

The Women of Saudi Arabia

"ONE OF THE BEST FILMS OF THE YEAR. SOMETHING CLOSE TO A MIRACLE."

-Oliver Lyttelton, THE PLAYLIST

"FUNNY AND TOUCHING. DISCOVER WHAT CAN MAKE US HAPPY,  
BOTH AS MOVIEGOERS AND CITIZENS OF THE WORLD. 'WADJDA' DOES THE TRICK."

-Joe Morgenstern, WALL STREET JOURNAL

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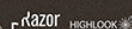
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# WADJDA

A SONY PICTURES CLASSICS RELEASE RAZOR FILM IN CO-PRODUCTION WITH HIGH LOOK GROUP AND ROTANA STUDIOS IN COOPERATION WITH NORDDEUTSCHER RUNDfunk AND BAYERISCHER RUNDfunk  
WITH THE SUPPORT OF FILMFÖRDERUNGSANSTALT MITTELDEUTSCHE MEDIENFÖRDERUNG MEDIENBOARD BERLIN-BRANDENBURG INVESTITIONSBANK DES LANDES BRANDENBURG SUNDANCE INSTITUTE FEATURE FILM PROGRAM DORIS DUKE FOUNDATION FOR ISLAMIC ART  
PRODUCED IN COOPERATION WITH DUBAI ENTERTAINMENT AND MEDIA ORGANIZATION AND ENJAAZ A DUBAI FILM MARKET INITIATIVE DEVELOPED WITH THE SUPPORT OF RAWI SCREENWRITERS LAB ABU DHABI FILM COMMISSION HUBERT BALS FUND PRESENT "WADJDA" REEM ABDULLAH  
ABDULLRAHMAN AL GOHANI AHD INTRODUCING WAAD MOHAMMED PRODUCED BY OLE NICOLAISEN EDITED BY THOMAS MOLT MUSIC BY PETER POHL COSTUME DESIGNER OLIVER ZIEM-SCHWERDT EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS MARC MEUSINGER SEBASTIAN SCHMIDT PRODUCED BY OLAF MEHL WRITTEN BY MAX RICHTER DIRECTED BY ANDREAS WODRASCHKE  
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY LUTZ REITEMEIER EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS HALA SARHAN CHRISTIAN GRANDERATH BETTINA RICKLEFS RENA RONSON LOUISE NEMSCHOFF PRODUCED BY AMR ALKAHTANI PRODUCED BY ROMAN PAUL GERHARD MEIXNER EXECUTIVE PRODUCER HAIFAA AL MANSOUR



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JOURNEYS IN FILM

educating for global understanding



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## About *Journeys in Film*

Founded in 2003, *Journeys in Film* operates on the belief that teaching with film has the power to help our next generation gain a richer understanding of the diverse and complex world in which we live. Our goal is to help students recognize cultural biases and racism (including their own), cultivate human empathy and compassion, develop a deeper knowledge of universal issues and current challenges, and encourage civic engagement as competent world citizens.

Award-winning feature films and documentaries act as springboards for lesson plans in subjects ranging from math, science, language arts, and social studies to other topics that have become critical for students to learn about: human rights, environmental sustainability, poverty, hunger, global health, diversity, gender, and immigration. Prominent educators on our team consult with filmmakers and cultural specialists in the development of curriculum guides, each one dedicated to an in-depth exploration of the culture and issues depicted in a specific film. The guides complement teachers' existing lesson plans and meet mandated curricular requirements, providing teachers with an innovative way to fulfill their school districts' standards-based goals.

We prepare teachers to use film effectively in the classroom through customized professional development workshops and online webinars.

Journeys in Film is an organization with proven results. Individual teachers worldwide and entire school districts in the U.S. have employed our interdisciplinary film-based curricula.

- Millions of students have learned about our multicultural world through Journeys in Film's middle school series, based on films from Iran, South Africa, South Korea, the Maori of New Zealand, Tibet, India, China and Saudi Arabia.
- Students are becoming inspired by the courageous contemporary and historical figures portrayed in films such as *Hidden Figures*, *The Post*, and *He Named Me Malala*.
- Films like *Schindler's List*, *Defiant Requiem*, and *Big Sonia* not only teach about the Holocaust, but also demonstrate how one person can make a difference in the lives of others.
- Teachers are using our outstanding documentary series to teach about historical events, American prison systems, the critical role of photojournalists, and positive psychology.

