award at the Cannes Festival. *The Silences of the Palace* was selected for the Directors Fortnight at Cannes in 1994, where it received Special Mention for the Camera d'Or Award. It won the International Critics' Award at Toronto. In 1995, Tlatli won the Best Director citation at the All African Film Awards.

### FILMOGRAPHY

*The Silences of the Palace*, 1994

*The Season of Men*, 2000

*Nadia and Sarra*, 2004

### THEMES

**SOCIETY** (patriarchy, silence, language, movement, change)

**Patriarchy:** In her films of Moufida Tlatli addresses the issues of the cultural preponderance of men in the Tunisian society. The disproportionate definition of spaces and roles according to gender perpetuates social inequalities and further deepens the class divide between a category of poor women and a category of privileged men.

*The Silences of the Palace* The plot of this film revolves around the power of patriarchy in society, as symbolized by the power of the beys in the microcosmic Tunisian world that their palace constitutes. The princes, Sid'Ali and Si Bechir, allegorize the insolent and fanatical masculinities for whom women only figure as accessories in the palace where they reign as absolute masters who tolerate no contradiction. When they feel like it, the two princes order that the servants of the palace join them in their beds. From these coerced relationships between the beys and their servants, Khedija had a daughter, Alia, certainly from Sid'Ali, and an aborted pregnancy from Si Bechir. The princes' sexual abuse on women does not stop with the mothers but also extends to their offspring. Thus, as soon as Alia reaches puberty, she becomes Si Bechir's object of desire who, after unsuccessfully trying to rape her, demands that her mother send her to his room.

*The Season of Men* Life in Djerba is governed by the law of patriarchy, which is represented by Saïd. In Saïd's absence, that law is curated by matriarchs like his mother and his mother-in-law, who make sure that Aïcha does not sidestep man's authority and soil man's honor. And these matriarch-guardians of man's honor play their roles with loyal zeal. Saïd's mother keeps her own daughter and her daughters-in-law in a state of quasi-incarceration. She forbids them to make themselves attractive, to speak to men, to dream and talk of love, to laugh, and to go out without permission. Their daily penitence must be work and wait. Even her daughter Zeineb, whose husband has left her for France the day after their marriage and has given no news of himself for seven years, must remain devoted to her absent husband and wait. When Aïcha complains to her mother of the mistreatment she gets from her aunt, her mother advises her to be patient and get in line, for she has a reward coming at the end of her suffering, the reward of becoming a mother-in-law one day, who will relieve herself of her burdens, by passing it onto her own daughters-in-law.

**Silence:** In Tlatli's films, one of patriarchy's tools for ruling over women's lives is a tightly observed code of silence. If this paradigm is not observable in *Nadia and Sarra*, which features a more modern Tunisia, we see its efficient functioning in *the Silences of the Palace* and in *The Season of Men*, which feature a more traditional Tunisia.

*The silences of the Palace* A strongly held code of silence that forbids the servants to complain about their pains or to denounce their torturers, but which tacitly requires them to suffer, persevere, and remain quiet, maintains the grip of patriarchy on the servants. On the day of Alia's birth, one of the new maids, to whom the law of silence has certainly not yet been explained, asks who baby's father is. And it is Khalti Hadda, the oldest of the servants and the matriarch of the micro society of the ground floor, who immediately calls her to order by summoning her to keep quiet. The new servant must then have understood that in the world of the palace, there are questions that one cannot ask. Similarly, when Alia asks her mother who her father is, the latter imposes silence on her.

*The Season of Men* The code of silence that maintains patriarchy's hold on women is put to work in Tlatli's second film. To keep their family's honor unsoiled, the women left in Djerba by their husbands are not allowed to voice the pains nor speak to anyone outside the family compound. The Matriarch is the one who oversees the execution of that rule. The matriarch's daughter Zeineb would love to have a conversation with the town fishmonger to allay the seven-year-long desertion of her husband and her isolation, but the matriarch would not allow it.

