

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Bezness (1992)

Nouri Bouzid

OVERVIEW

In this film, Nourid Bouzid raises a sensitive issue in the Arab world, that of prostitution, and particularly male prostitution. In the tourist town of Soussa, unemployed young Tunisian males sell their bodies to foreign tourists in full view of an Islamic and conservative society attached to a traditional idea of manhood. Here, it is the global world that comes to meet a local world, and the consequences are not always desirable. Abdellatif Kechiche, playing the main protagonist of *Bezness*, won the Golden Bayard Award for Best Actor at the 1992 Namur International Festival of French-Speaking Film.

CHARACTERS

<i>Rufa</i>	A male prostitute
<i>Khomsa</i>	Rufa's fiancée
<i>Shuttle</i>	Rufa's little brother and Fred's guide
<i>Fred</i>	A European photo reporter and friend of Rufa
<i>Fatma</i>	Rufa's sister
<i>Ghalia</i>	Khomsa's friend and neighbor

SYNOPSIS

Deported from Europe after a stay of sixteen years, Rufa became a gigolo on the beaches of Soussa in his native Tunisia and trained a young class of male prostitutes. Rufa is now waiting to make enough money in his "bezness" to marry his fiancée Khomsa. However, in a Tunisian society, which expects him to be a model of decency, it is not easy for Rufa to rationalize for his fiancée and his sisters the incongruities between his profession and his traditional role as a guardian of morals. The situation becomes even more complicated for Rufa when his fiancée, fed up with his hypocrisy, decides that what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander and flirts with the idea of accepting the advances of Fred, a charming foreign photographer.

SCENES

The Cameraman Fred is a Western photo reporter on assignment in Tunisia. He is tasked to document the phenomenon of male prostitution. His guide is Rufa's ten-year-old brother nicknamed Navette (Shuttle). Fred photographs young Tunisian males prowling the beaches in search of male and female tourists to whom they can sell their bodies. Fred's assignment has developed into a personal crusade. The longer he stays in Tunisia the more questions he has. He is convinced that Tunisia and its people harbor some great mysteries. He wants to pierce the veil that hides the mysteries of the Tunisians' lives.



Rufa's Job: Male Prostitution

Rufa is the star of the male prostitutes. He is the most sought-after male. He is also the mentor of most of the male prostitutes, whom he has trained. Rufa lives with his mother, his sisters, and his fiancée Khomsa, who has been waiting for him to make up his mind about marriage. Khomsa does not like Rufa's sleeping around with tourists. He tells her that it is strictly business. To catch his female customers, Rufa plays on the clichéd Western perception of the ignorant Tunisian. He always carries in his pocket an old letter and approaches the tourists, asking them if they can read him a letter from his girlfriend, for he is illiterate. The letter is very descriptive of the kind of lover he supposedly is and of the things he can do in bed. And when he senses that the reader is stimulated by the description, he invites her to experience what she just read.



Rufa's Family

Rufa wants to police his sisters' lives. He is afraid that they might get into activities that would sully the family's honor. He does not like his fiancée's friends either. He thinks that they can lead her astray. His sister Fatma works outside of the home as a domestic. He resents it, especially when he thinks that she might remove her veil at work. He objects that she launders her bosses' undergarments because he thinks that is indecent. She points out to him that with his line of work he is not the right person to lecture her about decency. Rufa beats his sister up. She threatens to leave the family home to stay away from his control.



The rape

Khomsa will not have premarital sexual intercourse with Rufa, but he gets drunk and forces himself on her. Now, she is afraid that he might deceive her, that he might not marry her. Her friend Ghalia urges her to leave Rufa, who, she thinks, is not the right person for Khomsa. But Khomsa is afraid that, to make her pay for leaving him, Rufa might tell everyone that she is no longer a virgin, leave her, and go into exile in Europe. Khomsa's friend tells her that she can have a hymen reconstruction surgery that will fool even the smartest man.



