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جسد غريب

Jassad gharib

Foreign Body

Raja Amari

Producer Dora Bouchoucha, Dominique Besnehard. **Production companies** Nomadis Images (La Marsa, Tunisia), Mon Voisin Productions (Paris, France). **Written and directed by** Raja Amari. **Director of photography** Aurélien Devaux. **Editor** Guerric Catala. **Music** Nicolas Becker. **Sound** Ludovic Escallier. **Sound design** Cyril Holtz, Benoît Hillebrant. **Production design** Rauf Helioui. **Costumes** Soraya Mangin, Nabila Cherif. **With** Hiam Abbass (Leila), Sarra Hannachi (Samia), Salim Kechiouche (Imed), Marc Brunet (Jacques).

Colour. 97 min. French, Arabic.

Premiere September 14, 2016, Toronto International Film Festival

World sales UDI

Samia is from Tunisia and has arrived in France illegally, barely surviving the journey across the Mediterranean. Yet arriving in a new society hardly means an end to obstacles: How do you lose your status as a foreign body? Samia makes friends with Imed, who she knows from her home country. At first glance, he seems to have made it: he works in a bar without papers, has a flat and friends. She stays with him but soon realises that he and his social circle will not permit self-determination on her part. She decides to move on and manages to get Mme Berteau, a bourgeois widow, to employ her as a maid. Flat, clothes, residence permit – Samia now gets it all. The two women grow closer, while Samia's relationship with Imed cools. He represents the life she left behind. But then Mme Berteau and Imed take a liking to each other.

Within the web of attraction and dependency that develops between the three characters, the camera always keeps close to Samia, making tangible just how urgently she seeks to take her fate in her own hands. *Jassad gharib* is the portrait of a determined young woman looking to live in freedom.

Marie Kloos

Shifting borders and identities

I wanted to draw the portrait of a group of immigrants from an intimate perspective in their struggle for a better life. Underlying the shady relationship between the three characters is a sexual tension that always keeps them on the edge of their own emotions, their own expectations and their own limits. The confrontation between them will evolve in an unexpected way. They are both fragile and strong in the turmoil of the political and social context today.

It is a film about shifting borders and identities both realistic and imagined. Beyond the current political circumstances related to radicalism and immigration issues, I wanted the viewer to follow the story of an individual struggling and adapting himself to a chaotic new life where he is not only a victim, but is also capable of treason in order to survive at any cost.

Raja Amari

“Sometimes, the enemy is a lot closer than you’d think”

The story in Jassad gharib combines the universal – the living conditions of immigrants – and the intimate – how desire is born and circulates. How did you come up with this idea?

Raja Amari: I’ve been meaning to make a movie about immigration for a long time. I wanted a strong scenario, off the beaten track. I realised that if an immigrant doesn’t want to end up in a lasting state of poverty and social seclusion, they have to really conquer their host country, socially and geographically. So I came up with this idea of a character, an undocumented migrant who, like all the others, is forced to get a job, get papers and make friends – but also a character that chooses to discover something new, something deeper and personal about relationships between individuals (desire, sensuality and sexual impulse). After many years thinking about this story, the character of Samia came to me. I created her with a complicated past – an Islamic fundamentalist brother that she runs away from after denouncing him and whom she is still afraid of – and I surrounded her with two other main characters. Two migrants, like her: a man who immigrated to France just a few years ago and who wants to help her but ends up trying to control her life and brutally showing his desire for her; and a woman who has been established for a longer time and who is going to offer her a job and also, help her to slowly accept and discover her body. Those three will end up interweaving and satisfying their desires.

Fundamentally, my movie shows that if you truly want to find your real identity, you eventually will. Even with this back and forth between the conquest of a social status that can be publically shown, and the exploration of sexuality, which stays private.

Samia does not have an easy temper. She is very proud, refuses submissiveness and compromises, wants to walk tall... Does she take after you?

She is an indomitable and free woman even though she is an undocumented migrant, so, yes, I think we are a bit alike [laughs].

In this movie, you talk a lot about feminine desire, and without any false shame. That’s shown in the very sensual filming of women’s bodies...

