

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Martial Frindéthié, PhD

Essaïda (1996)

Mohamed Zran

OVERVIEW

Auteur Mohamed Zran was born in 1959 in Zrazis, Tunisia. Like most filmmakers of his generation, he studied cinema at the Ecole Supérieure d'Etudes Cinématographiques de Paris. He made mostly short films before embarking on his first feature film, *Essaïda* (1996).

Film *Essaïda* is a film about the forgotten populations of Tunisia. To the wretched of Tunisia, whose voices are not heard by the decision-makers, Zran, in the guise of a documentary filmmaker, wanted to make a fiction that gives a voice to the voiceless. Through his camera, the wretched of the town of Essaïda speak. And when Essaïda speaks, what the city reveals is the frustration of a population that, towards the end of the 1990s, still struggles to see the promises of jobs and prosperity made almost ten years earlier, in 1987, by Ben Ali's government, and that, little by little, has become the breeding ground for extremist forces that like to prey on the impatience of those overlooked by the system. Chedli Bouzaiane (Nidal) won the Best Actor Award at the 1996 Amiens International Film Festival, and Mohamed Zran won the Bronze Rosa Camuna at the 1997 Bergamo Film Meeting.

Background The town of Essaïda, about ten miles from Tunis, is one of the last suburbs on the rural exodus towards Tunis, where a rural population, crushed by poverty and attracted by the glitter of the Tunisian capital, puts down its bundle and settles. In Essaïda, one is not very far from Tunis, because at night, one can still perceive from afar the lights of the towers that lick the sky, and, with a little bit of audacity, make trips to the capital to breathe in the perfume of the rich, to have one's eyes filled with their fortunes, and to have one's mouth watered by the succulent dishes that they fill their bellies with, and that give them the illnesses that only the rich contract. In Essaïda, once one crosses the threshold of the family home, where the father reigns supreme, there are no rules except the rule of the jungle, the survival of the fittest. It is that law of the jungle that Zran captures for us through this film.

CHARACTERS

<i>Amine</i>	A Tunisian artist
<i>Nidal</i>	An adolescent beggar
<i>Sonia</i>	Amine's fiancée
<i>Zeineb</i>	Nidal's mother
<i>Omar</i>	Nidal's father
<i>Halem</i>	A gang leader

SYNOPSIS

Amine, a renowned Tunisian painter, stumbles upon Nidal, a young beggar, and is immediately captivated by the teenager's melancholic expression. For him, Nidal's gaze expresses the anguish of a population, which he wants to capture by painting him. Amine abandons his fiancée, Sonia and his current projects and moves to the poor neighborhood of Essaïda, where the young beggar becomes his model. In Essaïda, Amine gets closer to the people but also finds himself entangled in their dilemmas.

SCENES

Amine wants to work with Nidal

Nidal and two of his companions are competing in the streets of Tunis to see which of them begs best. People pass them by, ignoring them or telling them to get a job. Nidal's performance, however, moves Amine, an artist, who gives him a handout. Amine is intrigued by Nidal and follows the teenager, who tries to outrun him, back to his town of Essaïda. Amine insists on talking to Nidal's parents. He explains that he is a painter, and that he would like Nidal to pose for him for two hours a day. Nidal's father is an unemployed man who spends his days playing cards or dominos with his friends and drinking. He is hesitant because he wants his son to get a paying job. Amine promises that he will pay Nidal. The father agrees on condition that the money, five dinars a day, is given directly to him. Nidal's friends flood him with questions. They want to know who this man is that he introduced into the hood. They suspect him of being a cop. Nidal begins to pose for Amine in his studio in Tunis. However, the boy is fidgety and cannot keep still. Amine tells him that his look and attitude are very different to what he saw in him in Essaïda. Amine tries to impose postures on the teenager, who starts to resist. Rumors begin to circulate about Amine and Nidal's relationship. Nidal tells him that his friends say shameful things about them that he doesn't want to repeat. He asks Amine what he will do with all these portraits. Amine tells him that he will show them at an exhibition for people to look at. Nidal complains that this will make him look like a fool. Nidal refuses to be painted bare-chested.



