

**« Sudan, remember us »
directed by Hind Meddeb**

Technical Informations

International title : Sudan, remember us

Original title : Sudan Y'a Ghali / السودان يا غالي

Country : France, Tunisia, Qatar

Year : 2024

Running time : 76min

Color : Yes

Language: Arabic, English

Cast & Crew

Writer - Director : Hind Meddeb

Editing : Gladys Joujou

Sound : Hind Meddeb, Damien Tronchot

Script consultants : Nadine Naous, Léa Pernollet

Cast : Shajane Suliman, Maha Elfaki, Ahmed Muzamil, Khatab Ahmed

Production : Echo Films & Blue Train Films

Co-production : My Way Production Tounès

Producers : Abel Nahmias, Michel Zana, Alice Ormières

Co-producers : Taoufik Guiga

World Sales : Totem Films

Mena Sales : MAD Solutions

French distribution : Dulac Distribution

Subventions & Grants

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Logline

They are young Sudanese yearning for freedom. Their revolution is poetic, driven by the power of words. As it intertwines their stories, the film reassembles fragments of a revolution, a battle pitting the voices of youth against the military's might.

Director's biography

Filmmaker based in Paris, Hind Meddeb's work has taken her from Europe to Africa and the Middle East. Citizen of both sides of the Mediterranean, she represents peoples and territories in their complexity. By filming by herself, she creates intimacy, showing historic events through individual paths. Between 2011 and 2013, she directed TUNISIA CLASH and ELECTRO CHAABI, two feature documentaries on musical creation as a revolutionary act. Her latest film, PARIS STALINGRAD was selected in numerous festivals (Cinéma du Réel, TIFF, PSIFF, CPH:DOX etc. and received two awards at the Documentary Edge Festival NZ). The film was theatrically released in France in May 2021.

Synopsis

Shajane, Maha, Muzamil, Khatab and the voice of the poet Chaikhoon. They are in their twenties, politically active and artistically creative. This film is a cinematic chorus, the collective portrait of a generation fighting for freedom with their words, poems and chants. Faced with a corrupted army and a paramilitary militia responsible of war crimes in Darfur, Kordofan and Blue Nile, they could have lost heart before starting. Without the dream guiding them, the power of imagination and the might of poetic discourse, they would not have overthrown the former regime. The film relates the uneven struggle that pitted the voices of the revolution against the fire of the militia.

Director's statement

I met the characters in 2019, at the revolutionary sit-in that lasted 57 days around the Army headquarters in Khartoum, Sudan. Since then, I've been following them: at the time of the dictator's fall, after they survived the June 3 massacre - when the army attacked the sit-in killing hundreds of people in a few hours, while resisting to the military coup of October 2021 marching every week during more than a year, until the war started scattering causing death and destruction everywhere.

I have been closely observing the progress being made in Sudan in terms of women's rights and freedom of conscience, because the country is at the crossroads of worlds that I have frequented since childhood. My mother left Morocco and my father Tunisia in the seventies to escape dictatorship, searching for freedom in France. It's been three generations since decolonization of people trying to change regimes in Africa and Middle East, in vain. This film is about how to face this impossible change. Standing in front of a powerful army, how can a pacific movement succeed? The more I discovered Sudan, the more I saw how much poetry was a tool of resistance in this revolution is. The more I was filming, the more it was emerging in conversations, in demonstrations, on walls. The film documents how poetry is part of action and how it is part of the film's character's life. It is common for a political discussion to turn into a poetic joust. In Sudan, people recite poetry the way they breathe. At first, I thought I was witnessing improvisation sessions that would begin in the middle of a conversation. But after a great deal of research and translation, I realized that nothing

is improvised. As soon as a new poem is published, or simply recited by the poet himself on YouTube (poets are present on social networks and have a large following), people are quick to learn it by heart. Thus, the poets have accompanied each stage of the revolution, composing lengthy works that I would describe as "epic poems", written as history is made.

I started to translate their poetry and, as a filmmaker, I felt myself like a translator. Words can be stronger than weapons. I think about this poetic verse: « Bullets don't kill, silence does». I won't stay silent; I'll share with a worldwide audience the Sudanese way of fighting with words. I'm chasing beauty in a country scarred by years of dictatorship and a military oppression.

