

Disrupting Societal Hegemonies in *Wadjda* (2012) by Haifaa al-Mansour

The story of *Wadjda* exists in an extremely patriarchal society where women must adhere to a strict dress code and they must stay out of the sight of men who do not belong to their immediate family. The society misuses the rhetoric of “women’s greatness,” going through extreme measures for the “protection” of women’s honour that it instead becomes a device that fuels harmful patriarchal notions and takes away women and girls’ autonomy. In Haifaa al-Mansour’s film, *Wadjda* (2012), she cautiously brings light to these societal hegemonies using subtle disruption techniques, such as through *Wadjda*’s determination to go against the norms, in order to bring awareness to women’s experiences in a male-dominated society.

In the film, *Wadjda* is characterized as a girl who wants to challenge societal expectations and live free of society’s constraints upon her through participating in activities that are not the norm for women and girls in Saudi Arabia. Al-Mansour uses *Wadjda*’s presence as a disrupter in all settings, as she is seen doing or wanting to do things that her society frowns upon. Al-Mansour uses this disruption technique to show viewers how societal hegemonies appear from the perspective of a 10-year-old girl, and how they can be an obstacle between women and girls and their aspirations. Although *Wadjda* does not speak out against the hegemonies and most characters in the movie are represented conforming to the norms, the film forces its audience to have a conversation about the hegemonies’ harms. For example, *Wadjda* is a spectator when it comes to her mother’s every-day struggles; she watches as her mother loses her designated driver and struggles to get around places, as women were not allowed to drive at the time by law. Neither *Wadjda* nor her mother challenge the law or take any particular stance against it, but showing this struggle is meant to bring an awareness within the audience to create a terrain for critical debate about women’s treatment in the male-dominated society.

Further, al-Mansour achieves disruption by deploying symbolism across the film which embodies a practice that counters what is typically accepted. In the film, Wadjda is determined to own a bicycle and challenge her friend and neighbour, Abdullah, with it. For women and girls, riding a bicycle is shameful albeit not unlawful; yet, for Wadjda, this bicycle symbolizes freedom from restraints she is put under from societal expectations, and she is determined to get it. The bicycle represents a certain liberation from patriarchal structures for not only Wadjda but also for all women and girls whom Wadjda sees struggling under the male-dominated society throughout the film. This is why Wadjda getting the bicycle is very important to the plot of the story; although it does not change the conditions around Wadjda and her mother, it certainly shifts the hierarchal reality and calls for deeper conversations about women and girls' struggles and efforts around the world.