**Language:** Tlatli exposes language as a tool for building a societal order that keeps women in a subaltern state. This criticism is more apparent in *The Silences of the Palace*, where the princes have coded the language of the Palace for the subjugation of the slaves.

*The Silences of the Palace* In the palace, one must not denounce, complain, or question the abuses of the princes. Silence is the rule. If one must speak at all, however, the language to use is the one that they Beys have codified for the maintenance and perpetuation of their preponderance. In the palace, language is reworked to find new signified to traditional signifiers. Thus, the signifiers "upstairs" and "herbal tea" are respectively associated with the signified "the chamber of domination" and "sexual gratification." When one of the beys comes downstairs and says to Khedija, "bring me my herbal tea upstairs," she understands that what he means is "bring me my sexual gratification in the chamber of domination." Silence and language codification participate in the maintenance and perpetuation of patriarchy. The palace being an allegory of Tunisian society, Moufida Tlatli is hinting that in society in general, language is the instrument of patriarchy and complicit in its subjugation of women.

**Movement:** In Tlatli's films, there are suggestions that if people are oppressed, it is less because language has failed them than because their movements have been restricted. The filmmaker hints at the fact that to subvert patriarchy's will-to-domination, one must be inhabited by a multiplicity of movements.

*The Silences of the Palace* For Alia, the little slave, freedom implies autonomy of movement more than it does freedom of speech. As a servant who is not allowed to go wherever she wishes within the palace, Alia, nonetheless, forbids herself no space, no corner of the palace. Thus, walking in the footsteps

of her playmate, Sarra, the little princess, Alia allows herself as much freedom as Sarra is afforded. To her mother, who reminds her of her place in the kitchens of the palace, remarking that she cannot “take Sarra as an example,” Alia replies that she hates pots and pans, meaning that she hates her condition of slave. So, moving about in the palace, Alia ascertains her freedom not through words, as she talks little, but through movements, that is, by annexing spaces. Alia, a girl claimed by no identifiable father, by all indications a bastard child of an abusive rapport between a slave mother and an all-powerful master, is necessarily “meant” to escape the holy unified trinity (the father, the mother, and the child). This bastard child speaks no father’s language; she speaks not at all. Instead, Alia walks, trots and runs, leaps, dances and dreams of love, where no girl is expected to run; where Sarra, the legitimate child, and the good princess, Daddy’s precious little girl, is not supposed to run; where movement, especially excessive movement, is not girl-like, is not, in other words, in the order of things.

*The Season of Men* Just as speaking might undermine patriarchy’s control, being allowed unmonitored movements might, too. So, the matriarch ensures that she reduces her daughters-in-law’s as well as her own daughter’s movements. Aïcha cannot visit her mother without her mother-in-law’s approval. Little Meriem, Aïcha’s daughter, escaped a rape on her journey back home from school. For her grandmother, this could have been prevented if the child were not permitted free movement, a danger to patriarchy’s honor. To make sure that news of the attempted rape on little Meriem does not get out and sully the family’s honor, the matriarch wants to confine the child to the compound and away from school.

**Change:** Tunisia is in a process of transformation from a traditional to a modern society. As a female filmmaker, Tlatli envisions the new Tunisian society as one that makes more room and affords more opportunities to women. She makes her films the carriers of this vision.

*The Season of Men* The matriarch’s attempt to confine Meriem like she does the adult women of the family and prevent her from attending school is an opportune moment for Tlatli to insert the possibility of subversion of patriarchy’s grip and herald change, the coming of a new social era. Aïcha decides that no one will ever keep her daughters out of school, and she personally walks her daughter to school. Aïcha knows too well what it costs for women to sacrifice their studies for a marriage. She stopped school for her husband Saïd and has been dependent on him and subservient to his mother. She wishes for her daughters to have a better life than the one she has. She knows that only education can give them options in life. And her persistence to keep her daughters in school pays off. Emna is a talented violinist. She is an independent woman who decides the kind of relationship she wants, when she wants to commit, and where she wants to live. Meriem is married with a loving young doctor, Sami, who understands her, gives her her space when she needs it, and comes to her when she needs him; a man completely opposite to her chauvinistic, unloving father. Emna, Meriem, and Sami sound the death knell of a bygone era and usher in a new age where women are men’s partners and not their slaves.

