

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Martial Frindéthié, PhD

Professor / Le Professeur (2012)

Mahmoud Ben Mahmoud

OVERVIEW

Professor was shot in Tunisia, during the Arab Spring (2012). It deals with sensitive issues in the Arab world, including those relating to individual freedoms and multiparty politics. For unexplained reasons, the authorization to produce this movie was delayed for months by the Tunisian government. *Professor* won the Best Screenplay Award at the 2012 Carthage Film Festival, and its main actor, Ahmed Hafiène, won Best Performance at the Arab Film Competition at the 2012 Doha Tribeca Film Festival. The director, Mahmoud Ben Mahmoud, is a Tunisian-Belgian of Turkish descent born in Tunisia.

SYNOPSIS

In 1977, the Tunisian government of President Habib Bourguiba was battling with unions demanding better treatment and opposition parties demanding legitimacy. The newly created Human Rights League, established to give the West the illusion of democracy in Tunisia, could serve as a channel for protest for opponents if left unchecked. The government co-opts a prominent constitutional law scholar, Professor Kh'lil Khalsawi, to be its voice in the League to ensure that it is not used as the opposition's political tool.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Professor Kh'lil Khalsawi (Ahmed Hafiène): Professor of constitutional law

Neila (Sondos Belhassen): Professor Khalsawi's wife

Houda Askri (Lobna M'lika): Professor Khalsawi's student and girlfriend

Mr. Ben Mansur (Ramzi Hazaïez): A lawyer and member of the League of Human Rights

Mr. Nasser (Lofti Dziri): Leader of the presidential party

PLOT

SCHOOL

Pr. Khalsawi lectures Pacing up and down an amphitheater and speaking without notes, constitutional law professor Kh'lil Khalsawi is lecturing on the history of the Tunisian constitution. The first Tunisian constitution, he teaches his students, dates back twenty-five centuries, during the Carthage Period, as proven in Aristotle's "Politics," which considered The Carthaginian Constitution the best of its time. As for the current constitution, he adds, it is the greatest acquisition of Tunisian independence, as it is the symbol of the country's freedom, order and justice that protects individual liberties, such as, freedom of expression, of movement, and of political party affiliation. Professor Khalsawi's students listen attentively and take copious notes.



LOVERS

Miss Askri needs to talk At the end of the lecture, as the auditorium empties, a student, Miss Askri, approaches the professor. He tells her that he has not seen her for a long time. He asks her how her thesis on "the constitutional validity of laws" is progressing. She tells him that she had gone to see her sick mother, and that her thesis is progressing slowly. Miss Askri wants to discuss her work with the professor. He asks her to meet him in his office. Another female student seated in the front row, follows their conversation with interest and discreetly takes notes.

Love in the office Professor Khalsawi's and Miss Askri's bags and books are strewn about on the floor in the professor's office. Dissimulated between the bookshelves, the professor and the student kiss and caress each other. He tries to lift her skirt. She says to him that she is afraid that someone might enter to surprise them. He reassures her that nobody will come. She tells him that she has class in a few minutes. He says to her, panting, that she told him she was leaving only for one day. She replies that her mother was sick and needed her. He tells her that he needed her too, that he has missed her. She strokes his face and tells him that she has missed him too, but that she must leave for her next class.



Professor goes Jogging It is dusk. The imam's call for the dawn prayer can be heard in the distance. Professor Khalsawi, dressed in his jogging suit, walks hastily up the stairs to Miss Askri's apartment. He opens the door, takes off his clothes, and slips in her sheets. He kisses her neck. She opens her eyes and asks him what time it is. He answers that it is the prayer of dawn. She asks him what excuse he made up this time. He replies that he said he was going jogging. She asks if his wife believed him. He replies that he does not care.



