

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## ***Le Cri du Coeur / The Heart's Cry* (1994)**

Idrissa Ouédraogo (1954-2018)

### OVERVIEW

**Auteur** Idrissa Ouédraogo was a Burkinabé filmmaker whose work critically examined the interplay between tradition and modernity within his country's evolving social landscape. Born on January 21, 1954, in Banfora, Burkina Faso, and raised in Ouahigouya, a northern town, he was the son of farmers. His rural upbringing profoundly shaped his artistic sensibilities, influencing his portrayal of social hierarchy, communal life, and cultural transformation in Burkinabé society. Ouédraogo pursued film studies in Ouagadougou, Kyiv, and Paris, culminating in his graduation from the Institut des hautes études cinématographiques (IDHEC) in 1985. His cinematic work offers nuanced explorations of identity, tradition, and societal change, frequently challenging established norms. His filmography includes *Yam Daabo* (*The Choice*, 1987), *Yaaba* (*Grandmother*, 1989), *Tilai* (*The Law*, 1990), *Karim and Sala* (1991), *Samba Traoré* (1993), *Le Cri du cœur* (*The Heart's Cry*, 1994), *Kini and Adams* (1997), *La Colère des dieux* (*Anger of the Gods*, 2003), and *Kato Kato* (2006).

**Film** *The Heart's Cry* (1994) is an 86-minute French-language drama that explores themes of identity and cultural dislocation through the story of an African boy struggling to navigate between his Malian roots and his new life in France. The film won the OCIC Award – Honorable Mention at the Venice Film Festival in 1994 and was also nominated for the Golden Lion, one of the festival's most prestigious awards.

**Background** Filmed in Mali and Paris, France, *The Heart's Cry* was produced by Centre Européen Cinématographique Rhône-Alpes, Les Films de l'Avenir, and Les Films de la Plaine. Though Saïd Diarra (Moctar) was a newcomer to acting, before *The Heart's Cry*, several cast members had already made notable contributions to African and French cinema. Alex Descas (Ibrahim) was acclaimed for his portrayal of Joseph Mobutu in Raoul Peck's *Lumumba* (2000), a powerful political drama about Congo's independence. Félicité Wouassi, cast as Saffi, had starred as Josie in *Rue Princesse* (1994), a vibrant Ivorian comedy by Henri Duparc. Richard Bohringer (Paulo) was a well-established French actor by the time of this film.

### MAIN CHARACTERS

**Ibrahim** (Alex Descas) A successful mechanic in France who brings his wife and son to reunite with him  
**Moctar** (Saïd Diarra) A young boy from Mali who goes to France to reunite with his father  
**Saffi** (Félicité Wouassi) Moctar's mother who goes to France with Moctar to reunite with her husband  
**Paulo** (Richard Bohringer) A troubled vagabond who becomes Moctar's confidant

### SYNOPSIS

Moctar is born in France but spent most of his childhood in Mali, surrounded by a rich cultural and spiritual environment. When he moves to Paris with his mother to join his father, the transition is difficult. The city's fast pace and emotional distance leave him feeling disconnected and alone. He begins to see visions of a hyena, which reflects his inner conflict and his enduring connection to the spiritual world of Africa. The adults around him fail to understand these visions. His parents follow the advice of a psychiatrist who wrongly concludes that Moctar is experiencing delusions. They place him on medication, hoping to suppress what they see as a psychological issue. At school, Moctar is mocked by classmates and overlooked by those who might have offered support. He becomes increasingly isolated, caught between

two cultures and unable to express the depth of his emotional and spiritual struggle. Everything begins to change when Moctar meets Paulo, a quiet and solitary man living on the margins of society. Paulo carries a painful memory. Years earlier, he accidentally killed a young boy who ran into the street chasing a ball. The tragedy left him emotionally scarred and afraid to become a father, even as his girlfriend dreams of starting a family. When Paulo sees Moctar in a similar moment of danger, he intervenes and forms a bond with the boy. Their friendship becomes a turning point. Paulo listens without judgment and helps Moctar explore the meaning of the hyena. He encourages him to see the vision not as something to fear, but as a reflection of his emotional truth and cultural identity. In return, Moctar's openness allows Paulo to confront his own fears. Together, they discover that healing comes through empathy, honesty, and the courage to face what lies within.

