

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Martial Frindéthié, PhD

Nadia and Sarra (2004)

Moufida Tlatli

OVERVIEW

In her third and last film, Moufida Tlatli revisits some of the themes that are dear to her, such as memory, the victimization of women, and sacrifice. The setting, however, is different. It is modern Tunisia, where the woman is no longer necessarily confined and victimized by the man in the domestic space but by the misunderstanding of others, whether female or male. This film did not receive the popularity of Tlatli's two previous features and was criticized for stretching to perpetuate an old stereotype of the Arab man.

CHARACTERS

<i>Nadia</i>	Married to Hedi
<i>Sarra</i>	Daughter of Hedi and Nadia
<i>Hedi</i>	Married to Nadia
<i>Om El Khir</i>	Nadia's servant
<i>Leila</i>	Nadia's best friend

SYNOPSIS

Nadia, a forty-seven-year old, pre-menopausal high school teacher living in an upper-middle-class neighborhood of Tunis, has difficulty accepting aging and the changes her body is going through. Her trouble is heightened by the fact that her husband, Hedi, is taken by his work and his social life, and her beautiful eighteen-year-old daughter, Sarra, goes about her life sharing little about herself. Nadia develops symptoms of self-hatred, jealousy, irritability, bulimia, and bipolarity that threaten to destroy the already-precarious equilibrium of her family.

SCENES

Rememorying Seated in her bed, forty-seven-year-old teacher Nadia rummages through some pictures. She pulls out an old picture of her young self, looks at it, and smiles. Suddenly her smile morphs into a sad grin, and in place of her picture, it is the face of her eighteen-year-old daughter, Sarra, that appears.



Resentment Nadia, her husband and another couple, Leila and Tarak, are in a restaurant eating. A dancer is performing on a stage. All the customers' gazes are focused on the dancer, but Nadia is looking at her husband reproachfully. Leila notices her friend's displeasure and tries to distract her by asking how her daughter is doing. Nadia complains that Sarra is always on the phone or in the bathroom. On the way back home, Hedi remarks that Leila and Tarak are aging well. Nadia remains indifferent.'

Jealousy Sarra is on the phone, seated on her bed in her pajama shorts and top when her parents get home. They come in to say goodnight. Her mother gestures disapprovingly about the way the young girl is dressed. She kisses her on the forehead, and the daughter gets up to hug her father. Nadia looks at the father and daughter contemptuously.



Erratic behavior Nadia sits in bed sulking. Then she gets into her husband' arms and asks him to hold her tight. She gets away from him as he tries to kiss her and tells him that she is not the dancer of the restaurant. Hedi defends himself, saying that he just looked at the dancer, like everyone else at the restaurant.



Envy Nadia steps outside on her classroom balcony to watch the girls volleyball team practice. Sarra is part of the team. Nadia's gaze catches her daughter's youthful figure. The mother has a discomfort and leans against a pillar to recapture her strength.



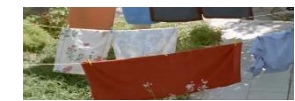
Intrusiveness Nadia sneaks into her daughter's room, smells her perfume, puts on her lotion, and tries her bra over her dress. As she opens Sarra's drawers, the teenager enters and asks her if she needs something. She pretends that she was putting some order in her messy room. Sarra does not believe her, but she does not let it show. She gets upset and kicks her dresser when she is alone.



Pessimism Nadia is visiting her friend Leila. Leila wants to know why she was so impatient with Hedi at the restaurant. She explains sardonically that it is the effect of aging. Age is only in the head, Leila replies. Nadia retorts that they are not alike. Leila does not understand Nadia's pessimism. Tarak gets home from work, says hello to Nadia and hugs and kisses his wife. Nadia is upset and bids Leila and Tarak goodbye. On another night, On the way home from the doctor, Nadia leads Leila in front of the poster of the erotic movie she has been watching lately. Leila tells her that this is not a movie for her. Nadia gets upset. Leila reveals that she, too, has started going through menopause. Nadia wants to know how she manages to look unchanged. Leila retorts that she watches her well-being, for it is important for her and her husband, Tarak. Leila's mention of Tarak upsets Nadia and makes her snap at her friend. The women bid each other goodbye.



