

THE SWIMMERS:

A MUST-WATCH TALE OF STRENGTH AND REFUGEE REALITIES

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One of Netflix's most-discussed productions this past year was writer-director Sally El Hosaini's *The Swimmers*—and for good reason. *The Swimmers* (2022) covers the high-profile story of the Mardini sisters, Yusra and Sarah, as they travel from their hometown of Damascus, Syria, across the Aegean Sea to Germany, and finally to the Rio Olympics. At the center of the movie is the sisters' famous sacrifice as they volunteer to swim and steer their overcrowded migrant ship after it begun sinking mid-journey from Turkey to Greece. The enormity of the story and its larger subject, the Syrian refugee crisis, pairs well with the humanistic dynamic of the sisters, further complemented by the fact that the actresses who portray the Mardini are the real-life sister-actress duo Nathalie and Manal Issa. Overall, the product is a movie that is sure to leave you feeling every emotion on the spectrum.

The film begins with a birthday celebration for Yusra, the younger of the sisters. We see her looking at videos de-

picting political unrest from the Arab Spring, worried that something similar might happen in her own hometown. Her mother assures her that it won't.

“Nothing like that can happen in Syria.”

With this introductory scene, El Hosaini effectively humanizes a story that is often left conceptually removed from the collective consciousness. It messages that you, the audience, cannot and should not cast this off as an isolated incident happening to people unlike you, in a land unlike yours.

Jumping through time, we see the sisters out at a nightclub with their cousin Nizar. In one of the film's most powerful visuals, we see the girls dancing on the rooftop as a Sia song belts “I am bullet-proof, nothing to lose. Fire away, fire away...” to the backdrop of missiles falling onto Damascus.

The next few scenes showcase the brutality of everyday life during the Syrian conflict. We follow the sisters along the streets of Damascus: in hookah bars

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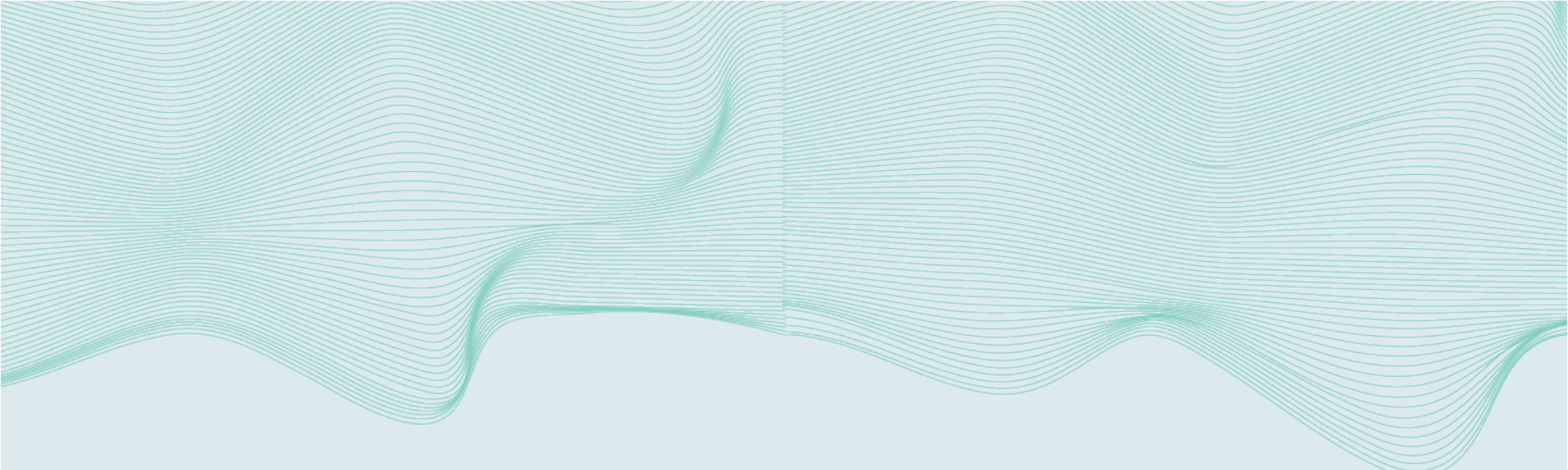
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talking about friends lost as casualties, traversing through military checks, and being caught in crossfire while riding public transportation. These anecdotes build up to a scene in which Yusra comes face to face with a defunct missile while swimming after a nearby football field gets bombed. Throughout this first act, El Hosaini illustrates the extent to which violence and fear became mundane and common in Syrian society, before she starts narrating the story of the girls' escape.