## SCENES

**Ibrahim mails a letter to his wife** Ibrahim Sow steps out of his Paris apartment and walks to the mailbox, where he slips in an envelope. Then he gets into his car, marked with the logo of his business, "Garage du Triangle," and drives off toward his workshop.



**Moctar and his grandfather** The camera shifts to a village in Mali, West Africa. Moctar, an eleven-year-old boy, strolls alongside his grandfather, their conversation light and affectionate. Suddenly, the old man is overcome by a fit of coughing, prompting them to head back home. Visibly concerned, Moctar urges his grandfather to give up smoking.



**Saffi receives Ibrahim's letter** Moctar is playing with his friends on the beach. A child announces the arrival of the mailman, and both adults and children rush toward him with excitement. The postman reads out the names of the recipients and hands out the letters. Saffi, Moctar's mother, receives a letter. She opens the envelope and begins reading it on the spot. Saffi calls out to Moctar and tells him that his father has written to them, and that they will soon be joining him in France. Obviously saddened, Moctar sits quietly in a tree, gazing out over his village. He watches birds gliding above the marshes and shepherds leading their animals to pasture.



**Moctar is sad to leave** Moctar and his mother are taking the bus to the airport. Moctar's grandfather accompanies them to the station. Moctar asks his grandfather who will take care of him from now on. His grandfather reassures him, saying not to worry, that his aunts are still in the village and will look after him. As the child runs toward the bus, he suddenly stops and turns around to cast one last glance at his grandfather.



**The family is reunited** Ibrahim goes to pick up his family at the Paris airport. Moctar is clearly impressed by the monuments. In front of the Eiffel Tower, he exclaims that everything looks exactly like the postcards his father used to send them. Ibrahim, with a camera in hand, takes pictures of his wife and son. With visible pride, Ibrahim leads his family through the garage. He points to the workers' overalls hanging from a coat rack, a quiet symbol of his progress. Saffi smiles and tells him he has made it, that she could not be prouder. Ibrahim says that it took relentless effort, and even a loan, to bring his vision to life. Moctar smiles at his father, then slips outside to the street.



**Moctar's first day at school** Moctar is enrolled at the neighborhood school. On the first day of class, he is asked to solve a math problem on the board. His teacher is impressed by his intelligence, but his classmates whisper that he has a magical charm that gives him the right answers, just like all Africans.



**Saffi has a job** Ibrahim reaches out to his contacts to find work for Saffi and she is hired as an office cleaner. She leaves for work very early in the morning and eats her lunch alone in a public garden. In the evening, she returns home exhausted and collapses onto the couch.



**Moctar has a vision of Hyenas** Moctar thinks he sees a hyena pass by. He blinks, trying to make sure he is not dreaming. Back at home, he asks his father if there are hyenas in France. He tells him he is certain he saw one near the garage. Ibrahim chuckles and replies that the only hyenas in France are in the zoo. Moctar is once again haunted by visions of a hyena. Early in the morning, he leaves his room to check if the animal is really lurking nearby. He spots the beast. It stares at him, then begins to chase him. Moctar stumbles and scrapes his knee. He tells his father about the frightening encounter, and his father sets out to investigate. Ibrahim finds no trace of the hyena. He tells his son that he is old enough not to be afraid of an imaginary hyena, and that at his age, he was chopping wood in the forest. Ibrahim is upset.