Phobia Nadia eavesdrops on her daughter's telephone conversation with her friend. The girls are talking about their weekend plans. Nadia has a malaise and opens the window for some fresh air. Her discomfort gets worse when through the window she sees a red bedsheet drying on the clothesline in the garden.



Obsession Nadia sneaks into the kitchen in the middle of the night to binge on food. Then, she tiptoes into Sarra's bedroom, pulls the bedsheet off her sleeping daughter, and brushes her hands over the adolescent's body. Nadia goes to the gymnasium the next day and submit her body to such a rigorous exercise that the gym attendant has to intervene and warn her of the danger of a heart failure. In the gym shower, Nadia keeps gazing at the young women customers showering and walking about in their bath towels.



Envy Nadia goes to the movies and watches an erotic film. She comes home aroused and ready to rehearse the scenes she saw with her husband but does not wish Hedi to see her body. So, she turns off the bedroom light. Nadia buys herself a short, tight white dress with red flowers that catches her attention in a window display. Her daughter thinks that the dress is not appropriate for her age. Hedi comes in to let her know that he will be working over the weekend at the factory. She gets angry and leaves. Hedi wants to understand what the problem with Nadia is. Sarra tells her father that her mother has been bingeing on food and buying whores' dresses. He slaps her for speaking badly about her mother.



Amnesia Nadia is forgetful. Nadia returns to the same erotic movies and falls asleep in the theater. She is awakened by the usher and cannot remember in which street she parked. She hails a taxi to help her search for her car. Nadia decides to see a doctor. She tells her that she wants some medication to become a real woman. The doctor reassures her that she is already a woman and suggests that she talk to a therapist. While she is waiting for her mother, Sarra is courted by a young doctor. Nadia is not pleased to see him. Nadia buys her daughter a red dress and almost forgets her wallet in the store. Nadia questions Sarra about her male friends. She confuses time and people, for example, the young doctor with a high school friend Sarra was talking to moments ago. She wants to know what Sarra has been hiding from her. The school principal telephones to let Nadia know that she forgot to show up for her scheduled students-parents' meetings. Nadia's behavior in the classroom is also becoming more unpredictable and making her students uncomfortable.



Judgmental Hedi and Nadia have been invited to a reception. Nadia cannot decide which dress to wear. Hedi picks his favorite dress for her. She will not change in front of him. He understands and says that he is going to see what Sarra is up to. Nadia accuses Sarra of being secretive. Hedi asks her to stop being hypercritical of her daughter if she wants Sarra to confide in her.

Inappropriate behavior For the party, Nadia has put on a different dress from the one her husband picked. She gets drunk at the reception. As she sees her husband dancing with a younger woman, she decides to showcase her dancing talent for everyone to see. She dances sensually in a circle formed by the guests, who clap for her. Hedi feels humiliated.



Irrationality Nadia's increasingly irrational behavior worries her husband, her students, and the principal. Hedi talks to Sarra about his concerns. She advises him to speak frankly to her mother. Sarra's friends alert her about her mother's strange behavior in the classroom. The principal asks Nadia to take a long break.



Anger Nadia spots her daughter with the young doctor at a restaurant. It brings her memories of her youth and fills her with sadness. Sarra is wearing the red dress her mother bought her. Nadia asks her if she is wearing that vulgar dress and makeup because she is meeting her lover. Sarra reminds her that she bought her "that vulgar" dress. She angrily removes the dress and throws it on her mother's bed. Nadia insists that she put it back on.



Grief Sarra and her lover end up in the same restaurant where her mother and father were with Leila and Tarak. The same dancer is performing on stage and overtly flirting with one of the customers. Sarra turns around to see who it is and sees her father smiling at the dancer. She leaves the restaurant upsets and arrives home crying. Her mother wants to believe that she was mistreated by her lover and demands that she no longer see him.



Assault Nadia puts on the flowery white and red dress she bought and goes to a bar. She gets drunk. She goes to a restaurant to eat and drinks some more. A man follows her, leads her into a dark alley, and tries to rape her in her semi-unconsciousness. Some motorists scare the aggressor away by blowing their horns and turning their high beams on him.



