

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Martial Frindéthié, Ph.D.

A SEASON IN FRANCE / Une Saison en France (2017)

Mahamat-Saleh Haroun (1961-)

OVERVIEW

Auteur Mahamat-Saleh Haroun is Chad's first feature film director. Born in 1961 in Abéché, Chad, Haroun studied cinema at the Conservatoire Libre du Cinéma in Paris, then journalism at the Institut Technique in Bordeaux. Haroun has produced several documentaries and short films. He has produced eight feature films, including *Bye Bye Africa* (1999), *Abouna* (2002), *Daratt* (2006), *Sex, Okra and Salted Butter* (2008), *A Screaming Man* (2010), *Grigris* (2013), *A season in France* (2017), and *Lingui, Sacred Bonds* (2021). For a brief period, from February 2017 to February 2018, Haroun held the political post of Minister of Tourism, Culture and Crafts in Chad. Haroun's films have won him several awards and international accolades. In 2011, Haroun sat on the jury for the main competition that Robert De Niro chaired at the Cannes Film Festival. In 2012, Haroun was selected as a president of the 28th International Love Film Festival at Mons

Film Haroun insists that the focus of his film is on immigration. Nonetheless, *A season in France* is an exploration of themes as diverse as war, religion, love, quest, and many others. *A Season in France* did not live up to the critics' expectations, although it did win the 2018 Signis Award commendation:

Background With this film, "I wanted to give faces to the migrants," says Mahamat-Saleh Haroun. The film, therefore, had to differ from those films that show hordes of immigrants flooding across borders, where the anxieties of the individual subject are lost in the multiple. So, for this film about the immigrant, which also deals with many other related topics, the director convinced Eriq Ebouaney, an actor known for capturing emotion, to play the lead role. This 101-minute drama, set during one of the cyclic Central African civil wars, was entirely shot in France and in French, with an international cast. Ebouaney is a Franco-Cameroonian actor with an impressive filmography. Sandrine Bonnaire (Carole) is a French actress, film director, and screenwriter, who has appeared in over 40 films and won numerous awards.

CHARACTERS

Abbas Mahadjir A French language teacher in the Central African Republic who flees his war-torn country
Asma and Yacine Abba's two children
Carole Abbas' French girlfriend
Etienne Abbas' friend and compatriot

SYNOPSIS

Civil war rages in the Central African Republic. Abbas, his wife and their two children, Yacine and Asma, and Abbas' good friend, Etienne, try to find safety outside the Central African Republic. As they flee, Abbas' wife is killed by a rebel bullet. Somehow, Abbas, the children and Etienne end up in France, where they try to obtain refugee status from the French National Asylum Court. In the meantime, Abbas and Etienne trade their former respective hats of French teacher and philosophy teacher for those of a vegetable vendor for one and a security guard at a clothing store for the other, both working illegally. Etienne lives on a vacant lot, in a wooden shack built from salvaged materials, and heats himself in the winter with charcoal embers lit in a simple bucket beside his bed. Abbas, for his part, lives with his children here and there, in apartments lent temporarily by friends. Abbas' nights are haunted by nightmares of his flight from the Central African Republic and hallucinations in which he believes he sees his wife. However, with the help of his French girlfriend, Carole, Abbas does his best to cheer up his children, who miss their mother and their big house. back home, and who occasionally sink into melancholy. Carole proposes marriage to Abbas, but he reminds her that he still has no papers. Martine, Etienne's girlfriend, would also like to have a stable relationship with Etienne, but Etienne is so preoccupied by his stateless status that he cannot think of anything else. Moreover, Etienne dares not even reveal to Carole the precarious conditions in which he lives, nor his

status as an undocumented immigrant. When Etienne's and Abbas' final appeals are rejected by the National Asylum Court, and Etienne's shack catches fire, Etienne sets himself on fire on the premises of the National Asylum Court. He dies a few days later from his burns, and is buried in France in strict privacy, in the presence of Abbas, the children, Carole and Etienne's girlfriend, Martine. As for Abbas, who is ordered to leave the French territory, he takes refuge with his children at Carole's, who shelters him illegally. One day, when the police comes knocking on Carole's door and threaten her with imprisonment if it turns out that she is hiding Abbas in her home, Abbas realizes the risks he is exposing Carole to. In Carole's absence, Abbas surrenders himself to the immigration police and is deported from France. He leaves Carole a letter with no indication of his whereabouts. Devastated, Carole searches the city for Abbas and the children and goes to the Jungle of Calais (a camp for illegal immigrants hoping to cross into England). But it is too late; the camp has been dismantled, and Abbas, who had once advised Etienne that they all go back to Central Africa, is certainly already on a plane, with his children, towards that destination.