Project History

In 2016, thousands of refugees camped in the streets of Paris, in terrible conditions, living with constant police harassment. I went to the camps to support them daily. Refugees were arriving from Afghanistan, Somalia and many other countries, but most of them were from Sudan. Since the French government had closed the border with England, the Sudanese, most of whom were English speaking natives, could not join their families and friends in England. Stuck in Calais, they were forced to go back to Paris and ask for political asylum in France. I speak Arabic and so I began to help some of them to translate their stories for their asylum applications. This is how I met Suleiman, a young refugee from Darfur. While spending time listening to his story, a long journey to escape war and slavery, he shared his beautiful poems with me. His natural behavior in front of the camera and his poetic thoughts about exile resulted in his becoming the main character of my documentary, "Paris Stalingrad".

***Exile is a liar
It tricks you
with its pretty bright streets
It digs your pain for free
Whether you're wounded or fooled,
Whether you're sick or exhausted
It doesn't care
It lures you with illusions
And feeds your sadness
As the wind fills the sails on a boat
Souleiman Mohamad***

While shooting *Paris Stalingrad*, I met many other Sudanese in exile, like Moneim Rahma, a poet and political activist who was condemned to death in Sudan because of his political engagement with the SPLA, the *Sudanese People's Liberation Army*. In Sudan, he co-founded the *Sudanese Writers Union* and the daily newspaper *Ajras Al-Hurriya* (Bells of Freedom). After escaping from jail, he was in exile in Ethiopia and finally granted asylum in France. In 2015, he received the *Oxfam Novib/PEN Award for Freedom of Expression*.

I also met the poet and political activist Hassan Yassin. Together, we created and staged a lecture of his poems about Paris accompanied by a group of classical musicians (baroque). He has been in France for 3 years and was still waiting for the immigration authorities to recognize him as a political refugee; he finally got his papers at end of January 2020, and we organized a party to celebrate with

him his new life. His crime in Sudan was having created an NGO to save abandoned babies born outside marriage; as most of the time these babies were found left in the garbage. With his NGO, Hassan was also bringing education to orphans of the civil war. Persecuted by the regime, he was repeatedly tried and jailed because they considered he was helping Darfur's war victims, which meant the enemy. Ultimately he was forced to leave his country. In France, Hassan wrote poems about loss of identity when you are not treated as a human being. A book of his poetry has been published by "Presses du Réel", and Hassan is scheduled to do a residency at "La Maison de la Poésie" in December.

***What can be worse than the word 'refugee' to name a man?
(...) You, the passerby in front of me:
I am a migrant who has survived the fermentation of flesh in the Mediterranean
to come in the streets of Paris
These streets cleaned in the early morning, and I am here!!!
I am the lie of this world
I am this share of publicized humanity
They are looking for strategies to get rid of me
They spend colossal amounts
They have created commissions to uproot me
So I no longer know if I'm piece of meat or a piece of asphalt (...)
Hassan Yassine, The Curse***

Between 2017 and 2019, I worked with Hassan, Moneim and Suleiman on the translation of their poems, and with them, organized musical poetry nights bringing them on stage in front of a large audiences during cultural festivals including "La Voie est Libre" and the "Nuit de la Poésie", held at Le Maison de la Poésie, Institut du Monde Arabe and the Eglise de Saint-Merry.

When the revolution started in Sudan, my friends Hassan, Moneim, Suleiman, along with many others, wanted to take part in the uprising, but it was too early for them to risk heading back to their country. They were very excited that I could freely travel there and bring back my impressions on the revolution. I traveled, animated by the desire of my exile Sudanese friends. Following their advice, I obtained my visa from Tunisia, using my Tunisian passport.

