

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Martial Frindéthié, PhD

Bent Familia / A Girl from a Good Family (1997)

Nouri Bouzid

OVERVIEW

Nouri Bouzid's *Bent Familia* is the indictment of a Tunisian society that aspires to modernism and proudly showcases its glittering façade, but which has paradoxically decided to walk towards modernity without the full contribution that women can make, preferring to maintain them in domestic subaltern positions. Bouzid studied film at the *Institut National Supérieur des Arts du Spectacle*, in Brussels, and he taught film at the *École des Arts et du Cinéma* in Tunis. In 1997, *Bent Familia* won the Audience Award (Golden Antigone) at the Montpellier Mediterranean Film Festival, the Best Actress Award at the Namur International Festival of French-speaking Film, and the OCIC Honorable Mention at the Venice Film Festival.

CHARACTERS

Amina : A mother of two, she interrupted her studies when she got married.
Aida : A divorced mother of two, she is a childhood friend of Amina's.
Fatiha : An Algerian refugee, she is a friend of Aida's.
Majid : Amina's overbearing husband
Slah : A divorced man and friend of Aida's

SYNOPSIS

During a visit to a clairvoyant, Aida, a divorced Tunisian mother of two, meets an old childhood friend, Amina. Amina is married to an authoritarian man who claims that he is a liberal and yet torments her and their two daughters. Aida introduces Amina to her friend Fatiha, an Algerian refugee who fled the civil war's horrors in her country and is waiting for a visa to go into exile in France. The meeting of the three women offers them the opportunity to talk about their lives, share their joys, expel their pains, and garner strength to survive a patriarchal society bent on silencing their voices and limiting their movements.

SCENES

PATRIARCHY: MEN'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS WOMEN

Single women: Harassment On their way back from the beach, the three women are harassed by two male motorists. Amina is frightened, and Fatiha is upset. To escape them, Aida drives carelessly. They park the car and blow off steam by taking their frustration on each other. They walk towards the sea, share snippets of their lives, and soon regain their good mood.



Daughters One of Majid's teenage daughters has a boy's name written on the palm of her hand. He scolds her for that and gathers his other daughter to warn them both to stay away from boys. He says he is a liberal father, but their sinful behavior might cause him to become strict.



Prospective Bride for Moez Amina's extended family is having dinner at her parents'. They discuss Amina's brother Moez's upcoming marriage. His prospective bride's origin, social class, and physical appearance do not meet the family's expectations. Amina's husband and mother do not like her social background. Moez's father advises his son to make sure that, like a car, his future wife's body and engine are in excellent condition, and that she has never been driven before.



Too young to marry Amina's youngest sister, Aziza, defends Moez's fiancée, whom she knows as a teaching colleague at the university. Aziza is immediately attacked for not being a model female herself because she has rejected all her suitors. Amina defends her younger sister's right to marry when she is ready instead of being given away to a stranger. Majid and his father-in-law do not approve of Amina's intervention. Majid scolds his wife, ordering her not to voice her opinion on the matter.



Divorced Women Aida calls Slah aside and tells him that her status of divorcee already invites gossip from the neighbors, and that he should avoid provoking more rumors with his frequent visits. Slah replies that a divorced man is as stigmatized and miserable as a divorced woman and needs affection, too.



Aida's son is embarrassed. Aida's son, Mourad, wants his mother to stop having male guests at her house. He hears his friends gossiping about his mother and is embarrassed. His mother tells him that it is not in her nature to close her door to people. Mourad urges his mother to get married, otherwise he will go live with his father.



Violence on women Fatiha is traumatized by the violence she experienced in Algeria, which she blames on a world governed by men. She wakes up at night crying. Aida and Amina try to comfort her. The women talk about the ways men treat them. Amina does not want to return to her husband. Aida dissuades her.



