

## Women Stereotypes in ‘Wadjda’ And ‘Where do We Go now?’: A Multifaceted Analysis

Ayman R. Yasin, Gina Salama \*

### ABSTRACT

This study sheds light on two modern Arab films that address the stereotypical image of Arab women in two diametrically different countries: Saudi Arabia and Lebanon. The analysis is based on two Arab films ‘Wadjda’ and ‘Where do we go now?’. The study discusses the linguistic, social and psychological analysis of the female characters in the films. It also identifies women roles in the society and in the family. The paper concludes that although Arab women are treated inferiorly, they started to play major roles in changing their lives and others’ mentalities as well as contributing to changing the society’s stereotypical image about women.

**Keywords:** Stereotype, Woman Image, Social, Linguistic, Arab Cinema.

### INTRODUCTION

Arab women live in different social, cultural, tribal and religious societies. Women issues are directly related to the political regimes and economical situations in these countries. Women in the Arab societies are seen as weak, vulnerable and unaccountable creatures. This study aims to shed light on two Arab cinema films that directly address some women issues in the Arab world. The importance of the study lies in analyzing the social, psychological, cultural, political and economic issues of Arab women in the third millennium in two diametrically different countries: Saudi Arabia and Lebanon.

‘Wadjda’ (2013) is set in an extremist Islamic regime, Saudi Arabia, and ‘Where do we go now?’ (2011) is set in the most liberal Arab country, Lebanon. The directors of the two films are both females who have been greatly affected by the western cinema. The two films were chosen because the main character in each is a female who tries to verbally and physically change a

stereotypical image about women’s roles in society. Moreover, the researchers aims to see if the Arab woman image of the 1950-2000 has changed in the third millennium. In this paper, we argue that despite their stereotypical roles in the Arab world, women stand against their subjugation to defend their equal rights.

The study aims to answer the following questions: What are the roles of the women in the society and in the family? Do cinema films reflect the real life of women in the Arab world? What are the ideologies that Arab films depict?

### Literature Review

Arab cinema started in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Egypt. Since then, “Women ... were not granted the same privileges as men, with legal restrictions and social inhibitions regarding marriage, divorce, dress code, etc.” (Buskirk, 2015). Farrugia (2002: 58) adds that women were forbidden to participate in early Egyptian theatre, hence casting young men to play female roles. Moreover, women were expected to play traditional roles as mothers, wives, and daughters (Ibid: 77-85). Eschholz et al. (2002) find that women are often depicted as

---

\* Princess Sumayya University for Technology, Jordan (1), The University of Jordan, Jordan (2). Received on 07/04/2016 and Accepted for Publication on 16/08/2016.

unemployed more than their male counterparts. Women are also shown as being financially dependent on men. They are comic, passive, emotional, followers, powerless and preoccupied with pleasing men. We will see that this is true for most women characters in '*Wadjda*'.

On the other hand, the Lebanese film industry, which blossomed during the late 1960s, witnessed a rise in films that deal with women's issues. Also, the Lebanese film industry witnessed an increase in the number of female directors with the spread of video, electronic media, and audiovisual schools which graduated hundreds of students in various film jobs (Aghacy, 1999). Nowadays, matters became even better for Lebanese women due to cultural, political and religious considerations; Lebanese women do not experience the same obstacles encountered by women in other Arab countries.

Signorielli (2012) quoted in Kharroub and Weaver (2014: 180) show that Arab women are still underrepresented, cast in stereotypical roles and occupations. They are also taken less seriously than men and are often shown as emotional and weak. In addition, women appeared more often in domestic roles and less often in occupational roles and were much more likely than men to promote body care and household cleaning products (Nassif & Gunter, 2008).

As for women image, Arab Development Report (2005) pinpoints that images of women were restricted to a number of similar models, and films failed to reflect strong women who can critically solve problems. Ramzi (1995) argues that women were portrayed as failing to take successful decisions in their family lives and that these decisions were usually destructive to their families. Moreover, women are often depicted as "a cunning devil who seeks nothing but pleasure, marital or extra-marital. All she wants is to catch a man, any man, since this is every woman's highest goal" (Ramzi, 2004). The positive image, though, was limited to portraying women as a religious person or a loving mother (Agwa, 2000).

Analyzing 410 movies and 460 female characters in the Egyptian cinema during the period 1962-1972, El

Hadidi (1997) finds that the Egyptian cinema presented a distorted image of woman, portraying her as deviated in her behavior or in her thinking or in both. Moreover, the traditional look of men to women remained the same; women are sex objects.

Despite some exceptional leading roles for women in the Arab cinema, most previous literature leaves no doubt that women in the Arab world are subjugated, underrepresented and looked upon as inferior to men. This study will investigate whether such roles and image remain as they were or they have changed with all women liberation and equality movements equipped with vast technological advances.

