

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## CHILD OF THE TERRACES / Halsaouine (1990)

Férid Boughedir

### OVERVIEW

Shot in the Tunis suburb of Halsaouine, Férid Boughedir's *The Boy of the Terraces* renders the delights of a Tunisian childhood kingdom furnished with boundless familial love, fantastical stories, risky games, and a few tears. Most of all, the filmmaker captures the anxiety of being cast in the no-man's land between no-longer-a-child and not-yet-a-man that is the buffer zone keeping apart the world the women from that of the men. This directorial debut of film critic Boughedir won him the Best Feature Award, the Silver Hugo Award for Best First Feature Film, and the Siff Best Director Award at the 1991 African Film Festival.

### CHARACTERS

<i>Noura</i>	A twelve-year-old Tunisian boy
<i>Jamilla</i>	Noura's mother
<i>Salih</i>	The shoemaker
<i>Azzouz</i>	Noura's father
<i>Leila</i>	Jamila's maid

### SYNOPSIS

This is the tale of a twelve-year-old boy wanting to be a man, and what it costs him to gaze at the world with grownup's inquisitiveness. Noura is still considered a child by his mother and allowed to join her in the public women's bathhouse. Noura also wants to be accepted in his older friends' gang, and for that they ask him to use his access to the women's hammam to give them detailed reports of the anatomies of the neighborhood's girls. Noura's look changes from that of an innocent bather to the gaze of a voyeur, and the consequences for him become existential.

### SCENES

#### WOMEN'S WORLD

**Restrictions on women** The women of the household are subjected to Azzouz's censorious look. Latifa has left her husband and is living at her sister's house. She displays her trousseau for Jamilla and Salouah to see. Jamilla is caught by her husband putting on Latifa's makeup, and she tries to cover her face. Azzouz does not like Latifa's presence in his house because she is a divorcee. Noura's aunt Salouah wants to smoke a cigarette, but she cannot do it in her brother's presence. Jamilla and her friends are singing lewd songs, dancing, clapping, and ululating. The women hear Azzouz hail his wife from the street, and they all scurry to sit quietly.



**Jamila keeps Noura close to her** Jamilla comforts Noura after he has been punished by his father. She thinks that it too dangerous for him to continue working at the barbershop because of the political unrest. She wants him to help at home. Noura does not like going to the hammam. Nourra goes to the women's bathhouse (women's hammam) with his mother Jamilla, his aunt Salhoua, and his young brother. The women wash the children's hair with black soap and vigorously scrub their bodies.



This is an experience that Noura and his younger brother dread. Noura is like one of the women. Noura rummages through her things and watches her unpack her clothes in her bedroom, brings her bra in the bathroom, or helps her fasten her bra. Noura helps Leila, the young maid, serve tea to Jamilla's female guests in their dressing room. Noura sits with his mother and aunts with the women listening to their lewd jokes.

## ROLE MODELS

**Older Boys.** Noura wants to be fully accepted in the gang. He tells them that he is not a child anymore. Noura wants to fit in with his older friends, Moncef and Mounir. He sees them flirting with girls in the souk and decide to join in. They tell him that he is too young for that. The three boys collect empty bottles to sell to the wine shop owner, but Moncef and Mounir will not share their gains with Noura because they think that he is not old enough. Noura wants to impress his two older friends so that he can be fully accepted in the gang. He steals his father's pornographic magazines and shares it with them on the beach. Moncef and Mounir are thrilled, but they want more. Since Noura has access to the women's bathhouse, they want him to be attentive the next time he goes there and describe for them the anatomies of the neighborhood's girls. Noura reports his findings: He describes for them the girls' breasts. However, his friends are not satisfied. For him to be fully accepted, he must give them details of the girls' lower anatomies. He promises to do better next time. Noura presses his mother to take him to the hammam.



