

Language and Terrorism: A Pragmatic and Semiotic Analysis of the Girls' Transformation in *Four Daughters* (2023)

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Abstract—The research investigates "Four Daughters" (2023) by Kaouther Ben Hania through pragmatic and semiotic analysis to study how extremist discourse transforms the linguistic and identity aspects of the girls. The research proposes that the transition from maternal openness to ideological closure occurs through intricate processes of symbolic and linguistic breakdown. Specific film sequences are examined to demonstrate how silence, body language, and spoken words function in creating this identity transformation. The analysis shows how ideological discourse transforms identity by removing doubt and openness to create absolute certainty and finality. The research incorporates Austin and Searle's speech act theory, Barthes' semiotics of imagery, and Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power in language. It demonstrates that the film presents more than just a documentation of personal crises, as it reveals a general symbolic breakdown that cinema uses to expose the discursive fractures resulting in radicalization.

Index Terms—visual semiotics, hybrid documentary, multimodal discourse, visual-linguistic naturalization, Kaouther Ben Hania

I. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Arab cinema has undergone a significant shift in its examination of identity, violence, and extremism. The combination of documentary and fictional elements in hybrid films creates complex, critical analyses of socio-political phenomena. One of the most compelling examples is "Four Daughters" (2023) by Tunisian director Kaouther Ben Hania (see Figure 1). The film showcases a profound dramatic analysis where language meets memory and identity confronts violence. Multiple cinematic layers challenge the relationship between factual and artistic representation. The film tells the true story of Tunisian mother Olfa, who lost two of her daughters, Rahma and Ghofran, to ISIS terrorism. In doing so, it transforms personal grief into a social and cultural issue.

This film's documentary-style hybrid approach enables real people to share scenes with professional actresses, creating multiple storylines that blend authentic materials with scripted content. This method allows the audience to interpret identity, representation, and loss on different levels. The film portrays extremism as a process that unfolds through linguistic and mental changes, creating divisions between personal identity, family ties, social connections, and native speech. This study will examine these changes by applying pragmatic discourse analysis, speech act theory, and multimodal semiotics to demonstrate how language, gestures, imagery, and silence create meaning within the cinematic

text. This analysis connects with modern research on extremist discourse and ideological recruitment, revealing how doctrinal speech functions at both linguistic and symbolic levels. This study adds value by providing a pragmatic and semiotic analysis of "Four Daughters," examining sensitive issues such as extremism, familial breakdown, and symbolic violence through its hybrid cinematic structure, which combines factual and fictional elements. This study enhances existing critical approaches to modern Arabic cinematic discourse by showing how language, embodied performance, and visual elements affect or challenge social connections. This research is significant because the ideological recruitment of Arab youth continues to grow, necessitating an examination of the linguistic and symbolic processes that lead to this transformation, particularly within family settings, where language evolves from personal to divisive.

This study examines how hybrid films create ideological discourses and depict their connections to familial and social structures using detached linguistic and cognitive methods. A fundamental opposition between maternal intimacy and ideological rigidity emerges throughout the movie, as displayed by the characters. This transformation occurs through a slow process of discursive and imaginative development that requires detailed analytical methods to understand its narrative and pragmatic dimensions. This study also examines how "Four Daughters" combines cinematic elements to create a multifaceted narrative about identity, violence, and extremism. Speech act theory and pragmatic analysis are applied to study the transition from family dialogue to ideological language. Multimodal semiotics examines the integration of spoken language with visual elements, body language, and auditory silences. This study aims to contribute to Arab critical scholarship on cinematic meaning-making processes by demonstrating how visual-dramatic discourse reveals identity transformation and belonging fragmentation in contemporary cultural environments.