### **Wadjda**

*Wadjda* was produced in 2012 in Saudi Arabia. It was written and directed by Haifaa al-Mansour. It was the first feature film ever made by a female Saudi director. It won several awards at film festivals. It successfully earned a nomination for Best Foreign Film at the 2014 BAFTA Awards.

'*Wadjda*' is a story about a girl who tries to rebel against the stereotypical roles women play in a radical society. One day, her young neighbor (male friend) Abdullah grabs her scarf and speeds off on his bike. Wadjda decides to purchase a bike and race him. She earns money by participating in the school's Quran competition which requires her to memorize a fifth of the Quran. When Wadjda wins the competition, she shocks everybody by announcing her intention to buy a bicycle with the prize money. However, the teachers ridicule her and do not give her a chance to express her opinion. Instead, they tell her that girls do not ride bikes and therefore the money will instead be donated to Palestine on her behalf.

'*Wadjda*' depicts all the usual stereotypical roles. Being a female, Wadjda is watched by construction workers who think of molesting her. Wadjda's father gets engaged to a second woman while he is still married to her 'poor' mother; a female who is powerless subjugated

creature. The school principal forces the young women to stay out of male sight. i.e. to live in the shade. Women work and cook while the men work and play games (McGill, 2013).

The film also contains many *values* inconsistencies. Wadjda's father pursues a second wife because his mother demands a grandson and chooses his next wife herself. Ironically, women practice prejudice against other women. The husband leaves his wife and daughter and remains physically and emotionally absent. Nevertheless, Wadjda's mother tries constantly to look after her beauty in order to win back her husband. Moreover, young women in school have to dress in loose shapeless clothing. By contrast, the teachers are allowed to wear makeup and tight skirts. Finally, drivers, who are mostly Bengali, are mistreated in the film even by children (Muzaffar, 2014). *'Wadjda'* is, thus, a film about the oppression and inferiority of women (Osenlund, 2013).

As a critic, Mozaffar (2014) mentions that many westerners love this material as a sort of proof of Islam's backwardness. Nonetheless, the film raises some questions about stereotype roles. In the story, Islam is only present in the form of a video game that is designed to teach Quran which is read here for competition not for worshipping.

### **Women Subjugation**

Wadjda contains a lot of scenes that show women subjugation in the Saudi society. At the very beginning of the film the girls are shown to all wear black gowns with the same type of shoes. All women cover their faces when they go out. Female teachers dictate what students should do and instill the culture of subjugation in the minds of the little girls. Wadjda's mother dedicates her life to her husband who is going to get married to another woman to get him a boy child.

What is even worse is that women accept being treated inferiorly as part of the culture. For instance, women try dresses in the bathroom not in a fitting room.

Even Iqbal, the Pakistani driver, who is supposed to be inferior to Saudis, talks rudely to the women whom he drives to their work. He yells at Aisha. He tells Wadjda that she has a long tongue. He denies Wadjda's mother going to work because he does not want to give her a ride. He even turns off the AC and women could say nothing about it.

Women exclusion is culturally deeply-rooted. While checking the family tree on the wall, Wadjda notices that it contains only men 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. The mom accepts being subjugated without even thinking about changing it.

Finally, with the society's blessing, girls are forced to get married even before the legal age. One of Wadjda's classmates, a thirteen-year-old girl, gets married as soon as she hits puberty.

### **A Rebellious and Feminist Character**

It is very clear that Wadjda has a rebellious character. Unlike all other girls, she prefers to wear tennis shoes and not to cover all her hair. This displeases her teachers. Her room looks like boys rooms. On the wall appears the word '*danger*' and some non-girlish pictures. She also plays with boys, which is strictly prohibited in Saudi Arabia. She runs like boys. She dreams of having a bike like other boys. Riding a bike signifies equality with males and freedom since women in Saudi Arabia are not allowed to drive cars or to go on rides by themselves. Wadjda's insistence on having it is a way of telling everyone that women should have equal rights as much as men.

Wadjda dresses like a westernized girl. She's trying to act like an American teenager by putting the headsets and painting blue nail polish. Moreover, her drawings on her converse shoes looks like an American font.

Perhaps her character is much affected by an incident that happened at the very beginning of the film when Abdullah, the boy she is friends with, took off her scarf

and rode his bike away. Therefore, all through her life, she tries hard to prove that girls can be as tough as boys. She also tried to change the stereotypical image that the conservative, and perhaps extremist, Saudi society has about females. In addition, her mother's passive reactions against her father's tyranny, negligence and maltreatment contribute to her rebellious character. She does not want to endure the same agony that her mother and all other females in the society live.