Nadia and Sarra The new Tunisian society desired by Tlatli is hinted in *Nadia and Sarra*. It is a Tunisia that offers women opportunities for education and employment, and therefore, financial independence and freedom of decision. This is the Society of Nadia, an educated woman, a French teacher in a Tunisian high school, married, and the mother of a teenage daughter preparing for her baccalaureate. Nadia and her husband Hedi, who live in a comfortable neighborhood of Tunis, often go out with friends to eat in restaurants or to attend receptions. With Nadia, we are far from the woman confined and without options. With Hedi, we are far from the abusive and chauvinistic husband who gives himself life and death rights over his wife. In Nadia and Hedi’s relationship, we are far from a marriage that looks more like an institution of incarceration than the union of two beings attracted to each other, and who freely choose to look in the same direction. *Nadia and Sarra*’s new Tunisia is a society that sees the economic and social chasm that separates men from women narrowing.

RELATIONSHIP (love, friendship, family)

**Love:** The characters in Tlatli’s films often derive their complexities from the relationships they have with each other. A seemingly obvious love relationship can turn out to be more ambiguous than it first appears and open up avenues of questioning about the protagonists involved. Similarly, a relationship that

at first glance appears abusive may conceal surprising bits of affection. Here, the cases of Sid'Ali and Khedija in *The Silences of the Palace* and of Nadi and Hedi in *Nadia and Sarra* are illustrative.

*The Silences of the Palace* In *The Silences of the Palace*, love takes on sometimes ambiguous contours. The coerced relationships between the beys and their slaves do not always seem to be easily categorized as such. It is clear that between Sid'Ali and Khedija a relationship is established that plays on the balance of power, on the fact that Sid'Ali, as one of the absolute masters of the beys' palace, cannot be denied anything by Khedija, who is his slave. However, one also realizes that Khedija seems to be attracted to Sid'Ali, of whom she has become pregnant and whose child she has chosen to keep. The way in which Khedija abandons herself in Sid'Ali's arms, the anticipation with which she awaits his visits in the slave quarter, the anxiety with which Sid'Ali waits outside Khedija's door to be told of Alia's birth, all lead one to believe that Khedija loves Sid'Ali, and that Sid'Ali returns this love to her with equal intensity. Moreover, did not his wife reproach him for being too attached to the servants, not to say to Khedija? However, given the nature of the power struggle between the master (Sid'Ali) and the slave (Khedija), it is not unreasonable to ask the question of the sincerity of this relationship. Does Khedija really love her master, or does she only give herself to him to give herself time to survive? There are, nevertheless, sincere loves in the palace that serve as lifelines for the slaves who endure difficult living conditions. It is Khedija's love for her daughter Alia, a love that is so strong that it leads the mother to give herself as a sacrifice to Si Bechir who is about to rape her daughter. It is also the shared love of the slaves, which allows them to face the harsh trials of deprivation of freedom. It is also the love of the old servant Khalti Hadda, who for years serves as an adoptive mother, comforter, and caregiver to all the maids in the palace. It is also perhaps the love between Alia the little slave and Sarra the little princess.