The trade

The male prostitutes are all dreaming of leaving Tunisia for Europe. Rufa has a German customer-lover who is soon returning to Germany after sixteen years in Tunisia because he thinks that the sparkle of the early years that he saw in the country has died. He would like to take Rufa with him, but Rufa has been hesitant. One of Rufa's recruits, El Krak, asks him to let him take his place if he is not interested. Rufa will let him have the German for a price. Rufa introduces El Krak to his German lover in exchange for El Krak's gold chain. After that, Rufa returns to his German lover. He has changed his mind and has decided to go to Germany with him if his German lover is still willing to facilitate his entry as he promised. He tells him that he has nowhere else to go and has been forsaken by everyone. The German tells him that it is too late. It was his idea to send El Krak his way, and El Krak has replaced him. I



Friction with the police

Rufa is harassing a young tourist. The police chief calls him into his office to talk to him about his passport. He informs Rufa that he cannot travel. His passport has been seized because he has a bad record. He was once deported from Europe. He jokes that Rufa is getting a lot of work from the tourists. Rufa jokes back that the Tunisian body is an export commodity in high demand. The police chief warns Rufa against AIDS. Rufa pulls a condom from his pocket and shows it to him.



Looking for Khomsa Rufa takes one of his women customers to his home with him, and Khomsa is furious. They get into a quarrel. Rufa leaves with the woman and returns home the next day. To take their revenge on Rufa, Khomsa's friend and Rufa's sister facilitate Khomsa's encounter with Fred. Rufa learns that his fiancée Khomsa and sister Fatma have disappeared. He enquires about their whereabouts at Ghalia's. She slams the door on him. One of the neighbors tells him that Khomsa is with Fred. He gets on his new bike, offered to him by his German lover, to look for her. Khomsa sees Rufa looking for her and runs back to Fred's to seek refuge.



Khomsa's temptation Khomsa watches Fred sleep and runs to the beach to avoid temptation. In the morning, Fred finds Khomsa on the beach. Her apprehensions have subsided. This time, when he walks towards her, she, too, walks towards him. They embrace. However, she cannot bring herself to make love with him. She runs to a shrine to purify herself and gets into a trance to dance away her sins. Fred follows her and tries to photograph the interior of the shrine. He retreats and excuses himself when a woman tells him that it is a space reserved for women only.



Confrontation at the Shrine In a desperate effort to gain back Khomsa's love, Rufa braves the interdictions and pursues her all the way into the shrine, raising the women's outrage. Rufa sees Fred leaving the shrine. He runs to get his bike and circles around Fred for a moment without saying a word, then, he leaves. Fred goes to the beach and smashes his camera on a small boat. He knows that he has lost Rufa's friendship and protection.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

RUFA Rufa is a hypocritical, lying, aggressive, and undependable crook. As the eldest son in the family, with his mother, siblings, and fiancée to take care of, Rufa's task is difficult in a country that is "developing" at the expense of its people. Rufa seems to be telling us that he has only two choices: go back into exile and leave his family without a cultural helmsman or stay with them, while working in a profession that corrupts his role as a family leader.

Hypocrite Rufa is a hypocrite. He acts as the guardian of morals to his fiancée, his sisters, and his sisters' friends. He forbids them to go out without his permission, to smoke, to show themselves to strangers without their veils, and he finds it indecent that his sister Fatma washes the underwear of her employers. However, he himself is far from being a model of the morality he preaches. He leads a life of gigolo. He trains young Tunisians into prostitutions. He even gets drunk and forces himself on his fiancée Khomsa, who has sworn herself to "no premarital sex," a vow that the moralizer he wants to be should applaud. Rufa's life is antithetical to the role which has been assigned to him.

Liar-crook Rufa is a prostitute/gigolo who approaches his customers with false pretenses, by passing for a vulnerable, illiterate Tunisian who needs a lustful love letter read to him. With this first lie, Rufa hooks his victims and strips them of their money and property. He even offers the wedding ring of one of his clients to Khomsa, who tells him that she is not fooled and has her doubts about the origin of the gift. He manages to make his German lover buy him a bike, but he keeps lying that he needs cab money because the bike is broken.