ASKRI'S POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

Miss Askri has guests It is night. The professor discreetly parks his car in a dark alley in front of a building. He gets out, looks around, goes up the stairs, and opens a door and enters, a bottle of wine in his hand. Two men are sitting at the dinner table with Miss Askri. She gets up and comes towards him, smiling. He is surprised that she is not alone. She tells him that she has two guests, Italian journalists. He tells her that she had not informed him. She answers that it was not planned and asks him to come and meet them.

Miss Askri gets a job Professor Khalsawi greets Miss Askri's guests. He later joins her in the kitchen, while she is making tea, complaining that her guests don't seem to want to say goodbye. He wants to know how she met them. She explains that they responded to her job ad posted at the Dante Institute because they needed an interpreter for their reportage on the Berbers. He asks her if it is because she is short of money. She asks him to come and join the guests in the dining room.

Miss Askri goes interpreting Miss Askri is preparing to leave with the Italian journalists. The professor is not very happy that she leaves him again. She tells him that her mother is going to the hospital, and that she needs to work to pay for her expenses. She tells him that her leaving the university for a while will put them in less of a spotlight because the Communist student group, of which she was a part, would hang her if they knew she was having an affair with someone close to the regime. She bids him goodbye and leaves in a jeep with the two Italian journalists.

News of Miss Askri As Professor Khalsawi is lecturing, Sinda, his secretary, waves to him and he leaves. She tells him that after calling ten hotels, she was able to find out that an Italian journalist has made a reservation in a hotel in Nafta, and that they are arriving tonight. He is happy to hear the news and places a kiss on Sinda's cheek, who wants to know why he is so interested in these journalists. He tells her that he wants them to write about human rights in his country. She watches him walk away, disbelieving.

Going After Miss Askri The professor sneaks out of bed and tiptoes to his office to make a phone call to the hotel where Miss Askri was supposed to stay. The concierge tells him that she is not there. He gets dressed but, just as he is about to leave, is surprised by Neila. He tells her that he is going south to see some prisoners and that he didn't want to wake her up. She asks him why he didn't mention it the day before. She gets angry and tells him that she is not fooled, that she knows that he is going to see his slut. The children are awake and follow the whole scene. Professor Khalsawi tells his wife never again to humiliate him like that in front of the children.



No trace of Miss Askri The professor drives all night and arrives at the hotel the next day. The concierge tells him that the people he is looking for have never stayed there even though their reservation was not cancelled. He gets a room but cannot sleep. He goes downstairs to smoke a cigarette and hears two tourists speaking Italian. They did not meet any other Italians with a local girl, they say. The next day, the professor sets off again in the direction of Tamaghza, the intended destination of Miss Askri and the journalists. A restaurant owner remembers them and their jeep and tells him the direction they took, towards a phosphate mine.

Miss Askri is arrested Miss Askri's father is waiting for the professor at the university. He tells him that the police have informed him that his daughter has been arrested. They also searched his daughter's apartment and took everything they wanted to take. His daughter told him about the professor, and he hopes the professor can help him find answers. The professor rushes to Miss Askri's apartment and finds it upside down. As he comes out, he sees two policemen in a car who have come to guard the building. He almost gets spotted and goes out the back of the building. The professor goes home and waits, dozing in front of his phone. The phone rings and wakes him up. The person on the other end of the line tells him that Miss Askri's arrest is political and requires a high-level intervention.

Miss Askri's father is bullied Professor Khalsawi goes to see Miss Askri's father. The father tells him that he is worried, that the public prosecutor has threatened him, accusing him of being responsible for the misdeeds of his daughter, whom he has raised badly. The professor tells him that the prosecutor has no right to threaten him, and that he will take care of getting his daughter out of jail. He gives the father an envelope of money and asks him to bring his wife, Miss Askri's mother, to Tunis for treatment. Miss Askri's father gives the professor a bag of groceries that Miss Askri's mother would like to send to her daughter.



