



Cinematic Orientalism: East-West Perception in Netflix's 'Swimmers'

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Abstract: This article analyzes the movie "The Swimmers" using ideological and frame-by-frame film analysis methods. The themes, characters, and locations in the film are evaluated in the context of the critique of orientalism and self-orientalism, analyzing how ideological themes are processed and reinforced. The film associates concepts of faith and hope with Christianity, presenting Christian characters as saviors. While telling the story of Syrian refugees, the film chooses Christian and European-looking heroes, portraying Muslims negatively. Emphasizing the superiority of Western culture, the film depicts the Eastern world as backward and helpless. Countries such as Türkiye are coded as dark and uncanny, while European countries are idealized. The positive portrayal of Greece praises European efforts towards refugees but creates a negative image of the Turkish Coast Guard. The orientalist and self-orientalist elements of the film are attempts to present an attractive narrative for Western audiences. The Muslim screenwriter's distortion of Eastern historical realities under Western producers' influence represents self-orientalism. This approach reflects an endeavor to present Eastern culture in line with Western perspectives to gain Western approval, reinforcing prejudices rather than fostering understanding of cultural and political differences.

Keywords: Swimmers, Orientalism, Self orientalism, Syrian refugee, Netflix

1. Introduction

Among other functions, cinema is one of the most effective tools of both ideological and cultural representation. Cape (2003) argues that films have at least two types of influence on film-society interactions: First, film reconstructs ancient social practices by creating new thinking patterns; secondly, it changes and shapes the existing social structure. However, some, like Wedding and Boyd (1999) on the other hand, believe that films are just the reflections of the real norms of the society. In fact, it is possible to assert that both views hold true simultaneously: On the one hand, every movie offers audiences the opportunity to get to know a certain culture, society and experience, while at the same time presenting/imposing a certain ideological discourse, political and social perspective. In this sense, motion pictures are not only an art form but also an ideological discourse. Pre-cinematic Western artists and writers' perspectives have permeated cinema, bringing these ideologies into contemporary works.

In this context, the phenomenon of "orientalism", which was frequently encountered in literature and philosophy before cinema, also appears in cinematic works. Orientalism explains how Western observers and artists perceive, want to perceive, and represent the geography they call the East. Orientalism, identified and theorized by Edward Said (1998), refers to the tendency of Westerners to portray the East as an exotic, mysterious and barbaric place with a distorted and prejudiced view. Such a perspective excludes and marginalizes Eastern cultures and societies as inferior and second-class, while positioning the West as the highest representation of civilization, a central and redemptive power. As a kind of mental colonization, Orientalism's activity of exoticizing and caricaturing Eastern cultures as a presupposition can be accompanied by physical intervention after a while. In this respect, the assignment of the Eastern world as secondary by the intellectual representatives of Western civilization based on their own prejudices, fantasies, imaginary images and illusions is also an attempt to assign a master to the world, and beyond this representation, it creates a master/slave dialectic and reinforces the situation of masters owning slaves. Indeed, as Said (1998, pp. 80-109) points out, the West's marginalization of the East serves the purpose of reinforcing the West's power and prestige in the global



world while making the East second class. In other words, while writing its own civilizational history and ideal, the West has depicted the East with negative qualities as a way of envisioning its own future. This mechanism of othering emerged as a prerequisite for the West's process of making sense of its own existence and eventually became a kind of indispensable binoculars of the Western view of the East (Aydemir & Çelik, 2023).

So much so that, in time, it spread to Eastern artists and thinkers themselves and the concept of "self-orientalism" emerged. Ultimately, Western stereotypes and expectations about Eastern cultures affect Eastern intellectuals who try to shape their own cultures, especially those who remain under Western influence. This has led to the emergence of self-orientalism. The concept of self-orientalism, which can be translated into Turkish as Internalized Orientalism, refers to the tendency of a society or culture to conform its cultural elements or identity to the "Western perspective". Such an attempt to conform also distorts its own identity and culture to some extent (Bezci & Çiftci, 2014, p. 143). In this respect, Self-Orientalism symbolizes the activity of adopting the West's distorted view of the East instead of one's own Eastern view and acting in accordance with Western expectations in order to integrate into the West and, moreover, to be seen as one of them.

On the other hand, it is inevitable that the phenomena of orientalism and self-orientalism observed in other branches of art such as novels and paintings are also observed in cinema. While cinema can reinforce orientalist or self-orientalist discourses, it also has the potential to challenge these discourses and offer alternative perspectives.

The movie *Swimmers* (2022), which is the subject of this study, is open to an orientalist reading since it was produced by Netflix, a Western platform, and to a self-orientalist reading since the director and screenwriter Sally El-Hosaini is Welsh-Egyptian. In addition, many people involved in the production of the film are Syrians, such as the film's co-producer Hassan Akkad a Syrian filmmaker who was imprisoned in the past for protesting against the Syrian government (Saldana, 2022). This makes the film even more susceptible to a self-orientalist reading.

In this context, this article aims to explore how the film "Swimmers" reflects and reinforces orientalist/self-orientalist discourses. We will analyze various aspects, including character choices, settings, and atmospheres, to understand how the film embodies an orientalist perspective. While "Swimmers" tells a refugee story through two immigrant sisters, it also addresses immigration as a fundamental human condition. By examining the representations within the film that depict this migration journey, we can gain insights into the underlying ideologies and cultural narratives it conveys.

This analysis serves to demonstrate how cinema shapes cultural representations and perpetuates common stereotypes. Moreover, it underscores the importance of more inclusive, equitable, and diverse portrayals in film. Key questions to address include: Are the character choices aligned with the film's subject matter? How do cinematographic decisions enhance the storytelling and narrative? What central message does the film convey, both explicitly and implicitly? Additionally, we will explore the authenticity of the film's adaptation from a true story and consider any distortions of reality. Finally, we will examine whether "Swimmers," created by a Muslim scriptwriter-director for Christian producers, can be interpreted as a hybrid and layered example of orientalism and self-orientalist discourse. By critically analyzing the orientalist discourse in "Swimmers" through the lens of both distorted Western perceptions and the willing participation of Eastern representatives, we emphasize the value of diverse perspectives and encourage broader understanding and empathy within the realm of cinema.

