



*Full Length Research Paper*

# Metaphors of Resistance: What the film *Wadjda* says about present-day Saudi Arabia as seen from the perspective of a female guest worker

Patrice Flynn

Mount St. Mary's University  
Corresponding author email: [pflynn@msmary.edu](mailto:pflynn@msmary.edu)

## Abstract

The 2014 Oscar-nominated film, *Wadjda*, about a Saudi girl's struggle for individuation, reveals as much about the power of independent filmmaking today as it does the stagnation of an 80 year old Arab nation whose King died on January 23, 2015. Western viewers are drawn into the ultimate reality show, whereby, life in a very guarded and repressive society is revealed on the big screen. Thus the film's attention and accolades. *Wadjda* provides an access point to talk about present-day Saudi life and the sanctioned disregard for women in ways that might elevate the floor of debate in American politics, business, and media during a time when US-Saudi relations are being revisited because of waning U.S. dependence on Saudi petroleum, a re-escalation of American militarization in the Middle East, and continued Saudi support of radical conservative Muslim extremist groups around the world.

**Keywords:** Saudi Arabia, human rights, Saudi women, Wahhabi Islam, *Wadjda*

## INTRODUCTION

When the film *Wadjda* first came out, I thought it would be another romanticization of the rise of feminism in Saudi Arabia, a notion that appeals to Americans and Europeans who want to believe it is just a matter of time before women in Saudi are treated with respect and dignity. I did not want to see the film and was disappointed with what I was reading about the film in the Western press. When I finally saw *Wadjda*, I was pleasantly surprised. I was reminded of what I saw and experienced in Saudi Arabia as a guest worker at a Saudi private women's university from 2006 to 2009. I also felt an immediate connection with the filmmaker and all my Saudi female coworkers and their daughters in Saudi Arabia with whom I worked and lived.

*Wadjda* was produced and directed by a gifted filmmaker, Haifaa Al Mansour, who was born to a progressive Saudi family in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia in the 1970s. Her current home in Bahrain and marriage to a U.S. diplomat give her the protections necessary to create the first feature film shot on-location in Saudi Arabia in defiance of ancient customs. I applaud Al Mansour's filmmaking skills and creativity in producing

what has become a popular indie film that received numerous global awards and nominations from the British Film Institute, to the Dubai International Film Festival, Durban International Film Festival, Fribourg International Film Festival, Guild of German Art House Cinemas, Göteborg Film Festival, Los Angeles Film Festival, Oslo Films from the South Festival, Palm Springs International Film Festival, Rotterdam International Film Festival, Sydney Film Festival, Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival, Tromsø International Film Festival, Vancouver International Film Festival, Venice Film Festival, and the Oscars.

Al Mansour's use of metaphor to examine resistance is evocative and has a lot to offer the West. The metaphors remind me of the women's liberation movement in the United States some fifty years ago. When I was a child, women's liberation was coming to the forefront of our collective consciousness. Wives and mothers across the country read Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and said, *Yes, that's my life!* Today, Saudi women watch the film *Wadjda* and experience that same sense of recognition and

affirmation for the first time. Finally, a splinter of life's daily reality is on the big screen.

While there may be parallels in our respective experiences, it is easy to confuse the American feminization process with what is happening in present-day Saudi Arabia. So it is not surprising that Western journalists romanticize the meaning and significance of the film, suggesting that Saudi is experiencing their moment of women's liberation. I argue that this is a false premise. The journalists do not have clue how we as women are treated in Saudi Arabia. The country is governed by fundamentalist Wahhabis stuck in a 7<sup>th</sup> century mindset and not budging. The changes that I grew up with in America are nothing like what Saudi women are facing.

Thus the paradox: Saudi looks like it is a nation on the brink of a social revolution vis-à-vis women's liberation, but in reality it is a whole different animal. The Wahhabi Islamic ideology is vastly different from the American democratic ideology on many levels. Incremental changes in the treatment of women in Saudi Arabia are not leading to fundamental reform. Unfortunately, what the West sees through the eyes of the Saudi monarchy can misguide us into believing that a process of gradualism is overtaking the kingdom to the advantage of women. This could not be farther from the truth.

