

Wadjda, a Film That Quietly Sets the Stage for a Cultural Revolution in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract : This study seeks to shed some light on the political and social ramifications and implications of Haifaa al-Mansour's 2012 film Wadjda. The film made international headlines following its release, and was touted as the first film ever to be shot in its entirety inside the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and also the first to be directed by a female (Haifaa al-Mansour). Wadjda revolves around a simple storyline: A teenage Saudi girl living in the capital city Riyadh—named Wadjda—wants to have a bicycle just like her male teenage neighbor and friend Abdullah, but her ultra-conservative Saudi society places so many constraints on its female population—including not allowing girls and women to ride bicycles. Wadjda, who displays a rebellious spirit, takes concrete steps to save money in order to realize her dream of buying a bicycle. For example, she starts making and selling sports bracelets to her school mates, and she decides to participate in a Qur'an competition in hopes of winning a sum of money that comes with the first prize. In the end, Wadjda could not beat the system on her own, but the film reverses course, and the audience gets a happy ending: Wadjda's mother, whose husband has decided to take a second wife, defies the system and buys her daughter the very bicycle Wadjda has been dreaming of. It is quite significant that the mother takes her daughter's side on the subject of the bicycle at the end of the film, for this shows that she finally came to the realization that she and her daughter are both oppressed by the cultural norms prevalent in Saudi society. It is no coincidence that this change of heart and action on the part of the mother takes place immediately after the wedding night celebrating her husband's second marriage. Gender inequality is thus placed front and center in the film. Nevertheless, a major finding of this study is that the film carries out its social critique in a soft and almost covert manner. The female actors in the film never issue a direct criticism of Saudi society or government; the criticism is consistently implied and subtle throughout. It is a criticism that relies more on showing than telling. The film shows us—rather than tells us directly—what is wrong, and lets us, the audience, decide and make a judgment. In fact, showing could arguably be more powerful and impactful than telling. Regarding methodology, this study will focus on and analyze the visuals and a number of key utterances by the main actor Wadjda in order to corroborate the study's argument about the film's bent on critiquing patriarchy. This research will attempt to establish a link between the film as an art object and as a social text. Ultimately, Wadjda sends a message of hope, that change is possible and that it is already happening slowly inside the Kingdom. It also sends the message that an insurrectional approach regarding women's rights in Saudi Arabia is perhaps not the right one, at least at this historical juncture.

Keywords : bicycle, gender inequality, social critique, Wadjda, women's rights

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