

منادى العين

WHO DO I BELONG TO

A FILM BY MERYAM JOOBEUR

LUXBOX

 74^e Internationale
Filmfestspiele
Berlin
Competition

A young man with short brown hair, wearing a dark blue and white jacket with yellow and white stripes on the sleeves, and blue jeans, is walking away from the camera on a sandy path. The path is flanked by dense, vibrant pink and purple flowering bushes and trees. The background shows a large, rounded hill covered in the same colorful vegetation under a clear sky. The overall scene is a beautiful, surreal landscape.

INTERNATIONAL TITLE: *Who Do I Belong To*

ORIGINAL TITLE: *Mé el Aïn*

DIRECTOR: Meryam Joobeur

COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN: An official coproduction between Tunisia, France, Canada - in collaboration with Norway, Qatar, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

PRODUCTION YEAR: 2024

DURATION: 118 minutes

LANGUAGE: Arabic

TECHNICAL INFORMATION:

Ratio 2048x 1426 (1.434), 24 fps | Sound format 5.1

CAST

SALHA NASRAOUI (Aicha)

MOHAMED HASSINE GRAYAA (Brahim)

MALEK MECHERGUI (Mehdi)

ADAM BESSA (Bilal)

DEA LIANE (Reem)

RAYEN MECHERGUI (Adam)

CHAKER MECHERGUI (Amine)



SYNOPSIS

Aicha lives in the isolated north of Tunisia with her husband and youngest son. The family lives in anguish after the departure of the eldest sons Mehdi and Amine to the violent embrace of war. When Mehdi unexpectedly returns home with a mysterious pregnant wife, a darkness emerges, threatening to consume the entire village. Aicha is caught between her maternal love and her search for the truth.

CREW

Director & screenwriter Meryam Joobeur

DOP Vincent Gonneville

Art director Mohamed Ilyes Dargouth

Editors Maxime Mathis & Meryam Joobeur

Costume design Salah Barka

Sound recordist Aymen Labidi

Sound designer Gwennoé Le Borgne

Dialogue editor Elias Boughedir

Mix Niels Barletta

Music Peter Venne

Producers Nadim Cheikhrouha, Sarra Ben Hassen, Annick Blanc,
Maria Gracia Turgeon, Meryam Joobeur

Coproducers Vincent Dupuis, Victor Lech, Baptiste Leroy, Ramsis Mahfoudh,
Dyveke Bjørkly Graver, Andrea Berentsen Ottmar



Production

Tanit Films

Midi La Nuit

Instinct Bleu

Coproduction

1888 Films

Godolphin Films

Eye Eye Pictures

INTERVIEW WITH MERYAM JOOBEUR

Let's go back to the very beginning. How did *Who Do I Belong To* come about?

The journey for *Who Do I Belong To* began in February 2017 in the most unlikely of ways. It started with a road trip across the north of Tunisia with my cinematographer and long-term creative collaborator, Vincent Gonneville. Having mostly grown up in the USA, I was eager to discover my homeland, Tunisia, and curious to explore different landscapes. We drove without a specific direction in mind, and on one fateful day, we encountered two brothers, Malek and Chaker Mechergui, as they led their father's sheep to pasture. The brothers had striking looks that I had never seen in Tunisia before – both red-haired, with faces covered in freckles. Despite our attempt to take their photo, they declined. As we continued our journey, we discovered that in this region of Tunisia, especially after the

Tunisian Revolution, a significant number of men had gone to Syria to join ISIS. This information surprised me because it was challenging to fathom men from this rural environment choosing to join ISIS and engage in a war so far from their home. I began contemplating the families of the young men who leave, considering the heartbreak, shame, and immense confusion experienced by parents when their child takes such extreme and violent actions. At the time, it was a taboo subject – we knew a lot about the victims of ISIS but not much about the families of these men. Motivated by these reflections, I wrote a screenplay for a short film titled *Brotherhood* exploring this perspective, and I was determined that Malek and Chaker would act in the film. I did manage to find Malek and Chaker again, and we shot *Brotherhood* in 2018, which went on to premiere at TIFF and be nominated for an Oscar in 2020.

While filming *Brotherhood*, my attention gravitated towards the female characters within the family—the mother and the Syrian wife brought home by the son. This fascination gave birth to *Who Do I Belong To*, driven by a desire to delve into the feminine perspective and examine themes of motherhood and the victimization of women.