This article uses the film *Wadjda* to deconstruct the reality on-the-ground for women in modern Saudi Arabia. The discussion is organized around four key *metaphors of resistance* presented in the film: (a) lifting the veil, (b) rationalization, (c) fantasy, and (d) global capitalism. These themes open a door into a very secretive and protected world. The article closes with possible next steps for Saudi women and a wake-up call for the West to look more closely at the real Saudi Arabia, not what the royal family and their U.S. lobbyists want us to think about their once and future kingdom.

### **Metaphor #1: Lifting the Veil**

*Wadjda* lifts the veil on Saudi Arabia by drawing Western viewers into a real-time reality show, whereby life in a guarded and repressive society is revealed on the big screen. Such voyeurism is novel because few foreigners are granted entry into Saudi Arabia and even fewer get to spend time with women given that most business people and foreign dignitaries are men confined to spaces with other men. Both Saudi and foreign men wonder what life behind the veil is really like. Thus the power and intrigue of the ubiquitous Saudi black veil that serves as a metaphor for a constructed reality that obfuscates more than it illuminates. It also represents enormous barriers to entry into Saudi culture and the nation itself for foreigners.

Saudi Arabia is a closed society more so than any other nation. Non-Saudis are not welcome to visit the

country, tour around freely, or emigrate voluntarily. Limited access is by design. Those who want to experience Saudi life first-hand must go through a lengthy and intrusive procedure to determine eligibility to visit for a set period of time, including Hajj pilgrims and guest workers.

### **Hajj Pilgrims**

The largest group of visitors to Saudi Arabia comprises pilgrims seeking to fulfill the fifth pillar of Islam by travelling to Mecca to perform the Hajj, a religious ceremony at the holiest site of the Islamic faith. To do so requires paying a Saudi-certified Hajj tour company that takes care of all arrangements and accompanies the pilgrim 24/7 while conducting the week-long ritual. Pilgrims enter Saudi via a Hajj-only airport on the outskirts of Jeddah where they are loaded onto a bus, driven to Mecca, lodged in enormous white tents, conduct the pilgrimage, and driven directly back to the airport. Saudi has instituted an elaborate system that ensures that no pilgrim is left behind in search of employment as a guest worker. Last year, more than 2 million Muslims performed the Hajj, some 1.4 million of whom were not Saudi citizens. While pilgrims are treated well, they are given the clear message that their time in the kingdom will be short and guarded.

### **Professional Guest Workers**

Those of us who enter Saudi as guest workers go through an even more elaborate process. It is important to note that my experience was that of a well-paid professional American in stark contrast to the majority of guest workers who are recruited from very poor countries to perform menial tasks and, hence, are treated somewhat differently than the process described below.

The process of obtaining permission to enter Saudi Arabia as a guest worker to serve in a professional capacity begins with a security clearance conducted by the sponsoring employer. Once cleared, the sponsor prepares a Letter of Invitation proposing the terms of employment and requests certification from the Saudi Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The approved invitation is then sent to the Saudi Ministry of Labor in Riyadh requesting authorization to hire the foreign worker. If approved, the Labor Ministry sends an authorization letter to the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia in the foreigner's country of residence. Part of the frustration at this point in the negotiations is knowing on which desk the Letter of Invitation sits, often unbeknownst even to the Saudi sponsor.

Following official approvals, the Employment Visa procurement begins, a process that can take up to one year. The foreign worker must take a battery of medical tests to rule out HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, tuberculosis, and

other transmittable diseases. Documentation by a licensed physician in the foreign worker's home country is supplied to the Saudi Embassy along with a completed work visa application form, passport, photographs, certified and notarized copy of applicant's university diploma and transcripts (validated by the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission in Washington, DC). The foreign worker must also submit an offer letter from the sponsor with official certification by the government and block visa number, employment contract with terms of work signed by employer and employee, a police clearance report from the foreign worker's home town, and the visa fee. These numerous steps signal the hesitancy to allow foreign workers into Saudi Arabia.

