

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Lilia, A Tunisian Girl / Lilia, une fille tunisienne (2016)

Mohamed Zran

OVERVIEW

Auteur Mohamed Zran was born in 1959 in Zrazis, Tunisia. Like most filmmakers of his generation, he studied cinema at the Ecole Supérieure d'Etudes Cinématographiques in Paris. He made mostly short films before embarking on his first feature film, *Essaïda* (1996). *The Prince* (2004), his second feature film, was nominated for the Golden Pyramid at the Cairo International Film Festival. Zran's latest film, *Lilia, a Tunisian Girl*, did not meet with critical praise.

Film The film was shot 2016 with Tunisian actors in some of the most affluent neighborhoods of Tunis. The film was selected for several festival awards, including the Best Foreign Film Prize and Best Leading Role Award at the International Filmmaker Festival of World Cinema, in London. The film won no award and received dismal reviews from national and international audiences and critics, who found it unstructured and thematically opaque.

Background *Lilia, A Tunisian Girl* was shot five years after the Tunisian Revolution of January 14, 2011 and after the October 23, 2011 elections that brought the Islamists back to power, thus threatening the progress that Tunisia made on women's right. The filmmaker wanted a forward-looking cast and chose his actors accordingly. With Samar Matoussi (Lilia), the filmmaker took a chance on an unknown actress, one that had never played a role in any film.

CHARACTERS

LILIA A young Tunisian girl, who is convinced that her beauty is a formidable power of seduction
FATOUM Lilia's mother
NEJIB Lilia's husband, who is killed by his own daughter
MOHSEN A philosophy teacher, who once taught Lilia and Miloud
AHMED Fatoum's boyfriend with whom Lilia falls in love
MILOUD An old student of Moshen, who is now a friend of Moshen and Lilia.

SYNOPSIS

A philosophy teacher is trying to explain to his students Spinoza's idea of the relationship between the mind and the body and how absolute knowledge is mediated by the threefold relation of imagination, reason, and intuition. Lilia, one of his students, is convinced that her body is her mind, and that it sends messages of seduction that no man can resist. However, when Lilia falls in love with her mother's boyfriend, who seems to have no romantic interest in her, she feels hurt and pursues him until her jealous mother kills her boyfriend and commits suicide. From that tragic day, Lilia's life starts to unravel in a mysterious way.

Lilia eventually gets married, but she is not happy with her husband and marriage. She becomes an alcoholic. Her step daughter Samira dislikes Lilia. She is very greedy for her father's business and kills her father at the end.

SCENES

The philosophy course Lilia and her classmates Souad and Miloud listen to a lecture by their philosophy professor about Spinoza's idea of the body and the soul. Lilia and Souad seem particularly interested in the lecture and compete to answer the professor's questions.



Fatoum is dating Lilia's mother tells her that for the last few months she has been dating a handsome young man whom she met in her medical practice. Lilia is happy for her mother and encourages her to enjoy this first love since the death of her husband, eighteen years ago.



Souad likes Ahmed Lilia and her friend Souad come out of school. Souad sees Ahmed, a friend of her brother's, on a motorcycle. She hands her bag to Lilia and runs to climb on the motorcycle, asking Ahmed to take her for a ride. Souad's brother, Jamil, invites Lilia for coffee with him. She refuses and enviously watches Souad ride away with Ahmed. Miloud joins Lilia. He informs her that Ahmed is Jamil's friend, and that he has just arrived from Germany. Ahmed comes back to drop Souad, who wants to know why Lilia is not with her brother, Jamil. Lilia tells her that Jamil is not her type, and that it is rather Ahmed who interests her. Souad accuses Lilia of always coveting the men she likes.



Ahmed is Fatoum's boyfriend Fatoum, Lilia's mother, prepares herself to meet her boyfriend. The doorbell rings, and Fatoum asks Lilia to open the door. Lilia sees Ahmed and is shocked. Ahmed and Fatoum sit in the sofa. Lilia brings them a tray of cold drinks and locks herself in her room and cries. Fatoum apologizes to Ahmed for her daughter, who left so quickly. She tells him that Lilia is in the middle of an exam, and that after the exams, the three of them can go out. She tells him that until they are officially engaged, she would prefer that they avoid meeting at her place in order not to frustrate Lilia. Fatoum goes upstairs to see what is wrong with her daughter. She tells Lilia that if she does not like Ahmed, she will stop seeing him, because she counts more than anything for her. Lilia reassures her mother that Ahmed is the right man for her, and that she withdrew to her room because she was not feeling well.