**Salih** Noura visits Salih, the shoemaker-poet and complains that his two older friends do not take him seriously and keep treating him as a child. He asks Salih at what moment a boy becomes a man. However, he advises Noura to be patient, for one does not decree being a grown-up. Only a woman will decide whether he is a man or not. She will show him when the time comes. Salih shares his passion for music and poetry with Noura. The Sheikh disapproves of Noura spending time with Salih, whom he thinks is a drunk and a sinner. **Salih's is romantic.** For the circumcision of Noura's little brother, Salih composes a special song about being kind, understanding, and compassionate to women. Salih's song, which displays his sensitivity and vulnerability as man, is a veiled declaration of love towards Latifa. The song touches Latifa, who, from the women's section of the courtyard, responds in kind with her own undisguised declaration of love, while Salouah is trying to stop her for being so direct. The women and men in the audience love Latifa's song. Azzouz does not like her open frankness. Salih also stands up for his beliefs. Salih is arrested, beaten, and imprisoned for remaining unapologetic for his political convictions. The night before, he had contested a political slogan on a wall that praised the president as the mind of the people. He had crossed that slogan and written that the people must have their own minds.



**Fathwe dirts** While bringing him his lunch in his shop, Noura catches his father flirting with one of his customers. Noura also spots some pornographic magazines on his father's backroom shelves with images of naked French women. He asks his father if his aunt Latifa is a virgin and gets slapped in the back of his head by Azzouz who scolds him that this is not a question for a child to ask. Azzouz teaches Noura the two cardinal precepts of manhood: Never cry and never hang around with women.



## NOURA BECOMES A MAN

**Leila** Banned from the women's world and not yet accepted in the men's world, Noura goes up the roof to think over his options. Leila has left him a message: her necklace under his pillow. He sneaks into her bedroom and tries to undress her, unsuccessfully. Noura convinces Leila to undress and play the scene at the women's hammam. Jamilla catches them and decides that Leila must leave the following day. That night,



Leila slips naked in Noura's bed and they make love. The next day, as Leila is about to leave, the Sheikh looks at Noura and notes that there is no doubt that Noura has grown into a man.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### **NOURA** (*Impressionable- Manipulative- Jealous-Lost- Determined*)

Noura is an impressionable, manipulative, and jealous boy, whose determination to become a man too quickly got him lost and wandering between the worlds of childhood and adulthood. Noura likes the club of his older friends. He wants to be like them. However, he is in no hurry to grow up, because he loves his mother's hugs and her boundless affection. When, in order to gain the esteem of his friends, they lead him to do things that get him banished from the kingdom of childhood and its delights, Noura has only one option: to become a man as soon as possible, or else remain in the no-man's land of no longer-a-child and not-yet-a-man.

*Impressionable* Noura aspires to be a part of his older friend's gang, but they keep telling him that he is not yet ready to fully join them. For that to happen, he must pass a series of tests, such as spying on the girls in the women's hammam (bathhouse) and reporting on their anatomies or bringing them pieces of Latifa's undergarments. To be accepted by his friends, Noura takes risks that cause him to be ejected from the women's hammam and to lose the unconditional affection that his mother and aunts give him. Now considered a big boy, he is no longer entitled to unconditional access to his mother's and aunts' domains.

*Manipulative* Noura was able to use his mother's deep affection for him to his advantage. Jamilla certainly knew that her son was no longer a child. She wanted to delay as long as possible his tipping into the clan of men, and more precisely into the sphere of influence of his severe, negligent father, her husband Azzouz. Noura knew it, and he played on this maternal weakness to have access to the women's hammam.

*Jealous* Noura is jealous of his father, whom he sometimes perceives as a rival in his quest for his mother's affection and in his pursuit of manhood. This can be seen when, on the day of his brother's circumcision, Noura asks his mother if his father will spend the night in her room. And at the end of the film, Noura's insolent smirk to his father from the rooftop is as if to signal to him that from now on, there is nothing he knows more than he does, and that he, too, has attained that status of man that made him think he was so superior to his son.

*Lost* A difficult and most vulnerable moment for Noura is the moment of transition. Ripped off the women's world and severed from his mother and aunts' love, he has not yet gained acceptance into the world of his father and is left to flutter like a bird chick fallen off the nest and not ready to fly.

