

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Martial Frindéthié, PhD

## MAN OF ASHES / L'homme de cendres (1986)

Nouri Bouzid

### OVERVIEW

In a July 2011 interview, Nourid Bouzid stated that the success of *Man of Ashes* convinced him that all subjects were now accessible in Tunisia. Indeed, with this, his first film, Bouzid starts the cinematic provocation that will be his trademark in the films to follow. In *Man of Ashes*, nothing is taboo, or at least all taboos are questioned, ranging from patriarchy to black magic, through homosexuality, masturbation, prostitution, and pedophilia. Set in the town of Sfax, about 170 miles southeast of Tunis, Bouzid's first film won the Carthage Film Festival Gold Tanit, one of Africa's top cinema prizes.

### CHARACTERS

*Hachemi* : A young Tunisian woodworker  
*Farfat* : Hachemi's best friend  
*Ameur* : Hachemi's old boss  
*Mustapha* : Hachemi's father  
*Neffisa* : Hachemi's mother  
*Levy* : An old Jewish neighbor

### SYNOPSIS

A few days before Hachemi's wedding, while the women are busy cooking for the guests and the men are busy setting up the tent for the reception, a graffiti on a wall disrupts the atmosphere. His best friend, Farfat, is slandered for not being a man. Farfat and Hachemi were molested by the same man, their boss at the carpentry shop where they were apprentices. This secret they kept for years now comes to haunt Hachemi, plunging him into a deep melancholy and making him doubt his sexuality and his readiness to get married.

### SCENES

#### FARFAT

**The Past** As a child and an apprentice at Ameur's workshop in the city of Sfax, Hachemi witnesses another apprentice, his best friend, Farfat, being molested by their boss. He, too, was a victim of Ameur's depravity.



**Gossip and humiliation** Someone has written gossip on a wall, questioning the masculinity of Farfat. Hachemi asks one of his apprentices if he has any idea who wrote the graffiti that says "Farfat is not a man." The apprentice says he does not know. Hachemi asks his apprentice to fetch him fresh water from a neighbor's well. A large crowd has gathered in front of Farfat's house. Farfat's father is furious because he has seen the graffiti about his son. He says that Farfat is a disgrace to his family. He kicks Farfat out of the house and throws his things into the street. He does not want to hear any more about his shameful son. Farfat's mother tries to defend him and gets into an argument with her husband, who claims that he is the victim who needs support from her and not his son Farfat, who brought him dishonor. Farfat meets Hachemi at the workshop, cursing and raging, determined never to return home. He feels humiliated by his father's treatment. Hachemi is sad for his friend. He tries to calm him down and invites Farfat to sleep on the spare bed in the workshop, but Farfat prefers to make himself a bed under a tent on the rooftop.



### **Farfat's Humiliation, anger, revenge and escape**

At old Sejra's, Farfat gets angry with his friend Hazaiez the baker, who teases him by dancing flirtatiously with him. The two friends' argument comes to blows, and Hazaiez throws his past with Ameer in Farfat's face. Farfat leaves the party in anger. His friends are afraid that he might do something regrettable. Days ago, Farfat filed a knife to use on Ameer, and he goes to get it. With the help of Hachemi, Farfat escapes from Touil looking for him on his bike. Farfat goes to Ameer's home to confront him. A confident and arrogant Ameer is ready to fight Farfat if the latter will drop his knife. Hachemi, who is holding Farfat back, lets him run to Ameer and stab him in the lower abdomen. Ameer falls on his knees telling Farfat and Hachemi that he initiated them to woodworking, and that they will always be his apprentices. Then, Ameer falls on the ground and dies. Hachemi lifts Farfat on his shoulder, and with Touil and Hazaiez, they run from the crime scene. Farfat is walking on a railway track, trying to keep his balance. The police come looking for him. He is warned by his young friend Anis. Farfat leads the police through the maze of the medina, on the roofs of houses and ends up losing his pursuers, flying off roofs, like a bird. Armed with a stone, little Anis scratches off the wall the graffiti insulting Farfat.