*The Season of Men* If divorce is not allowed in Djerba, if the women of Djerba are obliged to tie their lives to evanescent partners, at least they can relieve themselves, heal their bruises with small escapades, small deceptions, even if only subliminally. Thus, Zora flirts with the fishmonger, who was Zeineb's target before her mother, suspicious, called her to order. Thus, Zora suggests to Zeineb to wax and make herself beautiful because you never know, a man could be interested in her, which would make her forget all the restraints of a good girl. Thus, Aïcha asks her mother-in-law to let her visit her mother. And at this escape, where she takes Zeineb with her, Aïcha finds comforting words from her mother and Zeineb finds them from a man. Aïcha has sensed an attraction between Younès and Zeineb. So, on their way back home, where Younès is driving them, Aïcha asks him to make a detour for her to see the tip of Djerba and the ferry she has not seen for a while. This detour she requests is for her cousin Zeineb and Younès to be alone together for a few moments. And so much the worse for the old shrew who waits for them on the threshold of the door that they finally cross at a late hour. The matriarch will never know that Aïcha has facilitated Zeineb's meeting with Younès on the journey back from visiting Aïcha's mother. Nevertheless, as if fate wanted to punish them for affording themselves a little joy, Aïcha and Zeineb return home to discover that on her way home from school, Meriem was almost raped.

**Friendship:** Relationship of friendship is a central preoccupation in Tlatli's films, which transpires most in *The Season of Men*. One cannot not help but be touched by the great friendship that binds the women together on the island of Djerba, and which allows them to survive the eleven long months of waiting for their husbands under the implacable watch of their mother-in-law.

*The Season of Men* The greatest friendship in the family court is the one that, despite the disapproval of the matriarch, exists between the two cousins, Zeineb and Aïcha. Zeineb's husband deserted her the day after their wedding, and for seven years has been exiled in France without giving any news of him. In her depression, Zeineb finds a sympathetic ear in Aïcha, who consoles and cares for her when her psychosomatic crises of physical pain and melancholy occur. It is also in Aïcha's weaving work that Zeineb finds a distraction from the gloom of her life. Aïcha knows that the pain of her cousin and friend Zeineb comes from her not being loved by a man, of not having felt the embrace of a man for seven years. When, during a visit to her mother's house, Aïcha feels that her cousin is attracted to a man, Younes, who is not indifferent to Zeineb either, Aïcha arranges for them to meet in an isolated place. From this meeting, of which the matriarch will never know anything, will be born a love relationship between Zeineb and Younes, which will cure Zeineb of her melancholy.

**Family:** The dysfunctional family is a recurrent motif in Tlatli's films. In *The Silences of the Palace* as well as in *The Season of men*, the family unit is caricatured as the site of oppression and individual entrapment. In *Nadia and Sarra*, Tlatli depicts the family unit in its most decayed form.

*Nadia and Sarra* From the outside, the relationships in the family of Nadia, Hedi, and Sarra are most desirable, but from the inside what we see is a dysfunctional family. Nadia and her husband Hedi show all the outward signs of happiness. A successful liberal couple, living in an upscale area of Tunis, Hedi and Nadia go out with friends frequently, and whenever possible, they eat dinner together at home, which is served by a cook at their service. Their daughter Sarra, a senior in high school, is a well-rounded and accomplished young woman who likes them and causes them very little worry. However, underneath this veneer of perfection, lies a world of frustration and misunderstanding. Nadia, in her pre-menopausal stage, struggles in isolation with symptoms of bulimia, feelings of inadequacy, and bouts of jealousy and bipolarity. Hedi doesn't know which saint to turn to in order to help his wife who refuses to confide in him, preferring instead to accuse him of faults he doesn't understand. And the father asks for help to his teenage daughter who does not understand why he comes to her, while he should talk to his wife, of whose mood swings she has also paid the price. From this seemingly united and happy family, what is revealed in the end are deeply dysfunctional relationships.

PSYCHOLOGY (Loss, isolation)

**Loss:** Tlatli tackles the theme of loss in all her films. In *The Silences of the Palace* is the loss of women's freedom of movement freedom of speech, and dignity. In *The Season of Men*, the loss experienced by the women is that of intimacy and love. In *Nadia and Sarra*, loss is that of youth, which leads to psychological breakdown.