Figure 1. Maternal Authority and Fractured Identity in the Official Poster of *Four Daughters*. From https://www.imdb.com/title/tt27502426/mediaindex/?ref_=mv_close

II. LANGUAGE, THE BODY, AND THE IMAGE: A PRAGMATIC AND SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF DISCOURSES OF EXTREMISM AND REPRESENTATION IN *FOUR DAUGHTERS* (2023)

The dramatic changes in contemporary Arab cinema provide a fitting context for exploring identity, violence, and extremism through films such as "Four Daughters" (2023), directed by Tunisian filmmaker Kaouther Ben Hania. Discourse consists of more than just language; it is also composed of various symbolic systems, including graphic, typographic, gestural, spatial, and sonic systems. Together, these systems constitute a kind of visual grammar similar to linguistic grammar. These systems are used to analyze visual and multimedia texts (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020; Bateman, 2014).

"Four Daughters" uses dialogue, body language, direct eye contact, and the positioning of characters within a room to communicate. The characters are portrayed in depth, not merely as a backdrop to the action. Their body posture and the lighting during their confrontations with Olfa provide clues to their state of mind. According to Jewitt (2021), scholars must explore the interaction between modes to understand how symbolic power systems are constructed for resistance or accommodation. Gunther Kress argues that visual and linguistic elements are combined through "semiotic weaving" to create meaning. In this theory, silence is a visually expressive sign with communicative significance, and image

composition is the visual equivalent of lexicogrammatical options in verbal language (O'Halloran, 2004). Even if one overlooks the visual dimension of the girls' radicalization, visual images can interpretively complement or surpass the content.

This study is grounded in speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1975), which is a linguistic theory that posits language not only conveys factual information but also shapes and transforms social life. According to this theory, language enables confessions, denials, and apologies, doing more than merely conveying information. The theory identifies three types of speech acts: locutionary acts, which produce meaningful sounds; illocutionary acts, which are intentional actions performed through utterances; and perlocutionary acts, which describe the impact of utterances on listeners. Two contrasting styles of speech are presented in "Four Daughters." The mother uses guilt as the basis for her stance on birth control, while the daughters use a rigid, illogical approach to create recruitment materials for a doctrine. Through her words, "I chose the path of truth," the daughter-actress performs an illocutionary speech act, transforming her identity through new linguistic-ideological structures while severing her emotional connection to her family. The mother lacks the ability to produce meaningful speech acts. Statements such as "I should have been closer" and "I'm not enough of a mother" fall into the category of "unhappy speech acts," as defined by Austin. This demonstrates a loss of linguistic power. According to Austin and Searle, context determines the effectiveness of an utterance. The same sentence could function as a prayer, an incitement, or a threat, depending on the context. The language of extremism operates through doctrinal strictness, transforming every statement into an absolute command or truth and blocking any form of doubt or diversity.

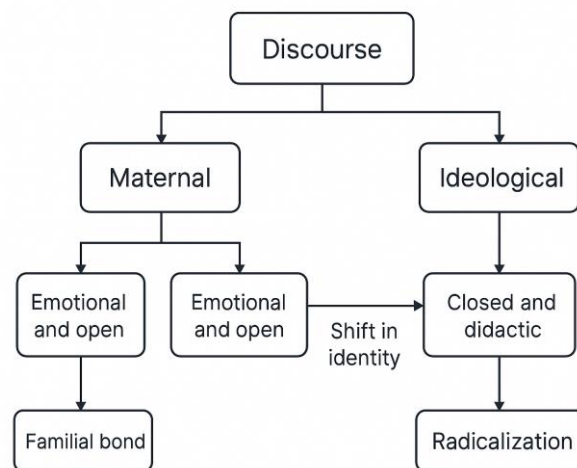


Figure 2.

The process of developing extremist discourse involves experiencing trauma and isolation before adopting a new discourse, which leads to radical changes in language and identity (Figure 2). Analyzing "Four Daughters" requires a method that combines pragmatics, semiotics, and discourse analysis. A visual diagram accompanies the film, illustrating how maternal emotional discourse transforms into ideological, dogmatic discourse through various layers. The initial "Discourse" box branches off into two separate categories: maternal and ideological discourse. Visual elements in the film reveal the core concept by contrasting the mother's emotional dialogue with extremist religious terminology. The mother uses emotional discourse to express her feelings and empathetic approach. She admits to not being "enough of a mother." This emotional discourse initially creates strong family bonds that later break down. The mother undergoes a complete transformation, shifting from being "emotional and open" to "closed and didactic." She makes the pivotal choice to abandon her family and join an extremist organization. She shifts from speaking freely to following strict ideological language, abandoning her personal identity in the process.