Support Om El Khir, the servant, prepares tea for Nadia, which she brings to her room. She purifies the house with incense. Leila arrives to inquire about her friend's well-being and takes her back to see her doctor. Nadia has not been taking her medication. The doctor insists once more that she take her medication and see a therapist. Hedi comes and sits on the bed close to Nadia. He wants to have a talk with her, but she will not. He leaves the bedroom, powerless. Om El Khir massages Nadia, gives her a footbath, dresses her in a traditional *jellaba* and takes her to a prayer shrine to be purified. The red curtains of the shrine upset Nadia. She gets violent with Om El Khir and leaves the shrine.



Psychosis Nadia is painting the house in red. Sarra is curled up on the floor, crying. Hedi tries to take the paintbrush from Nadia. She refuses. He hits her. She throws the paint at him and Sarra. Hedi and Nadia struggle. They slip and fall on the floor in the red paint. The father, mother, and daughter, all covered in red paint, hold one another and cry. The next day, Hedi walks Nadia to her therapist. Sarra finally completes a sculpture she has started. It is a monument to her mother.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

NADIA If Moufida Tlatli's intention is to condense in Nadia the anxieties of women on the verge of menopause, one could say that she has done it with mastery. Nadia concentrates all the possible demons of this moment which is for many women a period of doubts and lack of confidence. However, if the goal of the filmmaker is to create empathy for the women who go through the difficult times of menopause, the character of Nadia, by her wickedness towards those who seek to understand her in order to come to her

rescue, is off putting. Nadia inspires very little empathy. Nadia rebels against her husband, her daughter, her maid, her friend Leila, her principal, and her doctor and seems to blame them all for her condition.

Fixated Nadia has an obsessive attachment to young girls' bodies and to the color red. She hides to watch her daughter play volleyball, she spies on young gym patrons in the locker room, she sneaks into her daughter's room at night to uncover her from her sheets and caress her body in her sleep, and she resents hearing that her friends have kept their youthful bodies. She goes to the movies several times to watch the same erotic film about two young actors making love. All that is red arouses her and makes her sad at the same time. She buys her daughter a red dress and accuses her, when she wears it, of dressing like a whore. She sees a red sheet drying on the clothesline in the garden and almost faints. At the end of the film, she starts to paint the house in red when her husband arrives and tries to snatch the brush from her. In the ensuing struggle, the whole family is left wading, crying, and hugging each other in the red paint.

Jealous Nadia is jealous of her daughter, of her body, her youthful energy, of the affection her husband has for her, and of the teenage hobbies she allows herself with her friends. Everything about Sarra reminds her of what she lost and will never recover—her youth. She is jealous not only of her daughter. Nadia is also jealous of her friend Leila, who, although in premenopausal state like her, seems to live her age well, has an attentive husband, and takes time to go out and do some relaxing activities with her sister. When during a visit to Leila, Nadia sees the affection that Tarak gives his wife, she gets angry and suddenly decides to go home. The very idea of a woman her age being happier and more fulfilled disturbs Nadia and fills her with bitterness.

Hypercritical Nadia's bitterness leads her to be overly critical and callous to her daughter. She accuses her of not tidying up her room when she is caught going through Sarra's things there. She accuses her of spending too much time with her friends rather than thinking about her baccalaureate while Sarra is a good and confident student. She falsely accuses her of not telling her about her plans. Nadia accuses Sarra of ingratitude, of being closer to her father than to her, reminding her that it was she who carried her in her womb and nurtured her with her breast. Nadia's tendency to make her daughter feel guilty and to criticize her for nothing stems from her excessive jealousy towards the youngster.

HEDI Hedi is a clueless, non-confrontational husband. He feels helpless in the face of the difficulties his wife is going through. He tries to understand her, but she refuses to talk to him, expecting him to guess everything. His jokes to lighten her mood are awkward and further hurt Nadia. He feels powerless and seeks his daughter and Leila's help.

Clueless The words Hedi uses to comfort Nadia or to joke with her hurt her more than they help. For instance, to his daughter who at the dinner table pecks like a bird, he asks that she take the example of her mother, who does not deprive herself of food. He doesn't understand that what he takes for his wife's good appetite is rather the result of an eating disorder associated with her felt inadequacy. When, after a party with friends, he points out to his wife the happiness and unaltered beauty of a couple of their friends, he doesn't realise that she feels his remarks are a way of judging her against them. And when, in order to reassure her about her insecurity regarding her figure, which for her is deteriorating, he explains to her that it is the normal effect of aging, he can't imagine how she feels hurt.