Wadjda seems to have high expectations of women's role in society. She does not believe in the stereotypical roles that are preordained for women in her society. She thinks that women can be singers and girls can be cheerleaders or sports fans. While singing, she found that her mom had a beautiful voice. She asked her to become a singer. However, the answer was straightforward: *"women cannot sing in Saudi Arabia, plus your dad will get very jealous"*.

She also believes that girls can become businesswomen and females can normally talk to males. She seems very interested in Abdullah who also shows much interest in her. She hates the way males treat females. When Abdullah wants to teach her how to ride a bike, he adds the small supporting wheels so that Wadjda can ride the bike. She expresses her resentment as she wants to be treated like a grown up child.

Wadjda believes that the teachers exercise their tyranny on students perhaps because they are oppressed themselves. The whole school discipline is fake. Teachers take much care of their beauty and they have their own stories but they are very strict with the girls about their dress and relationships.

As part of her personality, Wadjda is a responsible person. She cares about her mother and so she goes to look for Iqbal in the neighborhood. She wants to help her mother find someone to give her a ride to work. Although she is young, she could threaten Iqbal and made him get back to his work.

Wadjda is a determined person. She could change her teacher's opinion about her by winning the competition.

The teacher asks her to pray in the first line next to her because of her performance in the competition. However, she does not hide her personality and ambition; she tells her teacher and students that she is going to buy a bike with the money she will obtain from winning the competition.

After Wadjda gets the bike, she rides it in the street and races Abdullah and beats him. She reaches the highway where she happily looks at the cars flowing on both sides. She could prove that women can be as good as men and that they can achieve the goals they set for themselves.

### **Wadjda's Mother: A Stereotypical Woman**

In congruence with Signorielli (2012), Nassif and Gunter (2008), Ramzi (1995), Hadidi (1997), female characters in *Wadjda* play stereotypical women roles. The best example is Wadjda's mother who tries hard to please her husband. She always straightens her hair and paints her fingers and toes to look beautiful all the time. She cooks for the family and follows up on Wadjda's studies. She always wears beautifully. Wadjda notices how her dad looks at her mom and flirts with her. Mom enjoys playing the female role and takes care of her femininity all the time. She intends to buy an extraordinary dress for her brother-in-law's wedding because she wants to protect her husband from other women. She wants them to know that her husband is emotionally and sexually satisfied to have her as his wife.

Wadjda's mother is dependent on her husband despite his negligence of her. She expresses her love for him on many occasions. She says that he is the most handsome man in the world. She adds that he was the first man and will be the last man in her life. Whenever she wears any dress, she asks Wadjda if her father will like the dress. She does not think of leaving her husband despite his plans of getting married to a second wife. Wadjda's mother is doing everything to please her husband. She does not want to get a job at the hospital because of her husband's jealousy. She does not want to have short hair

because her husband likes long hair.

On the wedding day, the mother tells Wadjda that this is her father's wedding and instead of buying a dress she bought the green bike that Wadjda has always dreamt about. This may indicate that the mother doesn't want her daughter to endure the subjugating life as she did. She wants her daughter to be free.

In sum, Wadjda's mother reflects the stereotypical character of women in such a conservative society. She accepts being treated inferiorly by her husband and by males, including the driver. She believes that a woman's role is to please and obey her husband all the time. She even teaches her daughter to follow the same path when she grows up. The only thing that looks odd in her character is probably smoking. She smokes secretly at home when her husband is not there. She also smokes when she is nervous. It seems that smoking is some way of protesting against women state in Saudi Arabia.

### **Where Do We Go Now?**

*'Where do we go now?'* is fantasy produced in 2011 by the Lebanese director Nadine Labaki. The film was a premiere in the 2011 Cannes Film Festival. The film won the People's Choice Award at the 2011 Toronto International Film Festival.

The events of the film take place in a rural Lebanese village where Christians and Muslims coexist in an uneasy peace. The village's cemetery is filled with the bodies of young men who have died in sectarian warfare. Women in the film try to ease religious tensions between Christians and Muslims who have lived peacefully together for years in this small Lebanese village. However, hostility arises among the men of the village at the slightest thing. The women collaborate to avoid sectarian war through a series of subtle plans. However, none of these plans succeed in slowing down the rise of violence. At the end of the film, a tragedy strikes and drives women to make a personal sacrifice to spread peace in the village.

Amal, the main character, is a beautiful Christian

widow who runs a café. She falls in love with Rabi', a Muslim worker who is painting her café. The women of the village meet in the café to gossip and to plan how to end the war between the two religions.

