

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE GOLDEN HORSESHOES / Les Sabots en or (1987)

Nouri Bouzid

Contents (Overview-Synopsis-Characters-Character Analysis-Themes-Scenes)

OVERVIEW

The Golden Horseshoes is a film that has gone through some cuts to accommodate the censorship of the Control Commission of the Tunisian Ministry of Culture and Information. This could explain the unstructured aspect of the film, which looks more like an attempt to put together puzzle pieces, although Nouri Bouzid is known for not making linear movies. Looking beyond this overwhelming cinematic construction, the viewer cannot help but admire the audacity with which Bouzid tackles taboo subjects in the Arab world.

SYNOPSIS

Youssef Soltane is a Tunisian left-wing activist who, after six years of torture in the prisons of Tunisia's totalitarian regime, is trying to put his life back together. During the sacred night of Ashura (Muslim day of fasting and repentance), he chooses to go against all that constitutes Tunisian "decency" in order to see how much of a life of free will is still possible in a country taken hostage by the guardians of decency. The next day, after a heated conversation with his brother Abdallah, the fundamentalist butcher, Youssef kills himself.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Youssef : A leftist militant
Abdallah : Youssef's brother, a Muslim fundamentalist
Zineb : Youssef's girlfriend
Sghaier : An old neighbor and friend of Youssef

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Youssef (Emotional)

Youssef is the tragic hero who dies at the end of the film from the ingratitude of human society and his own flaws. His mistake is an error of judgment. That of not having understood the fickleness of the masses, their propensity to quickly bend their backs when the whip of repression cracks so close to their ears.

Idealist Youssef dreams of a world governed by political and individual freedoms, such as freedom of thought, of worship, and the right to difference. This world was not possible under the totalitarian regime that he fought, and which led him to prison. He realizes upon his release that this world is not possible under the fundamentalism that has taken the country hostage. During his discussion with his fundamentalist brother in the slaughterhouse, Youssef tells him that he wants the right to doubt, to question, to not believe, which both politics and religion make a crime; therefore, refusing a life encased in oppression in the name of "decent feelings," he chooses suicide.

Bitter Youssef is a man full of bitterness. He realizes that he has served as a horse to others, and that in return, he only reaps ingratitude. In his fight for freedom, he lost contact with his children, almost all his friends left him, he lost his job at the university, and he is barely respected. The irony of his struggle is that the breach that he opened for freedom of expression allowed an intolerant fundamentalism to position itself, which now considers him harmful to society.

Paradoxical Youssef wants to appear liberal, but he has reflexes that betray his masculinist education. He has difficulty accepting that Zineb is not in the mood to make love when he wants to. The day he visits his daughter Meriem, who doesn't know he's coming, and he surprises her in her studio with just a bedsheet

around her chest, he gets nauseated and runs to vomit. And when his daughter Raja tells him that she is in a play, he gets offended and asks her how she could have made such a decision without his consent. Youssef has unacknowledged dogmatic impulses in him.

Abdallah (Closed)

Abdallah, the butcher and Youssef's brother, is the prototype of the chauvinist male fed by fundamentalist ideology. For him, there should be no other world than his own according to the Koran. He imposes his vision of the world by punishing some and intimidating others.

Dogmatist The world according to Abdallah is Manichean. One is either good or bad, saved or irredeemable. On the good side are the Muslims, preferably the fundamentalists, and on the bad side are the atheists. Abdallah thinks that atheists, like Youssef, are not only harmful to society, but that they are dangerous and, therefore, better dead than alive.

Narrow-minded Adel wants to pursue his studies in Europe, and his father comes to ask Abdallah, his brother, to buy back his inheritance so that he can ensure Adel's studies. Abdallah tells him that Adel cannot learn anything positive in France, that France is a land of moral and physical prostitution. He will only come back with bad ideas and bad diseases to end up, like his father Youssef, being a burden to society and to God.