**The principal talks to Ibrahim** Moctar confides in one of his classmates that he's been seeing a hyena. His classmate replies that there are no hyenas in France. Their teacher overhears the conversation and promptly calls them to order. Moctar's teacher speaks to the school principal about his frequent distractions. Concerned, the principal visits Ibrahim to discuss Moctar's visions and his difficulty adjusting. Ibrahim reassures him there is no need to worry, and that Moctar made up the whole story to get his parents' attention. He promises the principal that Moctar will be fine. He tells them that Moctar's condition requires the help of a psychiatrist. Saffi protests, insisting that her son is not crazy. But Ibrahim urges her to do whatever is necessary to help Moctar.



**"We are foreigners!"** Ibrahim comes home furious with his son. He tells Moctar that they are foreigners in France and must avoid drawing attention from the authorities, and that any incident could spiral out of control. Saffi tries to explain that the transition has not been easy for Moctar. Ibrahim turns to her and asks if she thinks things have been easy for him in France. He reminds her of the sacrifices he made to bring them to him. Saffi urges Moctar not to drive his father mad. Moctar retreats to his room, takes out his notebook, and writes to himself: "There are no hyenas in France. This is not Africa."

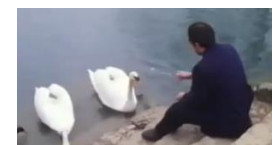


**Paulo encounters Moctar** Moctar is lost in thought and nearly hit by a reckless driver. A passerby by the name of Paulo rushes over to ask if he's hurt, then turns angrily toward the driver, reminding him to watch out for children. But by the time the man turns back, Moctar has already run off. Paulo entertains him with a few magic tricks. Paulo tells him that not everything we see is necessarily real, and urges him to pay close attention, to notice how things appear and vanish in his hands. Then Paulo introduces Moctar to his girlfriend, Deborah.



**"Things are better now!"** Saffi visits Ibrahim at his garage. She tells him she feels they have all been working too much, barely finding time to be together as a family. Ibrahim replies that she should not think that way, and that things are much better now than they used to be. To lift her spirits, he takes her hand and starts to dance with her.

**Paulo misses Moctar** Deborah complains that Paulo is spending too much time worrying about Moctar. Paulo replies that Moctar needs him. She snaps back that Moctar has parents to take care of him, and that she, too, needs attention. Paulo comes to wait for Moctar outside the school, but his classmates tell him Moctar has been absent for several days. Visibly saddened, Paulo wanders along the banks of the Seine. Ibrahim, too, seems to feel the weight of solitude and watches from the window, hoping for his family's return.



**Ibrahim visits his uncle Mamadou** Ibrahim and Saffi send Moctar to spend some time with his uncle Mamadou in the countryside. There, Moctar reconnects with a sense of Malian community, sharing jokes and news from back home. He spends long days with his cousin, rediscovering the wide-open spaces he had missed. Moctar confides in his cousin, recounting the visions that continue to haunt him.. But the cousin passes on Moctar's words to Uncle Mamadou, who reacts with outrage. The scandal he creates leaves Moctar in tears. Moctar's mother comforts him, saying that even if his visions are real, there is no reason to fear a hyena, because it is a timid animal.



**Moctar will see a psychiatrist** Moctar and his mother return to Paris. Saffi argues with Ibrahim, telling him that France is destroying them and that it is not a place for people like them. Ibrahim accuses her of resenting him for bringing the family to France. Eventually, the tension subsides, and the parents agree to have Moctar see a psychiatrist. Medication is prescribed for him.



**Moctar wants to stay at Paulo's** Moctar runs away from home and seeks out Paulo, hoping to stay with him. Déborah objects, leading to a heated argument between her and Paulo. Ibrahim, however, remains confident that Moctar will return home. After all, he says, the boy does not really know anyone else. To Ibrahim, Moctar is being overly dramatic. All that is expected of him, he insists, is to do well in school, to secure a future in France like so many children of immigrants before him. After a walk through Paris with Moctar, Paulo gently encourages the boy to return to his family. Later, Paulo and Déborah reconcile. Sitting next to Deborah in their bedroom bed, Paulo looks at the woman with tenderness and promises her a child as beautiful as Moctar.