But I like those bodies. They are an essential element in emancipation or frustration. *Red Satin*, my first movie, was about a woman who unfettered herself by dancing. I really enjoyed filming it, because I needed to focus on capturing the beauty of those moving bodies, and conveying their emotions and sensuality. More than ten years later, shooting that is still in my mind.

How did you choose the actors in Jassad gharib?

I saw Sarra Hannachi in a Tunisian movie and I loved her beauty, strength, magnetism, and sensuality. During her auditions, I was captivated by her. She was exactly like the Samia I imagined, with this rebellious and untameable side.

For Leila’s role, the one that initiates Samia into the ‘realities of life’, I chose the wonderful heroine of *Red Satin*, who became a really good friend of mine, Hiam Abbas. I love both the woman she is in real life and the actress she is on stage. She is sensual, instinctive, and smart. I am really happy with the choices I have made. I think the confrontation between these two really different actresses is really interesting.

For Imed, the male character, I wanted an actor who was beautiful in a devilish way, but also gentle and kind of threatening. Salim Kechiouche was perfect.

Part of the movie was filmed in Tunisia, and the other part in Lyon...

Most of the movie was filmed in Tunisia. The interiors of Leila’s and Imed’s apartments were filmed in Tunis. The aquatic images from the beginning and ending evoke the idea of ‘crossing’ and shipwreck, as do the ones of Samia on the beach. As a filmmaker born in Tunis and raised in Bizerte, there’s nothing more beautiful and inspiring to me than the Mediterranean shores and lights, even if the sea is now a tragic cemetery...

The sequences in the city were filmed in Lyon. It is a very cinematic city. There is a river in the centre that evokes the idea of time passing, and the architecture is varied and beautiful. The better-off bourgeoisie rubs up against a multi-ethnic population. It was perfect for what I wanted.

Jassad gharib tackles many subjects: immigration, integration, desire, of course, but also rejection, Islamic radicalism and betrayal. Did you want this movie to have a political impact?

Almost every movie has a political impact. Knowingly or not, visible or not. Mine does with Samia’s brother, which brings up the problem of radicalisation in my country and in the entire world. But I think the main subject of my movie is human complexity. What are men and women made of? How do they behave in private? What brings them closer? What tears them apart? Of course I do not give any answers but I indicate paths for thinking.

Jassad gharib, or ‘Foreign Body’ in English: why did you choose this title?

Because it can have different interpretations. First, we think of a migrant who’s trying to settle somewhere. But seen as a metaphor, it evokes what weighs us down, what we want to force out of ourselves to feel better, lighter, like fear and frustration, two emotions we have a lot of trouble fighting off. The title also refers to the relationship between the three characters. Even though they come from the same country, they are strangers to each other. Sometimes, the enemy is a lot closer to you than you’d think.

Sensuality and desire are kind of taboo subjects, so we can say that making this movie was brave and also provocative. Were you afraid of the reaction it could have sparked in some countries, including yours?

Saying no would be a lie, but when I write, I try not to think about it. My two previous movies were also kind of sensual in their own way, and stirred up some unfriendly reactions. But on the other hand they have really been defended. This is the important thing. Tunisian cinema is known for daring and women have a great importance in them.

All three of your movies focussed on a female character. Is it a coincidence or a necessity for you?

I do not have a real answer. But I think that women characters are more interesting, more complex. I feel closer to them, perhaps because I am a woman myself. But you might have noticed that men are also very important in my movies. Their role is even essential. Otherwise, how could we talk about attraction and rejection and people's relationships?

Interview: Dominique Poncet, August 2016



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Raja Amari was born in 1971 in Tunis, Tunisia. She earned a degree in French Literature from the University of Tunis in 1993. From 1994 to 1998, she studied at the film school La Fémis in Paris. Her graduation project was the screenplay to her first full-length feature film, *Satin Rouge*.

Films

1998: *Avril* (30 min.). 2001: *Un soir de juillet* (20 min.). 2002: *Satin rouge / Red Satin* (89 min., Berlinale Forum 2002). 2004: *Les traces de l'oubli / Seekers of Oblivion* (52 min.). 2009: *Dowaha / Buried Secrets* (91 min.). 2014: *Printemps Tunisien / Tunisian Spring* (93 min.). 2017: *Jassad gharib / Foreign Body*.