2. Literature

Orientalism, defined as the West's distorted view of the East, becomes a pervasive perspective in Western discourse. It assumes an ontological characteristic within Western ideology. As Said (2003, p. 347) elucidates, the West has ideologically branded Islam as the new 'evil empire' to justify its conflicts,

equating it with terrorism, violence, and oppression. Echoing this sentiment, Khalid (2014, p. 5) observes that Islam is often transformed into a threatening, untrustworthy, and anti-Western entity. Hall (1992, p. 188) further contends that Islam is portrayed as a reactionary force in stark contrast to the modern West.

Films significantly influence societal perceptions, manipulating themes of social class, race, and nationhood. Busso and Vignozzi (2017) assert that cinema has the power to shape the public's understanding of these critical social issues. Bednarek (2015) concurs, noting that characters in films not only mirror cultural and social norms but also contribute to the creation of new symbolic orders.

Given these considerations, it is likely that films produced in Western countries may propagate prevalent Western viewpoints. Meguid (2020), referencing Nicha (2012, p. 2), articulates that for many Americans, Hollywood films serve as windows to the world beyond their borders. However, the representations in such films are not always equitable or objective. This is attributed to the West's historical use of its cultural, intellectual, and scientific advancements to impose its hegemony, defining non-Western cultures from its own perspective. Shotat and Stam (2014) argue that Eurocentrism—what they equate with imperialism—underpinning films, is the West's practice of 'othering' the East and perceiving itself as the sole source of culture and civilization. This study will highlight the orientalist perspective present in the film *Swimmers* and its production context. Prior to delving into these assessments, a review of the film-specific literature is warranted.

Upon examining the film's critiques and accolades, it is evident that *Swimmers* was met with acclaim by numerous Western film critics. Roman (2022) commended the film for its "artistic elements that poignantly capture the enduring effects of war," noting El-Hosaini's adept portrayal of trauma's lasting impact. Hammond (2022) lauded *The Swimmers* as "a compelling and suspense-laden narrative of refugees' quest for a better life against formidable odds," while extolling El Hosaini's directorial prowess and the authenticity lent by her Arab heritage. Claudia Puig of Film Critic (2022) characterized the film as "inspirational, albeit episodic, and a definitive crowd-pleaser." Gatter (2023) deemed it an "Odyssean epic," acknowledging its status as the most-watched film globally and its challenge to simplistic Western perceptions of refugee identities. Concannon (2022) critiqued the film's pacing despite its "emotionally charged depiction of Yusra and Sarah Mardini's heroic swim across the Aegean Sea, towing a flotilla of refugees." Persaud (2022) described the film as "A Resounding Tale of Hardships and Hope," and Rechtsaffen (2022) as "A Crowd-Pleasing Drama of Struggle, Sisterhood, and Olympic Dreams." Debruge (2022) offered high praise, titling their review "'The Swimmers': Hope Floats in This Largely Factual Account of Syrian Refugee Sisters."

Bonaime (2022) represents one of the few detractors, criticizing the film's narrative for "only sporadically delivering the story's potential impact, instead succumbing to clichés and a disjointed narrative." Similarly, Lattanzio (2022) disparaged the film's narrative depth in their review titled "'The Swimmers': An Uninspiring Migrant Drama That Fails to Plunge into Depth." It is apparent that while the film generally garnered positive feedback regarding its message and themes, criticisms were predominantly directed at its storytelling.

Furthermore, while Western film audiences (Rotten Tomatoes, 2022; IMDB, 2022) expressed admiration for the film, a significant portion of the Turkish audience (Eksisözlük, 2022) perceived the film as prejudiced. Interestingly, one might contend that among the most pivotal critiques of the film emanated from Manal Issa, who, notwithstanding her role as the lead actress, remarked in an interview with Zilko (2022): "It felt like one of those banal American films, filled with many orientalist clichés."

Regarding academic discourse, the film *The Swimmers* has not been the focal point of specialized studies, with the exception of the works by Gökalp and Buyuran (2023), which interpret irregular migration through the film's lens. A plethora of additional insights and interpretations have been disseminated

across online platforms, which will be assimilated into pertinent sections of this analysis. This study distinguishes itself by concentrating on an orientalist critique of the film, offering a novel perspective on *Swimmers* and contributing substantially to the extant body of literature.

3. Method

This article employs a mixed methodology to scrutinize the orientalist discourse within the film *The Swimmers*. The approach integrates ideological film analysis with frame-by-frame scrutiny, facilitating a comprehensive examination of the film's themes, characters, and settings. Additionally, it employs a critique of orientalism and self-orientalism to delve into the film's discursive operation and the ideological themes it propagates.

Ideological film analysis endeavors to unearth the underlying ideological messages, values, and beliefs within a film. Echoing Comolli and Narboni (1976, p.25), the camera is not merely a seeker of reality but a recorder of the dominant ideology's worldview. Consequently, films reconstruct the dominant ideology through ideologically filtered life experiences, rendering them inherently ideological discourses. The objective of film criticism, as posited by Comolli and Narboni (1976, p.29), is to elucidate the interplay between film and ideology and to decipher the functioning of ideology within films. In "Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film" (1988), Ryan and Kellner contend that films represent a battleground for constructing reality. Kellner (1982, pp.133-155) views films as a mirror to everyday life's representations, suggesting that films should be analyzed from various perspectives in relation to the era's elements. Films are to be seen as an integral part of a deliberately crafted system of cultural representation. Kellner (1978) underscores that ideological criticism entails dissecting images, symbols, myths, belief systems, and narratives. In a subsequent work, Kellner (1991) argues that ideological film analysis not only identifies the dominant ideology's manifestations in films but also exposes the cultural contradictions of the society from which the film originates. Thus, ideological film analysis deciphers the social and political dynamics and the societal struggles depicted in the film. Summarizing Özden (2004, pp.165-169), ideological film analysis employs a broad spectrum of theories, including semiotics, structuralism, and psychoanalysis, to reveal the ideological functions of films. It also uncovers how films position audiences and their cultural codifications, as well as how cultural representations are internalized within films.

This study will apply ideological film analysis to *The Swimmers*, analyzing both explicit and implicit discourses in the context delineated by Kellner, and will uncover the reproduction of orientalist thought and the functioning of political dynamics within the film. This analysis will expose the film's political discourse and the societal vision of the dominant ideology, as reinforced through an orientalist lens. It will enable an analysis of the perspectives of Western intellectuals in general, and Netflix in particular, as well as Eastern intellectuals influenced by self-orientalism, on the Syrian civil war. The analysis will acknowledge the complexity and contradictory nature of films, which may embody diverse discourses, ideological stances, narrative strategies, image constructions, and cinematic effects, rather than a singular, unadulterated viewpoint, as suggested by Kellner (2009).

