

JUNE FILMS

PRESENTS



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
2025 OFFICIAL SELECTION
COMPETITION

THE LITTLE SISTER

A FILM BY HAFSIA HERZI

2025 – FRANCE, GERMANY – DRAMA – FRENCH – 107'

mk2
FILMS

SYNOPSIS

Fatima, 17, the youngest of three daughters, treads carefully as she searches for her own path, grappling with emerging desires, her attraction to women, and her loyalty to her caring French-Algerian family. Starting university in Paris, she dates, makes friends, and explores a whole new world, all while confronting a timeless and heartrending dilemma: How can one stay true to oneself when reconciling different parts of one's identity feels impossible?

INTERVIEW WITH HAFSIA HERZI

Under what circumstances did you discover Fatima Daas's *La Petite Dernière* (*The Little Sister*), and why did it resonate so strongly with you?

After *You Deserve a Love*, my first feature film, my agent informed me that Julie Billy wanted to offer me the adaptation of Fatima Daas's book. She and Naomi Denamur had acquired the rights to the novel and had just launched their production company. I hadn't heard of it at the time, but I instantly fell in love with it when I read it. As a woman, it impacted and moved me. My immediate thought was: "I've never seen a character like this on screen." A heroine of North African descent, a practicing Muslim, living in the suburbs, attracted to women. In that environment, homosexuality is often told through a male perspective, not a feminine one. From my own experience, as a "girl from the projects" growing up in the northern neighbourhoods of Marseille, I've known characters like this. In the projects, it's not easy to be different – and own it. Stereotypes are deeply rooted, and judgement reigns supreme. But this story can't be reduced to one social type – it's completely universal.

What was the writing process like? Did you give yourself a certain license with respect to Daas' original text?

The book is quite reserved in tone, which matches Fatima's rather quiet nature. Much of it is hinted at and needs to be guessed. I knew adapting the book wouldn't be easy, so my condition was to have total freedom. I didn't want fifty people involved at that stage. In any case, the adaptation is quite free. I kept some characters exactly as they appear in the book and created others. Sometimes, just one word or phrase could spark an entire scene. And conversely, some elements – like her childhood – don't appear in my film at all. Essentially, I took certain elements from the book and tried to bring clarity to more internal, grey areas. But I always stayed true to what interested me: the character. Still, it was important that Fatima Daas be part of the process. I regularly sent her different drafts to get her feedback. It's her story, after all! I wanted to be faithful to that and respect her experience. I never wanted her to be kept in the margins. While we were casting, I even sent her photos of the actors being considered for key roles... I also had to ask her very personal questions – about sex between two women, physical gestures, the main character's asthma... I had a long list of questions, and each answer helped me stay as close as possible to her personality. I also did a lot of fieldwork. I spent evenings in lesbian bars to better understand the atmosphere, where we were welcomed with open arms and such kindness. I talked to many people about LGBTQI+ issues and did a massive amount of research. I wanted to grasp their challenges as much as I could by listening to the very people who experienced them. I also learned everything I could about asthma with lung specialists. The doctor in the film is a real life one – I convinced him to join the project while I was doing research.

This is your first time adapting a novel. Usually, you write your own stories. How did this change your relationship to writing?

It's true, I'd never done an adaptation before. At first, I really wondered if I'd be up to the challenge – and to the expectations of readers who loved the book. Fatima's feedback at different points in the process reassured me of the project's credibility. Since the book doesn't have a lot of dialogue, I also had to find its tone, its words, its voice in order to stay true to it and be as precise as possible. In any case, I didn't want the character to be overly talkative. On the contrary, everything had to be readable through the looks she gives, her observations, her attentiveness – like a sponge absorbing the world. It's mainly those around her who do most of the talking. Unexpected things also gradually added themselves during the writing process, like when I learned about my actress, Nadia Melliti's, passion for soccer. After seeing her videos, it felt natural to incorporate that into her character.

The film opens with a scene of ablution and prayer. This is how the heroine is introduced. And yet, *The Little Sister* is anything but a dogmatic film – meaning, one that focusses solely on religion. Your primary objective is to create a universal story that resonates with everyone, no matter their origins or religion.

Yes, exactly. That first scene shows her daily routine – it's part of who she is, how she was raised, part of her upbringing, her life and her choices. We're plunged straight into her intimate world and her innermost faith. By filming these gestures, you see a ritual that soothes her. You can feel that. The idea was to show that she prays and that she does so of her own will. Beyond her, we don't know if her sisters pray.