Ms. Labaki, the director, writer and main character, decides not to name the village in order to suggest it as an allegory about religious intolerance and male belligerence. The village women, tired of losing their men because of war, band together to keep the peace by any necessary means. Their solidarity is established in the opening scene by a march in which a group of Christian and Muslim women form a solemn swaying procession to the cemetery. The same women gather regularly at the café, to gossip and devise strategies to keep the men away from fighting. Those men pretend to be brothers until the tiniest provocation incites them to blind fury. The conflict escalates when someone sends goats to the mosque, and the holy water in the church is replaced with chicken blood.

One of the women's first actions is to disconnect the village's television set because of the news of religious strife in the region. Amal and Yvonne, the mayor's wife, trigger this female regiment. Yvonne fakes a mystical dream from which she gives divine instructions to the men to keep peace. In their most extreme scheme, the women distract their men by importing a group of Ukrainian strippers who pretend to be lost after their bus breaks down. As the men prepare themselves for war, their wives drug them with hashish. Things get worse when a young man is killed in cross-fire while riding his motorbike outside the village. In order to keep peace, his mother and her friends secretly buries the body and spread the word that he has mumps and is too ill to receive visitors.

### **Women of the Village**

The main character of the film, Amal, is a young beautiful widow who has a charisma that attracts the men of the village. She is atypical woman who runs her own business. She keeps her poise and detaches herself from

men. The only man she thinks of is Rabi', the painter. Both Amal and Rabi' play a leading role in the village; Amal for the women and Christians, and Rabi' for the men and Muslims. Amal is respected by all other women. She dedicates her café for the women meetings. They think about the plans there. The women listen to Amal and respect her point of view. Though not a religious person, Amal is concerned about unifying both religions rather than showing her dedication to Christianity.

The other women of the village seem to play typical feminine roles. However, they think about their society, the village, plan for it and contribute to changing it much more than men do. Other than Amal's love affair with Rabi', the film does not contain any love affairs. There aren't any obscene scenes except those that are brought up accidentally on TV and the Ukrainian dancers. Perhaps the writer and director of the film, Labaki, sees that a religious theme like the one discussed in the film contradicts with having several love affairs or obscenity.

The friendship relationships between Muslim and Christian women are very strong. They treat each other like sisters. The familial bonds with their families were very strong as well. Marital relationships are shown to be stable. The only thing that shakes this image is when the Ukrainian women try to seduce men, but that takes place before the women's eyes. So, the men have no whatsoever chance of cheating on their wives. The village women, in fact, plotted the Ukrainian story to distract the men from killing each other.

### **Social, Economic, Cultural and Religious Situation**

The film is a fantasia. It shows the village as an isolated island which does not have any contact with the external world except through Wassim and his Muslim companion boy. The village has sporadic information about the external world; either through the carriers or through the TV.

Socially, the village seems to have solid relationships among its inhabitants. However, it is deeply divided into Muslims and Christians. The social bonds among each

religion followers are very strong, perhaps due to the presence of an enemy: the other religion followers. Social classes, though present, are not stressed in the film. Yet, Christians are generally richer than Muslims which is also true of Christians and Muslims in the Arab world.

Economically, the village represents third world countries. They have their own resources but they rely on external supplies. They raise cattle and work in farming.

Culturally, religious traditions and customs control the society though it appears that both Muslims and Christians have the same traditions. The only apparent difference is that Muslim women tend to cover their heads and men may wear some Islamic clothing such as the dishdash. Christian women, on the other hand do not cover their heads and they wear makeup. Christian men appear to wear more formally, e.g. suits. Men, generally, look down women. Any incident can turn the village upside down. Everything could arouse them and get them into conflict.

Religion plays a key role in the film; most events evolve around religion or triggered by religious motives. At the very beginning of the film, the church and mosque are shown standing next to each other, separated by one small building only. The scene repeats several times in the film especially at day break and on the days when sectarian conflicts arise. The priest and Sheik also appear together in the party. They also discuss every conflict that takes place and try to come to diplomatic solution that satisfies both parties. Each of them does his best to convince his people that the other party is not involved in the incidents and misfortunes that they experience. On all common occasions, they appear together and they both address the village people to express unity and peace.

Religion is deeply rooted in the hearts of the people of the village. Christian women call Mary the Virgin whenever they want to do anything important. Mary's sculpture appears several times in the church and in the Christians' homes. On the other hand, Islamic phrases are also stressed here and there all through the movie. At the

party, the village's Christian headman tells Muslims that they can eat the food since it is *halal*\*. In addition, in their gatherings, a Muslim may ask his Muslim fellows to declare his faith, say that there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his messenger.

Although the people of the two religions live together, they are not happy. They pretend to love each other, but even the slightest thing could arouse their deeply rooted religious beliefs. For instance, in the party, Wassim, a Christian boy, sits on the Muslim side. He wears a hat. The Muslim boys play with his hat to tease him, and a fight almost starts. Anything could uncover the fake friendly relationship between the two parties.

