



INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS

---

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Wadjda by Haifaa Al-Mansour, Gerhard Meixner and Roman Paul

Review by: Waleed F. Mahdi

Source: *Journal of Islamic and Muslim Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (May 2016), pp. 100-102

Published by: Indiana University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/jims.1.1.12>

Accessed: 15-06-2017 17:38 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://about.jstor.org/terms>



*Indiana University Press* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of Islamic and Muslim Studies*

## **Wadjda**

*Narrative/Fiction, 2012, 1 hour 38 minutes, Directed by  
Haifaa Al-Mansour, and Produced by Gerhard Meixner and Roman Paul*

American feminists adopted bicycling as an icon of disruption that challenged masculine hegemony at the end of the nineteenth century. In *A Wheel Within a Wheel: How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle* (1895), suffragist Frances Willard provided a personal account of the liberating element of the bicycle in the United States. It marked a necessary medium of transition for women from the private to the public sphere, and emerged as one of many signs of rebellion against Victorian conservative traditions. The historical significance of the bicycle in the US feminist movement serves as a critical transnational backdrop to the narrative of female empowerment in *Wadjda* (2012), written and directed by Saudi filmmaker Haifaa Al-Mansour. The first feature film entirely shot in Saudi Arabia revolves around a young girl's dream to buy and ride a bicycle in a society that heavily polices women's autonomy and public presence. The purpose of this review is to sketch the film's proposed narrative of female empowerment at the intersection of family and society.

*Wadjda* presents a penetrating critique of family and school as two important sites perpetuating repressive patriarchy. Al-Mansour's decision to project women in family and school as a force that sustains patriarchal hegemony serves as a refreshing reminder of French philosopher Louis Althusser's term "ideological state apparatus," which refers to the role of educational, religious, and social institutions in preparing children to become docile citizens ("Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," 1970). In this film, family and school are presented as the immediate sites that challenge the eleven-year-old Wadjda (Waad Mohammed), and disrupt her search for independence, symbolically codified in the bicycle.

Both Wadjda's mother (Reem Abdullah) and the school principle Ms. Hussa (Ahd Kamel) represent two social institutions that deny the full articulations of Wadjda's nonconformist tendency. They both resort to "shaming" as a disciplinary technique in socializing Wadjda to gender norms and expectations of adulthood in her society. Wadjda's mother informs her that the society frowns upon girls who ride bicycles. She instructs her to abide by society's codes asking her a rhetorical question, "Did you see a girl riding a bicycle?" She even warns her that bicycle riding will hurt her chances of becoming pregnant in the future. Meanwhile, Ms. Hussa is adamant in her mission to prepare students like Wadjda to become proper female citizens and future wives. Her strict policies regarding dress code and moral

conduct are predicated on punishment as a means for obedience and submissiveness. When Wadjda wins first prize in a Qur'an recital competition and announces her intentions to purchase her dream bicycle, Ms. Hussa shames her and donates the money to Palestine on her behalf.

Although presented as agents of social order, Wadjda's mother and Ms. Hussa eventually diverge in their embrace of her resilience. Her mother gifts her the bicycle in a symbolic moment of contestation directed against the Saudi patriarchal gender norms, which foreground the public agency of men and marginalize women to the domestic sphere. This defiance is shaped in part by the mother's disillusionment in male privilege, which calls upon Wadjda's father to search for a son through a second marriage. On the contrary, Ms. Hussa cannot afford any compromises. Her school is not presented as a site for enlightenment but rather as a disciplinary center to produce pious women suitable for marriage. She is preoccupied with the schoolgirls' behavior, and constantly issues orders. They are being told not to laugh out loud because their voice is *awrah* (body part that should be covered). They are instructed to refrain from nail polish, eye-catching clothing, colored shoes, and music because they are forbidden. The camera captures their performance in school to be mostly conducted within the range of memorizing Qur'an, performing *nasheed* (religious music), and praying. The school is a place of paranoia, especially when it comes to girls holding each other's hands. If this occurs, they are warned to receive school-wide humiliation following a promise not to repeat their "shameful" behavior. The film portrays expressions of religion and honor as the only two issues that students are learning in the school.

While this critique of family and school as two sites exemplifying the Saudi ideological state apparatus is welcome, it is incomplete in dissecting the issue of women's rights in the country. The film does not produce any explicit critique of what Althusser calls the "repressive state apparatus," which refers to other governing sites that enforce patriarchy like government, courts, police, etc. For instance, Al-Mansour refers to the issue of banning women from driving in the country through a dramatization of the transportation hardship that Wadjda's mother faces along with other neighborhood women. The message of this scene entails the vilification of a South Asian driver, who is presented as angry, impulsive, and disrespectful. Such a portrayal may suggest that Saudi women generally face male aggression whether foreign or domestic, but it also contributes to a demeaning stereotype of foreign laborers who work in an indentured labor system. The film fails to unveil the complicity of government agencies in maintaining repressive status quo politics directed against both foreign laborers and women.

In addition to the film's lack of interest in the politicized nature of the issue of female empowerment, it does not necessarily promote a nuanced reading of

gender disparity in the Kingdom. The feminist narrative promoted in this work reproduces certain characteristics of Western feminism, which has been critiqued for decades for its imperial universalization of women's rights. Al-Mansour dismisses the complexity of feminist narratives emerging at the intersection of gender and class in Saudi Arabia, and instead develops the plot primarily through the lenses of a middle class family structure similar to that of Wadjda's and her mother's. The priorities of women coming from the working class, let alone foreign laborers, do not necessarily resemble those of the middle class, upper class, or ruling elites.

The film does not acknowledge the divergence of women's class-based concerns, but rather codifies them in a stereotypical platform in a way that caters more to Western viewers instead of offering a serious intervention into the country's sociocultural conditions. Al-Mansour's empowerment narrative certainly subscribes to East-West binaries. Capturing Wadjda's rebellion through her consumption of Western commodities, i.e., insistence on wearing Converse All Star boots and selling rock music mixtapes, adds insult to injury. The film seriously lacks the vision to foreground the possibility of producing a feminist narrative that reconciles religion, tradition, and locality. Its message could be easily dismissed as another example of works produced to satisfy a curious Western gaze.

Regardless of its flaws, the work should still be applauded for many reasons. It signals the possibility of successful filmmaking in Saudi Arabia. Securing permissions to shooting the film, looking for funding, and enduring the hardship of filming the outdoor scenes are hurdles that this Saudi filmmaker has overcome. The film has been screened in many film festivals across Europe, the United States, and the Middle East, and gained distribution privileges as well. The film's authenticity, cinematography, and dramaturgy are contributing factors to its success. Wadjda's story itself is too important to ignore in a society that continues to blur the boundaries between female teenagers and adults. Moreover, the film's critique of school and family as the perpetrators of social repression and discrimination is insightful in its unsettling of the two institutions and their roles in society.

WALEED F. MAHDI

*Visiting assistant professor at George Mason University with teaching and research interests in US-Arab and Muslim cultural politics. His current book project explores the visual representations of Arab Americans in Hollywood, Egyptian, and Arab diasporic filmmaking. In fall 2016, he will join the University of Oklahoma as an assistant professor in the Department of International and Area Studies, and the Department of Modern Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics.*

doi: 10.2979/jims.1.1.12