Amina meets her old friend Aida at the fortuneteller's Aida and her sister Meriem are consulting a clairvoyant because Meriem wants a male baby. Aida stumbles upon her old friend Amina. She, too, has come to see the old mystic because her husband is becoming distant. She thinks that he is having an affair and hopes to get help from the mystic to make him more loving. Amina gives the sisters a ride home, and Aida invites her in for coffee. Amina learns that Aida is divorced and never remarried. Slah, a friend of Aida's, is waiting for her on the staircase with her daughter and enters the apartment with them. Aida introduces Amina to her Algerian friend Fatiha and to Slah. Amina and her friends go out. The three friends decide to go out. They drive to the beach, where they recollect old happy days and talk about hopes for a renewal of those good times.



ANGRY HUSBAND

Majid is angry when his wife is late coming home. Majid, Amina's husband, is pacing the dining room waiting for his wife. He is upset that Amina did not ask for his permission to go out. When Amina arrives home, he warns her that he will no longer tolerate her absence. She explains that she met her old friend Aida at the fortuneteller's and spent some time with her in town. This infuriates Majid even more, who accuses his wife of permissiveness.



Majid assaults Amina. Majid gets angrier after Amina visits her friends a second time. When Amina returns home, her youngest daughter is waiting for her at the entrance, upset. The teenager urges her not to worry about her and to take care of herself. Amina goes to her room, undresses in front of her mirror, and explores her body to see how years of marriage have affected her. She takes out a bottle of pills from her purse and walks to the sink. Majid's call startles her, and the tablets spill onto the sink. Alone in her bedroom, Amina picks up a box of old pictures from her closet and reminisces about school and how Aida and she used to be happy. Majid's presence at the threshold of the bedroom startles her, and she quickly closes the box and puts it away. Majid joins her in bed. She refuses him. He rapes her.



Majid tries to mend things with his wife. Majid represents himself as the victim and paints Amina as the victimizer for refusing him sex. She is offended by his propensity to see her as the one at fault and to bring everything back to sex.



Amina wants a divorce. When Amina suggests that they get a divorce, Majid becomes furious. He stands up, lights a cigarette, and paces the room, shouting. He reminds Amina of all the financial sacrifices he makes for her. He threatens to cut off all financial support to his wife. He accuses her of being a bad example to her daughters and a bad daughter to her mother. Amina stands firm on her decision.



Mother counsels Amina Majid confiscates Amina's car keys and dismisses the maid. Amina's mother comes to get her. Majid drives his mother-in-law to Aida's place to convince Amina to return home. Amina's mother does not want to hear her daughter's explanation. For her, Majid is just a man who acts like one. Amina's mother gets angrier at her daughter when she realizes that Aida, with whom Amina has been staying, is a divorcee.



Majid returns Aida's car and papers Majid comes knocking on Aida's door. He wants to have a word with his wife, but she will not meet with him. He gives back Amina's identity papers and car keys.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

AIDA Aida is a hospitable, defiant, and sensitive person. She is a woman with a strong personality. Divorced and the subject of gossip, she lives her life with little attention to her neighbors' condemnations and speculations. Her home is a sanctuary for her friends in difficulty, who find security and affection there, although she herself is chasing after an ever-deferred love.

Hospitable To her son, who asks her to stop receiving men in her home because people insinuate things about her morality, Aida replies that her house is the house of God, and that she cannot shut her door to anyone. And when Fatiha asks her to go into exile in Europe with her, Aida replies that she must stay in case a soul in perdition comes seeking comfort. Aida's house is indeed a home for people in need of help. She welcomes Fatiha in her flight from the violence of Algeria's civil war. She welcomes Slah, the divorced man, who is stigmatized by the Tunisian patriarchal society. She also welcomes Amina in her escape from the physical and emotional abuse of her husband. And it is in Aida's home that all these broken wings recover their health before taking flight again.

Defiant From the point of view of traditional Tunisian society, Aida is a rebel. She refuses to conform to the diktat that a divorced woman must remain an unpopular pariah, a recluse who makes herself as invisible as possible to the public. In private, as in public, Aida affirms her presence without apology. She works in an environment frequented by men, which bothers her young brother. She displays her friendship with Slah, a single man, which earns her the gossip of her neighbors and the reproach of her son. She takes up the challenge of the men who, during their trip to the beach, harass them, which earns her Amina's discontent. And she loudly expresses her displeasure against Amina's mother's insinuations about divorced women.