SCENES

Abbas in France Abbas wakes suddenly. He has just had a nightmare in which indistinct characters re running through a forest, out of breath, pursued by soldiers firing in their direction. Abbas leaves his room. In the corridor leading to the bathroom, he thinks he sees the image of his wife. He walks towards her. She steps back, then she vanishes. Asma, Abbas' ten-year-old daughter, tells her father that she misses her mother and has been dreaming about her again. Abbas takes Asma in his arms and tells her that he misses the girl's mother too. Abbas sings his daughter the nursery rhyme her mother used to sing to her, until the child falls asleep. Abbas's children are melancholic. They blame him for lying to them that they would be welcomed with open arms in France, and that they would have a better life. They ask their father if they will ever have their own apartment, rather than living in temporary apartments lent to them by friends. Abbas reassures the children that this is a temporary home, and that one day they will have a big house like the one they had in Bangui, with a room for each of them. The children smile again as they describe what their rooms would look like in the dream house.



Two friends Etienne ("Uncle Etienne" for the children) visits his friend Abbas. He brings a pizza for the kids and books for Abbas. Yacine recalls in a monologue that his uncle Etienne was a philosophy teacher and his father a French teacher in Bangui, Central Africa. Every morning, Etienne shaves and washes at the public bath, then gets dressed and takes up his job as a security guard outside a Parisian store. Abbas tells Etienne that it would be better for them to return to the Central African Republic. Etienne replies that the Central African Republic, like all of Africa, is just a fiction. Etienne says he would rather stay in France and live clandestinely. Abbas tells Etienne that what they have left is their dignity, and that it must be saved. Abbas invites Etienne to share his apartment. Etienne rejects Abbas' help and asks him to leave him alone.



Etienne and Martine Etienne comes to see his girlfriend, Martine, after a week's absence. Martine is not very happy. He tells her he did not contact her because he was busy. He says he has a present for her to make up for it. He pulls a papaya out of his bag. Martine cuts the papaya and shares it with Etienne. She pours herself some wine, drinks it and passes the glass to Etienne, who takes a sip. Martine undresses Etienne, who is visibly uncomfortable. They go to the bedroom. Etienne is unable to make love to Martine. He tells her that he has become impotent, that he is useless. Martine thinks Etienne is cheating on her and no longer desires her.



Etienne dies Etienne lives in a shack built from salvaged materials. He heats himself with a bucket full of coal, which he lights every evening. One day, Etienne finds his shack completely destroyed by fire. He searches through the rubble to find his important papers, but everything has burned. Etienne goes to the National Asylum Court and sets himself ablaze. Etienne is badly burned and hospitalized. Abbas and Martine, Etienne's girlfriend, go to visit him in hospital. Martine tells Abbas that Etienne never told her exactly where he lived. Etienne is buried in a Parisian cemetery. Only Abbas, Carole, the children and Martine attend Etienne's burial.



Selling vegetables Abbas' children, his son, Yacine, and his daughter, Asma, are still in bed. Abbas makes them breakfast, gives them a kiss, and leaves the house to start his day selling vegetables at the local market. His girlfriend, Carole, sells flowers at the stall right beside him.



Carole's birthday Abbas and the children visit Carole for her birthday. The children love Carole's apartment. They share a cake made by Carole, unwrap presents and dance. Carole has a letter for Abbas, which he waits to open when he gets home. With the children in bed, Abbas opens the envelope given to him by Carole. It is a letter from the National Asylum Court, informing him of his rejected appeal and giving him thirty days to leave France. He is also required to hand in his passport at the police station and report there once a week until his stay expires.