The ideological discourse functions as a powerful instructional framework. This is evident when the daughter says, "I chose the path of truth." The discourse presents itself as absolute truth, leaving no room for doubt or uncertainty. This framework can lead to radicalization, causing family members to completely disconnect from their community through linguistic, symbolic, and physical means. The visual design reinforces this idea by initially presenting both discourses in symmetrical positions. Then, a horizontal displacement creates an imbalance that illustrates divergence. The path toward extremism is presented as an inevitable process rather than a personal decision, signifying a structural transition into ideology. Figure 2's analysis of "Four Daughters" demonstrates how family disputes evolve into a symbolic conflict between personal and authoritarian communication methods, representing emotional and ideological language systems. According to Austin and Searle (1962, 1975), Barthes (1972), and Baudrillard (1983), the discursive change in the film illustrates identity transformation through discourse. The visual image provides a powerful method for studying the fundamental structure of extremism based on human experiences. Through semiological analysis, the female body in "Four Daughters" (2023) functions as an ideological battleground, representing the power struggle between family,

religious, and societal forces. This study's analytical framework integrates Barthes's (1972) body-as-cultural-sign theory and Baudrillard's (1983) representation-as-simulation theory.

In "Mythologies" (2020), Barthes explains that culture applies symbolic meanings to bodies, transforming them into cultural signs that people can interpret. A body's appearance on screen causes it to lose its purity because the social and political environment assigns symbolic meanings to it. Throughout the film "Four Daughters", the girls face different levels of bodily restriction:

- The mother exercises physical and moral control through her authority.
- The external religious authority requires complete body concealment through black clothing and veils.

These bodies derive their meanings from the social order within which they are expressed (see Table 1). According to patriarchal and ideological systems, the adolescent female body is a dangerous entity that requires disciplinary action or purification. Baudrillard (1983) explains how reality disappears when simulations replicate it instead of showing reality, obscuring the truth in the process. He names this phenomenon "simulacrum".

In the film, two young actresses represent the two lost daughters through their performances. This depiction provides a symbolic version of reality rather than authentic facts. The screen presents the director's interpretation of the girl rather than her actual self. In this way, the female body becomes a simulacrum, losing its personal power and conveying only external messages representing purity, extremism, nostalgia, and guilt.

TABLE 1

Agent	Mode of Control	Visual Symbols
Mother / Family	Emotion, guilt, protection	Touch, gaze, prayers
State / Society	Neglect, restriction, control	Absence of security, travel ban
Extremist Group	Recruitment, ideology	Blackness, purity, erasure

The body serves as a physical space in which ideological representations occur. The girl expresses her lack of ownership over her body when she says, "I didn't feel like my body was mine. It felt like everyone else's".

The Semiology of Violence Analysis reveals:

- In the film, the female body acts as a symbolic system that highlights power struggles between patriarchy, ideology, and family.
- According to Bourdieu (2001), clothing, veiling, the gaze, and silence function as -visual systems that serve as tools of symbolic violence.
- The girls lose their agency and become "ideologized symbols," forced to exist within discourses they did not create but must endure.

III. DECODING THE SYMBOLS OF SILENCE, LANGUAGE, AND THE BODY IN *FOUR DAUGHTERS*: A SEMIOTIC AND PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO REPRESENTATIONS OF RUPTURE, AFFILIATION, AND SYMBOLIC COLLAPSE

The silent confrontation between Olfa and her actress daughter marks the beginning of a tense, emotionally charged scene in the film. As they exchange glances and subtle movements, every word becomes nonexistent, creating a thick silence that holds significant power (see Table 2). This absence of dialogue becomes an advanced discursive method, as described by John Searle. Searle explains that speech acts can exist beyond spoken words through the deliberate withholding of speech (Searle, 1975).

