

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## Moez Kamoun (1962-)

### LIFE

Born in 1962 in Tunis, Moez Kamoun studied cinema at the Ecole Supérieure d'Etudes Cinématographiques de Paris. Kamoun is married to Philippa Day, a producer known for Star Wars: episodes 2 and 3. They have two children.

**ACHIEVEMENTS** As a first unit director or an assistant director, Kamoun has collaborated in more than a dozen films nationally and internationally. He has worked alongside Tunisian directors Nouri Bouzid and Férid Boughedir as an assistant director. He also collaborated with international directors Anthony Minguella on *The English Patient* and George Lucas on two Star Wars films. Kamoun was also the production manager for several documentaries and films, notably *Who Was Jesus* (2009), *House of Saddam* (2008), *National Geographic: Engineering the Impossible* (2007) and *Ancient Rome: The Rise and Fall of an Empire* (2006).

### FILMOGRAPHY

*Touch* (2022)  
*The Crow's Siesta* (2018)  
*Late December* (2010)  
*Word of Honor* (2003)



(Moez Kamoun in 2021 on the set of *Touch*)

## THEMES

### SOCIETY

**Gender:** Kamoun tackles the issue of gender in *Word of Honor*, *Late December*, and *The Crow's Siesta*. In the first film, he shows how perceptions on gender are acquired through culture. In the second film, Kamoun shows the link between social mobility and gender in the Tunisian society. In the third film, he praises women's resilience.

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

*Late December* *Late December* shows the link between social mobility and gender. Exhausted by being constantly harassed by the factory foreman, who threatens her with dismissal if she does not accept his advances, Aïcha decides to quit her job. The factory is no longer a healthy work environment for her. The consequence of the manager's behavior is that it exposes Aïcha to precariousness and contributes to the feminization of poverty in Tunisian society, where harassment of women in the workplace is commonplace. To climb the social ladder, a woman needs to be bound to a man. And Aïcha's mother, who laments the loss of her daughter's job, says it well: How can Aïcha manage without a job and without a husband, in a village that has seen all its men emigrate? However, providence seems to offer Aïcha's mother a solution. Sofiane, the son of the neighbor Habiba, is returning from France after ten years of exile to find a Tunisian wife. Aïcha's mother brings a picture of her daughter to Habiba so that she can show it to her son, in the hope that he will like Aïcha and make her his wife. Aïcha's mother lights candles to God, apologizing for taking up his valuable time, and imploring him to perform a miracle so that Sofiane might find her daughter to his liking and marry her to give her a better future in France, and also give her, the mother, the opportunity to fly to visit Aïcha there. It is therefore by clinging to the male gender that the female gender can hope to have a place on the ladder of social mobility.

*The Crow's Siesta* Fatma successfully manages a Tunis restaurant by the beach. Her husband, Ibrahim, who is addicted to betting, gambles away their home and their restaurant, and is sent to jail after violently trying to recover their loss. Left alone and with no resources, Fatma makes a deal with her ex-husband to withdraw his charges against her husband in return for her managing his decadent restaurant in the middle of the desert. Ibrahim is freed and joins Fatma in the desert. The desert connotes abandonment, danger, and mystery, a place of dissolution. Yet, Fatma is able to bring the restaurant to life and even make it successful. The place becomes crowded again with tourists, and Fatma can make and save some money with which she hopes to open a new restaurant of her own. Fatma stands as a figure of women's psychological vigor and endurance in the face of life's difficulties.

**Class:** The issue of societal inequality is among Kamoun's central concerns. In his movies he denounces the deep stratification of the Tunisian society. In *Late December* particularly Kamoun denounces the pretentiousness that tends to come with high class status.

*Late December* "Money doesn't buy happiness," the saying goes. Social class, it could also be said, does not constitute happiness. For money and social class to bring happiness, it seems, they need to be accompanied by love. Adam is a doctor in the big city of Tunis and belongs to a social class that most of his fellow citizens would envy. However, the breakup with his girlfriend has plunged him into depression and drinking, and it is in a small village in the mountains that he has come to find solace. And it is perhaps Aïcha, the end of the film seems to suggest, who will make him recover his taste for life. Similarly, by Tunisian standards, Sofiane, who lives in France, is successful. He can afford to return to Tunisia with a car loaded to the brim with suitcases full of gifts for his mother. He leads the kind of life that Aïcha's ex-

boyfriend, Mourad, dreams of. Nevertheless, he feels the lack of love, which he had hoped to find in the form of a submissive, virginal woman from his village. Adam and Sofiane's social classes have not spared them unhappiness.

