

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Martial Frindéthié, PhD

Mohamed Ben Attia (1976-)

LIFE

Mohamed Ben Attia was born on January 5, 1976, in Tunis, Tunisia. After a diploma from the Institute of Higher Commercial Studies of Carthage in 1998, he attended the Université de Valenciennes, where he obtained a diploma in Audiovisual Communication. Ben Attia started in short films, for which he wrote and directed several fiction projects, including *Romantisme: Deux Comprimés Matin et Soir* (2005), *Comme les Autres (Kif Lokhrin)* (2006), *Mouja* (2010), *Loi 76* (2011) and *Selma* (2013). Having finally built up an artistic conviction, he directed his first feature film, *Hedi: A Wind of Freedom* (2016), which will be followed by another feature film, *Dear Son* (2018).

ACHIEVEMENTS

Ben Attia's films won a variety of awards. *Heidi* won the highest recognition, the Diamond Valois Prize, at the Angoulême Francophone Film Festival, in 2016. Majd Mastoura (who played Hedi) won the Silver Bear for Best Actor, and the film won the Best First Feature Award at the 2016 Berlin International Film Festival. At the 2016 Amiens International Film Festival, Mohamed Ben Attia won the Amiens City Award for Best Director and Faiza Ben Messaoud (who played Rim) in Ben Attia's *Dear Son*, won the Best Actress Award. Mohamed Dhrif (who played the role of Riadh) Won Best Actor Award at the 2018 El Gouna Film Festival and Best Actor Award at the 2019 Critics Awards for Arab Films

FILMOGRAPHY

Romantisme : deux comprimés matin et soir (short fiction) (2005)
Comme les autres (short fiction) (2006)
Mouja (short fiction) (2010)
Loi 76 (short fiction) (2011)
Selma (short film) (2013)
2016 : *Hedi, a wind of freedom* (feature film) (2016)
Dear Son (feature film) (2018)



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1. SOCIETY (gender, religion, patriarchy, tradition/modernity)

Gender: Ben Attia gives us a glimpse of several aspects of the female gender in Tunisian society, not so much to contrast them as to show the diversity of Tunisian women. This is most apparent in his film *Hedi* and its illustration of three female agencies.

Hedi Hedi's mother is illustrative of the Tunisian matriarch who is deeply rooted in her tradition and aware of how she is viewed by her neighbors. Therefore, she wants to make sure that her son's marriage reflects positively on the family. And so, she invests years of planning in it, to the point of marginalizing the one who is directly concerned, that is, Hedi. Somewhat in the same vein as the traditional female, but with a dose of modernity, is the young Khedija, Hedi's bride, who regards her marriage to Hedi as an escape from the overbearing, conservative grip of her parents and the stifling atmosphere created by their never-ending quarrels. And then there is Rim, an unattached, uninhibited woman who lives according to her passions, quick to jump in with both feet on the next adventure, and who gives Hedi some strength for rebellion and some aspiration for freedom. These three images of women illustrate the diversity of the female gender in Tunisia, which should not be painted with a single brush stroke.

Religion: Although the theme of religion is central in Ben Attia's films, he hardly dwells on it. Religion is rather a support to explore other themes, such as marriage or happiness.

Hedi The theme of religion is only mentioned in passing, but it is nevertheless present and important in the film. We see it from the beginning when the older brother arrives from France, and his mother goes down to greet him in the street. After embracing his mother, Ahmed immediately remarks that her veil partially reveals her hair, and he adjusts it for her. This gesture shows that religion is part of the organizing principles of Tunisian society. And this principle still asserts its importance in Hedi's wedding rituals. It is soon after the prayer, and straight from the mosque, that a delegation of men from Hedi's family, led by his brother, goes to Khedija's father to officially ask for his daughter's hand in marriage.

Patriarchy: Ben Attia's treatment of patriarchy seems to have more to do with the image of the absent or failed father than that of the ever-present domineering masculine figure. When the father is not erased and replaced by the figure of the overbearing mother, as in *Hedi*, the father is a failed role model, who is unsuccessful in steering his progeny in the direction he wishes, as in *Dear Son*.