Nidal respects Amine more than his father

Omar learns that his son does not want to work with Amine anymore. He ties him up and beats him. Nidal's mother intervenes to push her husband away and free her son. She accuses Omar of making their lives miserable and exposing them to humiliation. Nidal returns to Amine. He tells him that he has more respect for him than for his father and wants to model for free.



Amine explains Essaïda to Sonia

Amine explains to his fiancée, Sonia, that he is no longer interested in the artistic exhibition he is preparing. He tells Sonia about the strange and exciting atmosphere of Essaïda, and how he immediately felt at home in an environment he did not know. Sonia listens to him, unimpressed. He tells her that he wants to stop everything to go and live in Essaïda and start again from zero.



Amine takes Sonia to visit Essaïda

Sonia is shocked by the poverty of the city. Amine explains to her that behind this poverty there are very kind people. Sonia is afraid and tries to hold on to Amine's arm. He pulls away. She complains about the looks people give her. Amine tells her that she will have to get used to coming to Essaïda because he is going to live there to be closer to the people he wants to paint.



Sonia is not comfortable

Amine takes Sonia to the market to introduce her to Nidal's mother and younger sister, Donia. Nidal's mother compliments Sonia on her beauty and offers her a loaf of the bread she sells. Sonia compliments Donia, who asks her mother if she can ever be beautiful and dress like Sonia. Her mother tells her that if she does well in school, one day she will dress like Sonia. Amine introduces Sonia to Nidal and his friends. The boys indulge in familiarities with her that annoy her. She decides to go wait for Amine in her car.



Sonia leaves Amine Sonia is not happy with Amine's decision to live in Essaïda, which he made without consulting her. She reproaches him for being selfish and not caring about the people who love him. She tells him that if he wants to devote himself to humanitarian works, he can do so without her. She makes him get out of her car along the highway and drives off, leaving him standing in a cloud of dust and smoke. One day, Sonia surprises Amine with a visit. He is happy to see her. She tells him that she missed him and wants to see the work he has done in Essaïda. She is impressed. He asks her to stay with him in Essaïda, and she promises to think about it. The women of Essaïda make derogatory comments about the clothes Sonia wears when she comes to see Amine, and the men whistle at her. Some people throw stones at her. Sonia asks Amine to come and live with her in Carthage. He tells her that Carthage is not the place for him. They argue, and she leaves.



The rhythm of Essaïda The teenager introduces the painter to the heterogeneous population of Essaïda. Amine befriends the blind poet Souleymane, who helps Amine look for a house to rent in Essaïda. Souleymane finds Amine silent and wants to know what's going on. Souleymane plays music to cheer him up. Amine's days are punctuated by walks with Souleymane, relaxing on the rugby field or balancing on the crossbar of the rugby goal, the fishmonger's calls, the neighbors' quarrels, and the thundering music above the city. Amine absorbs all these noises with happiness.



The violent father Nidal, an idle teenager, who begs in the streets of Tunis, is being whipped by his father Omar, for coming home empty-handed. His mother tries to protect him, but the father turns his whip on her and her younger sister. Omar is not happy with Nidal's wage. Amine comes to see Nidal's father to give him his son's first pay. Omar is drunk and sleeping it off on a mat in the yard. His wife wakes him up with kicks. Omar thinks his son's pay is insufficient. He tells Amine that Nidal would earn ten times more begging in front of the mosques. He thinks that the work Amine has Nidal do will never make the boy independent and get him out of his house.

