



Wadjda

A case study in Narrative and Representation

Notes for teachers by Roy Stafford

Teachers' Notes

This pack was written to support an education event for 16-19 year-olds featuring a full screening of *Wadjda* (Saudi Arabia-Germany 2012) and associated presentations and discussions.

SPOILERS!

Please note the pack includes a Synopsis and there is an assumption that anyone using it has already seen the film.

Roy Stafford, October 2014

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The images from *Wadjda* courtesy Soda Pictures.

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Wadjda (Saudi Arabia-Germany 2012)

Directed by Haifaa Al Mansour

Written by Haifaa Al Mansour

Produced by Roman Paul and Gerhard Meixner for Razor Film, High Look Group, Amr Alkhahtani, Rotana Studios, Norddeutscher Rundfunk and Bayerischer Rundfunk

Cinematography by Lutz Reitemeier

Film Editing by Andreas Wodraschke

Original Music by Max Richter

Production Design by Thomas Molt

Sound Design by Sebastian Schmidt

Runtime: 97 mins

Leading players

| | |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Reem Abdullah | <i>Mother</i> |
| Waad Mohammed | <i>Wadjda</i> |
| Abdullrahman al Gohani | <i>Abdullah</i> |
| Ahd | <i>Ms Husa (School principal)</i> |
| Sultan al Assaf | <i>Father</i> |

Synopsis (from the Press Pack)

Wadjda is a 10-year-old girl living in a suburb of Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia.

Although she lives in a conservative world, Wadjda is fun loving, entrepreneurial and always pushing the boundaries of what she can get away with.

After a fight with her friend Abdullah, a neighbourhood boy she shouldn't be playing with,

Wadjda sees a beautiful green bicycle for sale. She wants the bicycle desperately so that she can beat Abdullah in a race. But Wadjda's mother won't allow it, fearing repercussions from a society that sees bicycles as dangerous to a girl's virtue. So Wadjda decides to try and raise the money herself.



At first, Wadjda's mother is too preoccupied with convincing her husband not to take a second wife to realise what's going on. And soon enough Wadjda's plans are thwarted when she is caught running various schemes at school. Just as she is losing hope of raising enough money, she hears of a cash prize for a Koran recitation competition at her school. She devotes herself to the memorisation and recitation of Koranic verses, and her teachers begin to see Wadjda as a model pious girl. The competition isn't going to be easy, especially for a troublemaker like Wadjda, but she refuses to give in. She is determined to continue fighting for her dreams . . .

Bicycles, budgets, genres and gender

Wadjda became a highly successful film, celebrated by film festivals around the world before an equally successful appearance on release in specialised cinemas across North America, Europe and the Middle East. But *Wadjda* is not a difficult and inaccessible 'art film'. It draws inspiration from the long history of films with relatively simple narratives, many of which owe a debt to *Bicycle Thieves* (Italy 1948) – the most influential of the films to emerge during the period of Italian neo-realism in the aftermath of the Second World War.

I hope to engage students in a simple exercise to think through why a bicycle is such a desirable object for a scriptwriter to make available (or not!) to a character in a film narrative. What I hope to demonstrate is that the bicycle prompts a number of story ideas that can be exploited by the writer.

At the most obvious level, the bicycle is a means of transport that gives freedom to anyone who can't afford the means to travel by car, bus or train – or who is, for whatever reason, barred from driving or public transport. In some cases, transport to work or for work is essential (as in *Bicycle Thieves*). But bicycles also give a different kind of freedom for young people – as a hobby, the basis for a holiday or simply to escape local social restrictions. Several films use the image of girls and women on bicycles, especially in stories set in the early 20th century, as an image symbolic of 'social freedom'.

For young people (i.e. under the legal driving age), a bicycle may also be a glamorous or prestigious object – something which enables them to be 'one up' on their peers.

For these reasons, a bicycle-focused narrative is perfect for the central idea of neo-realism – a story taken from everyday reality – not a heavily-constructed story imposed on a fictional environment as in Hollywood. Realist films can have a powerful impact on audiences not used to seeing themselves on screen. Neo-realism depends on location shooting, potential use of non-professionals as actors and the cultural 'fit' between story, actors and location. These factors should help to make filming possible on relatively small budgets.