Abbas is impotent Abbas is unable to make love to Carole. She asks him to stop thinking about his deceased wife and live for himself and his children. Abbas tells her that he knows his wife is not coming back, but he has difficulty getting her out of his head.

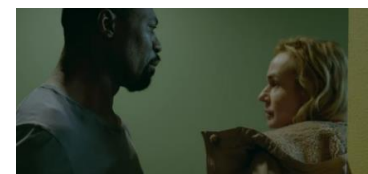


Abbas has a nervous breakdown Abbas has a breakdown at work. He throws away the vegetable crates and smashes the pumpkins. Nadine, his boss, tells him he is fired. Abbas and his children find another apartment to rent. The apartment is dilapidated, and both Abbas and the kids are visibly unhappy with it. Yacine eavesdrops on a conversation between the landlord and his father. The landlord is asking Abbas to vacate his apartment immediately because Abbas is late on the rent. Abbas begs him to give him one more week to make good on his rent. The landlord refuses. Abbas and the children go to Carole's, who opens her arms to them. The children are happy, and so are Carole and Abbas. While they are in bed, Carole suggests to Abbas that they get married. Abbas replies that he has no papers. The phone rings. Abbas is told that Etienne has just died.

Abbas is hunted down Abbas reminds Carole that his thirty days of respite have run out, and that he is now an undocumented immigrant. Carole tells him that there is still one last chance, which is the administrative court. Abbas starts sobbing in Carole's arms. She kisses him and reassures him that all will be well. Abbas' nightmares resume. Abbas also hallucinates. The police knock on Carole's door. They are looking for Abbas. Abbas and the children hide. Carole tells the police that she does not know Abbas' whereabouts. Carole learns from the police that Abbas never appealed to the administrative court as she had advised him to do.



Abbas and the children leave Abbas tells Carole that he loves her, and that he would not want her to get into trouble because of him. While Carole is out, Abbas and the children leave. Abbas leaves a letter for Carole in which he thanks her for her love and tells her that they are leaving for an unknown destination.



Carole looks for Abbas Carole is devastated. She searches the city for Abbas. She goes to the Calais Jungle (the camp for illegal immigrants hoping to cross the Channel to England). The Jungle has been dismantled. There is no one left there. Carole breaks down in tears.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

ABBAS An excellent father to his children, Asma and Yacine, Abbas is an emotional man. He cries his sorrows in secret so as not to alarm his children. The memory of his wife killed by Central African rebels haunts him, and he blames himself for not having been able to protect her.

Emotional Abbas is a very emotional man. Abbas and his children are undergoing difficult moments as undocumented immigrants. When he is overwhelmed, Abbas hides in the kitchen to cry, away from the children. To release his overflow of frustration, Abbas takes it out on the vegetables he sells. He breaks vegetable crates and smashes pumpkins. When his latest appeal for asylum is rejected by the National Asylum Court, Abbas sobs into Carole's arms, who consoles him and reassures him that there is still hope.

Caring Abbas is an attentive father to his children. For their well-being, he wakes up at dawn to go to work selling vegetables. He tries to give them a normal life in a very challenging context by grooming them before school, by helping them with their homework, by taking them to choose books from the local library, and by cooking for them, although the meal is too often limited to omelets. Abbas does everything he can to create normalcy in his children's lives

Guilt-ridden Madeleine, Abbas' wife, fell victim to rebel bullets during the family's flight from the Central African Republic. Abbas feels guilty for not having been able to protect Madeleine. Abbas is haunted by the memory of his wife, and has nightmarish nights, agitated by the sound of machineguns and his wife's frightened scream. Abbas confides in Carole that he cannot get Madeleine's tragedy out of his head.

THE CHILDREN (YACINE AND ASMA) From the death of their mother in the Central African Republic to their living as undocumented immigrants in France, Abbas's children, Yacine and Asma, have experienced a lifestyle unlike that of most children their age. This has made them mature quickly and be on their toes. Nevertheless, they remain children, who are imaginative and easily seduced by the fantastic.