Nidal is thrown out of the house Omar refuses to let Nidal eat at home until he finds a job that brings him money. He tells Nidal that other children his age shine shoes and sell newspapers to bring money to their fathers, and that Nidal should do the same. Nidal says he wants a dignified job. Nidal rebels and asks his father why he does not work. His father kicks him out of the house. On another night, Omar gets drunk. Nidal goes to look for his father. Nidal runs to the bar where his father hangs out. He finds Omar drunk on the street and wants to help him get home. His father rejects him saying that he does not know him. The boy pleads with his father. Omar leaves, indifferent. Nidal goes home to tell his mother that he left his father drunk in Tunis and that he refused to follow him. She takes a wheelbarrow and tells him to follow her because by now he must be at his usual place. The mother and the child find the father asleep in an alley. They put him in the wheelbarrow and take him home.



Nidal meets the gang leader Halem Nidal is hitchhiking to Tunis. Halem, a gang leader, picks Nidal up in his car and talks to him about making easy money. He takes Nidal to his big house, serves him a drink, and offers him a place in his gang of burglars who target rich houses. Halem gives an address to Nidal and two other teenagers. They have fifteen minutes to rob a home and collect specific items he has listed. Nidal is impressed by the wealth of the house and wonders how one person can have so much good stuff. The teens collect the items on the list. Before leaving, Nidal urinates in the living room. The boys are proud of their achievement. Halem organizes a big party at his house, to which he invites many girls. Nidal is not in the mood to dance and asks to be paid. Halem gets angry and only gives him a



portion of what he owes him. Nidal leaves while promising Halem to come back to get his due.

Halem is arrested Nidal returns to Halem for his money. While they are arguing, the police arrive and arrest the gang leader. Nidal manages to escape. Nidal returns to the streets and starts snatching women's bags. He buys new clothes and frequents the popular nightclubs of Tunis. While Nidal and one of his friends are in a nightclub, a member of Halem's gang recognizes them and alerts the gang. Nidal and his friend are beaten by Halem's gang.



The murder of a cab driver Nidal and his friend Sami rob and kill a cab driver in an attempt to steal his money. Nidal is wounded in the attack and goes to take refuge at Amine's house, telling him the lie that his wound came from an attack by a rival gang. The men of Essaïda accuse Amine of being at the root of what is happening and of polluting their environment. They demand that Amine leave. He tries to explain to them that he has nothing to do with what is happening, and that he is only an artist. The crowd starts to get excited. He withdraws so as not to aggravate the situation.



Nidal's death The police raid the neighborhood. Sami, Nidal's accomplice, is arrested when he tries to leave Essaïda. The police spot Nidal on his moped and chase him. Cornered, Nidal climbs up the pole of a high voltage line. The police chief implores him to get down, promising to treat him like his own child. Amine unsuccessfully tries to persuade Nidal to come down, and when the boy refuses, he returns to painting a mural of Essaïda he had started days earlier. Nidal's father arrives and begs his son to come down, promising to no longer beat him. The boy's mother shrieks with a ululation while her son plunges to his death. His coffin is carried by a large crowd of young people from the city, who sing and ask Allah to forgive and accept Nidal.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

AMINE He is a selfish, passionate, and eccentric artist. Though a prolific artist, he is not always rational. He seems oblivious of other people's feelings. He acts on a whim without considering his fiancée's opinion.

Selfish Amine, as Sonia tells him, is a selfish character. He is in a romantic relationship with Sonia, his fiancée, and every decision he makes affects her, too. However, he does not discuss with her his decision to move to Essaïda. He presents her with a *fait accompli* and expects her to comply.

Passionate Amine is passionate about his art, which takes precedence over all other things, even his relationship with Sonia. For this passion, he puts himself into an environment that is completely foreign to him and frantically produces a collection of paintings. When Sonia visits him for the first time in Essaïda, she is impressed by the quantity and quality of his work.

Eccentric Amine leaves his bourgeois environment of Carthage on a whim and decides to move to Essaïda, a poor neighborhood that the inhabitants only dream of leaving. He makes this decision, which affects his daily life, because he believes he has read in the eyes of a young beggar a melancholy that he wants to paint. That expression, according to him, represents the state of being of a whole city, of a whole segment of the Tunisian population.