Miss Askri on trial It is the day of Miss Askri's trial, and Professor Khalsawi is in the courtroom with Miss Askri's father. The judge asks the young woman to explain her ties to the trade unionists and communists whose leaflets were found in her apartment. She says she has no connection with either the trade unionists or the communists. As for her links with the Italians, she was only their interpreter. The judge wants to know why she did not warn the authorities of the bad faith of the journalists when she found out that they were not there for a documentary on the Berbers. She tells him that it is not her role to denounce them. She tells the judge that the police extracted a confession from her through torture. The members of the League protest this violation of the accused's rights. The prosecutor accuses Miss Askri of smearing the police. She removes her veil and exposes her shoulder to show the marks. The judge takes offense at her lack of decency and adjourns the session. Miss Askri is returned to a holding cell.



The professor visits Miss Askri in jail The professor manages to bribe a guard to see Miss Askri. She tells him that she has been beaten, and that the guards refuse her any access to a doctor. The professor gives her news of her parents and hands over her mother's package of food. She informs him that she tried to reach him several times at his home during her arrest, but that the phone was hung up on her every time. She tells him that the Italians had kept the truth from her at first. He wants to know why she stayed with them when she knew what they were doing. She says that there is no Tunisian law that prevents anyone from doing a report on a strike or helping journalists. He gets angry and asks her if she doesn't know her country. She asks if he has forgotten that he taught her that Article 8 of the Constitution guaranteed freedom of expression. He invokes the primacy of the "raison d'Etat." She asks him what is happening to him. He apologizes and asks her to remain strong. The guard arrives and tells him to hurry to get out for the hearing will be resuming.



Four years for Miss Askri The hearing resumes. The judge reads the deliberations of the court, which condemn the defendants to four years in prison. The courtroom becomes chaotic. The members of the League of Human Rights call the verdict a scandal. The defendants, including Miss Askri, shout that it is just a travesty of justice. The professor protests the judge's ruling, telling him that Tunisia is not a 'banana republic' and promises to refer the case to the president. Miss Askri's father collapses in despair. The defendants are taken away by the guards. The professor yells at Miss Askri to stay strong, that he will get her out of jail.

COMMITTEE

Mr. Nasser has called The professor is sitting at his office desk. His secretary, Sinda, brings him tea and tells him that in his absence, the secretary of Mr. Nasser, the presidential party leader, has tried to reach him. He asks her why she did not inform him earlier. She answers that he was in class. He asks her to call the party leader's office back immediately.



Mr. Nasser's offer Professor Khalsawi is received by Mr. Nasser, the leader of the presidential party, who expresses to him all the gratitude of the government for the work he does in his conferences and his interviews to give a good image of the country. The professor is flattered and grateful. Mr. Nasser tells the professor that the government has a new mission for him. They want him, with six other men, to represent the party at the newly created Human Rights League. His role will be to represent the interests of the government and to make sure that the League does not become the instrument of left-wing nostalgic nationalists, hatred-filled communists, and French-educated bourgeois. He tells the professor that at a time of tense confrontation between the government and the workers' union, they do not need the League to add fuel to the fire.



A promotion Professor Khalsawi tells his wife, Neila, that he has accepted the mission as an honor and a promotion. Neila thinks that he is naïve and does not realize that the party will use him to crush civil liberties. He insists that he is doing this for them and for the children. He asks Neila if she is not dreaming of a beach house. She retorts that her dream was with him, and it has not changed. His face turns gloomy. The phone rings, and he rushes to get it in his office. It is Miss Askri calling. His children are fussing at the dinner table and making a lot of noise and Neila is trying to calm them down. He slams the door of his office close.

Quarrel at the LHR

The League of Human Rights has its first meeting. On the agenda is support for striking trade unionists fired for their activities and support for students tortured by the police. Professor Khalsawi defends the actions of the government and is reminded by a member of the League that their duty is to defend liberties and not the policies of the government in power. The professor insists that the students' publications tarnish the country's image, jeopardize the dignity of the president, encourage violence, and are not defensible under the guise of human rights. The meeting ends with shouting from both sides and accusations of treason and veiled threats by the professor to have some members arrested.