Fatoum is dying Fatoum has a mysterious chronic illness that she hides from her daughter. She tells Ahmed about it and he suggests that she seek treatment in Europe or America. She tells him that it is hopeless, and that the only option left to her is to live her life to the fullest without too much stress. She would also like to spare her daughter the painful news that she has an incurable disease, as she would not want to disrupt Lilia's exams.



Miloud's advice to Lilia Lilia is consumed by Ahmed. She speaks about him to her friend Miloud, who tells her to forget about him, especially because he is her mother's boyfriend. Miloud advises Lilia to content herself with the lavish reception that Ahmed will certainly offer to her when she graduates. Lilia confides to Miloud that she will go to study fine arts and philosophy in Paris. Miloud would like to study fine arts in Tunis, but his adoptive parents want him to study business in order to become the managing director of their hotel in Tunis.



Lilia assaults Ahmed Ahmed arrives unannounced at Fatoum's house, and Lilia again opens the door for him. She tells him that her mother is on call at the hospital. Ahmed decides to come back later, but Lilia asks him to wait, and that her mother would not be long. Lilia comes to sit near Ahmed in the sofa, caresses him, and wants to kiss him. He gets up, pushes her back and decides to leave. She pushes him violently in the sofa and throws herself on him. They both find themselves on the ground, and while he struggles to get up, she tackles him to the ground and starts kissing him.



Fatoum kills Ahmed Fatoum returns home and hears shouting. Seeing her daughter struggling with Ahmed on the floor, she seizes a decorative vase in the foyer and knocks out Ahmed, who falls in a pool of blood. Lilia, hysterical, convinced that her mother has just killed Ahmed runs to lock herself in her room. She cries herself to sleep. Fatoum, seized by malaise, also takes refuge in her medicine in her room.



Fatoum commits suicide Lilia is awakened by the noise of a pickaxe in the garden. She goes to the window and sees her mother digging a hole. Lilia gets down to see what became of Ahmed's body in the living room. Ahmed is not in the living room, and she sees no trace of blood there. Later, she finds her mother unconscious on the sofa and tries to wake her up in vain, confessing to her that it was her fault, and that Ahmed was not trying to assault her. Fatoum does not respond. She has overdosed on her pills.



Graduation The film moves fast forward. Lilia has graduated. She goes to the cemetery to pray at her mother's grave and then goes to France to continue her studies as she had planned.



LILIA'S MARRIAGE

Lilia marries Nejib A few years later, Lilia marries Nejib, a rich businessman, and lives in a sumptuous villa in Tunis. Her nights are haunted by nightmares about her mother and Ahmed. Lilia has also become a heavy drinker. She is under the care of a psychiatrist, whom she has decided to stop seeing. She is upset each time her gardener makes noises with his pickaxe. Her husband, Nejib, is in a conflict with his daughter from his first marriage, Samira, who wants to have control over his business.



Lilia is a heavy drinker Lilia has a private studio at home where she makes sculptures. Her bottle of whiskey never leaves her side when she is in her studio. Lilia's sculptures haunt her.



Haunting memories Lilia is in her studio drinking. She is tormented by painful memories of her mother and Ahmed. The gardener enters without warning. She is furious and reminds him that he must never enter her studio while she is working. The cook arrives and begs Lilia to stop drinking and to eat something.



Samira hates Lilia Samira walks into her father's office unannounced, and he is not happy to see her there. She tells him that the woman he chose, Lilia, will have no share in the family business. She says that she will not let Lilia sully the company as she sullied the reputation of the family with her bad company. She promises Nejib that with the help of the board of directors, she will make sure of that.



Samira kills her father Lilia is in the kitchen. Nejib is upset that she is not yet ready for their outing to a restaurant, where he has reserved a table for two. As she tells him that she is not in the mood for that, he reminds her that he is her husband. She retorts that she is a free woman. They fight. He starts strangling her. She tries to defend herself by grabbing a knife on kitchen island. She loses consciousness and the knife falls from her hands. Nejib's daughter, Samira, who had been watching the whole scene discreetly, picks up the knife and stabs her father. Lilia, unconscious, and Nejib, stabbed, collapse on the floor.



