

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Martial Frindéthié, PhD

The Crow's Siesta/La Sieste du corbeau (2018)

Moez Kamoun

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OVERVIEW

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

Film *The Crow's Siesta* is a cautionary tale to a society that is mostly Islamic, but some members of which have been drifting away from their spiritual foundation. Moez Kamoun raises his compatriots' awareness about the dangers of charlatanism, alcoholism, and gambling, which are cardinal sins in the Muslim Holy Book. The film was shot in Tunisia in 2018 and did not receive much international interest.

Background Tunisia, in the aftermath of the 2011 Revolution, is a nation in deep depression. Direct foreign investments, which constituted the backbone of the Tunisian economy, have been scared out of the country. For many Tunisians, the future is gloomy and scary, and the need to secure it becomes an imperative that drives them into taking shortcuts that make them lose their spirituality. It is against this background of social profligacy that Kamoun makes *The Crow's Siesta*, a cautionary tale about moral decadence.

SYNOPSIS

Fatma is the happy owner of a successful beach restaurant in Tunis. One night, her husband, Ibrahim, an addicted gambler, wagers the restaurant at a card game and loses it to a man, who he is unaware is Fatma's ex-husband. Determined to get his wife's property back, Ibrahim goes to the new owner of the restaurant and assaults him. Ibrahim is arrested and jailed. When Fatma goes to plead with her ex-husband to drop the charges against her husband and have him freed, he proposes in exchange that Fatma revive a failed restaurant he possesses in the Tunisian desert. Ibrahim joins his wife in the desert, where Mokhtar, a charlatan, has him under his spell and promises him wonders if he and his wife obey all his commands.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Fatma (Souhir Ben Amara): A young Tunisian woman, who loses her restaurant

Ibrahim (Abdelmonem Chouayet): Fatma's husband

Mokhtar (Foued Litaïem): A charlatan, who promises wonders to Ibrahim

Fatma's ex-husband (Ali Khemiri): A gambler, who wins his ex-wife's restaurant from her current husband

Salah (Fathi Akkari): An artist and friend of Fatma

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Fatma (Emotional)

Fatma is a resourceful and resilient character. She is a loyal wife to Ibrahim, but her unconditional love for him makes her dependent to him and vulnerable to his deceptive practices.

Loyal At the end of *The Crow's Siesta*, the character Fatma wonders why she is still sticking by her husband, Ibrahim. She concludes that it is best that she stay by him despite his flaws, for she loves him. Fatma's loyalty to Ibrahim is indeed unconditional. Many women would have left their husband for doing to them what Ibrahim did to Fatma. For Fatma, however, leaving Ibrahim is not an option. She has chosen to remain faithful to him through good and bad times.

Resilient Fatma is a strong woman. She has lost her business and her home. She is left jobless and penniless. Her husband, Ibrahim, in jail, she was left alone to fend for herself. Yet, she manages to get Ibrahim freed. She accepts an offer to operate a new restaurant in a desolate place in the middle of the Sahara Desert, which she makes prosperous until Ibrahim's thoughtlessness ruins everything again.

Dependent Fatma is pulled to the bottom by her husband each time she rises. Twice, he makes her lose her job and her savings. However, she loves him and cannot get away from him. In her monologue, on the bus that is transporting Ibrahim and her to Tunis from the desert, Fatma wonders why she still loves Ibrahim despite what he did to her, and she concludes that she is certain of one thing. That they will always be together. Fatma's relationship with Ibrahim is toxic. Her unhealthy attachment to Ibrahim makes her entirely dependent on him and unable to make informed judgments.

Ibrahim (Closed)

Ibrahim is a naïve, closeminded 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 does all his wishes.

Naïve Ibrahim is a naïve and malleable character. His cellmate has sensed his weakness and recommended him to Mokhtar, his accomplice in the desert, to manipulate and fleece him. Ibrahim believes that Mokhtar has a supernatural power to make him rich and make his wife and him have children. Mokhtar takes advantage of Ibrahim's naiveté and swindles him.

