

# Female Triumph: Haifaa Al-Mansour's Feminist Issues as Reflected in *Wadjda*

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## Abstract:

This article examines the film *Wadjda* (2012) directed by Haifaa Al-Mansour and its portrayal of feminist issues. *Wadjda* portrays the story of a young Saudi girl named Wadjda who dreams of owning a bicycle, despite societal restrictions on women. Through an analysis of the film, this research explores the ways in which Al-Mansour addresses feminist themes and challenges traditional gender norms within Saudi Arabian society. The article also depicts Al-Mansour's use of the protagonist's journey as a means of discussing issues such as gender inequality, restrictions on women's freedom, and the importance of education for girls. The film similarly portrays the resilience and determination of its female characters, promoting the idea of female empowerment and self-expression. By investigating Al-Mansour's feminist concerns through the lens of *Wadjda*, this study leads to a deeper understanding of the film's social and cultural significance, as well as its contribution to the global discourse on feminism and women's rights.

**Keywords:** Female Triumph, Gender, Haifaa Al-Mansour, masculinity, Saudi Arabia, *Wadjda*.

## انتظار الأنثى : انعكاس المخاوف النسوية للكاتبة هيفاء المنصور في رواية وجدة

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## المستخلص:

يتناول البحث فيلم "وجدة" (٢٠١٢) للمخرجة هيفاء المنصور وتصويره للمخاوف النسوية. ويحكي فيلم وجدة قصة فتاة سعودية شابة تدعى وجدة، تحلم بامتلاك دراجة هوائية، رغم القيود المجتمعية المفروضة على المرأة. بتحليل الفيلم، يستكشف هذا البحث الطرق التي تتناول بها المنصور المواضيع النسوية ويتحدى المعايير التقليدية المتعلقة بالنوع الاجتماعي داخل المجتمع السعودي. كما يصور المقال استخدام المنصور لرحلة بطلة الرواية كوسيلة لمناقشة قضايا مثل عدم المساواة بين الجنسين، والقيود المفروضة على حرية المرأة، وأهمية تعليم الفتيات. يصور الفيلم بالمثل مرونة وإصرار الشخصيات النسائية، ويعزز فكرة تمكين المرأة والتعبير عن الذات. بالتحقيق في اهتمامات المنصور النسوية من خلال عدسة وجدة، تؤدي هذه الدراسة إلى فهم أعمق لأهمية الفيلم الاجتماعية والثقافية، فضلاً عن مساهمته في الخطاب العالمي حول النسوية وحقوق المرأة.

**الكلمات الدالة:** انتصار الأنثى، النوع، هيفاء المنصور، الذكورية، السعودية، وجدة.

## 1. Introduction:

In the realm of film, certain narratives have the power to not only entertain but also challenge societal norms and discuss pressing issues. Haifaa Al-Mansour's critically acclaimed film, *Wadjda*, serves as a powerful testament to the filmmaker's feminist concerns. Released in 2012, this groundbreaking work marks the first feature film to be made entirely in Saudi Arabia, a country where the female population often faces significant cultural and societal challenges.

With an astute and empathetic approach, Al-Mansour artfully weaves together a compelling story of a young girl named Wadjda, whose indomitable spirit and determination casts light upon the gender biases and restrictions imposed upon women in Saudi society. Through Wadjda's journey, the film becomes a catalyst for exploring themes of empowerment, equality, and the struggle against societal norms.

Al-Mansour's feminist concerns come to the fore as she deftly navigates the interplay between traditional Saudi values and the quest for personal freedom. The film's protagonist, Wadjda, epitomizes the spirit of resilience in the face of adversity, challenging prevalent gender roles and inspiring audiences with her desire to own a bicycle in a society where girls are discouraged from riding them.

The significant achievement of *Wadjda* lies not only in its poignant storytelling but also in its ability to place a keen spotlight on the struggles faced by women in Saudi Arabia. In a country where women's voices are often silenced or marginalized, Al-Mansour boldly presents a female protagonist who embodies the yearnings, aspirations, and resilience of many young girls and women. By doing so, she highlights the importance of representation and empowers audiences, both within and beyond Saudi Arabia, to reckon with the pressing need for gender equality.