### **HACHEMI**

**Upcoming Marriage** Hachemi is now a master woodworker in Sfax. He is ready to be married in a few days. His mother and aunts are busy in the kitchen preparing the *baklava* pastry for his wedding guests. His mother also purifies the house with incense. Hachemi seems preoccupied. The men are busy setting up the tent for the reception of Hachemi's wedding. His father asks him to help them, but Hachemi is not in the mood for the task. Melancholic, he watches the men work,. Hachemi walks through the courtyard without greeting the women. His mother joins him and tells him that his behavior is embarrassing. She wants to know why he is so morose.



**Stirring up the past** Hachemi goes up to the terrace of the house. His younger sister joins him there. He asks her if she remembers the year he was kicked out of school. She tells him that she was too young to remember. He asks her if she remembers Jacko. She remembers him and his sister Rosa well. She regrets that they left the city. Pictures from his album are scattered on the floor. Hachemi asks his mother if she remembers the year of Habib's death. She asks what made him think of it. His sister tells his mother that Hachemi has been stirring up the past since morning.



**Mr. Levy** Hachemi visits Mr. Levy, the father of his childhood friends Jacko and Rosa, in the old neighborhood, where Jews, Muslims, and Christians coexisted, before the new districts of Sfax dispersed them. Hachemi learns that his childhood friend Jacko is married in France and has a child. Jacko's sister Rosa now lives in America. Hachemi announces his upcoming marriage to Mr. Levy, who brings out his lute and a bottle of *boukha* (fig-based Tunisian liquor) to celebrate the news. Mr. Levy is proud of Hachemi, whom he introduced to carpentry before entrusting him to Ameer. At the end of his song, Mr. Levy offers his lute to Hachemi as a wedding present. The *boukha* got the better of Mr. Levy, who stretches out in his couch for a rest. Hachemi tells him that he came to see him because he needs to talk to him about something that happened a long time ago, that he couldn't tell his father, and that the secret is eating away at him. He starts to talk about Farfat and him, about the time they worked as apprentices at Ameer's workshop. Hachemi hears Mr. Levy snoring. He turns around and realizes that the old man has been sleeping all this time he was talking and has not heard his confession. Hachemi lets Mr. Levy rest and goes home. He returns to Mr. Levy's house and finds people in mourning. One of Mr. Levy's neighbors tells him that his old friend has died. A devastated Hachemi sits in Mr. Levy's living room with the other mourners.



**Father is angry** Hachemi's father, Mustapha, asks him how many of his friends he has invited to the wedding in order to plan the seats. Hachemi doesn't answer, and his father gets angry for being ignored. His mother tells him that she has invited Ameer's entire family. Hachemi says she should not have. His father yells at him that he is ungrateful after everything Ameer has done for him. Hachemi retorts, angrily, that he has paid his debt to Ameer. His father is furious at Hachemi's tone and reminds him, in case his upcoming wedding goes to his head, that he is still the father. Hachemi gets up and goes to his room. His sister and mother join him there. His sister brings him his medication and a glass of water. He pushes her aside and asks if he was expelled from school because he was an idiot.



**Hachemi has a breakdown** While Hachemi is at Mr. Levy's, his mother discreetly goes into his room to purify it with incense. She also hides under her pillows a prayer folded in a charm. Hachemi does not go straight home. He goes to his workshop, where, lulled by a rocking chair, he returns to his past, to the painful episodes with Ameer, and begins to sob. Overwhelmed with anger, he starts to break everything in his workshop. This wakes up one of his apprentices who was sleeping there. Hachemi sees him and becomes furious and chases the apprentice, who runs out of the workshop. Farfat arrives at the workshop drunk and rambling. Hachemi helps him to lie down in the bed of the workshop and settles himself in the rocking chair. Farfat confesses that he knows no one in Tunis. He asks Hachemi if he thinks that his mother will miss him. Hachemi does not spend the night in the room purified by his mother.



**The whipping** Hachemi comes home in the early morning. His mother is waiting for him on the doorstep with his sister. She smells wine in his breath and advises him to avoid his father, who is waiting in the living room. His father sees him and scolds him. Hachemi wants to go out again, but his mother, his sister and his brother block his way. He locks himself in his room. His mother calls an exorcist to deliver him from his demons by fumigations, incantations, and trances. The exorcism session does nothing. Hachemi tries to leave the house and is held back by the women. He tells them that he does not want this marriage and neither does God. His father, furious, threatens him and tells him that his marriage has been decided, and it will take place. He gets his whip and whips his son.