Addicted Ibrahim's and Fatma's difficulties start with Ibrahim's addiction to gambling and alcohol. His gambling addiction causes him to wager and lose his restaurant and home during a card game. This flaw is compounded by the fact that he is a heavy drinker. Under the influence of alcohol, Ibrahim goes to threaten his wife's ex-husband and lands in jail.

Closeminded Ibrahim and his wife have been unable to have children. Ibrahim is convinced that his wife is the one to blame for their childlessness. In a conversation with the charlatan, Ibrahim agrees that when a couple have problems conceiving a child, it is always the woman's fault. He holds this belief because he is vigorous in bed. Ibrahim even uses the fact that Fatma has not been a mother to blackmail her into heeding his wishes and to make her feel guilty when she complains about his excesses.

Mokhtar (Disagreeable)

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.

Manipulative Mokhtar is a sweet talker. He has detected Ibrahim's desperation for money and children, and he exploits those vulnerabilities in the most despicable ways. First, he makes Ibrahim steal his wife's money for him; then he plots a strategy to have his way with Fatma. However, Fatma, who has always been suspicious of Mokhtar, does not fall for his manipulation.

Perverved Mokhtar is a sexually deviant character. He collects women's undergarments, which he purchases at the local tailor's second-hand clothing store. He preciously keeps these undergarments in a chest by his mat and unfolds and refolds them ritualistically with a deranged pleasure. He peeks in on Fatma when she sleeps, and he ultimately concocts a failed scheme to have sex with her.

THEMES

SOCIETY (gender, patriarchy)

Gender (Women's Resilience) 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, therefore, free 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.

Patriarchy One of Ibrahim's and Fatma's biggest dream is to have children, which Ibrahim reveals to the desert charlatan. The charlatan asks him if he performs his marital duties well. 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 then 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 sexual 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.

PSYCHOLOGY (addiction)

Addiction In this film, Kamoun addresses some of the evils plaguing Tunisian society after the failed promises of the January 2011 revolution. 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 lead 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.

APPEARANCE (vs. REALITY) (deception, superstition, Delusion/self-delusion)

Deception 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 and 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.

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," are "idolatrous sacrifices." 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, 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.

Delusion/self-delusion Ibrahim is 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 in 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.

FLAWS (greed)

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

SCENES

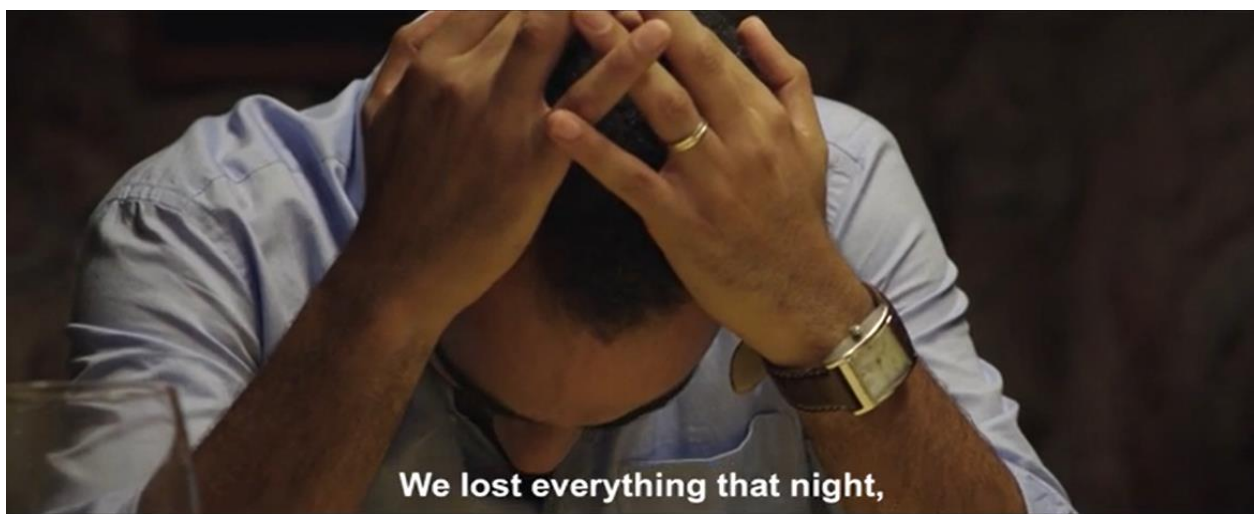
Ibrahim is a gambler Fatma and her husband, Ibrahim, are a happy couple. They run a successful seaside restaurant in Tunis. Ibrahim is a gambler. He is losing a lot of money playing poker with two men in the backroom of his restaurant. One of these two players is Fatma's ex-husband, but Ibrahim does not know that.



