

# New Tunisian Films: “A Son” and “She Had a Dream”

Noteworthy, New Tunisian Films

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*“A Son” and “She Had a Dream”, both from Tunisia, are among new productions distributed by [ArtMattan](#) Films the U.S. this fall.*

The compelling plot of **“A Son”** opens with the Ben Youssef family picnicking among friends in the Tunisian countryside. Meriem (Najla Ben Abdallah) is an outgoing professional woman, who with Fares (Sami Bouajila), an adoring husband, and their son Aziz, carouses happily on their homeward drive to Tataouine city. An innocuous road sign indicating the highway towards Libya, seems irrelevant to this happy trio. In fact, it signals trouble ahead. Indeed, they suddenly encounter a skirmish between bandits and a police patrol on the road. They escape but not before a stray bullet hits 11-year-old Aziz.

Their joyful afternoon abruptly ends, sending Meriem’s marriage into a downward spin. Although the child is alive, the family learns that his liver is damaged and he cannot survive without a transplant. The search for an organ donor consumes the distressed couple (and the remainder of the film) when their blood tests reveal Meriem’s type is incompatible, and that Fares is not Aziz’s biological father. Fares, enraged by this sudden revelation, is incapable of cooperating in the search to save his son.

Medical details about transplant surgery are bypassed while the plot centers on the hunt for a donor. Meriem, abandoned and shaken by the fear of losing both husband and son, gradually emerges from her stupor to track down her discarded lover over a decade ago. The overwhelming pain of the estranged couple –superbly acted by both Abdallah and Bouajila– and their son’s failing life propel the film forward.

In 2011 the so-called Arab Spring that first erupted in Tunisia resulted in a new democracy there. In nearby Libya however, U.S.-led bombings triggered that nation’s disintegration, which in turn affected its neighbors. How it might have impacted Tunisian lives is suggested through this family tragedy.

While Meriem clandestinely continues her efforts, the distraught father is drawn into the underworld of donor trafficking. We are given a glimpse into that sordid world as we follow the trafficker to a secret site in nearby Libya. We arrive at a children's home housing would-be donors, youngsters kidnapped for such purposes. Nuanced clips of this forsaken place powerfully convey the cold-heartedness of the business. We get the awful picture. Although the anguished father accepts the deceit and cooperates.

Tension grows as Aziz's young life ebbs and estrangement between his parents deepens. In the hallway where they struggle to cope with their yawning insecurity, silent families watch dispassionately, each absorbed with its own crisis. The couple's furtive search—hers for news of the biological father, his for the prize of his forbidden alliance—slowly proceed.

The minimal dialogue employed throughout the film is reinforced in the bleak hospital corridor and in the vacant desert beyond. Director [Mehdi Barsaoui](#) effectively juxtaposes the private human drama against the expanse of the Tunisian desert where lonely roads and treeless hills appear as unpredictable as the life of this family. That forlorn desert landscape was the site of the violent ambush, the hideaway for captive organ donors, a retreat for bewildered Fares, then the barren intersection where he's handed not a packaged organ but a barefoot lad nearly his son's age. 'The liver is here; take it', commands the accomplice. Fares manages to find a villager willing to care for the ransomed child before returning, empty handed, to his son's bedside. There he finally accepts the only option and joins Meriem to find Aziz' biological father.

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"A Son's" hushed emotions recall earlier Tunisian films:- [Moufida Tlatli's](#) "The Silences of the Palace" and [Sanaa Akroud's](#) "Myopia". 'Things unspoken' may be such a compelling feature of Arab life that filmmakers frequently draw it into their art form.

**"She Had a Dream"** is a personal political story, also set in contemporary Tunisia. This documentary introduces us to Black Tunisians' experience of racism, to the country's ongoing experiment with democracy, and to one citizen's decision to join that effort.

Director Raja Amari is known for her portrayals of women on the cusp. Here, focused on the daily routine in one Tunis neighborhood, she follows the nascent political career of Ghofrane Binous. The story is propelled by this 25-year-old's vitality, her candor and the authenticity of people she encounters during her election campaign.

It's 2019, just eight years after Tunisia's 2011 revolution; Ghofrane, motivated by her experience of marginalization as a Black Tunisian, pursues a seat in parliament. Her campaign is unsuccessful. But the film records more than a woman's unrealized dream. It's an authentic example, at the most local level, of what democracy is about. We accompany the candidate while debating good-naturedly with friends, strategizing with allies and other activists, cheerfully conversing with sceptics in the street, and justifying her alliance with an unpopular party.

[Director Raja Amari](#) has found a sympathetic character for an engaging political-feminist exposé. Boisterous, friendly episodes are woven with intimate exchanges between Ghofrane and her family, with young women in their hair-salon, with

unemployed youths, and in candid political assessments with members of M'Nemty, an association of Black citizens.

Our heroine's original aim of widening possibilities for Black citizens however becomes secondary to the issue of public disenchantment with politics and how to inspire citizens. This fundamental dilemma is captured in an intimate exchange between Ghofrane and her younger sister when the girl confesses that she simply yearns to leave Tunisia. Perhaps this bashful 13-year-old's alternative dream is the real challenge to any leader.

[Art Mattan festivals](#) offer access to quality international releases within a year (or two) of their appearance in Europe. This is because North African productions such as these are often collaborations with French and other European companies.

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**N Aziz** whose anthropological research has focused on the peoples of the Himalayas is the author of the newly published ["Yogmaya and Durga Devi: Rebel Women of Nepal"](#), available [on Amazon](#).

*Barbara is a frequent contributor to Global Research.*

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