Hedi When Hedi's mother finds him at the hotel in Madhia, where he had gone to join Rim instead of being in Kairouan for his wedding reception, she tells him that if his father were alive, he would have disapproved of his behavior. The mother considers that what she does for Hedi is in the name of his father, in accordance with what the father would have wanted to see happen. She is thus, in the absence of the father, an extension of the father's authority. When Hedi's older brother, who lives in France, arrives in Tunisia, the mother unloads this task onto him. It is therefore Ahmed, the older brother, who plays the role of the father, and who leads the delegation of men to officially ask Khedija's father for his daughter's hand. Here, Hedi's father having passed away a year earlier, the patriarchal duties are taken over by the mother, who is not very successful in carrying in out and by Hedi's older brother Ahmed, who is himself alienated from Tunisia because living in France with a French wife, whom his mother will not accept as part of her family. Hedi tells his mother and brother that they play his father's role poorly, and that his father would not have been as intrusive in his life as they are. Both in the mother and in the older brother, patriarchy is burlesqued as a failed patriarchy from whom unfurls a failed authority.

Dear Son In this film Ben Attia paints a patriarchy that has lost control of the situation. Riadh's meager financial resources make it difficult for him to adequately provide for his family. Money is tight, buying groceries is difficult, unpaid bills are piling up, providing medical care to his son is financially challenging, and his hope of sending his son overseas to study is proving impossible. Furthermore, despite his efforts, Riadh cannot get his son to open to him about his future plans. His questions about Sami's plans after his high school exam annoys the teenager and creates a rift between them. Ultimately Sami leaves to join rebel fighters in Syria, and the father, to ascertain his authority pursues him to bring him back home. The father's peregrination from Tunisia to the Turkish-Syrian border is fraught with failures, and he returns home without having even crossed the border into Syria but lying to his wife that he has seen his son, who refuses to come back home. Here, patriarchy is not absent, but his burlesqued authority hardly makes his presence felt.

Tradition/modernity: Ben Attia's films have this particularity of presenting Tunisian society as being at the crossroads between tradition and modernity, with a foot in both. Sometimes this dualism is shown by the filmmaker as prudence or hesitation by the society to throw itself into modernism, as is the case with *Hedi*. Sometimes it is represented as a joyful symbiosis of two facets of the society that the Tunisians hold dear.

Dear Son Tradition and modernity are presented in this film, less by opposition than as two aspects of Tunisian society coexisting in perfect harmony. Here, it is Riadh's conservatism that meets Sameh's sometimes brazen liberal approach, in asking him how his sex life with Nazli is going, advising him to give flowers to his wife to arouse her sexual passions, and suggesting that the solution to Sami's discomfort is good sex. Although Riadh finds Sameh's conversations a bit risqué, and perhaps even for this reason, he enjoys Sameh's company and does not hesitate to put her advice into practice. For example, Riadh takes her word for it and buys a rose for Nazli, but then lies to say he was coerced by the florist to buy it. And as if to better dramatize this coexistence of tradition and modernism, Sameh, too, finds herself caught up in a bad marriage that she hesitates to end because of financial difficulties and of possibly traumatizing her daughters. And curiously, it is Riadh who, having made his pilgrimage in search of happiness, advises Sameh to think of her own happiness rather than that of her daughters, and to separate from her abusive husband.

2. ECONOMY (poverty)

Poverty: The economic difficulties of Tunisian society in the aftermath of the January 14, 2011 revolution are among the central concerns of Ben Attia's films. The theme of hardship is present in both *Hedi* and *Dear Son*, although it is most apparent in the second of the two films.