Nejib has disappeared Lilia wakes up a few hours later in her bed, not knowing how she got there. She sees the marks of her struggle with Nejib on her body. She goes down to the kitchen but finds no trace of struggle there. She goes to knock on Nejib's office door. He is not there. The gardener is spying on her. She goes to the pool and sees him watching her. She motions to him to come and asks him where Nejib is. He tells her that Nejib left in his car a while ago.



Gardner is Infatuated with Lilia Her gardener, a deaf-mute, simple-minded man, is fascinated by her and hides to watch her work. The gardener is infatuated with Lilia. He has been stealing and collecting her undergarments in his room.



Miloud manages a hotel

Miloud is now the manager of his parents' hotel. He is not shy to flirt with the handsome customers who come there. Today, he has set his eyes on a young man lying on a deckchair, to whom he offers to put on sun cream. Miloud's old philosophy professor comes to see him. He asks Miloud to serve him two beers. Miloud tells him to go and have them served himself. They start a debate about the master and the slave. Miloud says that his money makes him the master since he is the one who feeds the professor. As for the professor, he maintains that his intellect makes him the master and Miloud the slave. Their conversations turn to Lilia, and to the hold that she has on men.



Moshen and Miloud are assaulted

Miloud and Moshen go to a restaurant to eat a roasted sheep's head. They are the target of the customers' stares. Miloud tells Moshen that it is his attire—his red shirt with a bowtie and his long black coat—that attracts people's curiosity. Moshen retorts that it is rather Miloud's short stature that causes people to gaze. The two friends are heckled by the restaurant's customers, then beaten up and kicked out of the restaurant by a bully. Moshen shouts his anger and asks what Tunisia would be like without intellectuals like him.



Moshen and Miloud visit Lilia

Lilia goes to see Miloud. She tells him about her fear of having killed her husband and being watched, but he thinks she's paranoid as usual. He thinks she drinks a little too much. She shows him the bruises on her neck and body and explains that Nejib tried to rape her, and that she killed him, or at least she thinks she did, as she has found neither his body nor the murder weapon. He suggests they go and have some fun at Moshen the philosopher's house. While he is getting ready, she falls asleep in his bed. Miloud lets her rest and goes out. Moshen visits Lilia. Moshen finds Lilia in her studio in a depressed state, a glass of whisky in her hand. He describes her as isolated, sad, complicated and mysterious.

Looking for Nejib

The police are interested in Nejib's disappearance and question the maid in the kitchen. The police are particularly interested in a knife that is missing from the knife rack. The maid tells them it is simply lost, as kitchen utensils often are. Ali, the gardener, eavesdrops on the police interrogation. The maid confides in Lilia that the constant presence of the police is beginning to scare her. Later on, Lilia, Miloud, and Moshen are driving through town in Lilia's car. Ahmed's motorcycle with an unidentifiable rider passes them unnoticed. She cannot understand how Nejib could disappear without giving any news. He usually tells her when he travels. Moshen suggests that a girl must have turned his head.



Samira incriminates Lilia

The police question Samira and her mother, Nejib's ex-wife. Samira's mother advises them to search the airports, as her ex-husband had a habit of disappearing without a trace when he fell in love with a woman. Samira advises the police to question Lilia instead.



Samira threatens Lilia

Miloud and Moshen are visiting Lilia. She tells them that she thinks she is being stalked. Miloud blames her worry on hysteria and paranoia. He tells her to take advantage of her husband's absence and enjoy life. Lilia says that she keeps losing her things, and that even her underwear is disappearing. Samira arrives, insults Lilia's friends and slaps them around when they object. She accuses Lilia of her father's disappearance and threatens Lilia with her life.



The missing knife

Lilia tells her friends that the police have been harassing her. Miloud thinks that she made up the whole story about her struggle with her husband and his mysterious disappearance. Samira is looking for her father's body. She checks the gardener's room and finds that he has been collecting Lilia's underwear. She also finds the missing knife there. She knocks him unconscious as he returns to his room. Miloud is also searching for Nejib's corpse and is knocked unconscious by Samira as he ventures into the gardener's room.