Journeys in Film guides help teachers integrate these films into their classrooms, examining complex issues, encouraging students to be active rather than passive viewers, and maximizing the power of film to enhance critical thinking skills and to meet the Common Core Standards.

### **Why teach with film?**

Today's students are the most visually literate generation in history. According to the Social Science Research Network, 65% of people are primarily visual learners. Today's students are more affected by media than ever before. They seldom need to be coaxed into watching films; after all, everyone loves a good movie. Through their own desire to be entertained, students become captivated learners.

Films have long been overlooked as an educational tool. We teach our students literature that originates from many places around the world, but we tend to forget that what often spurs the imagination is both visual and auditory. Film, which in minutes can be screened and beamed to every country in the world, is this extraordinary educational tool that goes right into the heart of different cultures. One of its strengths lies in its ability to present information rapidly and convey atmosphere, making that world come to life. It allows viewers to "feel" and thereby develop empathy skills, thus potentially increasing the likelihood of students connecting personally to the content, which in turn helps with understanding and analyzing concepts.

In teaching with films, we encourage our students to be critical consumers of what they see and teach them to consider the perspective of the filmmaker and challenge generalizations. Analyzing film and media is an empowering skill and one that is increasingly important for young people. To this end, it is imperative to integrate the film into a larger lesson, using it as a launching pad for historical and cultural exploration, as well as an examination of narrative perspective, character development, and media literacy.

**In one 7th grade student's words, "I like Journeys in Film because it just doesn't teach you like a book. It's better when you can actually see it happening. Films give a first-hand view of places and stories."**

## A Letter from Haifaa Al Mansour



I truly hope you enjoyed watching my film *Wadjda*. It is not only the first feature film I directed, but was also the first film ever shot in my home country of Saudi Arabia. It is also the first film directed by a Saudi woman. So it is the first of many things, but

certainly not the last, as Saudi Arabia has now lifted the ban on both the production and exhibition of films within the Kingdom. I know we will now see many more films coming from my country and am so excited about all of the amazing stories there that are waiting to be told.

*Wadjda* is a very personal story for me but it is not autobiographical. I was never as tough or rebellious as Wadjda when I was a kid! But I learned to go after the things I want in life just like her. The story was influenced a lot by all the girls that I knew growing up, that were so full of life and creativity but never found an outlet for all of their potential. I know they could have done so much more if they had just taken a chance and pushed the boundaries of their lives a little. So I wanted to make a film that celebrates the very difficult choice of stepping outside of ascribed social limitations to pursue a dream. It is never easy, but just like my dream of making films in a country where cinema was forbidden, I wanted to show how important it is to try. I believe we all have to work hard to create the change we want to see in the world.

My goal with *Wadjda*, and with every film I direct, was to make an entertaining film that people enjoy. If a film is not entertaining, the message will never get through. I also wanted to make a film that could be special to Saudis, and make the medium itself seem more accessible, while still

presenting a window to our world to international audiences. As the script developed, I constantly tried to look at it from the outside, to the universal themes that it spoke to. I didn't want to give foreign audiences the false impression that it would be an easy or acceptable thing for a girl to ride a bike around Riyadh, so it was hard not to want to put in a bleaker end to her journey. But I think the positive aspects of the film help audiences relate to the story more.

I knew that Western audiences had ideas and concepts about women in Saudi but didn't know much about the day-to-day life of women in the Kingdom. It is hard to be a woman in Saudi Arabia and I wanted the world to know how strong the women are in my country. They are tough and sassy and the new generation has a whole new outlook and window to the world. They are empowered and motivated to improve their status within the society in ways my generation could never have imagined. They are survivors.

So I hope this film gave you a little insight into the place that I am from. Most of all, I hope it encourages you to tell your own story, to think about what is special and unique about your journey, and how you can share your perspective with the world. We need to hear about every person that takes a risk, no matter how small, and pushes for something they believe in. Those are the stories that will move the world forward.

I am so honored to be included in your studies and sincerely look forward to someday hearing all of your stories.

Respectfully,  
Haifaa Al Mansour

## Introducing *Wadjda*

A young girl who desperately wants a bicycle of her own and tries to earn the money to buy it. A wife and mother who worries about losing her husband to another woman. These two story lines intertwine in the film *Wadjda* against the backdrop of conservative society in contemporary Saudi Arabia and the cultural pressures that this society exerts on women.