**Hachemi visits Touil** Hachemi visits his friend Touil, the blacksmith. He complains that his father treats him like a child. His friend tells him to be thankful that his father has taken on all the expenses of his marriage, and that soon he will be a married man. The *sirocco* will not change anything. Hachemi is not very enthusiastic about the idea of marriage. His friend asks him why he and Farfat look so unhappy. Hachemi says he is afraid that things will end badly for Farfat. Farfat tells Hachemi that he feels cramped in Sfax, that he wants to go far away and without luggage.



**Night-out** Hachemi goes on a night out during which he spends time with his friends Farfat, and Touil, drinking beer at the city's shipyard. Farfat gets drunk and has a breakdown. He complains about the treatment he receives from his father and the people of the city. He cries and throws himself into the sea from a jetty. Hachemi's parents are worried that he is still out. Hachemi comes home at five in the morning and goes straight to his room. He lies down in his bed and rubs himself sensually against his sheets. He remembers the unfortunate Farfat who needs help. He visits their friend Hazaiez, the baker, to collect some money for Farfat. Hazaiez is frustrated with Farfat, who stole his father's motorbike and put him on bad terms with his father. Hazaiez is not happy to help Farfat, but he recognizes that even when it is burned to the ground, friendship smolders under the ashes and burns those it touches. So, he gives some money to help Farfat. Hazaiez complains about his life as a single young man and tells Hachemi that he is lucky to be getting married soon.

**Party at Sejra's and Amina** After a drunken night at the bar, Hachemi's friends decide to take him to bury his bachelor life at the brothel of Sejra, an old prostitute converted into a madam. A young prostitute named Amina, dressed as a bride, plays for Hachemi the scene of the bridal room. Her softness and her reassuring beauty allow Hachemi to conquer his fears and go to the end of the intimacy.



The next day, Hachemi returns to Sejra. He has become attached to Amina and would like to live at Sejra's with Amina. Sejra tells him that she has always dreamed of having a son like him, but she advises Hachemi to forget Amina because in their profession, they have learned to be forgotten. Amina is sad. Hachemi leaves a scarf for Sejra to present to Amina as a present.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Levy** Mr. Levy is a nostalgic but open character. He is the opposite of Mustapha. Although he is proud of his children, Jacko and Rosa, he does not expect them to be the cause of his glory and honor. They are in France and America, communicating with him when they can. He sends them presents from home and is happy that they are happy with their respective families. His happiness is not contingent on their doing what is good for him. He is an open character with whom Hachemi likes to talk.

*Nostalgic* Old Levy is nostalgic for the days when his neighborhood was a multi-cultural hub. He tells Hachemi about what Sfax was like in those days, a cosmopolitan city where Jews, Muslims and Christians from all over the world lived together. It was also a time of lively evenings of meetings and music. He regrets that all this has evaporated, and that the people have gone to live separately, each with their own clan, and that the city has fallen silent.

*Open* Hachemi would not have had the conversation with his father that he has with Mr. Levy. This is because, unlike Hachemi's father who only talks to his son with a threat in his mouth and a whip in his hand, Mr. Levy is an open-minded man who takes the time to listen to Hachemi and tell him that he is proud of him and what he has become. It is unfortunate that unforeseen events cut short the conversation between the old Jew and the young Muslim.

**Mustapha** Mustapha is a conceited and clueless character. He is the prototype of the traditional Tunisian patriarch entrenched in a closed universe that prevents him from seeing the suffering of his son. Instead of trying to understand Hachemi and help him, he adds to the young man's anguish.

*Conceited* Mustapha seems to live only for his honor. He organizes a wedding for his son for which he intends to invite two thousand guests. It doesn't matter to him if Hachemi is happy or not, as long as at the end of the ceremony, for which he has taken charge of the expenses, his reputation in Sfax is magnified. It is, thus, out of the question that Hachemi avoid this marriage. He will force him by the whip, where the medication religiously given him by his sister, the constant fumigations of his mother, and the exorcism sessions of the old women had no effects.

*Clueless* Mustapha has no idea what the name of Ameer means to his son. He still sees Ameer as his son's benefactor. He does not know the harm he is doing to Hachemi by giving Ameer and his family a place of honor at Hachemi's wedding. Mustapha's rigidity has prevented him from understanding the pain his son has been going through since the age of ten, when Ameer abused his innocence.

