

The place in between a film by Sarah Bouyain



an Athénaïse production



Synopsis

Amy, a young mixed-race woman, travels to Bobo, Burkina to reconnect with her mother whom she was separated from at the age of eight. She discovers only her aunt living in the family home, finds the courtyard of her childhood both comforting and unsettling. She feels a stranger in a city where she has no bearings.

For years now, Mariam, a Burkina housecleaner in Paris, has lived as a furtive shadow on the margins of society.

Familial Tones, Shadows, and Glimmers

Sarah Bouyain's first feature-length film is full of the dark weight of sorrow and the glimmer of buried feelings. It timidly opens the door onto the fractures that mark women. The destinies of three women collide : the solitary Mariam, from Africa, who has retreated into her work cleaning the offices of a Parisian bank ; the young mixed-race Amy who takes off in search of her African mother ; and Acita, Amy's aunt who lives in Burkina and who knows the past others would like to forget. But Amy, who decides to go to Burkina, does not speak Dioula and so can only communicate with Acita through Kadiatou, her charming maid.

Mariam's life in the suburbs wears on her, the only glimmer in its dreariness are the Dioula classes she gives to Esther, a French woman employed at the bank where she cleans. Amy runs up against indifference, the night, the language she does not speak. Acita wants to regain Amy as the daughter she never had. Amy persists in the search for her mother who seems to have vanished. Distance causes separation, continents become frontiers, time deepens the pain. Amy tries to reconcile the images of her father, a white man who settled in France and who died a year ago, with the obscure outline of her African mother whom she knew only as a child. Between abrupt associations and moments of imaginative candor, the various relations gradually become clearer.

The dissociated, vague identities Amy tries to redraw, the better to accept them, vibrate in *The place in between* without clashing. Generations confront each other, cultures collide, lives march by. Amy wants to take her life in hand by acknowledging her origins. Mariam lets her life slip away across the repetition of the days as she pines the child taken from her. The editing accentuates these fractures; the frames fix the movement. There is an “on-the-edge” intensity in the actors’ performances. **Dorylia Calmel**, merciless in *The Bloodiest* by Jean-Piere Bekolo, presses on as an unsettled young mixed-race woman. **Assita Ouédiaogo**, combative in *The Promise* by the Dardenne brothers, internalizes the feeling of exile. **Blandine Yaméogo**, irrational in *Delwende* by Pierre Yameogo, gives nuance to the fractures.

Nathalie Richard and **Djénéba Koné** hold their places around these women in crisis, eclipsing the few men scattered throughout the story - and that because *The place in between* is above all a woman’s affair. Filmmaker Sarah Bouyain, born in France to a father of Burkinan origin, has explored her mixed-race roots in a documentary *Children of the White Man*, 2000 and a collection of short stories *Métisse façon*, 2003. Shooting her film in both the Parisian suburbs and Bobo-Dioulasso, Sarah Bouyain harmoniously associates the various locations, which allows her to delicately explore the filiation that threads its way between the women, between the mixed colors while suggesting that when one’s heart is at peace one can open that heart to the world.

Michel Amarger

film reviewer for RFI / Africiné



Conflict / Reconciliation

The title, The place in between, is it meant to focus attention on the subject of your film ?

The title is straightforward. But it can be seen from two quite different angles. For the young woman who travels to Burkina what stands out is that of being a stranger. As for Mariam, in a different way she too is a stranger, having put her life on hold, as it were, over a situation that has never been settled. The film explores the question of being a stranger: a stranger to oneself, a stranger to a culture. There is that slight gap that exists between oneself and others, those in close proximity.

But aren't the two worlds in your film in conflict?

They are certainly distant from each other, but not dissociable. There are key locations. For example when Amy arrives in Africa, we see her in a tailor's shop, but we don't feel any rupture. It is only when she walks outdoors with the tailor and gets on his motorcycle to go to her aunt's house that we are sure she is in Burkina and not France. Then there is the room in the residence Mariam shares with another woman; it situates itself somewhere between the two worlds, and is one of the bridges or formal links that connects them. These bridges mainly exist in the characters' minds. The young woman always thought of Burkina because that's where her mother was. The mother always thinks of Burkina because it is her past, where her daughter was taken from her. Of course it is a painful connection, nourished by nostalgia, but it exists. What connects people is also family, the love we hold for each other.



Tell / Imply

Why not show the characters and their relationships at the beginning of the film ?

The problem with films about families is that one feels obliged to outline, more or less deftly, the family genealogy - which can seem quite plodding. We tried to simplify the script as much as possible in that sense. A lot of the more explanatory scenes were cut during editing. There is a lot of silence in the film, but there are also some very talkative moments. When we were writing the script we didn't want those conversations to reveal too much. We wanted them to resemble more a sort of musical chatter. What the characters talk about, what the audience should understand is conveyed by something else.

Mother / Daughter

In the film the mother is far from Burkina, far from her daughter, and far from her present environment. Why emphasize her solitude?

