

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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WAITING FOR HAPPINESS / Heremakono (2002)

Abderrahmane Sissako (1961-)

OVERVIEW

Auteur Abderrahmane Sissako is a Malian-Mauritanian film director and producer. His father is from Mali and his mother from Mauritania. Sissako was born in 1961 in Kiffa, Mauritania, and grew up in Mali, where he completed his primary and secondary education. Sissako returned to Mauritania at age 19, and, thanks to a study grant, flew to the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography of Moscow to study film between 1983 and 1989. Sissako has been living in France since the early 1990s. He is married to Ethiopian filmmaker Maji-da Abdi. Sissako has produced a handful of shorts and documentaries, and a number of feature films, including *Life on Earth* (1998), *Waiting for Happiness* (2002), *Abouna* (2002), *Bamako* (2006), *Timbaktu* (2014), which garnered a dozen awards, and *Black Tea* (2024). In 2023, along with fifty other activists from around the world, Sissako signed a letter calling for an end to hostilities in the war between Israeli forces and Hamas and for Israel to withdraw from the Gaza Strip.

Film While the characters in *Waiting for Happiness* wait for the conditions for true happiness to be met, life passes them by, and they miss the opportunity to live it. In this film, Sissako wants to invite viewers to live in the moment, rather than postponing enjoyment for a wellbeing, often promised by the engineers of globalization, that may never arrive. Among other themes, the film deals with globalization, happiness, loneliness and death. *Waiting for Happiness* won the International Federation of Film Critics' FIPRESCI Award at the 2002 Cannes Festival.

Background *Waiting for Happiness* is a translation of the Bambara word *heremakono*, which is a name carried by several villages in Mali and Guinea. *Waiting for Happiness* is a 96-minute drama produced with a 1.4 million Euro budget. The film was shot on location, in the Mauritanian city of Nouadhibou. For this film, Sissako has used non-professional actors, to whom he allowed the freedom of improvisation. The languages spoken in the film are French, Assaniya (A Mauritanian variety of Arabic) and Bambara.

CHARACTERS

Abdallah (Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Mohamed) A seventeen-year-old who, after many years in his father's country of Mali, comes to visit his Mauritanian mother while waiting for a passport so he can emigrate to France

Maata (Maata Ould Mohamed Abeid) An elderly Mauritanian fisherman turned electrician, who takes an orphan boy under his wing as his apprentice

Khatra (Khatra Ould Abder Kader) A nine-year-old orphan, who lives and works with Maata as his apprentice.

SYNOPSIS

Heremakono, translated as *Waiting for Happiness*, is more of a series of vignettes about life in Nouadhibou than a coherent narrative. The coastal town of Nouadhibou, Mauritania, is the transit point for African migrants dreaming of crossing the Atlantic to Europe. For years now, Nouadhibou's fishing boats have been resting, bottom up, on the town's beach, and most of the town's men, who used to make a living from fishing, have turned to the more lucrative, albeit illegal, business of smuggling migrants. Old Maata, on the other hand, has opted to become an electrician, and, with the help of Khatra, his quick-witted 10-year-old orphan apprentice, he is doing his best to connect the town's inhabitants to the power grid. A resident's defective electrical circuit puts Maata's skill to the test, and after many attempts to get a light bulb to work, Maata concludes that he is not as good an electrician as he thought, and he sinks into depression and death.

Nouadhibou is also the maternal village of Abdallah, a seventeen-year-old man, who after many years spent in Mali, his father's country, returns to spend some time with his mother, while waiting for a passport to be issued, so that he can attempt the adventure to Europe. To the great despair of Abdallah's mother, the young man has taken on habits that make him an outsider in Mauritania: Abdallah has taken up smoking; he dresses in Western style; and he speaks French rather than the local Assaniya. Abdallah's efforts to integrate into Nouadhibou's lifestyle always fail. Furthermore, his attempt to reach Europe is thwarted at the last moment when he misses his train. However, Abdallah's fate is far more enviable than that of the many migrants whose bodies are washed up on the beaches of Nuadhibou.