Sensitive Slah compares Aida to a violin whose slightest touch triggers a reaction. It is an appreciation of the emotional and expressive character of Aida. She does not have a filter, but rather says what she feels when she feels it, even if it means sometimes pushing the cork too far and apologizing afterwards. From her friends (Slah, Amina, Fatiha) to her foes (Amina's mother, Majid, the harassing neighbor) to her sister, all have borne the brunt of Aida's emotivity. Aida's sensitivity and spontaneity enable her to put herself at the service of her friends when they need comfort.

AMINA Amina is a shy, loving, and courageous character, who gradually comes out of her shell. Amina's abusive relationship seems to have struck her with aphasia. She speaks little, but the expressions on her face say a lot about her suffering. By reuniting with Aida, Amina experiences a happiness she has not known since the day of her marriage to Majid.

Shy Trapped for too long in the straitjacket of an abusive traditionalist marriage, Amina does not always feel comfortable with the casualness of her two friends. To the sometimes-daring behavior and conversations of her friends, she offers a shy smile when she does not express her astonishment. Over time, however, with conversations and emotional hugs from her friends, Amina's shy smile and curled up body open up to new intensities. And it is she who, blushing, confesses to Fatiha that since she found Aida and her friends, she has been feeling sensations to which she is not accustomed.

Loving What did Amina want that Majid could not get her? What was she asking for the marriage to be saved? Simply that Majid return to her a little of the love she gave him. That he be a caring husband, that he take her out to eat at a restaurant. That he travel with her from time to time. That he be proud to be with her in public and show her off as his wife. Amina had to love her husband to make such requests, for a woman disdainful of her husband would never have wished to be on his arm in public. Majid was too selfish to understand that the mother who loved her children deeply was also a wife who loved her husband deeply and asked only for his love in return.

Courageous Over the course of the film Amina's courage develops. Hesitant at first and acquiescing to all the humiliations of her husband and society's patriarchal restrictions, her reunion with Aida and her meeting with Fatiha further opens her eyes to her oppression and infuses her with the courage to name her evil and consider the solution. "Divorce," which for Amina was a taboo word before her reunion with her friends, the life of a single woman, which she could not envision, frightens her less and less, and appears, on the contrary, as the way out. And when she utters the word "divorce" in front of her husband as a solution, he receives it as a shock, makes all kinds of threats to his wife, and is surprised that his intimidation does not sway her. The Amina who stands before him now, and who refuses his supplications and her mother's injunction to return to him, is no longer the submissive and shy wife he has tormented for years. She is another Amina, determined and courageous, who will not reverse her decision to emancipate herself. Majid has no choice but to admit defeat.

MAJID Majid is a hypocritical bully. He is the quintessential chauvinistic man and husband. He sees his wife as his property whose voice and movement he is entitled to control, and he cannot understand that she sees things otherwise.

Bully Majid is a bully to his family. He torments his children and is physically and psychologically abusive to his wife. He sees fault in everything she does without his permission. His domineering attitude is sometimes challenged by his teenage daughter who reminds him that her mother is an adult and should not be dictated to about how to live her life. The best example of his bullying is the scene in which he rapes his wife when she tells him that she is not in the mood for sex.

Hypocrite Majid has a representation of himself that contrasts with reality. He claims to be a liberal and yet torments his children and beats and rapes his wife. He claims that his brother-in-law's marriage is an event that concerns the whole family and therefore requires that family members be consulted, yet he will not allow Amina to offer her opinion. He asks that Amina interrupt her studies to stay at home to have children and take care of the house but does not miss an opportunity to complain that he is the provider of the family, who strives to protect everyone financially but receives in return only disrespect and ingratitude.