Perhaps the most shocking scene that embodies religion bias is when Amal, the protagonist, brings a Ukrainian girl to the painter's house to let her sleep over for a couple of nights since she does not have any sort of accommodation. Amal thinks of distracting the painter, whom she loves, from planning anything with his Muslim fellows against the Christians. A conversation takes place between the painter and the Ukrainian through Amal since the painter does not speak English. Amal purposefully misinterprets some of the painter's phrases because they are too harsh for the Ukrainian. At the end of the conversation, the painter feels that Amal has brought the Ukrainian for him to have sex with her. In fact, Amal is testing him, but he becomes very nervous and tells Amal to look for a Christian guy for the Ukrainian. That really infuriated Amal because she realizes then how deep religion is rooted in the hearts and minds of the village's men.

### **Women: The Mastermind**

Nadine Labaki was very cautious to show woman power and wisdom all through the film. Although the women seemed to have the typical roles that women have

in the Arab cinema, Labaki gives women a tacit power that controls the village, its men, its religious figures, and the whole incidents that take place at the village. The priest and the sheik, the religious figures, are aware of that power and they are convinced to follow the women's plans in diverting the men's attention away from fighting. Unlike most Arab films, women here are shown to be wise and witty.

As in many other Arab films, women here play stereotypical roles: they cook, clean, and follow their husbands in everything they say or do. They are interested in their femininity. They are eager to see what the village carriers have brought from the city. They are keen on the women objects the carriers bring so that they can please their husbands by the lingerie and make-up they buy. Despite their stereotypical roles as housewives, the women are the mastermind that plans all the important events and incidents in the village. They kept on telling their men to stop fighting and think about the future of the village. However, when they found out that their advice is of no use, they started to plan on their own to get things in the right way. Moreover, there are few non-stereotypical roles. For example, in addition to raising her child, Amal runs a café and represents a successful business woman.

The film starts with all women going to the cemetery together wearing black, walking like a marshal, and dancing a soft dance. Their unity signifies their power regardless of their religions. All through the film they control the course of events. For instance, in the party while a boy is changing the channels on the television with the remote control, he stops it at a news channel that is reporting a sectarian conflict in one of the Lebanese villages. Everyone in the party pays attention and they become ready to start a fight. Noticing that, Amal quickly changes the channel to another one which shows an intimate scene. Everybody forgets about the conflict.

In another scene, Christian people finds that the church cross is broken. They spontaneously accuse Muslims of doing so. Getting angry, a Christian man

---

\* Muslims do not eat pork and do not eat any meat that has not been slaughtered according to their religion. The (\*) conditions for any meat to become halal, the person who slaughters must mention the name of the Lord before he slaughters the animal. For drinking, Muslims are not allowed to have any liquor beverages.

becomes very angry and chases a Muslim a boy who walks on a stave. He hits him hard. The boy's mother rescues her son. The Christians realize that if the boy's father knows about it he might kill the man. A Christian woman follows Umm Ahmad, the boy's mother, and begs her not to tell her husband. Thinking about the consequences, Umm Ahmad replies, '*Do you think I am crazy to tell him?*' She is mature enough and altruist since she ignores her broken son and thinks of the whole village.

When Wassim is accidentally shot in a sectarian conflict in one of the neighboring villages, his mother, full of agony, prefers hiding the corpse in a well in order not to cause more deaths in the village. Even when Wassim's uncle comes to look for Wassim, the mother tries hard to stop him from going into Wassim's room. Still, he insists on walking into the room. When he does not find Wassim, he knows that his nephew was killed. His first suspect is Muslims. So, he pushes his sister away and rushes towards the door, but Wassim's mother shoots him on the leg to stop him. The mother's wisdom saves the village much trouble and fight.

However, news travels fast. Learning about the killing of Wassim, evil sparks again in the men's hearts. Therefore, the women come up with another effective idea. They add a drug powder to juice and pancakes and induce the men to eat and drink. Getting high, the men start laughing hysterically, dancing and joking. They totally forget about Wassim and their revenge. Meanwhile, some women go to the fields where the men hide their guns and transfer them to another spot. Thus, the women's drug plot, though wicked, save many lives and unify the men who decide to go all to the cemetery to bury Wassim.

Finally, Labaki contrives the Ukrainian models story in order to show the shrewd thinking of women. Having their husbands thinking about taking revenge from each other, the women thinks of brining a Ukrainian model band just to distract the men. Indeed, the men are astounded by them since the models were beautiful,

young, sexy and seductive. That incident diverts the men's occupied thinking of revenge for almost a week. However, the plot backfires when the women start feeling jealous.