Aggressive Rufa has always threatened the women in the apartment block to make them pay for their lack of respect for tradition. He carries out his threat when his sister reminds him that he is not an example of decency. He beats her and drags her by the hair. He gets drunk and has non-consensual sex with Khomsa. When Khomsa leaves him and he learns that she is at Fred's, he punches and breaks the mirror in the hotel restroom where he went to wash his face after hours spent searching for Khomsa.

Undependable The person closest to Rufa, his fiancée Khomsa, does not trust him. After consuming some wine, he forced himself on her and made her lose her virginity. Now Khomsa is afraid that

Rufa will blackmail her, that he will reveal her impurity to the community, thus making her unmarriageable, and go into exile if she decides to leave him. She feels compelled to stay with him, lest he expose her. We know that Rufa is a liar to his customers, and his German lover has straightforwardly told him that he is not trustworthy. However, that Khomsa feel this way about Rufa is an indication that even those closest to him are not immune to his deceitfulness.

KHOMSA Khomsa is a confused and psychologically confined character. She is the embodiment of a person torn between personal aspirations and social restrictions. She does not know if she loves Rufa for fear of leaving him and contradicting cultural and family prescriptions. She does not know if she refuses to love Fred for fear of contradicting her religious preconceptions that place him in the category of the uncircumcised infidel. She knows, as Ghalia has confirmed to her, that she deserves better than Rufa. She also knows that Fred is sweet, sensitive, and handsome, and that she is not indifferent to his charm. However, she also remembers that Ghalia, who nevertheless threw her into his arms, warned her that dating Fred would require a lot of boldness, as it would be tantamount to sinning twice. Khomsa's body is the scene of a constant struggle between what she wants and what her culture tells her to want.

Confined Khomsa is a woman constrained by Rufa's rules and by her societal formatting. Her movements outside of the home are limited to the strict performance of her chores, such as going to the sea to wash the wool or to feminine social activities, such as, going to the women's public bath with her friends and Rufa's sister and mother. Rufa will not allow her to go out unveiled. However, Rufa does not need to be present for his rules to be enforced. From a very tender age, Khomsa has been configured, through her culture, to monitor herself. Thus, despite the deep attraction she feels for Fred and despite Rufa's betrayal, the simple idea of thinking about loving Fred is for her a sinful act punishable by death. In Fred's house, she thinks aloud in Arabic about how she would love to throw herself in his arms, to do with him what Rufa does with his Western lovers. As soon as she has said it, she condemns herself as deserving of death and thanks God that Fred does not understand Arabic, and that no one else was there to hear her sinful words.

Confused Khomsa's constant struggle between her feelings and what her culture prescribes as proper has her confused. Does a woman scream and call for help when she is being sexually assaulted by a man to whom she is betrothed? Does her protest in this case figure as an act of defiance against cultural authority? Is she still a pure woman, a marriageable woman if she has been forced by her fiancée into losing her virginity? Is she allowed to love someone else when her fiancée has given her plenty of reasons to walk away? Can she walk away with a foreigner and still be a good Tunisian woman by the standards set by her culture, or will it amount to reneging on her culture, her friends, and her family?

FRED Fred is an elated and bold photographer led by his camera into the narrow streets and open beaches of Soussa like an emotional, frantic explorer. Fred's Tunisia is the one offered to him by the lens of his camera. Unfortunately, this camera only chooses to go after what Fred considers strange and mysterious. With Rufa, his friends, and Rufa's family members, Fred could have been closer to the real Tunisia if he had chosen. In fact, Khomsa once advised him to put down his camera and look at the country with his own eyes rather than with the eyes of an exalted and bold mystery hunter.