Ten-year-old Wadjda's friend Abdullah has a bicycle and to Wadjda his bike represents the speed and freedom that only boys seem to have in this gender-conscious society. Having found the bike of her dreams in a local shop, Wadjda makes and sells bracelets and runs errands to earn enough money to buy it, which sometimes gets her in trouble with her school principal. When she hears about prize money for the winner of a contest that tests knowledge about the Quran and the ability to recite the sacred text, she decides that, in spite of her previously lackluster effort in learning the verses, she is going to win this prize.

Meanwhile, her mother is coping with a long commute with a cranky and overbearing driver, the restricted job opportunities she faces as a Saudi woman, and her loneliness. Her husband wants a son and she is unable to give her one; his family is pressuring him to take a second wife. She is also trying to bring up Wadjda as an almost-single mother, and Wadjda is a handful.

Students will identify with Wadjda's longing for what seems to be an unattainable goal and with the difficulty that she has fitting into her strict and conservative girls' school; her worn sneakers, visible often in the film from the opening credits on, symbolize her independence and desire to go her own way in a world that wants to force her to hide her individuality and ambition. It will be more difficult for Western students to understand the totality of restrictions facing women in this society, restrictions that are challenged most effectively by this film. This curriculum guide will help students to enter this world and understand its nuances.

This award-winning film is the work of writer and director Haifaa Al Mansour, who learned about film from her father's videos, since movie theaters were not allowed in Saudi Arabia from 1974 to 2018. She is the first female Saudi director and the first director to make a feature-length movie filmed entirely in that country.

**DIRECTOR:** Haifaa Al Mansour

**WRITTEN BY:** Haifaa Al Mansour

**PRODUCER:** Gerhard Meixner

**CO-PRODUCER:** Amr Alkahtani

**EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS:**

Christine Granderath, Louise Nemschoff, Bettina Ricklefs,  
Rena Ronson, Hala Sarhan

**MUSIC:** Max Richter

**CINEMATOGRAPHY:** Lutz Reitmeier

Artwork from *Wadjda* appears courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics Inc.



# The Women of Saudi Arabia

## Enduring Understandings

- Women and girls in Saudi Arabia live with legal, cultural, and social limitations on their behavior, but some find ways to challenge and resist these limitations.
- Individual women and girls in Saudi Arabia react to legal, cultural, and social demands on their behavior in diverse ways: some reinforce the rules, others resist them.
- Women and girls in Saudi Arabia change their perspectives and behaviors over time and depending on context.

## Essential Questions

- In what ways does everyday life in Saudi Arabia impose restrictions on the lives of women and girls? Where do these restrictions come from?
- The film *Wadjda* depicts the lives of women and girls in various locations. How do the settings of home, school, and street (coming and going between home and school or work) present different challenges and interactions for the characters in the film?
- How did the director of *Wadjda* use cinematic techniques, such as sound, costume, and symbolism, to represent female characters' individual responses to their situations?
- What gendered limitations and expectations do you face in your own life? Where do they come from and how do you and others react to them?

## Notes to the Teacher

The modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was founded in 1932, with the Holy Quran serving as its constitution. The country's official policies and informal restrictions on women and girls, however, are not simply interpretations of Islamic doctrine, but rather rooted in tradition and culture. Rules restricting women's ability to travel without a male guardian, own property, or drive were enshrined in law, while others regarding the specifics of dress codes and public decorum tend to be enforced socially. As the sources and enforcement of restrictive expectations on Saudi women and girls are varied, so are their responses from acceptance to resistance, as in the case of activists who worked for the right to drive. The film *Wadjda*, the first Saudi film directed by a woman, depicts a range of reactions to a variety of gendered expectations.

Filmmaker Haifaa Al Mansour uses literary techniques, like characterization and setting, as well as cinematic techniques, like sound, costume, and symbolism, to highlight many restrictions on women and girls, as well as resistance and reinforcement of those restrictions by female characters. In film the use of such storytelling tools often reinforces the story. For example, the red dress that *Wadjda*'s mother considers buying helps to characterize the way the mother responds to the possibility of her husband taking a second wife (allowed by Saudi law); the costume symbolizes her only option, to emphasize her own sexuality and femininity, in resisting that possibility. Analyzing the ways in which such techniques come together in *Wadjda* helps reinforce the understanding of how women and girls navigate challenges in the Kingdom.



