

# Mahamat-Saleh Haroun's *A Season in France*: The human cost of the refugee crisis

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*The film screened at the 2017 Toronto film festival. It has now opened in the US.*

*Written and directed by Mahamat-Saleh Haroun*

The never-ending neo-colonial wars in the Middle East, Central Asia and parts of Africa, exacerbating the already terrible poverty in those regions, have driven millions upon millions to seek what they perceive to be more stable conditions in Western Europe.

The responsibility for the refugee crisis and the immense suffering involved lies entirely with the great powers led by the United States. Cynically and demagogically, American and European politicians of every stripe, from the extreme right to the so-called left, then demonize immigrants and blame them for mounting social and economic woes.

Within the intelligentsia and artistic circles, voices condemning this catastrophic situation have been shamefully few. The honorable exceptions in cinema include Gianfranco Rosi's *Fire at Sea* (2016); Mahdi Fleifel's short *A Drowning Man*, shown at the 2017 Toronto film festival; *Desierto* (2015, Jonás Cuarón), about the plight of Mexican immigrants; and a relative handful of western European documentaries and fiction films—*Samba* (2014, Olivier Nakache, Eric Toledano), *Si-o-se Pol* (2013, Henrik Peschel) and others.

Mahamat-Saleh Haroun's *A Season in France* is a serious effort to paint a picture of the human cost of the refugee crisis. Intentionally or not, the title as well as the events themselves bring to mind Arthur Rimbaud's extended poetic work, *A Season in Hell* (1873).

Haroun was born in 1961 in Abéché, Chad. He is a director and writer, known for *Bye Bye Africa* (1999), *Dry Season* (2006) and *A Screaming Man* (2010).

In his new film, Abbas (Eriq Ebouaney) has fled the war-torn Central African Republic—one of the 10 poorest countries in the world—with his two children. He continues to be tormented by the memory of his wife, murdered during the civil war in his native land. Having assured his kids they will all be welcomed in France, Abbas encounters the opposite: a horrible web of bureaucracy and personal abasement. Every road is blocked as he tries to obtain legal status.

In fact, his relationship with a Frenchwoman, Carole (Sandrine Bonnaire), is all that stands between his family and

homelessness. Also having fled Africa is his brother, Etienne (Bibi Tanga). Like Abbas, Etienne is educated, and like Abbas, working low-paying jobs, forced to shower in public baths and living in a makeshift hut.

As hardship piles on top of hardship, it all becomes too much. Etienne sets himself on fire in protest in a government office building. Eventually, Abbas and his children are forced to disappear.

Carole's parents were refugees too, as Haroun explained to an interviewer from Cineuropa, "they came to France from Poland during World War II. In a way, Carole found the story of her own parents in Abbas' story, and that brought them closer." Haroun told the same interviewer that the system for evaluating claims for asylum in France "is a disaster because it takes a long time for refugees to get a response to their request. In the meantime, they are destabilised, living in a kind of no man's land, under the shadow of a death sentence."

In an interview included in the film's production notes, Haroun explains he chose to make Abbas a refugee from the Central African Republic "for the sake of topicality: it's a country that is in difficulty, violence is still ongoing there, the civil war is not over. And it's a country that is closely bound to France historically ... Like many French-speaking African countries, it's a nation that was simply invented: France gave it a name, borders, a currency and a language ...

"Hence, the manner in which France treats Abbas is all the more unjust. I cut one scene in which we learn that Abbas' grandfather had served in the French army and had even died in France. Abbas is a French teacher; France is genuinely his second home. And language is a very strong bond between people, far stronger than the colour of one's skin."

Haroun noted that the plight of Syrian refugees was better known: "Yes, there is a kind of refugee hierarchy, almost a 'fashion.' There are those whose reason and need for leaving their country is widely known to the general public ... But what drives Central Africans from their country is less well known, they are not on the media radar, their problems are given less consideration. I'm not accusing anyone, but that's what I've observed. There are 400,000 refugees from the Central African Republic in Chad. I've visited their camps; they have fled appalling violence. No one flees their country with a smile on

their face.”

*A Season in France* is sincere and effective in portraying the poverty and humiliation that lead Etienne to psychologically unravel in the movie’s most disturbing moment. Overall, the film has a certain stiffness and lack of dramatic explosiveness, a muted quality. Conveying the dimensions of the ongoing tragedy is not an easy artistic undertaking.