**Patriarchy:** Patriarchy is a recurrent theme in Arab cinema. Kamoun denounces the silencing of women's voice in the Tunisian society as a consequence of an excessive valuation of man. He also parodies a man's biggest anguish, which is his fear of passing.

*Late December* The voice of men is considered not only the dominant voice, but also, and above all, the only voice worth listening to because it speaks for all. Indeed, no woman from the village is invited to the meeting convened by the elected officials to ask the people to move down to the valley in order to inhabit the new houses made available to them by the government's urbanization program. However, it is undeniable that women, as much as men, and perhaps even more than men, will be impacted by the decisions that are made. Yet women's voices have not been included in the debate. Worse, it is men who, in their presumption of dominance, speak on behalf of women and assume what is good or not good for them. For example, the elected officials argue that in the new town, women and girls will enjoy themselves and be less bored because they will have the opportunity to go out and shop. The villagers, on the other hand, ask the elected officials to stop talking about their women, whom they know well and who have no intention of going out. Without asking the women and girls, the village officials, who are all men, and their male constituents, assume that they know what is good for them.

*The Crow's Siesta* One of Ibrahim's and Fatma's biggest dreams is to have children, which Ibrahim reveals to the desert charlatan. The charlatan asks him if he performs his marital duties well, and Ibrahim says he does. The charlatan then concludes that if Ibrahim does not have erectile dysfunction and performs well in bed, Fatma must be at fault for their childlessness. The charlatan adds that when a couple is childless, it is always the woman's fault, to which Ibrahim agrees. So, here are two men arrogantly making pronouncements on a woman's fertility without any scientific proof and blaming her for a couple's unmet expectations. Ibrahim's and the charlatan's verdict on Fatma emanates from a patriarchal conception that automatically associates men's physical prowess with fertility, discounting or not envisaging the possibility that some sexually vigorous men might not have enough spermatozooids or might not have spermatozooids able to reach the women's fertile eggs. In the patriarchal conception of gender, women are the weak sex, and therefore at fault for anything perceived as weakness in the couple. The film makes a mockery of patriarchy: the charlatan deceives Ibrahim, the pretentious vigorous male. And Ibrahim chases after the charlatan to make him pay for his deception. This chase at the end of the film is not only comic. It is tragic. It is patriarchy degraded.

*Touch* 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 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 one's 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.

**Women as object:** 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.

*Touch* Hager's mother worries that her daughter has sullied the family honor firstly by having sex before marriage and secondly by expecting a child while still 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 her 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 comments that a man is his bank account. Hence, Kamoun's film denounces a second instance of objectification, that of men. The simplification of reducing Yassine to his bank account makes him a mere abstraction, a purchasing power devoid of feeling and emotion. This idea dehumanizes Yassine.

**Women's sexuality:** Women's sexuality in the traditional Arab world is generally considered normal only to the degree that it takes place within the institution of marriage. Outside of marriage, as Kamoun shows in *Touch*, women who are open about their sex lives are viewed as promiscuous and dishonorable

*Touch* Women are expected to remain virgins until their marriage, and on the day following their nuptial night, the groom's mother and aunts seek proof of the bride's honor 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: run out of town, far away from her community and live incognito in a distant place; or be rescued by her rapist, who would marry her and restore her from "damaged good" to honorable woman; or 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 by a different director, *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 Rebeh 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: it should not involve desire, pleasure and eroticism, only strict procreation.

**Shame:** 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.

*Touch* 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 child, the father continues to probe her life. He wants to understand the discrepancy in the expected date of the child's birth. 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 hide her "shame" and suffer in silence, while 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, conceals 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): Kamoun's critique of beauty is most apparent in *Touch*. Indeed, 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.

*Touch* An attractive man must be tall (whatever that means) and Hager's 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:** Most human communities attach certain stigmas to disability that have the deleterious effects of pushing disabled people in the margin of society. Kamoun denounces this injustice in *Touch*, where he shows how society's narrow-mindedness causes it to lose the valuable insights and contribution of disabled people.

*Touch* Yassine is an industrious man and 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 why she chose to marry him, a blind man, one of the lowest ranking among his fellow human beings.

**Superstition:** 'Idolatrous sacrifices' are among the evils seen as "abominations and the handiwork of Satan," against which the Koran warns Muslim believers, and from which it commands them to turn away so that they can "attain success." Kamoun criticizes Tunisians' love affair with superstition in a country that boasts its attachment to the Prophet's teachings.