The origin of my interest in poetry and exile is related to my own family background and the heritage of my father's life engagement. Abdelwahab Meddeb was a poet, a novelist and an essayist. After 9/11, he put aside his literary and poetic writings and began a long battle against ignorance. He built a historical, political and theological framework to share the untold story of Islamic civilization with the world. As a poet, a novelist, a philosopher, a university professor, an Islamic scholar, an art historian, a radio show host and a translator, armed with historical facts and a Sufi spirit, he challenged the jihadist ideology of Al Qaeda and the Islamic political vision of the Muslim Brotherhood movement. He published a series of books on Islam that diagnosed the origins of Islamic fundamentalism and religious extremism.

He always thought that religion in politics was a threat for individual rights and freedom. He believed that no revolution could succeed without including women on the political scene and in the public space. He based his work on ancient figures of Muslim spirituality including Sufi women like Saida el Adawiya and Saida Manubiya.

I conceived my film including his spiritual heritage.

When the Sudanese Revolution started, I immediately thought of my father who died 5 years ago. I felt how relevant and effective his thoughts could be. Through his books and interviews, I felt he was still alive among us. I realized that I could include him in a dialogue with the peaceful, secular, and feminist revolution happening in Sudan.

The video of a young Sudanese woman wearing a traditional white dress, chanting, went viral on social networks. She sang:

***“They burn us in the name of religion
They kill us in the name of religion
They imprison us in the name of religion
But Islam is innocent
Islam tells us to rise against our tyrants!
Bullets don’t kill, Silence does.”***

Her name is Alaa Salah. She is a 22-year-old architecture student and she was chanting the words of the Sudanese poet Azhari Mohamed Ali. After that episode, the Sudanese themselves started to say: *“our revolution is a woman”*. The message she was sending to the world is very similar to my father’s narrative: *“don’t oppress people in the name of Islam, leave them to experience their own spiritual path”*. The spirit of the Sudanese revolution and its slogans vibrate with my father writings. It’s as though his dream was becoming true. When I was in Sudan, I suddenly heard his own words in the voices of Sudanese revolutionaries. With regards to the inferior status of women in Islam, my father Abdelwahab wrote: *“All those who want to follow the founding scriptures are faced with a conundrum. What can they do in the face of a [Koranic] verse which explicitly establishes the superiority of men over women, [namely] verse 34 of Surat 4, which reads: ‘Men have authority over women because God has favored one over the other.’ The only solution for the women and men who wish to follow the Islamic faith while adapting to the modern principle of gender equality is to acknowledge that all Koranic edicts regarding women’s inferiority are obsolete, and that they are rooted in historical circumstances rather than in immutable principles.”*

I was a child the first time I heard about Sudan. It was in 1983. My father was working on the translation into French of the novel *“Season of Migration to the North”* by the great Sudanese writer Tayeb Salih. About him, he said: *“this is the best Arab contemporary literature and it comes from Sudan.”* Abdelwahab wanted to bring Sudanese literature to the world’s attention, and in directing this film, I do so as a continuation of his wish.

My father was committed to translation. According to him, it was the best way to resume an interrupted dialogue between East and West. He wrote: *“Translation is what will serve as an intermediary between the languages. On this question, Goethe was prophetic, for in our day, in the world tribe of poetic creation, often the poet attributes his talent and his mastery to the act of translating. Every translator should be seen in the same way: he tries to be the mediator of this spiritually universal activity and undertakes to promote reciprocal exchange. For whatever one may say about the insufficiency of translations, translation is and will remain one of the worthiest and most important activities in universal world exchange.”* This film is also about translating poems and revolutionary slogans and sharing them with the rest of the world.

The main characters in order of appearance in the film

Shajane Suliman, 29, the voice of hope

« My pen was forged during the sit-in: what I saw there inspired all these Utopian messages ». Nicknamed the "Minister of Happiness" by the revolutionaries, Shajane Suliman was one of the most famous "messengers" who came each day to the sit-in to encourage the revolutionaries who were camping on site and those manning the barricades. She is followed by thousands of fans on social networks and one cannot walk along the street with her without passers-by, in tears, stopping her to thank her for her words or to take a photo with her. Modest and reserved, at the age of 29, Shajane has unintentionally become one of the faces of this revolution. She owes this popularity to the simplicity of her personality coupled with an uncommon literary and political intuition. Her message is a powerful one: according to her, our beauty resides in our differences. Her first name means "sorrow" in Arabic and it is also the title of a melancholy song by famous Lebanese singer Fairuz. Shajane embodies a form of poetry of the present. She represents the possibilities at work in Sudanese society. After spending her whole life in Saudi Arabia where she was born, she only recently discovered her homeland, when her family was forced to return to Sudan following her father's death. This return to the old country was accompanied by a genuine fall in social status. Her father's work in Saudi Arabia allowed the whole family to live decently. But now, three generations live together in the grandmother's house in Khartoum, in a revolutionary period when it is hard to find work and when galloping inflation seriously degrades living standards. Shajane is now part of a downgraded middle class whose sole capital is its scientific and poetic education.