Fatma hides the day's earning Fatma is hiding the day's earning from Ibrahim by stashing it in her underwear. Ibrahim comes to the cash register to get some money to continue playing, and he finds it empty. Fatma tells him that she has just paid the staff. He is not pleased. Fatma tells him that she disapproves of his inviting people to play poker at the restaurant. Ibrahim asks Fatma to bring them a drink instead of complaining. She reluctantly complies. Her ex-husband fondles her when Ibrahim is not looking.



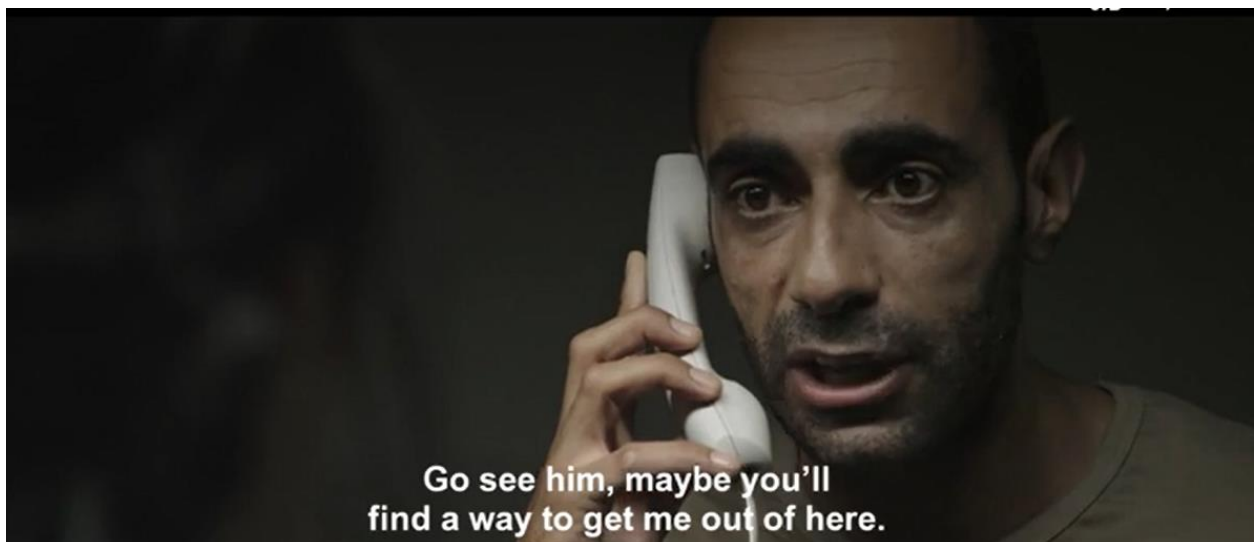
Ibrahim wagers the restaurant Ibrahim has lost all his money, but he will not stop playing. Unbeknownst to his wife, Ibrahim goes to fetch the restaurant's title deed, and places it on the betting table. Ibrahim ends up losing the restaurant to Fatma's ex-husband.



Ibrahim is jailed Fatma cries inconsolably. She asks her husband if she is the next thing he will use in his obsession with gambling. He asks her to trust him to get their restaurant back. Ibrahim threatens Fatma's ex-husband, who calls the police. Ibrahim is arrested and thrown in jail.