Ideological film analysis will be utilized to elucidate how the characters and plot convey specific ideological positions to the audience. Frame-by-frame film analysis will dissect the visual and narrative components of the film in a stepwise fashion. This meticulous examination will reveal the representation of characters, events, settings, and ambiance, the employment of visual symbols, and the reinforcement of an orientalist discourse through film technique. It will scrutinize the orientalist discourses endorsed by the selection of locations, character placement, and visual symbolism in *The Swimmers*. Moreover, the film will be critiqued for its handling of stereotypes, biases, and marginalization through an orientalist lens. This critique aims to illuminate the ideological and cultural foundations that *The Swimmers* reinforces and how it can be approached from an alternative perspective. Data collection was conducted by meticulously watching the movie and analyzing the scenes in detail.

As this study pertains to film analysis, it does not necessitate a specialized approval process for human participants. Nevertheless, the film's copyrights and terms of use were respected. Moreover, the principles of objectivity and impartiality were upheld during the analysis, ensuring an unbiased examination of the film's representations and narrative. No specialized software was employed for data analysis; the film analysis was performed manually, and the findings were directly analyzed in textual format.

The scope of this study encompasses Netflix's films about the East, with *The Swimmers* serving as the sample. The film was selected through purposive sampling. All scenes and characters were analyzed, negating the need for a specific sample size. Given the study's focus on film analysis, the sample selection was not random but entailed a thorough examination of the entire film.

The data analysis process encompassed both ideological film analysis and frame-by-frame film analysis. Ideological film analysis involved identifying the film's primary ideological messages, dissecting the ideological representations of characters, and extracting the film's social and political messages. Frame-by-frame film analysis entailed a detailed examination of the film's visual symbols, settings, and ambiance, pinpointing orientalist themes, and analyzing the film's visual narrative.

4. General information

4.1. Film credits

Original title: *The Swimmers*

Sales and distribution: Netflix

Director: Sally El Hosaini

Screenplay: Jack Thorne, Sally El Hosaini

Producers: Tim Bevan, Stephen Daldry, Eric Fellner

Production: US/UK co-production

Production Year: 2022

Genre: Drama, Political

Duration 134 minutes

Language: English

Filming Location: Türkiye, UK, Greece, Brazil, Berlin, Belgium

Cast:

- Matthias Schweighöfer (Sven)
- Manal Issa (Sara Mardini)
- Nathalie Issa (Yusra Mardini)
- Ali Suliman (Ezzat Mardini)
- Ahmed Malek (Nizar) (IMDB, 2022).

4.2. Movie true story

The narrative of the film *The Swimmers* is anchored in the factual account of Yusra and Sara Mardini's flight from Damascus to Berlin as refugees in 2015. At the ages of 17 and 20, they commenced their perilous journey from the Syrian capital in August 2015, traversing Lebanon, Türkiye, and Greece, before their eventual arrival in Berlin in September of the same year. The sisters' voyage was fraught with challenges. Notably, during their clandestine passage from Izmir in Türkiye to Greece aboard an

overcrowded dinghy, the vessel's engine failed under the excessive weight, and they began to sink. The Mardini sisters' proficiency in swimming was pivotal in ensuring the survival of all on board. In a decisive moment, recognizing the imminent peril, they and two others disembarked to reduce the dinghy's load and swam alongside it across the Aegean Sea for several hours, tethered to the raft, thereby saving the lives of 18 people (Simons, 2022).

Upon reaching Greece, they endured days without food (Theis, 2022). Their subsequent overland trek took them through Macedonia, Serbia, and Hungary. Yusra's recollections of the journey through Hungary are marked by the term "horrible," reflecting the severity of their experiences. Contrary to the portrayal in the film, the rape scene is entirely a work of fiction (Nair, 2022). Throughout Europe, the sisters encountered significant anti-migrant prejudice and discrimination, which initially made it challenging for them to identify with the term 'refugee.' Sara recounts, "People treated you like you had some kind of disease, like you were not human" (Syed, 2022). Yusra has been outspoken and fervent in advocating for refugee rights. Currently, Sara faces legal proceedings in Greece, with charges including human trafficking, stemming from her humanitarian activities in Lesbos—a situation that Amnesty International has criticized as "unjust and baseless" (Jessop, 2022).

4.3. Plot

The movie tells the dramatic story of a Syrian family through two sisters, Sara and Yusra Mardini, daughters of a family living a happy and modern life in Damascus. Their father, a swimming coach, is training the sisters for the Syrian national swimming team for the Olympics. As the Syrian civil war escalates, the sisters' lives remain monotonous. One day, Yusra narrowly escapes death when a bomb falls into her indoor pool during a swimming race. This incident causes her fears and dreams to clash. Convincing their father that they can pursue their dreams in Germany, the sisters embark on an unpredictable journey with their cousin Nizar. The sisters dream of becoming Olympic swimmers, while Nizar dreams of becoming a DJ. Their first stop is Istanbul, where they stay in a hotel and consider illegal ways to reach Germany. Their time in Istanbul is bleak, and they are eager to leave. Despite their father's warnings, they set off for Greece by boat. When the boat's engine breaks down, they are stranded at sea with 18 others, struggling to survive in a damaged vessel. Nizar calls the Turkish Coast Guard for help but is told they cannot assist because the boat is close to Greece. Thanks to Sara and Yusra's heroic actions in the water, minimizing the boat's weight, they are saved and reach Greece. In Greece, which is depicted as welcoming to refugees, Sara, Yusra, and Nizar continue their journey with other companions. They face various dangers, especially in the Balkans, where Yusra is at risk of rape. Needing rest, they stop in Hungary and stay in a hotel. Nizar finds out about a bus to Berlin that helps refugees without charging money, and they manage to catch it. After a long journey, they reach Berlin. They spend two months there; during this time, Yusra trains daily on her own, although she cannot swim because there is no pool. Sara, in contrast, indulges in entertainment, drinks alcohol, and eventually realizes she doesn't want to swim. Yusra decides to try her luck and introduces herself to a swimming coach named Sven at an indoor pool. Initially skeptical, Sven gives them a chance. Upon seeing them swim, Sven decides to coach Yusra. Sara, disenchanted, gives up swimming. Yusra trains hard for the Rio Olympics, not for the Syrian national team as she had hoped, but for the refugee team. The movie ends with Yusra winning a race, becoming the pride of the refugee team and fulfilling her dreams. Sara, on the other hand, goes to Lesbos and dedicates herself to helping incoming refugees (Zengin, 2022).