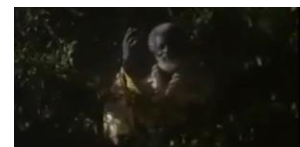
**Paulo's story** Moctar asks Paulo to help him get rid of the hyena that haunts him. He leads Paulo to a vacant lot, which he claims is the creature's lair. As rain begins to fall, they take shelter inside the rusted shell of an old, abandoned truck. Paulo starts to share his own story, and Moctar, curled up beside him, begins to drift into sleep. Paulo confides in Moctar. Paulo tells Moctar that years ago, a child chasing after his ball suddenly appeared in front of his truck. He slammed on the brakes, but couldn't stop in time. The child died beneath the wheels.



**Trapping the hyena** Paulo prepares materials for a bonfire. He piles up old mattresses, some old chairs and some woods. He tells Moctar that the ball is now in his camp. Moctar pretends to fight the hyena and corner it in a circle of fire. Moctar then pretends to open a space for the hyena to escape. Paulo tells him that now, the hyena will watch over him.



**"Never repeat it"** Moctar's vision of the hyena is replaced with that of his grandfather. As he calls his grandfather, Paulo tells him never to repeat to anyone that he saw his grandfather, or he will be sent to an asylum this time.



**Paulo wants to drive** Paulo now works in Ibrahim's garage. During his breaks, he takes a stroll with Ibrahim. Paulo sees a truck like the one he used to drive. He goes around it and looks at it with visible envy. Moctar tells him to get in and drive. Paulo steals the truck and goes for a joyride with Moctar before returning it to its owner. Paulo tells Moctar, visibly excited, that he will go back driving trucks.



**The dead are never gone** Ibrahim receives a letter from Mali announcing the death of his father. He shows it to Moctar. Moctar is devastated by the loss of his grandfather, and Saffi is inconsolable. Later, Paulo finds Moctar sitting alone in a park. He tries to comfort him with lines from a poem by Senegalese poet Birago



Diop: "The dead, those who are dead, are never gone ..." Moctar repeats the words and, little by little, his smile returns.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### MOCTAR

Moctar is an imaginative and homesick boy whose surreal visions reflect his longing for Mali and his struggle to adapt in France. Misunderstood by those around him, he faces isolation and emotional confusion. Yet his resilience shines through as he seeks meaning and holds onto his spiritual roots.

*Imaginative* Moctar's rich imagination shapes his experience in Paris, where he envisions a hyena wandering the city streets. This surreal image mirrors his inner conflict and yearning for the spiritual essence of Mali. His imaginative visions serve as a link between his former life and his current reality, helping him make sense of his feelings of displacement.

*Homesick* Raised in Mali, Moctar is overwhelmed by a profound sense of loss and disorientation upon arriving in France. The unfamiliar language, culture, and urban surroundings intensify his yearning for the warmth and familiarity of home. His homesickness surfaces through emotional withdrawal and confusion, made more painful by the indifference of those around him who dismiss or overlook his inner turmoil.

*Isolated* Moctar's visions and emotional sensitivity set him apart from his peers, who mock and misunderstand him. His schoolmates as well as adults, including his parents, struggle to connect with his inner world, leaving him feeling alone. This isolation deepens his psychological distress and fuels his search for meaning.

*Resilient* Despite being ridiculed and misunderstood, Moctar continues to seek answers to his visions and feelings. He does not shut down emotionally but instead finds strength in his spiritual connection to Mali. His resilience is evident in his willingness to confront the unknown and embrace his identity.

### SAFFI

Moctar's mother is a hopeful, protective mother, guided by love and the dream of a reunited, joyful family. Her traditional beliefs shape her understanding of Moctar's visions, often clashing with the secular norms of Paris.

*Hopeful* Saffi arrives in France with dreams of reuniting her family and building a better life. Her optimism is rooted in love and the belief that change will bring happiness. This hope, however, is tested by the emotional challenges her son faces.