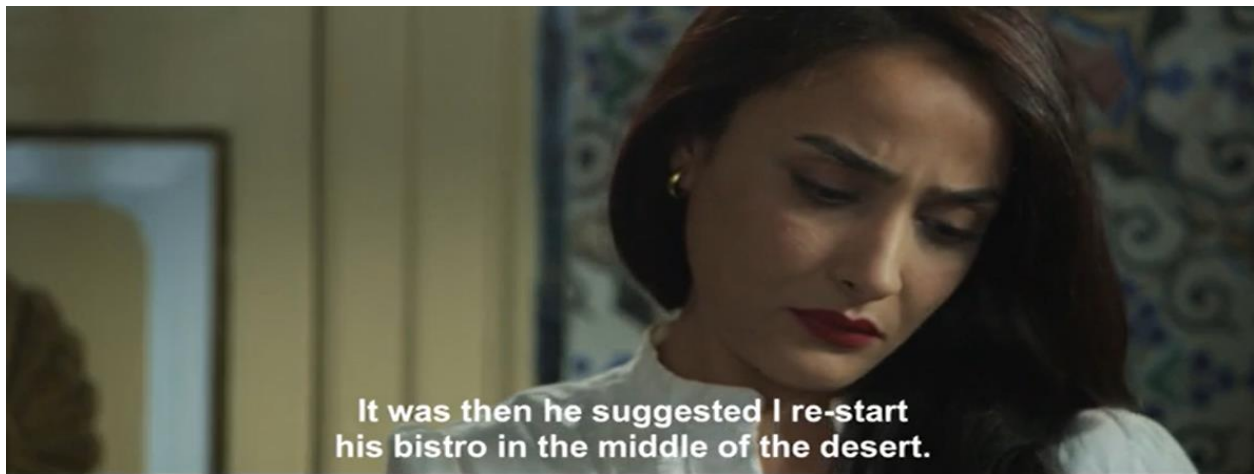
Ibrahim asks Fatma to plead for him Left on her own and with no resources, Fatma starts looking for a job. She scours the city but is unable to find anything. She visits her husband in jail. He tells her that his two-year sentence might be reduced with good behavior, but he still wants Fatma to go and appeal to her ex-husband to drop his charge and have him freed. Ibrahim's request upsets Fatma.



Fatma visits her ex-husband Fatma makes herself beautiful, ensures that her blouse is open enough to show her cleavage, and goes to see her ex-husband. He keeps her waiting on purpose. He tells her that she was wrong to marry Ibrahim. He asks her if she needs some money. She tells him that she needs her restaurant back.



A job offer in the desert Fatma's ex-husband tells her that she cannot have her restaurant back. Fatma laments about the difficulties she is undergoing. To help her, he offers her the opportunity to manage a run-down bistro he owns in the desert. She accepts but wants him to have her husband freed first.



Fatma visits Salah Fatma explains her situation to her old friend Salah, an artist, who proposes that she come share his house with him. He also advises her to accept her ex-husband's offer in order to get Ibrahim out of jail and go start life anew away from the city. Fatma asks her friend to accompany her on the desert adventure.



Ibrahim wants to join Fatma in the desert Ibrahim is brooding in jail. His cellmate is predicting a bleak future for him, saying that he had better stay in jail because his life outside will be miserable. He tells him that on top of losing his home and business, he has certainly lost his wife, too, who has by now chosen to live with someone else. Ibrahim replies that he will get out of jail and join his wife, who has simply accepted a job offer in the desert.

Ibrahim must meet Mokhtar Ibrahim 's cellmate tells him of a man named Mokhtar, who lives in the desert, and whom Ibrahim should meet when he gets out of jail. He tells Ibrahim that Mokhtar can solve his financial problems, and that Ibrahim's being born a premature is sign by the spirits that he is the natural assistant to guide Mokhtar in his search for hidden treasures in the desert. Ibrahim's cellmate tells his visiting girlfriend to follow Fatma wherever she goes.

Ibrahim is freed Ibrahim is freed and goes to see Fatma at Salah's. Fatma is happy to see him, and she jumps into his arms. They pack for the desert, but Ibrahim does not want Salah to come with them and suggests to his wife that they leave without telling him. The couple set off to the desert to start afresh.