Mansur brings news of Miss Askri At the next League meeting, Ben Mansur, although convalescent, is present. The agenda concerns the two foreign journalists and Miss Askri. She is accused of having helped the foreign journalists to get in touch with nine striking miners. Professor Khalsawi immediately defends Miss Askri, explaining that she was only an interpreter for journalists doing a report on the Berbers. Ben Mansur replies that this is the argument they used to obtain the travel documents, and that the Italian consulate recognized the facts.

Ben Mansur is assaulted Mr. Ben Mansur, a human rights lawyer and a member of the League, who was opposed to the professor, is assaulted and is in the hospital. The professor goes to see him. His companions suspect that the professor has carried out the threats he made at the last meeting. The professor defends himself and the regime. At home, Neila asks him what happened. He tells her that Ben Mansur was attacked by thugs and wants to make a political issue out of it.

The professor plays nice with Ben Mansur After the meeting, the professor waits for Ben Mansur and offers to drive him home. Ben Mansur asks him what all this kindness is about and reminds him that only a few days ago he threatened to cut out his tongue. The professor apologizes and admits that everyone was on the edge that day. Ben Mansur tells him that by defending Miss Askri, he is only doing the work of the League of which he is a member. The professor wants to know in which prison Miss Askri is kept. Ben Mansur informs him that she is being held at the Manouba women's prison. He asks if he can see her because he is worried about her condition. Mr. Mansur asks him if he does not trust his country's prisons anymore.

Signing the communiqué The League of Human Rights draws up a press release asking for the release of Miss Askri, convicted on false grounds. Some members faithful to the government refuse to sign the press release on the pretext that it insults Tunisian justice. Professor Khalsawi paces the room. Mr. Ben Mansur begs him to sign the document. The professor apologizes to Ben Mansur for everything he did to him. Ben Mansur tells him that it's time for him to decide whether he will fight for his student and for his own dignity or continue to humiliate himself by blindly following the regime. Professor Khalsawi signs the press release, which is sent to foreign newspapers.

MINERS

The phosphate mine Professor Khalsawi comes across some miners who recall that two journalists came to interview their comrades in the mine. They offer to drive him there with their locomotive. At the entrance of the mine, the professor sees strikers. He enters the mine, out of breath, and finds striking workers, who tell him about their difficult working conditions and the diseases they have been contracting from the mine dust for a miserable salary and false promises of improvement for the past five years. He recognizes that they are brave. He learns that the journalists had come to meet a certain Tlili, the dismissed leader of the strike, of whom no one has had any news for a while.

Looking for Tlili. Professor Khalsawi drives to Tlili's place. In front of Tlili's house, he is stopped by two party men who ask to see his papers and ask him if he is looking for Tlili the trade unionist. He lies that he is looking for the train station. He realizes that Tlili is being held prisoner by his interrogators, who show him the way to the station. He drives for a few moments and then stops to think. He decides to turn around and return to Tunis. He finds a letter from Neila, who has gone to her parents' house with the children. He joins them there and tries to convince his wife to return home with the children.



JEALOUSY

She is not worth it Professor Khalsawi goes to see the leader of the party, Mr. Nasser, who is not very happy to receive him. He asks Mr. Nasser to help him get his student out of the situation she is in because of an incompetent judge who is likely to make the country a laughingstock. Mr. Nasser reminds him that justice is independent, unless he has given people the impression that it is not. Mr. Nasser tells him that he is blinded by his feelings, that the whole city knows about his relationship with Miss Askri, and that he can even provide him with the list of his personal belongings seized at her home. Mr. Nasser tells him that he also knows that he went after her in the mine. Very angry, Mr. Nasser insists that it is necessary to get rid of the communist disease that wants to make Tunisia a Moscow or a Beijing. Mr. Nasser tells the professor that he will send him the evidence that Miss Askri is not worthy of his good opinion. He asks him to forget her and to think about his future because the president wants to make him the first minister of human rights.