Wadjda had a much higher profile as a film associated with this kind of approach because of two linked factors. It was the first feature film to receive festival acclaim and international distribution to be produced from within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) – a country which has no conventional cinemas. Secondly, in a highly conservative country in which women are excluded from many aspects of public social activity *Wadjda* was written and directed by a woman, Haifaa Al Mansour.

Every aspect of the narrative in *Wadjda* is in some way gendered. *Wadjda* herself is an outgoing and enterprising girl who comes up against sanctions – she shouldn't be wanting to ride a bike, never mind possess her own and she is caught between the authority of her school and her mother at home – in both cases 'institutions' headed by women who are themselves constrained by their gendered social roles.

Although it is a simple story, Haifaa Al Mansour effectively grafts onto the central narrative a more familiar generic narrative about the competition/contest that *Wadjda* must win in order to find the money to buy the bike. This generic narrative refers to the unlikely winner, the overwhelming odds and the high school setting but the graft is largely successful and the

director weaves through it the same gender issues within a specific KSA context, but which become recognisable because of their universality in the teen film/high school picture.

Background

I don't think that students need to know a great deal about KSA to understand and enjoy the film but you might want to dig a little into the background of the country and society to explain some of the aspects of the film that will be strange to some students.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the second largest Arab country by area (after Algeria) and the sixth most populous with 30 million people and one of the highest growth rates. Half the population live in one of seven major cities. Riyadh, the capital, has a population of 5.3 million. The Kingdom was formed from smaller states in 1932 and has been free of foreign control since that time. Oil reserves were discovered in 1938 and the country is now wealthy but heavily dependent on the price of oil. Inequalities of income exist but the reporting of 'poverty' is not allowed in the Saudi media. Saudi Arabia has a very conservative society and is directly ruled by the royal family. The population is 97% Muslim, and of these 85% Sunni. There are also significant populations of migrant workers. (Iqbal, the driver in *Wadjda*, is presumably a migrant and therefore concerned about his residency status.)

The most striking aspects (to a westerner) about Saudi society are those derived from the ultra-conservative religious conventions (interpretations of Sharia Law). Alcohol is forbidden and women's lives are highly controlled. Women should always be completely covered in the presence of all men except their close family. Women are not allowed to drive – and by extension, 'good' girls should not ride bicycles. Men are allowed to take up to four wives at any one time but women are expected to be monogamous. Divorce and custody precedents favour men.

In many ways, the social issues that arise from this kind of religious proscription are similar to those in Iran, which is not an Arab country and which is predominantly Shia rather than Sunni. However, Iran has had a significant history of film production and over the last 25 years, despite censorship and government pressure Iranian filmmakers have gained international reputations. KSA has no film industry as such.

Film in Saudi Arabia

Film was much slower to develop than in Iran but there were improvised cinema halls in the kingdom up to the 1980s and there have been films, both features and documentaries produced in the past. Religious conservatism eventually caused enough pressure to have the cinema halls closed after 1990 at which point local audiences focused on videos and satellite TV as well as locally produced television. The two recognisable stars of *Wadjda*, playing the mother and the school principal are respectively Saudi Arabia's main female TV star and a celebrated (short) filmmaker trained in the US.

There have also been film festivals in recent years and at least one sanctioned release for a Saudi film in the kingdom. The comedy film *Menahi* was officially screened in 2009 – but only to men and boys and girls under 12. The mixing of men and women in cinema halls is one of the two reasons for the general cinema ban (the other being the 'un-Islamic' nature of most film narratives). *Wadjda* is not the first Saudi film, but it is certainly one of, if not 'the', first to be produced in the country and featuring a Saudi cast. The irony of this is that the Saudi production company in joint production of the film is the Rotana Group, the biggest media

company in the Arab world and part-owned by Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal. The same company has been behind film festivals in Jeddah and other developments.