Once the employment visa is issued by the Saudi Embassy and the foreigner is approved for entry, a Business Class airline ticket (for the American employee) is hand-delivered and travel begins. When the female traveler arrives at the Saudi airport, she must don the requisite full-length black abaya body covering to enter the airport transit area where she waits until allowed to clear customs and find the male driver sent by the sponsor to escort her to the workplace.

Throughout the duration of stay, the guest worker's passport is stored in the sponsor's locked safe. Departure from Saudi Arabia is granted only with the return of the passport, written permission from the sponsor, and an official release letter from the government. Working under this kind of uncertainty makes for a tense work relationship and omnipresent sense of distrust.

### Restrictions on Saudi Female Travelers

Saudi women go through an equally arduous process when traveling in and out of their homeland. As part of my work as a senior executive at a women's university, I oversaw the complex human resource management process for Saudi and non-Saudi employees. I learned that the Saudi guardianship rule prohibits a Saudi woman (under the age of 52) from leaving the country without the consent of her male guardian, in effect treating women as minors. A married woman often carries a letter from her husband indicating that she may travel on her own. Despite the letter, in some instances, the husband is called to the airport to verify to the guards that she has his permission to depart. It is assumed that a wife might otherwise flee on her own accord, the same assumption made about foreign workers.

To make matters worse for women, in 2012, Saudi officials started an e-government service that notifies men by text messaging when any of their dependents crosses a Saudi border.

While watching *Wadjda*, the viewer becomes aware of the ways women are physically restricted and guarded. The most obvious form of restriction is the requisite body and head coverings (i.e., *abaya* and *hijab*, respectively) that the viewer sees throughout the film. Ten-year-old

Wadjda, the film's protagonist, is constantly fussing with her abaya and hijab and told by her mother, school principal, and teachers to "cover" herself, which speaks metaphorically to the need for girls and women to protect themselves from the dangers of life in Saudi society.

Wadjda tries to differentiate herself by wearing purple-laced Converse (a brand of tennis shoes), running down the street with an open abaya and sometimes without her head covering, and riding away on her bicycle. The narrative suggests that Wadjda's physical restrictions mask her emotional, psychological, and intellectual restrictions that result from male domination. The motion picture genre enables us to see and feel the metaphor of the veil more broadly as restriction on the human person.

### Metaphor #2: Rationalization through Self Repression

Saudi women find intricate, often unconscious, ways to rationalize repressive policies, even the most educated and well-paid professional Saudi women with whom I worked. Sexist policies reinforce a woman's subservient status to her male guardian (*mahram*), be it her father, husband, uncle, brother, half-brother, or son.

I remember one afternoon working with my staff to secure the necessary exit materials for some of our faculty members. As we processed papers, the unspoken and attendant stress reflected our second-class status and the palpable fear of breaking the law inadvertently and forever paying the consequences. One of the senior staffers looked up from her work and said to me, "Doctora, this policy is good for us women because it means that the men are taking care of us. It's their job." Silence, coupled with a deep sense of pity, was my only response to this women's unconscious internalized repression and rationalization of archaic policies that she has been forced to live by all her life. Women teach their daughters to behave accordingly so as not to jeopardize marriage prospects and/or otherwise disgrace the family.

Restrictions on women's movement in and out of the country show little sign of loosening under the present hermetic monarchy backed by puritanical Wahhabi Muslim clerics. The government and religious leaders ensure the enforcement of strict Shari'a Islamic law through the workings of the *Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (Hai'a)* whose representatives publically shame miscreants to keep females in line.

One small shift that I witnessed in 2007 was a royal decree allowing Saudi women to travel by airplane in-country without a male guardian and to be able stay overnight at a women-only hotel, the first being the Al Faisaliah Hotel in the capital of Riyadh. I believe part of the motive behind this allowance is to enable women to conduct commerce, an activity that is highly valued in Arab culture as discussed later in the paper under the metaphor of global capitalism.

In such a physically restrictive environment, it is no

surprise that women reach out through the Internet to connect with other people beyond their involuntary cloistered walls. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other online social media are prevalent in Saudi Arabia. According to *The Economist*, "Saudis watch an average of seven YouTube videos a day," some 8 million Saudis use Facebook, and micro blog traffic is the highest per capita in the world (September 13, 2014). Usage is limited by firewalls that restrict access to the worldwide web. Finding ways to ease these firewalls will open doors-of-the-mind to women by enabling them to read books not sold in the kingdom and to take college courses online through international institutions of higher education.