*Protective* As a mother, Saffi is deeply concerned for Moctar's well-being, even if she does not fully understand his visions. She tries to shield him from ridicule and seeks medical help when his behavior becomes troubling. Her protectiveness is driven by love but sometimes clashes with cultural misunderstandings.

*Traditional* Saffi holds onto the customs and values of Mali, which influence how she interprets Moctar's behavior. She believes in spiritual explanations and respects ancestral wisdom. This traditional mindset creates tension in the modern, secular world of Paris.

## IBRAHIM SOW

Ibrahim is an ambitious, pragmatic father who sees assimilation as key to success. His focus on logic and order creates emotional distance, especially with Moctar. Though well-meaning, his detachment reveals the strain between integration and connection.

*Ambitious* Ibrahim worked hard to establish himself in France, driven by the desire to provide for his family. His ambition reflects the immigrant dream of success and stability. He sees relocation as a necessary step toward a better future.

*Detached* Years of separation from his family have created emotional distance, especially with Moctar. He struggles to connect with his son's inner world and often responds with logic rather than empathy. This detachment makes him seem cold, though it may stem from his own survival mechanisms.

*Assimilated* Ibrahim has adapted to French life, embracing its norms and expectations. He values rationality, order, and progress, often dismissing spiritual or emotional concerns. His assimilation highlights the tension between cultural preservation and integration.

*Pragmatic* Focused on practical solutions, Ibrahim seeks medical help for Moctar and encourages him to adjust. He prioritizes functionality over emotional depth, believing that problems can be solved through action. His pragmatism is both a strength and a limitation in addressing his son's needs.

## PAULO

Paulo is a quietly empathetic and nonconformist figure whose mysterious presence offers Moctar a rare sense of understanding and emotional validation. Living beyond the bounds of convention, he serves as a spiritual guide, embodying a wisdom that embraces the unseen and challenges rigid norms.

*Empathetic* Paulo is one of the few characters who truly listens to Moctar without judgment. He recognizes the boy's pain and offers comfort, treating his visions as meaningful rather than delusional. His empathy allows Moctar to feel seen and validated in a world that often ignores him.

*Mysterious* Little is known about Paulo's background, and he seems to drift through Paris with a quiet wisdom. His enigmatic nature adds depth to his role as a spiritual guide for Moctar. He embodies the idea that understanding does not always come from conventional sources.

*Nonconformist* Living outside societal norms, Paulo challenges conventional ideas of sanity and success. He embraces alternative ways of thinking, which makes him uniquely equipped to help Moctar. His nonconformity is not rebellion but a quiet resistance to rigid structures.

## THEMES

**Cultural displacement** In *The Heart's Cry*, Ouedraogo shows how migration can fracture identity, leaving individuals caught between two worlds, no longer fully at home in the past, yet not fully integrated into the present. For children especially, migration is a profound emotional upheaval. Migration severs ties to familiar languages, customs, and relationships, while demanding quick adaptation to unfamiliar norms and expectations. This in-between state creates a sense of dislocation, where identity becomes fragmented by memory, longing, and the pressure to belong. The emotional cost of such displacement is quietly threaded throughout the film, showing how the loss of cultural and familial intimacy can unsettle one's sense of self. This fractured identity is embodied in Moctar's experience. His move from Mali to France is a painful change of scenery and rupture from the warmth of his homeland, a painful experience of cultural displacement.

*Illustrative moment:* Deracinated from the familiar rhythms of his childhood, the beaches of Mali, his playmates, and his grandfather, Moctar finds himself in a world that feels deeply alien. Although he spent the first five years of his life in France, the return feels more like an exile than a homecoming. In Mali, French and Bambara coexisted as languages of communication; in France, French dominates, leaving no room for the linguistic and cultural plurality he once knew. The fast-paced, money-driven urban environment of Paris, which forces both his parents to work long hours outside the home, further isolates him from familial warmth. Moctar's struggle is both logistical and psychological. He feels lost, haunted by dreams of his grandfather and the playgrounds of Mali. His parents, preoccupied with work and frequent arguments, fail to provide the emotional and cultural support he once had. Fortunately, Paulo, a French vagabond he befriends, offers a compassionate ear, allowing Moctar to express the heavy burden of change he carries.



