

**DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY**  
**2024/25 SEASON**



**FOUR DAUGHTERS**

(Language: Arabic, French, English)

Director: Kaouther Ben Hania

UK Release: 2024

Running time: 107 minutes

Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 25 September 2024

“I hate girls. I never wanted daughters,” says Olfa. And yet, she had four of them. Only two, Eya and Tayssir, remain in their home in Tunisia. The circumstances that lead to the disappearance of the two older girls, Rahma and Ghofrane, are explored in this potent, probing and occasionally manipulative hybrid documentary which casts actresses in the role of the missing women. It’s frequently an uncomfortable watch and, at points, prompts prickly ethical questions about the potential for the re-traumatisation of documentary subjects. But, perhaps more unexpectedly, this bold and confrontational film is also joyous, playful and in some ways even empowering.

It marks a return to documentary for Kaouther Ben Hania, whose debut non-fiction feature, *The Challat of Tunis*, opened Cannes ACID in 2014. Her second documentary, *Zaineb Hates the Snow*, premiered in Locarno. After her fiction debut, *Beauty and The Dogs*, screened in Un Certain Regard in 2017; she went on to direct the Oscar-nominated art world satire *The Man Who Sold His Skin*. Ben Hania has cited *Dogville* as an influence on her latest project, but *Four Daughters* stands on its own as a distinctive, daring and original work that should spark debate on the festival circuit and will likely prove to be of interest for arthouse distributors. Jour2Fête will release the film theatrically in France in the summer.

Olfa may “hate girls”, as she says during one of many heated moments, but she has even less time or respect for men. Yet she unwittingly speaks for them, fully embodying the patriarchal pressures the Tunisian society imposes on girls and women – particularly those like Olfa’s daughters, who have the misfortune to be strikingly beautiful. Olfa’s fear of men’s interest in her daughters twists itself into an assumption of moral failure on the part of the girls, manifesting in savage verbal assaults and physical attacks. Eya and Tayssir reminisce about brutal beatings meted out by their mother; Olfa herself admits to breaking a broom handle during a prolonged assault on Ghofrane – punishment that only ended when Olfa thought her daughter was dead.

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To recreate moments and memories with the participation of Olfa and her remaining daughters, Ben Hania employs actresses to play the roles of Rahma (Nour Karoui) and Ghofrane (Ichraq Matar). In addition, she recruited the Egyptian-Tunisian star Hend Sabri to play Olfa and interrogate her about her actions and motivations. While the film doesn't fully condemn Olfa, it does hold her to account: "You are selfish, Olfa," says Sabri, during a process of improvisation and unpacking that feels a lot like group therapy.

Like therapy, the film takes its participants to some painful places – and the camera is at times perhaps a little over-eager to hone in on tears glistening in the eyes of these women. At other moments, it's the actors who struggle. Majd Mastoura, who plays all the male characters, calls a halt to the filming of one harrowing scene in which Eya confronts the abuse she and her sisters experienced at the hands of her mother's boyfriend. What follows is important: Eya insists that the scene is essential and that she has already acted it out many times before during previous counselling sessions. Ben Hania doesn't stake a claim in the family's story – she allows Olfa and her girls to have considerable input in deciding the direction that the film takes.

The agency and control that the subjects are given is key. After all, it was control over an aspect of their lives that led to the loss of the two older girls. Given the option of being labelled as whores or embracing religion, they opted for the latter. And gradually, they became radicalised to the extent that both left to join Islamic State in Libya. They remain in Libya, in prison alongside Ghofrane's young daughter. Meanwhile, Olfa and her remaining daughters campaign for their repatriation and try to figure out how to break the family's cycle of suffering – a 'curse' that is passed on from mother to daughter in each new generation.