The ability to capture the daily restrictions of women in Saudi Arabia reflects the brilliance of Al Mansour who knows intimately what women and girls struggle with growing up in Saudi and brings those experiences to the narrative. No doubt we both have Saudi friends who paid fertility specialists to ensure that they would give birth to a male, not female, child. In the film, Wadjda's mother is reminded of her status in terse conversations with her husband who is about to marry a second wife because the first did not bear him a son.

As the film illustrates, internalizing one's second-class status as a Saudi woman wears on the body and spirit. Wadjda writhes at her mother's pain and loss, which become internalized in the next generation of females. Living in such an environment is hard for women of conscience, especially those who know how females are treated elsewhere in the world through their own travels or through social media.

The rationalization and internalization of constant oppression spills over into journalistic and academic comments on Al Mansour's film. Commentary focuses on Wadjda's playtime with a Saudi boy who is also about ten years old. Age is a key element of the story because this means the boy has no control over the girl yet, making their interaction permissible and, thus, believable. Because Wadjda does not always wear the ubiquitous black hijab head covering, we know that she has yet to menstruate. Once a girl reaches puberty, she is at great risk if seen in public with marriageable males, be they a childhood friend or brother-in-law who are potential husbands. Saudi Aramco's review of the movie describes Wadjda's male friend as a "sweet, loyal and charming" boy who secretly lets her ride his bicycle (Al-Habbal, 2014:10). This is a gratuitous depiction of a child whose allegiance will swiftly shift away from his female friend when he reaches adolescence.

Unfortunately, the minority status of women in Saudi Arabia is not challenged by any world body, including the U.S. Government whose primary human rights concerns are "the injunction against the practice of other religions throughout the kingdom" (Prados & Blanchard, 2006) and terrorism (Blanchard, 2014) based on the reality that 15

of the 19 hijackers on September 11, 2001 were Saudis and all were members of Al-Qaeda.

Despite 80 prosperous years of economic and military relations between the U.S. and the House of Saud, the U.S. has yet to embed human rights requirements into its arms sales to Saudi Arabia, which between October 2010 and December 2013 amounted to a remarkable \$86.6 billion for high-value fighter aircraft, helicopters, missile defense systems, missiles, bombs, armored vehicles, related equipment, and military training (Blanchard, 2014). As U.S. dependence on Saudi fossil fuels wanes due to increased domestic production, perhaps the balance of power could shift in a way that would embolden the United States to demand measurable human rights advances for women as a prerequisite for future bilateral defense and security sales. Until this happens, women's repression will be reinforced through bilateral arms deals between the Saudis and the United States.

Meanwhile, the 2013 *Global Gender Gap Report* from the World Economic Forum shames Saudi Arabia with a ranking of 127 out of 136 countries, near rock bottom in the treatment of women further reinforcing Saudi women's second-class status at home.

### **Metaphor #3: Fantasy**

Al Mansour adroitly uses the brief pre-pubescent moment in a female's life as a metaphor to explore a possible alternative reality or fantasy. Saudi women project deeply onto girls at this age, knowing full well that their lives will change dramatically in a matter of months when meager freedoms disappear altogether. Very smart of Al Mansour to name Wadjda's friend Abdullah, the name of the sitting monarch, HRH King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud to whom some turn in hopes of religious reforms in the same way that some Catholics turn to Pope Francis.

I am in awe of Al Mansour's courage to push the boundaries of what is and is not acceptable discourse in Saudi Arabia disguised in a simple fanciful children's story. "The events surrounding the story are real, raw and authentic to the point that it shocks me as a Saudi," says artist Manal Al Dowayan (Al-Habbal, 2014:10-11). My guess would be that the content itself does not shock a Saudi woman, but rather the fact that such a film was allowed to be the first ever produced on Saudi sands. The reason the film was allowed to be made in-country is because the House of Saud simply does not take women seriously enough to deconstruct the metaphors in the film that speak powerfully to women's experience.