Disappointment Professor Khalsawi's secretary, who has not heard from him for three days, knocks on his door and finds him in a pitiful state. She starts to clean his apartment and to put it in order. Ben Mansur arrives to tell the professor that the two Italians have been pardoned by the president but nothing about Miss Askri. To Ben Mansur's surprise, the professor tells him that he doesn't care about Miss Askri's fate. He tells him that she is a bitch who betrayed them all, and he shows him photos sent by Mr. Nasser in which Miss Askri is kissing one of the Italians. Ben Mansur tells the professor that Miss Askri's private life is of no importance to him. The League has asked for the support of the Italian ambassador, who will give a conference this afternoon, and he hopes to see Professor Khalsawi there.

Scandal at the Italian Embassy Professor Khalsawi arrives at the Italian Embassy just as the ambassador is having a press conference. The professor listens to him until the diplomat gives the floor to one of the journalists. The professor then erupts and accuses one of the journalists of having seduced and made false promises of employment in Italy to Miss Askri in order to mislead her. The journalist gets angry and accuses the professor of attacking him out of jealousy. The professor accuses the Italian of being a miscreant who violated the societal rules of a Muslim country, which could cost him his life. The press conference ends in scandal.

EXILE

Going away A sad Sinda helps her boss pack his books. Sinda asks the professor if he knows where he is being moved. He replies that he is being taken away from Tunis so that he can no longer talk to the press. Three of his students come to see him and tell him that some students have written a report about him, accusing him of favoritism towards Miss Askri. Two men drive the professor to a small village in the mountains, which will be his new home.

House arrest The authorities confine Professor Khalsawi to a mud house, with no furniture, no running water, and no electricity. He relies on candlelight and queues like any other villager to fetch water, which is distributed daily from a cistern. He does his laundry by hand, seated in front of a basin of water, on the only stool in his house. In all his movements, the professor is flanked by a guard who follows him like his shadow. The professor spends his time playing checkers with the men of the village, reading, and listening to the radio. Under his house arrest, the professor learns from the newspapers and the radio that the hunt for the regime's opponents continues intensively with the approval of President Habib Bourguiba.



Neila's visit Neila and the children come to visit the professor. Their suitcases are meticulously searched at the entrance of the village. They are happy to be together again, and the professor covers his wife with kisses. She has hidden under her clothes newspaper clippings and letters supporting his struggle, which Ben Mansur has taken care to collect. He finds a letter from Miss Askri, which he retreats to read, watched from a distance by two guards. From her prison, Miss Askri expresses her admiration for Professor Khalsawi and thanks him for what he has given her in love and education.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Houda Askri (Open)

Miss Askri is adventurous, manipulative, and untrustworthy. She cheats on the professor with one of the Italian journalists and, thereby, loses one of her strongest supporters. The photos taken of her frolicking with the Italian not only convinced the regime that she was not just an interpreter; it also angered the professor, who sabotaged her chance to be released.

Adventurous Askri is a young woman ready for adventure. She throws herself into a love affair of uncertain outcome with a married man, who is her law professor. As soon as the opportunity is given to her to go on an adventure with two Italian journalists, she seizes it. And even when she discovers the danger of the expedition she has embarked on, she carries on without a second thought, until the authorities arrest her.

Untrustworthy Miss Askri is not a trustworthy person. She made the professor believe that she had just met the two Italian journalists for whom she worked, while she was already dating one of them. While she was calling him and making him believe that she missed him, the photos Mr. Nasser sent the professor showed her intimately involved with her Italian lover in the swimming pool of one of the hotels where they stayed. She would have continued this little game of deception if their excursion had not been interrupted by the police.

Manipulative Miss Askri appears to have the professor wrapped around her little finger, which she makes do whatever she wants. She makes him rent an apartment for her. She takes pleasure in knowing that he leaves his wife on tiptoe to come and see her. She disappears for days, and when she reappears, she finds an excuse to be alone with him in his office to arouse him and make herself more desired.

