



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
UN CERTAIN REGARD
SÉLECTION OFFICIELLE 2023



The
**MOTHER OF
ALL LIES**

A FILM BY **ASMAE EL MOUDIR**

2023 | Morocco, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt | 97'

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LOGLINE

On a handmade set recreating her Casablanca neighborhood, a young Moroccan filmmaker enlists family and friends to help solve the troubling mysteries of her childhood.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

Young Moroccan filmmaker Asmae el Moudir wants to know why she only has one photograph from her childhood, and why the girl in the picture isn't even her. She decides to explore the past and its mysteries by creating a handmade replica of the Casablanca neighborhood where she grew up. There, she begins to interrogate the tales her mother, father and grandmother tell about their home and their country. Slowly, she starts to unravel the layers of deception and intentional forgetting that have shaped her life. The truth is hard to face, but in this sometimes surreal nonfiction film, El Moudir begins to draw what is real to the surface.

LONG SYNOPSIS

Every family has secrets. But when young Moroccan filmmaker Asmae El Moudir agrees to help her parents move out of the Casablanca house they'd lived in throughout her life, she realizes that her family's mysteries are vast. Why do her parents have only one picture of Asmae during childhood? And why is she certain that the girl in the picture isn't her at all? What other stories her family has told are untrue?

To pry open the lies, El Moudir and her father build a handmade set that recreates their neighborhood. In an atmosphere that balances the surreal and the all-too-real, she brings the whole family to the soundstage where the miniature town is built and begins to ask questions, unraveling the story, letting her family members talk, asking probing questions. Slowly, she begins to interrogate the tales that her mother, father and grandmother have told all her life about their home and their country, starting to understand the layers of deception and intentional forgetting that have shaped her life. She captures their stories — and sometimes the pain and anger that comes with feeling them unearthed — in nonfiction that feels like a dreamscape, treading into a collective subconscious.

Ultimately, El Moudir confronts the fact that her grandmother, the family's matriarch, is the reason so many dark facts and painful memories have been buried in the past. She's the personification, in a sense, of her whole country. The reality of the past is buried beneath their feet, embedded in the walls, layered into the buildings and places. Truth is hard to face; only by dipping into the emotional texture of the lies can El Moudir start to draw what's real to the surface.

INTRODUCTION

Memories of my childhood home in Casablanca bring up strong feelings in me. I experience a mix of powerful sounds: my father's hammer breaking down walls in the neighborhood, the TV broadcasting speeches of King Hassan II, Nass El Ghiwane's music playing on the radio, the sound of pots and pans in the kitchen where the Friday couscous was being prepared. If I concentrate even more, these memories become visual and I can see my parents' faces, my grandmother, our blue door, the King's picture on the wall and more particularly, I can very clearly recall a photo of me as a child. The only one I had. A photo my mother gave to reassure me although it never did. I was convinced that it wasn't me in that picture and that my mother lied to me.

At the time of this event, I was twelve years old. My friend Raja was showing me her holiday photos from Tangiers when I realized that I had no pictures of myself as a child. But I was fascinated by the imagery that overflowed from my friend's photo album. I liked to get lost in these albums and tell myself all kinds of romanticized stories. But when I asked my mother for my own childhood pictures, the only one she finally gave me was the photo of another little girl.

This lie, a sensitive memory from my teenage years, was my first big conflict with my mother. After numerous fights, she finally revealed her secret to me. My grandmother—the figure of authority and head of the family, always refused any human representation inside the house, pretexting that it was forbidden by our religion. In truth, the reason for her rejection of photos ran deeper and was much more personal and painful as I discovered through the filming.

Forbidden images

At the beginning of my project, my grandmother refused to be filmed. Once again the question of human representation was an issue. This made me question the relationship of each member of my family with images. Mine, my mother's, my grandmother's, but mostly my country's, who it seems, prefers to erase images of its own past, like those of the Bread Riots.

Lies are revealed

After some years abroad, I returned to the family home and neighborhood of Casablanca where I grew up, to help my parents move out. Leaving this neighborhood, filled with historical events, in order to live far from the city center was a new start for my parents. And it was a good way for me to introduce my camera into the house and question them about the mysterious photo from my childhood in order to find the truth behind it.

During one of my visits, I saw on TV, news of the inauguration of a cemetery not far from our place, dedicated to the 1981 Bread Riots victims. I was already twenty-five years old when I discovered this completely forgotten event of my country's history. The violent Bread Riots had taken place thirty-eight years before, not only in my city, but in the middle of my neighborhood and of my family.