Bodily performance represents a failure of communication, replacing traditional linguistic dialogue with visual tension. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2020), the visual composition of a frame can convey meaning equivalent to verbal communication. Olfa's central position on screen symbolizes the heavy burden of guilt and the fundamental importance of motherhood; however, the actress displays emotional distance through her sideways lean. The visual grammar of this shot uses composition, orientation, and spacing to create meaning.

This scene exemplifies Roland Barthes's concept of connotation, in which meaning emerges from the emotional and cultural significance of visual elements rather than their direct appearance. Every gesture, including broken eye contact, an out-of-reach hand, and irregular breathing, serves as a "saturated sign" conveying grief, loss, and blame.

Butler (2005) would analyze this silence as a form of implicit resistance to dominant discourse. It could function as a symbolic withdrawal or refusal of recognition or as an internalized scream within the frame. Butler (2005) observes that language exists beyond spoken words, encompassing unspoken expressions and suppressed communication. A fixed camera angle allows the audience to immerse themselves in the silent atmosphere of the scene. According to Machin (2016), image stillness is an artistic choice that creates heavy or confusing effects, contrasting with the resolving qualities of moving camera shots.

TABLE 2
TECHNICAL BREAKDOWN OF THE SILENT SCENE

Visual Element	Possible Connotation
Fixed shot	Temporal closure, suspended action
Olfa centered in frame	Centrality of motherhood / guilt
Actress leaning sideways	Role fracture / emotional distance
Dim lighting	Sadness, silence, emotional disconnection
Absence of music	Emphasis on the moment's harshness

The "joining moment" scene in *Four Daughters* represents a symbolic turning point that marks the final stage of transitioning from personal understanding to complete absorption in absolute discourse (see Table 3). This scene provides a visual representation of what Baudrillard (1983) calls a "hallucination of presence": the body is physically present but lacks semantic meaning and exists only to convey ideology.

The scene begins with a slow-motion sequence in which the girls move toward an invisible point on the horizon. This symbolizes their permanent departure from freedom and loss of direction in life. The slow-motion view from behind creates a ritualistic atmosphere, rather than depicting a simple escape or travel experience. Visual studies indicate that back framing creates psychological distance between the viewer and the character, abstracting the body (Machin, 2016).

The black clothing removes natural meanings from the body, transforming it into an extremist, religious, puritanical entity. According to Barthes (1972), the body functions as a sign that sociocultural systems transform into new collective meanings by removing its individual characteristics. Black is a universal symbol representing purity, mourning, dissolution, and disappearance. The minimal audio environment, with sounds restricted to their most intense levels and punctuated by silence, creates a sensory emptiness resembling the "empty room" in ritual theater (Schechner, 2002).

Butler (2005) refers to this shift as a "loss of discourse" because the girls now communicate through the ideological language of others rather than through their own voices. In this depiction, the female body exists as an expressionless object, transforming from a vocal subject into a discursive object.

TABLE 3
VISUAL AND SYMBOLIC ANALYSIS

Element	Symbolic Interpretation
Slow walking	Rite of passage, no return, decision solidified
Filming from behind	Loss of subjectivity, marginalization of identity
Black clothing	Erasure of the female body, religious recoding
Homogeneous background	Dissolution of environment, world reduced to one path
Absence of dialogue	Disconnection from self-language, dominance of ideological discourse

Throughout the film, the sudden shift in the girls' speech from maternal warmth to ideological stiffness serves visual and linguistic purposes, depicting their identity transformation. According to Pierre Bourdieu, the "linguistic market" is an exchange system through which linguistic styles gain authority (Bourdieu, 2001).

Olfa's maternal communication style contains emotional elements, pleading speech patterns, repeated statements, and fragmented emotions. These statements aim to establish understanding and acceptance above all else. Expressions such as:

"I don't understand what happened."