Masculinist Abdallah considers it a humiliation that Meriem, his brother's daughter, refused money from him. Coming from a girl, Meriem's behavior is an insult to him. He also cannot stand the fact that Youssef is supported by Zineb, a woman. He tells Youssef that he is a cursed man, a damnation to the family, and a shame to their father.

Zineb (Open)

Zineb is a modern and financially independent Tunisian woman who does not intend to have her life dictated by a man. Her position on this subject could seem arrogant, especially to Youssef who, whatever one says, remains conscious of a societal judgment on what it entails to be a man.

Disillusioned Zineb is exhausted by Youssef's idealism. She thinks that the years spent in prison have not made him understand the futility of his struggle, and that he still lives in the illusion that he can change things. He refuses the job she found him, remains sardonic about the possibility of returning to teaching, and above all, no longer takes care of his body. In their last scene together, she turns her back on him in bed, and when he complains about it, she tells him that he has botched his life and neglects his body appearance.

Loyal Zineb seems to have taken Youssef back after his years of incarceration more out of loyalty and pity than love. She has moved on with her life. She is no longer attracted to him as she once was. She finds him neglectful. However, she offers him a place to stay because it would be unbearable for him to live with his fundamentalist brother Abdallah in the family home. Although Zineb is no longer in love with Youssef, she remains loyal to him as a friend and allows him to live in her house if he has nowhere else to go. However, beyond this purely friendly loyalty, she feels free to come and go as she pleases.

THEMES

Society (Religion-gender, class, myth)

Religion-gender Abdallah, Youssef's younger brother, is a Muslim fundamentalist. He has a very clear idea of what the role and place of women in society should be, and he delivers it to us throughout the film by the judgments he passes on his brother's daughters. His conception of gender roles and spaces is based on religion. For him, a woman, from her very tender age, must be discreet, veiled, silent, pious, and virtuous. He beats Meriem when she is about five, because she imitates her brother Adel and leaves the bathroom door open when she is on the toilet. He tells her that Adel is a boy, and she is a girl. There are, therefore, behaviors that are acceptable for him and not for her. He is angry at Meriem for humiliating him by refusing to take money from him. In his conception of gender relations, it is the man who gives and the woman who receives.

Class The religious conception of the gender relationship so dear to Abdallah the fundamentalist can be subverted by women's social class. Zineb, Youssef's lover, is a bourgeois woman. She is a university professor, financially independent, and liberal. In the relationship between Youssef and the bourgeois Zineb, it is rather Zineb who gives and Youssef who receives. It is in her house that Youssef, the unemployed man, lives, and it is she who feeds and clothes him. She is free of her movements, goes out of the house and comes back in whenever she wants, because, as she says to Youssef, she does not belong to anyone and does not need anyone's permission to live her life. This upsets Youssef, who thinks that she objectifies him. It particularly makes Abdallah angry, who sees his brother as a failed man whose liberal culture the world does not need. Abdallah, thus, mocks Youssef, whom he calls a gigolo, a kept man, a whipped man.

Myth The white horse outfitted with gold horseshoes in the film mythologizes the tragic hero. Young and dynamic, it is pampered and adulated because it carries on its back the aspirants of great adventures and great battles to prodigious distances, leading them from victories to victories. Old and ill, it is taken to the slaughterhouse and ruthlessly killed, while no honor is given to it for the great triumphs that men enjoyed thanks to its strength and bravery. The horse's sacrifice will only have served others. To the animal, not even a recognized retirement, only a premature death will be offered, so that it is no longer a burden. And, in a final gesture of ingratitude, its flesh will be consumed. Youssef compares his fate to that of the horse with golden horseshoes. Like the horse, he carried on his back the Tunisian people's aspirations for democracy, but when came the time to share the bounty of the gains that he has initiated, his name faded, and he became a burden. It is not he who kills himself at the end of the film. It is the ingrate Tunisian society that kills him. The Youssef of the Arab world are numerous. Today, the young Tunisian fruit vendor whose immolation started the Arab Spring, Tarek Bouzizi, has had his struggle appropriated by various interests while his name is barely remembered.