After convincing their cousin Nizar to come with them, the girls make their way to Istanbul via Lebanon. From there, instead of taking them to the Bulgarian border, a smuggler convinces them to

take a boat to the Greek island of Lesbos. When they get there, however, the refugees discover that the boat is too small for the number of people the smugglers are trying to transport, and despite their objections, the boat still sets sail.

Thus begins the climactic second act of the film. We follow the sisters as they volunteer to swim through the Aegean Sea in an appropriately claustrophobic scene, witnessing the dramatic arrival of the refugees at the shores of Lesbos as they cathartically trash the boat that failed them. We watch as they make their way through Europe on foot, being smuggled in buses and encountering plenty of dangerous situations until they finally reach Berlin. While this might be



viewed as a happy ending in many refugee stories, in the brutal reality of *The Swimmers*, that is not the case.

The third act, although notably slower than the other two, serves perhaps an even more important purpose. It could easily have focused solely on Yusra's subsequent success and perseverance as a swimmer, as she joined the Refugee Olympic Team and qualified for the Rio Olympics; however, although the third act does primarily cover Yusra's swimming career, it still manages to incorporate the post-happily-ever-after reality for most refugees.

Yusra's strength and determination in achieving her goal are inspiring. It could have been easy for the director to succumb to the pitfalls of romanticizing trauma, but not only would this have made Yusra's story larger than life, it would have also made it a less realis-

tic account of tragedy and strength. The movie tells the story in an appropriate light: it shows Yusra's strength but also shows Sara's sacrifice as she gives up an easier life in Berlin to go back to Lesbos and help refugees crossing into Europe. It also captures the reality for many refugees through Nizar, who accompanied his cousins through the journey and went through the same struggles; however, because he did not know how to swim, he could not participate in the most easily marketable and televised portion of their story: the tale of exceptionality in the face of struggle, a trope that most Western audiences expect to hear.

Without an exceptional talent or story that makes him of instant use to the new Western society that has "accepted" him, we see him lost in the frustratingly endless loop of bureaucracy and closed doors that await most refugees when

they arrive in Europe. The journey does not end in the destination for these refugees, with their struggle merely shifting forms but continuing, a point the movie makes sure to acknowledge. In doing so, I believe El Hosaini helps transform *The Swimmers* from just a feel-good account of Yusra Mardini's success into a more accurate portrayal of a greater sociopolitical reality for millions of Syrian refugees. In the end, this accurate context only heightens the triumph and emotional weight of Yusra's later success in the Olympics. As we hear her sister Sara's pep talk right before her Olympic race, Yusra did not just achieve this for herself, but for everyone else who couldn't.

Ultimately, El Hosaini achieves something remarkable with the film, which catapults it to a "must-watch" status. *The Swimmers* is a tale of success in the face of unbelievable hardship, but it

is also a harrowing account of the reality of the times we live in. It is a universal story of family and of sisterhood, but it is also a political statement. We witness the depth of the Mardini sisters' love for each other portrayed exceptionally by the Issa sisters. The film brings our attention to Sarah Mardini in the finale, informing us that she was arrested by Greek authorities after returning to Lesbos to help arriving refugees, with the charges carrying potentially long-term prison sentences. At the time of the movie's release, Mardini was still awaiting trial and the film's popularity brought international attention to her case. While we cannot say for sure if this spike in international interest helped her situation, as of January 13, 2023, the Greek court officially dropped some of the charges, with weakened felony charges still standing and awaiting a future court date.¹