Ben Mansur (Conscientious)

Ben Mansur is a fair and altruistic lawyer for whom the defense of individual freedoms as enshrined in the constitution are inalienable. His honesty eventually earns him the respect of his fiercest opponent at the League of Human Rights, Professor Khalsawi.

Fair Ben Mansur is a fair lawyer, a man of mission, who does not allow himself to be distracted by his emotions. Although he knows about the relationship that binds his most ardent opponent, Professor Khalsawi, to his client, Miss Askri, he has decided to defend her with all his energy, without considering the professor's callousness towards him. It is ironic that it is still Ben Mansur who asks the professor to leave his emotions aside and help him defend Miss Askri.

Altruist Ben Mansur was violently attacked by the men of the presidential party, who reproached him for his stance in favor of individual freedom. The blows and injuries he received caused him to be hospitalized for a few days. However, hardly has he recovered than he returned to the League to work for the release of the Italian journalists and Miss Askri. Ben Mansur put the welfare of those he defends before his own.

Professor Khalsawi (Emotional)

Professor Khalsawi is the exact opposite of the image of the calm and rational teacher that he projects in the university lecture halls. In reality, he is an emotional, jealous, and unfair man, who is revealed to us in his everyday life as someone who practices the opposite of what he preaches.

Emotional One would expect the professor to be a reasoned man by virtue of his training and profession as a lawyer. However, the professor's actions are driven more by emotion than by reason. From his love affair with Miss Askri, which made him meet her in his office at the risk of being caught by his secretary or someone else, and made him get out of his marital bed at odd hours to meet her in her apartment, to his trip to the phosphate mine and his outburst at the Italian embassy, only emotion motivated him.

Jealous When the professor receives from Mr. Nasser the photos of Miss Askri and one of the Italian journalists kissing, he wished only that she would stay in prison. From that moment on, he made no effort to help Ben Mansur defend Miss Askri. He even told the lawyer that he didn't care if Miss Askri died. The professor gets carried away by his excessive jealousy at press conference held at the Italian Embassy. The scandal he creates certainly jeopardizes the release of Miss Askri for which the Italian consul's press conference was organized.

Unfair For a law professor, Mr. Khalsawi only wants to apply the law when it suits his interests. Thus, at the first meeting of the Human Rights League, he defends the government's policy, whose representative he is at the League, rather than the victims of police abuse. He even threatens his colleagues in the League who have a different view of the situation. It is only when his girlfriend becomes a victim of the system and is imprisoned that he talks about the importance of individual liberties in the hope of getting her released.

Remorseful Professor Khalsawi feels remorse for having written a report on Ben Mansur, who sent the regime's bloodhounds to him. He also regrets having participated in the consolidation of a political power that subjugates the people. He therefore agrees to suffer house arrest rather than withdraw his signature from the press release. The professor can be blamed for waking up only when his interests were at stake. In any case, it is always an event that provokes awareness, whether personal or otherwise.

Contradictory Professor Khalsawi visits Miss Askri in her cell and asks her why she carried on with the expedition after she discovered that the journalist were deceitful, and why she helped them instead of denouncing them. This goes against the very principles that he teaches in his constitutional law classes, which propound the strength of the law and the primacy of individual liberties. By reproaching Miss Askri for exercising her fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of expression and movement, the professor denies the very principles he teaches in his classes.

THEMES

SOCIETY (patriarchy, religion, class)

Patriarchy Miss Askri's father is intimidated by the prosecutor, who comes to his house and says that he is responsible for Miss Askri's actions because he has raised her badly. The prosecutor plays on the importance of the patriarch's honor, which depends on the daughter's good behavior, to intimidate him and obtain from him elements incriminating Miss Askri. The prosecutor knows that in order to save his honor, the father could disown the unworthy daughter and turn her over to the justice system with a confession. Miss Askri's father is influenced by this thinking when he swears to the professor that he has given his daughter a good education. The professor reassures him that the prosecutor has no right to come to his house and intimidate him. Furthermore, the insistence that the police have Miss Askri's and the Italian journalists' underwear seized from them at the moment of their arrest or the professor's clothing seized from Miss Askri's home implies that the authorities have evidence of Miss Askri's immorality, and, therefore, evidence of her de facto guilt. In other words, she would already be guilty of the facts of which she is accused by the mere fact of being guilty of moral impropriety in a society where her sexuality, unlike that of the man, is to remain subject to the law of closure of the hymen before marriage.