**Homesickness** Homesickness is a longing for a place as well as a yearning for the emotional anchors that give life meaning: familiar voices, comforting routines, and the subtle rhythms of a known world. For many, the transition to a new environment brings excitement, but for others, it evokes a quiet ache, a sense of dislocation that no amount of novelty can soothe. The heart clings to memories that feel more vivid than the present, and the mind seeks refuge in the past when the future feels uncertain. This emotional dissonance is especially profound in moments of cultural displacement, where even language and gestures feel foreign. It is in this emotional landscape that Moctar arrives in Paris, where the promise of opportunity clashes with his deep longing for the warmth and familiarity of Mali.

*Illustrative moment:* When Moctar arrives in Paris, his father takes him shopping and touring the city, emphasizing that they are now surrounded by hope and opportunity. Yet Moctar longs not for material promise, but for comfort, familiarity, and emotional safety. His memories of Mali, especially of his grandfather and village, resurface constantly in dreams and daydreams, offering refuge from the disorienting realities of France. The contrast between the vibrant warmth of his recollections and the cold, often indifferent atmosphere of his new surroundings deepens his sense of loss. Whether at home or at school, Moctar feels out of place, disconnected from the world around him. His visions and dreams are steeped in nostalgia, not as escapism, but as a quiet resistance to the erasure of his identity, a yearning for a life that still feels more real than the one unfolding before him.



**Immigration and integration** *The Heart's Cry* critiques the common expectation that immigrants must shed their cultural identity in order to be accepted. It reveals how this demand for assimilation often disguises exclusion, presenting conformity as a condition for belonging. Rather than celebrating diversity, such environments pressure newcomers to erase their histories and silence their differences. The film argues that real integration cannot be one-sided; it must involve mutual adaptation, where both immigrants and host societies learn from and accommodate one another. This vision of cultural plurality challenges rigid norms and calls for spaces that welcome complexity and difference. At its heart, the film shows how the emotional and psychological cost of forced assimilation can fracture families and isolate individuals. This broader critique becomes deeply personal in the story of the Sow family, where the struggle to belong exposes the urgent need for empathy, understanding, and a more inclusive definition of community.

*Illustrative moment:* Ibrahim Sow worked hard in France to become the owner of a garage. After years of sacrifice, he finally decides to bring his wife and son back to France, seven years after they had returned to Mali due to the harsh living conditions. For the Sow family, this move is intended to symbolize progress and opportunity. However, young Moctar's struggles tell a different story. He is haunted by visions and finds it difficult to navigate life in France. His social life deteriorates, his academic performance declines, and his parents begin to argue more frequently. Moctar's inability to integrate is not rooted in unwillingness, but rather in the rigid expectations imposed by society regarding what it means to "fit in." He is placed in a system that does not speak his language, both literally and figuratively. Instead of interpreting Moctar's visions as symbolic of the tension between his desire to adapt



to a new environment and the cultural identity shaped over seven years with his grandfather and childhood friends, Ibrahim attempts to force assimilation by subjecting his son to psychiatric treatments.

**Culture and psychiatry** Cultural psychiatry explores how cultural beliefs and practices shape the way mental health is understood, experienced, and treated. It questions the assumption that psychiatric diagnoses are universally valid, showing how cultural frameworks influence what is seen as normal or pathological. Emotional distress may be expressed through culturally specific symbols or behaviors that don't align with Western clinical models. When these expressions are misread through a dominant cultural lens, people risk being misdiagnosed and subjected to treatments that ignore their lived realities. This disconnect is especially manifest for those navigating cross-cultural transitions. In *The Heart's Cry*, such tensions surface in Moctar's story, a young boy whose visions are interpreted as illness rather than culturally meaningful expressions of inner turmoil. His experience highlights the dangers of overlooking cultural context in psychiatric interpretation and care.