*Determined* Azzouz has been an absent father and has not taught Noura much about the world of men, other than to smack him on the back of the head and tell him what questions NOT to ask and where NOT to be. Up to now, his mother and his aunts have been his comforts. Now that he has been expelled from their world and removed from their protection and affection, he is helpless; but above all, he understands that he must learn to fend for himself. Thus, when he sees his good-for-nothing friends, who have only caused him trouble and are the cause of his ejection from the women's hammam, he avoids them like the plague, determined to forge ahead, alone, in the construction of his manhood.

### **AZZOUZ** (*Negligent- Disciplinarian*)

Azzouz is a negligent and disciplinarian father. He lacks the tools to lead his son into manhood. When he does not throw his hands at Noura, he throws them in the air and gives up. His teaching method is to tell his son what not to do, but he is incapable of teaching him what to do.

*Negligent* Noura's father senses that his son has grown and does not belong with women any longer. It is his turn to take over Noura's education, take him to the men's hammam, spend more time with him, and talk to him about the birds and the bees. But Azzouz is too lazy and negligent to instruct his son further by taking him into the men's world. He hesitates and fails to establish a meaningful connection with his son. Noura learns to be a man by scavenging advises from Salih, bad experiences from his friends end even from his father, and love from Leila.

*Disciplinarian* Azzouz's pedagogical method is to monitor and punish: to monitor Noura to catch the deviations he commits and to punish him. His partner is the puritanical Sheikh, who reports Noura's bad behavior and the bad company he keeps in town and helps Azzouz punish him. At the end of the film, when the Sheikh suggests that Noura is now a man, it may be another way of telling the father that he has done something irreparable with Leila. This time, however, the Sheikh walks away with a smirk, and Noura does not intend to be punished

**JAMILLA** (Protective-affectionate- Persuasive)

Noura's mother is protective, affectionate, and persuasive. She is the kind of mother every child would dream of. Her affection is boundless, her protection reassuring, and her good mood infectious. Nonetheless, she also knows when to set boundaries for Noura.

*Protective-affectionate* Jamilla is the person Noura always runs to or who comes to his rescue when danger is looming. Noura is being punished by his father for pestering girls in the street. His mother watches from a corner of the room, cringing at each blow he receives from Azzouz. When she senses that her child has had enough, the mother rushes to wrestle him from his father. And when Noura reports that political protesters have passed by the barbershop where his father sent him to work as a punishment, she covers him with hugs and tells him that he will no longer return to the barbershop. He will stay home with her and help her with his young brother's circumcision preparation. The day Noura is dismissed from the women's hammam and is nowhere to be seen. Her worry is visible as she looks for him and asks Leila to help her find him.

*Persuasive* Jamilla is a cheerful woman who approaches difficult situations with good humor rather than confrontation. Her husband does not want her sister Latifa in his house, because she is divorced and penniless. She tells him to imagine what an advantage Latifa, a good embroiderer, could be for his fabric store. And when her husband discovers that Latifa knows nothing about embroidery, she points out with a smile that the meat he brought from the market is not of good quality either, as if to say that everyone can make mistakes. To the owner of the hammam who refuses to let her son in, Jamilla explains that this day is more special than her wedding day, and that Noura's father, so hopelessly careless, cannot scrub him as clean in the men's hammam as she would in the women's.

**Salih** (Eccentric- Mentor)

Salih is an eccentric mentor. He brings a refreshing antithesis to the representation of Tunisian masculinity. Sensitive, liberal, a heavy drinker of alcohol, a poet, and politically voluble, he is a cocktail of what it takes to get into trouble in this very conservative society.

*Eccentric* Salih is not the typical Tunisian man stuck in religious and social preconceptions. He is a non-conformist who is neither shy of showing his feelings nor afraid to offend the guardians of culture. When his heart beats for Latifa, who is coveted by many men in Halfaouine but unconquered, he expresses his love in poetic letters and lyrical songs to win her heart. And when the political slogans do not suit him, he rewrites them and assumes his actions. His house remains open to Noura and his friends, who find there a non-judgmental space where they can let their fantasies run free. His free thinking makes him the enemy of the religious and political conservatives, who end up getting the better of him.

xz Salih is a drunk who understands the damage that alcohol can cause. He openly tells the adolescents how drinking has made him lose his family. He cautions them against drinking and is quite violent with Moncef when he once catches him trying to take a sip of alcohol. He teaches the boys poetry, compassion, and respect for nature.

