

Four Daughters [15]

2023 France/Tunisia/Germany/Saudi Arabia

110 mins

UK released	1 March 2024
Director	Kaouther Ben Hania
Screenplay	Kaouther Ben Hania
Cinematography	Farouk Laâridh
Music	Amin Bouhafa
Cast	Olfa Hamrouni; Eya Chikhaoui; Tayssir Chikhaoui (as themselves); Hend Sabri (Olfa); Nour Karoui (Rahma Chikhaoui); Ichraq Matar (Ghofrane Chikhaoui); Majd Mastoura (The Men)

“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.

Olfa may “hate girls”, 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.

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 (abridged)

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