Elated Fred is exhilarated by his stay in Tunisia, to the point where he refuses to respond to his employers' injunction to return to Europe. He is convinced that, like an explorer in an unknown land, he is on the trail of a treasure hidden behind every Tunisian face and door. In order not to miss any clue that could lead him to his great discovery, he takes pictures of every event he witnesses. His camera never leaves him, to the point where Khomsa, who becomes his muse, asks him if he has eyes to see behind this camera that always hides his face.

Bold Fred's excitement, his desire to discover the Tunisian "mystery," leads him to take daring actions. Twice, his camera is snatched from him for taking forbidden pictures, and in the souk he is chased by an angry shopkeeper. Pretending ignorance, he dares to enter the women's part of a shrine to take pictures. Also, his decision to court Rufa's fiancée could have been more costly to him than simply losing Rufa's friendship and protection, for Rufa has proven to be a violent man.

THEMES

SOCIETY (patriarchy, gender)

Patriarchy: In *Bezness*, the institutionalized system of men's dominance over women survives thanks to the work of moral guardians, such as, Rufa and his mother, who take turn monitoring the movements and thoughts of the women. Rufa and his mother keep an eye on the movements and actions of Khomsa and Fatma. The first thing Rufa does when he wakes up in the morning is to ask his mother where his sister is. His mother tells him that she has given Fatma permission to go out, but Rufa worries that she might engage in acts that defile the family honor. His mother tells him to leave to her to make sure that this does not happen. Rufa forbids his sister to smoke and he chases away the girls who come to visit her, especially Ghalia, whom he accuses of perverting his fiancée, Khomsa. Rufa becomes furious when he realizes that his sister, who works as a maid, washes the underwear of her employers. He finds this indecent and shameful for his family. He wants to know if his sister uncovers her hair, too, when she is with her employers. Rufa keeps the women of the house under his tight supervision and confinement.

Gender Driven by blind anger, Rufa, who already violates the rules of masculinity according to Tunisian society by prostituting himself with men and women, now comes to violate the rules governing spaces according to gender. When he learns that Khomsa has taken refuge in the temple of prayers, a place strictly reserved for women, he arrives there with his motorcycle, and enters the space forbidden to men, violently pushing the women who try to forbid him the entrance. Fred, too, is there, taking pictures, driven by his fascination for Khomsa and by his curiosity as an explorer. Fred, at least, can claim the ignorance of the outsider. He can apologize to the women for not knowing that their space is off limits to him. He does so by withdrawing, while still stealing a few images of the place by leaving his finger pressed down on his camera's shutter button. If Fred can claim the stranger's ignorance. Rufa cannot claim this defense because it is he who recovers the camera confiscated from Fred, asking him to respect the space of Tunisian women. Rufa's personal interests therefore had to be at stake for him to forget his good disposition towards Tunisian culture, of which he claims to be the guardian.

RELATIONSHIPS (sexuality)

Sexuality The most obvious act of subversion is the Tunisian male prostitute who upsets all orthodox norms of masculinity in this predominantly Islamic and conservative society. Rufa and his recruits sleep with both men and women. The asserted homosexuality of Rufa and his colleagues undermines the concept of Tunisian masculinity based on an idea of the man as alpha male provider of the family. When Rufa's sister Fatma, in response to her brother calling her washing her employers' underwear indecent, tells him that he is not a paragon of decency and should refrain from moralizing her, it is to his degrading trade of prostitution that she refers. In fact, as far as Fatma is concerned, Rufa has failed twice as a man. He has not only prostituted his body, but beyond that, he has feminized it. And it is in silence that she thinks it, like so many other people in the Tunisian society. Rufa dishonored the orthodox notion of Tunisian masculinity. This is what Khomsa's friend Ghalia also thinks, who tells Khomsa that she deserves better than Rufa, and who encourages her to go out with Fred. For Ghalia, if Tunisian men are failed men, there is no reason for women to respect the laws they enact. So, she tells Khomsa that if Fred had shown interest in her, she would not have hesitated to go out with him. Ghalia is even bolder. To Khomsa, who tells her that she thinks to have lost her virginity with Rufa, and that he might use it to blackmail her with staying with him, Ghalia advises that she leave Rufa and for thirty dinars undergo surgery for a virginity restoration through hymen reconstruction.