## THEMES

### **SOCIETY** (gender)

**Gender** (space, role) One of the most obvious observations about *Halfaouine* is the filmmaker's structuration of the movie in three spaces or moments, a women's space, a men's space, and a space in-between that we can call neutral. The partitioning of the spaces does not follow a temporal or linear reasoning. These spaces or moments are interwoven, leaving it up to the viewers to disentangle them.

**Women's Space** The space that is most attributed to women in the Tunisian society, due to the household activities that take place there, and which are generally activities that occupy women, is the inner courtyard. It is also a closed space, where women can go about their business without their veils, away from the prying eyes of men. In fact, a bird's eye view introduces us to Jamilla's courtyard, where a woman is busy drying clothes on a clothesline. This is also where the women prepare the meal for the circumcision feast of Noura's younger brother. This is the women's domain. When the women enter this area, it is full of singing, clapping, ululating, and obscene conversations. In this space, Azzouz is only seen when he is passing between two rooms of the house. And when he understands that the women have besieged the courtyard and may be engaged in lewd conversations he prefers not to hear, he announces himself from the street by hailing his wife before he reaches the courtyard threshold. At that moment, the conversations fall silent, the cigarettes are extinguished, the dancers' dresses are adjusted, and the courtyard becomes a tidy space of sober conversation, until the passage of Azzouz. At that moment, Azzouz becomes the master of the place, the master of the courtyard, for a lapse of time; unless the circumstances of his appearance are of a coincidence which cannot prevent the women from laughing at his expense; unless while the women, in a pictorial speech mocking the small carrots and small cucumbers of their men who can barely fill their baskets, see Azzouz arriving, a basket full of vegetables in his hand. In which case, the master of the courtyard becomes inevitably the target of the joke; and the decorum is broken; and the man is made fun of by the women. Insofar as the women spend more time than the men in the inner courtyard, insofar as the men are there only sporadically, passing through, or during ceremonies, such as the circumcision of Noura's young brother, it is fair to say that the inner courtyard is the women's space. Outside the domestic space, what *Halfaouine* gives us to see as the most feminine space in the public domain is the women's hammam. There, women gather in their greatest comfort to take hot baths, wash their hair with black soap, and rub each other's backs with flannel gloves.

**Men's Space** Men rule the streets, the political demonstrations, the souk, the barbershops, and the mosque. One cannot say that they occupy these spaces exclusively, but they dominate them. The mosque, for instance, of which we get a bird's eye view at the beginning of the movie, is a compartmentalized space. Although it is more frequented by men than by women, who usually pray at home, it is not always an exclusively male space in Tunisia. Beside the mosque, there are spaces like the souk or the marketplace whose main traders (the fishmonger, the butcher, the fabric salesman like Azzouz) are men. The barbershop is an exclusively male space, where political discussions are held, and lewd jokes are told. Another exclusively male space that is mentioned several times in the film but never seen is the men's hammam. We learn from its attendant that the hammam is closed for cleaning.

**Neutral Space** Just as there are no exclusive female and male spaces, except the women's and men's hammams, there is no such thing as a neutral space per se. The neutral space is the space occupied by those in the Tunisian society that do not fall in the socially defined categories of fully functioning men or women. Thus, when Noura and his two older friends occupy a space, that space becomes a neutral one. It is a temporary borrowed space from which they are usually dismissed by those who think they own it. Noura sits with the women listening to their obscenities but is soon heckled by Zakia, who threatens him with castration; and Noura immediately gets up and leaves when he hears his father coming, who reproaches him for sitting among the women. Noura frequents the women's hammam, but he is expelled as soon as his innocent look turns into the look of an interested voyeur. Moncef, Mounir, and Noura explore the streets of Halfaouine without being bothered, until they start hitting on the local girls. At that moment, the freedom of movement they have in the streets is threatened by the Sheikh, who hails them and pursues them, forcing them to seek refuge on the roofs. Similarly, they are allowed to be at the circumcision party of Noura's younger brother as long as they understand that their presence does not give them the right to behave like adults. And there, too, they are slapped and expelled by Azzouz when he catches them flirting with the