How would you define Fatima as a character?

She's a young woman who's in pain, inside. But it's not like she's ignorant of what ails her – she knows exactly who she is. But she feels guilty with respect to her religion, her family, and herself. I don't think she really loves herself. She's torn: she's uncomfortable with her homosexuality, yet longs to live it fully. She reacts violently when people hold a mirror up to her. There's a kind of episodic self-loathing. I often directed her to be sort of split. I wanted the word "lesbian" to trigger a certain violence because it reflected both who she is, and who she isn't yet ready to be. That's often what it's like for people who can't accept who they are. Saying the word out loud is like letting out a secret.

The character is caught between tradition and modernity, between pressure from her boyfriend and family, and her deepest, most personal ambitions – both sexual and professional. How did you materialize that tension on screen?

She's afraid of hurting the people around her, of losing their love, of everything changing if her secret is revealed. I wanted her to be sensitive in spite of her armour and strong personality. She's both there and not there. I knew the camera had to infiltrate her privacy, that she had to be in every shot. I was extremely concerned with keeping everything realistic. What drives me as a director is looking for truth in life's tiny moments. The film's natural feel comes from scenes that were actually very rehearsed and scripted. I readjusted a lot based on the cast's sensitivities. My shots often emerged from conversations and mutual trust.

Everyone needs to feel comfortable and happy – this is what creates the best kind dynamic. But the real secret is rehearsal, just like in theatre. I led a coaching workshop with the cast where we rehearsed scenes. The goal was for them to forget the camera and just live out real moments without any safety nets. I keep a very small crew – five people at most. I always film that way, with a tiny crew. As an actress, I get distracted when there's too much equipment of technicians. For first-time actors to let go. We need to be discreet and get out of their way.

Like in *Good Mother*, this film focusses on the family unit, with a mostly absent father. Surrounding the mother here, we have Fatima and her sisters. The atmosphere is both warm and suffocating. Once again, this place seems to have a certain ambivalence for Fatima...

And I can confirm that this ambivalence is intentional. That's why they're always so physically close to each other in the apartment – to convey that claustrophobic atmosphere. The father in the book is harsher and colder. I didn't want to show that. I wanted to show something else. I was more interested in portraying a man who is dominated by the women around him. I cast the actor (Razzak Ridha), who lives in my neighbourhood. I kept seeing him in the street or in cafés. We invited him to audition, and the moment he sat down, I knew he was the one. To me, the mother knows about her daughter, while the father is clueless. As for the household, we didn't have many days to shoot, but I wanted it to instantly feel like a real, lived-in family. I was committed to capturing their daily life in that environment. The mom is actually cooking in those scenes. I'm obsessed with realism – down to the tiniest details and performances. The madeleines she bakes and offers her children, for example, are a nod to Proust. I'd never worked with a production designer before this film. With Dièné Béréte and costume designer Caroline Spieth, we collaborated closely to faithfully bring my vision of this family to life.

It is immediately clear that Fatima's homosexuality weighs heavily on her everyday life. As you mentioned earlier, French cinema rarely depicts Arab or Muslim lesbians. Do you feel like you were addressing an unspoken truth?

Absolutely. Every girl and boy going through what Fatima does will relate to her. During auditions, I met people dealing with truly horrific experiences. Some had been kicked out by their parents, disowned, rejected... It was awful. When our casting director explained the film, people would freeze at the mere mention of homosexuality. We'd hear: *"I can't act in this film."* *"I don't support homosexuality."* *"If my kid were gay, I'd strike them from the family register..."* Horrible things. I remember a taxi driver who recognized me and said he'd always dreamt of acting in a film. I offered him a chance to audition for the role of the father. He showed up – he seemed open-minded, he'd been a musician back home... But he instantly pulled out, too: *"I can't... What will my friends and family say?"* These stories of rejection and pain, and the blatant homophobia I witnessed, only strengthened my resolve – which was already pretty high – to see this project through. It wasn't easy to fund the film, because of the subject matter, but faced with such injustice, I just had to. I knew homophobia existed, but not to this extent. I was disgusted. The casting process was long because this film could only be made with people who shared its message of inclusion and tolerance.

The seasons act as the film's chapters. How do they help structure Fatima's journey?

