

Toronto International Film Festival 2019

## An interview with director Eva Mulvad: “You can...come a bit closer to having a more rounded understanding of the world”

By Joanne Laurier  
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We spoke last week in Toronto to Eva Mulvad, director of *Love Child*.

Joanne Laurier: We have already commented that the most interesting films at this year’s Toronto film festival concern the refugee crisis, immigrants, and conditions in the Middle East, North Africa. It’s not accidental or surprising.

Eva Mulvad: The refugee crisis is the issue of our times. It’s striking that it continues to be a problem. If we had politicians who wanted to solve it, it would be solvable.

I did another film set in a refugee camp in Denmark 20 years ago. At the time, I was very disturbed by the notion that people in such situations couldn’t affect their destiny. That is, a system takes over and you simply have to wait. You can’t take action on anything. I’m not sure I could stand being in that position.

I kept thinking about what this refugee life was like—walking the streets of Europe, drowning or almost drowning in the Mediterranean. This desolate feeling that is not described in the news or the “current affairs” approach. I can contribute with a human aspect. So, when my colleague, Morten Ranmar, who also co-directed the film, came with this story, we thought maybe it was a little detour around the current affairs type of story.

As you see in *Love Child*, the father is both a teacher and worked as an informant for Iranian intelligence. I think he was a small fish in a totalitarian system. It’s a system of people reporting on each other and creating fear. So, he was part of that system, and part of his job—because he was a teacher and spoke English—was to hang out and meet foreigners. And that’s how he met Morten.

Sahand was not a whole-hearted informer. So, for eight

years, he and Morten were in contact. When Sahand decided to escape from Iran with Leila and Mani, they thought it would be more secure for them if someone they knew was keeping an eye on them. Because where they come from, people just disappear...nobody knows, nobody asks. So, they felt it would make their position stronger if they were in touch with us. Then we followed the family for seven years—I also shot three other films during that time.

JL: The first scene, in which Sahand is packing his bags, saying, “I don’t know if I’ll be alive tomorrow,” is devastating. What was it like for them leaving Iran?

EM: They had a passport, but if someone hears you won’t be coming back, then you can be in trouble. They did not tell their family they were not coming back. Mani thought he was going on a vacation. They were afraid because if you have a child outside of marriage, people can be punished. For the men, it’s usually not as severe as it is for the women.

JL: You deal with the feelings of what it’s like to leave everything behind.

EM: In this film, the simple question is: What would you do if you had to leave everything and everyone, and start from scratch? We try to get the audience involved so it can see itself in the mirror. I try to get away from the numbness produced by the normal news reporting. We know that in Libya, there are horrible conditions for refugees. Many people are trying to get to Europe in boats, and we’re not welcoming them. Turkey is paid to keep the refugees.

JL: How did Sahand and Leila end up going to Turkey?

EM: It was the easiest route for them. Of course, if they could have bought a ticket to Canada, they would have

gone there directly. The family has never been out of Iran, so they thought because there was the UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] in Turkey, they would receive democratic treatment. But that's not what happened.

JL: The audience has a very intense relationship with Sahand and Leila, which is clearly your intent. One suffers their anxiety when information arrives about their status.

The family does not live in the worst circumstances, but what they are living through is emotionally brutal. They are more fortunate, in that they speak English and can read the immigration forms, and so forth.

EM: We discussed it a lot as to whether it was all right to take a story like this in the ocean of misery out there. Because it could feel like the family is more privileged—and shouldn't we focus on more dramatic stories? But perhaps we should have some nuance in these stories. There are something like 70 million refugees or displaced people. People living on the streets everywhere, it's horrible. My husband is from South America and we often go to Chile. There you have Venezuelans now coming, Haitians.

But there are a lot of people who are not what one thinks a refugee is. That's what I like about my job, you can open up something that is a bit different, and by nuancing things, come a bit closer to having a more rounded understanding of the world.

A refugee is someone who cannot live where they live and they are escaping *from* something, not going *to* something. People would prefer to stay home if they had a choice.

JL: There is a commonality. The family is living from day to day, always awaiting news of their status. So, despite the fact they may be better positioned, the stress is enormous.

EM: And just imagine if you are not able to read a complicated document from the UNHCR and if you're not used to dealing with bureaucracy.

There also needs to be a system sensitive enough to take into account that people may have done something wrong—like Sahand being forced to inform in Iran.

JL: There are soldiers who commit crimes in a war, but who are themselves victims of their governments and the military. What do you do about them? Danish soldiers have been in Afghanistan, they were obliged to do terrible things.

EM: Sahand may have been a "bad guy," but he was forced to do it.

JL: Sahand made a video of his apology to the person he wronged. Another important fact in the film is that even though the US was the family's first destination choice, by the time all three got their papers, Donald Trump had blocked immigration from seven predominantly Muslim countries.

EM: I like focusing on a smaller story and see how the bigger picture influences it. In documentary filmmaking, we like to have relevance to our stories. And some small ones can be visually and emotionally intense. Of course, it's horrible that their situation turned out this way. I was hoping that we could end the film with them in another country.

Right now, Sahand and Leila have a relatively good life as English teachers, but if they had come to the US, their English would not have been good enough for them to teach. They would have to start over again after spending seven years in Turkey, striving to build a life. I don't know if they have the energy to do that. And Mani is now 12 years old and he would have to adapt again. The success of Mani is the success of their project, and that is a heavy responsibility.

JL: They are still in limbo.

EM: Yes, they do not have permanent residence in Turkey. As long as they work and can make money, they are all right. But everybody is under pressure. The school they work at could not pay them for the summer. They are all right, but they are not all right. How can they build a life if they don't pay you? You can't do anything. And what if Turkish government policy changes?

JL: What do you think of the European and American policies?

EM: Politicians are using immigration as a tool to get reelected and maintain power. To me, the politicians are building on nationalism, building on fear, and they are oppressing some of the weakest people in the world.

After all, it's not that long ago that we [Danes and other Scandinavians] were fleeing conditions. To America, for example, where life was brutal. We should keep that in mind.

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