The director knows her filmmaking craft well and carefully uses metaphorical images that are non-threatening to Saudi men such as the bicycle (painted the same green as the Saudi flag) to symbolize Wadjda's desire to be a free and equal citizen.

Being women in Saudi Arabia, we learn to be skillful

when making personal and professional advances. Time and again while working in Saudi Arabia, I would be privy to deliberate obfuscations of women's advancements in higher education so as to appear nonthreatening to the monarchy. For example, when the academic year ended and time came for the annual university graduation ceremony, Saudi women outdid themselves. It was a party: *Girls' night out!* We hired hair designers and nail technicians to come on campus the day of commencement so the graduates would look glamorous. As each graduate crossed the stage, we gave her a college diploma and a gift bag of cosmetics. We filled the ceiling of the auditorium with helium balloons and glittering cut-outs that fell like rain at the end of the ceremony while techno pop music blared. It felt like a sweet sixteen birthday party rather than a threshold into a world where smart, educated women would be embraced by society. How adroit of the princesses who ran the university to know that by all means, this indeed was girls' night out, not a serious affair that might mark the beginning of a different kind of future for Saudis. Or at least that is what they wanted the patriarchy to believe for the moment.

In the same vein, Al Mansour's childhood story tones down the more serious elements of her message, which prod the viewer to consider how Saudi might be different if men stepped aside at times to allow women to be heard. What a dream! Al Mansour says she tells the story "softly, out of respect for the culture" (Hoggard, 2013). The film's metaphors are powerful and bring the truth home. The tears that many Saudi women report upon watching the film reflect their deeply held belief that such a fantasy future is not at hand. So they place their hopes and dreams on the next generation by educating their daughters and embracing girls' night out on graduation day.

#### **Metaphor #4: Global Capitalism**

Another effective technique used by Al Mansour to tell the story is Wadjda's decision to enter a Qur'an recitation competition to earn the 1,000 Saudi riyals prize in order to purchase the coveted green bicycle. This part of the narrative works well on two levels.

First, Arabs are ancient merchants who value entrepreneurship and global capitalism. If Saudi women are to work, commerce is one of the few acceptable avenues (along with teaching). Arabs pride themselves on running successful family businesses that engage in trade and commerce. Some women are allowed to join the family business and contribute in the back office. Ten-year-old Wadjda demonstrates her entrepreneurial spirit by entering a competition where money is awarded for achievement. If women are to be granted the right to earn money and support themselves, business is an acceptable route, albeit with pit holes as Wadjda sadly learns.

Saudi Arabia is a veritable crossroads of global capitalism as witnessed by the dizzying flows of synthetic and human capital investments that have enabled Saudi Arabia to become a rich nation over the past 60 years. Annual GDP is \$745 billion; sovereign wealth assets at the Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency are \$750 billion (*The Economist*, May 24, 2014). The King amassed \$1 trillion selling oil in the past three years alone.

The Saudi royal family is getting richer by investing in the support systems required for an advanced commercial economy, notably transportation infrastructure. A rebuilt Hijaz railroad will soon reconnect the Gulf with Southern Europe and the Silk Road reminiscent of the days of the Ottoman Empire. The Gulf state-of-the-art shipping infrastructure runs east to Asia and India, west to Africa, and north to Europe. Maritime ports along the Saudi coastline enable ships to unload cargo destined for Gulf residents and re-load with Saudi petroleum-based manufactured or assembled products heading to Asia, Western Europe, and Africa. Saudi is digging a new underground railway system for the capital, Riyadh, with six lines due to open in 2018. Jeddah and Mecca are installing mass transit systems valued at \$30 billion. A \$12 billion high-speed rail system will one-day connect Mecca and Medina. Commerce remains the central tenet in Saudi's economic development plan.

Hence, by writing into the film's script a role for Wadjda to solve her immediate problem through competitive entrepreneurship, Al Mansour is leveraging the kingdom's economic success to create a scenario where a young girl's dream might come true.