young waitresses. The most neutral space in Halfaouine is Salih's flea market. There, the young men find themselves in a laissez-faire environment, where all conversations are permitted as long as the teenagers do not touch alcohol, whose soothing effects Salih praises, but whose potentially destructive effects he warns them against. When he finds himself expelled from the domain of women but not yet admitted to that of men, it is on the beach and on the rooftops of the city that Noura will meditate on his next plans of action. It is from there that he decides to become a man in his own terms, a scavenger of experiences, of things learned from the unconventional Salih, but also from his strict and womanizing father, from the puritanical Sheikh, and from his loving mother and aunts.

**PSYCHOLOGY** (loss, regret, alienation, castration, fascination, isolation, sadness/melancholy)

**Loss** Expelled from the hammam, Noura goes home alone and disappears from everyone's site. His concerned mother asks for Leila to look for him. Leila finds Noura asleep in a bedroom, curled up in the position of the fetus. The scene of Noura's fetus position is significant: It connotes a desire for the return into a place of security he was expelled from, the mother's womb, to speak metaphorically, or in more realistic terms, the mother's protection, embrace, and love. There is a moment of total congruity between the world of the mother and that of the child, which is the moment before and just after birth, when the mother understands all the child's needs and attends to them. As the child grows up, the communication between mother and child becomes less perfect, but it is still maintained and nurtured thanks to the close relations that the child has with the mother. For Noura, it entails going to the hammam with his mother, receiving her constant hugs and kisses, being comforted by her when he is punished by his father, being allowed to sit with her in the women's gatherings and to listen to their conversations. The moment Noura is expelled from the Hammam, that strong, almost complicit, bond is irreversibly shattered. Though not yet an adult, Noura is expurgated as a grown male among the women, a voyeur, with a "glint in his eyes," as says the hammam owner, to Noura's mother. Noura's search for comfort starts right after he is banned from the Hammam. His two older friends hail him in the street, but he wants nothing to do with them anymore and avoids them. He sees them as dangerous to his wellbeing, for if they brutalize him, as they usually do, this time, he will have no motherly Jamilla, or Latifa, or Salouah to run to for comfort.

**Regret** It is not easy for parents to push their children into the uncertainties of adulthood. The process is even more difficult for mothers, who have a special bond with their children for having carried them in their wombs and nurtured them during their first years of vulnerability. We sense Jamilla's and also Latifa's pains as they see Noura being dragged out by the hammam attendant, who, incidentally, has been trying to convince them that Noura was no longer a child and did not belong in the women's hammam. We also see Jamilla's sadness when she returns from the hammam. The first thing she does as she crosses the threshold of the compound is to call for her son, but she hears no reply from him. She then looks for him in his familiar hideout and his room without success. She asks Leila to find him for her, for she is worried. Noura has not changed clothes for his brother's ceremony and is nowhere to be found. Jamilla misses her son; she misses his childhood; she misses his innocence.

**Alienation** Neither Jamilla nor her sister Latifa were fooled. They knew that Noura was growing up, that he was no longer a child, and that the world of women was attracting more and more curiosity in him. But where was the line between childhood and adulthood? Could Noura be an adult when he still knew nothing about women, their bodies, or their feelings? Must they not also, as his mothers, contribute to his education towards adulthood, give him a certain knowledge of the realm of women through the hammam and the women's discussion circles? So, Jamilla, her sister Latifa, and her sister-in-law Salouah deliberately delayed Noura's crossing into the realm of the men by holding onto him as a child, by allowing him unlimited access to the women's world despite clear indications that he was growing and developing a "glint in his eyes." Their effort to defer Noura's growth was defeated at the hammam. From that moment forward, Jamilla, Latifa, and Salouah lost Noura as a child, they alienated him from their world, and pushed him into the realm of Azzouz, his father, without properly preparing his weaning. Noura used to respond to Latifa's songs and come to her bedroom to rummage through her clothes and pictures. That night, when Latifa sang, she saw a silhouette tiptoed past her bedroom door and walk up the stairs to the room where Leila slept. She stepped outside and recognized Noura. He avoided her and was going to Leila. He was not coming for maternal love. He was seeking romantic love. Latifa returned to her bedroom with a sad smile on her face. She knew that she had lost Noura as a child.