Hedi In *Hedi*, the eponymous character is sent to the town of Madhia by his employer to work door-to-door, because the economic situation has become such that business is no longer viable. Hedi's boss tells his employees to go and get the customers where they are rather than sitting in the office waiting for them. And when Hedi does go out to meet customers, they tell him that they cannot afford new vehicles because of the precarious economic situation. Rim, Hedi's lover, also lives this economic uncertainty, obliged to accept a job that she does not like. She tells Hedi that at thirty, dancing for tourists is not her dream job. When Hedi meets his buddies from Kairouan in a café, they are almost all unemployed and rave about the fact that he has a job at Peugeot, and they ask him if he could find them a job with his employer. The Tunisian revolution has scared off foreign investors, and with them went the jobs.

Dear Son One predominant theme in *Dear son* is hardship as a consequence of the unmet promises of the Arab Spring. As he did in his previous feature, *Hedi*, Ben Attia denounces the flight of assets from Tunisia following the unrest of the Arab Spring and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and the consequent impoverishment of the middle and working classes. In *Dear Son*, this situation is dramatized by the difficulty of Riadh's family to make ends meet. At the end of his working life as a dockworker, a father of a nineteen-year-old in his graduating year and the husband of a wife who works part-time, Riadh can barely afford the basic necessities at the grocery store, let alone pay for his son's tutorials and therapy sessions at the psychiatrist's, or provide him with an education in Canada. When Riadh's search for his son, who has gone to join a jihadist group, leaves him penniless in a town on the border of Turkey and Syria, one wonders if it is a new awareness of what his happiness ultimately amounts to, or a lack of money, or both, that compel him to turn back. This economic dilemma is also dramatized by Sameh's Riadh's (Riadh's female colleague

and friend's) difficult financial situation, which forces her to remain in an abusive marriage because she cannot afford an apartment by herself.

3. RELATIONSHIP (marriage, friendship)

Marriage: One aspect of relationship that is keenly explored in Ben Attia's films is the topic of co-dependence in marriage. This topic, which appears only cursorily in Ben Attia's first feature, *Hedi*, with Khedija's premarital expectation to fully lean on Hedi and experience life fulfillment through marriage, is fully developed in *Dear Son*. Here, the characters Nazli and Riadh are representative of unhealthy mutual attachment in the institution of marriage.

Dear Son The marriage in this film is tragic in that it involves a kind of co-dependence that reduces individual freedom. Riadh and Nazli have lived all these long years supporting each other, leaning on each other to the point that the weakness of the one leads to that of the other. When Riadh decides to go to Syria to look for Sami, Nazli begs him not to abandon her. She tells him that their son's departure has taken its toll on her, and that if he were to leave, as well, it would finish her off for good. However, Riadh does not care about his wife's lamentations, and he leaves to search for Sami. When the couple receives news of Sami's death, and after mourning, it is now Nazli who decides to go and live with her aunts, and Riadh who begs her not to leave him alone, saying that he would not survive without her. And this time, it is Nazli who, ignoring her husband's pleas, frees herself from her codependency. And it is outside the marriage, after finding another job as a foreman in a quarry, that Riadh's face really lights up for once, as he assumes a role as an open, sociable, and happy individual, and learns to make new friends outside of the marriage.

Friendship: Friendship, as presented in Ben Attia's films, goes beyond cultural beliefs and generations. This theme, timidly addressed in *Hedi* with the friendship between the young conservative Hedi and the thirty-something liberated Rim, is further reinforced in *Dear Son* by the friendship between Riadh and Sameh.

Dear Son The friendship between Riadh and Sameh is one that not only combines conservatism with liberalism but is also intergenerational. In terms of their age, Sameh could easily be Riadh's daughter. However, far from being a father-daughter relationship, it is a true friendship of colleagues sharing meals together, either at work or outside of work, shopping together at the flea market, and sharing conversations and views on various topics, and binding these two characters from different generations. Riadh would not have had the kind of conversations he has with Sameh with his wife Nazli. And Riadh does not seem to frown upon Sameh's sexually explicit remarks. On the contrary, he seems to find a certain pleasure in them, an air of freedom, an opportunity to escape from the subdued conversations that fill his conservative household.