*The Crow's Siesta* Ibrahim, whose eponym in the Koran is a prophet and messenger of God, a man of integrity and not an idolater, is nothing like his koranic namesake. Ibrahim, drinks, gambles, and above all is a superstitious man, who hopes to get rich and have children by following the advice of a mysterious and perverted charlatan in the desert where his wife runs a restaurant. The charlatan has Ibrahim spellbound and makes him work in a cave digging for elusive treasures, makes him steal his wife's savings for him, and even almost succeeds in having Ibrahim deliver him his wife for his sexual pleasure. Ibrahim finally discovers that the charlatan is a fraud and chases him through a cave that collapses and almost kills the swindler. Finally, Ibrahim and Fatma leave the desert having lost everything. The film thus delivers another cautionary tale to Muslim believers through Ibrahim's problems, urging them to follow the path of Allah and not that of sellers of illusions.

**JUSTICE** (injustice): Kamoun criticizes the selective aspect of justice in the Tunisian society. He specifically denounces the unfair treatment women get in the male-interest-dominated justice system. A woman in Tunisia has little chance of getting reparation when her rights are trampled on by a man.

*Touch* 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 popular judgment of them caused those girls 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 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.

## RELATIONSHIPS

**Friendship:** Friendship is not just the support entity we ordinarily know it to be. It is also the site of deep competitions and jealousy. *Word of Honor* shows how friendship turns to hatred when aspirations are not met.

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

**Marriage:** Polygamy has been illegal in Tunisia since 1956. Men find, however, ways to get around the Tunisian marriage law by invoking religion. Kamoun critiques this aspect of the Tunisian society in his first film.

*Word of Honor* Saad is married to Khadija, but he also has his eye on the widow Faiza and promises her marriage under the Muslim cohabitation regime. When she takes offense, saying that she does not intend to be taken advantage of, he promises her that she will be treated as his wife and that the marriage will be done properly. So, he organizes a wedding, or at least what looks like one, where only he and Faiza are present, without any witnesses. It is clear that the relationship between Saad and Faiza is no different from that between Abbes and his secretary Selma. Saad's marriage to Faiza is a pure act of theatricality and insincerity because the conditions necessary for this marriage to be sincere are not met. For example, Faiza asks Saad where the two witnesses are, because a marriage is only valid when it is performed before at least two witnesses. Saad replies that they are old enough to marry without witnesses. Another missing requirement is the signing of a certificate by an authority who has the power to do so. A marriage is not simply decreed, it is a performative act. This performative aspect is missing for Faiza, for whom marriage is a state of mind (a lived feeling) and not a state of thing (an administrative formality).

**Loyalty-love:** Marriage does not necessarily involve loyalty and openness. Traditionally, Tunisian men consider that certain aspects of their lives, especially their financial situations, must remain hidden from their wives. *Word of Honor* denounces this state of mind.

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

**Incompatibility:** Marriage is not always the site of compatibility of feelings and aspirations between those involved. In Tunisia, as we have seen in Kamoun's films, by entering marriage, women too often enter failure-bound relationship with men.

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

## PSYCHOLOGY

**Loss:** Kamoun explores several aspects of loss in his films. *Word of Honor* especially tackles the loss of freedom through marriage and the loss of friendship through betrayal.

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

**Isolation:** One common theme in Arab film is that of isolation. In *Late December*, Kamoun shows how the Arab immigrant is psychologically isolated in a space between his homeland and his host country.

*Late December* Sofiane is a lonely man, locked in his apartment on the tenth floor of a building in a Paris suburb. Indeed, despite what Sofiane's mother says about her son's popularity with women, and despite what he himself says about his many French conquests, Sofiane's return to Tunisia in search of a wife from his village is proof that the ten years he spent in France were spent in solitude, with an idea of identity and culture that is long gone. Sofiane remained in mental inertia, deferring his happiness until the day when he would find his ideal Tunisian identity. And Sofiane is all the more disappointed when he realizes that even in his village, protected by the ramparts formed by the mountains, the Tunisia of his fantasies no longer exists and will never exist again. The Arab girls of France whom he hates because they navigate between two waters and speak Arabic as poorly as they speak French are the Arab girls of his generation. As Aïcha has proven to him, they will not imprison their sexuality to wait for a backward man like him. Rather, they

will abandon narrow-minded men like Sofiane in their towers of illusion and partner up with men like Adam, who are more fluid in their understanding.