NIDA Nida is a boy who is abused by his father and left to the streets by an incompetent political regime that took him out of school at an early age.

Exploited Nida is exploited by his father. He begs for or poses for Amine's portraits to put money in the pocket of his father, who spends his days drinking and gambling. When Nidal comes home empty-handed, his father beats him and forbids him to eat. He is also exploited by Halem, the gang leader, who makes him work and refuses to pay him.

Emotional Nidal is emotionally dependent on his father's love. When his father disowns him, he goes to Tunis to work with Hamel's gang robbing the homes of the rich. As soon as he gets his share of the loot, he runs to his father to give it to him, begging him to take him back as his son. Nidal is so dependent on the esteem of the abusive father that he is willing to pay cash for that respect which is always denied him.

OMAR By Tunisian standards, Omar is a failed father. He does not play his role of provider. He spends his days drinking and playing cards. He lives off his wife's trade and his son's begging.

Irresponsible Omar is a lazy father. While he insists that his son Nidal get a job and earn money, he spends his days playing cards or dominoes, drinking and sleeping. The money from his wife's bread business and his son's begging is what supports his family. He does not play his role as a family provider.

Abusive He is a violent father and husband who has made Nidal and his mother his punching bags. He beats Nidal when the teenager comes home empty-handed, and he beats the mother when she tries to extract the son from his brutality.

NIDAL'S MOTHER (ZEINEB) Nidal's mother is a protective, hardworking, and optimistic woman. She is the pillar of the family.

Protective Nidal's mother suffers the whippings her son receives from Omar as if he were giving them to her. When she can no longer bear to see her son being punished by his father, she steps in and takes the father's lashings in his place. She tries, as much as she can, to alleviate Nidal's suffering by making herself his shield against Omar.

Hard-working It is essentially the mother's bread business that feeds the family. She is always busy grinding flour, kneading dough, baking the bread, and selling it at the market. She is the backbone of the family, not Omar, the lazy alcoholic.

Optimistic Nidal's mother believes in education, in its ability to change people's social status. When her daughter, admiring Sonia, asks her if she will ever be able to dress like Sonia, the mother tells her that if she does well in school, one day, she, too, will be able to afford Sonia's clothes. She encourages her daughter not to accept her condition as a fixed fact but as an aspect of her life that she can control and change.

THEMES

SOCIETY (patriarchy, class, language, ululation)

Patriarchy Omar, Nidal's father, is a caricature of patriarchy. Like a lion with its pride, he does nothing but wait for his wife (and his son when possible) to fetch him his daily bread. It is his wife who makes and sells bread in the market with her daughter, and it is his son who begs at the mosques to feed him and put money in his pocket. When he is full and drunk, and not playing cards or dominos, he goes to bed to sleep off his binge. And when the money he expects from his son doesn't come in, he whips him, and also whips his mother, who tries to shield the boy from his violence. Sitting on top of the family pyramid, he orders, exploits, and punishes.

Class *Essaïda* is like a journey through the various strata of Tunisian society. Amine is a well-known artist, who is part of the Tunisian upper middle class. He owns an art studio in Carthage, a bourgeois part of Tunis, in a world that shelters him from the poverty and daily realities of the lower class until he reads *Essaïda's* anguish in Nidal's eyes and discovers the boy's world. A world of poverty, delinquency, and frustrations that people create for each other. But also, a world of solidarity and kindness, as Amine points out to Sonia. And, then, above the poverty of *Essaïda* and the upper middle class of Sonia and Amine, there is the insolent wealth of those whose houses are robbed by Halem and his gang. Nidal is so overwhelmed by the opulence of this class that he wonders how one person can accumulate so much wealth. One of the gang members tells Nidal that the people who own this kind of house can not only own all of town of *Essaïda* if they want, but they can also enslave its entire population. Nidal is so disgusted that he urinates in the living room before leaving. For Nidal's mother, only education can reduce the gap between the social classes. So she tells her daughter that if she works hard at school, she will be able to dress like Sonia one day.