5. Findings

5.1. National identities and character representations

In the cinematic narrative, characters are pivotal elements that facilitate a profound comprehension of the story and the thematic essence of the film. Characters embody the cinematic experience, offering the audience a direct reflection of the film's thematic core. In this context, selecting the appropriate character to convey the theme and subject matter of the film constitutes a crucial phase in script

development. The selected character ought to possess traits that deliver the most potent message. Furthermore, this character should epitomize the societal segment they represent. Consequently, screenwriters must take into account the dynamics, cultural attributes, and social fabric of the society depicted in the narrative when choosing the principal characters. Thus, characters should be endowed with not merely individualistic traits but also attributes that mirror the societal macrocosm. They should personify the thematic and narrative essence of the chosen story with utmost efficacy.

Upon examining the film *The Swimmers*, it becomes apparent that a divergent approach was adopted. The family selected to portray Syrian society, particularly the two sisters, is depicted as a Christian household with a distinctly Western orientation. The patriarch is portrayed as a swimming coach, and his daughters are depicted as aspiring Olympic swimmers. Their Westernized appearance, travel habits, and leisure activities, including frequenting nightclubs, suggest a European lifestyle within Syria. Notably, their fluency in English is emphasized. The film eschews religious undertones; although the characters are Christian, their faith is not explicitly delineated, save for a subtle nod through Sara's cross earring. This choice seemingly mitigates the representational crisis by casting Christian protagonists as an exceptional representation of Syrian refugees, who are predominantly Muslim. The narrative of Yusra, a successful Christian figure spotlighted amidst millions of Muslim refugees, potentially misrepresents the broader Muslim community.

Image 1

The Cross Earring of Sara, One of The Leads of The Movie.



The character profiles selected by the writer/director, despite strategic intentions, inadvertently present a challenge to equitable representation. Narrating the refugee story through a profile that does not accurately reflect the general Syrian populace, particularly the refugees, and doing so within a biographical film, skews reality through a self/orientalist lens.

Sally El Hosaine, the director, reveals her motivations for choosing this narrative, stating, "they reminded me of when I grew up in Egypt in the 90s. It reminded me of myself and my friends. It is not often that we see modern and liberal Arab women on our screens" (Jessop, 2022). This admission confirms a deliberate choice for a modern and liberal portrayal, yet it is evident that such a representation, divergent from the typical Syrian and refugee population, cannot justly convey the refugee narrative. As Gatter (2022) observes, these narratives diminish Yusra and Sara's character arcs to mere reflections of "Western eyes." The film's implicit message, "we are just like you," is clear, as the Eastern artist endeavors to align with Western ideals, perceived as the epitome of civilization. This portrayal is further emphasized in the depiction of other characters: the entire Christian family and positive figures exude a Western/European, modern image, while "jihadists, terrorists, Syrian soldiers" are associated with Islamic symbols like beards and turbans. Overall, the Muslim image is portrayed as menacing, in contrast to the modern and humane European representation. The small Christian minority featured in the film constitutes a fraction of the 7 million Syrian refugees. In the cinematic realm, characters deemed worthy of rescue are those resembling the creators. Ironically, Western producers have influenced Eastern artists in these choices, leading to Eastern storytellers crafting narratives that cater to Western preferences. This process is so ingrained that explicit instructions are unnecessary. Despite the majority of the director/screenwriter and crew being Muslims and the film

being shot primarily in Türkiye, the protagonists and heroes, Yusra, Sara, and Sven, are Christians, while Muslims are cast as terrorists, vulnerable refugees, and oppressors.

5.2. The refugee experience and orientalism

The intersection of refugee experiences and orientalism merits further exploration, particularly from cultural and political standpoints. The Refugee Experience encompasses the trials of individuals compelled to flee their homelands due to war, natural disasters, economic strife, or human rights abuses. Upon resettlement, refugees encounter cultural, social, and economic challenges, impacting both individual and societal levels.

The Swimmers, featuring scenes across over seven countries (predominantly Türkiye), offers poignant insights into refugee experiences. A notable scene involves Yusra's harassment by Syrian soldiers under the guise of a search, paralleled by verbal abuse from rebels opposing the Syrian regime. The film equates the regime with its adversaries, coding both as malevolent. This narrative approach glosses over the complexities of the Syrian civil war's history and dynamics. Furthermore, the protagonists and their families, representing an unscathed Christian community amidst the conflict, appear detached from the war-torn Syrian society. They are portrayed as innocent bystanders, unaffected by the civil war, with their homes and family intact, continuing their lives as if insulated from the surrounding chaos. Remarkably, the sisters' true plight is depicted as commencing only after their departure from Syria, with their refugee status taking effect upon their arrival in Istanbul, despite traveling on a tourist visa. Their most significant experience unfolds in an Istanbul mosque.

Image 2

The Image of Two Sisters Who Came to Türkiye from Syria Wearing Headscarves in a Mosque.



In the film *The Swimmers*, the portrayal of the two sisters, who are typically depicted with a modern appearance, donning headscarves to enter a mosque in Istanbul, presents a stark contrast to their Westernized representation. This visual choice blurs the distinction between their Syrian origins and a Western upbringing. The narrative further accentuates the disparity between the sisters and the refugees they encounter in Türkiye, including those from Somalia and Afghanistan. The sisters' distinctiveness is highlighted throughout the film. In Türkiye, the sisters find themselves in a bleak, unwelcoming environment, devoid of assistance. However, upon their arrival in Greece, the atmosphere shifts as Greeks and Europeans provide aid, including toys for children. The film also depicts refugees holding banners pleading for German assistance, while Merkel is shown discussing humane solutions to the crisis on television. This portrayal subtly reinforces the West as a savior through the lens of refugee experiences and Christianity. A Somali Muslim woman's decision to remove her headscarf upon nearing Germany, stating it is better not to appear too foreign, is endorsed by the film's narrative. This suggests that assimilation or acceptance by Westerners may require Muslims to adopt a Western appearance.

Throughout *The Swimmers*, Western identity is depicted as foundational and superior, while Muslim identity is associated with inferiority and underdevelopment. The sisters' experience as tourists in Istanbul is portrayed as more dire than their life as refugees in Germany. Türkiye, a Muslim-majority country, is depicted as inhospitable even for tourists, whereas a refugee camp in Germany is likened to a nightclub from the outset.