"I should have been closer."

These statements demonstrate the characteristics of weak representational speech acts, as defined by John Searle, because they express emotions without producing any effect. After adopting an ideological stance, the daughters speak with absolute conviction through assertive slogans. During her monologue, the actress playing the daughter states:

"I chose the path of truth."

"You are drowning in misguidance."

Language transforms into an ideological instrument that produces absolute rhetoric and blocks open discussion. Fowler (1991) defines this type of language as "overregulated language," which people use to establish dominance through symbolic power rather than achieve mutual understanding. According to van Dijk's (1998) "ideological knowledge model," ideology creates a unified yet restrictive linguistic framework that resists different interpretations. Ideological language establishes a discursive identity that functions through binary oppositions, such as Us versus Them, Truth versus Falsehood, and Purity versus Deviation. Olfa is met with dismissive silence and an intense stare before an ideological declaration cuts off any potential conversation. The visual structure of the scene reflects the new discursive authority as the lighting dims and the camera angle lowers.

During the scene in which photos are destroyed, one actress performs an action that invites viewers to analyze the collapse of traditional family symbols. This action represents more than mere anger; it symbolically cuts ties with a declining value system. The female body exists between two conflicting linguistic frameworks: the maternal language she can use and the ideological language that demands absolute certainty. According to Barthes (1972), family photos function as cultural signs that extend beyond their representations. Destroying or damaging these images challenges their symbolic power.

Olfa's weak maternal language when attempting to win back her daughters reveals a language crisis that produces ineffective speech acts, according to Austin (1962) and Searle (1975). Her repeated declarations, "I'm not enough of a mother" and "I couldn't protect them," symbolize her powerlessness, transforming language from a means of presence and containment into a declaration of failure. During the confrontation with the actress in this scene, silence functions as a "silent speech act" to indicate the failure of symbolic communication (Machin, 2016).

The daughters use ideological language when they say, "I chose the path of truth" (see Figure 3) to express their identity through a discursive system controlled by ideological principles. Baudrillard (1983) explains how simulations replace reality by becoming more believable than the authentic thing; meanwhile, signs function to hide rather than reveal

authentic meaning. The new affiliation is more appealing because it provides a unified symbolic framework, unlike the fragmented patterns found in familial discourse.



Figure 3. A Symbolic Moment of Ideological Transformation: The Disappearance of Subjectivity Behind Doctrinal Ecstasy. From <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x95bkzq>

IV. DECONSTRUCTING DISCOURSE AND REPRESENTING THE BODY BETWEEN MOTHERHOOD AND EXTREMISM IN *FOUR DAUGHTERS*

A semiotic and pragmatic analysis of selected scenes from "Four Daughters" (2023) by Kaouther Ben Hania reveals how language, body language, imagery, and silence come together to transform the discourse on violence and extremism within a fragile and fractured family. During the silent confrontation between Olfa and her actress daughter, for example, the absence of words becomes a powerful means of expression. According to Speech Act Theory (Searle, 1975), failing to speak when words are expected creates a significant communicative action. In this context, the inability to discuss loss results in a profound breakdown of symbolic communication within the family. According to Butler (2005), the politics of silence indicate that what remains unspoken conveys much more than words do; visual suppression proves to be more powerful than spoken words.

The sequence showing the daughters joining an extremist organization reveals how the female body loses independence and becomes a mere object under complete discursive control. Visual indicators of self-erasure include slow back-framing camera movements, dark tones, black clothing, and walking toward an undefined horizon. These transform the body into ideological messages. According to Baudrillard (1983), this represents a "hallucination of presence," displaying a body that exists visually yet lacks semantic value, transforming from a self-determining subject into a passive container of external meanings.