**Fear (Castration)** Noura has been listening to the brouhaha in the courtyard. He can tell by the noises what is happening exactly. He could imagine his little brother immobilized on the operating table, crying. He could imagine the circumciser approach the child with his scissors, and when Noura heard his little brother scream his heart out, he understood that the child's prepuce had just been cut. Reliving his own circumcision, Noura grimaced, and covered his genitals, as if to protect himself against a second circumcision, or a castration as Zakia has threatened. Indeed, earlier in the day, Zakia, one of his mother's friends, friends, had given him an ominous warning. As Noura was sitting with his aunt Latifa in the women's group listening to their lewd conversations, Zakia grabbed him, forced him to sit in her lap, and joked that today was the day when he would be circumcised a second time, and this time, his whole penis would be removed, meaning, he will be castrated. Zakia's threat and Noura's fear of castration evokes the Freudian tale of the Oedipus complex, whereby the boy in competition with his father to gain his mother's affection is threatened of castration and must step back from his mother and patiently learn manhood from his father, and wait for his own day to come.

**Fascination** Noura's unconscious fascination with his mother and his instinctive perception of his father as a rival is most discernible in a scene where, in preparation for the circumcision feast, Noura is helping his mother grind some meat and make sausages. At one point he asks her out of the blue if his father is going to sleep with her tonight. Astounded by the question, Jamilla replies, "where else do you expect him to sleep?" And she casts him a long, reproachful look. Noura's fascination for his mother and his subliminal hatred for Azzouz, the strict father who beats him and slaps him on the head for the slightest misconduct almost cost him castration as Zakia has predicted earlier. Fortunately for Noura, he is only banished from Jamilla's overbearing affection to be pushed into his father's kingdom to learn from him how to become a man. And although Noura learned little from his inattentive father, of whom Jamilla says that he is hopeless, Azzouz's pornographic magazines that Noura slipped surreptitiously under his shirt, the passes he witness Azzouz make to his female customers and to his sister-in-law Latifa contributed to what incited his curiosity about the female body.

**Isolation** Noura's expulsion from the world of his mother is both traumatic and aspirational. In the sense that it comes with no warning, no preparation, it is traumatic. Usually, a child's weaning from his mother's breastmilk comes gradually. In contrast, Noura's weaning from his mother's world is sudden and disgraceful, as he is beaten by his mother and the hammam attendant, jeered by the women, and dragged to the changing room to get his clothes and leave unaccompanied. As painful as it is, Noura's exclusion from the women's hammam precipitates him into a promise, the promise of his father's world, of the men's world. He will no longer be attending the women's hammam, but he will be going to the men's bathhouse and learn to be a fully grown man. And so, in a failed attempt to take one last peek in the women's hammam, which is thwarted by the menacing face of the hammam attendant, Noura walks nonchalantly to the men's hammam, only to be told that it is closed for cleaning.

**Sadness/melancholy** This is the beginning of an unfulfilled promise that sends Noura into deep melancholy, as he relives scenes of happy moments with his mother in the women's bathhouse. The last time Noura's mother was trying to get him admitted to the women's bathhouse, she had explained to the attendant that Azzouz was hopeless, that Noura would come back from the men's hammam dirtier than he went in with his father. It did not matter at the time, because Noura was still considered a child and in the care of his mother, who washed him thoroughly. Now that Noura is excluded from his mother's world and is supposed to be taken care of by his father, the closing of the men's hammam and Azzouz's absence indicate that Noura will not be receiving his education about manhood from his father, that he might even remain dirty forever, that is, an incomplete man. This has a larger significance. It points to the false promise of wholeness, of completeness, as individuals are ejected from the comfort zone of motherly love into that of fatherly rigid, masculinist societies.