The film follows her over the span of a year – a slice of life between high school and university. It allows us to show the passage of time. We shot in two parts: a few days in winter, and then in spring. I insisted on it, even though it was technically challenging. But it was essential for me to show trees fading and then coming back to life. It also helped me create ellipses and, in a way, match the fragmented nature of Fatima Daas's book. Ellipses allow the viewer to project and fill in the blanks.

Despite everything weighing on her, you never frame Fatima as a victim. She's resilient. She fights.

And she has her dignity! That's why she's often alone in her moments of sadness. I didn't want to make her a victim, even though some might see her that way, and doomed from the start. She's mentally strong. She forges her own path, and ventures into life and sexuality with courage. It's a journey – a complex one, yes – but it leads toward the light.

Your attention to gestures and faces is striking. You often use close-ups, and your sensitivity and way of seeing people bring to mind filmmakers like Abdellatif Kechiche, who gave you your start, the Dardenne brothers, or Ken Loach. Do you feel connected to their cinematic lineage, or at least share a common desire to portray real people and real life?

I'm a huge fan of those directors. I'd add Andrea Arnold, too. I admire them all. They're major inspirations for me. I love the truth that radiates from their films. What I want is for viewers to forget they're watching a movie. I love filming daily life. *The Little Sister*, for instance, starts just like *Good Mother* – early in the morning, with gestures showing the protagonist's real life. I love dialogue that seems trivial. I love when conversations overlap around a dinner table. I care a lot about sound design. I love it when it's "messy." But technically, that requires a lot of logistics, I hate ADR... I love it when there are mistakes; I tell actors not to stop if one happens. Realistic, everyday scenes are very hard to shoot. I wanted a certain tenderness – even though we shot practically everything handheld. I love close-ups. Filming souls, faces, portraits, feeling someone's breath, their skin... I'm a fan of Pagnol, of Renoir – those great portraitists of cinema, or painting.

Nadia Melliti is dazzling as Fatima. This is her first role in a film. How did you discover such a talent, and when did you know she was your heroine?

We went on a massive casting campaign, where we auditioned both professional and non-professional actors for more than a year in several cities. I kept getting photos from the casting director. When I saw hers, I thought, "Wow!" But I assumed she was mixed-race and not North African, as we required. The first time she was filmed, her hair was covering most of her face. Two weeks later, we called her back – but there was a problem with the camera. She was eventually able to do a full audition. When she did, I didn't direct her. Everyone would come in and improvise without knowing what characters they'd be playing... When I met her, I was very moved even before we really spoke. She talked a bit about her studies, and as she was leaving the room, seeing her from behind, I just knew it would be her. Like an artistic love at first sight. I saw the character in every one of her gestures and could project it onto her. She

spoke fluent Arabic. I loved her aura, her mystery... She reminded me of an Egyptian goddess. I had dreamt of a discovery like this, because the whole film relies on her. The moment I pointed the camera her way, I instantly knew – 100% – that everything was there and that she would exceed my expectations. She's reliable, mature, intelligent, and born for this.

What were your main acting directions for her?

She has a gift. Truly. When she read the script, she understood everything. She impressed me on set with how immediately she grasped things. I didn't really need to explain much. It was easy and relaxed. We laughed a lot, we'd get emotional...

Ji-Min Park plays the young woman Fatima falls in love with. What convinced you she was the right actress for the role?

That character, in the script, was really tricky. I didn't want a stereotypical profile. I told the casting team I didn't care about her origins. One day, filmmaker Davy Chou met with me to pitch a project. I wasn't familiar with his work, although I knew he had a film in Cannes around the same time I was there with *The Rapture*. He sent me his films, and when I watched *Return to Seoul*, I was blown away by Ji-Min Park – by her aura, her presence... In an interview, I also loved the way she talked about acting, her joy in living in the moment on a film set. The next day, he gave me her number and I met with her. She agreed to audition. And with Nadia, they instantly clicked.

Tell us about the film's cinematography, which was done by DOP Jérémie Attard...

He had also shot my previous films. It was a team effort with the production designer and costume designer. I wanted the night scenes to feel sensual and the day scenes to be bright. I chose the locations based on that – especially ones with black and red tones for evening scenes. I wanted it to be even more beautiful than my earlier films and for Nadia to be lit as naturally as possible. That said, we didn't use a lot of lights. I hate it when a DP takes three hours to light a scene. And I think that too much lighting can distort or ruin a shot. I like it when a shot breathes, lives – like in the final scene.

Did Géraldine Mangenot, the editor, have to sort through a mountain of footage? How did the editing process go?

