**ASSIGNMENT COVER SHEET**

### FASS: COMMUNICATION

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<tr>
<td><strong>NAME OF STUDENT</strong></td>
<td>Marnie Hensler</td>
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<td><strong>(PRINT CLEARLY - SURNAME, FIRST NAME)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>STUDENT ID NUMBER</strong></td>
<td>99214443</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>STUDENT EMAIL</strong></td>
<td><a href="mailto:henslermarnie@googlemail.com">henslermarnie@googlemail.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>STUDENT CONTACT NUMBER</strong></td>
<td>0452527101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NAME OF TUTOR</strong></td>
<td>Rayma Watkinson</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>DUE DATE</strong></td>
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Wadjda is not just a film that raised international awareness because a Saudi woman directed it – it is a film affecting real change. It shakes up conservative Saudi Arabia, where cinemas do not exist and women are still not allowed to drive or leave the house without a male guardian. It is a film that screams for change in status of women addressing “the issue of the female voice” (Stevens 2013, p. 29). Wadjda makes a statement and gently critiques nuisances concerning women in the kingdom. Through the eyes of the feisty 10-year old main protagonist Wadjda, the audience is presented with the everyday of Saudi women and its concomitant limited mobility. This essay argues that Al-Mansour diplomatically criticizes the status of Saudi women in her country not only through selective cinematic strategies but also through circumstances accompanying the production without offending her intended Saudi audience. To begin with a few aspects on the director herself, the production as well as censorship will be outlined, before moving on to the cinematically transmitted critique points. This includes discussing the role of a child protagonist for communicating the critique, main dichotomies, as well as the motif of movement and freedom.

The likeable young character of Wadjda refuses to accept certain conventional patterns as granted and gets a green bike into her head. She wants to race her best friend Abdullah – even though it is inappropriate for Saudi girls to ride bicycles (“if you ride a bike you won’t be able to have kids”). All of this is portrayed through the universal eyes of Wadjda, which makes the intended critique rather indirect, implied, and soft. Al-Mansour herself says, “having a child gave (...) [her] a lot of freedom as a writer” (UTS Library 2013, 1:03). A child-protagonist is a clever move since the critique is automatically cushioned. Gabrielle O’Brien calls this method a “sugary feel-good note” (O’Brian 2013, p. 49) and the audience certainly understands what is meant by this: Wadjda is hard not to like and empathize with, which, in turn, makes the discourse more approachable – especially for a Western audience – and thus the critique more gentle but not necessarily less powerful.

Haifaa Al-Mansour is the first female Saudi director to ever direct a film entirely shot in Saudi Arabia with an all-Saudi cast. Interesting to mention here is the fact that Al-Mansour completed a Master’s degree in film studies in Australia: ”I want to
prove that not because I am only a Saudi female (...) I can get into a festival and win awards. I want a film that’s winning awards because of the narrative” (UTS Library 2008, 6:35). It took over five years to pull the movie together after workshopping the script over and over again. Finally, the investments by Rotana, which is the Saudi Prince Alwaleed bin Talal’s production company, and investments by German producers Gerhard Meixner and Roman Paul, made *Wadjda* come true (Bloom 2013). Yet, despite the fact that a great part of the funding came from within Saudi Arabia and that it was shot with official permission, Saudis still are not able to watch it in their country as cinemas have been banned since the 1980s. Saudis have to travel to Bahrain instead to see *Wadjda* (artsfreedom 2012). However, Al-Mansour wanted to make sure to provide access to the film in form of DVD or TV and thus had to make sure to conform to certain standards of the Muslim authority and thus avoid censorship.

I tried not to film anything that would be censored, but you never really know what they might not like. It’s crazy and unpredictable and I hope they won’t cut anything (Al-Mansour in Stevens 2013, p. 30).

The fact that she succeeded at publishing *Wadjda* despite the highly complicated and restricted conditions is a stable critique of the system and projects an optimistic outlook for possible future changes.

The cinematic critique in *Wadjda* is communicated through excellent use of mise-en-scène, framing, and performance, stressing the limited mobility Saudi women experience everyday in the kingdom. This critique, in turn, is passed down through two narrative strings tightly interwoven: the upbeat and optimistic plot line of *Wadjda* and the adult version of Saudi women in the form of her mother. Before analysing explicit cinematic techniques, it is important to understand the sublime artistic thread running in the background of the narrative first. According to Adorno, art itself is a “system of contradictions” as quoted in McGee’s *Cinema, theory, and political responsibility in contemporary culture* (McGee 1997, p. xii) meaning that artists present contradictions in order to transduce a political, critical or artistic message. This can perfectly be seen in *Wadjda* as Al-Mansour brilliantly makes use
of dichotomies to express critique of Saudi women’s status in the kingdom: the inside and outside, men and women, childhood and adulthood. These contradictions communicate critique in a soft and gentle way since they are presented cinematically and not literally and shall be outlined below.

The most obvious contrast is created between the two worlds Wadjda is exposed to. On the one hand there is the very Americanised home, where she is allowed to listen to Western music, wear non-traditional clothes, as well as paint her nails and braid soccer bracelets for her “enterprise”. On the other hand there is the highly conservative and traditional outside world with its many restrictions concerning behaviour, movement, and clothing (UWIRE Text 2013), in which constant surveillance is indicated through the metaphor of the harsh desert sun (Stockdale 2015). However, Al-Mansour does not offend Saudi culture since men and women are never shown together in one shot in the outside world, but only in the inside, in the protected area. The director herself says that she “tried to be respectful of the culture and not to be offensive” (Bloom 2013). This can also be seen in her detailed commitment to framing. A medium close-up of the school’s gate closing creates a feeling of claustrophobia and limitation and signals the harsh border between these two worlds. Furthermore there is a close-up of a mug depicting a person that can only be assumed to be a mother since she is completely veiled, holding a very young daughter in colourful clothes. This points to the lack of freedom Saudi women face when it comes to clothing due to the strict separation of the two spheres mentioned.