Ahmed is not dead

Ahmed, whom Lilia was convinced her mother killed, reappears at Lilia's house. She faints when she sees him. He revives her. She wants to know how he is still alive after being buried by Fatoum. He explains that he received a blow on the head, was unconscious, and when he woke up, he



was all alone in Fatoum's living room, so he went home. Hidden away, Samira listens to the conversation. Lilia accepts Ahmed's version of the story.

Samira stabs Ahmed Ahmed and Lilia decide to go to Fatoum's place to look for a briefcase that Ahmed had left there the last time he visited Fatoum. Samira follows them there and sees Ahmed and Lilia kissing. Sneaking up behind, she stabs Ahmed in the back. She then threatens Lilia with the knife she used on Ahmed. Ali, the gardener, who had regained consciousness and followed Samira, appears, strangles her and saves Lilia.



Ali is arrested The police's investigation of Nejib's disappearance leads them to Ali. He is arrested and made to reveal where he hid Nejib's body. He had encased it in a block of plaster stolen from Lilia's sculpture studio. Ali was not mute all this time. He confesses that he killed Nejib to protect Lilia. Lilia breaks everything she created in her studio and leaves for an undisclosed destination.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

LILIA Lilia is a sad, isolated, and disloyal woman. Her drive for attention seems obsessive, leading her to the most destructive actions.

Sad Despite the appearance of joy that she displays, Lilia is a sad, young woman. She is haunted by dark guilt about the deaths of her mother and her mother's boyfriend. Her art reflects her emotional torments, which she tries to hide in heavy drinking.

Isolated Lilia is an isolated woman in her big house. Besides Miloud and Moshen, who visit her now and then, she has little contact with the outside world as she used to when she was a student. Her friends have mostly faded away, her past confidence has evaporated, and she is trapped in her daily apprehensions.

Disloyal Lilia, as her friend Souad once reproached her, is a disloyal character. She coveted all the men that Souad was interested in. She coveted her mother's boyfriend and pursued him until her mother assaulted him, believing that he was the one chasing after Lilia.

MILOUD Miloud is a supportive friend to Lilia. He is amusing and always tries to lighten up a bad situation with humor.

Supportive Moshen, Miloud is the only one among Lilia's former friends who kept in touch with her. He often visited her and listened to her vent and share her fears and frustrations. He also opened his house to her as a place to rest, away from the abusive environment created by her husband Nejib and her stepdaughter Samira.

Amusing/cheerful Miloud is a cheerful young man. Despite the derision that he encounters everyday because of his small stature and his sexual orientation, he is never in a bad mood. On the contrary, he is the one who lightens up the mood with his self-deprecation, his good humor, and his lightheartedness.

MOSHEN This philosophy teacher is overtly formal and always serious. Every conversation is for him an opportunity to engage in deep philosophical exegesis.

Formal No matter what the weather looks like, whether he is by a pool or at a local bar, Moshen is always formally dressed. His red shirt under a long, black coat makes him stand out like a sore thumb. In the local restaurant where he goes to eat a roasted mutton head with Miloud, his attire attracts them attention and derision.

Serious Moshen's conversations with his former students, who become his friends, are always academic. Either by the pool of Miloud's hotel, at a local restaurant, or at Lilia's place, he extends his lectures outside of the classroom by delving in exegeses either about the master/slave dialectic or about the importance of intellectuals in Tunisian society.

THEMES

SOCIETY

Class Tunisia is a society beset by deep class divisions, a topic that Zran has addressed in his other movies, such as *Essaïda* (1996) and *The Prince* (2004). Zran revisits this theme in *Lilia* by showing how insolent ostentation coexists with abject poverty. The world of Lilia, her family, and her friends is one of flashiness that showcases impressive houses, the latest expensive cars and bikes, and the best schools of Tunisia. Ahmed, the boyfriend of Lilia's mother is an heir who lives mostly in Germany and comes only sporadically to Tunisia. In Tunisia, he lives in his parents' sumptuous villa and drives an impressive Harley Davidson bike. The brother of Souad, Lilia's friend, drives a rutilant Porsche. When the reality for most Tunisian youths, as many films have shown, is to scrape by on the bottom and dream of illegal exile, the students at Lilia's high school, as is the case for Lilia herself, speak of picking the schools of their choice in Europe to continue their studies. Other students, as is the case for Miloud, are handed over family businesses even before graduating. While these affluent people lounge by their pools and dine at expensive restaurants, the bottom tier of the population spends their lives as housemaids or gardeners and take out their frustration on each other at local bars.