After the death of his old master, little Khatra buys himself an electrician's overall and takes up his master's work. Khatra realizes that it was the electrical network that was faulty, not his master's work. Using his slingshot, the child takes his revenge on the city's streetlamps, then decides to leave Nouadhibou by travelling clandestinely on a train. However, he is caught by the controller and thrown off the train. Khatra decides to leave via the dunes, and we see him emerge from a tuft of grass between the dunes as if from the pubis of a prone woman.

SCENES

Makan buries his radio A sandstorm blows in and buries part of the population centers of the Mauritanian town of Nouadhibou. After listening to his radio, Makan wraps it in a plastic bag. He buries the radio 5 feet away from a bush. Makan returns after the storm to collect his radio, but he cannot find it. With the help of little electrician apprentice Katrha and Maata, the child's master, Makan searches for his radio, in vain. The little boy continues to search for the radio. Then he sees a bush blown over his head by the wind. He then realizes that the bush Makan used as a landmark to bury his radio might as well have been uprooted, causing Makan to search in the wrong place.



Be patient! Abdallah, dressed in Western clothes, is waiting for a cab to leave to Nouadhibou, his maternal village. He looks impatient, pacing back and forth. The other passengers, dressed in traditional clothes, sit in the shade of a building, drinking tea and chatting. The driver succeeds in repairing the breakdown. The passengers resume their journey in silence. Abdallah finds himself trapped between the driver and another passenger. Abdallah is the only passenger not wearing a turban. The sun beats down on his eyes, and he squints.



I am not afraid to die Strolling across the rooftops of the concession's houses, Khatra sings a song in French. His master, Maata, scolds him and reminds him that he has already forbidden him to sing this song or to walk on the rooftops. Khatra replies that he is not afraid to die. The master electrician asks his little apprentice to connect an electric cable for him while he is on the rooftop. Khatra picks up the cable and tells his master to be careful not to electrocute him. Maata mockingly replies that he was saying earlier that he was not afraid of dying.



Abdallah observes Abdallah observes the scenes in his mother's courtyard with visible curiosity: a young woman from Mali, Nana, braiding her daughters' hair, a street vendor selling veils imported from China and Switzerland. From his small bedroom window, Abdallah observes the movements of the street. Nana, the Malian woman, receives a man in her room, who leaves his shoes on the doorstep. Abdallah takes out a cigarette and lights it. His mother urges him to get rid of the cigarette.



Passing on tradition A neighbor of Abdallah's mother teaches her daughter to sing in the local language (Hassaniya) and to play a stringed instrument, a kind of Oud. Abdallah watches with curiosity.



The doctor is Nana's client Abdallah goes for a medical check-up at the village clinic. Abdalla recognizes the doctor's shoes. They belong to one of the young Malian woman's clients. The doctor seems not to be feeling well. He lies down on the bed in the examination room while his patients wait.



Khatra and Abdallah From his window, Abdallah is tutored in Hassaniya (his mother tongue) by little Khatra. The child teaches Abdallah to say the words for body parts. Khatra laughs at Abdallah, who has trouble pronouncing the words. Abdallah also gives Khatra French lessons.

Maata, the electrician and his little apprentice, Khatra. Abdallah reads by the light of street lights, as the electricity is not working at his mother's house. The next day, his mother sends for Maata, the electrician, who arrives with his little apprentice, Khatra. Maata changes cables and bulbs several times, but he cannot get the power to come back on. He finds it all very strange. Khatra tells him that the materials must be bad quality equipment imported from Taiwan. Maata sends Khatra to the vendor to check the quality of the bulb. Khatra returns to tell Maata that the bulb tested at the vendor's works well. Maata tells Khatra that he has given up, and that the light bulb will never work for him. Khatra tells Maata to never give up, and that the light bulb will work. Maata goes back to work and tries to connect his customer's circuit to one of the street lamps. Maata's persistence ends up creating a short-circuit in the electrical network.



Chinese watch salesman In the streets of the capital, Abdallah recognizes a pair of shoes, the only pair of closed shoes he saw outside Nana's door. They're being worn by a Chinese watch salesman. The Chinese watch salesman invites Nana to a karaoke bar-restaurant. He takes the microphone and sings a song in tribute to his country, which he misses, and his mother's love, which he wishes he could have now.