Politics (Democracy, leadership)

Democracy The white horse with golden hooves that appears at the beginning of the film and reappears throughout the film and that will later be slaughtered for its meat, because it is no longer useful to its rider, is a beautiful allegory of the ingratitude that is at the heart of any revolutionary movement. The emergence of democracy requires a struggle and sacrifices. In the struggle for democracy there are always those who are at the forefront, the leaders, who take risks, who expose their lives and their future, and there are those who enjoy the fruits of this struggle. Leaders of the struggle for democracy are like horses that carry on their backs an often-ungrateful people, ready to lead them to the slaughterhouse as soon as the struggle becomes hard.

Leadership Sghaier and Youssef compare themselves to the white horse, which by its strength, sacrifice, and courage, carries people to freedom. Sghaier has a bullet still lodged in his abdomen as a testimony to the sacrifice he made in the Indochina war. Today, he lives in cellar, cut off from daylight and electric power, and forgotten by those for whom he fought. As for Youssef, the former head of a revolutionary leftist movement, *Perspectives Tunisiennes*, which fought for rights that other people enjoy today without him, and sometime at his expense, while he wasted his life in the jails and torture chambers of the reactionary and brutal power, his name is barely mentioned. He finds himself a lonely man, cut off from his children, dumped by his lover, and mocked by his brother. He is no longer the leader admired by his students and his colleagues. He decides to put an end to his humiliation by taking his own life.

Crime (violation, punishment, revenge)

Violation Youssef is accused of at least two violations, and for each of these two crimes, he suffers the decreed punishment. His first crime is the one he commits against the political power by leading a leftist movement that demands the restoration of people's fundamental rights repressed by the state, such as the right to think differently, the right to individual freedoms, and the right to political freedom, in particular, the right for a multiparty system. Youssef's second crime is the one he commits against the institution to which, ironically, his struggle has allowed freedom of expression and emergence, fundamentalism. This religious extremism, hitherto repressed by an intolerant political power champion of the single party system, finds, with the freedom of expression won thanks to Youssef's struggle, a power that it intends to institutionalize as state power. Thus, the fundamentalists want to gag any secular thoughts.

Punishment For his offense against the state, Youssef is hunted down, arrested, tortured, and imprisoned for six years, thereby, losing his job and being alienated from his children. For his crime against religion, Youssef is chastised by his brother Abdallah. During Youssef's absence, Abdallah takes revenge on his children, tormenting them, imposing an ultra-conservative upbringing on them, and alienating them from their father and his social ideals. During the confrontation that Youssef has with his brother in the slaughterhouse, Abdallah suggests that Youssef will be better dead than alive, for he has defiled the idea of manhood and the honor of the family. He even claims that his brother is dangerous to society, no better than the animals he slaughters every day in his job as a butcher.

Revenge Youssef takes Abdallah at his word in an ultimate gesture of revenge: He sullies Abdallah's religious pride with an indelible stain. Youssef commits suicide, soiling his brother and all his morality with Islam's cardinal sin of suicide. How is this a revenge, one might ask. By taking his own life, Youssef subverts the power of Allah, who is the divine decision-maker, and who has the right of life and death on every one of his creators. By so doing, Youssef has hurt Abdallah in what is his innermost conviction and his priceless pride, his faith. It is not just himself whom Youssef kills. He also kills his brother's standing in his religious community. Youssef stains Abdallah for life.

Relationship (marriage, friendship, desire)

In this film, loyalty in friendship, marriage, and love seems to yield under the strain of political commitment and time.

Marriage The "until death do us apart" maxim did not come true for Youssef and his wife Fatma. Their marriage was the first casualty of his political commitment. His wife could not stand his activism, and she told him to his face that his father was right to say that he was a good-for-nothing. Unable to stand the constant humiliation of his wife who saw his intellectual work as unproductive, and whose lack of intellectual sophistication he, too, scorned, Youssef divorced Fatma. She fell ill and died. He did not go to her funeral for fear of confronting his children's reproachful gazes.