Non-confrontational Hedi is the kind of husband who prefers to avoid confrontation. Whenever Nadia starts to get upset about something he said or insinuated, he apologizes and steps back saying, "I understand," even when it's obvious that he often doesn't understand at all where Nadia's resentment comes from. He's also a liberal husband, who goes out with his wife to eat, meet friends at parties, and who does not object to her working outside the home and having her time and space. Hedi is at the opposite pole of the authoritarian and forceful Arab male that we encountered in Tlatli's two previous films, *The Silences of the Palace* and *The Season of Men*.

SARRA Sarra is a youthful, empathetic, respectful, intelligent, and loving teenager who tries the best she can to balance her social life with her family's imperatives. She is unfortunately too often the victim of her mother's words and actions, fueled by insecurity.

Youthful Much to her mother's chagrin, Sarra is the epitome of a mentally and physically healthy teenager. A good student, she is also an accomplished artist, a good sportswoman and an athlete who takes care of her body. She is extroverted, has friends with whom she goes out. All of this gives her very little time to devote to her parents, whom she nevertheless adores. If the father sees no inconvenience in the way Sarra lives her life, for the mother, to whom Sarra reminds all that she has lost forever, Sarra's youth and the casualness are taunting.

Empathetic Despite her teenage casualness, Sarra is deeply concerned and affected by her mother's condition. Her friends talk about it at school, and it makes her uncomfortable. During a conversation she has with her father about her mother, she asks him to speak frankly to Nadia to find a way to help her. She supports her mother as best she can, accompanies her to her doctor's appointments, goes shopping with her, and comes to her room when she sees her sad. However, she is ultimately only a teenager with limited intervention skills.

THEMES

RELATIONSHIP

Individualism In a Tunisian society running inexorably towards modernism, where most people are caught in the compression of a time and a space over which they have very little control, it is difficult to stop and take the time to understand the depth of others' anguish. Nadia's friends see her only sporadically, in the corridors of the high school where she works, at a bar for a drink swallowed quickly, or during a meal consumed hastily at a restaurant, before leaving to submit to new family or professional demands. Nadia's daughter Sarra has her life as a teenager to live, which she spends on the telephone, with her high school friends, or with her lover. She also has her final high school exam (the baccalaureate) to take. She hardly has the time and certainly not the experience to fully grasp the difficulties her mother is going through. Hedi's male perspective on what his wife is going through, compounded with his busy schedule at the factory, does not allow him to be fully supportive to his wife. And Nadia's doctor can only stick to her professional exercise of prescribing medication and recommending her patient to a psychiatrist, which Nadia herself will not accept. At some point, Nadia's psychological imbalance causes her to be nonsocial.

Sisterhood Nadia's symptoms demand that she be surrounded by a support group of women, a sisterhood that she cannot easily get in the urban center of Tunis with its hustle and bustle. However, there is, fortunately, a rural consciousness in the big urban Tunisian center in the form of Nadia's maid, Om El Khir, a rural consciousness who has been thus far discreet. Om El Khir's intervention is deep and thorough. She purifies Nadia's house with incense. She massages her and gives her a foot bath. She dresses her in the traditional *jellaba* and covers her hair with a veil before taking her to a traditional prayer shrine to get her purified. The shrine to which Om El Khir takes Nadia is a closed space of sisterhood, where in an atmosphere of burnt incense, chants, drumming, food offerings, prayers, and trances, devotees dance their anxieties out. Just as she refuses the help of her doctor and a psychiatrist, Nadia refuses the help of the sisters in the shrine. It is difficult to know whether Nadia would have gained peace from the sisters of the shrine. What is certain is that there, at least, she would have had a support group dedicated to helping her despite the imperatives of the fast-paced urban center.

