

Saint Omer (2022)



Prof. & writer Rama in France attends the trial of a fellow Senegalese woman accused of murdering her child. (c) Wild Bunch International

Alice Diop's film is based on a trial she attended. So, like the heroine in the script she co-wrote with Amrita David, she has fashioned a story inspired by a murder, that of a child by her mother. It will leave you pensive about motherhood and even more about how culture and prejudiced expectations can poison the life of an outsider.

Rama (Kayije Kagame) is a university professor and writer married to an older white man, Adrien (Thomas de Pourquery). She intends to base her new book on the trial of a Senegalese woman, Laurence Coly (Guslagie Malanga), who is accused of murdering her 15-month-old daughter. It is to be an adaptation of the myth of Medea, the daughter of King Aeetes of Colchis and wife of the mythical hero Jason, who after a series of adventures murders her own children. The trial is to be held in the village of Saint-Omer, which gives its name to the film.

Under questioning by the judge (Valérie Dréville), we gain information gathered from police reports and investigations about the calm defendant. Laurence has much in common with

Rama, her mother Odile Diatta (Salimata Kamate), also from Senegal, and her partner Luc Dumontet (Xavier Maley), also an older white man—Rama's husband, however seems infinitely more loving. Luc never would include the defendant in any of his family plans, always keeping her isolated from them. Laurence had been a candidate for a PhD. in philosophy. Both she and Rama are distant from mothers that seem uncaring about them. And Rama, several months pregnant, will soon become a mother.



Laurence, the mother, calmly says she does not know why she killed her infant daughter. (c) Wild Bunch International

As the various witnesses are questioned by the defense lawyer Ms. Vaudenay (Aurélia Petit) and the prosecutor (Robert Cantarella), we see that Laurence had led a privileged life, but not one that had been free from society's racism that viewed her as a stereotype. A university official explains that the girl had wanted to write her thesis on Wittgenstein but they had advised her to study someone of her own culture, after which she had dropped out of the program. The press and others express great surprise that Laurence, an African, speaks such high French, whereas Rama thinks she is just a well-educated woman like herself. When asked directly by the judge why she left her infant on the beach to be drowned at high tide, she replies that she does not know, that that is what she hopes to find out at the trial. Then she suggests it

might be sorcery. She repeats this later, so I wonder if this is from her awareness of the racism of the whites and the acknowledgment that they will never be able to understand her, always regarding her as African. (Hence, they cannot arrive at "the right judgment" in Jesus' statement because of being deceived by "appearances.")

Rama in thinking about the trial comes to see that as she faces becoming a mother she has a support system denied to Laurence. Indeed, the film seems to be a contrast between the extreme isolation felt by the defendant and Rama's realization of the supportive love of her husband and coming to terms with her own mother. That the director/writer is interested in more than producing a courtroom drama we see by the ambiguous way in which the film ends. This is a good one to see with a friend so you can share bewilderment and insights.

This review will be in the February issue of VP along with a set of questions for reflection and/or discussion. If you have found reviews on this site helpful, please consider purchasing a subscription or individual issue in The Store.