**Hachemi** Hachemi is a melancholic, loyal, lonely, and conscientious character. He is a tormented young man, who takes refuge in a chronic melancholy. His father is too selfish to understand him and his mother too fragile to bear his pain, while his friends idealize his situation. Only old Levy, who died before he could talk to him, could perhaps have helped him.

*Melancholic* Hachemi was traumatized by the repeated rapes he suffered under his master carpenter, Ameer. Unable to talk about it to his parents entrenched in their intolerant conservatism, the young man suffers his trauma in silence in the grip of a constant sadness. Hachemi barely smiles. The sound of a lock, a door closing, a naked body, an old photo, the name of his attacker— everything reminds him of his ordeal and plunges him into indescribable melancholy.

*Loyal* When all Sfax seems to have abandoned Farfat, when his father kicks him out and he becomes a pariah, his loyal childhood friends, and particularly Hachemi, come to his aid. Hachemi consoles Farfat and offers his friend a bed in his workshop, but Farfat prefers the freedom that rooftops give him. And when Farfat, depressed and drunk, comes back from his night of drinking, crying about his fate, it is again Hachemi who is there to support him, console him, and put him to bed. Hachemi makes the rounds of his friends to collect money to help Farfat, who has decided to leave Sfax, and to whom Ameer refuses to pay the money he owes him.

*Lonely* Hachemi is a young man secluded in his torment. He wants to confide in someone. However, the conservative rigidity of his father and the traditional role of his mother in the Muslim context make such a conversation impossible. Hachemi turns to the Jew, Mr. Levy, who dies before the young man can confide in him.

*Conscientious* Hachemi is the owner of a workshop in which he employs Farfat and trains some young apprentices. His own apprenticeship could not have been easy, as he did it under the tutelage of a pedophile. But Hachemi's perseverance at work made him a proud craftsman of Sfax whose workshop never lacks orders. And above all, Hachemi became a master woodworker who trains his apprentices in the ethics of the profession.

**Farfat** Farfat is a promiscuous and angry character who acts on a whim. Hachemi once confided to Touil that he was afraid things would end badly for Farfat. He was right. Farfat's uncontrolled anger ended up making him a fugitive wanted for murder.

*Promiscuous* Touil, Farfat's blacksmith friend, tells him that he is afraid for him, that he fears that his friend will develop diseases through his promiscuity. If the molestation of the two childhood friends by Ameer has developed in Hachemi a withdrawal into melancholy, in Farfat, this molestation has developed a precocious sexual exuberance and drunkenness that worry his friends.

*Angry* Farfat is prone to excessive tantrums that make his friend Hachemi worry that things will end badly for him. One of his greatest episodes of anger occurs at Sejra's house, when, angry with Hazaiez, Farfat grabs the lady's poor cat and sends it spinning violently through the air. It is finally Ameer who pays the price of Farfat's repressed anger, when, with a stab in the lower abdomen, the young man makes him pay for what he made him endure years before.

## THEMES

### **SOCIETY** (patriarchy, identity)

*Patriarchy* Mustapha wants his son to marry a Muslim woman, who would give him good Muslim children to continue the family line in religious and cultural purity. He does not care if his son is ready. He does not care if his son loves his future wife. As he says himself, the men (he, the father of the bride-to-be, and Hachemi's uncles) have decided the wedding day. That is that. It is his honor that is at stake through this wedding for which he paid all the expenses, and for which he has invited two thousand people. Hachemi's nonchalance in helping to organize the wedding exasperated him. His reluctance to accept a marriage that his father offers him and a woman that he has chosen for him is insulting. And to make him pay for his insolence and his lack of gratitude, Mustapha whips his son, who dares to speak out against him, the fundamental father, guardian of the family identity.

*Identity* Identity is determined by family membership, which itself is shaped by religious beliefs. Thus, Hachemi's identity derives from his family, of whose morals the father is the guardian, and these morals are regulated by their Islamic faith. The father, thus, ensures the continuity of the family identity, which is only possible if the individual identity of each member conforms to the collective identity of the family. To ensure this, the father chooses the son's wife (as Mustapha does for Hachemi) or the daughter's husband, whose family background he knows. Here, the collective interest of the family takes precedence over personal interest and individual desires. The recalcitrant is brought to order by fumigation, exorcism sessions, pills, and whipping. These methods of coercion are not always effective in maintaining family order, as Hachemi shows us, who established some independence from the severe father.