In this lesson, students will first reflect on the kinds of gendered expectations they face in their own lives. Next, they read “The Changing Face of Saudi Women,” a 2016 *National Geographic* article on women in Saudi Arabia. This article includes background on the sources of legal and social restrictions placed on Saudi women, as well as a range of reactions to them. Using this text as background, students will work in groups to analyze scenes in *Wadjda* to make sense of the different restrictions on women and girls and the various responses women have to these restrictions. The class will then consider how cinematic techniques enhance the viewer’s understanding of the main ideas behind the film. Finally, students write an essay or prepare a graphic to analyze gender expectations and responses in *Wadjda* or another film of their choice.

Here are some resources you might find helpful:

The Saudi Embassy’s webpage about Saudi Arabia

<https://www.saudiembassy.net/history>

A recent report on human rights in Saudi Arabia from Amnesty International

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/saudi-arabia/report-saudi-arabia/>

Current events and reports on conditions in Saudi Arabia from Human Rights Watch

<https://www.hrw.org/middle-east/n-africa/saudi-arabia>

An episode of *To the Contrary* about gender equality in Islam

<https://www.pbs.org/video/-contrary-gender-equality-islam1/>

#### COMMON CORE STANDARDS ADDRESSED BY THIS LESSON

##### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1**

Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

##### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.2**

Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

##### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.3**

Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

##### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.5**

Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.



**Duration of lesson**

5–6 class periods, including screening the film  
*Wadjda*

**Assessments**

Class discussions  
Completion of handouts  
Concluding essay or graphic

**Materials needed**

Video of *Wadjda* and projector  
Paper and pens for students  
“The Changing Face of Saudi Women” at <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2016/02/saudi-arabia-women/>  
Copies of **HANDOUTS 1** and **2**

**Procedure****Part 1: Rules for women in Saudi Arabia**

1. Ask students if they have ever wanted to do something important to them only to have an adult tell them “girls don’t do that” or “boys don’t do that.” Discuss some of the students’ experiences and share one or two of your own experiences if you wish.
2. Tell students they will be viewing a film set in Saudi Arabia featuring a young girl who really wants to own and ride a bicycle. However, to do so would violate the customs of her society. Mention that the film also shows customs that govern the roles of the adult women in her life. Explain that they should expect to see a lifestyle different from their own, particularly around expectations for women and girls. Ask them as they watch, to jot down a list of restrictions faced by female characters. Then show the film.
3. After the screening, ask students to share their responses to the film and answer any questions they may have. Then ask them to tell you the restrictions on women and girls that they noted as they watched. (Possible responses: *Wadjda*’s mother cannot drive to work on her own; women wear black *abayas* over their clothing; girls should not play with boys; girls may not stay outside where men can see them; *Wadjda*’s mother hesitates to work in a hospital where she would be in contact with men.)
4. Explain to students that the restrictions they noted come from various places: from religion, from the law, or from social customs. The rules might be enforced legally or socially. Then give students access on their



computers or devices to the article “The Changing Face of Saudi Women” at <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2016/02/saudi-arabia-women/>. As they read, have students complete **HANDOUT 1**, noting restrictions faced by women and girls in Saudi Arabia and identifying whether the restrictions are legally or socially enforced.

Suggested responses:

1. Students should list five of the following: having to cover the body and face with the abaya and niqab when out in public; restrictions on the color of the abaya in many places; needing to live with a male guardian; needing a male guardian to approve getting a passport or taking legal action; inability to sit with an unrelated male in a public place, such as a restaurant; separation of the sexes in department stores.
2. Conservative religious movements spread throughout the Middle East. The Saud family enforced conservative beliefs and customs as a way to avoid being overthrown.
3. Some women resent and even resist these restrictions; others help to enforce them by verbally attacking a woman who resists them.
4. Answers will vary.

## Part 2: Film techniques

1. Tell students you are going to show them some clips from the film they have just seen. Give students copies of **HANDOUT 2: SCENE ANALYSIS**. Then divide the class into groups, assigning each group one of the following scenes.