The importance of memories

This discovery brought back another memory: my mother telling me about the most traumatizing day of her life. One Saturday morning, army bullets started whizzing throughout the neighborhood and almost took her life and that of my elder brother, Ahmed. It was the day of the Bread Riots. Why did she never tell me more about that day? Why did my parents keep me in the dark about this terrible event? It made me determined to continue uncovering the lies and omissions, the loss of memory.

While I was watching the same news, I was particularly moved by the portraits of the victims brandished by their relatives. One of them caught my attention: the black and white portrait of a young girl held up with both hands by a woman with a sad face. The girl in the picture had long black hair, a thin face, black eyes and a serious expression. Her name was Fatima. She was twelve and she died on June 20th, 1981, on the very same streets where I played carelessly during my childhood.

When I learned that Fatima's body was never found, I immediately thought about that precious photo of her, so important to her family. It was like seeing oneself in a reverse mirror: I have a living body but no photo to document my childhood, and her family have no body but they do have a precious photo to hold on to.

The Issue with images

The issue with images seemed to me to be a relevant way to talk about my country. There is only one photo of the day of the Bread Riots that survived through all these years: a black and white picture of dead people on a street. All the others were destroyed. There are no national archives in Morocco.

To remedy the lack of images, I decided to make a movie about the memory of a neighborhood through personal events: my neighbors' memories, and historical events; my country's memories. My childhood picture was the perfect starting point to begin exploring family secrets and lies in order to move on to the buried memories of my country.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE BREAD RIOTS

On June 20th, 1981 in Casablanca, during the "Years of Lead," a popular uprising known as the Bread Riots shook the city walls. Men and women from the most disadvantaged neighborhoods demonstrated against the unjust increase of the price of flour. Those increases, mandated by the government, pushed the main unions to call for a national strike. Thousands of people reacted to this call and went out into the streets, mostly in deprived neighborhoods. Demonstrations quickly turned into riots and were violently repressed by police forces, who fired on the demonstrators. At the time, officials stated that 66 people died, but according to the unions there were more than 600 casualties, or more than a thousand according to the CDT and USFP leftist parties.

At the end of these unequal fights, bodies were carried away by military forces in order to avoid

public burials and more potential demonstrations. The military even entered people's homes to look for the bodies that had been hidden by their families. These precautions were part of a general action to block all information. The idea was to erase as quickly as possible all traces of the riots and to stop the broadcast of any information that would contradict the official line.

CREATIVE APPROACH

Reconstituting History

I had to constantly compensate for the lack of a visual archive. To partly rebuild these memories, I decided to create a miniature replica of the Sebata district and of our house. It was a way to freely reenact facts through the memories of each one of us. My story is made of memories of the little girl I was and of memories told by my parents and grandmother.

My father, a mason, built many houses in Casablanca and other cities. I wanted him to build the miniatures of our house and our district, where he had always lived. He designed the structure of these tiny settings with the same material he used to build our houses (cement and bricks). Then I worked with a decorator to make these miniatures as realistic as possible, to be able to recognize the house in which we all lived.

With the miniatures I showed everyday life in our house, life in the district when I was a child, and the power structure inside our home. They allowed us to understand the family's mechanism, the way we interact with each other, the problems we face every day. On the other hand, present time is represented by "real" images and focuses on the investigation in the cemetery and testimonies from my neighbors.

The miniatures connect all the threads of the story. They enabled me to tell childhood memories but also to reenact the day of the Bread Riots. These are key moments that connect our personal lives with the country's history.

My father often tells me that in 1981 he was building walls in army officers' houses and that in those days he had no political conscience. Today, with some distance, he better understands the events he experienced at the time. It is with this new conscience that he built the miniature district.

Using my voice to lead the story

By giving voices to myself as a child and as an adult, even though they might contradict each other, I allowed myself to examine the stories that made me who I am today. My voice became a key element leading the film and the spectator's viewing. My questions and my fantasized memories — between fiction and reality, between truth and lies — show how difficult it is to build one's identity when all your memories are unreliable. I move from one room to another, from one story to another, through the association of ideas and objects. Depending on the characters, I point out different stories and observe the reactions. Crises appear in an unexpected way, thanks to everyday life situations more than to a precise chronological thread.

The goal was to create a dramatic progression with emotional peaks on the cemetery and the Bread Riots. I balanced these peaks with lighter stories, family stories filled with humor, mixing the innocent gaze of the child and the rational analysis of the adult. I am not trying to document the true story of my family but to make a film about the multiplicity of points of view and the plurality of interpretations that exist within one household, not only for the sake of family history but for that of national history as well.

I am mostly filmed in fragments; in mirrors, for example, but mostly in the memories of the past where I am a miniature character. While the little girl tells her childhood memories, the director pushes the images to tell something else.

Layers...