**Longing:** Longing is the psychological state of several characters in *Touch*. Mahmoud, Hager, Yassine, all long for something that seems out of reach given their social conditions.

*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 the 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.

**Addiction:** One aspect of addiction that Kamoun criticizes in the Tunisian society, besides dependence on alcohol, is addiction to gambling. In *The Crow's Siesta*, the filmmaker shows the devastating consequences of this flaw.

*The Crow's Siesta* Ibrahim's addiction to gambling is symptomatic of the 'get rich quick' syndrome affecting many Tunisians looking for a way to financially shelter themselves against an uncertain future. His addiction to gambling leads him to lose his restaurant and home, which in turn drives him to addiction to alcohol and uncontrolled violent behavior that lands him in jail. Tunisia is mostly a Muslim society that frowns upon gambling and alcohol, considered great sins and Satan's handiwork in the Koran. Therefore, the accumulation of interdicted behaviors that leads to Ibrahim's demise are cautionary tales for Muslims. "Engage in behaviors forbidden by the Koran, and you will end up losing everything, like Ibrahim," seems to be the message of the film

**Jealousy/anger:** Individual aspirations and ambitions lead to competition, and competition generates anger and jealousy on the part of those whose ambitions are not met with success, as Kamoun demonstrates in *Word of Honor*.

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

## FLAWS

**Pride:** Kamoun denounces the inflated pride of patriarchy. In *Late December*, he shows how patriarchy's ego delays women's emancipation, but he also shows how patriarchy itself is held in a psychological backwardness by man's superiority complex.

*Late December* Aïcha was twice the victim of the hurt pride of men. First, it was her manager who, wounded in his pride at having been rejected by Aïcha, threatened to fire her. The young woman thus chose to quit her job to protect herself from her manager's threats. Second, when the factory manager saw Aïcha with Adam, he ran to tell Sofiane that the girl he wanted to marry was promiscuous. Sofiane, too, feeling his pride hurt by the fact that the woman he was about to marry was not a virgin, decided to humiliate her before rejecting her. It is in Adam, a man of moderate pride, that Aïcha finally finds true love. Adam knows her, knows everything she has gone through, and loves her as she is.

**Greed:** Another cardinal sin in the Koran, against which Allah warns Muslim believers, is that they "shall not take each other's money illicitly." Kamoun denounces greed in Tunisian society.



*The Crow's Siesta* Taking one's money through gambling is considered illicit. Fatma's ex-husband, who expropriates Ibrahim through gambling, has sinned by the Koran's standards. Ibrahim himself, who, in his obsession to get rich quickly, gambles away his wife's home and restaurant, has also sinned by the Koran's rules. And the desert charlatan, who fleeces Ibrahim and Fatma, is also a greedy sinner. The demise of these three characters is meant to teach us a moral lesson: that greed is always punished by Allah. Fatma's ex-husband's businesses, as evidenced by his restaurant in the desert, are not prospering, and he himself is unhappy after having lost Fatma to a man of no means like Ibrahim. As for Ibrahim, he keeps sinking into deprivation the greedier he gets. And the greedy charlatan, who is seen wounded and crawling in the unforgiving desert after barely escaping being buried under the rubbles of the collapsing cave, has uncontestedly met with death. Here again, this moralistic film cautions against an indecency before Allah: greed.

## APPEARANCE

**Self-delusion:** Self-delusion, as a way to cope with a difficult reality, is one of the themes that are recurrent in Kamoun's films. We briefly see this exercise in delusion in *Touch* when Hager's father has convinced himself that he will become a member of parliament and change things in Tunisia. In *Word of Honor*, *Late December*, and *The Crow's Siesta* Kamoun explores this theme more extensively.

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

*Late December* Ibrahim, the cab driver, lives in his world of illusion. He has convinced himself that he is a great poet and this conviction jeopardizes his family life. In fact, the poems Ibrahim writes are an ordeal for the ears of those to whom he offers to read them. However, convinced of the beauty of his poems, which he spends whole days writing and, as he likes to say, concentrating on, Ibrahim neglects his wife's sexual appetite. And it is the Omda that satisfies them. Emna, his daughter, who has more than once witnessed the infidelities of her stepmother, wants to tell him what she is doing. But our poet, immersed in his writings, does not have time to listen to her. Or, perhaps he knows it, but prefers to have a poetic reading of the disloyalty of his wife.