- Group 1: The opening scene (00:41-02:47)
- Group 2: Wadjda and her mother with their driver (4:32-6:07)
- Group 3: Wadjda races Abdullah on foot (07:38-09:21)
- Group 4: The girls in the school yard (15:00-16:58)
- Group 5: Wadjda is interrogated by the principal (26:41-28:35)
- Group 6: Wadjda’s mother’s friend discusses hospital jobs (45:28-47:00)
- Group 7: Wadjda and her mother on the roof (1:01:07-1:02:35)
- Group 8: At the hospital (1:09:16-1:10:35)

Tell them they are to choose two characters and two behavioral restrictions from the scene. Students should first note where this restriction comes from (using the *National Geographic* article as a support), and how each character reacts to it. (For example, at school, girls must wear black shoes. This restriction is social; the article notes that wearing black shoes is not a legal rule, but rather an informal one, in place because of the school. Wadjda resists this rule by wearing sneakers; the principal reinforces it. ) Point out the questions on the first page of the handout.

2. Run through the clips; this should take about 15 minutes. As you start each clip, alert the appropriate student group of their responsibility for analyzing the scene and taking notes on the first page of the handout.
3. Ask each group to share out their findings. Support students in making sense of where restrictions come from, specifically to note that what are often considered to be religious restrictions are often simply tradition or else very specific interpretations.

4. Explain to students that filmmakers use different techniques to highlight their messages. These include using music/sound (for example, to set tone and mood); costume (to conform to or contrast with settings and to illuminate character); and symbols (to represent deeper meanings). These are similar to how literary devices like imagery and onomatopoeia are used in literature; these techniques deepen the message through their appeal to different senses.
5. Rewatch several of the scenes listed above, this time asking students to note the use of music/sound, costume, and symbols, and to explain if and how each of these elements contributes to the main idea of the scene. Discuss each scene immediately after viewing.
6. Conclude by reminding students that gender restrictions and expectations exist in all cultures. These manifest themselves in many ways, including differences in how men and women dress, in speech, and in the degree of acceptance of LGBTQ individuals and communities. Remind them of some of the gender differences that they cited at the beginning of the lesson.
7. Assign students to do one or more of these final assessments, individually or in pairs:
  - a. Write an essay in which you discuss the ways gender expectations are resisted or reinforced in your own culture. What are the consequences for those choices? How do those consequences differ from those faced by characters in *Wadjda*? Do you think that these restrictions on Saudi women and girls will eventually be lifted? Why, or why not?
  - b. In writing or comic-strip format (where students sketch the scene and include notes on symbols, sound and music, and costuming choices), have students answer the following: If you were making a short film about the lives of people in your community, what are two ways you might represent the way individuals react to (resist or reinforce) expectations around gender?
  - c. Describe two ways in which gender is represented in a film or TV show you are familiar with. How do cinematic techniques clue viewers in to gender expression, expectations, and resistance or reinforcement to expectations around gender?

**Extension activities:**

Follow this method of analysis with another film featuring the responses individuals have to legal, social, and cultural limitations on their behavior. (Suggestions: *Hidden Figures*; *The Color Purple*; *Suffragette*; *Pride and Prejudice*; *Belle*; *Malcolm X*)



## Handout 1 ► P. 1

# The Women of Saudi Arabia: Guided Reading Questions

**Directions:**

Read the article “The Changing Face of Saudi Women” at <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2016/02/saudi-arabia-women/>. Then answer the following questions.

1. What are five ways in which the lives of women of Saudi Arabia are restricted?

a.

b.

c.

d.

e.



**Handout 1 ▶ P. 2**

## The Women of Saudi Arabia: Guided Reading Questions

**2.** Why were restrictions on women tightened in the 1980s?

**3.** According to the article, how do women feel about these restrictions?

**4.** The first driver's licenses issued to Saudi women were granted in 2018, after this article was written, although they must still have written permission from their male guardian to drive. Do you think this decision will lead to other changes, or not?



## Handout 2 ▶ P.1

# Scene Analysis

**Scene for analysis** \_\_\_\_\_

**1.** Give a brief summary of what happens to the characters in this scene.

**2.** What restriction(s) on girls and women do you see in this scene?

**3.** Do you think these restrictions come from religion, law, or tradition?

**Handout 2 ▶ P.2**

# Scene Analysis

**4.** How are the restrictions enforced?

**5.** How do the characters respond to the restrictions?



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