**Wendy Ide, *Screen Daily*, 20 May 2023**

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**(As with all films we include positive and negative reviews to provide Society members with a balanced overview of the film screened. *Four Daughters* has a number of critical reviews, but with one exception all were behind paywalls and therefore unable to be accessed. Therefore, we enclose an audience member's critical response as posted on the professional site IMDb [International Movie Database]). *Dorchester Film Society***

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“Odd setup here with the mix of actors and the actual family, blending live interviews and reenactments. I'm not sure it works. It's a little meta, and on the plus side, in some ways it might actually help demonstrate some of the lived pain of the girls. There are some highly emotional scenes right from the get-go, and I definitely wasn't immune to sympathizing with what this family has gone through. But, was it just me or is this movie extraordinarily incriminating of the mom? She is pretty hard to like and seems easy to blame for contributing to her daughters' attraction to extremism, but regardless, it's not hard to connect with her pain and loss and regret. And maybe I'd connect even more with it all and have more understanding if I was a mother or a daughter. There definitely could be a big blind spot here for me in that regard. The mother-daughter dynamic happening in the midst of a lot of other poignant themes like abuse, religion, and conservatism. In the end, I thought there would be a bigger payoff, some bigger moments to finalize the story. And I think the material was there, but tone-wise it sort of builds to a plateau.”

**Jonathan K, audience review, IMDb, March 12, 2024**

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“The bond of women, especially those in a family unit, is a testament to shared experience. The influence of what it means to walk the world as a woman and to be raised under a roof where the patriarchal and misogynistic influences are experienced identically is what governs the link of sisterhood. While the title of Kaouther Ben Hania’s documentary *Four Daughters* hints at a centrality based in motherhood, it equally examines where the splits in sisterhood occur. The documentary's true base is that in a home full of women habitually living under the same circumstances, coming of age can be a soul-shaking experience, and family bonds are not always matched to the influences of religious or political dogma.

Olfa Hamrouni has four daughters: Eya, Tayssir, Ghofrane, and Rahma. However, the two eldest, Ghofrane and Rahma, disappeared from their home years ago, radicalized to run away and join ISIS. As Olfa and her youngest two daughters recount the memories of their lives before and after they left, they simultaneously unpack the consequences of where their femininity meets culture. They dissect the worlds and histories that have built them and bring to the forefront of their minds the subconscious yearning for all women to experience power.

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Olfa, Eya, and Tayssir are around to tell their side of the story. Ghofrane and Rahma are not, so two actresses, Ichraq Matar and Nour Karoui, respectively, fill their space in the film. They act as inserts in reenactments of sisterly moments, embodying the space they've left behind in the present by taking on the depictions of their memory.

Though their presence as actors is not forgotten, a by-proxy bond via the sharing of trauma makes their inclusion effective. When they enter the room to be introduced, the sisters immediately know who will portray each sister, and Olfa is moved to tears. Memories of laying in bed together, playing with each other's hair, and running the gamut of sisterly conversations, like first periods, puberty tales, and boy gossip, feel utterly genuine. It's a womanly bond playing as a sisterly bond, but the artifice enhances the authenticity of the film's emotional core. However, the imbalance of impact among the women leaves a lingering question: at what emotional cost are these actors participating?

Actress Hend Sabry is Olfa's insert, stepping into the story to reenact memories too painful for Olfa herself to embody. Yet many times, when Sabry is performing, Olfa is visible in the background—an omnipresent force in her fictionalized depiction, even stepping in to correct how it's being told. "Four Daughters" prioritizes empowering its women to take ownership of telling their story while also allowing its actors to participate in it. Sabry will ask questions, challenge Olfa's iron fist, and even call her out for enforcing certain misogynistic, patriarchal social policies in raising her daughters.

What's difficult to measure is the ethics of these moments. How much personal critique is permitted as these women bear their greatest traumas? When do questions become judgments? And on the other end, how much emotional weight are the actors expected to take on? In a particularly uncomfortable moment, actor Majd Mastoura, who depicts each male figure in the women's lives, becomes so overwhelmed that he stops a scene and refuses to pick it back up. Eya, upset, relays that it's his job as an actor to run the lines, that this isn't his trauma, and that he should come back and finish the scene.