How did you find the brothers again after that first encounter on the road?

I always enjoy recounting this part of the story because it's a testament to the power of our instincts. When I initially met the boys, I didn't ask for their names, nor did we note the exact village where we met them. All that I knew was that I couldn't stop picturing their faces. I imagined those two brothers playing the main characters of what would become my short film, *Brotherhood*. In the screenplay for *Brotherhood*, I wrote that those two brothers had a little sibling – I thought I would cast a young actor to play that part. Luckily, Vincent was also charmed by the brothers and loved my script, so we decided to go back and look for them. We drove aimlessly around the north again, asking strangers if they knew the two young red-haired shepherds. It was challenging because the landscape had shifted; we had met them in winter and went to look for them in summer. As we were on the verge of giving up, Vincent identified a pile of rocks, and a nearby shepherd pointed out their house. As we approached the house, I started to panic, realizing how strange this whole situation was. They had been reluctant to have their photo taken, and now I was

proposing they act in a film! However, upon arriving at their house, the first person to emerge was their six-year-old brother, Rayen. I was utterly astonished; he was the little brother I had “imagined” in the script. It felt like a sign, with too many connections to ignore. I persuaded them to join the short film, and since then, all three have blossomed into incredible actors. Observing and supporting their growth as actors has been an immensely gratifying experience for me as a filmmaker.

Can you elaborate more on how you worked with the brothers Malek, Chaker and Rayen?

I knew it would be challenging for the brothers because would have to truly embody other characters over a six-week shooting period. My dear friend and the amazing Tunisian theatre and cinema actress Salha Nasraoui (who plays the mother in both films) agreed to train the brothers over the course of two years. We would meet for two weeks at a time and dive into theatre techniques, breath-work, and body awareness. This time together also deepened our connection to each other and, most importantly, between Salha and the brothers. More and more, I believe that trust in a creative endeavour is invaluable,

particularly the trust between a director and the actors. With trust, each party can genuinely surrender, revealing their true selves both in front of and behind the camera.

Malek, Chaker, and Rayen impressed me with their acting progress in the six weeks. From my perspective, they have truly evolved into professional actors.

There is an interesting tension between the professional and non-professional actors in the film. How did you work on that?

As I mentioned earlier, the roles of the parents were portrayed by the seasoned actors Salha Nasraoui and Mohamed Hassine Grayaa. Completing the main cast were actors Dea Liane and Adam Bessa.

It was crucial for me that the entire cast had the opportunity to connect with each other on a human level before the shoot. Dea portrayed Malek's Syrian wife, and I wanted them to spend some time together before filming. Despite Dea being based in Paris, she graciously came to Tunisia for a week during prep.

She participated in our final training session with Malek and his brothers, and I took her north to visit the brothers' village. Although Malek and Dea faced a slight language barrier (speaking different dialects of Arabic), the time spent together definitely forged a connection which we can feel onscreen.

Tunisian actor Adam Bessa couldn't join us for the final training session but spoke on the phone with Malek since they were to portray childhood friends in the film.

Our way of working closely resembled a theatre ensemble, placing a strong emphasis on trust-building and allowing lots of room for exploration. Malek, Chaker, and Rayen brought an authenticity that guided the professional actors to seamlessly embrace the specific rural way of life we were portraying. On the other hand, Salha, Mohamed, Dea, and Adam played crucial roles in establishing the emotional boundaries within scenes, particularly in the initial stages of the shoot. As we reached the conclusion of filming, Malek, Chaker, and Rayen had absorbed their characters to the point where it felt like second nature.

Women are at the center of your feature debut *Who Do I Belong To*.

It wasn't a conscious decision to delve into the women of the family; rather, it was instinctive. Interestingly, this choice coincided with a period in my life where I was profoundly exploring the essence of womanhood, confronting the societal expectations imposed on women versus my personal aspirations.

Your response to the previous question seems to connect to the title of the film...

Absolutely! The title of the film, *Who Do I Belong To*, holds profound personal significance, encapsulating the essence of my journey in its creation.

What's fascinating about writing and directing something personal is that your comprehension of the story continually evolves with emotional and spiritual growth. During the challenging editing process (the dreaded Mount Everest for all filmmakers), I realized the central question I had been

grappling with throughout the years of making the film was: Who does my life belong to?