Friendship After his divorce, Youssef is taken in by Zineb, a bourgeois woman and his university colleague. She is fascinated by his intelligence and the aura he has with his students. With Zineb, Youssef experiences another form of relationship, though not as formal as marriage, nonetheless, accepted under the nickname of engagement. She introduces him to friends who become followers of the "Perspectives Tunisiennes" movement, of which he is the initiator. However, when the repression of the regime becomes hard, the left, as Youssef says so well, is no longer in fashion, and the new disciples of "Perspectives Tunisiennes" fade away, some preferring to be on the side of the political power. Zineb, too, leaves Youssef. The magic of his glow had faded over the six years he spent in jail.

Desire For Youssef, desire no longer must be tied to institutional relationships. Indeed, after he spent six years in the jails of the regime, the Zineb that Youssef found upon his release was no longer the attentive lover he knew. She was now an arrogant, hard woman, disillusioned with his political struggle, who has lost all respect for him, and who no longer hesitates to tell him that he has failed in his pursuit of impossible dreams and botched his life. If institutional relationship, such as marriage or friendship, is not worth its weight in love and loyalty, then why not seek love and pleasure in the anti-institutional, ephemeral relationship? For Youssef, there is no doubt about it. A stranger can offer as much love, and even more, than a known lover. Thus, on the night of Ashura, Youssef spends passionate moments with a stranger in a boat moored in a bay.

Quest (explore)

Exploration On the night of Ashura, Youssef was on a quest for life. With his friend Sghaier by his side, he was in the pursuit of a life still worth living in the Tunisian open-air prison of repressed desires. That night, he surveyed the city, from its main avenues to its most forgotten places. He confronted his fears, his hesitations, his misplaced prides, and his repressed desires. He made himself humble and sought the love of his children. He made himself brave and took out his old proscribed writings. He became lustful and made love like a maniac. He became a sinner, a free thinker, and walked in the opposite direction of the crowd mentality of Ashura. The next day, when he confronted his brother Abdallah the butcher in his slaughterhouse, he realized that life as he conceived it, the life of free will, would be unlivable in a Tunisian

society taken hostage by what the morality police called "decency." For Youssef, life not governed by volition was not worth living. Youssef's suicide at the end of the film is a gesture of love for freedom of life, which was his ultimate goal.

Psychology (sadness, alienation)

Sadness Youssef is a sad, bitter, and physically and psychologically isolated man who has paid a high price for his commitment to democracy and now wonders if the sacrifices he has made and the losses he has suffered are really worth it. His struggle for political freedom, for freedom of expression, and for individual rights, such as the right to doubt, to be different, and to think differently, has cost him his marriage, has alienated him from his three children, has taken away his university position, and has deprived him of six years of his personal freedom. He leaves prison destitute and anonymous, while the fruits of his political struggle are consumed by others without him.

Alienation Youssef tells Zineb that the people she introduced him to are cowards who have abandoned the ideals for democracy the moment the struggle became hard. Youssef tries to save what he has lost, at least what is still salvageable, such as, his relationship with his children, running after them, asking that they all resume living in the same house. But it is too late, as his daughter Meriem tells him. The children have grown up and are no longer easy to live with. Adel and Raja are aspiring actors who feel comfortable among their fellow students. Meriem lives with her boyfriend, and all his children prefer to avoid him if they can. In these conditions of deep isolation, irremediable losses, and total alienation from the society whose living conditions he fought to improve, Youssef perceives only one solution, exit by suicide.

SCENES

Wife: Fatma There is constant friction between Youssef and His wife. Youssef is working on a text by Gramsci, the Marxist philosopher, but his children, who are playing in the courtyard, prevent him from concentrating. He asks his wife, Fatma, who is washing wool in the courtyard, to make them keep quiet because they will not listen to him. Fatma tells him that she can work well in the noise, and so must he, too. He replies that he is talking about intellectual work and not about sweeping floors. She accuses him of being very proud and condescending. He grumbles that he should not have listened to those who convinced him that it was a good thing to have children.