POWER

Wealth vs intellect There is a discussion between Miloud and Moshen, his old philosophy professor, about who wields real power in society, the intellectual or the wealthy. Miloud has taken over the management of his adoptive parents' hotel and bar and lives a comfortable life. He has kept his friendship with his old philosophy teacher, who often hangs around his restaurant and eats and drinks for free. Moshen wants Miloud to bring him his drink by the pool, but his former student tells him that he should get it himself since his old professor's influence no longer holds. In fact, Miloud tells Moshen that it is rich people like him who hold power in society, and that intellectuals like Moshen are only celebrated slaves. Moshen tells Miloud that he made him what he is with the education that he gave him when he was his student. The jostle of words between the two friends does not reach any clear conclusion. Nevertheless, Zran's invitation to reflect on this theme leaves no doubt. In a previous film, *The Prince* (2004), the Tunisian filmmaker had alluded to the disproportionate importance accorded to money as opposed to intellect in Tunisian society and the consequent brain drain when Raouf, a poet, decides to accept a teaching offer in Canada because of the country's takeover by greedy capitalists that have little regard for intellectuals. Raja Amari, another Tunisian director, dramatizes this topic in *Tunisian Spring* when a young, brilliant graduate from a teachers' school is unable to find employment in a society beset by greed for money.

Seduction Moshen and Miloud never settle on whether the wealthy or the intellectuals wield power in Tunisia. One thing they seem to agree on, however, is that Lilia's power of seduction makes her obtain whatever she wants. Lilia wanted a rich life and she lived it with her husband, Nejib, whom she did not love, but who, nevertheless gave her a financially comfortable life and a sumptuous villa with the art studio she dreamt of. She wanted her mother's boyfriend, Ahmed, and he came from the dead to tell her that he loved her. Nevertheless, it would have been too easy to grant Lilia everything she wanted on account of her beauty while some still toil day and night without any hope of realizing their dreams. Zran, who, as shown in his previous films, is a staunch critique of social inequalities, had to show that being born with a silver spoon in one's mouth or with good, beautiful genes does not necessarily make one happy. Therefore, the filmmaker made Lilia's life one of psychological and somatic torment, of nightmare, anguish, and headaches that she tried to elude in alcohol. Lilia's ultimate desire is crushed as Ahmed, who explained that he was never killed by Fatoum, is now killed by Samira. It is as if the filmmaker wanted to tell the viewers of *Lilia* that she who has no control of her life, despite her beauty, actually wields no power either, and that the true power is in the people, provided they know how to harness it into action-oriented movement, as the January 14, 2011 revolution demonstrated.

PSYCHOLOGY

Otherness Moshen, Miloud, and Ali are some of the marginalized people in Tunisian society. The adoptive child of a rich couple, Miloud is both a little person and a gay man. And although he enjoys abundant love and affection from his parents, whose hotel and restaurant business he has inherited, he is not always tolerated by his fellow countrymen. Moshen (who is Lilia and Miloud's old philosophy teacher and friend) dresses atypically, always wearing a shiny red shirt with a bowtie, black pants, and a long, black coat. At a restaurant, Moshen and Miloud are harassed by some intolerant customers who do not like their

appearances or Miloud assumed sexuality. The two friends are beaten and kicked out of the restaurant by rowdy customers, who find them useless to society. They are stigmatized for their appearances that do not conform to conventional standards. Likewise, the simplemindedness of Ali, Lilia's gardener, makes him the target of Lilia's and others' ridicule. For Lilia and Samira, Ali is just a weird fixture in the house, and when she is not taking out her frustration on him, Lilia accords him little attention, treats him as an invisibility and goes by him almost naked even when Moshen so perceptively tells her that Ali is smitten by her. Miloud, the successful restaurant owner, Moshen, the philosophy teacher, and Ali, the jack-of-all-trades, are treated as socially irrelevant characters though their contributions to society are there to be seen. They are the characters through whom Zran criticizes bigotry in the Tunisian society and calls for tolerance, empathy, and social inclusion.