I came to the realization that I had constructed a narrative of who I thought I should be, shaped by external expectations, and it had evolved into a prison. It became clear that my characters, especially Aicha, Brahim, and Mehdi, were also wrestling with this same dilemma.

When the constructs of what we believe ourselves to be—be it family religious beliefs political affiliation nationality—start to crumble what remains? It's a daunting process to strip away the labels that form the foundation of our identity. I'm intrigued by the essence that remains when we are completely exposed, without the layers of constructed identity.

Can you elaborate more on this? particularly in regards with the wider society.

I can only share my personal observations, and it seems to me that there is a rising tide of fear in the world. Generally, when confronted with fear, we attempt to assert control over reality (a phenomenon I've encountered in my own life). I sense that people are gripping their identities more tightly, especially those rooted in religion and nationalism—history is full of evidence for the dangers such attachments pose, leading to genocide and war, as we unfortunately witness today.

It's tempting to pigeonhole individuals based on their ideologies, yet this often does a disservice to their true identity. This is where the transformative power of cinema and storytelling becomes crucial. In my films, I always aspire to dismantle the labels we habitually affix to people. With *Who Do I Belong To* I wanted to create a rich and complex portrait of a family that happens to be Muslim. I wanted the story to resonate on a universal level.

How familiar were you with the theme of Islamic radicalization?

I intentionally didn't want to emphasize it too strongly. While the brothers do join ISIS, my intention was to approach it in a more universal manner, highlighting that it's not exclusive to Islamic extremism but indicative of fundamentalism in general. I was curious about the familial and personal wounds that could attract someone to extreme ideology. Growing up in the U.S. post-9/11 and witnessing Tunisia after the Revolution, I observed a significant rise in conservatism and radicalization in response to uncertainty.

What intrigues me is the commonality among people driven to take extreme measures, whether it's joining a radicalized group, embracing an extreme ideology, or joining a cult. It seems to stem from a shared place—a quest for meaning, a search for security during times of fear, a longing for community, and an outlet for personal wounds, anger, and resentment. It's easy to label something as purely evil and distance ourselves, but understanding the roots of the problem is essential for addressing it.

Every culture and religion has experienced extremism, and every civilization or community has, at some point, committed acts of genocide. There is something universal about this dark aspect that warrants examination. I don't aim to provide definitive answers, but through the film, I express my personal journey with darkness and hope that it resonates with audiences, encouraging thoughtful reflection.

The film conveys that a family is a group of people that can come together despite their differences, like a smaller-scale version of society. Was it an underlying idea in your story?

This is why I'm passionate about studying family dynamics — after all, society is essentially a large family. If we can overcome issues of communication and ideology within our own families, perhaps we could apply the same principles on a larger, more complex scale. The challenges we encounter at the micro-level often manifest on a macro level—miscommunication, misunderstandings, resentment, and the denial of each other. We witness these issues daily in our personal lives and in wider society.

How do you think your multicultural upbringing influenced your filmmaking?

Existing in a liminal space between places has afforded me the ability to observe things with a certain distance. This is why I emphasize nuances—having lived in various cultures, I find it challenging to accept that one way of functioning is the 'right' way. In my stories, I'm consistently drawn to articulating the inner emotional lives of my characters, prioritizing their experiences over underlining the specificity of their cultural or religious 'identity.'

You also seem enamored with the Tunisian landscape, which is beautiful despite the isolation and poverty of the community you portray.

My love for storytelling came from my Tunisian grandmothers and the folktales they told me as child. I left Tunisia for the United States when I was six years old. I would only go back in the summertime. When I went to film school, I decided to shoot my first film in Tunisia with my grandfather after the Revolution. I have been reconnecting with Tunisia since then through my filmmaking.

To be honest, I didn't know the north very well until my road trip in 2017. Coming from the south, where the landscape is flatter and more arid, I was intrigued to explore the north. Witnessing mountains, lakes, cliffs, and forests, I was astounded that such diverse landscapes existed in my homeland. My affection for the village of Louka, where we shot the film, has deepened throughout these years. The film became a collaborative effort with the entire village; the villagers not only acted in the film but also graciously allowed us to film in their homes, and some even joined the crew.

I'm particularly excited to screen the film in Louka. We'll probably do an outdoor screening on the beach where we filmed some of scenes.

The style and form of the film shift away from naturalism and embrace magical realism. It is almost a fairy tale, which is rare for films discussing social and political aspects.