### **RELATIONSHIPS** (Friendship, marriage, sexuality)



**Friendship** Relationships such as friendship and marriage are governed by religious and ethnic identity. For example, when Hachemi's mother noticed salt on her son's body while bathing him and reminded him that he was not allowed to bathe in the sea, the father immediately assumed that Hachemi was there with the Jewish boy Jacko. Mustapha ordered his son to stay away from Jacko, as each religious group should socialize only with its own. As a child, people in the neighborhood teased Hachemi that Jacko's sister, Rosa, would be his wife. Hachemi recalled this episode from his childhood to Mr. Levy, who laughed, noting that it was obviously only a jest. Mr. Levy continued, saying that though friendship between these adolescents was tolerated, the marriage between a Jew and a Muslim would be highly unlikely. Here, Mr. Levy agrees with Mustapha that at some point, each ethnic and religious group must stick together, separate from other groups, although Mustapha sees this separation much earlier, from early childhood.

**Marriage** Thus, Jews, Muslims, and Christians stuck to their religious and ethnic groups when it came to dating and marriage, for marriage was done from the perspective of loyalty to and perpetuation of the group, whose factor of identification was religion. Even sexual attraction is regulated, as it can lead to inter-religious mixing. The parents are the matchmakers and take care to choose their children's partners so as not to allow deviations that would undermine loyalty to the social group. Here, love is secondary. Hachemi's future wife, about whom we learn nothing in the film, was chosen for him by his parents, and the date of his wedding was set by both fathers. His opinion counts for little or nothing. And when he tells his father that he does not want this marriage, his father tries to persuade him with a whip.

**Sexuality** For Mustapha, Hachemi remains a child, and therefore punishable under his guardianship, as long as his sexuality has not developed. This day will come when he will have consummated his marriage, and not before. For Farfat, his sexuality will remain embryonic, because heterosexuality is the official state sexuality, especially since any other form of sexuality is punished by Tunisian law. Heterosexuality also seems to be the official sexuality of the Muslim religion. This makes Farfat's rumored homosexuality a breach of the religion. Although his friends tolerate Farfat's sexuality and worry, as does Touil the blacksmith, only about what his promiscuity might cost him, for Farfat's father, his son's homosexuality constitutes a disgrace to the family and a sin against God. So, he banishes his son and throws his belongings into the street for everyone to see, thereby cutting himself off from the damnation that Farfat embodies. Farfat's attempt to affirm his sexuality by sleeping with one of Sejra's daughters is useless in the eyes of his friend Hazaiez, who continues to chastise him, to call him a child, and to remind him of his rape by Ameer, the pedophile. For Farfat, therefore, the only alternative to reclaim his sexuality is to kill his demon, in the person of the one who molested him, Ameer. Farfat goes and fetches his knife, not to kill Hazaiez, the person who insulted him, but to kill Ameer, the person who made the insult possible.

## **APPEARANCE** (dishonesty, betrayal, secrecy)

**Dishonesty** Under a false air of honesty, Ameer is in fact dishonest. He is the opposite of what people think of him. For Hachemi's father, Ameer is an honorable man who made his son what he is today, a successful woodworker. So, he invited Ameer's whole family to his son's wedding and doesn't understand why Hachemi objects. He sees this opposition from Hachemi as pure ingratitude. Mr. Levy also has a high regard for Ameer, whom he considers an honest worker, and to whom he offered his workshop when he retired. Of course, Mr. Levy is far from imagining that Ameer does not always pay his employees, that Farfat, to whom Ameer owes money for work, has been to Ameer's shop on several occasions to ask for his money and never got paid. Mr. Levy and Hachemi's father are far from imagining that Ameer is a pedophile who abuses his apprentices and not the honorable man they think he is. The irony for Mustapha is that he is also far from imagining how right he is: Ameer has made Hachemi the person he is today but not in the sense that the father thinks. He has made Hachemi a chronic melancholic.