Nana's grief Nana shows Abdallah a photo of her late daughter Sonia. She explains that the girl's father is it was Vincent who named Sonia. He is the girl's father. She explains to Abdallah that the girl's father is French. She tells him that Sonia died of a fever, and that she went to France to meet the father to tell him to his face, but he received her badly.



MICHAEL

Michael's farewell photos Michael, a would-be immigrant, prepares to cross the ocean in a few hours. Before his departure, Michael and his friends have their photos taken at the local photographer's, in front of a representation of Paris and the Eiffel Tower on the wall.



Where is Michael now? Michael left for Europe two weeks ago. Sitting by the sea, his friends scan the horizon and speculate on his Whereabouts. One of them thinks that Michael must be in Tangier. Another retorts that Michael is probably already in Spain. Some migrants' belongings wash up on the beach and are picked up by the men.



Michael's body A body washes up on the beach. It's that of Michael, and it is Makan who found it. The Mauritanian police find photos of Michael that he took with some of his friends just before he left. The police ask Makan if he recognizes the dead man. Makan replies that he did not get close enough to identify the dead man.



ABDALLAH

The wrong fabric Abdallah decides to visit his uncle. He has a traditional outfit sewn for the occasion. When Abdallah arrives at his uncle's house, he realizes that the fabric he has chosen for his outfit is the same one used for the furniture covers and the drapes.



Abdallah sleep-walks Abdallah has sleepwalking episodes. Still asleep, he gets up at night and tries to walk out of the house. His mother shakes him out of his torpor.

Abdallah's mother worries about him Abdallah's mother confides in Abdallah's uncle. She worries that her son remains locked up all day and refuses to make friends or wear traditional Mauritanian clothes.



Abdallah tries to confide in Nana Abdallah tells Nana that he knows no one in the village. While he is talking to her, a new customer comes, and she has to go. Abdallah watches Nana take her client to her room, visibly disappointed.



A failed encounter Abdallah's mother introduces him to some young girls in the neighborhood. The girls do not seem very interested in Abdallah. They make fun of his inability to speak Hassanya. Embarrassed, Abdallah gets up and leaves.

A few dance steps Abdallah is reading in his room. Outside, the women are clapping their hands and dancing to the rhythm of the drums. Abdallah puts down his book and gets up to dance a few steps. That night, Abdallah slips into Nana's bed while she sleeps, and falls asleep in her arms.

Abdallah wants to leave Abdallah packs his bags and says goodbye to his mother. He tries to climb the sand dunes to get to the train station. His closed shoes are filled with sand and prevent him from moving forward. Abdallah sits down in the sand, looking exhausted and breathing hard. A passing Mauritanian man offers Abdallah a cigarette. Abdallah looks at the man's feet: he is wearing sandals. The man climbs the dunes without difficulty and disappears behind the dunes, leaving Abdallah sitting in the sand. The train leaves without Abdallah.



KHATRA

Maata's death **Tell me a story** Khatra begs Maata to tell him one of his stories. Maata is hesitant, but the old man finally gives in. Maata tells Khatra a story of the time he used to be a fisherman. Maata gets out of bed in the middle of the night and heads for the beach, illuminated by a light bulb at the end of a cable. Khatra doesn't see him and sets out to find him. The child discovers the old man lying in the sand. Khatra pleads in vain with Maata to wake up. Maata has just died on the beach with a lit bulb in his hand.

Light Bulb Khatra takes the bulb from his master's hands and throws it into the sea. The child sits on the shore watching the light bulb float on the water. Moments later, the sea throws the light bulb back onto the shore. Khatra takes back the light bulb. He walks along the shore towards town. He stops in front of a store displaying a worker's overall in his size. The child buys the uniform, wears it, and goes to screw the light bulb to the ceiling. The light bulb still fails. The child lies down in his old master's bed, eyes fixed on the ceiling. A few minutes later, the bulb lights up. Khatra emerges from the house. Armed with his slingshot, he smashes the light bulbs on the street lamps.