Fatma feels out of place Life in the desert proves difficult for Fatma. It is hot and different from what she is used to; the resort is isolated and surrounded by sand dunes, and so far, she has not seen a single customer. However, Ibrahim's loving presence by her side makes the situation bearable. Mokhtar lives in a dark room surrounded by an assortment of charms and a pet chameleon. He notices the presence of the newcomers and comes by the restaurant to investigate.



Mokhtar inspires disgust Mokhtar's path crosses Fatma's. She does not sense anything positive coming from his presence. With his black umbrella over his head, she compares him to a crow. Alya, the girl who was tasked to spy on Ibrahim and Fatma, comes looking for a job. She presents herself to Fatma as an indigent orphan seeking to better her life.

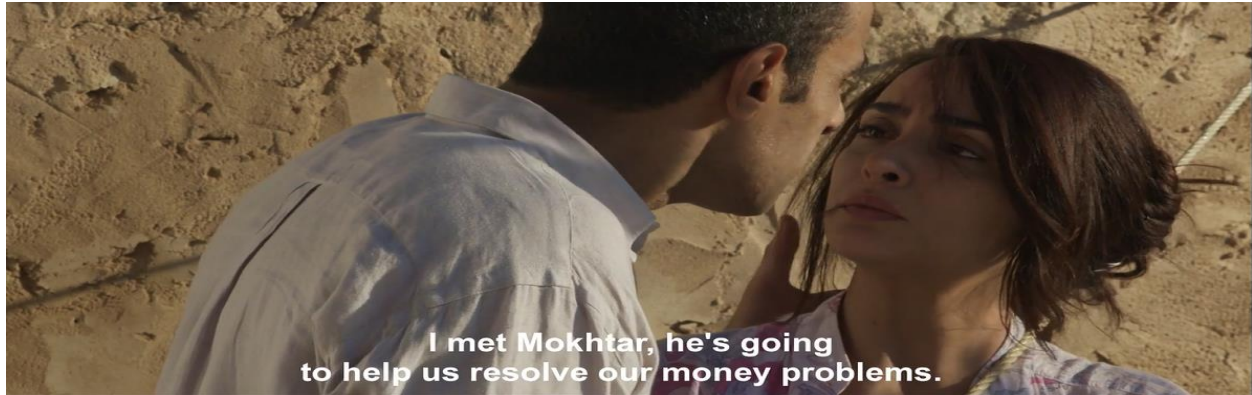




Ibrahim meets Mokhtar In his dark room, lit by the weak flames of six candles, Mokhtar admires his collection of women's undergarments, then he carefully puts them away in a wooden chest by his bed before lying down for the night. The next day, Ibrahim introduces himself to Mokhtar, who feigns not to know who sent him and plays hard to please.

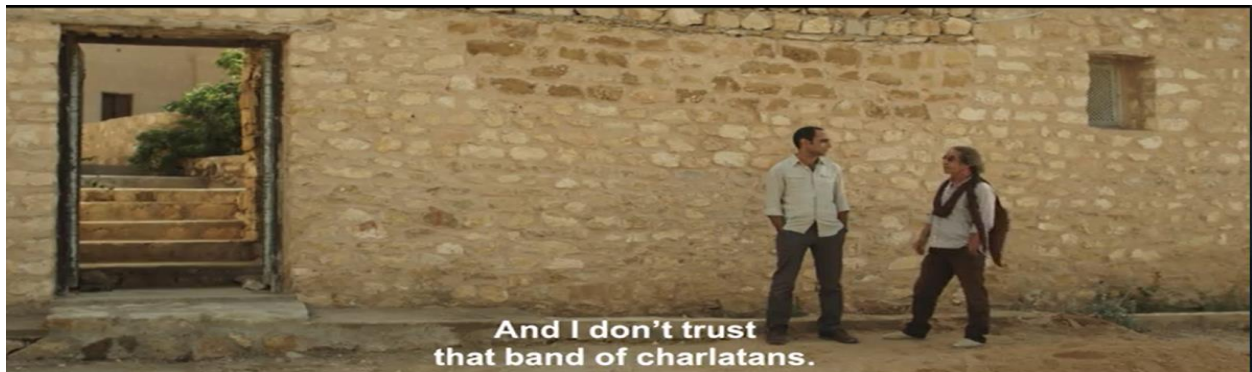
Salah is distrustful of Mokhtar The next day, Fatma sees Mokhtar at a local store selecting his new collection of women's underwear. Mokhtar has an assistant. They both are trying to convince Ibrahim and Salah, who has joined his friends in the desert, to work for them digging for ancient treasures in a cave. Salah tells Mokhtar that they will get back to him after discussing that idea, and Ibrahim insists that he must consult his wife first.