The artistic form of blending genres also came from an instinctive place. When I switched to the feminine perspective, it naturally happened. Dream language and communication with the subconsciousness became the backbone of Aicha's journey. With my cinematographer, Vincent Gonneville, we came up with our own way of translating this to screen. We wanted to evoke something sensorial and visceral, to get inside the characters' hearts and minds. I agree that the blend is not common, but it was a way of underlying the metaphorical aspects of the story. My hope for anyone watching the film is that they release assumptions and embrace the feelings and sensations that arise. The film is open to interpretation, and the use of poetry can be seen as an invitation to reflect.





DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Meryam Joobeur is an Academy Award nominated writer, director and producer based in Montréal. Her short films *Gods, Weeds and Revolutions* (2013) and *Born in the Maelstrom* (2017) were screened in dozens of national and international festivals. Her short *Brotherhood* (2018), a co-production between Canada and Tunisia, won over 75 international prizes, was screened in 150+ festivals and was nominated for an Oscar for “Best Live Action short” (a first for a Tunisian film). Her first feature *Who do I belong to* (2024) premieres in official selection at the 74th edition of the Berlin Film Festival.

She is an alumni of TIFF talent lab, Rawi Screenwriters lab, Berlinale Talent Lab and the Sundance Screenwriters lab.

DIRECTOR'S FILMOGRAPHY

Brotherhood (2018)
Short Fiction - Producer, Writer, Director
92nd Academy Awards, USA
Nomination for Best Live Action Short 2020
Toronto IFF Canada - Official Competition
Winner Best Canadian Short 2018

Born in the Maelstrom (2017)
Short Fiction - Writer, Director
Gala IRIS Cinema Québec, Canada
Nomination for Best Quebec Short Film 2018

Gods, Weeds & Revolutions (2012)
Short Documentary - Writer, Director, Producer, Editor
RVCQ Film Festival, Canada
Winner of Best Student Short 2013
DOXA Vancouver documentary festival, Canada
Winner Best Canadian Short Documentary 2014

PRODUCER'S BIOGRAPHY

MIDI LA NUIT

Passionate about innovative storytelling and the power of images, Annick Blanc and Maria Gracia Turgeon (twice Oscar-nominated) co-founded **Midi La Nuit**. There, they produced, among others, the successful short films *Brotherhood* by Meryam Joobeur (Oscar nominee, Best Canadian Short TIFF, Sundance 2018), *The Colour of your Lips* by Annick Blanc (Canadian Screen Award nominee), *Fauve* by Jérémy Comte (Oscar nominee, Special Jury Award Sundance, Telluride 2018) and *Pre-Drink* by Marc-Antoine Lemire (Best Canadian Short TIFF 2017). In 2024, they are releasing their 2 first features *Who Do I Belong To* by Meryam Joobeur premiering in competition in Berlin and *Hunting Daze* by Annick Blanc in South By Southwest.

INSTINCT BLEU

EAVE producer Sarra Ben Hassen has more than twenty years of experience in the executive production in local and international projects in Tunisia. In 2018, she produced the Oscar-nominated short film *Brotherhood* by Meryam Joobeur. Then, she co-founded the Tunisian company **Instinct Bleu** dedicated to producing Arab and African talents. *Who Do I Belong To* by Meryam Joobeur is her first feature. She is currently producing a documentary feature film *My father killed Bourguiba* by Fatma Riahi and developing an animation 2D feature film *Between heaven and earth* by Nadia Rais.

TANIT FILMS

Paris based **Tanit Films** was founded in April 2014 by Franco-Tunisian producer Nadim Cheikhrouha. Graduated from HEC Paris in 1998, Nadim held various positions within TF1 Films Production, TPS Cinema, and Mandarin Films before becoming a producer at Screen Runner, Jade Productions, and, since 2014, Tanit Films.

Tanit Films is the culmination of over twenty years of experience in the film industry. Through his company, Nadim has helped bring to life some of the most acclaimed and important films to come out of the Arab and African world in recent years such as: Kaouther ben Hania (*Beauty and the Dogs; The Man Who Sold His Skin; Four Daughters*) ou- Philippe Faucon (*Fatima; Amin; Harkis*) – Meryam Joobeur (*Who Do I Belong To*) - Mohamed Ben Attia (*Hedi; Weldi; Behind The Mountains*) ..

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