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Introducing Islam through a Subversive Saudi Drama

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In two classes that I teach—"Islam" and "The Qur'an"—I often assign the film *Wadjda* (dir. Haifaa Al-Mansour, 2012) as the first homework assignment. *Wadjda* tells the tale of a young girl (same name as the film's title) in Saudi Arabia who longs to own a bicycle, despite cultural norms that allow them only for boys. Her story takes place before a backdrop of a Muslim society, institutional corruption at her all-girls school, her parent's crumbling marriage, and a male-dominated world.

Most importantly, even for the uninitiated, I find that the film is plenty relatable to American college students. *Wadjda*, the protagonist, is an adorable, clever, and perseverant young girl and it's easy to become engrossed in her story.

I give students a pair of questions to consider as they watch the film, which we spend time exploring in the following class meeting: 1) In what ways does *Wadjda* challenge stereotypes (yours or American society's more broadly) about Islam; 2) In what ways does *Wadjda* confirm stereotypes about Islam?

These questions are straightforward, but I find that they work well because they set a tone that invites students to share their experiences, without risking right or wrong answers at the very beginning of the semester. The questions additionally push students to reflect on the complex

choices and characters in the film as well as on their own complexity as agents in the world.

Naturally, American students enter a course on Islam with any number of sensational ideas about Muslims. Western cinema, moreover, often presents Muslim characters as nothing more than bloodthirsty villains or quaint Orientalized simpletons (or both), which Jack Shaheen adroitly explores in *Reel Bad Arabs* (both the title of a monograph and documentary film). Indeed *Wadjda* could well be the first film college students ever see that portrays Muslims as something other than caricatures.

By and large students like the film, but I do struggle with how to make the plot sound more intriguing when I tell students about it on the first day of class (i.e., it's about a girl who wants a bike?); trailers are helpful. Because *Wadjda* features primarily female characters, it pushes Western viewers all the more, given the naïve ideas many of us have not only about Muslims in general but about Muslim women in particular.

The context of the film also offers much for reflection. It's the first feature film directed by a Saudi woman. It has received acclaim across many venues, including "Rotten Tomatoes" and the *New York Times*, which refers to the film as "sweetly subversive." It was also nominated as best foreign language film for the Academy Awards and adapted in 2015 as an English-language novel.

Despite all the benefits from assigning the film, I find that subtitles tend to invite a minority of students to complain, as the labor of viewing while reading taints their experience with the film. While I appreciate this as a consumer—plainly, subtitles can create more work for the film viewer, who often prefers a more passive than active experience—I think it also symbolizes a valuable struggle when encountering new cultures and new ideas. Additionally, unless the viewer knows to interpret a small clue (a shirt with KSA on it), or previously learned the context for the film, it's actually not even completely clear where the film takes place.

Throughout the film, Wadjda's aloof father explores the possibility of a second marriage, while her mother struggles to provide for her family and create a good life for her only child. Like many good films, the characters in *Wadjda* are complex and believable. Wadjda argues with authority figures and listens to Western music but also lives innocently in her own challenging world of early adolescence.

Toward the goal of acquiring her prized bicycle, Wadjda learns to negotiate a few under the table deals with members from her community (e.g., delivering secret messages between sweethearts), but her primary strategy to earn money involves entering herself in a Qur'an recitation competition. She practices with dedication and her hard work shows. Students won't usually catch a certain subtlety at this part of the film, but the verses recited in the competition (including their translations in subtitles) speak to many of the themes in the film—thus this scene on its own could work well pedagogically in a number of contexts.

While the film resolves the question of acquiring the bike (with an endearing twist), the overall ending leaves Wadjda's future open to interpretation. I think it leaves a key question for my

students: How can *Wadjda* and other females in the film demonstrate such agency and complexity if Muslim women are supposed to be oppressed? Even though this question presupposes a monolith of “Muslim women,” I think that the first part of the question, which acknowledges complexity and nuance, works well to emphasize one of the main themes of my courses: you can’t study religion without also studying people. Indeed, a required visit to a local mosque is among the most memorable aspects of my course for many students, so starting the semester with a drama helps set the stage for thinking about humanly complicated interactions with our course topic.

What makes the film so effective, though, is that it’s not just a central question that the film raises. It touches effectively on so many themes, subtly and explicitly, central to what I want my students to engage throughout the course: gender, Islamophobic stereotypes, “religion” vs. “spirituality,” public vs. private religion, multivalent characters, polygamy, and non-English languages. Islam functions subtly in the film, moreover, which works well pedagogically for communicating how religion often works in people’s lives—as an integrated but still striking aspect of culture and society, in relationship to the lives of individuals, with unique stories and experiences.

I’ve introduced other courses I’ve taught, as well, with feature films, and in this way, I think my approach with *Wadjda* is largely transferable as a model to begin a course. I would like to argue, as well, that it’s a strategy that could do well to receive more attention. After all, how important is the “hook” in any rhetorical expression? I’m of course not arguing that films are necessarily the best hook to capture students’ attention—I think this is largely a matter of taste—but I wonder to what extent that opening a course with a feature film is often overlooked because it doesn’t fit into the typical paradigm of how a college course is supposed to begin. Indeed, how *is* a college course supposed to begin?

Do you use films to frame your courses? What kinds of questions best help your students to make sense of their themes? Have you screened *Wadjda* for your students?

Please leave your thoughts in the comments section below!

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