**QUEST** (wandering, exploring, knowing)

**Wandering** There is in Noura's relationships with his father, and to a certain extent with most of the men in Halfaouine who can pass for father figures, an emptiness that needs to be filled with information. Those relationships are structured around interdictions and strikes rather than instruction. When Noura asks his father whether his aunt Latifa, who is divorced, is a virgin, his father smacks him on his head and tells him to leave these kinds of questions to adults. Azzouz misses a good opportunity to teach his son



about the birds and the bees. When Azzouz returns from the market with a basketful of vegetables and finds his son listening to women's lewd conversations and laughter about the size of cucumbers, he calls Noura aside for a rehearsal of the precepts of manhood he has taught him. So, Azzouz asks Noura if he remembers his lessons. The child remembers the first one: A man never cries. He gets a smack on the head for forgetting the second one, before his father repeats it for him: A man does not hang around women. Thus, is summarized Azzouz's lesson on manhood, a lesson that is more a catalogue of prohibitions than a teaching. Likewise, when Noura approaches the butcher about to slaughter his sheep, he is told to go away, for this is an adult's business. Other than a number of dogmatic "no", Noura gets little teaching on what it takes to be a man from his conventional (biological and social) fathers. It is instead thanks to his non-conventional father, the drunk poet Salih, that Noura gets to explore the paths to manhood. The bazaar of the shoemaker is a treasure trove of bibelots collected from far-off places that titillate the boy's curiosity, and which he lets him investigate freely.

**Exploring Manhood** Abruptly removed from the women's hammam and from his mother's security and affection and prematurely thrown into the world of an elusive father, Noura is no longer a child and not yet a man. He will need to explore on his own and learn to build his adulthood. He gets closer to Salih the drunk poet and asks him what it takes to become a man. In a gesture that indicates that his lips are zipped, Salih hints that becoming a man does not have a predetermined recipe, thus, encouraging Noura to write his own manhood, which Noura does by observation. Noura invests the rooftops of Halfaouine and, flying from one level to another, he collects individual experiences. From Salih, he learns that a man can also be sensitive, contrary to what his father told him, that he can be vulnerable and humble. It is this vulnerability and sensitivity of Salih that makes him conquer the heart of Latifa, a woman who fled from a rich husband and who resisted the solicitations of the men of Halfaouine, including Azzouz. Noura also learns from Salih that a man must be ready to go to jail for his beliefs when Salih is arrested for writing his political opinion on a wall.

**Knowing** Outfitted with the lessons gathered from teachers, such as, Salih and his aunt Latifa, Noura heads to adulthood. He takes his apprenticeship to manhood as far as trying to undress Leila in her sleep. And when he fails, he proposes that they recreate the atmosphere of the women's hammam at home while his mother is absent. Jamilla surprises them and asks the Sheikh to come get Leila. The night before she leaves, Leila invites herself into Noura's bedroom while he is on the rooftop freeing Salih's caged bird, and she sneaks under his covers, naked. In the morning, an elated Noura dances and jumps on the rooftops. The next day, the perceptive Sheikh looks at Noura and exclaims to Azzouz "there is no doubt. That son of yours is grown now." Noura has found his way into manhood by himself, without the father's help. And when Azzouz tries to ascertain his authority on Noura, the son looks down at the father from the rooftop with a taunting smirk.

## QUESTIONS

1. One of Azzouz's cardinal precepts regarding manhood is that "a man must not hang around women." What is Azzouz afraid of? What would be for him the consequences of men hanging around women?
2. Do you know of spaces in your own cultures that are exclusively designated for specific genders? On what logic are these assignments based?
3. Noura gets slapped by his father for asking if his aunt Latifa, who is divorced, is a virgin. What do you think is Noura's understanding of virginity?
4. As we see in the film, Noura goes to the women's hammam until late in his pre-teen years. In your own families or cultures, when is it no longer acceptable for children to see their parents' nudity?
5. We see in Latifa's and Jamilla's expression that Noura's banishment was as painful for them as it was for him. What can explain Noura's mother and aunt's bereavement?
6. Why has "becoming a man" turned into an existential necessity for Noura after he was banned from the women's hammam?
7. When do you become an adult in your culture? Are there any responsibilities that come with that status?