Throughout *Wadjda*, Al-Mansour subtly challenges the patriarchal structures and societal expectations that limit women's agency and opportunities. Through its storytelling, the film examines the intersections of gender, family, education, and social norms, offering a thought-provoking exploration of the constraints faced by Saudi women within a complex sociocultural context.

Furthermore, Al-Mansour admirably portrays the importance of education as a tool for female empowerment. In a society where education for girls is often seen as a threat, the film underscores the transformative power of knowledge and the right to learn, emphasizing the potential for positive change that arises when women are given equal educational opportunities.

In this article, the researcher argues that despite female stereotypical roles in the Arab world, women stand against their subjugation and defend their equal rights. In fact, Al-Mansour's '*Wadjda*' offers a perception into the challenges of Saudi Arabian women. Along with highlighting social challenges, *Wadjda* correspondingly exposes the triumph of women that is achieved here when a girl challenges her family and the society.

## 2. *Wadjda*: Film Narrative

The Film tells the story of a girl named Wadjda who desires to ride a bicycle. The narration of the film explores a set of issues such as societal and political restrictions, gender inequality, and women's freedom. In Saudi Arabia, women are prevented from

certain social and political activities. Moreover, they are not allowed to ride cars, bicycles, and even interact with men. These limitations are bounded by police who prevent any violence against the rules [1:p.199].

Wadjda is a ten years old girl who lives an ordinary life with her family. Although she has an ordinary life, she is not an ordinary girl due to her desire to ride a bicycle just like the boys in her neighborhood. Her desire grows up when she decides to compete with her friend and neighbor Abdulhah. However, Wadjda is not supposed to play with Abdullah as soon as she reaches the age of maturity [2:p.255].

The film opens with a scene where Qur'an is being read in a classroom at school. Wadjda is sitting at the very end of the class. She does not follow the orders and pays no attention to the teacher; thus, when she cannot read a verse in front of her classmates, she feels embarrassed. After school, she is on her way home when she meets Abdullah. who is riding his bicycle and teasing her. Hence, she challenges him to buy one and win the race. She likes a green bicycle and tries to convince her mother to buy it. However, her mother cannot afford it. As a result, Wadjda starts making bracelets and sells them at school in order to save money and buy her favorite bicycle [3:p.49].

One day, Abdullah gives his bicycle to Wadjda to learn how to ride it at the roof of her house. Then, a competition is announced at Wadjda's school with a 1000-R awards. Wadjda is extremely excited and starts her training to memorize verses from Quraan so as to get the awards. Wadjda wins the competing with the assistance of her mother who has a tender voice. On the day of announcing the winner, the principal asks Wadjda to donate the money to Palestinian people[4:p.101]. Wadjda gets sad and then she discovered discovers that her father is getting married to another woman to have a son since he cannot have a boy from Wadjda's mother. When her mother witnesses Wadjda's sadness, she buys her a bicycle. The film ends with the scene in which Wadjda is riding a bicycle with Abdullah [5:p.232].

### 3. The Repercussions of Patriarchy on Rebellious Souls

Within the context of Haifaa Al-Mansour's film, *Wadjda*, the repercussions of patriarchy on rebellious souls become a central theme that unfolds throughout the narrative. The story goes deep into the consequences of a patriarchal society on those who challenge the established gender roles and norms. In *Wadjda*, the titular character's rebellion against the patriarchal structures is met with varying repercussions.

As a young girl in Saudi Arabia, Wadjda is expected to conform to societal expectations, suppressing her individuality and dreams in the process. While watching the film, the viewer becomes conscious of women's physical restrictions. Women were regulated to cover their body and head by wearing abaya and hijab. The protagonist is told by her mother, teachers, and school principal to cover herself in order to be safe from the dangers of society. Wadjda, standing against their wills, differentiates herself by wearing a purple converse, colored socks and running with(out) an abaya and riding away on her bicycle [6:p.57].

The principal of the school, Wadjda's mother, and teachers all misread the religious conviction. They make girls frightened of God instead of choking them with knowledge. Girls, from childhood, are trained even at schools to obey the society directed by men.