She is alone because of all that she carries inside which has yet to be resolved. The film also touches on integration and non-integration. I very much like the parallel between Mariam and her roommate who is from Mali. She is also living in France and is a stranger, but she has adapted. She has hung posters in the room and she has friends; we see her talking on the phone. She has a life while Mariam has none. Mariam has decided to remain in a no man's land, perhaps to punish herself. Maybe she feels guilty for all that happened with her daughter. All of that makes it impossible for her to live in the present, to be where she is - in France. She refuses to take advantage of her life, and the actress who plays her brings that dimension to the role.

You seem to create an opening through her relationship with Esther to whom she is teaching Dioula. Why break it off so suddenly?

Mariam sees her relationship with Esther as a way of escaping, of experiencing something different. It also gives her a sense of identification: all of a sudden she has a relationship with a white person in France, someone different from the other people she knows. Esther helps her to realize that she possess something: she can teach someone another language. And this opens a door that Mariam had never thought of opening. But it also brings her back to the question of her daughter.





Communicate / Internalize

One also communicates in Dioula, one of the languages spoken in Burkina. Though Mariam never transmitted that language to her daughter, she is teaching it to the white lady. Is that an additional rupture ?

The original idea for the film was that of learning Dioula. It has remained in the film as a way of showing how difficult it can be to communicate. The mother tongue carries a lot of symbolic force. The editor regretted the fact that we did not subtitle certain conversations, for example when Amy and her aunt argue. You can sense the rage and pain, but unless you speak Dioula you can't understand what is being said. The audience finds itself in Amy's shoes. So different people will understand different things in the film. Nonetheless, what is essential does not go unperceived, because what is essential is not only cultural. There are two things at play here. Culture is what makes Amy feel like a stranger. For example, the taxi driver considers her to be white and so asks her for more money. That is the consequence of colonialism. What really is at issue here is the individual. Her family history could just as well have been lived by a French family living in France.

Participate /Watch

Why did you choose to follow Amy with a fixed camera?

I don't like the fact of describing a place through movement, as a sort of preamble to indicate where one is. The main location, which is the house in Bobo-Dioulasso, is also the house where I spent summer vacation with my grandmother. I remember sitting and really not much happening, nothing much moved though my grandmother and I talked a lot. It was a very static, settled sensation. When we placed the actors on the set that sensation again became palpable. The fixity of the frame allows us to see Amy who is anything but still. She comes, she goes...

There is a certain theatricality to the conversations between Amy and her aunt. Was that intentional?

In the scene, for example, where Amy and her aunt argue, it is obvious that her aunt is skillful with language, knows how to manipulate it, whereas Amy is not used to such disputes or the gestures that accompany them. The aunt's theatricality is well controlled because that is how people argue in Burkina, and Amy does the best she can.

Did you cast the actors for their different sensitivities?

Dorylia Calmel, who plays Amy, has spent more time on the stage than on film sets ; she performs trapeze. But her performance has a more sober touch to it than Blandine Yameogo in the role of the aunt, who herself is a stage actor and dancer. When we did the casting for the aunt, Blandine really moved us. Assita Ouedraogo's performance as Mariam is altogether different. She had impressed me in *The Promise* and I always knew that I wanted her to play Mariam. Her presence on the screen is quite strong, austere. And there is something about her slender, angular body that is quite unusual. We remain in the realm of realism and yet she stands a bit outside of it. When watching Assita Ouedraogo play Mariam, it is her solitude that one first notices and only then the fact that she is African. Perhaps you do not think her sadness comes from the fact that she is far from her country, that she has no papers and works cleaning office buildings. Perhaps you understand that her solitude is the result of a painful family experience.

Write / Film

Did the film change a lot between the initial project and the final result?

The heart of the story at the beginning was language then it gradually shifted towards something more autobiographical. I wasn't aware that the film had actually borrowed elements from my own life and my own family.

Fiction brings you back to your reality?

My method of filmmaking more resembles auto-fiction. I use a lot of what are my actual experiences in my stories. Sometimes I push myself to experience certain things just so that I can relate them. We are all more aware of our comings and goings today. In general, the question of being mixed-race, of living in that place in between is one that is very pertinent. The world is constantly pressing forward, taking on new forms. People are closer in terms of distance but at the same time more distant from each other as far as communicating goes. The issue of mixed-race is one that we must continue to question and explore.



Crew

Screenplay	Sarah Bouyain, in collaboration with Gaëlle Macé
Direction	Sarah Bouyain
Director of photography	Nicolas Gaurin
Editing	Valérie Loiseleux Pascale Chavance
Sound	Marianne Roussy Cécile Chagnaud Thierry Delor
Music	Sylvain Chauveau
Sets	Bill Mamadou Traoré Barbara Creutz-Pachiodi Marie Le Garrec

Cast

Dorylia Calmel	Amy
Assita Ouedraogo	Mariam
Nathalie Richard	Esther
Blandine Yaméogo	Acita
Nadine Kambou Yéri	Kadiatou
Dominique Reymond	Marie
Djénéba Koné	Awa
Jérôme Sénélas	Eliot

Produced by Athénaïse (France) - Sophie Salbot

Co-produced by Abissia Productions (Burkina Faso) - Sékou Traoré

With participation of

Centre National de la Cinématographie - Région Ile-de-France - Canal + - Vision Sud-Est - DDC

82 min, 1.85, color, 35mm

The place in between



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