Shajane, who studies architecture as a realization of her childhood dream, is passionate about reading and writing. Influenced by her encounters at the sit-in, she has taken up drawing, the guitar and singing. Shajane is an optimist, always ready to try out new means of action. As she became famous via social networks during the revolution, a publisher has offered to bring out a book of writings and photos that sum up her revolutionary experience. She was about to launch a literary café in the Booktino bookstore. For many people, Shajane is a moral compass, the voice of wisdom and hope.

Shajane left for Egypt with her family.

She is living and working in Ajman, in the UAE.

Muzamil, 24, the painter of the revolution

Gifted in drawing, painting and graffiti, Muzamil uses his brushstrokes to serve the revolution. From the very start of the uprising, he has taken part in clandestine campaigns at night to cover the walls with revolutionary frescoes. In his neighbourhood of Beit El Mal, the inhabitants are extremely united and have long been organized in committees. The workers' unions are also very present there. Muzamil was present at all the demonstrations and was also among those who erected the first tents for the sit-in. During the 57 days of occupation, he only went home twice to fetch his belongings; he says that he barely took time to say goodbye to his mother because he was in such a hurry to return. As a witness to the June 3rd massacre, he knows that the military's plan was to shatter imaginations and "erase" the memory of the sit-in. He continues to get involved in his neighbourhood, organizing workshops and participating in the community kitchen that prepares meals and distributes them to street children. Discreet, distinguished and patient, Muzamil is always there for others, listening to the youngest. Disillusioned by inflation, the lack of social progress and the economic situation of his country, he sometimes despairs and thinks of going into exile. He hides

his anxieties behind his smile and it isn't until nightfall, when the time comes to confide in others, that he gives a glimpse of his aching soul.

Muzamil and his family went to Cairo.

He is now studying computer program in India.

Maha, 36, the feminist activist

"I left home on April 6th and, during the 57 days of occupation, I did not go back. For the first time in my life, I was living away from my family. I come from a very conservative neighbourhood, where many people close to the regime live. When I went to demonstrate, I had to make sure that nobody knew where I was going. Otherwise, I would have been reported." Maha is in her thirties and comes from a modest family. Previously shy and retiring, she confesses to me that she discovered herself at the sit-in, living her own life without being forced to hide behind a social mask. According to her, the importance of the role of women in this revolution is commensurate with the oppression they suffered under the al-Bashir regime. She explains that the state controlled women's bodies: subject to the guardianship of their fathers, older brothers or husbands, Sudanese women were considered eternal minors. If their way of dressing was deemed indecent, they were arrested by the morality police and could be whipped in public. That's why Maha wants to believe in this revolution: *"Sudanese women know that their future depends on this revolution, that they must fight for equality in the eyes of the law »*. The women who are demonstrating see themselves as the heirs of the Kandake, the ancient Nubian queens. A few months after the sit-in was broken up, when life resumed in Khartoum, Maha started making and selling jewellery on Athens Square. Aware of the harshness of society towards women, she prefers to laugh and make fun of the most tragic situations. Once a Sudanese woman reaches her thirties, she has little chance of getting married. Maha is well aware of this, but she still believes in love and freedom. Every day in the late afternoon, when the sun is a little less hot, she sets up her jewellery stall on Athens Square, drinking tea and talking politics with the friends who come to see her. Everyone knows her because she stood out as one of the most emblematic voices of the feminist struggle.

Maha took refuge in Port Sudan.

She is waiting for a visa to join her sister in the UAE.