The contrast between men and women is rather complex as it is closely linked to the notion of gender and thus deserves closer examination. The very first scene presents gender as a collective performance (girls singing verses of the Quran in conformity). In her essay Pedal Power, Gabrielle O’Brian refers to Judith Butler’s theory and explains how the opening scene shows how a highly gendered demeanour is being imposed onto young girls (O’Brian 2013). This depicts the Islamic “socio-political landscape” (O’Brian 2013, p. 48) of Saudi Arabia thereby communicating necessary metaknowledge to a Western audience without offending a Saudi audience. Other critical instances of the strict gender-segregation can be found easily: Wadjda walking home from school and being harassed by some builders or the heartbreaking
scene when Wadjda attaches her name onto the family tree but sees it removed the next day since it is against Muslim standards. Yet, there are also scenes that criticize this strict separation in a very humorous way. For example when Wadjda refuses to leave the schoolyard because men from the opposite rooftop could see the girls. The feisty character merely responds: “are they supermen?” – a brilliant move in performance to criticize daily limitation in mobility young Saudi girls experience without offending a conservative Saudi audience since it is cushioned by the moderating force of humour.

In terms of the contrast between childhood and adulthood it is obvious that Wadjda’s life is presented in a more optimistic way compared to her mother’s, which is harsh Saudi reality and law. However, the interplay between the two generations is shown in a very gentle way: mother and daughter presented in the domestic area preparing food while singing religious verses of the Quran or dress shopping in the mall for the uncle’s wedding. Both scenes help the audience understand the burden on the mother’s shoulders: she is presented as an example of Saudi women of today, whereas Wadjda is presented as an example of possible Saudi women of tomorrow since she refuses to conform. However, both try to pursue their individual goals (UWIRE Text 2013). The critique of the mother’s situation is communicated somewhat directly through explicit dialogues. Very early, the mother is presented in her typical morning routine when Iqbal the driver arrives and rushes her as usual. Throughout the narrative the mother’s dependence on the male driver becomes more and more obvious until it climaxes with her not being able to go to work due to a previous fight with Iqbal. The seriousness of this situation is outlined through several medium close-ups of her not moving, i.e. sitting on the bed or the coach for the day. Yet, the critique is softened as the solution converges with traditional Saudi culture: a patriarchal figure solves the issue. That Abdullah is this patriarchal figure in the situation and that Wadjda took the initiative can be considered as an ironic side blow of the director and itself conveys more implicit critique - quite brilliant if you think of it.

These three cinematically accentuated contrasts silently yet very clearly critique the main dichotomies of the kingdom. However, the critique is never too direct or
offensive, but subtly points out “the interplay between tradition and modernity (…) [and thus creates] just the right amount of tension for great stories” (Al-Mansour 2014, p. 11).

Another crucial aspect is the one of movement, which “literally and figuratively” constitutes the “desire for mobility” (O’Brian 2013, p. 48). Literally, this can be seen in the many dialogues of the mother complaining about the horrible situation with driver Iqbal. Figuratively, the audience is presented with the unavoidable motif of freedom in form of the bike. It is introduced in the 12th minute of the film presented on a truck passing by, suggesting motion and freedom. Diegetic music is applied to guide the viewer’s empathy towards the main-protagonist and her struggle for free movement the instance she starts running to follow the bike. Furthermore, the periodic motif of feet supports this “desire for mobility” as well, especially during the opening scene with the close-up of the girls’ shoes. Maria Garcia describes this as a “discomforting illustration of nonconformity”, (Garcia 2013, p.52), but it can also be seen as a humorous hint at the rebellious character of Wadjda since she later tries to conform to the school’s uniform by colouring her converses. O’Brian emphasizes that this motif is a “signifier of the desire for autonomy and female agency” (O’Brian 2013, p. 48).

In summary, Haifaa Al-Mansour is not a confrontational filmmaker, yet still clearly transmits the intended critique on the issue of the female voice in Saudi Arabia. Difficulties and prejudices during the production were overcome and conveyed critique already. The film itself communicates subtle critique through the use of a universal and highly likeable child protagonist, means of dichotomies as well as metaphors and repetitive motifs of freedom and movement. Yet, Al-Mansour created an artwork that neither complains nor blames, but rather shows the everyday of Saudi women’s life in the kingdom and simultaneously also entertains. It is this cinematic “realism of the film [that] demonstrates the possibility of thinking otherwise” (La Caze 2015). This is exactly how Al-Mansour’s critique is conveyed: it is not a forceful demand for a different mindset but only a depiction of how different one “could” think – a possibility and not a must. And this is why Al-Mansour created a diplomatic yet demanding artwork that aims for a Saudi future of women who speak
up and use their voice to change their situation. She herself says that she wants to “push people to be more tolerant and more open” (UTS Library 2013, 0:58) and this perfectly shows how Al-Mansour transmitted her critique, but managed to not offend her Saudi audience- diplomatic yet gently forceful.
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