Fatma regrets coming to the desert Fatma is doing her laundry. Ibrahim sneaks behind her and startles her by playfully grabbing her around the waist. She tells him to stop frightening her. Ibrahim does not understand why his wife has become so jumpy. She tells him that she has second thoughts about coming to the desert. Ibrahim reassures her that Mokhtar will help them with their financial problems. He reminds her that they have never been able to have children, and that Mokhtar might even have the power to help them with that. Fatma tells him that it is not wise of him to talk about their intimate issues with Mokhtar. Ibrahim gets upset.



Salah advises Ibrahim to avoid Mokhtar

Salah informs Ibrahim that he is not participating in Mokhtar's venture because he doubts Mokhtar's honesty. Salah asks Ibrahim to avoid Mokhtar, but Salah has difficulty persuading Ibrahim, who is convinced that Mokhtar's is the man who will solve his problem.



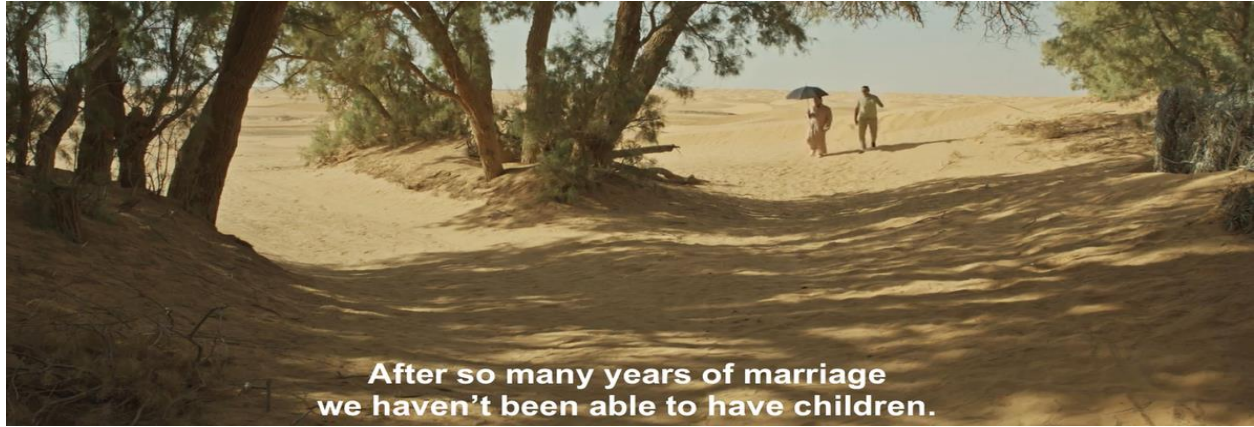
Fatma wants nothing to do with Mokhtar

While they are in bed, Ibrahim asks Fatma to lend him some money. She snaps at him and tells him that she has no money. She tells him that she wants nothing to do with his new friends, meaning Mokhtar and his assistant.

Ibrahim steals Fatma's money Ibrahim steals all his wife's savings. Mokhtar comes by to see him, and he hands Mokhtar the money. Against Fatma's advice, Ibrahim tells Mokhtar of their difficulty in having children. Mokhtar tells him that it is always the woman's fault when the couple does not have children. He assures Ibrahim that his expertise also extends to fertility issues and that he can help. However, he tells Ibrahim that Fatma must first learn to trust and obey him. Ibrahim promises to talk to his wife.