Image 3

Refugees Partying Wildly in Germany Refugee Camp



The film carefully weaves this message into the refugee experiences, particularly through Sara's decision to aid refugees in Lesbos rather than in Türkiye, which hosts a significant refugee population. The film implies that true refuge is found only upon leaving Türkiye, with Sara stating, "We will be safe when we cross to Europe." The difficult conditions faced by refugees in Greece are romanticized, presenting a visually appealing image, while glossing over Greece's harsh sentencing of Sarah for aiding refugees. Interestingly, while Greece and Europe are glorified, Balkan countries like Macedonia, Serbia, and Hungary are depicted in a dark and foreboding light. This representation may reflect these countries' anti-Western stances, with fictional scenes set within their borders. The film also briefly touches on Russia's airstrikes, highlighting the state's brutality. Germany, in contrast, is portrayed as a haven and the epitome of European salvation.

Image 5

Refugees Migrating on Foot in Greece



In addition, interestingly, while Greece and Europe are glorified, the Balkan countries Macedonia, Serbia and Hungary are presented in a dark and uncanny manner, as will be analyzed in detail below. It would not be wrong to say that this representation is a reflection of the anti-Western politics of these countries. As a matter of fact, many scenes that are not in the real-life story are fictionally designed as if they take place in these countries. In addition to these, especially Russia's air strikes are also shown, albeit through news reports, emphasizing the ruthlessness of the Russian state. Germany is depicted as the land of ultimate salvation representing Europe. Looking at the refugee experiences, Türkiye, Macedonia, Serbia and especially Hungary are portrayed as dangerous, uncanny, underdeveloped and uncivilized primitives. In contrast, the Christian neighborhoods of Syria, Greece, Germany and all of Europe are portrayed as the land of goodness, civilized, humane and absolute salvation.

5.3. The role of setting and color in the orientalist narrative

In cinema, the selection of locations for shooting scenes is a critical element that influences the narrative and ambiance of a movie. Locations embody the physical spaces where the story unfolds and can impart both explicit and implicit meanings to the audience. In this regard, location choices serve as a distinct language, capable of conveying expressions that may align or diverge from the movie's overarching language. The film's atmosphere is crafted through these chosen settings. For instance, a dark and narrow street may instill a sense of tension or peril, whereas a vast, grassy expanse can evoke feelings

of naturalness and serenity. Similarly, locations mirror the inner lives of their inhabitants, allowing inferences about the users of these spaces. Thus, locations are reflective of the characteristics and ethos of the society or culture depicted in the movie. Certain locations also carry symbolic significance, such as train stations, which often denote separation. Consequently, the choice of locations unveils the director's storytelling intent and the emotional journey intended for the audience.

Complementing spatial usage are colors. Colors, akin to locations, function as expressive tools and frequently enhance the atmosphere established by the selected settings. In this manner, they bolster or steer the emotional impact. Indeed, the film's color palette, in conjunction with the locations, shapes the overall mood of the film. Cool colors, such as blue and purple, can induce feelings of melancholy or enigma, while warm hues, like orange and yellow, impart sensations of vitality and warmth. Directors deliberately employ colors to define the scenes' atmospheres and provoke specific emotional responses from the audience, as the chosen colors directly influence the depiction of space. For example, horror films typically feature eerie atmospheres crafted with dark and somber colors, whereas romantic comedies are characterized by cheerful environments with bright and lively color selections.

Analyzing the movie *The Swimmers* in terms of atmosphere creation yields notable findings. The film exhibits no fixed color scheme; notably, as the sisters traverse different countries, both the location and color preferences evolve. This section will explore how the locations and atmospheres shift as the sisters journey through various countries and the meanings these choices generate. Sequentially, the environment and home of the Christian family in Syria are portrayed with warm colors, inviting spaces, and aesthetically pleasing settings.

Image 6

An Elected Representative from Civil War-Torn Syria



As depicted in the selected frame and other portrayals of Syria, the film represents the life within a narrow Christian context in Syria as a relaxed and cheerful summer day. The frame combines the golden hues of the sun, the cooling effect of blue, and the natural texture of green to forge a peaceful and enjoyable atmosphere. Additionally, the poolside setting signifies a communal space for relaxation and social interaction. The vibrant and colorful swimwear and inflatable toys mirror the energy and joy of summer. The golden sunlight conveys warmth and positive energy, while the blue pool water suggests coolness and refreshment. Overall, a serene holiday ambiance is established. This positive color usage and spatial selection persist in other scenes, such as Sara and Yusra's family home, the club where they socialize, the pool, the café, and more, which are not included here due to space constraints. The underlying message is that Sara and Yusra, along with their family, reside in a Syrian oasis of calm, unaffected by the war. Indeed, even as the civil war intensifies, the film continues to depict the sisters' surroundings in warm yellow and orange tones, maintaining a comforting setting. The civil war is portrayed as a distant calamity, menacing their peaceful enclave. Thus, the narrative positions this benevolent, tranquil Christian family as captives of barbaric, primitive, and inferior Muslims. Salvation is envisioned as asylum in Europe, specifically Germany, epitomized as the zenith of civilization. This representation of atmosphere in the initial part of the film undergoes a dramatic shift when the sisters

arrive in Türkiye. The color palette transitions from warm orange and yellow to cooler shades of dark green and black. Chilling and foreboding locales, perilous backstreets, are selected to depict Türkiye.

Image 7

Representation of an Istanbul Street



In the frame, Türkiye is portrayed as more uncanny than Syria through the director's cinematographic choices of space and color. The inclusion of a dilapidated bus as set decoration, the lighting, and the imagery of construction contribute to this eerie ambiance. Such an atmosphere is consistently evoked in all depictions of Türkiye throughout the film, coding it as a land of unsettling journeys and a perilous transit point for migrants. Despite support from the metropolitan municipality of Izmir (Izmirart, 2022), the director's comments encapsulate his view of Türkiye: "When we were shooting, Türkiye was on the red list, which meant that as filmmakers we were left to our own devices because no one could visit our set. Practically and creatively, this gave us tremendous freedom in how we shot" (Sarachan, 2022). The director, a Muslim of Welsh-Egyptian descent, seems to suggest that Türkiye is akin to a third-world country, implying that without Covid, his filming would have been subject to interference, a perspective that may be attributed to self-orientalism.