THEMES

SOCIETY (patriarchy, gender/objectification)

Patriarchy Majid and Slah are evidence that the preeminence of man is neither natural, nor permanent or real, only apparent. It is a constructed superiority that is based on a takeover of language by the masculine gender, and which sometimes escapes man's control. By codifying language (through grammar, glossary, and figures of speech) for the subjugation of woman, patriarchy, too, finds itself trapped in its own language game. For instance, Slah, the divorced man, confesses to Aida that the notion of a "divorced person" is as degrading for men as it is for women. For men, it connotes a state of "ex-ness," that is, ex-powerful, ex-potent, ex-respectable, and ex-man (in the patriarchal conception of the term). It is the fear of falling into this state of nothingness that leads Majid to take some drastic measures against Amina when she unexpectedly announces to him that she wants a divorce. Aida tells Amina that she should not have mentioned divorce, for it is a word that shakes men, causes them to become unhinged and enter a state of trance.

Gender/objectification Amina's extended family has gathered at her parents' home for dinner. This is an occasion to discuss Amina's young brother Moez's choice of a future bride. Moez's fiancée does not seem to meet his entire family's agreement. His mother does not like her Bedouin ethnic origin and her flat chest. Majid's does not like her social (working-class) status. As for Moez's father, he advises his son to choose carefully, for a woman is like a car. One must ensure that her body is impeccable, her engine in excellent condition, and most importantly that no one else has driven her before. The analogy Amina's father draws between a woman (a human being) and a car (an object) is telling. It reveals that for him, a wife is the husband's possession, just as are the furniture in his house and the cars in his garage. Consequently, the consideration that the husband accords to his wife is the same he would accord to any one of his possessions. Coming from Amina's father, in front of his daughter and his son-in-law, this indicates that this is also how he expects Majid to treat Amina. In fact, this is one of the complaints that Amina has against her husband, that he treats her like the furniture in the house or like a sex toy and has no warm feeling towards her. Aida's and Fatiha's disclosures of their own experiences with men suggest that, more than an isolated case, the objectification of women is rampant in North African societies

RELATIONSHIP (marriage, desire, friendship/sisterhood)

Marriage The fairytale stories that end with the line "and they lived happily ever after" seem to be an oddity in *Bent Familia*. Instead of being a moment of happiness, marriage in the film signifies women's loss of love, freedom, and happiness. If Majid and Amina are the representative couple of modern Tunisia, there is a case to be made about the unequal treatments that men and women receive in marriage in that north

African country. The expectations that marriage puts on women are unrealistic. As both the fortuneteller and Amina's mother advise Amina, the norm for a wife is to greet her husband's infidelities and bursts of anger with smiles and acceptance. In this context, a woman's demand for explanation, exchange and communication is perceived as disrespect towards her husband. Here, a woman's request for reciprocal love and intimacy is perceived as shameful and indecent.

Desire Majid never showed tenderness to his wife. His relations with her were always mechanical. She never dared to tell him until the day when, for once, he asked her what she wanted, without really wanting to hear what she had to say. She told him that she wanted to be held in his arms, to feel loved, to go out with him to eat at restaurants. Majid then withdrew and asked, "where does all this strange talk come from?" He wanted to know from where she got this new way of talking, these new sensations. He wanted to know where she learned all this, for, as far as he was concerned, this was not womanly. Desire, and especially sexual desire, is the prerogative of the husband only, who comes to his wife whenever he needs to fulfill it. The husband, as is the case with Majid, expects his wife to always be available to him. Any refusal is tantamount to a sin before God. Here, the wife is a machine of reproduction whose yearning for pleasure is immoral and must be kept under lock and key. And for the wife's pleasure to be better wrapped up and controlled, her movements must be monitored or simply prevented through isolation from her friends and the outside world. Amina confesses that she lost all her friends the moment she got married to Majid. Instead of bringing her love and fulfillment, marriage became for Amina, as for many Tunisian women, a system of incarceration.