*Illustrative moment:* Having recently relocated from Mali to France to reunite with his father, Moctar begins to see visions of a hyena stalking him through the streets of Paris. These visions are swiftly pathologized, dismissed by adults and medical professionals as symptoms of psychological disorder rather than expressions of emotional distress or cultural symbolism. Moctar is thus psychologized as a sick subject in need of correction. His father, eager to conform, accepts the psychiatrist's diagnosis and imposes treatment onto the child, deepening Moctar's sense of alienation. It is Paulo, a vagabond, who sees beyond the clinical lens, who offers Moctar empathy and understanding. Paulo recognizes the visions as cries for connection, helping Moctar navigate his insecurities and ultimately liberate himself from their grip.



**Spiritual connection** Spiritual connection often transcends geography, logic, and even time. It is the invisible thread that binds individuals to their origins, to ancestral memory, and to the deeper rhythms of nature and culture. For children especially, this connection can manifest through imagination, dreams, and symbolic encounters that defy adult rationality. When uprooted from familiar landscapes, the spirit seeks continuity, often through visions or sensations that evoke the lost terrain of belonging. Such experiences are not mere fantasies but expressions of a deeper truth, a longing for coherence between past and present. This is especially true for Moctar, whose displacement in France is inhabited with visions of a wild savannah beast.

*Illustrative moment:* Between the ages of five and twelve, Moctar lived in Mali, his parents' homeland. There, his childhood was steeped in his grandfather's tales of wild animals roaming the African savannah, and he thrived in a vast, open playground, swimming in rivers with friends, playing hide-and-seek among the trees, and chasing one another through the bushes. Now relocated to Paris, where he and his mother have joined his father, Moctar begins to experience recurring visions of a hyena roaming the streets of France, a country where such creatures are not expected to exist. The hyena, appearing mysteriously in this foreign landscape, is born of the realm of childhood, rich in imagination and wonder, a realm that adults, estranged from the primal breath of their origins, no longer know how to cherish. Moctar's father, along with the child's uncles and aunts, dismiss these visions as mere delusions. His father even agrees to psychiatric treatment, as if seeking to sever Moctar's spiritual and cultural bond with the Africa he himself abandoned for France.

**Redemption** In *The Heart's Cry*, Ouedraogo tackles redemption as a shared journey shaped by empathy, emotional restoration, and human connection. Redemption begins when individuals confront their pain through relationships that allow vulnerability and mutual recognition. Empathy becomes the spur, an invitation to listen, understand, and hold space for another's suffering. In this process, emotional wounds are not erased but acknowledged and reinterpreted, allowing healing to take root. Redemption flourishes when people move beyond self-preservation and embrace the transformative power of compassion. Through connection, guilt is softened, shame is spoken, and fractured identities begin to mend. This challenges the isolating nature of trauma, offering a path toward grace through shared experience. Whether between strangers or loved ones, moments of emotional reciprocity, of "you, too, despite so many differences?", create the conditions for restoration of the self and of one's capacity to love, protect, and belong. This vision of redemption is vibrantly embodied in the relationship between Paulo and Moctar,

where empathy and emotional honesty form the foundation for healing. Their bond reveals that redemption is not merely achieved in isolation but is discovered in the presence of another. It is a quiet, transformative process whereby connection becomes the conduit for finding one's self.