Khatra leaves the town Khatra will take the train out of town. The ticket inspector sees him board the train. The man chases the child and throws him off the train. Sitting in front of the rails, Khatra watches the train wagons roll by before his eyes, looking dejected. After the train has passed, Khatra gets up and walks away from Nouadhibou, into the desert dunes. He is seen emerging from a patch of shrubs in the corner of two intersecting dunes.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

MAATA Maata is an irritable old man, disillusioned by his new profession. However, Maata is full of affection for the little orphan he has taken under his wing as an apprentice electrician. Maata's depression drives him to death

Irritable Maata is a character irritated very easily. He scolds Khatra because the child sings a French song that he cannot understand. He gets irritated because Khatra plays on the rooftops when he has forbidden him to do so. He scolds Khatra because the little apprentice is earning money, which he prefers to keep with him rather than entrust to him. But all this is done in good faith, because deep down, Maata loves Khatra.

Affectionate Maata is a very affectionate character. The film does not say whether he is the grandfather of his little apprentice Khatra, but he could well be, by the affection he shows the child, which goes beyond the simple relationship of master and apprentice. Maata takes the child in, tells him stories in the evenings, gives him advice for life and teaches him a trade so that he can earn a living tomorrow. Maata is a much-needed loving figure for the little orphan.

Depressed Maata is a fisherman, who became an electrician when the fishing trade gave way to migrant smuggling. Maata dislikes his job. He feels trapped in it, and it saddens him. Little Khatra wants to hear stories about Maata's days as a fisherman, but the old man tells him he hates talking about those nostalgic days. Maata's sadness is compounded by the fact that he is not always successful at his new trade. His persistence in getting a light bulb to work on a faulty electrical network makes him doubt his own abilities and stains his pride.

KHATRA Khatra is a playful boy who takes life in stride. He is always humming a French song and playing on the rooftops, which exasperates his old master. He teases his master and laughs at Abdallah's clumsiness. He is also a stubborn child who does as he pleases, but he knows exactly the path he wants to take in life.

Playful Khatra is a playful child. He is introduced to us, carrying around his neck his slingshot that never leaves his side, playing and singing on the rooftops of his neighborhood and being scolded by his old master Maata for it. The child is always cheerful and quick with a joke, teasing his old master, telling him that he is afraid of death, and laughing at Abdallah's difficulties in pronouncing the Hassaniya words he teaches him.

Stubborn Khatra is a bit of a rebel at heart. The child is not always willing to follow his master's advice. His master tells him not to play on rooftops, but he does. His master forbids him to sing the French nursery rhyme he likes to hum, but Khatra starts singing again as soon as he is out of old Maata's sight. When the master dies, and Khatra realizes that it was the electrical circuit that was faulty and not his master's work, he takes out his slingshot and smashes the streetlight bulbs to express his anger.

Determined Khatra is a very determined child, who has a clear idea of what he wants to do when he grows up: he wants to be an electrician. When Maata, angry, scolds him and asks him what he would become without him, Khatra replies, "an electrician". Already projecting himself into this profession, Khatra asks the electrical equipment salesman to save the overall he wears for when he grows up. In the end, Khatra takes over his master's difficult light bulb, buys himself an overall in his own size, and takes over his old master's job when the latter dies.

ABDALLAH Abdallah is a character alienated from his mother's culture, having lived too long in his father's country. He observes Mauritanian customs with a detached air non-participation. This causes him to find himself emotionally and physically isolated.

Alienated Abdallah is a character who has become alienated from his maternal heritage. Having lived most of his life in his father's country, Mali, Abdallah understands neither his mother tongue, Hassaniya, nor the way Mauritians dress. In Mauritania, Abdallah is an outsider. His efforts to integrate into Mauritanian culture are clumsy and unproductive.

Passive Abdallah is a curious character. However, his curiosity is passive. Abdallah spends hours observing Malian behavior, but he does so with a kind of detachment and passivity, without really participating in

Mauritanian daily life. It is as if he were a researcher, watching his subjects without deigning to interfere in their lives. The difference here is that Abdallah learns nothing from his assiduous observations.

Lonely Abdallah is a lonely character. He has no strong ties with Mauritians. He finds their habits curious and bizarre, when they are not the ones who find him bizarre and ridicule him. Nana the Malian understands him better, and he tries to get closer to her from both a purely social and sexual standpoint. However, the prostitute's profession prevents him from having any real moment of intimacy with her. Their encounters are always interrupted by her customers.