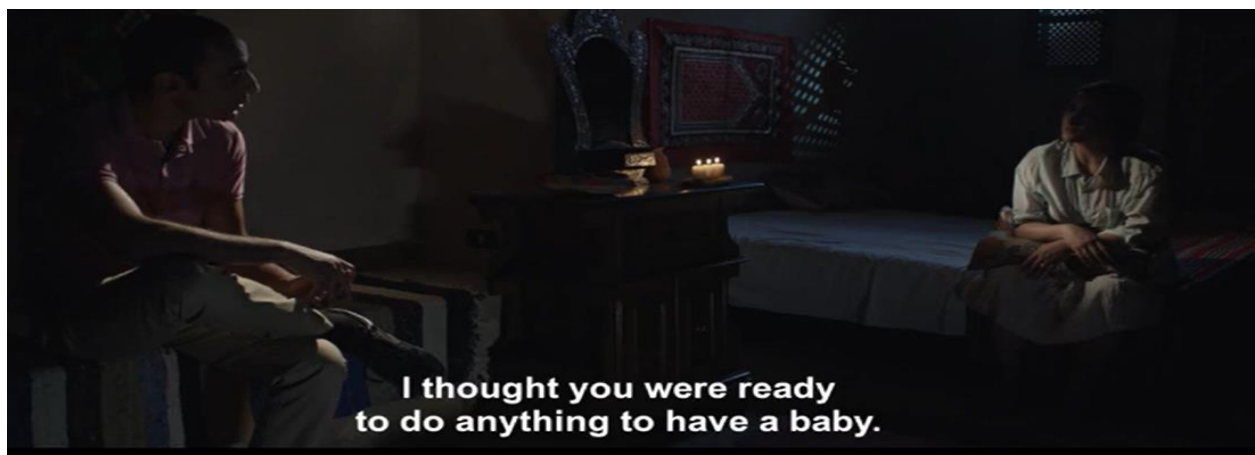
Mokhtar's manipulations Mokhtar takes Ibrahim to a remote cave and has him promise not to divulge its location to anyone. He threatens Ibrahim, saying that his grandfather, a holy man, will cast a spell on whoever betrays him. Ibrahim promises to keep the secret and not even to tell his wife about it. Mokhtar instructs Ibrahim to say God's name before entering the cave and to enter with his right foot first. Ibrahim faithfully follows the rituals.



Ibrahim is afraid Ibrahim is frightened by the dark interior of the cave. Mokhtar reassures him, but he also says that he is claustrophobic and cannot go any further into the cave. Mokhtar promises to help him with his financial and infertility problems if he carries on. Otherwise, they will have to part ways. Ibrahim does what he is told.



Ibrahim hurts Fatma Fatma realizes that her money is no longer where she kept it. She confronts Ibrahim and demands that he give back her money. Ibrahim reminds her that she said she was ready to do anything to have a child. She replies that that money was all they had left. Leaving the room, he asks what good is money anyway if there are no children to inherit it? Hurt, Fatma holds her face in her hands and sobs.



Mokhtar peeps on Fatma Salah goes to Mokhtar and asks him to leave Fatma and Ibrahim alone. Mokhtar asks Salah to mind his own business. While Fatma is napping, Mokhtar climbs on a barrel and peeps on her through her window. From her sleep, Fatma senses that someone is watching her. She wakes up suddenly but not in time to catch Mokhtar.



Ibrahim slaves for Mokhtar Mokhtar has Ibrahim toiling in the cave, digging for treasures that do not seem to exist. Ibrahim wants to give up, but Mokhtar keeps urging him to carry on. In the meantime, Fatma has sneaked into Mokhtar's room and is trying to locate her money. She opens his wooden chest and is repulsed by his collection of women's undergarments. She closes the chest and exits the room.