### Politics in the film

One of the goals of the film is to dissolve the sectarian barriers between Muslims and Christians through showing the devastating consequences of the conflict. Such a theme is very hot in Lebanon which has an equal percentage of Muslims and Christians. Politically, the president is usually Christian but his prime minster is Muslim. Every year hundreds of people are killed because of religious differences. Many plans and programs have been set to reduce the tension. Some were a success but the majority failed.

In '*Where do We Go Now?*', Labaki uses this microcosm to reflect the macrocosm, Lebanon and perhaps the whole world. The priest always speaks before the sheik as what happens in reality, the Lebanese president precedes his prime minster. Muslims and Christians in the village cohabit as the case in Lebanon. The carriers, Wassim and the Muslim guy, stand for businessmen in the society. Their customers are both Muslims and Christians. Parties and other social occasions are intended for people from both religions.

Labaki could successfully convey her message of tolerance through several incidents. When the Muslim boy on the stave was hit, his mother was very tolerant and chose not to tell her husband in order to avoid killing. Wassim's mother sacrificed her son for the sake of saving more lives. Her tolerance was indescribably wise.

Labaki manipulates the crisis of Wassim's murder to unify Muslims and Christians. All the village, men and women, children and elderly, Muslims and Christians, rich and poor, i.e. all society sectors, join the funeral. They all sing together Islamic and Christian funeral songs.

Even the love story in the film embodies a unity between two religions. Amal, the protagonist, is a



Christian whereas Rabi', the painter, is a Muslim. The love story indicates that love is stronger than all religions and human laws. Labaki was hoping that love leads to marriage which symbolizes unity between these two conflicting religions. Nonetheless, love between Amal and Rabi' has an open end that is congruent with the open end of the film.

The end of the film is left open so the audience may fill it on their own. When the village people arrive at the cemetery, the men who were carrying the coffin turn, '*where do we go now?*'. They do not know if they have to bury Wissam in the Muslim part of the cemetery or in the Christian one. That end may unify them or turn them apart again.

### **Bold ideas**

This work is different from most of the Arab cinema works in that it discusses a taboo idea, religion, in a very bold way. The film not only addresses an everlasting conflict between Islam and Christianity, it also tries to solve it in a brave way.

First, there are some scenes that are offensive to religion. The statue of Mary was broken deliberately. Christian people were offended to find their religious symbols degraded. On the other hand, some sheep entered the mosque and treaded on the Quran. Muslims were very upset when they saw many copies of the Quran thrown all over the place in the mosque.

Second, some scenes of tolerance were overemphasized. For instance, when the statue of Mary was broken, a Muslim woman was fixing it while chatting with her Christian fellows. Another scene shows Muslims and Christians going together to the cemetery to bury Wassim. The songs that were played in the background were a mix of both religions.

Perhaps the boldest idea is *conversion*. At the end of the film, the head of the village, who is Christian, wakes up to find himself sleeping in a house full of Muslim symbols such as the verses on the walls. To his surprise, his wife is wearing hijab and praying. He yells at her and

accuses her of insulting Mary and disobeying Christianity teachings. By analogy, Abu Ahmad looks for his wife and finds her performing some Christian prayers. She does not wear hijab. Abu Ahmad wonders what's going on; she tells him that she converted and she will not wear the head cover any more. So, Christian women become Muslims and Muslim women become Christians. Women are leading the most fundamental changes in society.

### **Similarities and Differences**

#### **Similarities between the Two Films:**

'*Wadjda*' and '*Where do We Go Now?*' have been chosen because they are similar in many ways. First, both films were directed by female directors who are affected by the western cinema and who defend feminist movements. The themes of the films address women's roles in society. They call for equal rights and leading roles for women. *Wadjda* does not want to live in a society that underestimates women and treats her in an inferior way. Women in Saudi Arabia mostly play the stereotypical roles that the society draws for them. '*Where do we go now?*' looks better at women. At least, women are not treated inferiorly. However, they are followers. Men lead them into conflicts. Women, here also, play typical roles like doing the house chores and taking care of the family.

As many previous studies, both films consider that women need to satisfy their husbands' sexual desires. This also resembles western films which look at women as sex tools and show them as seducing men and using their bodies for their interest. This could be true for most societies due to the spread of western films that use the woman's body to attract more spectators.

Al-Mansour and Labaki address societal conflicts. '*Wadjda*' discusses the conflict between a female child, whose desire is to have a bike, and the society, including her parents and teachers, who see that girls must not ride bikes because it goes against the values of the society. It is not a conflict to get a bike per se; rather it represents getting equal rights. It is a mutiny against traditions and

values that have been inherited for many centuries without even questioning their origins or validity. What is even worse, women themselves do not want to change these values. Wadjda's mother tries to raise Wadjda in the same way she was raised. The mother dictates what her daughter must do as a female.