THEMES

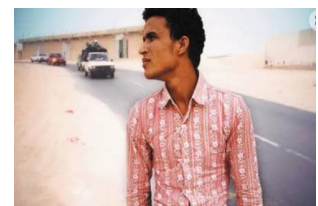
Survival Insofar as the desert is a place that tests human resilience, it is illustrative of the daily struggle for survival between hope and despair, beauty and horror. Sissako shows how the beautiful expanse of the desert presents daily perilous exercises for the men who live there: when they wake up to find their homes sunken under the sand, they have to dig them out with shovels in hand; or when a possession left at a precise spot marked with stakes cannot be found the next day. The desert's heatwave and pernicious grains of sand test not only men; they also test machines, breaking them and stopping them in their tracks, like the cab at the beginning of the film. However, these various challenges have hardened the desert dwellers, sharpening their creativity, strengthening their resolve, infusing them with patience. Here, the driver has to be a handyman, unless he wants to be trapped in the desert. Here, sandals are the order of the day, to conquer the sandy dunes. And turbans and hot tea are necessary to soften the scorching rays of the sky. To survive, the outsider in the desert must be a seasoned observer and a champion at adaptability. These qualities lack in Abdallah, the main character of *Waiting for Happiness*.

Illustrative moments: Fighting the wind and the desert dunes For an unknown reason, Makan, a Malian in transit in Nouadhibou on his migratory journey to Europe, decides to bury his radio in the sand, after wrapping it in a plastic bag. The next day, he realizes that the wind has blown away the shrub that served as a marker for the radio's location, preventing Makan from recovering his property. The battle against the wind and the desert sand is constant. Every day, the desert sand takes hold of the houses, and the men have to dig to extract their homes from the newly formed dunes. To overcome the sand dunes, the desert dwellers wear sandals instead of closed-toe shoes, making it easier for them to climb the dunes. Shovels and sandals are survival tools for desert dwellers. Abdallah does not understand this fact, and on the way to the train station to leave Nouadhibou, he is impeded by the closed shoes he is wearing, thus, missing the train.



Exile *Waiting for Happiness* deals with the topic of the psychological state of the exilic subject. Melancholy is the state of mind that throws the exilic subject onto the road to migration. And this state also remains his faithful companion, crushing him throughout this journey, the slightest element of which reminds him that he is no longer anchored anywhere. Indeed, the exilic subject, like Abdallah, like Makan, is a floating signifier, a soul empty of culture, or having culture only insofar as it exists exclusively in the realm of regret, nostalgia or lament. Makan is no longer in Mali, but neither is he in Mauritania, and Europe is still out of reach. He finds himself between nostalgia for what he used to be and dreaming of what he would like to be. The Chinese watch dealer mourns his distant homeland and his mother's lost love in karaoke bars. And Abdallah, although so close to his mother, no longer recognizes her, seeking instead, in the character of Nana, his father's homeland, while still dreaming of elsewhere, of Europe. The exilic subject, as the film shows us, is a character haunted by rootlessness, nostalgia and lamentations.

Illustrative moments: Melancholy and disorientation Makan is a transitory character with no place of his own, the wide expanses of the desert and the Atlantic Ocean are where he temporarily belongs. So Makan buries his pride possession, his radio, in the desert sand and marks the place. In the morning, the radio is nowhere to be found, because the desert wind has blown up the shrub that serves as a marker, causing Makan to lose his radio. As if to say that the exilic soul has no permanent place. Likewise, the ocean that keeps rejecting back migrants' belongings and bodies on the shore of Nouadhibou is to tell them that they are not welcome in the ocean either. The rootlessness of the transitory migrant is not just physical. The



psychological rootlessness of the exilic soul is visible in Abdallah and in the Chinese watch seller, both consumed with disorientation and melancholy.

Loneliness The wait for deferred happiness can lead to moral and physical isolation when the subject refuses to take the time to live in the present, sacrificing all attention to an uncertain future. Most of the characters in *Waiting for Happiness*, in anticipation of an unlikely departure, forget to enjoy the here and now. Abdallah is a quiet, yet uneasy young man, who could have taken the time to become accustomed to his mother's culture by embracing it. And yet, considering himself a man passing through, a man in transit, he superficially observes Mauritanian habits, looks at Mauritians with curiosity, but retains nothing from them. Likewise, the other migrants on the beach at Nouadhibou, who watch the movements of the sea and the schedule of the boats, dreaming of elsewhere, forget to live *in presentia*, to be members of the Mauritanian community, trapped as they are in their dreams of a Europe that for them only exists *in absentia*. Of all these characters in search of well-being, it is perhaps Nana, the Malian prostitute, who has made her bed in the present, and who suffers no loneliness, so numerous are those men who "wish to make her acquaintance," Abdallah being one of them.