As Gökalp and Buyuran (2023) note, in this Netflix film directed by an Eastern Muslim, Türkiye is depicted as a transit country and a significant hub for migrant smuggling, beset with inadequate social opportunities and security threats both within and at its borders. The film overlooks the fact that Türkiye hosts 4 million Syrian refugees, more than any other country globally. Yet, the film meticulously and persistently portrays Türkiye as a frightening, uncertain place to be avoided.

Image 8

Representation of a Street Image from Istanbul



The still from the movie, representing a street scene in Istanbul, illustrates the aforementioned points. The shot, taken at night on a rain-soaked street illuminated by neon lights, creates a mysterious, uncanny, and uncertain atmosphere. Closed shop shutters, a parked car, and distant figures contribute to a feeling of coldness and remoteness, reinforcing a sense of alienation and crafting an eerie urban atmosphere. This is precisely the sentiment the film conveys about Türkiye. The Western perception of Türkiye as an uncanny, distant, and alien place, necessitated by its geographical location, aligns with the film's portrayal. This point reveals a message far beyond the refugee issue that the Western intelligence

that made the film specifically deals with, and beyond the whole plot, the film shouts out this Western perception of Türkiye through the mouth of the Eastern Muslim director who "domesticates" it.

Image 9

A Hotel Room in Türkiye



In another frame, a hotel room in Türkiye is depicted, where the sisters, possessing 10 thousand euros and visiting Türkiye as tourists, find themselves. Their choice of this particular hotel, despite having ample funds and numerous options in Istanbul, may reflect the movie producers' preference rather than the characters'. This intentionally selected location reiterates the previously emphasized message. Dark and pale color tones in this frame, representing Türkiye, create a sense of confinement and limitation. These colors amplify feelings of mystery, eeriness, and uncertainty. The subdued lamp light and wall shadows underscore the disquieting atmosphere. The film codes Türkiye as a dangerous, uncanny, and obligatory transit route filled with uncertainties. It is noteworthy that the sisters' actual experiences in Türkiye were not negative. Nevertheless, the film opts to craft this adverse perception through its choice of colors and locations. Furthermore, the movie bolsters this perception with a fabricated addition: despite the presence of women and children on a sinking boat, the Turkish coast guard is depicted as refusing to help, leaving the migrants to perish at sea. This portrayal contradicts reality, as Güngör (2024) reports that in 2023 alone, the Turkish coast guard rescued 26 thousand migrants pushed into Turkish waters from Greece. Despite these facts, the film maligns Türkiye through both the script's language and cinematographic choices such as color, space, and atmosphere. Upon reaching Greece, the sisters' subsequent destination, a different selection of location and color is introduced. As the refugees awaken on the Greek island of Lesbos, the color scheme shifts back to warm hues.

Image 10

Refugees on the Greek Island of Lesbos



As depicted in the frame, the dystopian, uncanny, and perilous atmosphere associated with Türkiye is supplanted by sunny weather and shades of blue, symbolizing freedom and peace. All scenes set in Greece maintain this color scheme and similar location choices, thereby crafting a new layer of meaning that transcends the primary narrative of desperate refugees, instead portraying their plight as an unfortunate adventure under beautiful sunny skies.

Image 11

A Location in Greece in the Movie



In the frame illustrating Greece, the country is represented as a peaceful and inviting space. Light and pastel tones underscore the tranquility of the setting, with a serene sitting area nestled under the shade of trees. Throughout the film, Greece is portrayed as a welcoming environment, endowed with natural beauty and a warm climate, which stands in stark contrast to the movie's reality. Conversely, the true story reveals that the sisters endured days of hunger in Greece. While the film briefly acknowledges this hardship, it counterbalances the narrative with a scene where a public fountain is conveniently activated to aid the migrants, followed by immediate assistance from the Greek locals. The film's visual language already favors Greece through its color palette and atmosphere, and the narrative further diminishes the gravity of the sisters' ordeal with a dramatization that reverses the dire circumstances. Consequently, the moral weight of the refugees' starvation in Greece is negated by the color choices and an unrealistic plot addition.

Image 12

Life Jackets Abandoned by Refugees Arriving in Greece in the Movie



Image 13

Refugees in the Greece of the Movie



The two frames above push aside the veracity of the sisters' life story, instead coding Greece as the initial haven for refugees. Upon arrival, refugees symbolically discard their life jackets and disable their boats, signifying their entry into Europe and the end of peril. Ahead lies a path bathed in sunlight and promising horizons. Thus, when Yusra reaches Greece, she joyfully informs her family, "We are in Lesbos, we are in Europe," reinforcing the European/Western perception of Greece as the commencement of salvation.

The film disregards the sisters' actual days of starvation in Greece and the peril faced by refugees in Greek waters, such as the 15,000 refugees reported by TRT (2022) to have been pushed into Turkish territorial waters in 2021 and left to die, in favor of its overarching hegemonic narrative.

Moreover, the fact that these places, which are shown as Greece in the selected sample frames above and coded as Lesbos in the film and presented as welcoming places with bright colors and camera compositions, were shot in Çeşme on the Turkish coast (Cumhuriyet, 2022) has deeper meanings. The Western mind that makes the movie appropriates the beauty of the east and presents the east by shaping it according to its own distorted perception. This careful and deliberate design by the Welsh/Egyptian director with his American collaborators reveals exactly the nature that the Western masters and their hegemonic relations envisioned, created and shaped in the critique of orientalism/self-orientalism. As a matter of fact, while the beauty of Türkiye is attributed to Greece, Türkiye is portrayed in a dark, uncanny way.

The Mayor of Çeşme, M. Ekrem Oran, is quoted as saying, "We are carrying out very successful projects hand in hand in Çeşme, the Paradise on Earth. With its sea, history, nature, gastronomy and many other beauties, Çeşme is one of the leading tourism destinations. We think that such organizations are important for the whole world to see and know these beauties of Çeşme. It was a very successful and beautiful movie, I thank everyone who contributed" (Cumhuriyet, 2022). As a matter of fact, while the mayor was expecting an increase in the number of tourists because Çeşme would be shown in the film, the locations in the scenes shot in beautiful parts of Çeşme, in natural wonders such as Ilıca beach, were shown as Greece, thus using the beauties of Türkiye to attract tourists to Greece; moreover, Türkiye was shown as unsafe in other scenes, emphasizing that it was not an attractive and safe environment for tourists. Beyond all the other drawbacks, this is a kind of "falsehood", and considering the commercial dimension of the business, the fact that the landscapes sold as Greece are in fact Türkiye is also a kind of "fraud".