PSYCHOLOGY (confinement, otherness, self-deception, sadness)

Confinement Indeed, in addition to the physical restrictions by which the man wants to make sure that the woman's movements are reduced to their strict minimum in order to give them the least possible temptation to sully the honor of the family, there are psychological restrictions implanted in the memory of women from their youngest age, and which function as filters of their acts and their movements in the absence of the man. Psychologically there is the look of the others, the judgement on the woman that keeps her in a stupor and limits her initiatives. Thus, Khomsa is attracted to Fred, but she is afraid to let her feelings flow. On the first day of their meeting, she gives Ghalia a thread of wool, which Ghalia ties to Fred's

wrist. She looks at him with interest and wonder. She offers herself to his camera. And when, through Fatma and Ghalia, she finds herself at Fred's house, she admits aloud in Arabic that she would gladly give herself to him if she didn't feel judged by other people's eyes, if she didn't have all those social rules running through her head. And as soon as she says it, she curses herself for having thought it and said it and thanks God that no one had heard her, and that Fred does not understand Arabic. The ramparts of the psychological prison of the Tunisian woman are stronger than those of her physical prison. With Fred, Khomsa went further in expressing her feelings than she ever did. However, her conditioning was stronger than her desire and prevented her from following through with her impulse. Instead, she ran from Fred to wash away her "bad" thoughts and actions at the prayer shrine.

Otherness There is a conversation between Rufa and the chief of police in which the chief sardonically tells Rufa, who a few minutes before was harassing a tourist that business seems to be going well for him. And Rufa replies that the body of the Tunisian male is an export product in high demand. Thirty years after the euphoria that accompanied the end of colonization in Tunisia and heralded the country's independence, Tunisia remains highly dependent on currency brought in by an international tourism that feeds on the bodies of the Tunisian youth. Both the Tunisians and the Western tourists are guilty of this commodification of the Tunisian body. Indeed, the idea of the colonized other triggers in some Westerners a strong inclination to associate the colonized person with sex, physical potency, bestiality, and sinfulness. Despite scientific evidence suggesting that, on average, the colonized or black or brown persons' penises are no larger and no smaller than those of their white counterparts, this idea has survived time and nourishes much of the sexual tourism in the world. Tourists who come to Tunisia for sex arrive with the idea that in this hot country, where men have huge penises and bestial sexuality, their strong currencies can purchase pleasures repressed at home at a lower cost. They are guilty of surfing on a debunked stereotype of the other.

Self-deception Tunisians, like Rufa and his colleagues, are guilty of perpetuating this stereotype of the exotic other. Rufa's letter, which he makes his victims read for him in order to excite them and induce them into a relationship with him, reproduces these stereotypes. Nothing says that the Tunisian is more endowed than the European. Perhaps Rufa and his colleagues, whose business it is to sexually satisfy their clients, are well-endowed, since that is one of the attributes required for the job they do. However, one thing is certain: with the holiday atmosphere, the distance from Europe and the feeling of breaking a taboo (an evanescent and ephemeral love with a total stranger), the Western tourists in Tunisia will return home bathing in their own construction delusion and fantasies, seeing Tunisia and Tunisians the way they want to see them rather than they way they are actually, deceiving themselves that in Tunisia the sexes are bigger than in Europe; thus, perpetuating the stereotype that guarantees jobs in sex tourism in Tunisia.