The DVD release of *Wadjda* also features a 'Making of' documentary in which the director and her German Heads of Departments (see credits above) discuss the difficulties of making a feature in Riyadh. Money should not necessarily be a problem, although the budget would still be low by Hollywood standards. The two main issues were that the director could not easily appear on the streets amongst the male crew members and she sometimes had to direct by phone or radio mike from inside the truck and secondly it took some time to establish working patterns and language use conventions between German HoDs and Saudi crews. The other associated problem was the casting for the film. There are relatively few film actors in Saudi Arabia (in previous films, actors have often come from neighbouring Jordan or the Emirates) and finding groups of young women who would be prepared to go against conservative conventions to be filmed was also a potential difficulty.

Narrative: bicycle films

The following films all involve the need/desire for a bicycle as an important central element of the overall narrative:

Bicycle Thieves (Ladri di biciclette, Italy 1948)

This seminal film by Vittorio de Sica is based on a novel but has been inspirational for many filmmakers, especially in Asia. The simple premise is that an unemployed man living in a new housing project outside Rome is offered a job as a bill poster. The only catch is that he must have a bicycle in order to move between different poster sites. He acquires a bike but on his first day at work the bike is stolen. He and his son then search the city looking for the thieves and the bike. The man is accompanied by his young son and the search puts a severe strain on the relationship between them. The man is in danger of losing his dignity and the respect of his son when, in desperation, he steals a bike himself and is quickly caught. The film ends on a 'down' note, but audiences have always been profoundly affected by the film's humanism.

The Day I Became a Woman (Iran-France 2000)

This three-part film by Marziyeh Meshkini presents the different periods of a woman's life. In the second part, a young woman enters a bicycle race in defiance of her husband who gallops after her on a horse. When she ignores him he calls on a mullah and then the other male members of the family. The young woman is called 'Aho' which in Farsi means 'deer', one of which is seen in the sequence. The sight of many women in the full length black chador racing on bicycles offers a surreal image, one of several in this unusual film.

Beijing Bicycle (China-Taiwan-France 2002)

A film by the Sixth Generation director Wang Xiaoshuai, this has a direct connection to *Bicycle Thieves*. A young man from the countryside comes to Beijing and gets a job as a cycle courier, 'renting' his bike from the company until he has worked long enough to own it outright. His bike is stolen by a schoolboy who wants to impress his schoolfriends and one girl in particular. Both young men are struggling to cope with the pressures of the new China. Beijing has grown very quickly in the last few years. A bicycle was once highly desirable but in the dozen years since the film appeared the numbers on the streets of the city have been reduced.

The Kid With a Bike (Le gamin au vélo, Belgium-France 2011)

In the Dardennes Brothers' film the bike belongs to Cyril, a young boy in care because his single parent father refuses to look after him. The bicycle is an important element both as a plot device (it gets stolen again) and as a symbol (his father bought and then later sold the bike – so for Cyril its presence is always associated with his missing father).

I will use extracts from at least two of these films to demonstrate how the bicycle works as a feature of a film narrative. The obvious point to make is that for a film, a bicycle has the advantage of keeping the story 'moving', even if it is not necessarily an action film. At some point, the narrative will usually include a sequence of the protagonist pedalling on his/her bike and expressing the freedom of movement that the control over the bike gives the rider.

The idea of movement and a protagonist who seeks to possess a bike and then presumably to 'go somewhere' suggests perhaps that bicycle films might be 'quest narratives' and indeed some bicycle films which deal with bicycle races and competitions will be structured like the typical Hollywood quest narrative with its linear structure and a protagonist who has a goal and who by the end of the film will have 'won'. However, when the bicycle is used to enable social freedom which is still constrained by sets of relationships (e.g. the family or society in general) the resolution of the narrative may not be so clear cut. In each of the four examples above there is not a conventional 'closed' ending. In *Wadjda*, although the central narrative does seem to be resolved (Wadjda gets her bike), the two sub-plots (involving the mother and the principal) are not resolved.

Auto-biography and a story 'from the real world'

Those films labelled 'neo-realist' from Italy in the late 1940s tended to be made 'on the street' and to use shot sizes and framings associated with long takes and long shots. *Wadjda* does not have a distinct visual style as such but students may notice that there is more use of long shots and long takes than would be found in most Hollywood films. The narrative is intended to be played out in a specific environment in which women are 'unseen' and the narrative requires 'long shot observation', e.g. of Abdullah's uncle's compound from Wadjda's building.