Religion The influence of the Muslim religion in Tunisian society appears only in filigree in the film. For example, the reference to time is made in relation to the Imam's call to prayer. When the professor discreetly gets out of bed to join Miss Askri, and she asks him what time it is, he tells her that it is time for the dawn prayer. In the courthouse, as well as in their cells, women prisoners are required to wear a veil. So when Miss Askri appears before the judges, she is veiled. And when she removes her veil and uncovers her shoulder to show the marks of police abuse, her gesture causes a clamor in the courtroom and the contempt of the judge, who immediately orders a recess. In his excessive jealousy of the Italians, the professor accuses them of having violated the rules of a Muslim country by seducing Miss Askri, which could lead to their death.

Class Tunisia is a class-ridden society, which the professor refuses to see, accusing his colleagues on the League of Human Rights of wanting to transform Tunisia into Moscow or Beijing. In his ivory tower, the professor cannot perceive the misery of the ordinary people until he goes deep into the country in search of Miss Askri. In the rural areas of Tunisia, the professor finds a world that looks more like a moonscape than the rich neighborhoods of Tunis he inhabits. 500 meters underground, he sees suffering phosphate miners, wracked by disease and toiling for a pittance. His journey in search of Miss Askri is a pilgrimage to the underprivileged social strata of his country. He returns with his eyes open, as he tells both Mr. Nasser and his wife Neila. And when he is put under house arrest in a remote village in the Tunisian mountains, which has no running water or electricity, where he has to live at the pace of the local population, the difference in social classes takes on a more personal dimension for him.

JUSTICE (injustice, guilt)

Injustice The Tunisian state is guilty of injustice against its people. In the lecture halls of the University of Tunis, Professor Khalsawi glorifies the new Tunisian constitution as the best achievement of independence. He praises the document for its commitment to justice, freedom of expression, freedom of movement, and multipartyism. However, a great injustice is done to those who want to avail themselves of these rights: They are treated as criminals. The professor, who works for the regime, considers communists like Ben Mansur as traitors to the nation and writes reports about them that make the men of the presidential party attack them. Miss Askri and her companions are arrested and imprisoned for exercising the basic rights enshrined in the constitution, those of freedom of speech and movement. The professor himself is later placed under house arrest for having signed a communiqué calling for the respect of fundamental freedoms guaranteed by the Tunisian constitution. And President Bourguiba personally calls for the tracking down of opposition party leaders.

Guilt Post-independence Tunisia is a society of guilt. The professor feels guilty for having written a report on Mr. Ben Mansur, which earns him an assault and injuries from the regime's thugs. He also feels a little guilty for having participated in the impoverishment of the working classes and rural areas by supporting the insensitive policies of the government through his interviews, lectures and writings. Neila regrets hanging up the phone on Miss Askri when, being in the hands of the police, she was trying to reach the professor. And in a letter she sends to the professor from prison, which he receives under house arrest, Miss Askri feels guilty for having disappointed him. But if individuals in Tunisian society feel guilty for their actions, the regime remains unyielding in its determination to suppress the people. President Habib Bourguiba continues to proclaim loudly that the opponents of the regime constitute a communist gangrene that the country must get rid of. The self-criticism that leads individuals to rethink their actions is lacking among the leaders of the regime, who are rushing headlong to the subjugate the people.