Having established this skewed portrayal of Türkiye and Greece, the film extends a similar approach to other countries. The Balkan regions, including Serbia, Macedonia, and Hungary, along the route from Greece to Germany, are depicted in an equally uncanny manner, with a shift in shooting location preferences and colors following the depiction of Greece.

Image 14

Fencing on the Hungarian Border



In the frame under discussion, Hungary is portrayed with a dark, ominous, and intimidating atmosphere. The film's depiction of Hungary, and the inclusion of a fictional attempted rape scene not present in the sisters' actual story, suggests a narrative choice that transcends the plot and is reflective of broader Western political themes. The portrayal of Hungary as a foreboding place, akin to Türkiye, through its spatial designs and color palette, aligns with the hegemonic Western political narrative, irrespective of the film's storyline or the true events it is based on. Indeed, it is clear that Hungary's Prime Minister Victor Orban, who has a very tense relationship with the European Union, is a persona non grata for the European Union and its states (BBC, 2018). Hence, the film's representation of Hungary, particularly

against the backdrop of its Prime Minister Victor Orbán's strained relations with the European Union, seems to echo the Western political stance, elevating it above the film's narrative.

As Gatter (2022) points out, the film also draws attention to the sexist dimension of the issue by pairing the attempted rape in Hungary with the harassment attempt of the Syrian soldier. However, it should be added to this interpretation that the Hungarian policy, which challenges Western politics, is paired with the Syrian state policy. At this point, it is seen that in the case of Hungary, as in the case of Türkiye, Western general political stance gains a meaning above the story and message of the movie. This super code of the West, which codifies itself as the absolute truth, imposes itself as a dominant "super law" above the entire message of the movie when it comes to situations concerning its own interests. This super law cancels, distorts or adapts the message of the film when necessary. This super code is active in almost all Western produced films. As Nicha argues in the case of Hollywood (2014, p.4), such films are a kind of collective production which is influenced and manipulated by news media owners, politicians, filmmakers with radical political positions, the Department of Defence and the CIA (Nicha, 2012, p.4). This is probably why, as Majzoub (2017p.9) notes, Hollywood films are full of anti-Islamic stereotypes. As can be seen, this is not a matter of cinema and art, but rather a matter of western cinema's full engagement with Western politics. The validity of this code is also seen in other elements of the film.

Germany, depicted as the epitome of this "super law," is portrayed in the film as luminous, secure, and welcoming. The arrival of the characters in Berlin is met with open arms, casting Germany, and by extension Europe, as the ultimate saviors and sanctuary for refugees. This portrayal reinforces the notion of Europe as a beacon of hope and safety, in stark contrast to the darker representations of Türkiye and Hungary within the film's narrative.

Image 15

A View from Berlin



6. Discussion and Conclusion

Considering all these factors, when *The Swimmers* is viewed through the lens of orientalism, it becomes evident that the film exhibits a layered discourse of orientalism and self-orientalism. This discourse manifests in several ways:

Presenting Christians as the absolute savior: In *the Swimmers*, all active characters are Christians Yusra, Sara, and Sven. Despite the story's focus on Syrian refugees, predominantly Muslims, the film selects Christians as its protagonists. Consequently, the concepts of faith, hope, and salvation are associated with Christianity. The migration of Yusra and Sara from Syria to Germany and the revival of their hopes in a Christian town can be interpreted as symbolic of rebirth. Positive behaviors, such as swimming and enjoying life, are attributed to the Christian minority, while negative behaviors like fighting and deceit are linked to Muslims. The film's overarching message suggests that Christianity represents hope and light for humanity's salvation. In its depiction of the tribulations of a Muslim society, the film's reference to Christianity as a symbol of salvation or hope could be construed as a form of missionary activity. The Christian West, as a source of enlightenment, is positioned at the center, while the Muslim East is

portrayed as the periphery. Refugees find true salvation in Germany, where they also realize their dreams. The film presents a pyramid of salvation with the West at its apex.

Portrayal of Muslims as evil, primitive, backward and barbaric or as victims: The film depicts Muslim characters in two distinct ways: as barbaric terrorists or as innocent victims seeking salvation. The former represents the rebels in Syria, while the latter symbolizes Muslim refugees who migrated to Europe. Both representations are skewed. Muslims are depicted as terrorists when active and as helpless, powerless victims when passive. The film thus underscores the absolute and merited superiority of Western culture, casting the Eastern world as primitive, weak, and helpless. This establishes the hierarchy of civilizations as envisioned by the orientalist perspective. These modes of representation underscore Western cultural superiority. Muslims depicted as terrorists affirm the West's righteousness and supremacy, while those portrayed as victims seeking salvation highlight Western humanitarianism and compassion. The film's portrayal of Muslim characters solely as terrorists or helpless victims overlooks the complexity and diversity of real-world Muslim communities. This portrayal perpetuates stereotypes and a one-dimensional view of Muslims, aligning with Western media's frequent association of Islam with terrorism. The film's depiction allows the West to perceive itself as superior and to degrade the 'other.' This portrayal reflects an orientalist perspective, which positions the West as modern, civilized, and progressive, while describing the East as backward, primitive, and barbaric. The depiction of Muslim characters in the film as either barbarians or victims exemplifies this orientalist viewpoint. Nicha (2012, p.7) also notes that such negative characterizations of the East as a source of evil justify and even invite US intervention in the Middle East.

The East is portrayed as a dark land: The film presents Türkiye as a frightening, uncanny, and dangerous place. Countries not aligned with the West, such as Türkiye and Hungary, are depicted as eerie through the choice of locations and colors, while Greece and Germany are portrayed as paradisiacal homelands. This portrayal reinforces the stereotype of the "dark lands of the East," coding the East as subordinate to Western supremacy and as backward and dangerous compared to Western "civilization." By homogenizing the East, this approach dismisses diversity and richness, legitimizing Western dominance and superiority. The depiction of countries like Türkiye as "scary and uncanny" reflects an orientalist perspective in the film, which views the East as exotic, dangerous, and backward. This perspective emphasizes Western civilization and superiority, while defining the East as barbaric and in need of control. The portrayal of European countries like Greece and Germany as "paradise homelands" embodies the notion of Europe as the pinnacle of Western civilization, allowing the West to see itself as modern, civilized, and progressive, and to position other regions, especially the East, as inferior. However, this portrayal oversimplifies reality, ignoring the complexity and diversity of countries like Türkiye. The film's depiction of Türkiye through dark, gloomy, and uncanny environments, while being shot in bright and scenic locations like Çeşme and Alaçatı, suggests an ulterior motive. Additionally, the portrayal of Türkiye's beautiful parts as Lesbos/Brazil by an Egyptian screenwriter/director in an American/UK co-production for Netflix can be seen as the epitome of self-orientalism.