Language The street language that Nidal and his friends speak is different from Amine's formal language, and Amine does not always understand what is being said around him. For example, to ask Amine for a cigarette, Nidal says, "Pass me a cancer stick." When young people in a public garden make remarks about Amine and Nidal's relationship, Amine hears them but does not understand them. He asks Nidal what they are, but Nidal does not dare translate the remarks. Similarly, when Nidal and Sami set the stage for their robberies, their victims do not understand the coded language they speak, and therefore, do not suspect anything. Language is not only a tool of communication; it is also a tool of intended miscommunication between social strata.

Ululation The language of ululation in the Arab world means different things in different contexts. Arab women ululate to express joy at weddings and baptism. They ululate at funerals to express sorrow. In Nidal's case, his mother ululates to forgive him for the crime of murder he committed on the cab driver and the greater crime against Islam--that of suicide--he is about to commit. The mother senses in her son's eyes that he would not live. And she ululates to send him to Allah with a mother's forgiveness, for the greatest forgiveness a man can receive from a human being is from a mother. Nidal's mother, by forgiving her son with her ululation, wishes that in Allah's eyes Nidal would be forgiven half of his sin of suicide.

JUSTICE (injustice, guilt, revenge)

Injustice Social injustice is one of the greatest injustices because it leads to others. The development gap between the capital Tunis and Essaïda is insulting. On the one hand, people enjoy all the social services available, live in pleasant conditions, and on the other hand, people are forgotten and live off crumbs. Essaïda is a forgotten area by the government. Unemployment is rampant, education and youth development are non-existent, and consequently, precarity and delinquency are exacerbated. Frustrations make the populations in these forgotten areas turn on each other. Here, it is Nida's father who beats his wife and children. It is Nidal's friends who rob Amine, another friend of Nidal, who lives in the neighborhood. The systemic injustice, which creates family and societal injustices, is not confined to Essaïda. It reaches Tunis by ricochet, where idle, delinquent, and frustrated youth attack innocent people by committing crimes, as seen with Halem's gang, which burglarizes houses, or Nidal and his friend Sami who snatch women's bags. Thus, the injustice is spread by a vicious circle effect, because upstream, an incompetent Tunisian government has committed the injustice of discriminating against its population and restricting development to certain areas.

Guilt The police chief and Nidal's father seem to feel guilty as the teenager climbs the power line pole and threatens to throw himself off. The police chief asks him not to commit the irreparable act, to get down, and that he will treat him like his own child. Omar, on the other hand, begs his son to get down, promising never to beat him again. Nidal does not trust them. From up there, Nidal understands that both his father and the police chief are motivated by a reason other than his well-being. These representatives of two institutions—family and police—that have tormented him all his life cannot so suddenly, after he has just given them the best excuse to pillory him, tell him that they mean well. The only people who really loved and protected him were his mother and his adoptive father, in the person of Amine. The others are only afraid of having the stain of his suicide, one of the cardinal sins of Islam, on their conscience. Their expression of guilt, Nidal concludes, is a theatrical act, an act of insincerity.

Revenge Nidal's final act is an act of revenge against his tormentors. Amine, who knows him so well, who knows how to read in his eyes and in his movements what he lives and feels, Amine who knows how to paint his emotions so well, has understood that it is a waste of time to try to convince him to get down, and that this day will be his last day on earth. So, Amine goes to finish the story of Essaïda that he has fixed in a mural, making sure to inscribe the tale of Nidal in it. And his mother, who loves him so much and has always defended him against his father's brutality, also understands that he will not get down safely from his perch. So, with an ululation of pain, but also of forgiveness and blessing, she accompanies her son, who lets himself fall to the ground, staining, in revenge, all his persecutors with the sin of his suicide. It can be seen as prelude to the gesture of the young fruit seller, Mohamed Bouazizi, who, years later, will immolate himself to protest against the oppression of the system and ignite the Arab Spring.