4. PSYCHOLOGY (sadness)

Sadness The post-revolution Tunisian society is one that has not lived up to its promises. As such, it has created a society of melancholic souls. Ben Attia's characters reflect this sorrowful Tunisia.

Hedi is a sad film because all three main characters are ultimately sorrowful. Hedi, the film's main protagonist, is the personification of melancholy. The rare moments when his face lights up with a smile are the ones he spends with Rim, on the beach, in his hotel room, in the streets of Madhia, or at the *hizb* party. Even there, a little thing brings him back to sadness: the view of the cemetery brings back memories of his father who died a year ago. Rim's joke about his detached ear takes him back to scenes of being bullied in school. And at the end, when he decides to return to Kairouan rather than follow Rim to Montpellier, his long-cherished dream of independence fades away and tears of separation absorb him. Khedija is also a sad character. For her, marriage is a way out of the family home, which is plagued by disputes between her mother and father and threats from the judicial authorities on her father's trail.

5. QUEST (search, introspection)

Search: The quest for happiness through marriage or love or the quest for social status through inter-family ties is a central theme in Ben Attia's first film. The characters in the film *Hedi* are all actively involved in one aspect or another of this search for an object of desire.

Hedi The theme of the quest, in several forms, is central to this film. Hedi and Ahmed's mother search for social status within the Kairouan community, which will be achieved through her son's successful marriage to a girl from a wealthy family. And until we learn of Khedija's father's setbacks, he is held in high esteem in the Kairouan community, so that by joining his family, Hedi's mother immediately reaps some social benefits. For Khedija, too, marriage would take her out of the status of a girl and propel her into the coveted status of a respectable woman. So, she looks forward to her marriage with Hedi with excitement. And then, there is Rim's apparent independence, her excessive exuberance, her endless trips, which are only the superficial coating of a feverish quest, that of a stable job and a fixed life. Hedi is also looking for this fixed life, but with a partner who would combine Rim's exuberance with Khedija's stability. When he asks Rim what they will do after Montpellier and she does not give him a satisfactory answer, something gets lost in him. He feels that with Rim, he will only have half of what he is looking for, the other half being held by Khedija.

Introspection: The topic of introspection is a recurrent theme in Ben Attia's films. Ben Attia's main characters are often thrown in a journey that leads them to self-discovery. Riadh in *Dear Son* epitomizes this reflective subject.

Dear Son In this film, one aspect of the quest is that of introspection. Riadh's journey to find his son Sami is a personal journey to find himself. Having transferred his happiness into his son, Riadh cannot be happy unless he sees Sami happy. Riadh, who is just days away from retirement and struggling to make ends meet, denies himself almost everything for his son and even dreams of paying for his son's education in Canada by selling his car and taking out a bank loan, something his more realistic wife tells him would be impossible. When Riadh gives his son a shirt bought at a flea market, which the latter says he loves, the father's joy is indescribable. And when Riadh reads his son's message that he has gone to join a group of fundamentalist fighters in Syria, the father seems to have aged several years, as the news leaves him unhappy and disarmed. As he travels to bring Sami home, Riadh realizes that what he has gone to seek on the border between Turkey and Syria is less Sami's happiness than his own. The conversation he has about this with the owner of the family motel in Turkey is revealing. There, Riadh finally admits what his interlocutor was trying to make him understand: that what he is really looking for through Sami is his own happiness, and that Sami is only an artifice of this happiness. Having understood that, having taken some exhilarating dance steps and some sips of liquor in the company of young Turks, which made him realize that happiness can be lived without Sami, Riadh decides to return to Tunisia.

6. APPEARANCE vs REALITY (lie)

Lie: The characters in Ben Attia's films are representative of an emotionally affected post-January 14, 2011 Tunisian society that is trying to rebuild itself after a succession of trials and impediments. In this context lying becomes a coping mechanism by which one protects oneself as well as those one loves from life's harsh realities.