Accordingly, Wadjda's physical behavior, a result of male-domination, comes as a reaction to the psychological, intellectual, and emotional limitations.

What is even worse is that women accept being treated as inferior beings. Women, for example, change clothes in the restroom rather than in a fitting room. Even Iqbal, the Pakistani driver, who is considered to be lower than Saudis, treats the women he drives to work brutally. He refuses to drive Wadjda's mother to work. He even shuts off the air conditioning and the women say nothing.

As noticed, women's marginalization is strongly ingrained in society. Wadjda notes that the family tree on the wall solely has men's names. She inserts her name underneath her father's, perplexed as to why women are not included. However, she discovers in the morning that her mother has removed her name. The mother accepts her subjugation without any consideration of changing it [5:p.231].

One of the agonizing scenes, in the film, is that girls are compelled to marry before reaching the legal marriage age. Wadjda's thirteen-year-old classmate marries as soon as she reaches puberty. As a result, the relationship between husband and wife (the little girl) is one of exploitation; this interpretation underpins Delphy's claim that marriage is a labor contract:

The proposition is that marriage is the institution by which gratuitous work is extorted from a particular category of the population, women wives. This work is gratuitous for it does not give rise to a wage but simply to upkeep...The same work acquires value-is remunerated-as long as the woman furnishes it to people to whom she is not related or married [7:p.77-78].

Wadjda's desire to ride a bicycle thus becomes a metaphorical representation of her defiance against the restrictive gender roles imposed upon her. Yet, this rebellion is not without consequences. The first repercussion Wadjda experiences is the disapproval and scrutiny of her family, particularly her mother. According to traditional beliefs, a girl riding a bicycle is seen as rebellious behavior that tarnishes the family's honor.

Wadjda's mother, worried about the consequences for her daughter and the potential backlash from society, continually tries to suppress Wadjda's aspirations. This conflict between the desire for personal freedom and the pressure to conform underscores the challenges faced by rebellious souls within a deeply patriarchal society.

Another repercussion of patriarchal norms is the limited opportunities and lack of agency experienced by women in Saudi Arabia. Throughout the film, Wadjda encounters numerous limitations imposed upon her by society, from strict dress codes to restrictions on her movements. These limitations not only hinder her ability to pursue her dreams but also serve as a constant reminder of the suffocating impact of patriarchal ideologies.

Furthermore, the repercussions extend beyond Wadjda's individual experience and manifest in the societal resistance towards change. The film exposes the resistance against challenging the status quo, with the school administration dismissing Wadjda's dreams of participating in a religious recitation competition simply because she is a girl. This systemic resistance to change perpetuates the patriarchal power structures and inhibits the growth and liberation of rebellious souls.

However, despite the repercussions, Wadjda's rebellious spirit remains unyielding. Her determination to ride a bicycle becomes a symbol of resistance against the patriarchal

system that aims to confine and suppress her. It represents her refusal to accept the limitations imposed upon her solely based on her gender. Through Wadjda's unwavering spirit, the film emphasizes the strength and resilience of rebellious souls who challenge the norms, even at great personal cost.

#### 4. The Green Bike's Revolution

According to color psychology research, colors can elicit psychological reactions that impact emotions and moods. These responses can occasionally be linked to a color's intensity. In other instances, they are the result of cultural influences and personal experience. Many associate green with nature, conjuring images of verdant lawns, towering trees, and dense forests. Green is often described as energizing and soothing. Green is also frequently associated with wealth, good fortune, health, and envy. Green can be a sign of jealousy in addition to its good associations. It is likely that you have heard the phrase "green with envy." Green can also be a sign of a medical condition, as in the case of someone's green complexion [8:p.15].

The linkage between envy and green may have developed from the association between green and illness-as if envy were a disease unto itself. Manufacturers, marketers, and others use the different meanings associated with green to make an impact. For instance, green packaging is frequently seen on products that are produced responsibly. Similarly, it's frequently combined with blue in cleaning goods to represent purity and freshness.

The green bike in the film stands for the race between women and men, between what is acceptable and not acceptable. Moreover, it is a sign of illness in Saudi society. It is the envy the girls put within themselves since they cannot afford or get the simplest thing in life. To be envious could be dangerous but in this movie it is not. It means to be rebellious in order to gain their rights back through a revolutionary road.