Mature Yacine and Asma have grown beyond their years. This is due to the fact that they are confronted with a situation not faced most children their age. Abbas' two children have learned to read their father with remarkable acuity. They know when things are about to fall apart, when their father is depressed, and they anticipate their next move. Always on their guard, they never take anything for granted and never put themselves totally at ease because they know that at any moment they could be hunted down, and even expelled from the French territory.

Melancholic The unstable situation in which Abbas' children find themselves as a result of their undocumented status plunges them into melancholy. Yacine, the boy, is reserved and speaks little. Asma, though voluble, is constantly thinking of her mother and the prosperous, peaceful life her family had in Bangui, in Africa. She tells her father that she hopes they will one day go to a country where no one will chase them away.

Imaginative Despite the melancholy that often overwhelms them, Abbas' children, like many children their age, remain little dreamers who marvel at the slightest thing and let their imagination go wild. To lift them out of their sadness, Abbas takes out a map and asks the children to choose the country of their next destination. The children then embark on an imaginary trip around the world, picturing themselves as guests in the most whimsical of places: Brazil and its carnival, Morocco and its sunshine, Chad and its proximity to Bangui, and so on. It takes very little for them, like that moment of sharing cake and dancing at Carole's birthday party, to let their sense of fantasy and wonder get the better of their melancholy.

CAROLE Carole is a supportive friend to Abbas. She stands by his sides in his most trying moments. She tries to instill in him a faith in the future. Abbas unfortunately does not follow Carole's last advice to fight his deportation at the Administrative Court, and he runs out of time.

Supportive Carole has been a great support to Abbas and his children in their time of need. For Abbas, Carole is not only a lover, but also a compassionate friend, helping him with his administrative errands. When Abbas is depressed or desperate, he finds in Carole a sympathetic ear and shoulders to lean on. When Abbas is hounded by the immigration police, he finds refuge in Carole's home, before deciding to leave so as not to get his girlfriend into trouble.

Optimistic Abbas' situation has more than once driven him to despair. Each time, Carole is there to console him, reassure him and tell him to believe in the future. When Abbas' last appeal is rejected by the National Asylum Court, and he is given 30 days to leave France, Carole hides Abbas and the children in her home, convinced that there is still hope. She asks Abbas to lodge a final appeal with the Administrative Court. Unfortunately, Abbas does not follow Carole's advice.

ETIENNE Etienne is a caring individual, concerned about his friend Abbas' and Abbas' children wellbeing. However, Etienne himself is harboring his own difficulties, which he hides from the people around him out of pride. Etienne's demons get the better of him, and he kills himself.

Caring Etienne understands the financial difficulties his friend Abbas faces in raising his children with dignity. Meals, as the children complain, are too often limited to omelets. So, every time Etienne visits Abbas, he brings them a pizza to break their dietary routine. Abbas is very grateful, and tells Etienne that he should not always bring food. Etienne does not just think about the children. He also brings Abbas books to help him escape the harsh reality of exile.

Proud In all the long months Etienne dated Martine, he never revealed to her where he lived or what his legal status was. Etienne hid his home and his undocumented status from Martine not so much out of secrecy as out of pride, refusing to allow her look down on him or feel sorry for him. And when his house catches fire, and Abbas invites him to share his cramped apartment, Etienne refuses. His pride and honor have already taken a blow with France's refusal to grant him asylum, and he has decided that he will not live with this humiliation.

Wary Etienne is a man frugal on smiles. Whether with Abbas or his girlfriend Martine, Etienne remains cautious. This is because both the war in the Central African Republic and his difficult exile in France had made him a wary man, reluctant to open up and confide in others. Maybe Etienne would be alive if he had been a little more open to Abbas or Martine, a little less guarded.

THEMES

War Mahamat-Saleh Haroun once again touches on one of the subjects that preoccupy him, that of the interminable wars raging in Africa, tearing families apart, depopulating the continent and retarding its development. Abbas, a French teacher in Bangui, in the Central African Republic, is trying to save his family from war by leaving his country, which is plunged in a civil war. As they flee, Abbas' wife is killed by a militia bullet. The mother's sudden and premature death destabilizes Abbas' family. The children sink into melancholy. Yacine, in particular, Abbas' son, loses the smile so often seen in children his age, and Asma, the daughter, although usually in good spirits, misses her mother and talks often about her, especially the lullabies she used to sing her and the stories she used to tell her. As for Abbas, his nights are haunted by memories of his family's escape into the forest, the militia hunt and the death of his wife. He hallucinates, thinks he sees his wife, and speaks into the void. The most destructive effect of the war is to have turned this family, who thought they had found refuge in France, stateless and homeless. Abbas' latest efforts to obtain refugee status from the National Asylum Court having failed, Abbas and his children are living like fugitives, hiding from the police and continually changing residences at the whim of friends' kindnesses. Abbas finds this situation unbearable and dishonorable. He decides to return with his children to the hell of Central Africa.