*Illustrative moment* Paulo is a vagabond burdened by the memory of a boy he once accidentally killed with his car. Haunted by guilt, he drifts through life emotionally detached, unable to commit to his girlfriend Deborah, who longs for a child. When Paulo encounters Moctar, who nearly suffers the similar fate of being run over by a car, he is confronted with a symbolic echo of his past trauma. Rather than retreating, Paulo chooses to help Moctar, who is tormented by visions of a hyena and dismissed by adults as delusional. Unlike the other adults, Paulo listens to Moctar without judgment, offering the empathy he has been denied. In a moment of quiet intimacy, Paulo confides in Moctar about the accident, revealing the depth of his remorse. Although it is unclear whether Moctar, who appears to have drifted off as Paulo was speaking, actually heard his friend's confession, Paulo's act of vulnerability marks the beginning of his healing. Moctar's quiet presence and perceived compassion allow Paulo to confront his guilt and begin the journey toward self-forgiveness. Their growing bond softens Paulo's resistance to intimacy, gradually opening him to the possibility of nurturing life rather than fearing it. He tells Deborah that he will father her a child as beautiful as Moctar. When Moctar speaks of the hyena, Paulo does not dismiss him, but instead helps him interpret its meaning, validating Moctar's experience and affirming his cultural roots. Through this mutual exchange, Paulo redeems himself not only as a protector but as someone capable of deep compassion. Moctar, in turn, begins to reconcile his fractured identity, finding strength in the visions that once isolated him. In helping Moctar navigate his insecurities, Paulo reclaims his own humanity, transforming guilt into grace.



**Resistance and surrender** Migration often begins with hope, but over time it becomes a quiet struggle between identity and survival. Each generation adapts differently: the first resists, the second compromises, and the third often forgets. The desire to belong reshapes language, memory, and even imagination, until cultural difference is no longer a source of pride but a burden to conceal. What starts as resilience slowly turns into resignation. The host society tolerates difference for a while, then begins to treat it as a problem, until it disappears altogether. The cost of acceptance is often invisibility. In this cycle, Ibrahim learns to lie low, avoiding attention to protect himself. Saffi, worn down by the system, gives in and conforms. And Moctar, still a child, begins to internalize the erasure. In his notebook, he writes: "There are no hyenas in France. This is not Africa." His words mark the final stage of forgetting. The journey ends not in arrival, but in silence.

*Illustrative moment:* Ibrahim's family unravels quietly. In the heart of France, far from the rhythms of home, Ibrahim has learned the cost of visibility. Once perhaps a man of conviction, he now moves cautiously, his every gesture shaped by the need to remain unnoticed. His surrender is pragmatic. He tells his son and wife to not make waves in France, but to lie low, work hard, avoid trouble. The system is not their ally, he says, and anything could spiral. The system's looming presence must not be provoked. His anger toward Moctar is not just paternal frustration. It is fear. Fear that his son's visions, his refusal to conform, might draw the wrong kind of attention. Ibrahim's sacrifices are real, but they come with a price: the silencing of self. Saffi begins as Moctar's emotional anchor. She sees his pain, his confusion, and tries to mediate between his inner world and the rigid expectations of their new life. But her empathy is gradually worn down by the pressures around her, psychiatrists who speak in clinical terms, a husband who insists on discipline, and a society that pathologizes difference. She surrenders quietly. She agrees to the medication not because she believes Moctar is ill, but because resistance has become exhausting. In doing so, she trades her maternal instinct for sanctioned compliance. And then there is Moctar. The boy who sees a hyena. Moctar is young, and the weight of disbelief is heavy. When he writes, "There are no hyenas in France. This is not Africa," it is a resignation. He begins to doubt himself, to internalize the narrative imposed on him. His surrender is the most tragic, because it marks the loss of wonder, of cultural memory, of the right to see differently.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does the hyena symbolize in Moctar's journey? And how does its meaning evolve throughout the film?
2. How does the film portray the tension between cultural memory and assimilation?
3. How does Moctar reframe the idea of "home"? Is it a place, a feeling, or a relationship?
4. In what ways do Ibrahim, Saffi, and Moctar each respond differently to life in France?
5. How does Paulo's past trauma shape his relationship with Moctar?
6. What do Paulo and Moctar give each other?