Al- Mansour states that she is a religious girl; however, she likes to listen to foreign music and songs. Wadjda's behavior and trouble are augmented especially when Miss Nora who calls her mother to discuss Wadjda's attitudes and behaviors at school. To collect money, Wadjda starts making decorated colored bracelets and selling them to the other girls at the school although she knows very well that such accessories are forbidden.

Al- Mansour shows resistance through vivid metaphors, which have much to teach the West. The metaphors are similar to the American women's liberation movement from about fifty years ago. After reading Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), wives and mothers all throughout the nation exclaimed, "Yes, that's my life!" Saudi women now feel that same sensation of acceptance and acknowledgment for the first time when they see Wadjda [6:p.57].

According to Anderson, even though our experiences may be similar, it is simple to make a mistake about what is happening in Saudi Arabia now for the feminization of America. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that Western media romanticize the film's meaning and significance and assert that Saudi Arabia is living through a period of women's liberty. The country is run by hardline Wahhabis who are unwilling to change and are trapped in the worldview of the seventh century. In terms of women's liberation,

Saudi Arabia appears to be on the verge of a social revolution, yet it is actually a quite different country [9].

On many levels, the philosophy of the Wahhabi school of Islam differs greatly from that of the American democracy. Fundamental reform in Saudi Arabia is not being achieved by small, incremental changes in the way women are treated.

Islam, in this film, can be found at the local mosque, an on-stage competition, and a computer game that teaches the Qur'an. Here, the holy Qur'an is read for rivalry as opposed to embodiment. The remainder is a bizarre jumble of imposed cultural and theological themes. By immersing Western viewers in a live reality show that exposes life in a closed-off and repressive nation, Wadjda pulls back the curtain on Saudi Arabia. Since most foreign dignitaries and businessmen are men restricted to spaces with other men, such voyeurism is unprecedented because few foreigners are allowed admission into Saudi Arabia and even fewer get to spend time with women [10:p.210-11].

Numerous sequences in *Wadjda* depict the oppression of women in Saudi society. The females are seen wearing identical black dresses and shoes at the opening of the movie. When they go out, all women hide their faces. Little girls are taught to believe in a society of subjugation by their female teachers, who also set expectations for them. Wadjda's mother dedicates her life to her husband, who plans to wed a different woman in order to have a son. Even worse, women tolerate being treated less favorably as a societal norm. They change dresses, for example, in the restroom rather than in a fitting room [11:p.656].

The unsettling anxieties of child marriages are portrayed as well. During a scene at Wadjda's school, some of Wadjda's classmates pick on a girl, Salma, for her recent marriage to a man 20 years older than she is. Although the requirement for marriage in Islam is consent, confusion emerges as to what constitutes it. In fact, it is not unusual for families to pressure girls into marriage, especially in societies where clan and tribal affiliations run deep.

Al-Mansour discusses the well-known issue of Saudi ethnocentrism. Most of these drivers are from Bengal, who travel to the Kingdom in search of wealth and religious guidance in the home of their Islamic ancestors. Instead, they end up working in precarious positions as drivers and window washers. In this movie, even the kids treat them badly. In a scene, Southeast Asian women employed as housekeepers are subjected to frequent assault. While checking the family tree on the wall, Wadjda notices that it contains only men's names. Wondering why women cannot be included, she adds her name below her father's. However, in the morning she finds that her mom has taken her name out, showing that the mom has come to terms with being subjugated without even thinking about changing it [11:p.13-14].

It is obvious that Wadjda has a rebellious personality. She does not want her hair to be completely covered and instead likes to wear tennis shoes. Her room has a boy's room vibe about it. The word "danger" and a few non-girlish images are written on the wall. She also engages in play with boys, which is forbidden in Saudi Arabia. She runs like boys. She wants a bike so she can ride with other lads. Since Saudi Arabian women are not permitted to drive or embark on solo journeys, riding a bike represents freedom and equality with men [12:p.21].