'*Where do we go now?*' discusses a sectarian conflict that women are part of. However, women are marginalized in that they do what the men in the conflicting parties dictate. Nonetheless, women lead a white mutiny to end the conflict by diverting the men's attention towards the things that they care about.

Sexual desire is shown to play a considerable part in both films. Since '*Wadjda*' was produced in Saudi Arabia, it was not easy to show this directly. However, it is very evident that the society suffers from a complex of inferiority. Men watch women everywhere and all time. Even girls as young as 12 years old are watched and desired. Women try to take extra care of their beauty. Wadjda's mother and the teachers take care of their hair, nails, make-up and bodies. They like to look beautiful all the time.

On the other hand, '*Where do we go now?*' is much more liberal. Christian women tend to show more parts of their bodies. The Ukrainian women were almost naked, some of them are shown in bikini. Men's sexual looks chase them everywhere. Labaki shows that sex is even stronger than the Muslim-Christian conflict since the followers of both religions forget everything about their disputes when they see the Ukrainian band. Everybody tries to fill the pool for them to swim.

Finally, both films depict the power of religion on the society. In many cases, people are superficially religious. However, they follow religion teachings with no reluctance. In '*Wadjda*' we hear Wadjda, her mother, her classmates and the teachers read Quran on several occasions. Women cover their whole bodies and faces because of religion. Mix education does not exist because of some religious teachings. Actors say religious words, phrases and prayers all through the film. However, it

seems that religion has become like a tradition. People do not think religiously about what they do or say. Religion is even exploited and misinterpreted. When Wadjda wins the Quran competition, her teacher gets upset to learn that Wadjda is going to buy a bike with the money she gets. Therefore, the teacher scolds her in front of the whole school and decides that the money should be used to help people in Palestine.

In '*Where do we go now?*' the whole conflict and theme of the film is centered around religion. The priest and Imam, the church and the mosque, and the cross and Mary and the Quran are the symbols of the two religions. People fight, kill and hate each other over religion. The war in the village represents all wars in the world over religion. Labaki is very brave to address this issue in a time when the whole world, including Arab and Islamic countries, try to associate Islam with terrorism. However, Labaki sees the destruction in the region can be solved by cohabitation and tolerance.

The protagonist in both films is an exception in some way. Wadjda is the only girl who thinks of defying the values and traditions of her society. She wants the others to accept the change. On the other hand, Amal is exceptional in that she is independent. Although she is a widow, she runs her own business and she leads the other women in their plans to stop the conflict. Both films leave the audience with an open ending that is more real and expressive than having a solution.

### Differences between the Two Films

Despite the similarities between the two films, there are some differences. First, the conflict in '*Wadja*' is between an individual and the society whereas the conflict in '*Where do we go now?*' is between the followers of two religions. Second, in '*Wadjda*', women do not take any leading roles. The main character, Wadjda, tries to express her resentment about the inferiority of women. In '*Where do we go now?*', women have leading roles. Amal, the main character, runs her own business. In addition, unlike women in '*Wadjda*'

who accept their fate and do not want to change it, women in '*Where do we go now?*' are not happy about the village conflict nor are they happy about their role in society.

Women are used by men and have no freedom whatsoever in the former. In the latter, they exploit men and they have will to change themselves and change others. Furthermore, woman as a sex object is manifested in '*where do we go now?*'. This is shown when the Ukrainian band come to the village. The models use their bodies to attract men and dissuade them from fighting. They seduce the men by their minimal clothing and flirtatious movements. Labaki tries to show that women can use their bodies and beauty as a weapon to direct men in their own ways. On the other hand, '*Wadjda*' does not contain any direct seductive scenes. However, lust and sex is portrayed indirectly through women's talk about their beauty, wearing make-up and wearing sexy, though decent, clothes. Wadjda's mother made it clear that her main concern in life is to satisfy her husband. Even her thinking of buying the red dress for the wedding was induced by the fact that she wants to prove to the other women that her husband is sexually satisfied.

Moreover, it is very evident that men in the Saudi society look at women as sex objects. Even young girls are being harassed in the streets and watched even in their schools. Thus, the stereotypical image of women as sex objects is presented in both films though in different ways. It seems that the Arab cinema, like the western cinema, cannot dispense with the idea that men will keep

their sexual image of women.

Finally, while women in '*Wadjda*' go to work and get involved in the social and economic life, they accept their subjugation and do not intend to change it. They are dependent on men for everything. By contrast, whereas most women in '*Where do we go now?*' are housewives, except for Amal, they do intend to change the status quo. They also seem to be capable of solving problems even better than men.