*The Crow's Siesta* This Ibrahim is also a self-deluded man. He lives in the illusion of his greatness, even though all is falling down around him and by his fault. His expectation of having children is not met, but he assumes that he is too great to be at fault, and that his wife is the "guilty" party. When he gambles away his family's restaurant and home, he promises his despondent wife that he will get back their possessions, but he only succeeds in being sent to jail for exerting violence on his wife's ex-husband. In the desert, he is convinced that the charlatan will make him rich and make his wife fertile, but his persistence in this belief sinks his family deeper into deprivation. As Ibrahim slumbers on the bus that drives Fatma and him back to Tunis after their desert adventure, one wonders what other mirage he is dreaming of, which he will chase when he wakes, dragging Fatma with him.

**Dishonesty:** Kamoun denounces dishonesty as a flaw that is common in varying degrees in the characters of his first film. In *Word of Honor*, relationships, even among friends and married couple, are beset with this flaw.

*Word of Honor* Sassi's downfall begins with the dishonesty of his student Olfa, who plagiarized a book for her thesis. Olfa, seeing herself caught, reverses the situation by accusing her professor of sexual harassment. And to give more weight to her accusation, she lures Sassi to her house, who is caught in a compromising position and beaten by Olfa's guards. Then there is Abbes, a childhood friend of Sassi and Saad, who decides to make money by exploiting Sassi's hatred of Saad, who married Khadija, the woman

he was in love with. Indeed, to make Saad pay for what he considers a betrayal, Sassi decides to write a book that will expose his childhood friend. Saad is a man of faith and an ex-imam who, against the teachings of his religion, has made his fortune by gambling, bought himself a Mercedes, which he keeps secretly, and taken a second wife in an illegal marriage and hides her in a second home. This dishonesty of Saad is what Sassi wants to expose in a book. And Abbas extorts money from Saad, promising to bribe Sassi to alter his book so that he is not recognized in it. But Abbas doesn't give Sassi all the money he gets from Saad. He shares it with Selma, his secretary lover, who also runs away without paying the rent of the apartment in which they meet. Thus, Olfa, Saad, Sassi, Abbas, and Selma are all dishonest characters who deceive one another.

**Betrayal:** *Word of Honor* and *Late December* deal with issues of betrayal as a flaw in people. Either in the professional or domestic space men and women are affected by other's acts of betrayal, though women seem to disproportionately bear the brunt of it.

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

*Late December* Betrayal is observed in several characters in *Late December*. First, it is the foreman who betrays his profession by his dereliction of duty, and who betrays the trust his employees have in him by harassing them, making their professional space toxic. Because of him, Aïcha preferred to leave her job. Omda, the village chief and Ibrahim's friend, betrays their friendship by sleeping with Ibrahim's wife. Aïcha's companion, Mourad, promises her marriage and a life together in France. Trusting him, she offers herself to him. Meanwhile, however, he was preparing his trip without her. Aïcha gets pregnant with his child, and he disappears, leaving her alone with a pregnancy to manage in a community where an unmarried pregnant woman is seen as an outcast.

**Secret:** The traditional, rigid Tunisian society is one of whispering. In this society, secrets swarm in every community and family. Keeping them hushed and under lid is the only way to prevent shame and humiliation.

*Late December* Aïcha's village is a village of secrets, as the little Emna says, who knows and sees everything that happens there. The secret of the village chief and Ibrahim's wife is their love affair, which they have hidden from the whole village until little Emna discovers it. Emna did everything she could to alert her father, but Ibrahim never wanted to give his daughter the opportunity to speak out against her stepmother. So, Emna keeps the secret to herself. Aïcha also has a secret that she would prefer her mother never to find out: she is pregnant. So, she dresses in loose-fitting clothes to hide the pregnancy, and constantly looks at herself in the mirror to ensure that her appearance does not betray her secret. However, she shares her secret with little Emna, who steals money from her mother-in-law for her trip to the clinic in Tunis. Aïcha also shares her secret with Adam, who helps her get an abortion in Tunis. Perhaps the greatest secrets of the village lie in its silent cave-houses, where many love affairs begin and end, like that of Aïcha and her dishonest companion, and of Adam and Aïcha.

**Deception:** In the rigid Tunisian society, deception becomes a survival tool. To get around the perceptions and rigid rules set against individual liberties, people pass for what they are not. This theme, which has been treated by other filmmakers (Zran in *The Prince* and Amari in *Foreign Body*, is tackled by Kamoun in *The Crow's Siesta* and *Touch*.