Positive portrayal of Greece: The film's portrayal of Greece as a positive haven for refugees, despite the sisters' actual experiences of starvation, reflects a reversal of reality. The depiction of Greece as a "rescued" region for refugees, both narratively and through the use of colors, space, and atmosphere, suggests a form of European solidarity, positioning Greece as an extension of the West. The film overlooks the actions of Greeks who did not accept refugees, pushed them back to sea, or used violence against them. Moreover, the Turkish coast guard's absence in Greek territorial waters is portrayed in a manner that implies Turkish neglect of refugees. This positive depiction of Greece contrasts with the harsher realities and appears to serve as propaganda or a political message. By presenting Greece as a "rescue zone," the film seems to commend Europe's handling of the refugee crisis, supporting a specific political or ideological stance while straying from the truth. Additionally, the implication that the Turkish coast guard abandoned refugees is likely intended to exert pressure on Türkiye from the West.

The film thus distorts international relations and offers a biased viewpoint. In summary, the favorable representation of Greece indicates that the film diverges from reality, selectively presenting information to support a particular political or ideological narrative.

All in all, the film has a very strong orientalist discourse. Moreover, the journey depicted in the film, which is presented almost as the return of "Christians" from Syria to their homeland of Germany, creates a narrative of eastern exoticism. This coincides with Kirel's (2012, p.459) observation that in films with Orientalist elements, the East is depicted as a land of fairy tales and adventure.

On the other side of all these inferences emphasizing Orientalism lies self-orientalism. As a matter of fact, the fact that the director of the movie is an Eastern Muslim reveals that self-orientalism is also immanent in all these orientalist activities. On the other hand, as Aizura (2010, pp.14-15) points out, Orientalism inherently involves Self-Orientalism. The Muslim screenwriter and director El-Hosaini distorts the story of the refugee sisters to fit the Western perspective. He adds to and subtracts from the story, and especially through cinematographic arrangements, he affirms and sanctifies the east/west hierarchy and the hegemony of the west. Moreover, it completely ignores the social dynamics of the Syrian civil war, which is also a serious social problem, and designs a narrative that will satisfy the conscience of Westerners through the Christian family it chooses. In the story it tells, there is no place for the millions of people who died in the Syrian civil war, the thousands of migrants who drowned in Greek waters, the refugee children who disappeared in Germany. Indeed, this is not an approach that the Western mind, which is also the producer of the movie, can accept. This is why El-Hosaini, despite being a Muslim himself, takes a distorted view of the Muslim issue through a Western lens. This is a product of El-Hosaini's effort to present Eastern culture and history in a way that is attractive to Western audiences rather than its own dynamics and to gain approval from Western producers. Dirlik's (1998, pp.168-169) approach of Self-Orientalism, which he interprets as the deliberate misrepresentation of one's own values and the creation of an internal other, especially in everyday cultural evolution, fits this context very well. Under the guidance of the producers, El-Hosaine distorted the historical realities of the East to fit the Western perception.

At this point, El Hosaine's answer to the question "Was the situation of women on the journey of migration something you wanted to show in this movie?" is quite enlightening:

"I was trying to show not only the situation of women refugees, but also the achievement of their goals. Ironically, if the war hadn't broken out in Syria, I don't think Yusra and Sarah would have achieved everything they have achieved. The war has turned everything upside down. Patriarchal societies are being turned upside down, women are being given new freedoms. I wanted this movie to show girls and young women that they can follow their dreams. Growing up, I never thought that Arab women could be heroes because they were never portrayed that way in movies or on television" (Ciesnik, 2023).

El Hosaine's portrayal of the Syrian civil war appears to frame it as an opportunity for a select few refugees who have realized their ambitions. In this narrative, the more than a million individuals who perished in the conflict are rendered inconsequential. Furthermore, the depiction of a patriarchal society and the suggestion that the war facilitated its downfall implies that the conflict served as a catalyst for the Westernization of Arabs. Continuing this line of thought, El Hosaine interprets the gravest drama of the 21st century as a chance for a young girl to fulfill her aspirations, adopting a distinctly orientalist viewpoint. In another discussion, El Hosaine shared his intentions for "The Swimmers," stating, "I really wanted to humanize the refugees and show young Arab women in a way that had never been seen in cinema before, and that excited me" (Zengin, 2022). From the overall work, it is inferred that 'humanizing' equates to 'Europeanizing,' tailoring the depiction of Arab women to align with Western cinematic preferences. Gatter (2023), referencing anthropologist Lila Abu Lughod (2015), highlights a scene that encapsulates the film's orientalist perspective and the director's internalization of it: "One scene, for example, depicts Shada, a veiled Eritrean woman who meets the sisters during their

journey, remarking, ‘You don’t wear hijab. You swim. I’ve never met a girl like you before.’” Gatter interprets this line as Shada voicing the West’s aspiration for the liberation of veiled Muslim women. However, Gatter contends that “Yusra and Sara are more than the Western perception of them,” suggesting that the ostensibly benevolent view is merely an acknowledgment of the director’s attempt to curry favor with Western audiences by embracing their perspective. Conversely, the director sidesteps the risks associated with the post-9/11 portrayal of Islam as the principal adversary of Western civilization, as described by Dabashi (2008, p.1). By adopting a Western-centric lens, the director secures a safe position and reduces the likelihood of alienation from the Western community.

In conclusion, the film demonstrates that the Muslim director is capable of adopting a Western perspective, highlighting the presence of Christian and European-looking individuals among the refugees. Concurrently, the film implies that stories of non-modern, non-Christian, non-European refugees, such as Muslims in burqas—a common sight among Syrians—would not merit attention, even if they perished at sea. The film errs in its representation by selecting protagonists who do not accurately reflect the refugee demographic. It manipulates the narrative, purportedly based on reality, to align with Western political narratives through plot and cinematographic alterations. This skewed portrayal of the refugee crisis offers European audiences a series of cinematographic depictions that are palatable yet fundamentally flawed.

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