Motherhood "I carried you in my belly for nine months, I gave birth to you, I breastfed you, and now you turn against me, take your father's side against me, and love him more than you do me." These are the words that Nadia hurls at her daughter as the latter comes to her bedroom to comfort her the day after her assault. There is no doubt that Tlatli is trying to draw attention to the huge sacrifices that mothers the world over make for humanity. It is true that women can never be properly rewarded for their sacrifice. Tlatli's choice of Nadia as a mouthpiece for this cause and Sarra as the target of Nadia's recrimination defeats her purpose. Sarra is not a choice example of ingratitude. As teenagers go, Sarra is a respectful, loving daughter, close to both her father and her mother. Nadia, on the other hand, is a jealous mother who cannot stand the affective bond between Sarra and her father. Nadia's feeling of ingratitude from her daughter is exaggerated and stems from her insecurity and psychological instability. Nadia is not representative of the millions of women in the world who suffer from lack of appreciation for the sacrifices they make to humanity.

Desire/lust Nadia, lightly dressed, finds herself on the streets of a precarious neighborhood after having had too much to drink at a bar. On her way home, she is accosted by a man who tries to rape her. Nadia escapes thanks to the intervention of motorists who, without getting out of their cars, point their headlights at her attacker and honk their horns, which makes the aggressor flee. Moufida raises the question of the presuppositions linked to women's choice of clothing. Nadia wants to feel young and sensual because she has trouble coping with aging and thinks that she is no longer attractive to her husband. Therefore, she buys herself a little flowery dress that sits above her knees and exposes her back. In the social imaginary, such a dress would be inappropriate for her forty-seven years. Worn by a woman of her age, a dress like that would invite not only derogatory comments, but also anti-social behaviors. The dress stigmatizes Nadia. It makes her the object of men's desire and lust.

SOCIETY

Language/dress More than what men wear, what women wear seems to speak for them. When Nadia first shows her daughter the little flowery dress that she bought herself, Sarra does not hide her opinion that such an outfit would be unsuitable for her mother's age, would invite unwanted gestures. Ignoring her daughter's view, Nadia wears her dress to a bar one evening. As Nadia comes out of the bar, drunk, in her backless dress, the looks that the customers on the terrace give her are expressions of disgust or predation. To the people on the terrace or in the street, Nadia's dress sends a message of her supposed intention. In this sense, the little flowery dress speaks for Nadia, acts as Nadia's mouthpiece and speaks in her place. The dress is Nadia's word (her locution). The intention that the dress conveys when it speaks, which is Nadia's intention spoken for her by her dress is Nadia's illocution. And the reaction that the dress triggers is the perlocution. Thus, to the maniacal man that follows Nadia and tries to rape her, there is a whole dynamic at play that can be summarized as such: "The dress spoke to me and told me Nadia's intention, which was that she wanted me, she desired me. Therefore, I reacted to her invitation. I acted upon her invitation. I touched her. She made me do it. The dress made me do it." Nadia, the wearer of the dress, does not need to express herself, it is the dress that expresses itself in her place and triggers a reaction. In women's victimization, especially in rape cases, conservative logic is molded. For example, before inquiring about Nadia's well-being, her husband questions her when she comes home after a night of hard trials: "Where are you coming from at this hour, dressed like that?" Meaning, "Where are you coming from, at this hour, dressed in an outfit that so invites people to assault you?"

Language/drunkenness Another question that Tlatli raises, and which is important in a Tunisian society that, rapidly liberalizing, grants women the right to sit down at a bar counter to have a social drink before returning home, is that the woman, just like the man, exposes herself to drunkenness. Unlike the man's, however, the woman's drunkenness is perceived in a perverse logic. Women's drunkenness is often taken as an invitation to sexual intercourse; hence the growing phenomenon of what is referred to as "date rape." It is as if the inebriated woman lets the alcohol speak for her, which will say to the pervert, "take me." It is on this logic that the maniac works, who follows Nadia down the back alley, and who, without her giving him her consent, allows himself liberties over the woman's body.

Masculinity Hedi is not the overbearing traditionalist masculine figure of Tlatli's previous films. He is a liberal husband, who goes out with his wife to eat and drink with friends. He affords Nadia her own time and space and puts no restrictions on her movements, though some might argue that his questions such as "You see what time it is? Where have you been dressed like this?" are attempts to control Nadia's movements. Since we believe that a man getting home drunk at a late hour, dressed in a way that is not representative of what he usually wears, might face the same question from his wife, any attempt to make Hedi pass for an overbearing husband on account of these questions will seem unnecessarily hypercritical, and will contribute to victimizing Hedi. Liberalism does imply total aloofness or disinterest or lack of concern in the wellbeing of the other. It does not imply total laissez-faire or total "I-don't-careism." It does not imply sainthood and lack of outburst. Hedi must not be held to an unrealistic standard in order for him to be perceived as a liberal husband. And sometimes, Hedi's wife, and perhaps through her the filmmaker, attempts to hold Hedi to idealistic standards, only to make him pass for another example of the archetypical abusive Arab man when he fails.