PSYCHOLOGY (Isolation, alienation/loss)

Isolation Isolation is the regime's method of persuasion. In his search for Miss Askri, which puts him on the trail of the trade unionist Tlili, the professor realizes that the trade unionist, of whom no one had any news, is in fact kept under house arrest by the government. The professor himself, who, until Miss Askri was detained, had been defending the regime's repression, is a victim of this repression. Having signed a statement exposing the government's violation of citizens' rights, he is removed from his prestigious position in urban environment and put under house arrest in a small mountain village lacking all the modern amenities he had in Tunis and flanked with two guards who never leave his side. Here, the goal is to break down any will to resist in the opponent and make him reconsider his position in favor of the regime.

Alienation/loss The isolation imposed by the regime aims to alienate the opponent from everything that constitutes his frame of reference so as to make him evaluate what he loses by resisting and what he would gain by falling in line. For Miss Askri, it is the incarceration for four long years, which takes her away from her family and friends, interrupts her studies, puts an end to her future projects, and makes her an example not to be followed by any student who would have the idea of opposing the regime's diktat. For the professor, his confinement under house arrest with a lack of

comfort completely alienates him from the bourgeois life he used to lead, from the esteem he had among his students and colleagues, and above all from his wife and children, to whom the regime allows a few days of visits to the professor, so that he measures what he is losing by his inflexibility.

FLAWS (ambition)

Ambition Professor Khalsawi puts his ambitions before his principles. He is a respected constitutional law professor who respects the fundamental freedoms theoretically guaranteed by the constitution. His lectures, writings, and classes are not necessarily to glorify the government's methods but rather to express the government's promise to respect these freedoms. But when Mr. Nasser invites him to represent the government at the League of Human Rights, his role is clearly defined: to crush any proposal from the opposition, that is, to deny his own democratic convictions. His wife, Neila, warns him that he would be perverted, but he sees it as a worthwhile promotion. The professor plays his role as a spoiler of democracy well until the anti-democratic methods he defends are used against him. At that point, as he tells Mr. Nasser, his eyes are opened to the reality of ordinary citizens, arbitrary arrests, summary judgments, extra-judicial detentions, and the programmed poverty of the rural areas.

APPEARANCE (dishonesty)

Dishonesty Dishonesty is a flaw shared by most of the main characters in the film, but which they rationalize. First, there is the dishonesty of the professor towards his wife, whom he cheats on with his student. He justifies this dishonesty to Mr. Nasser by the fact that he loves his student and has big plans with her. However, Mr. Nasser tells him that Miss Askri is dishonest, and he proves it to him with explicit pictures. Mr. Nasser asks the teacher to be dishonest against his own principles, but for the sake of higher ideals, those of the "reason of state". For Mr. Nasser, there are forms of dishonesty that are justified, such as the one he proposes to the professor, and others that are of the low scale, such as the one shown by Miss Askri. And then there is the dishonesty of Neila, who leaves the phone off the hook to prevent Miss Askri from reaching her husband, and who lies, saying that it was her daughter who forgot to hang up the phone. When Neila's lie is discovered, she rationalizes it by citing her desire to keep her family together by preventing an intruder from leading her husband astray. For the film's protagonists, dishonesty is permissible so long as it is for a good cause, which they alone define.

QUESTIONS

1. Professor Khalsawi tells Miss Askri that there is no law forbidding a professor to love his student. How are professor/student intimate relationships perceived in your country, state, or culture? Are they considered lawful or unlawful? What is your opinion of such relationships? Do you consider them ethical or unethical? Justify your answers.
2. What do you think of the role that Sinda, Professor Khalsawi's secretary, plays in this film? Is it a typical secretarial role? Do you have any explanation for that?
3. In a Muslim society that usually puts great value on male children, Professor Khalsawi seems to favor his daughter more than his son. What could be the reason for that?
4. Professor Khalsawi's actions do not always match with the theories he teaches. Can you point to two moments of discrepancy between his words and his actions, and explain the causes of these discrepancies?
5. Professor Khalsawi tells Mr. Nasser that his eyes have opened, and that he will not withdraw his signature. At what specific point in the film do you think his eyes were opened? What event triggered his awareness?