Friendship/Sisterhood In *Bent Familia*, the women's act of "going out as women," which is synonymous with freedom and self-assertion, is already thwarted by the omnipresent masculine threat. Their entire conversation to and from the beach is taken over by their mourning of man in the absence of men (as they recall their first lovers) or by escaping man in the presence of men (as they maneuver their car to elude two harassing male motorists). This inescapable presence of the masculine figure undermines independent feminine existence. It sabotages the possibility of a female bond. In the film, the constant masculine intrusion into the female trip to the ocean almost leads to the breakdown of the women's unity. After they escape from the harassing motorists, the three women become hypersensitive; they get angry at each other. For a few seconds they stand on the beach a distance away from one another, facing different directions. However, as if to suggest that just as brotherhood is global and united in the subjugation of women, as Amina's father and husband have well indicated, sisterhood, too, should be united in the fight against patriarchy, the three women iron out their differences, and the beach on which they stand hugging becomes, once again, the space of reciprocity, of shared narratives, of mutual understanding. However, how long will these joint feminine efforts last before the lurking destabilizing force of masculinity comes blowing in, like a hurricane in a China shop? *Bent Familia* seems to suggest that in their fight against patriarchy women need to remain in a constant state of vigilance, in a permanent condition of self-consciousness, as patriarchy will not miss an opportunity to turn them against one another. The instability of feminine friendship tells a story: It is indicative of the extent to which, even in the absence of man, everything has been historically arranged so that, through the gift of culture, man's permanent preeminence is assured. Fatiha sums it up well when she asks: "Why did I grow up in a man's world?" That is, in a world constructed by men to guarantee the everlasting privileges of man.

PSYCHOLOGY (confinement/isolation, freedom, otherness, longing)

Confinement/isolation The interplay of inside and outside in *Bent Familia* is that of closure and openness, closure being the absence of freedom of expression and movement, and openness being the expression of feelings and mobility. It is no coincidence that the female characters choose outside as the site of their freedom. Aziza, Amina's youngest sister, threatens her parents with leaving the family home and renting an apartment of her own, from where she can be free to come and go without being indexed as a disgrace to the family. At home, within the walls of the family residence, speech and movement are held hostage by the patriarchal hierarchy. When Amina tries to offer her opinion about her younger sister's marital prospects, her father disapproves, and her husband shuts her up. Similarly, at home, within the walls of Majid's residence, Amina's movements are controlled by her husband, and her words are drawn from the vocabulary that Majid imposes on her as clean and worthy of women. Despite her appearance as

a free woman, Aida is also aware that what she does in the privacy of her apartment is spied on, gauged, and judged by her neighbors and even by her son. The inside, thus, becomes the space of restriction of speech and constriction of movement.

Freedom By contrast to the close space, the open air offers the possibility of liberated speech and movement beyond the Tunisian societal straitjacket, the straitjacket of patriarchy. The outside is liberating, and the quintessence of the outside is the beach, the most open place, where speech and movement can be expressed from the earth to the sky, from the beach to the horizon, without any physical barrier. In *Bent Familia*, it is at the beach, more than anywhere else, that the three friends confide in each other, share their sorrows, their joys, and their hopes. It is at the beach that Amina encourages Aida to remind her of the happy moments of their childhood. It is at the beach that Amina's smile lights up. It is also at the beach that conflicts between the three friends are resolved, when their confessions become painful and their words towards the other hurtful. The beach is the place of disclosure of sentiments, reconciliation, synthesis, and rebirth. It is upon their return from the beach that Amina's catharsis takes place and makes her say to her friends, "I do not want to go home."

Otherness Amina has threatened her husband Majid with divorce. This is a word that shook him. A divorced person in the Tunisian society is the "other," the outcast, the marginalized. So, Majid seizes his wife's car and papers to prevent her from leaving him. By so doing, Majid hopes to reduce his wife to nothingness, to make her existence even more contingent upon his presence, before she can do the same to him. By repossessing Amina's car, he also hopes to take away her ability for motion. As Amina takes refuge at Aida's, she finds an ally in Slah, the "divorcee," who understands her rebellion, and who infuses some strength into her so that she can continue to fight for the right to exist. Slah has been on the other side. He, too, has been branded by the language of patriarchy as "other," as non-being, and he now seems to realize that the notions of manhood and womanhood are illegitimate. Slah is a man who has not seen it coming, has not seen the language of patriarchy turn against him. Now that, like Aida, Fatiha, and Amina, he is a victim of that language, he becomes a defender of the women's cause, an ally in their struggle for recognition.