Anger/blame When a political system fails to deliver its promises of wellbeing to its population, it usually teaches the people to look for scapegoats towards which to direct their frustration. In Tunisia, the people find in each other and in themselves reasons for the system's failure. In a local restaurant where Moshen and Miloud have gone to enjoy a mutton head, a local delicacy, they are derided and beaten up by some patrons for allegedly damaging society's morals. Moshen always dresses in a long, black coat over a silk red shirt. Miloud is a person of small stature, who does not hide his gay mannerism. Moshen's gothic accoutrement and Miloud's physical appearance and open homosexuality make them the target of the people's curiosity and anger, and they blame them for leading the Tunisian society awry, whereas, in fact, the cause is to be found in the disastrous politics of the corrupt ruling class. Of course, people are easier targets than the political system. And so, they take out their frustrations on each other rather than the ruling class. The motif of the underprivileged blaming themselves instead of the authoritarian system that subjugates them is recurrent in Tunisian films.

FLAWS (greed, addiction, pride)

Greed Nejjib's and his daughter's constant struggles are fueled by greed. Samira is afraid that her father might turn over his business to his new wife, Lilia. She wants to prevent that from happening because she wants control of the business herself. Rather than engaging in a civil discussion with her father, Samira engages in a fight to the death with him, and she ends up stabbing her father to death. In her greed for love, Lilia, too, is engaged in a fight to the death with her mother to win the romantic affection of Ahmed, her mother's boyfriend. Ahmed is killed by Lilia's mother, who, in turn, kills herself. Thus, Lilia loses both her mother and Ahmed—even though, in a surrealist cinematic twist, Ahmed mysteriously reappears months later from the dead to declare his love for Lilia. In the case of Samira and Lilia, respectively, greed leads to parricide and matricide. Could there be a stronger cautionary tale against greed?

Addiction Lilia's universe is a foggy world influenced by alcohol where events happen in a surrealist way. Lilia sees her mother strike Ahmed with a vase. He falls on the floor in a puddle of blood. She is convinced that her mother has killed Ahmed, especially as she sees her mother later digging a grave in the garden and Ahmed is nowhere to be found. Then, her mother kills herself. Years later, Ahmed reappears to declare his love for her. Similarly, Lilia faints as her husband's strong hands tighten around her neck during an argument in the kitchen while she tries to grab a knife to defend herself. She later regains consciousness only to realize that her husband has disappeared. While she is convinced that she killed him, there is no trace of their struggle in the kitchen, and he himself is nowhere to be found. In fact, it is Samira, her stepdaughter, who killed her husband. However, Samira herself is dumbfounded as she cannot find the dead body of her father she left lying on the floor. Lilia is no longer sure whether she is living a nightmare or reality. Already addicted to alcohol, Lilia sinks deeper into alcoholism, and her already complicated world becomes more mysterious and out of her control.

Pride Lilia's husband, Nejjib, considers that he has some inalienable rights over Lilia. She is his wife, and for him, she is obligated to execute his desires and commands. Lilia does not think so and believes that she is entitled to her freedom. Nejjib's masculinist pride is hurt when Lilia refuses to go with him to the restaurant. He reminds her that he is her husband, and that she must submit to him. Her persistence to oppose him is unbearable to him, and he turns violent and starts to strangle her. However, his greedy daughter, who has been stalking him, catches him struggling with Lilia and stabs him as Lilia falls unconscious to the ground, in the hope that Lilia would be blamed for her father's death. Nejjib's death by

the hand of his own daughter seems to be the filmmaker's way of signaling the end of man's chauvinistic pride. It is Nejb's own progeny who, by killing him, arrests his illusion of superiority over women.

QUESTIONS

1. What first impression does this film give you about Tunisian society?
2. To what extent do Miloud and Ali, the gardener, represent the filmmaker's condemnation of intolerance and appeal for empathy?
3. What symbolism do you see in Samira's parricide?
4. Is Lilia's role in the film empowering or degrading for women? Justify your answer.
5. What other messages, in addition to those discussed this essay, does the film present?