Haifaa Al Mansour has been asked many times about the film's representation of women in Saudi Arabia. The issue here is whether her 'authorial voice' is important in the film, creating a specifically female discourse. Here's an extract from the interview in the Press Notes:

Is the character of Wadjda inspired by your own childhood, are there any autobiographical elements to this story?

Well, I come from a very supportive and liberal family. I remember when I was a kid my father took me along with my brothers to get bicycles and I chose a green one. I am extremely lucky to have a father who wanted me to feel dignified as a woman, but it was definitely a different story for my classmates and friends who would have never even dreamed of asking for a bicycle. But I think the heart of the story is something anyone can relate to, which is the idea of being labelled different or deviant for wanting something outside of what is traditionally considered acceptable. The Saudi culture can be especially brutal and unforgiving to people who fall out of step with the society, so there is a real fear of being labelled an outcast. So in some ways, the story is part of my life and the things I encountered in my life. A lot of my experiences, along with those of my friends and family, are reflected in the film in some way – they didn't just come from a concept in my mind.

There are several strong female characters - Wadjda herself, her mother, the school principal . . . Is WADJDA a women's film?

Maybe it is a women's film! But I really didn't intend it that way. I wanted to make a film about things I know and experienced. A story that spoke to my experiences, but also to average Saudis. It was important for me that the male characters in the film were not portrayed just as simple stereotypes or villains. Both the men and the women in the film are in the same boat, both pressured by the system to act and behave in certain ways, and then forced to deal with the system's consequences for whatever action they take. I do really like the scenes of the mother and the daughter together, and I think that a lot of love and emotion comes through in their relationship, when they are cooking or singing together, there is something very beautiful about it.

Online Resources

Press notes: <http://www.mongrelmedia.com/MongrelMedia/files/75/7525d233-d99f-456a-8083-efb581f7032f.pdf>

Guardian article on Saudi filmmaking: <http://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2013/jul/24/after-hollywood-saudi-arabia-film-wadjda>

Saudi Media Company Rotana: <http://www.rotana.net/en/r/tv-movies>

Feminist film blog review:

<http://auteusetheory.blogspot.co.uk/2013/08/wadjda-haifaa-al-mansour-2013.html>

Guardian interview:

<http://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2013/jul/14/haifaa-mansour-wadjda-saudi-arabia>

<http://www.sbs.com.au/films/movie-news/907541/wadjda-haifaa-al-mansour-interview>

<http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/reviews-recommendations/film-week-wadjda>

Report on film in Saudi Arabia:

<http://www.arabnews.com/news/455973>

<http://www.allreadable.com/baf0D5vj> (extended English subtitles with song lyrics)

http://www.readwithtajweed.com/tajweed_Intro.htm (explanation of some of the Arabic dialogue referring to the recitation of the Koran)

<http://salwanajd.wordpress.com/2010/03/20/traditional-food-from-najd-region/> (recipe for 'Margoog', the popular local dish eaten in the film)

Possible discussion questions

1. Why do you think Wadjda was so desperate to buy the bicycle?
2. Although the society depicted in the film may be unfamiliar to you, there are several aspects of teenage behaviour in the film that are familiar from the conventions also used in Hollywood or British films featuring schools and families. Can you give examples of these universal actions and how they produce meaning in the narrative?
3. Which of the actions or beliefs expressed in the film did you find most puzzling or surprising? Is it important to understand them in order to make sense of the overall narrative?
4. In some ways, *Wadjda* is as much about Wadjda's mother as about the girl herself. Can you give examples of the mother both conforming to the conservative view of women in society and also examples of her resistance (or attempts at resistance).
5. How important is Abdullah (the boy who is Wadjda's young friend) in the story? How would you describe their friendship and do you think it will last as Wadjda gets older?
6. The school principal, Ms Hussa, says that Wadjda reminds her of what she was like at the same age. What do you think she means? How would you compare Ms Hussa and Wadjda's mother?
7. The director Haifaa Al Mansour chose to film 'on the streets' and in two key locations – Wajda's home and the school. What are the advantages and disadvantages of filming in this way in Saudi Arabia?
8. Is it important that Haifaa Al Mansour is a female writer-director, born in Saudi Arabia but trained in Australia and now living over the border in Bahrain?