Immigration Carole, Abbas' girlfriend, is of Polish origin. Although her integration into French social fabric was difficult at first, she is now French and lives a life without the turmoil experienced by Abbas and Etienne. Haroun's film does not focus on the condition of the integrated immigrant, but rather on that of the immigrant who, while waiting for his status to be regularized, lives in fear of deportation. Exile has depersonalized this immigrant, turning him into a shell devoid of honor, freedom and hope. Indeed, for Etienne, a philosophy lecturer who had to flee his country because of the insecurity brought on by war, to

be forced to live in a wooden shack, on a public plot of land, and to bathe every day at the public baths before going to his job as a security guard, is quite humiliating. It is similarly demeaning for Abbas, a French teacher in Bangui, to flee his large home and end up sleeping in borrowed apartments with his two children and selling vegetables at the market. If Etienne and Abbas, the faces of the illegal immigrant, are in this disgraceful situation, it is because they cannot, at least not yet aspire, like any other free person living on French soil, to jobs in line with their training and to housing in line with the status these jobs would confer on them. Etienne and Abbas are not free to move around in France. They are on probation, and this probation, which limits their choices and aspirations also renders them impotent, incapable of desiring and loving. It is this depersonalization of the illegal immigrant, his reduction to the status of a thing, that drives Etienne to suicide. As for Abbas, he chooses to return to the Central African Republic, where he will rediscover his personality and perhaps even die, but die as a man rather than exist as a thing in France.

Religion At the Parisian cemetery where the burial of his friend Etienne, affectionately known to his children as “Tonton Etienne”, is taking place, Abbas says a prayer for his companion's soul. Abbas' prayer, recited in Arabic, seems to surprise his girlfriend, Carole, who apparently discovers for the first time that Abbas is a Muslim. Etienne, by his name, is obviously a Christian. Thus, the friendship between Etienne and Abbas, which began in the Central African Republic, continued on the road to escape the war-torn country, and carries on in France, is that of a Muslim and a Christian. And yet, the origins of the civil war that caused both Etienne and Abbas to share the same fate of exile and statelessness is indeed a religious chasm pitting Muslims against Christians. The long civil war in the Central African Republic began when, between 2004 and 2008, rebel groups from the Muslim north took up arms against their government, using the marginalization of Muslim populations as a pretext. Since then, the Central African Republic has known no peace, sinking into a succession of civil wars, each with a more far-fetched pretext than the last. Indeed, all too often in Africa, religion is used as a pretext for politicians to take up arms in their quest for power. Here, the filmmaker shows that the religious pretext is a farce, and that in the end, it is all about the quest for power, in which people, be they Muslims or Christians or whatever religion they belong to, become the butt of the joke at a very high cost.

Quest *A Season in France* is also a film about quest. The event that drove Abbas and his family, as well as Etienne, into exile was the quest for power by Central African politicians, who, using false pretexts, armed opposing factions and turned the country into a trap closing in on the civilian population. In exile, Etienne and Abbas and Abbas' children have their own quest: looking for the security they cannot find in their own country. This security becomes elusive in France. Their various efforts to obtain refugee status meet with refusal from the French administration. After several unsuccessful attempts to gain legal acceptance on French soil, Etienne, Abbas and the children are ordered to leave France. Etienne commits suicide, while Abbas returns to the Central African Republic to continue his quest for dignity and security, and to enable his children to fulfill their dream of recovering the big home and less stressful life they used to have in the Central African Republic. Abbas' departure is devastating for his girlfriend, Carole, who had hoped to marry him, and who in this quest had helped him, accompanying him to the National Asylum Court, giving him hope and compassion, sheltering him clandestinely at a huge risk to herself. The same goes for Etienne's girlfriend, Martine, who had also hoped to have a more fulfilling relationship with Etienne, and who sees her hopes dashed by his suicide.