*The silences of the Palace* The servants on the ground floor of the beys' palace are all there against their will. They were sold by their parents to the royal family to serve as their slaves for the rest of their lives. As Khedija explains to her daughter Alia, her parents dropped her at the palace at the age of ten, promising to come fetch her the following Friday. And each Friday, she waited at the gates for them to arrive until she gave up and settled in a life of servitude. With the slaves' loss of movements comes the loss of voice. The servants are expected to abide by the code of silence that forbids them to externalize their suffering to their masters, to protest their treatments, or to ask questions relating to their masters' sexual lives. All these interdictions and losses strip the servants of their human dignity and nature and reduce them to mere objects, to mere properties of their masters who dispose of them as they wish, sexually, physically, and mentally abusing them without having to account to anyone. Thus, the maids are tossed between the two princes, Sid'Ali and Si Bechir, who not only abuse them, but, as is the case for Khedija, would also abuse their children. Khedija's daughter Alia decides that she will gain her freedom and her voice by exiling herself from the palace. And this determination, which she has nurtured for years, finally comes to fruition when Lofti, her teacher and lover, takes her out of the palace. However, in the world outside the palace, in her life as Lofti's concubine, Alia realizes that neither her body nor her voice is her own, and that outside, as in the palace, she is subject to the loss of her dignity.

*The Season of Men* What the women of Djerba miss during the eleven long months of absence of their husbands, it is not only the embraces in the bed. It is also and above all the possibility to be their wives in full, to share with them long hours of conversations, to cook them their preferred meals, and do their laundry. Zora confesses that she misses her husband's shouting. This lack is so strong in Aïcha that when she accompanies Meriem and Emna for private lessons at their schoolmaster's and waits for them in his studio, she cannot help putting some order in his things, folding his clothes, and making his bed. She even proposes to come and wash his clothes the next time. Her daughter Meriem, who understands her mother's position of emotional vulnerability, intervenes to tell her that next time her father will be home, meaning "wait one more week." Unfortunately, when Saïd arrives, arguments and resentment beset the expectations and dash all hopes of intimacy.

**Isolation:** Tlatli's films deal with two forms of women's loneliness. There is the isolation women experience in the traditional world, where their movement are restricted by patriarchy and their voices and desires are put under the lid of "decency." This is the loneliness that the women of Djerba experience in *The Season*

of *Men*. And there is the loneliness that women experience psychologically in the modern society, where individualism prevails, and sisterly support is scarce. That is Nadia's loneliness in *Nadia and Sarra*.

*The season of Men* During the eleven long months that their husbands are away from Djerba, the women are under the watch of their mother-in-law, who practically holds them prisoner in the villa. They cannot go out of their own volition, nor are they allowed to take care of their bodies, nor to express affection to their children. Aïcha sings and plays with her daughters in her lap, but they quickly scurry to stop their singing and talking as soon as they hear the matriarch coming. The women wax and make themselves beautiful in secret, but they freeze as soon as the matriarch enters the room, for they are forbidden to make themselves beautiful, lest they should attract the gaze of men in the absence of their husbands. Any movement outside the villa's walls must be approved by Saïd's mother. She forbids Zeineb to approach the fishmonger, for fear that her status as a neglected wife should tempt him and pervert her. The matriarch even tries to control the movements of her granddaughters by decreeing the unschooling of Meriem. When Aïcha asks permission to visit her mother, the matriarch demands that she be accompanied by Zeineb, to ensure that Aïcha does not wander off. The irony here is that the matriarch's propensity to control Aïcha's movements by flanking her with Zeineb as a chaperone allows the latter to meet Younès and to undermine her mother's desire that she remain, for the honor of the family, a faithful wife to an absent husband.