RELATIONSHIP (sexuality)

Sexuality Nidal no longer wants to work with Amine because his proximity to the painter has led to insinuations that he is in a homosexual relationship with him, causing him to lose his dignity. Indeed, Nidal's dignity comes from the perception that his friends in the street have of his sexuality, a male sexuality asserting itself in the domination and penetration of the female sex. This masculinity, which conforms to Tunisian machismo, is cultivated through the bawdiness of his language and through the harassment of girls in the street. The street is the theater of expression of his masculine preponderance. At home, his father's whippings have emasculated him. He is no longer a man there. In the street, in front of his friends, he can play at being a complete man. But here again, rumors cast doubt on his sexuality. And to make matters worse, Amine intends to show portraits of him with his shirt off. Nidal tells Amine that these portraits will make him the laughingstock of the city. He no longer wants to work with Amine. He no longer wants to be mistaken for a homosexual in a community where such a label rhymes with inadequacy and abnormality.

PSYCHOLOGY (alienation, otherness)

Alienation The motif of the funambulist is a recurring symbol in Tunisian cinema. It is found more than once in the films of one of the pioneers of Tunisian cinema, Nouri Bouzid, and twice in *Essaïda*, when Amine climbs the crossbar of a rugby goal. This motif seems to connote the subject's inadequacy, his difficulty in finding his footing in the society that alienates him. It could also symbolize the subject being at a crossroads. Moreover, this rugby field is in a place where Amine explains that he comes to decompress when he is in a state of intellectual fatigue. This fatigue could be interpreted as the consequence of the great mental effort made by this upper middle class artist, Amine, to integrate himself at all costs in an environment that is not his, and which marginalizes him. In *Essaïda*, whatever he may want to think, Amine is the other. He is perceived as the intriguing outsider whose motives are suspect, the rich other whom people want to rob, and the social polluter, responsible for Nidal's deviations, and whom people decide to expel from the city. All through the film, Amine has been like a tightrope walker, never in a secure place, but awkwardly trying to establish himself in *Essaïda*, to find his footing in a city that reminds him of his foreignness.

Otherness Sonia lives in Carthage, an upscale suburb of Tunis, more Europeanized than Tunisian by the lifestyle of its inhabitants. The type of clothes Sonia wears and her appearance are more European than Tunisian. When she comes to see Amine in *Essaïda*, neither she nor her red convertible sports car go unnoticed. For the inhabitants of *Essaïda*, she is the other whom one admires, who simply intrigues, or whom one hates. For Nidal and his friends, as well as for Nidal's mother and sister, Sonia is admirable. Nidal's mother finds her beautiful, and his little sister Donia dreams of one day dressing like her. For some of the town's inhabitants, Sonia is a curiosity that they cannot take their eyes off. She complains to Amine about the way people look at her, and he blames her a little and tells her that it is normal because her appearance makes her an oddity in this environment. For some of Amine's neighbors, Sonia is the other shameless and impudent one whose appearance is insulting because she does not conform to the women's dress code in *Essaïda*. Amine's female neighbors look at Sonia with disdain, make derogatory comments about her, and a stone is even thrown in her direction. Sonia knows that she will be the other every time she comes to *Essaïda*. Therefore, she asks Amine to come back and live with her in Carthage.

Questions

1. Do you recognize challenges facing the youth in the town of *Essaïda* which are also shared by some youth in your country/state/city? What are they, and how are the decision-makers in your country/state/city working to solve them?
2. After he is beaten by his father for stopping to work with Amine and therefore not bringing money home, Nidal returns to Amine and commits to work with him for free. Why would he do that?
3. What do you make of the police officer asking Nidal to get down, promising to treat him as his own son?
4. Did Nidal slip or did he kill himself? Justify your answer.

5. Why did Amine return to his painting after just a brief attempt to get Nidal to get down from the pole? Do you think that he could have saved the boy's life if he had insisted?
6. What do you make of the police's presence at the funeral procession?