Dear Son In this film, lying is a kind of therapy that is used to ease the anxieties of those whom one loves and one's own anxieties, or to manipulate situations. Riadh is angry because his son, who was annoyed by his questions, abandoned him in the park. He tells Sami that he will not drive him to his party with his friends. But he comes around and decides to drive Sami, who tells him it is not worth the trouble. But the father reassures him that he does not mind at all because he was supposed to meet a friend in the same neighborhood anyway. Sami goes to his party, gets bored and calls his father to come and get him. Riadh, who has spent the whole time waiting for Sami in a parking lot, lies to his son that he had a coffee with his friend, and Sami lies to his father that he spent a nice time with his friends. Each seeks to protect the other from the reality of boredom and loneliness. Lying thus becomes a shield against an otherwise hard-to-accept reality, like when Sami pretends to love a seemingly baggy shirt his father bought him, or when Riadh lies to Nazli that he was able to talk to Sami in Syria, or when Riadh alters the sound of the computer so that Nazli never learns from Sami's video that father and son never met in Syria.

CHARACTERS

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Open vs Closed

Agreeable vs Disagreeable

Conscientious vs Unconscientious

Rational vs Emotional

1. Open

RIM (*Hedi*) She is an independent, spontaneous, and observant woman. She is a dancer, who has visited many countries through her work, met many people, and made many friends. She relies on no one and works hard in several countries to support herself. She seemed to have no romantic attachments until she met Hedi. Although she was devastated by their separation, she quickly dried her tears and flew to Montpellier for a new adventure.

2. Closed

- a. KHEDIJA (*Hedi*) Khedija is a shy, conservative, and sensitive girl. She has been dating Hedi for three years and is looking forward to getting married to him and having her own conservative family away from her parents, who have been fighting incessantly. However, even as she thinks of founding her own family with Hedi, the idea of leaving her parents' home breaks her heart.
- b. HEDI'S MOTHER (*Hedi*) Hedi's mother is an overbearing and conniving character. Not content with ruling Hedi's life, she also wants to rule Ahmed's. She has been controlling Hedi's life and stifling him since his father's death. She has transferred her happiness onto Hedi's existence, and she wants to mold him in a way that makes her happy. Hedi, who, according to Rim, does not look like a revolutionary, finally rebels and tells his mother to stay out of his life.
- c. SAMI (*Dear Son*) Sami is a sheltered and secretive young man. Despite being very close to his parents, hid a lot of things about his life from them. He was in contact with Jihadists without their knowledge. He so well prepared his exit from Tunisia that his parents, convinced that he was too sheltered a child to get into trouble, had not the slightest suspicion of his plans.

3. Rational

NAZLI (*Dear Son*) Nazli is a practical and strong woman. She is the one who keeps track of the family's finances and knows its financial limits. She also tries to keep a firm grip on things when Riadh tends to overdo it. She advises Riadh against his trip to Syria, warning him of the risks. It took Riadh's stubbornness and a trip to the Turkish-Syrian border to realize that Nazli had correctly assessed the dangers. Nazli does not realize how important she is to her husband until the day she decides to leave him and sees him completely unhinged, begging her not to abandon him.

4. Emotional

- a. HEDI (*Hedi*) Hedi is an indecisive, indolent, and inhibited character. His life is managed by his mother, who arranges his wedding, prepares the dowry, decides where he will live with his future wife, and, in a conversation he overhears between his mother and brother, even decides on the layout of his living space. Hedi's work as a salesman requires persuasion, enthusiasm, and persistence, which Hedi desperately lacks. Although Hedi succeeds in

overcoming his inhibition, he is still far from proving that he can overcome his indecision and indolence.

- b. RIADH (*Dear Son*) Riadh is a naïve and emotional man. He often lives in his dreams rather than in reality, and he does not take the time to evaluate the pros and cons of his choices and acts in the moment. Riadh invested his happiness in his son, Sam, and then became very resentful of his son when Sami left for Syria. He hated his son for destroying all of his deferred happiness.