I tried to give each scene several layers of reading and understanding. Objects in the film are not randomly placed here and there. We gradually discover their meaning as they return discreetly like leitmotifs. These objects provided rhythm and enabled me to rebuild both the family and national puzzles.

The first objects that allowed me to play with the threads of history are photographs. There was my photo of course, but also the photo of Fatima, of the Bread Riots, etc. Images are like relics of the past resting in a well-kept album like mine, or in a newspaper or on the wall like the king in my family's living room.

I also wanted to use, as a recurring element in the film, the typical setting of Moroccan photo studios: a gigantic image of Hawaii. Moroccan people associate Hawaii with bliss. I wanted to show the irony of this unrealistic quest for bliss in our society. This Hawaiian background is used several times with my characters, embodying the moments where I'm looking for truth. We discover that this image echoes the story of my childhood picture. Since I didn't believe I was the child in the picture my mother gave me, I wanted to erase her lie and take my first picture during Laylat-Al-Kdr night, a celebration where all the children are photographed in traditional costumes. In the photo studio, I obviously chose the Hawaiian background for my photo.

Miniatures, mirrors of my childhood memories and of the Bread Riots

How can we try to reconstruct the past if we have no archives to document it?

The staging, animation and personification of miniatures in place of characters is a radical aesthetic choice that acted as the bridge between two fundamental elements of this work: the personal and the political.

The choice of figurines to document what is missing had serious implications on the cinematographic questions of distancing and expressiveness. This method involves camera movements on artificial installations that are similar to real decors (particularly tracking shots, close-ups, etc.).

The scenes shot with figurines were joined together with real sequences using smooth transitions in terms of light and space, thus building a kind of ultra-personal narrative that always brings politics back to a personal level.

Faced with the reality of the situation and the lack of evidence of what really happened, the truth was reconstructed using clay, fabrics, wood, and paint. The creation of these miniatures was done by one of the main characters of the film: my father, Mohammed El Moudir, the most popular tiler/mason in the Medina of Casablanca in the '60s. Having built most of the walls and houses in the area, today he set out to reproduce the district and the El Moudir house, this time with more conscience. Furthermore, the miniature decors reproduce exactly what we see in reality, with the smallest details, including the tiling, the furniture, the colors of the objects, and the objects themselves. And the costumes for the figurines were made by another main character, my mother Ouarda.

The choice of working with figurines offered me the latitude in creation that a shoot with live characters would certainly have limited. Using miniatures is the solution I devised to share a past that I did not witness but to which I am capable of giving form.

ASMAE EL MOUDIR - Director / Writer / Producer

Asmae El Moudir (born in 1990 in Salé) is a Moroccan film director, screenwriter and producer. She studied at La Fémis in Paris and holds a master's degree in production from the Superior Institute of Information and Communication in Rabat and a bachelor's degree in documentary cinema from the Abdelmalek Essaâdi University in Tetouan. She also graduated in 2010 from the Moroccan Film Academy in Film studies (ISCA). Asmae has directed documentaries for SNRT, Al Jazeera Documentary, BBC and Al Araby TV. She has won important national and international awards and her films have been screened in festivals worldwide and presented in co-production markets. After making a number of short films, Asmae completed the mid-length documentary THE POSTCARD in 2020. THE MOTHER OF ALL LIES is her first feature film.

Select Filmography:

THE COLORS OF SILENCE (2012, Nadacom Production, 25')

THANK GOD IT'S FRIDAY (La Fémis 2013, 13') (the most awarded short film by the director)

ROUGH CUT (2015, Insightfilms, 25')

THE POSTCARD (2020, Aljazeera Production, 54')

THE MOTHER OF ALL LIES (2023, Insightfilms, 97')

Insightfilms

Insightfilms is a production company created in 2015 by the Moroccan filmmaker Asmae El Moudir. The company has produced Moroccan and international feature films for cinema and TV, series, single dramas, web-docs, live performance recordings, magazines, and numerous documentaries for TV channels of the Middle East and Maghreb such as SNRT, Al Jazeera Documentary, BBC, and Al Araby TV.

With their projects, they have been fellows at EURODOC, Doha Film Institute Producers Lab, Sud Ecriture, Final Cut in Venice, Pitching du Réel, Atlas Workshops, Marrakech International Film Festival, and CineGouna Platform. Their films have been screened at IDFA, Visions du Réel, Hot Docs, Durban International Film Festival, Malmö Arab Film Festival, Marrakech International Film Festival, and Tangier Film Festival.