Despite these obstacles, Wadjda and her interviewees figure up ways to participate in things they want. Because Wadjda is young enough to converse with older boys without raising red flags, a character like Abeer, who is in a premarital relationship, utilizes her to exchange notes with her partner [13:p.5-6].

Recognizing the significance of her position, Wadjda bills Abeer and her lover for her telegram service. Even though the plan can be successful for a while, Abeer is ultimately discovered and thrust into controversy. Similar to this, Wadjda's classmates Fatin and Fatima occasionally leave the class to read pop culture magazines and wear nail polish- as the items and behaviors that are prohibited at school.

Wadjda effectively depicts the new generational gap that has emerged with the introduction of new media. There is little doubt that Saudi adolescents are influenced by Western pop culture. Wadjda's taste in music and fashion-such as her Converse sneakers-, reflects that of many young Saudi Arabians who are starting to notice the outside world and form habits that are too difficult for religious authorities to control. Numerous Saudis who study outside become familiar with the grammatical, cultural, and political expressions of young, globally-minded activists, which they then organize back home[11: p.10].

*Wadjda* shows that women ought to have the same rights as males, which is why she is insistent on getting it. Wadjda has a Westernized style of attire. She wears the headphones and blue nail polish in an attempt to adopt the style of an American adolescent. Her doodles on her Converse sneakers also resemble an American typeface. The fact that Abdullah, as her friend removes her scarf at the start of the movie may have had a significant impact on her character.

Step by step, Al-Mansour deconstructs, through these two characters, the image of the Saudi social fabric in which they live. It is a complex fabric, full of conflicts and unequal relationships. This social fabric includes, for example, Wadjda's teacher, who says to her in one of the scenes: "You remind me of myself when I was little." But it seems to be nothing left of his stubborn, rebellious personality. Now she teaches her students that "school is a place for learning and morals," and prevents them from laughing in school, or deviating from the narrow boundaries set for them. It is not permissible for female students to enjoy the freedoms that the generation of their teachers did not enjoy.

Iqbal, the mother's private driver, is at the bottom of the social ladder in Saudi society. But the mother cannot do without him, because she is not allowed to drive the car herself.

One day, the mother becomes so angry with Iqbal because of his rude comments and his lack of punctuality, and she shouts at him, "Do you think there are no drivers except you? Tomorrow I will search for a better driver than you." However, who is actually the weaker side in this social pyramid: is the Saudi woman who depends entirely on the driver when she wants to leave the house? The next morning the mother finds herself stuck at home without being able to go to work, so she calls her employer and apologizes to him, saying that she has a "transportation problem"[14:p.29].

This disparity in the balance of social power reaches its peak when Wadjda, accompanied by Abdullah, goes to visit the driver in his simple residence designated for

expatriate workers, in order to convince him to return to work for Wadjda's mother. When Iqbal refuses, Abdullah threatens him with having his work visa withdrawn in Saudi Arabia, saying, "Tomorrow you will return to your work as a driver for Umm Wadjda"[14: p.99].

At this moment, the two children break the barrier between the world of innocent childhood and enter the world of adults, so the children's story turns for once into social criticism. Al-Mansour introduces this social criticism into her film skillfully and in a way that seems fleeting and unintentional. In fact, Al-Mansour addresses the issues of expatriate workers and women's issues in Saudi Arabia, but in the end she also addresses the issue of the green bike that Wadjda wants to race with Abdullah, the child she admires, "When I get on the bike and I beat you, we'll tie," Wadjda says.

## 5. Concluding Notes

The film presents a message of hope to all women. *Wadjda* clearly states the limits of legalism with regard to social constraints, gender and marriage inequality, and other issues. The state, Islamic legislative bodies, and cultural norms work together to establish and uphold laws that strengthen patriarchal systems and confine women to the home. This is how legalism is entwined. By using space, women create narratives that are in opposition to those that are pushed upon them. Despite the fact that women are the focus of Al-Mansour's narrative, her film appeals to Saudi adolescents whose values and perspectives diverge from their surroundings. Legalism robs Saudi youth of a sense of fulfillment by limiting their modes of expression, activities, and engagements. Thus, it can be noticed that even though there have been a lot of recent social advancements, *Wadjda* portrays problems that many people still face.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

There are no conflicts of interest

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