

THE SWIMMERS

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT AND GUIDING QUESTIONS

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

The Swimmers is a film about female emancipation that shows how inner strength rises out of suffering. It explores the power of ambition and freedom. Female ambition is so often a dirty word, but I wanted to celebrate it. I saw an opportunity to make complex heroes out of the type of modern, liberal Arab women who exist, but rarely appear on our screens. The type of Arab women I know, who Yusra and Sara are, who I am. That's why this story resonated so deeply with me.

War turns everything on its head. The patriarchal, cultural and religious structures that preserve society are shaken. Ironically, if it hadn't been for the Syrian war, Yusra and Sara would not have been allowed to go on such a life changing journey. To have had the freedom to take their lives fully in their own hands and to have become the heroes they are. The film is very much about two inspirational heroes. The obvious, celebrated one in Yusra, but also the unsung hero in Sara.

But at its heart, this is a love story between sisters. As a middle child, both a big and little sister, it was essential to me that this emotional core was the focus of the film. Because no matter what our background, or where we're from, it's this universal sibling relationship, the human story, that we all relate to. The journey to Germany, despite the obstacles it throws up, is an external one. The real journey is the internal one that Yusra and Sara go on separately, and together, as they overcome the difficulties they face and ultimately learn who they really are. They must accept their differences if they are to be able to love each other. For them, it's a journey from potential competitors to true sisterhood.

My ambition is to subvert the stereotypes of both refugees and young Arab women through the film. Not to portray them as victims who need to be liberated or outsiders. But to allow an audience in, to walk in their shoes. Because empathy is stronger than sympathy. I want the film to remind us that they are just regular people with full, regular lives, with hopes and dreams. Ordinary people who've had to make unimaginable choices, risking everything to survive. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie said, "the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete." I want the characters to be as they are in real life; complete, complicated, three-dimensional people who contain multitudes.

It was very important to me that the film be entertaining and have an irreverent sense of fun despite the often-bleak subject matter. A sense of humour has gotten me through the toughest times in my own life and it was the same for Yusra and Sara. There's a thin line that separates laughter and pain, comedy and tragedy, humour and hurt. — Sally El Hosaini

FILM DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

After watching the film, use the following questions to help guide discussion about the issues raised in the film.

1. Why did Sara and Yusra flee Syria?
2. The scene where the refugees throw everything they can into the water to keep the boat from sinking is clearly symbolic. Describe the symbolism of that scene. What and who did the refugees leave behind when they fled and what did they hope for their futures?
3. Describe the relationship between Sara and Yusra. How does it change over the course of the film?
4. In some ways, this story is very much a personal story about the Mardini sisters and their hopes, dreams, and challenges. It is also, however, a more representative story about refugees. What does this movie reveal about the refugee experience?
5. Part of the power of this film is that it personalizes the refugee experience and puts the voices of refugees at the forefront of the film. It forces us to ask ourselves what we would do in a similar situation and, more broadly, how we might develop more humane refugee policies. What would compel you to leave your home? What would you take with you? What might you have to leave behind? What would you hope for your future?
6. When they are in Istanbul, Sara says “we’re not refugees; we have a home.” What does she mean by this? Later, she says, “I am Sara Mardini. I have no country anymore.” What does she mean by this?
7. In her director’s statement, Sally El Hosaini asserts that *The Swimmers* is a “film about female emancipation” as well as female ambition. What is the film’s message about female emancipation? What is the film’s message about female ambition? Use specific scenes from the film to support your claims.
8. Both Sara and Yusra are heroic. Describe how each sister displays heroism. What can we learn from each sister? Are there other heroes in the film? Explain your answer.
9. Describe the refugee experience in Greece, Turkey, and Germany as portrayed by the film. What were the challenges that the refugees experienced in each country?
10. The image of the thousands and thousands of life jackets on the beach in Greece reveals the scope and scale of the issue. What do you think the responsibility of more stable countries to refugees is or should be? Why might some be resistant to providing aid? What do you see as a path forward?
11. In what ways did swimming provide a platform for helping other refugees?
12. Why does Nizar agree to accompany Sara and Yusra? How does his experience differ from theirs? In what ways is it similar?
13. Describe Sven’s relationship with Yusra. In what ways does he help her? In what ways does she help him?
14. The refugees are in a vulnerable position throughout their journey. What is the responsibility of others towards the refugees? How could citizens, like Sven, and larger entities like the Olympics or the government help to ensure that the refugees have their basic human rights? What do you feel your personal responsibility is towards refugees? How could you become a human rights defender for refugees in your community?