Humiliation Exile, as the cases of Abbas and his compatriot Etienne demonstrate, is seldom honorable. It is a humiliating situation. Respectively a French teacher and a philosophy teacher in the Central African Republic, Abbas and Etienne, who have no legal papers in France, find themselves a vegetable vendor and a security guard in front of a store. Etienne lives at the bottom of a wasteland, in a shack he built himself from salvaged materials, and he heats himself with a simple bucket filled with charcoal embers. As for Abbas, he has apartments lent to him for very short periods. Having been evicted for unpaid rent from the last apartment he was able to obtain on his own, he finds refuge with his girlfriend, Carole, until the immigration police come after him. This is the kind of disgrace that keeps Etienne from talking to his girlfriend, Martine, about his condition. Etienne would not even reveal to Martine where he lives. When Etienne's shack catches fire from his improvised heater, and his last recourse for asylum runs out, rather than return to the Central African Republic, as Abbas advises him, Etienne sets himself on fire in the offices of the National Asylum Court. As for Abbas, he finds it unbearable to play hide-and-seek with the police in front of his children and in front of Carole, who is sheltering him illegally, in breach of the law. Abbas decides to return to the Central African Republic, the country he fled.

Love/Sexuality Can an exiled person truly love until he or she has satisfied the basic need to be a free man or woman, able to walk down the street without looking over his or her shoulders, or to sleep without the fear of being awakened by the sound of immigration police boots at the door? Haroun's answer to this question seems to be a resounding no. Indeed, troubled by their condition as undocumented immigrants, which seems to have no end in sight, neither Etienne nor Abbas is able to get an erection when they are in bed with their respective girlfriends, Martine and Carole. The exile's sexuality is contingent on the legality of his condition. Etienne and Abbas' sexuality has been put on hold by the French National Court of Asylum. This will remain the case, at least in France, until the court rules in their favor. When Carole suggests to Abbas that they get married, Abbas replies that she is well aware that his legal situation has not yet been resolved, and that he does not yet have his papers. Everything happens as if the papers that Etienne and Abbas are waiting for are also the authorization to express their sexuality; as if the French Asylum Court were telling them, "No sex on French soil until your immigration status has been regularized."

Anxiety/Depression Anxiety and depression are recurrent discomforts for immigrants awaiting regularization of their status. When everything is in limbo and nothing seems to be moving in the direction of improving the immigrant's condition, anxiety about what will happen the next day causes the immigrant to become depressed, leading him or her to act rashly. The day after his appeal to the National Asylum Court fails, Abbas loses control and sabotages the thing that in these uncertain times gives sustenance to his family. In a sudden fury, Abbas throws the vegetables to the ground and breaks the crates. His boss, who could care less about his moods, fires him from his job. For Etienne, who no longer has the right to stay on the French soil, nor the right to live in a shack (because it caught fire), depression leads him to take his own life by self-immolation. Depression and anxiety do not only affect the adults. Abbas' children also know that their situation is unstable and that it could topple at any moment. The children see the anguish in their father's eyes, and this causes them anguish and melancholy, too. Yacine and his sister ask their father when they will have to leave their apartment, as they know they are only there temporarily. They ask him when they can expect to eat something other than omelets. When they see their father falling in love with Carol, the children are happy that he has found some joy again, and they, too, with him. But they are concerned about the probable end of this romance, which will throw them further into uncertainty. They want to know if their father will sleep in Carole's bed, because that would be a great story of stability. Unfortunately, it only lasts a few days. The police arrive, hot on their father's trail, and anguish takes over again. They must leave, like the anguished fugitives they are.