Sadness Rufa brings one of his customers, a Dutch woman, home and tries to sneak her in one of bedrooms. Khomsa finds out and they have a big quarrel. Rufa leaves with the Dutch woman and returns home the next day. His young brother Shuttle comes to him and asks him what makes him sad, who has angered him. Rufa affectionately pulls his brother towards him and asks him, "You want to be like me?" The boy nods, and Rufa proceeds to tell him the story of Soussa, of how a few years ago, when their father was still alive, this place was inhabited by only their family and Khomsa's family. There were no hotels then. "Not a single hotel?" inquires the child. "Not one," replies Rufa. What does this have to do with the child's initial questions, "Why are you sad? Who made you angry?" Considering Shuttle's age, ten to twelve years at most, Rufa is saying that ten years ago, there were no hotels in Soussa and the place had a low population density. Then came the hotels and the national and international crowds. What did the sprawling hotels and the international tourism bring to the local youths like Rufa, his sister Fatma, her friend Ghalia, Khomsa, and Khomsa's brother? Rufa and Khomsa's brother, along with many other young men, became prostitutes and hustlers. Some other young people got jobs as bartenders, hosts, servers, and entertainers at the hotels. Rufa's sister obtained a laundress job washing people's underwear, which Rufa finds indecent. This is what makes Rufa angry. This is what makes him sad.

QUEST (exploring)

Exploring The Orient has always titillated the Western imaginary as the mysterious, exotic other and invited all sorts of fanciful tales. In the film, Fred confesses that he has decided to prolong his stay in Tunisia because the more he knows about the country, the more there is to discover. He compares the veil that Tunisian women wear to a seal hiding mysteries, and he says that behind every face, behind every door

there certainly lies a treasure in wait to be uncovered. His camera becomes the key to open these mysteries, and Fred photographs everything he sees so as not to miss a trace to the Tunisian treasure. This gets him in trouble twice as people confiscate his camera, and Rufa is called to his rescue. Fred's desire to uncover a meaning in every event turns obsessional and voyeuristic. It is a voyeurism that dates from the first encounters of the West with the Orient, and which has given a lot of material to Western literatures. Fred does with his camera what the French painter De Lacroix did with his brush. He captures an eroticized and fantasized idea of the Orient. Fred pursues his erotic Tunisia in the person of Khomsa. For him, to possess Khomsa is to penetrate Tunisia, to understand and arrest its mystery. It is not coincidental that the filmmaker stops Fred at the edge of that penetration that Khomsa flees before she is possessed by Fred. By so doing, Nouri Bouzid avoids the totalization of a multifaceted country. He avoids painting a multicultural country with one brushstroke, or shall we say in one picture. Fred will never boast of knowing Tunisia just for having slept with one of its eight million inhabitants.

APPEARANCE (betrayal)

Betrayal Like most of the young people of Soussa, Rufa feels let down, betrayed, by Tunisia, and he sees no other solution than to his situation than exile. Rufa is sad to have to humiliate himself and his family to survive. He is angry that the promise of a better life with the coming of international tourism in Soussa never materialized. On the contrary, the post-independence tendency to attract foreign currency with tourism has a hypocritical underbelly. It encourages the desecration of cultural values and the pauperization of local populations. Cultural deviations, like prostitution, against which the authorities (like the police chief) feign to speak, but which they tolerate and encourage, stimulate international tourism. In fact, while the authorities might officially speak against prostitution's damage to cultural values, on the sly their support it as an incentive to tourism. The hospitality infrastructures are built to make prostitution possible and available: The architecture of the hotels on the beaches with their niches, their dark and intimate bars, are designed for this purpose. They are intended to encourage prostitution and to make the local youth the provider of the commerce of the body and of the entertainment that pushes them into exile. This is the life that Rufa's little brother, who wants to emulate him, is left with. This is what makes Rufa sad and angry. For, under the veneer of beauty and paradise, poverty is rampant. The local populations are expected to serve the rich tourists and starve in their slums.

QUESTIONS

1. Why did Khomsa accept the ring Rufa offered her, knowing full well that it was snatched from one of his customers?
2. Why did Khomsa not call for help when Rufa was forcing himself on her?
3. What do you think the future of little Shuttle will be? What are the prospects for him of escaping his brother's profession?
4. Does *Bezness* contribute to advancing or hurting the cause of gay rights? In which way?
5. What three propositions can you make to decision-makers in developing countries for international tourism to be economically fair and transformative for their local populations.