The film demonstrates an essential evolution in language, shifting from emotional maternal discourse with fragmented speech to rigid ideological speech employing slogans and absolute declarations. According to Austin (1962), Olfa's repeated statements, such as "I don't understand what happened" and "I wasn't enough of a mother," illustrate failed performative acts since language has lost its ability to act. The daughter's lines, such as "I chose the path of truth," demonstrate rigid ideological statements that construct reality through binary oppositions. In this transition, language evolves from dialogue to monologue and from communication to declaration. This evolution follows the model described by van Dijk (1998), which shows language operating within a hegemonic, exclusionary framework.

One of the actresses breaks away from conventional symbolic traditions by destroying a family photo. The photograph represents more than a historical record. As Barthes (1972) explains, it contains multiple cultural meanings that express familial ties, emotional relationships, and a sense of belonging. The destructive act goes beyond anger because it demonstrates the transformation of identity that occurs when new ideological structures replace the original self. Bourdieu (2001) shows how language value emerges through its social context within the symbolic language market. Maternal language becomes obsolete in an ideological, language-controlled space, resulting in family conflicts that exemplify the clash between competing discourse systems.

The disruption is evident through dim lighting and a downward camera angle, which symbolize defeat or collapse in the visual arrangement. According to Machin (2016), camera placement in film functions as "semiotic framing," which automatically generates emotional meaning. Through presentation methods of visual and spoken content, ideological discourse develops discursive tools that generate a stronger impact than verbal statements alone.

The film illustrates how family symbols and emotional language gradually disappear as ideological speech gains dominance. This study examines what occurs when personal identities merge with common beliefs and traditional symbolic systems lose their ability to prevent this process. The film examines family communication approaches, nonverbal expressions, and visual ideological content to study their roles in semantic changes during this period.

V. CONCLUSION

This article explores the role of body language and imagery as symbolic and semiotic components in the multimodal cinematic discourse of the film "Four Daughters." Through these elements, the film delves into social and existential themes such as extremism, family breakdown, and identity crises. This documentary/fiction hybrid offers an interpretive framework that combines language, body language, maternal doctrine, visual composition, and verbal communication.

In a scene where Olfa burns a family photo during her time with extremists, three significant yet quiet exchanges take place between her and her daughter. These exchanges demonstrate how the dynamics of human embodiment can be conveyed through silence. Bodily expressions merge with verbal language, and visual forms intersect with affective and cognitive disruption. The film exposes the deceptive nature of silence by utilizing Searle's (1975) concept of "silent speech acts." Through visual storytelling, Olfa communicates silently with her gaze as her daughter observes. This unique form of communication involves reflective movement and the arrangement of visuals (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020). The visual grammar of the film functions like spoken language, offering an interpretive framework.

As the film progresses, the daughters' speech undergoes a significant transformation in linguistic features and structure. Initially resembling their mother's, they eventually adopt rigid ideological speech patterns. They enter a symbolic order shaped by power relations, as theorized by Bourdieu (2001). The mother's language shifts between active dialogue and witness testimony about a family system crumbling under pressure. During a scene where the women's bodies are observed, Baudrillard's (1983) analysis of women as symbols without identity or voice becomes evident. The daughters become part of an organization when they don black attire, move slowly, and maintain silence, undergoing a ritualistic transformation.

A visual-semiotic analysis of "Four Daughters" reveals how the film's discursive and visual structures illustrate the dual nature of language: it can either assist or resist traditional representation. The film hides content beneath the images and uses silence as a powerful tool to express the "symbolic collapse" that leads to violent separation. This study highlights the importance of multimodal discourse analysis in examining visual and written texts to understand how professional readers recognize power structures and resistance mechanisms. Pragmatic and semiotic analyses allow researchers to explore structural aspects of films that translational narrative analyses overlook. The study uncovers how the female body serves as a significant semantic component of resistance or unbecoming. It also demonstrates the relationship between symbolic violence and gender in the film's narration and visual structure. "Four Daughters" is a metaphorical piece that exposes the breakdown of family organization under an ideological government, the limitations of language in capturing loss, how images serve as political statements that go beyond verbal authority, and the profound impact of silence.

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