It was my first time working with Géraldine Mangenot, which was an incredible stroke of luck. Thank god she edited the film! She began while we were still shooting. I wanted to work that way. She has an incredible sense of storytelling. We often chose the same takes, and were honest and straightforward with each other. We made big decisions and cut a lot... We had tonnes of footage, tonnes of material... I could make a second film with what we cut.

Amin Bouhafaf's music is used sparingly but powerfully...

He's someone I deeply admire, with undeniable talent. He introduced me to instruments I didn't even know existed. His work in films like *Four Daughters (Les filles d'Olfa)* and *Timbuktu* really amazed me. He also composed for *Visiting Hours (La prisonnière de Bordeaux)*, in which I acted. Right from the start, I told him I was clueless about music, but he immediately reassured me. My reference was a childhood music box. He was inspired by that, and I'm very

happy with the result. He's truly gifted. Like everyone involved in the project, he was deeply touched by the character. It's that collective empathy I mentioned at the start of the interview that brings light to Fatima.

***The Little Sister* is a journey toward equality, light, and hope. The character grows brighter as the story unfolds. She's an "equal among equals," as Etienne de La Boétie wrote. That's ultimately the aim of this film...**

Exactly. It's about a young woman who wants to live her own life. Her difference, in the eyes of others, shouldn't be a source of suffering. Healing also comes through knowledge – school, university, education, learning about the world... Education is so important, especially when you come from a background where equal opportunity doesn't exist.

ABOUT HAFSIA HERSI

Hafsia Herzi began her career as an actress in *The Secret of the Grain (La Graine et le Mulet)* by Abdellatif Kechiche, for which she won a César Award and the Best Emerging Actress Prize at the Venice Film Festival. As an actress, she has worked with filmmakers such as André Téchiné, Bertrand Bonello, Patricia Mazuy, Iris Kaltenbäck, Sylvie Verheyde, Teddy Lussi-Modeste, and Radu Mihaileanu.

Her first two films as a director were selected at the Cannes Film Festival. *You Deserve a Lover (Tu mérites un amour)*, selected for Critics' Week, received critical acclaim in 2019, and *Good Mother (Bonne Mère)* won the Ensemble Prize in the Un Certain Regard section in 2021, awarded by Andrea Arnold. Hafsia also directed a TV movie for ARTE, *The Playground (La Cour)*, which received two awards at the La Rochelle Festival.

In 2024, she played the lead role in *Borgo*, directed by Stéphane Demoustier, for which she won the César Award for Best Actress in February 2025. *The Youngest (La Petite Dernière)* is her third feature film as a director.

CAST

FATIMA	Nadia MELLITI
JI-NA	Ji-Min PARK
KAMAR	Amina BEN MOHAMED
NOUR	Melissa GUERS
DOUNIA	Rita BENMANNANA
AHMED	Razzak RIDHA
BENJAMIN	Louis MEMMI
NACER	Anouar KARDELLAS
JOVEN	Joven ETIENNE
TARIK	Waniss CHAOUKI
MADI	Madi DEMBELE
RAYAN	Mahamadou SACKO
ADEL	Ahmed KHELOUFI
PROFESSOR PREVOST	Pascal CHANEZ
INGRID	Sophie GARAGNON
AURELIA	Julia MULLER
YANN	Nemo SCHIFFMAN
HUGO	Victorien BONNET
VINCENT	Vincent PASDERMADJIAN
NINO	Gabriel DONZELLI
CASSANDRA	Mouna SOUALEM
JADE	Jade FEHLMANN
GABRIELLE	Gioia FARISANO
HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER	Julie CHAINTRON
UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR	Ahmet INSEL
IMAM	Abdelali MAMOUN
CLAUDE DJ	Claude-Emmanuelle GAJAN MAULL

CREW

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED by
PRODUCED by
COPRODUCED by
CASTING DIRECTOR
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY
PRODUCTION SOUND MIXER
FIRST ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
COSTUME DESIGNER
MAKEUP ARTIST
PRODUCTION DESIGNER
EDITOR
SOUND EDITOR
SOUND MIXERS
COMPOSER

Hafsia HERZI
JUNE FILMS
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Audrey GINI
Jérémie ATTARD
Guilhem DOMERCQ
Camille SERVIGNAT
Caroline SPIETH
Hanka THOT
Diéné BERETE
Géraldine MANGENOT
Rémi DUREL
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