Illustrative moments: stripped of all humanity Abdallah, Makan, Nana are lonely characters because they're in exile. Sissako allegorizes this loneliness of the exilic subject with the scene of Makan burying his radio in the desert, that sandy area which belongs to everyone and to no one at the same time. The lyricism of the Chinese watch salesman, who sings of lost maternal love in the karaoke bars of Nouadhibou, is enough to break anyone's heart. This man wandering the streets of Nouadhibou and the city's crowded markets is, nonetheless, a very lonely man in the midst of the crowd. This loneliness is also apparent in Abdallah, who in the land of his mother, among his own people, feels so out of place, so ill at ease. Abdallah does not speak his mother's language, has no attraction for the girls of Nouadhibou, and only rarely visits his uncle, at his mother's behest. And on the day the young man agrees to visit his uncle on his own, the clothes he chooses for the occasion make him blend in with the furniture and curtains, objectifying him, stripping him of all humanity.



Happiness The notion of happiness, as presented by Sissako in *Waiting for Happiness*, is an individual quest. For some people, like Maata the electrician and his young apprentice Khatra, happiness is the accomplishment of a job well done, which makes the worker feel good and gives him or her a sense of wellbeing. Maata and his apprentice seem to have as their essential quest bringing light at the end of a difficult bulb. Thus, Maata pursues this happiness to his death. For others, migrants like Abdallah, Makan and Michael, happiness implies material comfort, which is lacking in their countries of origin, and which must be sought elsewhere, in the space of the other. For others still, Nana's Mauritanian and migrant clients, happiness is the embrace of a woman, which they come to seek in Nana's arms. Sissako shows, however, that happiness is a notion always deferred, rarely achieved. Happiness, then, becomes a perpetual struggle to reach a goal that eludes the subject, a goal that he always expects, but never achieves. Seen from this perspective, the title of Sissako's film echoes that of Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*, whose overriding lesson is that the human experience is summed up in waiting, waiting for an inexorably fleeting paradise.

Illustrative Moment: forgetting to live and to learn In his mother's country, whom he had sought to see again before setting out to conquer Europe, Abdallah forgets to live, so consumed is he by elsewhere, Europe. Abdallah's mother has to remind him to live: she forces him to visit his uncle. She asks him to learn to speak his mother tongue and to dress like his fellow Mauritians. She organizes meetings for him with young Mauritanian women. All his mother's efforts are futile, because Abdallah has suspended all desire to live here and now, waiting to arrive in Europe to do so. While waiting for Europe and suspending life in Mauritania, Abdallah learns nothing that could help him with his migration plans. On the day of his departure, Abdallah, who has not understood that to climb the dunes easily he needs to wear sandals, compromises his journey when he realizes, too late, that his closed shoes are not suitable for the desert.

Love *Waiting for Happiness* explores the subject of love from the angle of the quest for intimacy and connection. The subjects of the film are all engaged in the quest for love, whether for a homeland or a person. For the migrants who attempt the European adventure, it is their disenchantment with their homeland that propels them into the hope of a poetic love affair with a foreign destination. At no point in the

film, however, is this poetic love of a man with a foreign nation realized. The migrants' bodies are tossed out by the sea. The Chinese watch salesman is homesick, and Abdallah the main character fails to find the true connection he seeks with his motherland. Interpersonal love is also treated by the filmmaker as a missed connection: Abdallah is not only ill at ease in his own country, he is also ill at ease with his mother, his uncle and the young girls of Mauritania. And his attempts to approach Nana, the young Malian prostitute, always fall short. Besides, what love can he get from Nana other than the bargained-for love she offers her clients? Sissako's treatment of love is pessimistic in *Waiting for Happiness*.