*Nadia and Sarra* The Tunisia of *Nadia and Sarra* is one of isolation. Of course, it is a society that has evolved from those of Tlatli's two previous films. However, it is a society in the working, and with modernity come new dilemmas for women. Nadia is a woman in a premenopausal stage who is experiencing some of the psychological effects associated with her condition, such as, feeling of loss of beauty and youth, sentiment of inadequacy, and beliefs of unattractiveness. This triggers in Nadia sentiments of jealousy whenever she sees the youthful and beautiful body of her eighteen-year-old daughter Sarra or whenever she learns that one of her friends is aging well. Nadia's frustrations turn to verbal abuse when she snaps at her husband, her daughter, her maid for no apparent reason, or self-destruction when she takes to drinking. Nadia's unwillingness or inability to openly speak with her husband Hedi, her daughter Sarra, or her friend Leila about what she is going through alienates them from her and her from them and causes her to live in psychological isolation despite being surrounded by family members and friends. Her isolation is compounded by the fact that the fast, modern society, with its compression of time and space, affords people few occasions to concern themselves with the problems of others. Hedi, Nadia's husband, is busy at the factory. Sarra, Nadia's daughter is busy preparing for her final exam and socializing with her teenage friends, and Leila, her friend, has her own family life and her leisure activities with her sister. So, unlike the rural society that offers women a strong support of sisterhood to allay their loneliness, in the modern society, despite the comfort and independence she gains, Nadia suffers in isolation.

PAST (memory)

**Memory:** All of Tlatli's films stress the importance of memory. In fact, introspection by a return in the past is an approach taken by Tlatli in her films. Usually, this return to the past, although painful, allows the protagonists to build new foundations. Moufida organizes this return through the use of flashbacks.

*The Silences of the Palace* The entire film *Silences of the Palace* is a series of flashbacks, nine to be precise, which begin at the moment when Lofti announces to Alia the death of Sid'Ali, and Alia arrives for the condolences in the palace that held her and her mother prisoner. Each door Alia opens in the palace, each object she touches, takes her back to the past, to episodes in her life, both happy and unhappy, that shake her, such as the moments spent in the kitchens with the maids, her games with Princess Sarra, the rape of her mother, the meeting with Lofti. It is from this memory that she becomes aware of her present situation with Lofti and her decision to keep the pregnancy she is carrying, and that Lofti advises her to abort.

*Nadia and Sarra* One important theme of Moufida Tlatli is remembering to confront one's past, set new perspectives, and rebuild oneself. Remembering is, thus, positive, in the sense that it is cathartic and liberating. In *Nadia and Sarra*, however, remembering is painful and destabilizing. It spoils the present without offering any viable prospect for the future. Since Nadia's problem has to do with the anguish of

aging and of body transformation, a process that is natural and irreversible, each moment of remembrance can only generate sadness in her. What is worse is that her daughter is living with her. And each time she sees Sarra's youth and vitality, she feels inadequate. Sarra is the symptom of her malaise. She sneaks in Sarra's room, smells the teenager's perfume, tries on her bra, reads a personal diary, and she eavesdrops on her daughter's telephone conversations to recapture some of her lost youth. Yet, each time she tries to borrow a piece of Sarra's life and travel back in time, it fills her with nostalgia, resentment, and deep gloom. It is not only through her daughter that Nadia tries to live youth vicariously. There is an erotic movie to which she keeps returning, and whose libidinous characters take her back to when her sexual desires were still intense and easily fulfilled. Each time she goes to see it, the usher has to wake her up from her seat in which she falls asleep of exhaustion. Remembrance does not open for Nadia the possibility of moving on. On the contrary, it feels her with melancholy.

## CHARACTERS

### Contents

*Open (Alia, Sarra, Hedi) vs Closed (Sid'Ali)*

*Agreeable (Khedija, Khalti Hadda) vs Disagreeable (The matriarch)*

*Conscientious (Aïcha) vs Unconscientious (Saïd)*

*Rational vs Emotional (Nadia)*

#### 1. Open

- a. **Alia** (*The Silences of the Palace*) Alia is inquisitive, rebellious, and disenchanting. She represents the body politic of the Tunisian nation. Impetuous, ambitious, promised a better future, she rebels and frees herself from the external oppressors (France and its local representatives, the beys), only to see herself subjugated by reactionary endogenous forces.
- b. **SARRA** (*Nadia and Sarra*) Sarra is a youthful, empathetic, respectful, intelligent, and loving teenager who tries the best she can to balance her social life with her family's imperatives. She is unfortunately too often the victim of her mother's words and actions, fueled by insecurity.
- c. **HEDI** (*Nadia and Sarra*) Hedi is a clueless, non-confrontational husband. He feels helpless in the face of the difficulties his wife is going through. He tries to understand her, but she refuses to talk to him, expecting him to guess everything. His jokes to lighten her mood are awkward and further hurt Nadia. He feels powerless and seeks his daughter and Leila's help.