While these meta-reenactments are the linchpin of *Four Daughters*, they are inherently one-sided, and the trust between performers is limited by the subjects' desire to have their stories told or reconstructed by their own means. This throws reliability into question and morality, as the accuracy of retellings and the respect between actor and subject are muddled. The more foundational aspects of documentary filmmaking, be it the talking heads style or archival footage found later on, is the support system needed to make it all work. Ben Hania's emotional eye is beautifully tethered to her analytical capabilities, and

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*Four Daughters* is a triumph of layered storytelling, even when its structure's fairness is questioned.

The bulk of the film shows Olfa, Eya, and Tayssir bearing a broad spectrum of emotions: nostalgia and fondness, despair, indignance, and anger. For the most part, while the actors engage, they discuss how they've been trained in their craft not to take on the trauma of their roles. This doesn't stop them from sharing tears, embraces, or knowing glances of discomfort. It's apparent that, especially for the sisters, making this film is therapeutic. Through reenactments, they say what they wish they'd said, relive moments far lost and longed for, and use a voice their younger selves had yet to develop. *Four Daughters* is the story of estrangement, reckoning, and catharsis.

There is no villainization, only the considerate narrative care to portray each of the women as whole people, driven to varying degrees of severance from the family principles by various authorities. The generational implications are equally moving, from Olfa's often oppressive traditionalism to Rahma and Gohfrane's extremism and Tayssir and Eya's more modern feminist sentiments. As Olfa and the sisters give perspective on their shared trauma and heartbreak and discuss the underlying principles of it with each other and the actresses, what ensues is not simply the story of a family but a tour de force examination of women's place in the world and the costs of how they choose to cope with it."

**Peyton Robinson, *RogerEbert.com*, October 27, 2023**

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"There is real emotional warmth and human sympathy in this otherwise somewhat flawed film, a docudrama experiment in getting actors to play some of the real people in a tragic news story from Tunisia. Olfa Hamrouni, a divorced woman from the coastal town of Sousse, made the headlines seven years ago when two of her four daughters, Rahma and Ghofrane, broke her and their sisters' hearts by vanishing from the country to become fighters and wives for Islamic State in Syria. Now director Kaouther Ben Hania re-enacts key parts of Olfa's family life, featuring the remaining sisters Eya and Tayssir playing themselves, but performers playing the vanished fugitives: Ichraq Matar is Ghofrane and Nour Karoui is Rahma.

Despite the fact that she hasn't vanished, and is in fact a vivid and formidable onscreen figure, Olfa is also played by an actor, Hend Sabri, so the procedure is already in fact slightly muddled, though no less intriguing. The performers and real figures are interviewed together, and then scenes are played out, with Olfa

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coming on to say where they're going wrong. The actor Majd Mastoura plays Olfa's distant and abusive father, and the film shows how weirdly upset he becomes to embody a vicious character from the real world.

Ben Hania seems to have embarked on this process with an open mind, having no clear idea what light this approach would shed on the case. In fact, I'm not sure how much light is shed on it, and in fact this technique might even be entirely wrong for finding out how and when exactly the two young women became radicalised. Imagining what was going on inside their heads using actorly intuition might not get us very far. In fact, a TV discussion panel clip showing Olfa furiously denouncing the politicians, and saying that their tolerance of jihadist imams after the Arab Spring was what turned her daughters, is a rather shrewd insight of the sort that docudrama does not yield.

However, these women have such a presence on screen that their sympathy drives the movie. There is something mysteriously moving about the real Eya and Tayssir being introduced to the actresses playing their sisters, and being awestruck and moved by how similar they are – and how strange it is to feel the four-way dynamic of their sisterly relationship being restored in this semi-fictionalised form.”

**Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 20 May 2023**