*The Crow's Siesta* Speech is a powerful tool of seduction and manipulation for whoever knows how to use it. When it comes to convincing his wife to do what he wants, Ibrahim is a sweet and convincing talker. He tells her that he loves her, asks her if she loves him, and tells her to trust him to do the right thing. And each time, Ibrahim betrays his wife by squandering their savings and leading them to ruin. Ibrahim himself falls under the seductive speech of his cell mate, the desert charlatan. Convinced that the charlatan can make him rich and even help his wife and him conceive a child, Ibrahim goes so far as to steal his wife's money for the impostor and almost deliver his wife to him as a sexual object. Speech is power, but

so, too, is money. Fatma's ex-husband is rich and is also the new proprietor of Fatma's restaurant, which he won at a card game with Ibrahim. He holds a certain power of manipulation over the couple, which he uses to shape their lives by sending them to manage one of his restaurants in the desert.

*Touch* 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.

## CHARACTERS

Open (**Adam, Yassine**) vs Closed (**Saad, Sofiane, Ibrahim, Hager**)  
Agreeable (**Aïcha**) vs Disagreeable (**Abbes, Mourad, Mokhtar, Mahmoud**)  
Rational vs Emotional (**Sassi, Fatma, Hager's mother**)

### 1. OPEN

- a. **Adam** (*Late December*): Adam is sensitive, compassionate, and romantic. He is not afraid to show his vulnerability. He loves nature, enjoys music, and is always ready to support those in need. Aïcha was lucky to have him in the village.
- b. **Yassine** (*Touch*): 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.

### 2. CLOSED

- a. **Saad** (*Word of Honor*): Saad is a secretive, hypocritical, and disloyal man haunted by the fear of being exposed. He made his fortune by playing the lottery, a fact that, if known, would affect his standing in the community.
- b. **Ibrahim** (*The Crow's Siesta*): Ibrahim is a naïve. Closed minded and unreasonable character addicted to gambling and alcohol. He falls under the spell of Mokhtar, a desert charlatan, who makes him believe that he can make him rich quickly and solve the couple's infertility problem. And Ibrahim unquestioningly follows the charlatan around and carries out all his wishes.
- c. **Sofiane** (*Late December*): Sofiane is an insecure and reactionary character. He dreams of a patriarchal society that is fast disappearing, but that he refuses to see die. He hopes to breathe new life into Tunisian machismo by starting a family with a religious, pure, and docile woman from his village. Aïcha shatters his dreams when she tells him that he will not find such a woman in the village.
- d. **Hager** (*Touch*): Hager is a traditional and emotional woman. She strove to conform to her parents' standards by not straying away from social norms 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.

3. AGREEABLE

- a) **Aïcha** (*Late December*): Aïcha is a confident and independent woman. She has always worked for a living, and, as she tells Sofiane, she does not intend to be confined to the kitchen of his tenth-floor apartment.

4. DISAGREEABLE

- a. **Abbes** (*Word of Honor*): Abbes is a duplicitous and greedy character, whose selfishness pushes Sassi to a radical act against Saad. He also takes the women around him for granted and ends up being lonely.
- b. **Mourad** (*Late December*): Mourad is a lazy man of bad faith. He uses Aïcha for as long as he needed her, gives her false hope, and abandons her with a pregnancy.
- c. **Mokhtar** (*The Crow's Siesta*): Mokhtar is a manipulative, distrustful, and perverted character. He is able to convince Ibrahim that he is a maker of wonders, and that he is the solution to all of Ibrahim's and his wife's problems. In fact, Mokhtar only has eyes on Ibrahim's money and wife.
- d. **Mahmoud** (*Touch*): Mahmoud is a dishonest and violent man. He takes advantage of Hager's naivety to rape and impregnates her. He only returns to her to blackmail her and her new husband.

5. EMOTIONAL

- a. **Sassi** (*Word of Honor*): Sassi is an unprincipled, naïve, bitter, and vindictive character. He seems to blame his failure in life on Saad marrying the girl he loves. He spends much of his time and energy thinking of how to make Saad pay for what he considers a betrayal.
- b. **Fatma** (*The Crow's Siesta*): Fatma is a resourceful and resilient character. She is a loyal wife to Ibrahim, but her unconditional love for him makes her dependent on him and vulnerable to his deceptive practices.
- c. **Hager's mother** (*Touch*): Hager's mother is 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.