**Betrayal** It seems that all those who were responsible for training Hachemi betrayed him. Unintentionally, Mr. Levy betrayed Hachemi by placing him under the supervision of a pedophile in the person of his foreman, Ameer, who molested Hachemi and Farfat. Ameer thus betrayed the trust placed in him by Mr. Levy, but above all, he failed in his role as trainer by scarring for life the children who were entrusted to him, making them tormented subjects: Farfat became a drunkard and a brawler, and Hachemi became a chronic melancholic and a skeptic about his ability to sexually perform in bed. Hachemi's father, too, guided by an authoritarian patriarchy, has pushed his son further into the depths of depression with his whip and insults, making it impossible for his son to communicate openly with him about the past that is

eating away at him. It is to Mr. Levy that Hachemi turns for this, Mr. Levy, who, in a final act of betrayal, falls asleep under the effects of wine while the young man starts to tell him of his ordeal, and dies the day Hachemi returns to his place hoping to find him in better condition to listen to him.

**Secrecy** Hachemi's father entrusted his son to Mr. Levy, the Jewish master woodworker, to make a man out of him. Mr. Levy promised that father to make Hachemi a good woodworker, but as for making him a man, the responsibility falls to him, the father. And Mr. Levy in turn entrusted Hachemi to his best worker, Ameer. However, all these father figures betrayed Hachemi one way or another, and the young man bore the secret of their betrayal as a burden. Above all, it is a family and societal pride couched in religious fanaticism that betrays Hachemi and Farfat the most. That misplaced pride made the Farfat and Hachemi's ordeal a sin to be kept secret, and it protected the victimizer by presenting the victims as unworthy of family and societal life and, therefore, subject to banishment. Thus, Farfat's father banishes his son when this secret comes out as graffiti on a wall. There is no doubt that Hachemi's father, with his distorted loyalty to family honor and religion, would also have banished his son if Hachemi's name were mentioned along Farfat's on that wall. Was this secret really a secret? Hazaiez says that all Sfax knows about the "Ameer affair". Were Mustapha and Mr. Levy unaware of it? Did they, too, cover Ameer to protect family honor? Did Mr. Levy really fall asleep or did he pretend to sleep in order not to be officially privy to this not-so-secret secret of which nobody wanted to talk?

### **PAST (Memory)**

**Memory** The past is a bitter-sweet memory when Hachemi and Farfat evoke it. First, with the past come back their childhood memories, a playful, carefree time, where they used to stay for long days on the beaches watching the gulls gliding or wading in the water of the low tide, collecting crabs and seashells with Jacko. However, the past is also hurtful. Farfat and Hachemi look at an old photo of them and Jacko from when they were much younger. They reminisce about the happy times they spent together smoking, sunglasses on their noses, pretending to be big boys. But very quickly they remember the aggression suffered at the hands of Ameer, which spoils these moments of happiness. In the same way, standing on a pier, Hachemi sees himself years before with his small friends, playing naked in the water, comparing the scars of their circumcisions. As soon as the image of the naked body appears to Hachemi, so comes, too, the image of his aggressor, Ameer the pedophile, locking him in the workshop to have his way with him. The realm of childhood, which for many people is a place of refuge when the present becomes difficult to bear, is for Farfat and Hachemi a torture chamber. Ameer has made it intolerable.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. In a fit of anger against Farfat, Hazaiez tells him that everyone in the town of Sfax knows about Ameer's misdeeds, which supposes that both Mr. Levy and Mustapha (Hachemi's father) knew about it. What would be their reasons for keeping it secret?
2. Imagine that Hachemi were a girl raped by her employer. What do you think Mustapha's reaction would have been? What would be her fate in the town of Sfax?
3. For Hachemi's father, his son's marriage is almost like a matter of life or death. Why are Mustapha and Neffisa (Hachemi's mother) more emotionally invested in Hachemi's marriage than he himself is?
4. Just before the police come looking for him, there is a scene of Farfat balancing himself on a railroad track. What does that scene symbolize?
5. Hachemi desires something different than what his father wants for him. The whip of the father is the instrument that is meant to redirect or restructure Hachemi's desires to make them fit his father's/the familial desires. Can you discuss one or two devices (either physical or abstract) in your family or cultures that function as whips, structuring your desires according to familial/societal ideals?