MARC LOTFY - Co-Producer

Mark Lotfy is an Egyptian producer and director. In 2005, he established Fig Leaf Studios, focusing on the work of emerging filmmakers, which quickly became one of the most prominent independent production companies in the region. He recently produced I AM AFRAID TO FORGET YOUR FACE directed by Sameh Alaa, which won the Short Film Palme d'Or at the 2020 Cannes Film Festival, and also produced films that were selected for film festivals such as the Berlinale, Sundance, Karlovy Vary, San Sebastian, and BFI. They include SOUAD, directed by Ayten Amin (Cannes 2020, Berlinale and Tribeca 2021) and CAPTAINS OF ZAATARI directed by Ali Elaraby (Sundance 2021).

HATEM NECHI - Director of Photography

Hatem Nechi (TSC) is a Tunisian cinematographer. Drawn to cinematography from an early age, he moved from northern Tunisia to Tunis to study film at EDAC School of Arts and Cinema. He went on to receive additional training at the NY-Paris-Rome Photographic Workshops. He is best known for his collaborations with directors Nouri Bouzid, Jilani Saadi, Kawther Ben Hnia, Abdelhamid Bouchnak, Hind Boujema, Sami Tlili, Hamza Oun, Saer Moussa, Mourad Ben Cheikh, Hichem Ben Amma, Wided Zoghalmi, Fatma Riahi, Jessie Detter, and Anis Lassouad.

NASS EL GHIWANE - Music

Nass El Ghiwane is a Moroccan musical group founded in the 1970s in Casablanca in the Hay Mohammadi neighborhood, one of the most intellectual and culturally rich areas of the city. Their repertoire is drawn from the melting pot of Moroccan culture and poetry, but also from Sufi texts from great religious figures of Islam. With their engaging and poetic lyrics reflecting the discomfort of Moroccan youth at the time and their powerful rhythms, played with traditional instruments, they have revolutionized Moroccan and North African music and left an indelible mark on the country's cultural landscape. American film director Martin Scorsese called the group the "Rolling Stones of Africa" and also bought the copyright of the song "Ya Sah" to include in the soundtrack of his film THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST.

MICHAEL FAWZY - Sound Design

Michael Fawzy is an Egyptian sound designer who has been working in the field of audio engineering for more than twelve years. He studied audio post-production for film and TV at the Berklee College of Music in the US. He started working in the field of sound engineering and music industry in 2007 and has taken part in the sound design of many independent fiction and documentary films featured at prominent international festivals. He has also led a variety of local and international workshops in sound design.

Insightfilms

In co-production with
Fig Leaf Studio
Al Jazeera Documentary,
Red Sea Fund, an Initiative of the Red Sea International Film Festival

presents

THE MOTHER OF ALL LIES

KADIB ABYAD

LA MERE DE TOUS LES MENSONGES

A film by Asmae El Moudir

Featuring

Zahra (Grandmother)
Mohamed El Moudir (Father)
Ouarda Zorkani (Mother)
Abdallah EZ Zouid (Neighbor)
Said Masrour (Neighbor)
Asmae El Moudir

Director	Asmae El Moudir
Script	Asmae El Moudir
Producer	Asmae El Moudir
Co-Producer	Marc Lotfy
Director of Photography	Hatem Nechi
Sound Recordist	Abdelaziz Ghasine
Editing	Asmae El Moudir, with the precious advice of Nadia Ben Rachid
Music	Nass El Ghiwane
Colourist	Minal Nabil
Sound Design	Michael Fawzy
Set Design	Mohamed El Moudir
Props	Nabil Ghowat, Mohamed Outouf
Costume Designer	Ouarda Zorkani
Production Manager	Rachida Saadi
First Assistant Director	Amina Saadi
VFX producers	Ibrahim Dwedar, Zeyad Al Gharabli, Merouane Tiriri

In co-production with Al Jazeera Documentary, Red Sea Fund, an Initiative of the Red Sea International Film Festival

With the support of Doha Film Institute, IDFA Bertha Fund, Hot Docs Blue Ice

Docs Fund, Docs Up Funds, Arab Fund for Arts and Culture - AFAC, Centre National du Cinéma et de L'image Animée, Région Île de France, Scam, Institut Français du Maroc, International Media Support (IMS)

Recipient of

The Netflix Creative Equity Fund, Atlas Workshops Development Grant and Post-Production Prize (Marrakech International Film Festival), Red Sea Souk Post-Production Award, OTICONS Award, Final Cut in Venice Post-Production Awards from TITRAFILM, le prix Coup de Cœur de la Cinémathèque Afrique de l'Institut français

Film Information:

English Title: The Mother of All Lies

Original Title: Kadib Abyad

French Title: La Mère de tous les mensonges

Genre: Documentary Hybrid

Country: Morocco, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt

Language: Arabic

Year: 2023

Duration: 97 min.

Picture: Color

Aspect Ratio: 16:9

Sound: 5.1 Dolby