



Article

“Do I Have to Wait for Heaven to Find a Home?”

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A film about one Somali youth’s search for belonging under the surveillance of the FBI

Barkhad Abdi is most widely known for his portrayal of a Somali pirate in the 2013 film *Captain Phillips* by Paul Greengrass. Unfortunately, *Captain Phillips* continues a long cinematic history of movies that frame Black people from the developing world as criminal, dysfunctional, or in desperately in need of rescue by Westerners. Even Abdi’s nuanced performance in that movie is not enough to transform its racist tropes. Luckily, his starring role in [Musa Sayeed’s *A Stray*](#) (2016) is a direct rejection of films like *Captain Phillips*, *Black Hawk Down*, and other films that scrutinize Somalis through a neocolonial gaze.

Black and Muslim in the American Police State

Adan (portrayed by Abdi) is seeking a home. He is not just searching for a physical place to live—something an FBI agent offers him after he leaves his mother’s house to create his own life as an adult. Like many young men his age, he is searching for a deeper sense of connection, belonging, and purpose. These are things the FBI cannot offer him. These are, in fact, the very things the government seeks to destroy, seeing the Somali migrant population only as criminals and terrorist cells in the making. Of course, the government’s offer to Adan of cash and a place to lay his head at night comes at a price: Adan is asked to

spy on his people.



Still from A Stray. Source: Musa Sayeed.



Still from A Stray. Source: Musa Sayeed.

Throughout the film, Adan faces a number of moral decisions, questions of faith, and opportunities to gain a deeper understanding of himself and the different lives around him. He is confronted with the task of caring for a stray dog Laila despite his cultural distaste for dogs; an FBI agent offers him a place in the suburbs in exchange for his cooperation; a restaurateur offers him a job but will not tolerate Laila's presence; he confronts the misconceptions that other communities of color have about him as well as the misconceptions he has about others; and he consults with a local sheikh on what it means to be a good Muslim in a complicated world. The other main character of the film, Laila, provides a chance for Adan (and the audience) to meditate on what it means to build

communities with others across lines of difference.

Rejecting the Stereotype

In the words of Danielle Haque, Musa Sayeed's 2016 film is a form of resistance against mainstream misrepresentations of Black youth, Muslims, and refugees in America. *A Stray*, she writes, "marks a departure from conventional human rights films about refugees through its refusal to show bodily suffering or play to clichés about Muslims conflicting with Western social norms." That is not the only way that the film departs from conventional human rights narratives. On the surface, many human rights films seem to focus on the plight of people in troubled areas of the world. In reality, many of those films are more focused on glorifying Western ideals and Western savior figures than they are providing an accurate depiction of world issues or the people affected by them. Haque, a professor at Minnesota State University, Mankato, adds that the film "defies the genre of human rights films that attempt to humanize refugees in order to appeal for rights or to animate audience sympathies."

[Read Danielle Haque's review](#)