A second reason the competition works well relates to changes in the Saudi labor market. The majority of the work done in Saudi is by foreign workers across every occupation. Saudi men hold jobs of apparent authority to give them something to do. But very few Saudi men allow their wives and daughters to obtain jobs outside of the home. There is fear of what could happen if women and men mix in public (*ikhtilat*). Women are to stay home, breed, and raise children.

As a result, very few Saudi females are gainfully employed: only 16 percent of Saudi women were in the labor force last count (Flynn, 2011). Among women with permission to work, 25% are actively looking but unable to secure jobs. When King Abdullah issued a royal decree in March 2011 offering unemployment benefits to Saudis for the first time, more than 80% of the registrants were women (Zoepf, 2013).

Cultural and religious norms are cited as justifications for limiting women's employment opportunities. A woman's piety is linked to the purity and religious authenticity in the practice of Wahhabi Islam in Saudi Arabia under the thumb of Muslim fundamentalist. The Saudis use religious justifications to enforce restrictions on women and maintain barriers to women's growth and development.

I believe a major labor force transition will occur in Saudi over the next decade because (i) the population is growing so quickly and (ii) it is expensive to maintain up to four wives simultaneously as allowed under Shari'a Islamic law. Today, Saudi men are letting their wives and daughters work in the formal labor market if it helps the family achieve middle-class status more quickly. The same phenomena was experienced in the United States during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when women's labor force participation rose from 34 to 60 percent because men encouraged their wives to work outside the home, knowing the family needed the money during a time when real wages of white men started falling (Flynn, 2003). The difference, however, is that the United States was integrating women into the broader society through education and labor market participation. In Saudi, women's labor participation is a means of raising family incomes, not a move toward women's full integration into society.

On the labor supply side, an increasing number of Saudi women are eager to study at the college and university levels, the majority of whom aspire to use their skills and knowledge in the paid labor market upon graduation. Even high school graduates are seeking employment to overcome social isolation, depression and boredom and to earn some money.

But employment options are scarce aside from teaching and family-owned businesses. Retail jobs were recently opened-up to women under the national "feminization" policy enacted in June 2011. Now young women may work in shops that sell women-only lingerie, cosmetics, abayas, and wedding dress. In the years to come, it is likely that more Saudi women will be allowed to secure gainful employment and strive for financial independence as Wadjda's initiative foreshadows, albeit without the full rights as citizens as accorded Saudi men.

### What's Next?

*Wadjda* allows us to dream through the powerful medium of independent film, hence, the overwhelming interest and accolades among reviewers. Westerners at some basic level understand that all is not well in Saudi Arabia, despite its status among US diplomats, military leaders and legislators and the offer for Saudi Arabia to assume a seat on the United Nations' Security Council in October 2013 for the first time. Saudi quickly rejected the coveted UN seat in the midst of push back from human rights groups that know the country's daily violations of the most basic human rights for girls and women. The film allows us to sit in a theater for a moment and envision an alternative reality for oppressed women in the Arab world through our imaginations. Kudos to Al Mansour for keeping the dream alive.

The film is a serious and commendable commentary on the life of Saudi women, despite naive film critics who write that Wadjda's rebellion against authority is "like a

Saudi Lisa Simpson" (Dudek, 2013). Wadjda's life is nothing like a fictional Lisa Simpson. Perhaps a more apt analogy would be to compare Wadjda to the young female protagonist Mary in the TV series "Little House on the Prairie" (1974) that captured a time in American history when pioneer women could have been disappeared in the vast prairie for being outspoken.

Like American pioneer women, Saudi women today have no laws to protect them from being flogged or stoned to death in public for speaking out for individual human rights. *The Economist* reported 79 executions in the year 2013 for offenses that included "sorcery" targeted to women (September 20, 2014). By living and working with women in Saudi Arabia, I was privy to the inside of Saudi life in a way that enabled me to recognize how unique this country is and the intractability of their religious beliefs when it comes to the lives of women.

In the end, I am glad I watched the film *Wadjda* as it held up a mirror to some of our shared experiences as expressed in this article. Perhaps Al Mansour's message is more a wake-up call and invitation for the West to look more closely at the real Saudi Arabia, not what the royal family and its American lobbyists want us to think about their once and future kingdom.

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