Illustrative moments: failed connections Abdallah's return to his homeland is prompted in part by his quest for maternal love and the perfect communicability of feelings that this love between child and mother implies. Unfortunately for Abdallah, the love his mother gives him no longer has that flawless value, where child and mother seem to be one physically and emotionally. Instead, this love is full of reproaches for Abdallah's new habits acquired in Mali, such as smoking, forgetting his mother tongue, clothing habits and so on. The connection fails both with the mother, the motherland, and the Mauritanian girls. It is by returning to Mali, in the form of an oft-interrupted connection with Nana, the Malian prostitute, that Abdallah hopes to find love. So, on his last night in Nouadhibou, Abdallah spends it in Nana's bed, snuggled up against her like a child with its mother. But it is not only Abdallah who seeks this connection. The men who come into Nana's room are also looking for intimacy and connection. But what they receive from Nana is only ephemeral. It is a mercantile love, paid for in cash. It is insincere. Perhaps the only true love in *Waiting for Happiness*, the only true connection, is the one between old Maata and his little apprentice Kathra. However, this love is broken too soon for the child when Maata dies on the beach of Nouadhibou.



Globalization A subject dear to Sissako's is globalization. This theme is at the heart of Sissako's first feature film, *Life on Earth* (1998), and continues to be addressed by the filmmaker in his later films, *Bamako* (2006) and *Timbuktu* (2014). Indeed, Sissako criticizes globalization, the ideology that is supposed to encourage the free flow of both capital and people, as having failed in the second part of its mission. The adventures of African migrants in their quest for the "European dream" clearly show that globalization is not an open door to the exchange of peoples, but a club exclusive to the West, which can afford the luxury of going wherever it pleases in the world and of making the world see things through the prism of the West. Not only does globalization not bring people closer together, it also isolates the most vulnerable culturally and technologically with its veiled assumption that Western culture is the norm and its desire to keep the developing world in the dark age by not properly sharing the benefits of technological discoveries. To avoid being swallowed up by the monster of globalization, which tends to homogenize peoples and turn them into poor replicas of the West, these vulnerable communities are erecting ramparts of resistance to protect their cultural habits.

Illustrative moments: the prism of globalization comes into play in *Waiting for Happiness*, as the Chinese watch salesman and the Swiss or Chinese-made veil salesman go door-to-door offering their wares to the people of Nouadhibou. Fearful of seeing their traditions disappear, however, the people of Nouadhibou cling to them, repeating them or passing them on to future generations. For example, Maata insists that his young apprentice stop singing the French nursery rhyme that the child is constantly humming. And in a courtyard next to Abdallah's mother's, a woman teaches her daughter to sing and play a traditional string instrument. However, a kaleidoscope given to Makan by the Chinese salesman mysteriously finds its way into the hands of the little singer and Kathra. The prism fascinates adults and children alike, who find themselves looking at the world through the gadget. Here, the object of globalization, the optical instrument offered by the Chinese, vies for an outlook of the world with local, fixed, resisting tradition.



Work Sissako's film broaches the issue of the technological divide between the West and the Third World, and its impact on the world of work. Indeed, the technological yields of globalization are unevenly distributed. While the Western world benefits from the scientific advances created by the circulation of great minds (we know the West's appetite for Third World minds, lured by resident cards, and referred to as "chosen globalization"), Africa is isolated in a widening technological divide. As a result, Africa remains the reservoir of a workforce whose qualifications are ill-suited to the demands of the modern world, and who

subsist on poverty-level wages. However, if Africa is isolated from the major technologies, it is not isolated from the Western media, which bombard it day after day with programs and films celebrating the economic success of the West, creating a fever among young Africans for exile to the West. For most Africans who, despite limited opportunities, decide to stay at home, either because they are too old or reluctant to embark on the perilous adventure of immigration, the choice boils down to wandering from one job made less enticing by globalization to another that is less satisfying.