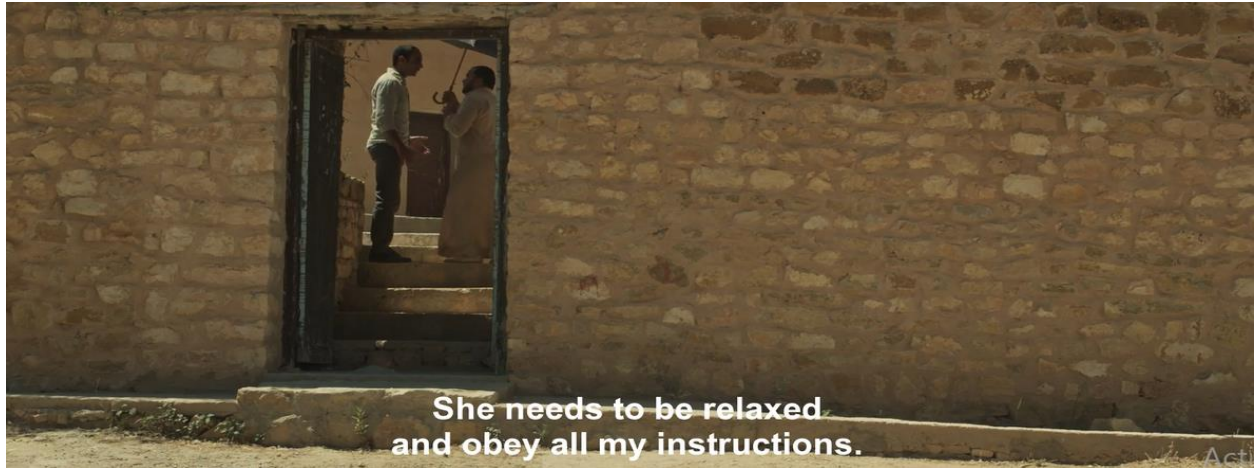
Ibrahim takes Mokhtar to meet Fatma The following day, Mokhtar tells Ibrahim that he had a vision regarding where to dig. He leads Ibrahim to a spot in the cave and asks him to dig. Ibrahim's pickaxe hits something. They dig it out. It is a metal box full of trinkets. They are excited but silent. Ibrahim is now absolutely convinced that Mokhtar has supernatural powers. He decides that his wife must meet Mokhtar.



Do anything he wants Ibrahim takes Mokhtar to his home and asks him to wait at the gate. He runs to Fatma with excitement, trying to convince her to cooperate with Mokhtar so that he can help them have a child. Fatma refuses to meet with Mokhtar. Ibrahim tells her that Mokhtar has real powers and just dug out a treasure from the cave. He convinces Fatma to give Mokhtar a chance to help them have a child. Fatma agrees to meet Mokhtar just once. She wants to know what she must do. Ibrahim tells her that she must do anything Mokhtar wants.



Mokhtar sends Ibrahim away Ibrahim goes to the gate to fetch Mokhtar, who insists once again that Fatma must relax and cooperate. Mokhtar asks Ibrahim to go fetch his herbs and charms, which he forgot to bring. Ibrahim leaves his wife, who is begging him to stay, and goes to fetch Mokhtar's herbs.



Mokhtar wants to undress Fatma Mokhtar orders Fatma to close her eyes. She complies. He starts undressing her. She screams, opens her eyes, and pushes him away. Ibrahim hears the commotion as he is returning with Mokhtar's herbs, and he sees Mokhtar run past him. Ibrahim runs to his frightened wife, who explains what had just happen.



Leaving the desert

Ibrahim chases after Mokhtar, who takes refuge in his cave. The cave collapses. Mokhtar is trapped. Ibrahim and Fatma leave the desert on a bus, once again destitute. Mokhtar finds a way out of the cave and wanders in the desert, wounded and dazed.



QUESTIONS

1. Why did Fatma never tell Ibrahim that the man to whom he lost their house and restaurant is her ex-husband?
2. The person who won Ibrahim's and Fatma's restaurant could have been anyone, and this would not have significantly affected the plot of the movie. Why did the filmmaker choose to make him Fatma's ex-husband?
3. Fatma gets a second chance in the desert. Of what is the desert emblematic?
4. How does the film mock men's chauvinistic pretentiousness?
5. Some characters in the film (the girl who spies on Fatma and Ibrahim; Mokhtar's assistant; Salah) have only fleeting appearances. Could the film have made sense without them? Explain your answer.