Nonetheless, it is highly commendable that Haroun, now living in France, has spoken out.

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*This is a portion of an interview the WSWs conducted with Mahamat-Saleh Haroun at the Toronto film festival in 2000, where Bye Bye Africa was screened, about the state of life in Chad and the condition of African filmmaking.*

*David Walsh:* Could you describe the present dilemma of African cinema?

*Mahamat-Saleh Haroun:* The present dilemma is that a lot of African countries don’t have the money to produce movies, so in the French-speaking countries every film is produced with money coming from France. And when somebody gives you money, you know, he or she is expecting something in return. He or she has an idea, perhaps a fantasy of Africa. African filmmakers want or need their own images of Africa.

The best way is to make our movies with our own means, and that’s why with this movie, *Bye Bye Africa*, I tried to shoot it in video, and the budget is only about one hundred thousand American dollars. And also I got the money from Chad. If we can find small budgets, maybe we can make good movies, if we have something to say. It’s not the same as having \$10 million, you can’t do the same things.

When I go back to my country, people consider me to be a spokesman, so I have to explain what the problem is, what the situation is. I have to make cinema about these problems, I can’t make a comedy about this or that. You want first to gain respect. This is the situation of the African cinema now.

*DW:* Is this the situation in Chad in particular, or throughout the continent?

*MSH:* It’s the same situation in Mali, there is no cinema now. It has been privatized. Previously the cinemas were public, and then the government said, ‘We don’t have the money,’ so they privatized them and there is nobody to buy these cinemas. Every cinema is closed. The same situation in Angola, the two Congos, also in Cameroon, cinemas are turning into casinos. It’s the same situation in Central Africa. It’s the same situation in Kenya. So *Bye Bye Africa* is a kind of manifesto, you know. I thought that first I had to talk about this problem. Then I can go out and make another movie. It’s the same situation throughout most of Africa, it’s a tragedy. ...

Should we just shut up because we don’t have money? I don’t think so. We have stories to tell, we have to build our memory, we have to put all our problems on the table and we have to find solutions. Even if there is no money, making movies is very important. Because people need to see their own

images and on TV in Africa you always have about 80 percent of the images from Hollywood or Europe, so it’s a kind of domination, a kind of colonization through images. We need to make movies against these dominant movies. ...

We need art, because we need a kind of mirror to see ourselves, to see what’s going on, to see what’s wrong, what’s right. I think art is a mirror that reflects our own reality. This is a mediatized world and if you are invisible, you are dead. If we have war in Africa, hunger, if we are poor and nobody sees us, we are dead, we don’t have any existence. It’s very important. Art is not only a mirror that reflects. You have to try to say, ‘Oh, you are not well, there’s a problem there, how can I heal myself?’, something like that. It’s always a kind of resistance, you know, to say something, it’s memory. Every human being needs a memory. If we build up our memory we can make a choice, try to know where we can go, where we want to go. That’s the role of art. ...

*DW:* Could you describe the conditions for ordinary people in Chad?

*MSH:* The situation is very hard, because you have a lot of problems. Unemployment, poverty. There’s been a crisis, war. That’s the life. People are trying to deal with these conditions in all sorts of ways. You have a lot of Mafia types. People don’t want to pay taxes because they don’t have money. It’s very hard.

*DW:* Is it possible to imagine a rebirth of African cinema without profound economic and social change?

*MSH:* I don’t think it’s possible. But we are beginning to do things too. We have our own cinemas. People are very excited to see this movie. You have a lot of young people who are dreaming. Dreaming of another life. So I think it’s a commercially viable way of doing films. But it’s impossible to do it if the political and social situation is bad. That’s why I think if I go back home, even if I die, it’s important to struggle, because I think that my struggle is also a political struggle.

Being a filmmaker you’re not living in a dream world, you’re in reality, and the reality of Chad is bad politically, socially. You cannot say, ‘No, I am an artist, this is not my problem.’ I have a duty to struggle in a political way, and that is dangerous, but the solution is to say to people, if I die, that it’s for history, it’s for something, you have to follow me. I’m dead, it’s for history, but we have to continue. Our happiness is out there, to get it we have to struggle.



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