Illustrative moments Sissako does not just show us young Africans eager to immigrate to Europe. He also shows us what fuels their dreams of the West, the West's economic success. For Michael, whose body is washed ashore by the waves of the Atlantic Ocean as he attempts the European adventure, Western success is symbolized by the Eiffel Tower shining brightly. With a portrait of this emblematic building in the background, Michael takes his farewell photos with his friends before boarding a problematic boat for his ocean crossing. Michael's dream, like Abdallah's, is alienated from the Western media. Abdallah only leaves his mother's backyard to watch French TV programs in the bars of Nouadhibou. And the more he watches them, the more intensified are his feelings of bitterness and unworthiness and his resolve to leave. For Maata, who is too old to leave and whose fishing trade has been wiped out by the exile fever and the rise of the smugglers, survival means changing jobs. Maata becomes an electrician, but he lacks the skills to sell himself at the level of a skilled worker. Maata's move from a low-paying job to one that's worse than his previous one makes him even more bitter. So Maata lets himself die, like an Africa dying under the weight of the technological divide and inequality.



Alienation To think of leaving is already have left, to have alienated oneself from one's native land and those who live there; such is one of Sissako's messages in *Waiting for Happiness*. Indeed, the theme of cultural alienation, initiated by Sissako in his first film, *Life on Earth* (1998), is repeated in subsequent films, notably *Bamako* (2006) and *Timbuktu* (2014). In *Waiting for Happiness*, this theme is dramatized in particular through Abdallah's inability to be psychologically and materially invested in the life of his motherland. Abdallah's situation is made all the more tragic by the fact that even when the elements to help him incorporate into the life of his compatriots present themselves to him, his obsession with Europe causes him to miss the clues, making him an outsider in this country that is nonetheless his own. Sissako's critique of alienation is, in a way, his trial of globalization, a doctrine more Western than African, which tends to turn Africa into a failed and caricatured copy of the West, accepted neither in Africa nor in the West.

Illustrative moments: Leaving on the wrong footwear The men of the desert all wear sandals for a reason: to avoid getting sand in their shoes and hurting their feet. Abdallah arrives in Nouadhibou in his Western clothes and closed shoes. For weeks, however, he cannot take his eyes off the feet of the people of Nouadhibou. He observes their footwear, open sandals, with curiosity, without understanding the reason for it. He understands it very late when, in exile to Europe, trying to climb the sand dunes behind which is the train that will take him out of town, he realizes the impracticality of closed shoes, and sitting, exhausted, he sees a man in sandals pass him by and climb the dunes without difficulty. The long years Abdallah spent in Mali, in his father's country, alienated him from the language and customs of his motherland.

Quest Human beings are unique in that they are always on a quest for wellbeing. And this quest very often leads them to explore new worlds, far from their comfort zones. For many young Africans, as Sissako so aptly demonstrates, the quest for wellbeing implies a transnational and even transatlantic displacement. Here, the subject leaves his homeland for other countries, across the desert or the Atlantic Ocean. With this extended migration, the subject's difficulties increase. In his quest for happiness outside his familiar environment, the subject is often faced with cultural alienation when new language barriers or foreign dress codes present themselves. To compensate for these difficulties, which can lead to isolation and social insecurity, the subject tends to look for allies in the new environments into which he is thrown, people in whom he can find the slightest common thread or trait. This is not always easy. The greatest danger facing the displaced subject is that of death. For the African migrant dreaming of Europe, Sissako shows that the lady with the scythe is the Sahara Desert, the Atlantic Ocean, those great fearsome expanses stretching to the horizon.

Illustrative moments Sissako seems to enjoy making his characters suffer in their frantic quest for happiness. They all find themselves in an impasse caused by cultural differences they cannot overcome. Abdallah bangs his head against the dress code, language and courting traditions of his mother's country, and he feels trapped in Mauritania. Maata does not like his job as an electrician, but he has no other choice since the traditional profession of fisherman no longer sustains and has been replaced by the culture of migrant smuggler. The Chinese watch salesman wanders around Nouadhibou, mourning the distant love of his mother. Makan's only means of communication with the outside world, his radio, is lost in the desert sand. Nana resolves to make a living out of her trap by becoming a prostitute. And as if to say that the ultimate fate of the subject trapped in his quest is death, Michael, the only person who actually dares to set out to conquer Europe, returns to Nouadhibou, his body washed up by the sea.



COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. Explain the film's title
2. Why does Makan bury his radio in the sand?
3. What is the symbolism in Abdallah's somnambulism?
4. Why does young Khatra attack lampposts with his slingshot?
5. What do you think will become of little Khatra? Imagine a sequel to the film.