### Conclusion

This research paper tackled two Arab films which were written and directed by Arab female directors. Although women in both films still play the stereotypical roles that were set for them since the dawn of the Arab cinema, these two films prove that women can covertly play major roles that affect the society in general and their lives in particular.

Unlike many of the previous Arab films, these two films defend women's rights and show that women can achieve their goals regardless of the obstacles they encounter. They can solve problems even better than men can. Women in the third millennium have started to fight against the society's traditions, values, and erroneous religious beliefs. In addition, women try hard to change men's and women's opinions about the roles of women in the society. Moreover, women can contribute to settling down disputes and conflicts that can take down the whole society.

### REFERENCES

- Aghacy, S. (Ed.) (1999). *Al-Raida*. 16, 86-87.
- Agwa, A. (2000). *The image of Women Portrayed in the Egyptian Movies Broadcast on Channel One on the Egyptian TV*, Cairo University, Mass Communication. Department, Cairo, Egypt.
- Al-Mansour, H. (Director) (2012). *Wadjda* Razor Film: Saudi Arabia.
- Arab Human Development Report, (2005). '*Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World*'. Retrieved from [www.arabhdr.org/publications/other/ahdr/ahdr2005e.pdf](http://www.arabhdr.org/publications/other/ahdr/ahdr2005e.pdf) <http://dx.doi.org/10.5860/choice.44-6583>.
- Ateya, A. (2014). 'Women Empowerment as Portrayed Through the Egyptian Cinema: Content Analysis of Films Produced between (2001-2011)'. *Journal of Middle East Media*, 10:61-85.
- Buskirk, W. (2015) *Egyptian Film and Feminism: Egypt's View of Women Through Cinema*. Cinethesia, 4, (2):4-23.
- El-Hadidi, M. (1977). *Image of Egyptian Women in Egyptian Film and its Social Consequences*. Unpublished PhD

- dissertation, Cairo University, Mass Communication Department, Cairo, Egypt.
- Eschholz, S. Bufkin, J. and Long, J. (2002). Symbolic reality bites: Women and racial/ethnic minorities in modern film. Sociological Spectrum, 22, 299-334. At: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02732170290062658>.
- Farrugia, M. (2002). The Plight of Women in Egyptian Cinema. PhD thesis, University of Leeds.
- Kharroub, T. and Weaver, A. (2014). 'Portrayals of women in transnational Arab television and drama series'. Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media, 58, (2):179-195. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2014.906434>.
- Labaki, N. (Director) (2011). Where do we go now? Lebanon.
- McGill, H. (2013). Wadjda [Online], posted in August. Available at: [www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/reviews-recommendations/film-week-wadjda](http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/reviews-recommendations/film-week-wadjda) (Accessed: 18 June 2015).
- Muzaffar, O. (2014). Western wrestling with 'Wadjda', posted on 27 February. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.rogerebert.com/far-flung-correspondents/western-wrestling-with-wadjda> (Accessed: 19 June 2015).
- Nassif, A., and Gunter, B. (2008). Gender representation in television advertisements in Britain and Saudi Arabia. Sex Roles, 58:752-760. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11199-008-9394-6>.
- Osenlund, K. (2013). Wadjda, posted on 10 September [Online]. Available at: <http://www.slantmagazine.com/film/review/wadjda> [accessed: 17 June 2015].
- Ramzi, N. (1995). Comparison between woman's and man's images in Egyptian drama – an analytical study. Cairo: UNICEF.

## الصور النمطية للمرأة في فيلمي "وجداء" و "هلا لويين": تحليل متعدد

أيمن ياسين، جينا سلامة \*

### ملخص

تسلط هذه الدراسة الضوء على فيلمين اثنين من الأفلام العربية الحديثة التي تناقش الصورة النمطية للنساء العربيات في دولتين مختلفتين كلياً، هما: المملكة العربية السعودية ولبنان. ويرتكز التحليل على فلمين عربيين "وجداء" و "هلا لويين؟" وتتعرض الدراسة للتحليل اللغوي والاجتماعي والنفسي لشخصيات النساء في الفيلم. كما تعرض إلى دور المرأة في المجتمع والعائلة. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أنه وبالرغم من أن النساء العربيات يعاملن معاملة دونية، إلا أنهن بدأن يلعبن أدوار أساسية في تغيير حياتهن وعقليات الآخرين، إضافة إلى إسهامهن في تغيير الصورة النمطية للمجتمع عن المرأة.

الكلمات الدالة: الصورة النمطية، صورة المرأة، اجتماعي، لغوي، السينما العربية.

\* جامعة الأميرة سمية للتكنولوجيا، الأردن (1). الجامعة الأردنية، الأردن (2). تاريخ استلام البحث 2016/02/23، وتاريخ قبوله 2016/05/29.