On another night, Youssef comes home late. His wife accuses him of being a good-for-nothing husband and father and of having resigned his family responsibilities for a political activism that goes nowhere. She informs him that some disreputable looking people have come looking for him. He advises his wife to tell them that she doesn't know where he is if they return, and he leaves precipitously.



Girl Friend: Zineb Youssef and Zineb become lovers. He finds refuge at Zineb's, a university colleague. She goes out shopping for him and brings him news. Zineb brings him a radio so that he can listen to the news, and she informs him that his militant friend Raouf has been caught by the police. She also tells Youssef that his students are making a lot of noise on his behalf. Youssef asks Zineb to find him a Muslim disguise that would allow him to go out. She brings him the costume and models it for him. She also brings him some flowers and a newspaper, and she tells him that she has transmitted his message to his friends and awaits their answer. Zineb asks Youssef if he is married. He tells her that he has just divorced. He wants to know if she is seeing anyone. She tells him that she is single. They become lovers.



Youssef is arrested Despite his full beard and his Muslim costume, Youssef is spotted by the police and arrested. He is tortured and imprisoned for six years. Most of his militant friends are arrested. Those who are not detained collaborate with the regime.



After prison After six years, Youssef is freed but has no job. He returns to live with **Zineb Youssef is melancholic**. Zineb comes home late at night from an outing and finds Youssef sitting in bed. He tells her that he was unable to sleep, and that he had not been at work either. He complains that the office job she found for him does not suit him, that it is worse than prison. She tells him that there are rumors that the university is planning to hire him back. He doesn't believe it. She asks him if he has visited his children. He answers that he prefers to avoid the gaze of his wife, Fatma. He confides to Zineb that he misses his children although sometimes he would have liked to be alone and without family ties. She tells him that the children can come live with them. Youssef and Zineb quarrel. Zineb removes her make-up and slips under the sheets. She is tired and must wake up early the next day for the university. Youssef wants to make love to her. She refuses. He wants to know what this means. She tells him that she does not feel like making love and does not need to explain herself. He becomes furious. He accuses her of inviting him into her life only to give him false hopes. She tells him that he has changed since his return from prison, has become touchy and no longer takes care of himself. He accuses her of cheating on him with numerous lovers. She retorts that she belongs to no one and is free to see whom she wants. She asks him if he thinks he is the world conscience or God's prophet. She tells him that he has failed in life and disappointed all the friends she has introduced him to. He replies that they were the ones who betrayed the cause when the struggle became hard.



Mother Youssef visits his mother on the rainy night of Ashura (a Muslim day of fasting and atonement). The matriarch laments that no one comes to see her, and that the family home is a big void. She asks him if he has any news of his brother Abdallah. She grieves that Youssef and his brother are strangers to each other and do not socialize. She asks Youssef if everything is fine at his house. He mumbles that it is not his house, but his mother does hear him. Youssef asks the maid to fetch him the key to his old room. The maid tells Youssef that no one has been in there since his wife died. While he is rummaging through his old papers, his daughter Raja arrives and jumps into his arms.



Daughter: Meriem Meriem, Youssef's daughter, is visiting her father at Zineb's place. It is his forty-fifth birthday. He is happy and rushes to hug Meriem, but she quickly shields herself with the bouquet of flowers she brought him. He tells her that he is glad she has come and that she will taste his cuisine. She asks him if he cooks and rolls her eyes in disbelief. He asks where her brother Adel and her sister Raja are. She tells him that Adel intends to study in France and needs his financial help. That is one of the reasons why she has come to see him. Youssef confesses to his daughter Raja that he feels scattered and suggests that they all get together, her brother and sister, she, and he, to reconstitute the family. Raja tells him that this will be difficult because they have all grown up and become difficult to live with. She tells him that she and her friends are putting on a play, and she would like him to see it performed. He is angry that she decided to be an actress without consulting him. He advises her to get her feet on the ground and stop living in the clouds. She goes downstairs, angry, reminding him that this is what she learned to do while he was away. Youssef joins Raja on the ground floor. She accuses him of having repudiated them all, her, her siblings, and her mother. She reproaches him for not coming to the funeral of her mother. She tells him that she had thought to please him by playing in a show, but he always finds a word to hurt people. She tells him that the little money he sends her does not give him the right to control her life. **Youssef has a panic attack** Youssef feels unwell. His daughter helps the maid put him to bed and asks him to spend the night at the family home, but he refuses because he did not tell Zineb. He sinks into a panic attack:



Son: Raja He becomes. He asks where his two other children are, if they are not with Raja because Raja is hiding from him that they are either in trouble with the authorities or have joined the fundamentalists. Raja tells him that they are fine. He asks Raja to pack her things and come live with him at Zineb's. She refuses. He grabs a folder of his writings and leaves the house.



Friend: Sghaier

Youssef hears a familiar tune coming from a basement. It is the cellar of his old friend Sghaier, a weaver who fought in the Indochina war, and who still has a bullet lodged in his abdomen, which the doctors have not been able to remove. He is happy to see Youssef again, who asks him to make him one of his strong teas. They drink and reminisce. They decide to walk around the city. Their nocturnal exploration leads them to the most abandoned places in Tunis. In the mazes of the casbah, Youssef's deepest fears, the tortures he has experienced, come back to haunt him in violent hallucinations. He finds solace in smoking rooms and in the arms of Nana, an old friend who was much closer to Raouf, a fellow political activist, of whom no one has had news since his arrest. Sghaier, too, has his anxieties about women. He has never known a woman because he has never married. He drags with him a pastoral morality that forbids him sex before marriage. As Youssef watches him play childishly with Nana's girl, he asks Nana to introduce Sghaier to love. The old man panics and runs away when Nana takes his hand, and he falls down the stairs. Youssef rushes to him and carries him on his back, and they leave laughing. The mood of the two friends oscillates between deep melancholy and exuberance. Youssef is saddened to hear from Sghaier's how his brother Abdallah mistreated his family when he was absent. Sghaier is afraid of being caught by the police with Youssef's subversive writings that have not left him since he recovered them from the family home. The two also feel exuberant when listening to the song of the horse with golden horseshoes, which they see as allegorizing their own lives, a song about heroes whose sacrifice is forgotten by those they led to victory.



Son: Adel. The young man lives in an apartment with a group of actors. He hears his father calling him and asks his friends to tell him that he is not there. But his father sees him filming him secretly. While returning to Sghaier, Youssef stumbles upon Adel in the street, who takes off running away from him. Youssef, soaked, ragged, and dirty, walks up against the flow of the faithful in white robes chanting the name of Allah in the fervor of Ashura.



Daughter: Meriem Youssef and Adel drive to Meriem's. She has been living with a man in an apartment. She does not know that her father and brother are coming to see her. Her boyfriend opens the door for Youssef and Adel. Youssef sees his daughter sitting in her studio bed with a bedsheet around her chest. He feels sick and runs out to vomit.



Brother: Abdallah Youssef goes to see his brother Abdallah at the slaughterhouse where he works. He would like to sell him his inheritance in order to pay for his son Adel's studies in Europe. Youssef and Abdallah have a violent conversation in which Abdallah tells Youssef that he is a failure as a father, as a man, and as a citizen.



The horse with golden horseshoes Youssef compares his life to that of Zineb's horse. Young and energetic, it is adored for the great races that it wins. Old and tired, those who used to put golden horseshoes on its hoofs when it led them to great victories are now quick to lead it to the slaughterhouse, not even allowing it to enjoy a small, decent retirement as a token of recognition.



Youssef commits suicide. Youssef returns to the family home, takes a shower, and cuts his wrist vein.



QUESTIONS

1. What do you think about the structure of the film? How different or similar is it to the structures of the films you usually watch?
2. Do you think that the filmmaker has a goal in mind in structuring the film in that way? What would that goal be?
3. Some of the scenes in the film are very explicit. Tell one or two scenes that struck you and explain why.
4. What does Youssef mean when he says that religion and politics do not allow doubt?
5. Is this assertion contradictory to his work of political activism?
 - a. How?
 - b. How not?