Longing *Bent Familia* features three women with various degrees of attachment to men and share the same tragic reality: Their lives are put on hold by men's tacit or manifest desire for supremacy. Aida is the single mother of two children, a young boy and a little girl. She has been divorced for seven years. Her ex-husband refuses to pay her any alimony, lest she should be independent enough to start dating other men. So, Aida is trying to raise her children the best she can by earning a living outside the home. Aida's unorthodox lifestyle, the fact that she is both a divorcee and a woman working outside the home, makes her the subject of wicked gossip by women and constant harassment by men. However, despite the neighbors' speculations that she is a woman of little virtue, Aida has been waiting for only one man, her Palestinian lover, Mahmed, held hostage in Gaza by a protracted peace negotiation between Palestinians and Israelis. For that man, Aida has gently rejected the advances of Slah, a good-natured divorced man who has been courting her for some time. Mahmed's constantly deferred arrival delays Aida's enjoyment of life as well.

Unlike her sister Aida, Meriem is still married. She has given two little girls to her husband, and although she claims that one should "accept everything the Lord gives," and that her daughters have brought good luck to her husband, Meriem, like her sister, is still waiting to experience her own happiness. She has a sense of incompleteness because she has not been able to give her husband the male child he desires. So, to disrupt the bad luck which somehow seems to make her a botched woman by causing her to give birth to girls only, to be a "true woman" who can give her husband his "mini him," she asks her sister Aida to take her to a fortuneteller and maker of wonders. By making it possible for her to give her husband a male child, the fortuneteller will, at the same time, make her a complete woman, a living woman.

It is on their visit to the oracle that Aida comes across an old friend, Amina. She, too, has come to see the fortuneteller, because she is afraid that her husband is deserting her for other women: He eats outside, comes home late, laden with the scents of other women. Amina is convinced that her husband is having an affair. However, the old oracle's advice to Amina is that she should neither listen to the voices of jealous

people who tell lies nor spy on her husband. Instead, she should make herself attractive, remain submissive and be grateful that her husband returns to her every night.

Thus, despite their seemingly individual concerns, Aida, Meriem and Amina all long for the same thing: the figure of a male character: Aida longs for Mahmed, Meriem desires a male child, and Amina wants to retain her husband on her own terms. Until their desires are satisfied, their own existences will be held hostage. In all three cases, they seek an absent man.

QUESTIONS

1. Aida and Slah are both divorced. However, Aida seems to cope better with solitude than does Slah. How can this be explained?
2. Why does Amina's friendship with Aida threaten Majid?
3. When Amina reproaches Majid for neglecting her, he replies: "That's the education I've received. That's all I know." What does this confession say about the way Tunisian patriarchal society has prepared its men for a global world with an accelerated empowerment of women in the domestic as well as professional spaces?
4. Fatiha says that she hates growing up in a country of men. What does she mean?
5. When Amina offers her opinion about her sister's marital status, her father is not happy and asks Majid, her husband, to control his wife. Why did he not directly address his daughter instead of asking his son-in-law to intervene?
6. From Aida's mother, who demands that Aida return to her abusive husband, to Aida's teenage daughter, who asks her to stand up for her rights, there is a drastic shift in compartment. How do you explain this shift? What prospect does it present for Tunisian society?
7. At the beginning of the movie, Slah is sitting on the staircase of Aida's apartment. At the end of the movie, we see Slah come down the stairs with a satisfied smile, and we see a despondent Majid walk and sit on the same staircase. How can you relate these two shots? What is the filmmaker trying to tell us?