#### 2. Closed

**Sid'Ali** (*The Silences of the Palace*) Sid'Ali is a warm and paradoxical character. Like the other beys, is a victim of his patriarchal environment and his social class, which blind him to the suffering of his servants. He has convinced himself that the people whom the princely family keeps in slavery on the ground floor live in the best of all possible worlds for them, and that they are happy under the tutelage of the princes. Despite his closeness to Khedija and Alia, despite his affection for the servants, he never bothered to understand life from their point of view.

#### 3. Agreeable

- a. **Khedija** (*The Silences of the Palace*) Khedija is paradoxically a resigned woman, yet with feminist qualities. Could Khedija have changed her condition if she was less resigned and more daring? Would she have come out of slavery if she had had the courage

to break her silence and speak frankly to Sid'Ali about her sorrows and sadness? Or would it be too optimistic to assume that the slave could reason with her master? We will never know because Khedija never took these actions. Remaining silent about one's suffering was the palace's rule not to break.

- b. **Khalti Hadda** (*The Silences of the Palace*) Khalti Hadda is motherly and dedicated. She is the quiet force of the slaves on the ground floor. She speaks little, but her presence is reassuring. She is the mother, caregiver, and educator of the servants. All Khedija and most of the servants know they owe much to Khalti Hadda. And the princes also owe her their lives, even if their position in the social hierarchy prevents them from acknowledging it.
4. Disagreeable

**The matriarch/Saïd's mother** (*The Season of Men*) The matriarch, Saïd's mother, is a vindictive, detached, and obsolete character. A product of an age-old patriarchal tradition that has victimized her, Saïd's mother seizes the opportunity offered by the marriage of her sons to perpetuate the subjugating system of patriarchy and to subject her young daughters-in-law to the suffering she endured as a young bride. Like a penitentiary guard, her implacable gaze never leaves her daughters-in-law, whose gestures and words she closely monitors. However, her victims do not always take her abuse in stride. In the villa of Djerba, where she keeps them confined, the women oppose her with small revolts, which little by little crumble the ramparts of her authority.
5. Conscientious

**Aïcha** (*The Season of Men*) Aïcha is a dutiful and defiant mother, who, despite the daily humiliation she suffers in the hands of her mother-in-law, remains progressive and supportive of her daughters. This mother has come to terms with the fact that the life she hoped to live by marrying Saïd is a delusion. For her children, however, Aïcha fights for a better life than the one she experienced in her marriage with Saïd and under the watchful eye of her mother-in-law. She believes in the transformative power of education to give her daughters options.
6. Unconscientious

**Saïd** (*The Season of Men*) Saïd is an unreasonable, insecure, and partial man, who projects his flaws on his wife. He is a pure product of the patriarchy that confers on him privileges of a conqueror, Saïd seeks only to preserve the system which he inherited, even if it means subjecting his daughters to the defects of that system. To perpetuate the antiquated order of male domination, Saïd can count on his mother's loyalty.
7. Emotional

**NADIA** (*Nadia and Sarra*) Nadia is a fixated, jealous, and hypercritical character. If Moufida Tlatli's intention is to condense in Nadia the anxieties of women on the verge of menopause, one could say that she has done it with mastery. Nadia concentrates all the possible demons of this moment which is for many women a period of doubts and lack of confidence. However, if the goal of the filmmaker is to create empathy for the women who go through the difficult times of menopause, the character of Nadia, by her wickedness towards those who seek to understand her in order to come to her rescue, is off putting. Nadia inspires very little empathy. Nadia rebels against her husband, her daughter, her maid, her friend Leila, her principal, and her doctor and seems to blame them all for her condition.