

Flee: The animated portrait of an Afghan refugee

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Flee, from Danish-French filmmaker Jonas Poher Rasmussen, is an evocative animated film that recounts the life story of Amin Nawabi (a pseudonym), who fled Afghanistan as a teenager in the early 1990s.

Amin's family ended up in Moscow when the US-backed mujahideen guerillas gained control of Afghanistan after the departure of Soviet troops in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet-allied regime three years later. The hair-raising account of his and his family's attempts to make their way to Scandinavia with the aid of human smugglers is moving and disturbing and speaks to the situation of tens of millions.

Flee was selected as the Danish entry for the Academy Award for Best International Feature Film, where it received a nomination, along with nominations in the Best Documentary Feature and Best Animated Feature categories, becoming the first film to be nominated in all three major categories simultaneously.

The film was clearly influenced by Ari Folman's *Waltz with Bashir* (2008), which proved once and for all that serious historical and social issues could be addressed in animation. *Flee*'s emotionally dynamic framing device involves the director's interviewing his friend Amin, whom he has known from their teen years at school together in Denmark.

The movie's opening sequences deal with the results of US policies toward Afghanistan beginning in the late 1970s, the origin of the country's tragic encounter with American imperialism that has lasted for decades. At that time, the Jimmy Carter administration adopted a strategy of ensnaring the Soviet Union in "its own Vietnam" by fomenting and financing an Islamist insurgency against the Stalinist-backed government in Kabul. It was the Afghans who were the main victims of this covert intervention, dubbed "Operation Cyclone" by the CIA, which unleashed a protracted civil war whose victims numbered over 1 million. Amin's father, an airline pilot, was arrested and murdered in prison by mujahideen forces.

Rasmussen remarks in the film's production notes that "Amin wanted to come to terms with his past—because all

the trauma associated with his childhood was creating distance between everyone in his life, not being able to share his full self had become a heavy burden for Amin. But he also wanted to share his story to make people understand what it means to flee for your life."

The animation allowed Amin to "feel comfortable with getting his story out, we could use his real voice in the film, but he could still remain anonymous," Rasmussen adds. "Which was also important for Amin as he has family who moved back to Afghanistan, and he wants to respect their privacy too."

The director continues, "The deeper he went into traumatic situations, the more concise details he would remember from his past. Over the course of three or four years, we did more than a dozen interviews together, each one stemming from an initial three-day session where Amin poured out his life story in often graphic and heartbreaking detail."

Rasmussen effectively intersperses archival footage with 2-D color animation sequences. Swedish composer Uno Helmersson's score provides a poetic coloring to Amin's recollections.

The youngest of five children, Amin, who recognizes he is gay at a young age, watches in the 1980s as Kabul television news reports that "terrorists [the Islamist forces] are receiving long-range missiles from the US government. The US wants a Vietnam War for the USSR in Afghanistan ... when the US supplies the terrorists with aid to destroy Afghanistan. Afghanistan could well become a second Vietnam for the US instead!"

Ultimately, with the outbreak of civil war in 1992, the family must flee. Amin describes Russia as "the only country that would grant us a tourist visa. ... We arrive after the fall of communism. People are starving, and the supermarkets are empty. The ruble keeps devaluating, and they keep printing new notes. ... There's a lot of crime and you can't trust the police. My big brother, who lives in Sweden, meets us in Moscow when we arrive. He rented an apartment for us. He fled in the '80s because he didn't want to go to war."

Human smugglers are the cheapest way out of the country at a cost of \$5,000 per person. “Those traffickers are such bastards, I think they’re a bunch of psychopaths,” says Amin. But the Russian police are worse, “the nastiest people imaginable.”

The family’s attempted escape from Moscow begins in a trailer with other refugees as young as eight months old, who then find themselves crammed into the hull of a unseaworthy vessel without a radio. In the nocturnal journey during a torrential downpour, the anguished passengers are eventually forced to “bail out the flooding boat.” A Norwegian ship with camera-clicking tourists appears, only offering to alert the Estonian authorities.

Amin, fluent in Dari, Russian and Danish, explains that the Estonian police “came to take us—men in camouflage with balaclavas and face paint. They scream and shout like crazy, ... I am crying and crying. I can’t stop. I can see the fear in the adults’ eyes. They’re terrified. ... We are locked inside an abandoned building. There are guards and on that same day, they run barbed wire around the building.”

He goes on, “People are in shock based on how they treated us. We thought we would be there for the rest of our lives. We have no idea what will happen to us. No one tells us anything. Journalists come and film us. We hope something will happen. But no! They get their footage of poor refugees and go home to do their TV shows. But nothing actually happens. It’s just us and the guards.”

Amin felt that his life had simply “ground to a halt.” Six months later, the Estonian authorities “gave us two options: stay here to rot or go back to Moscow. As soon as we arrive in Russia, we are arrested by the Russian police,” who want to send the refugees back to Afghanistan.

“But luckily, the Russian police were so corrupt that if we gave them the last of our money, they would let us go.” Amin describes an incident in which he is stopped by police and thrown into a paddy wagon with a young girl. They release him because he is penniless, but the girl’s fate is the cruelest! (“It’s one of the most horrible feelings I ever had.”)

The second flight from Russia is much more expensive and proves more successful. But Amin must tell the Danish authorities that he came directly from Afghanistan as the only surviving member of his family. It is an obligatory lie helping to cause a lifetime of haunting psychological damage.

Years go by before he can visit his siblings in Stockholm. Before the reunion, Amin is shown asking a Danish therapist for a pill to cure his homosexuality. Nonetheless, he comes out to his family, running the risk of being ostracized. Instead, there is a subtly delightful sequence in which his brother wordlessly drops him off at a gay bar.

Amin, now a successful academic, is married to his Danish lover, Kasper.

The filmmaker Rasmussen feels a deep affinity for Amin’s story. Coming from a Jewish family background, “the theme of flight and dislocation is especially important to me.” Fleeing from persecution and pogroms in early 20th century Russia, Rasmussen’s forebears sailed across the Baltic to Denmark, where his grandmother was born in his current hometown of Copenhagen.

“Her family—my family—applied for asylum, but they were denied,” the director says, “so they were forced to move again, this time to Germany. As a primary school student in Berlin, my grandmother was forced to stand before her classmates with a yellow star displayed prominently on her chest. Soon, she had to flee again, this time to England. It happened almost a century ago, but the story of her forced displacement and dislocation still hangs over my family.”

Amin’s story has a specifically painful, harrowing element. He fled one violently disintegrating society, Afghanistan, for another violently disintegrating one, Russia, trading one hellhole for another—all in his early teens. That he was gay in a culture that often persecutes homosexuals added to the overall trauma.

However, in the more general sense, Amin’s situation speaks to a vast human experience at present. The latest figures on displacement and dislocation are horrifying, an indictment of global capitalism. “While a full picture is yet to be established, UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] estimates that global forced displacement has surpassed 84 million at mid-2021.” The already acute refugee crisis has been greatly exacerbated by the pandemic.

The vast majority of the refugees come from countries that have either been direct targets of US and Western imperialist aggression and intrigue or are suffering as a result of decades of colonial domination and neocolonial occupation. Syria alone, which has been devastated for almost a decade by a bloody US-instigated civil war, accounts for over 13 million displaced people—more than half its pre-war population of 22 million.

Amin’s story is also inextricably linked to the dissolution of the USSR by the Stalinist gangsters in 1991. It is one tiny particle of that catastrophe, which now, in the form of the US-provoked proxy war between Ukraine and Russia, threatens world nuclear conflagration.



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