Memory Memory is painful, but it can also be a protective shelter against the sorrows of life. The memories that turn into nightmares and haunt Abbas' Parisian sleep are those of his family, terrorized in the Central African bush as they flee a Central African Republic that has become a trap for its inhabitants. They are memories of his wife, who is gunned down, and whom he is forced to leave behind to save their two children. This memory is all the more debilitating in that it renders Abbas impotent, unable to get an erection when in bed with Carole, his French girlfriend. For Abbas' children, the memory of the time before they fled the Central African Republic and moved to Paris is a haven of peace. It is the time of their mother, who sang nursery rhymes to them in their native language. It is the big family home. It is Dad, the respected French teacher, and Uncle Etienne, the celebrated philosophy professor. Ultimately, Abbas tells himself that, even if it is impossible for him to recover this lost paradise in its entirety, even if the bullets will continue to whistle close to his nervous body, but above all, even if the mother of his children will never be with them again, at least, in the Central African Republic, there is a chance that his diploma as a French teacher will still be useful to him, that he will find his home again, that his dignity as a man will be restored to him, and that his children will be proud of him. In the Central African Republic, at least, he will still be at home, and will not have to hide from the police when he takes his children to borrow books from the library. So, Abbas decides to go back and rebuild his lost paradise in the hellish Central African Republic.

Statelessness/migration The 1954 UN Convention defines a stateless person as any person who does not enjoy the protection of any state. From this point of view, Abbas is right to consider himself stateless. Abbas and his family fled the Central African Republic because the country, which had become dangerous as a result of the civil war waged by men who seek power at any and all costs, was unable to guarantee their protection. In fact, Abbas' wife, the mother of his children, fell victim to bullets fired by one of the factions involved in the struggle for power. By fleeing the Central African Republic to take refuge in France, Abbas hoped to find in this so-called human rights country the protection he was unable to enjoy in his own country. Instead of the expected safety, what Abbas finds in France is the inhospitality of a country that

forces him to live in hiding, to work illegally, to sleep with one eye open, to raise his children in dishonor, and to love on the run. In France, as in the Central African Republic, Abbas is a vulnerable man, without rights, without protection. In fact, he is even an undesirable, urged by the French authorities to leave France while all his legal recourses to obtain refugee status for himself and his children vanish. Etienne, who is in the same situation as Abbas, chooses death rather than return to the Central African Republic. As for Abbas, between two countries that reject him, the Central African Republic and France, he chooses the former, where he once had a little dignity, which he hopes to regain one day. Faced with their stateless condition, Etienne kills himself in despair, and Abbas chooses to live on, hoping for a better tomorrow.

Hope vs Despair Abbas has two young children for whom he must continue to hope. For them, he fled the Central African Republic; for them, he demeans himself in France, illegally working in vegetable markets and accepting the condescending tirade of a greedy, insensitive landlord. Abbas decides to return to his war-torn country for the sake of his children. Hope drives people to seemingly irrational decisions. How else to explain Abbas's return to the Central African hotbed he once fled? If not to give himself and his children a chance at life. And it is because hope is turned towards life that it differs from despair, which is turned towards death. Whereas Abbas' irrational act is life-oriented, Etienne's desperate act of killing himself in the building of the National Asylum Court is death-oriented. Etienne's last attempt to remain legally on French soil having been unsuccessful, and his shack having burned down, Etienne rejects Abbas' plea that they all return to Africa. Etienne tells Abbas that Africa is an illusion, that it simply does not exist. Etienne refuses Abbas' offer to come and share his small apartment with him, and urges his friend to leave him alone. The next day, Etienne goes to the National Court of Asylum, the tribunal that has killed all hope in him and thrown him into despair, and he immolates himself. A few days later, Etienne succumbs to his burns and, ironically, is buried in a Parisian cemetery. France, which refused to let Etienne live on its soil, accepts him in the death that despair threw him.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you think of the French authorities' handling of the case of Etienne and his children? Elaborate on your answer.
2. How would the situation of Abbas and his children and that of Etienne have been handled by the authorities in your country?
3. Explain the symbolism of the papaya that Etienne offers his girlfriend Martine to make amends.
4. Does Etienne's self-immolation serve a purpose? What purpose is that?
5. Many people think that suicide is a cowardly act. Do you agree? Explain your answer.
6. Can you find the irony in Etienne's burial? Explain it.
7. Was Abbas fair to Carole? Explain your answer.
8. Imagine what happens to Abbas and his children?