PSYCHOLOGY

Guilt Hedi feels guilty each time his wife snaps at him because he has not been able to guess what she feels. And each time she snaps, he backs off and say, "I'm sorry," without really knowing what he is sorry about. It is unfair that Nadia should expect her husband to read her thoughts and feelings when she refuses to confide in him, to tell him what bothers her. It is unfair that she expects him to be a psychiatrist, when she refuses the advice of her doctor to go to a psychiatrist. Here, the theme of the victimization of the woman by the man forces a bit too much, twists the logic, in order to make Hedi fit into the mold of an abusive husband. In doing so, it is rather Hedi who becomes the victim of an exalted activism that seeks to see in every action of the man an act of abuse against the woman.

Psychosis Nadia is psychologically unstable. Her infatuation with her daughter's youth has become pathological. She sneaks in Sarra's room, smells the teenager's perfume, tries on her bra, reads a personal diary, and eavesdrops on her telephone conversations to recapture some of her lost youth. Yet, each time she tries to borrow a piece of Sarra's life and travel back in time, it fills her with nostalgia, resentment, and deep gloom. It is not only through her daughter that Nadia tries to live youth vicariously. There is an erotic movie to which she keeps returning, and whose libidinous characters take her back to when her sexual desires were still intense and easily fulfilled. Each time she goes to see it, the usher has to wake her up from her seat in which she falls asleep of exhaustion.

Bipolarity A simple look, a misplaced word, a clumsy joke, a young girl's body, and a red color are enough to trigger a change of mood in Nadia. At the beginning of the film, while all the customers of the restaurant have their eyes riveted on the dancer's show, Nadia's reproachful gaze is directed at her husband. In the evening, in bed, she asks Hedi to hold her in his arms, only to withdraw the next second, accusing him of having a weakness for the dancer at the restaurant. When she spies on her daughter playing volleyball, Sarra's young and energetic body sends her into a state of melancholy. When at the dinner table Hedi jokes about her good appetite and speaks about the good appearance of one of their old high school friends who would like to invite them to her birthday celebration, Nadia takes offence and leaves the table. She listens to her daughter's phone conversation with a friend, and their good mood and the leisure program the girls are preparing for the coming weekend make her sad. She visits her friend Leila and gets upset and cuts her visit short when Tarak arrives from work and shows affection to his wife. She violently attacks, for no obvious reason, Om El Khir, whose only fault is to want to help her by taking her to a shrine of prayers and rituals.

PAST (Memory)

Memory One important theme in Moufida Tlatli's films is 'rememorying' as a way to confront one's past, set new perspectives, and rebuild oneself. Rememorying is, thus, positive, in the sense that it is cathartic and liberating. In *Nadia and Sarra*, however, rememorying is painful and destabilizing. It spoils the present without offering any viable prospect for the future. Since Nadia's problem has to do with the anguish of aging and of body transformation, a process that is natural and irreversible, each moment of remembrance can only generate sadness in her. What is worse is that her daughter is living with her. And each time she sees Sarra's youth and vitality, she feels inadequate. Remembrance does not open for Nadia the possibility of moving on. On the contrary, it fills her with melancholy.

QUESTIONS

1. What is the symbolism in Nadia's obsession with red?
2. Why was Sarra upset to see her father in the same restaurant she was eating with her boyfriend?
3. Sarra comes home upset because she has spotted her father in a restaurant where she was dining with her boyfriend, and her mother wants to believe that she was hurt by her boyfriend. Why is it important for Nadia that her daughter's sadness be caused by her boyfriend?
4. Hedi is a modern Tunisian man who still possesses some of the vestiges of conservatism. Discuss two to three instances where this contradiction is apparent in the film.
5. Can you think of instances where people's attributes or possessions become their word (locution), speak for them, by conveying their intention (illocution) and, thus, trigger specific reactions (perlocution) from people around them?