

Issues/Discussion Forum

Women's World: Saudi Female Film Director Defies Saudi Prejudice

Brave women around the world are fighting back authoritarian rule in all walks of life. Haifaa al-Mansour is the first Saudi Arabian woman to direct a feature film – *Wadjda* – entirely filmed in Saudi Arabia. Now, the film is in Venice film festival.

A guardian.co.uk report on August 31, 2012 said:

Haifaa al-Mansour is either a pioneer or a pariah, depending on your point of view or what side of the street you live on. In some areas of her native Riyadh, she felt able to shoot unimpeded. In others she was forced to hide in a production van, directing her male crew members via walkie-talkie for fear of sparking protests.

"Saudi Arabia is a very traditional, conservative and tribal society," she explained as her finished film, *Wadjda*, debuted to warm applause at the Venice film festival. "Men and women cannot be on the streets together, particularly if the woman is seen to be directing the men. People would come and tell us to stop filming. It was a challenging experience, to say the least."

Bankrolled by German money and overseen by the producers of *Paradise Now* and *Waltz with Bashir*, Mansour's film lifts the lid on the role of women in Saudi society. The title character is *Wadjda*, a rebellious 11-year-old girl who enters a local Qur'an-reading competition, planning to use the prize money to buy herself a bicycle.

Wadjda hurries through the dusty streets, scandalizing the faithful with her Chuck Taylor trainers and indigo laces. She wants to race the boys and prove she's the best. Her mother, however, is horrified. "Girls don't ride bikes," she says. "You won't be able to have a child if you ride bikes."

Mansour admits that the film was inspired, in part, by her own early years. "I wanted to make a film that was close to my world," she said. "I was fortunate enough to be raised by liberal parents who gave me and my siblings plenty of space to be creative."

"Many of my school friends were not so lucky. They had so much potential but no opportunity. I suppose I wanted to make a film that would inspire them."

Wadjda is both a heartfelt coming-of-age story and a damning critique of Saudi culture.

Wadjda's father claims to love his wife, but is nonetheless off scouting a second wife who might bear him a son. Inside the school grounds, the girls are forbidden from touching the Qur'an if they are having their period and are summarily banned from laughing in the yard. "Do you not remember?" the teacher scolds them. "A woman's voice is her nakedness."

Mansour admits she is viewed back home as a "polarizing figure", but insists that the country is on the brink of change. "Yes, Saudi Arabia is a difficult place for women.

"Women have to stick together and believe in themselves and push towards what makes them happy. We just need to push a little bit harder against tradition. We need to do things and make things and tell the stories that we want to tell. And I think the world is ready to listen."

Early evidence supports her view. Mansour's film has already been snapped up for distribution in Germany, Switzerland and France, with further purchases expected in Venice this week. The one place where it is unlikely to play is in Saudi Arabia itself: the kingdom currently does not contain a single movie theatre. "Cinema is illegal in Saudi Arabia," Mansour explains. "We are hoping this will change."

A defiant princess

Months ago, news of Sara bint Talal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, a Saudi princess and niece of Saudi Arabia's ruler, seeking political asylum in the UK surfaced.

A BBC report on July 8, 2012 said:

Princess Sara sought political asylum in the UK for herself and her children

Princess Sara claimed she faced persecution by members of her family and also some of Saudi Arabia's authorities.

The mother-of-four said she had applied to the Home Office for political asylum. She moved to the UK in 2007. Since then, she was living in London.

The Home Office was not willing to comment on individual cases.

She said in a statement that after she and her children's leave to remain in the UK expired, they applied to continue their stay in this country. However, this was refused by the Home Office in 2011.

She added: "So, with deep regret, and as I have been left with no other choice, I have written to the UK Home Office to indicate that I, and my children, wish to be granted political asylum.

"My reputation has been besmirched in the media by a baseless and malicious smear campaign.

"For years I have endured all this in silence, while trying to resolve my situation with dignity through the normal channels, without fanfare or publicity.

"But my pleas to the Saudi authorities in the Kingdom have been obstructed and denied, and the Saudi embassy in London has turned its back on me."

Princess Sara went on to say that she has "nothing but respect for my uncle King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, and the people of Saudi Arabia".

"All I have ever sought is my legitimate rights, so that my children and I can resume our lives with dignity and I can resume my civil society and development work."

According to the Sunday Telegraph, a Saudi embassy diplomat said: "The embassy has been involved in settling her visa issue and residency issue in the UK. We have tried to settle this issue.

"This matter is of a personal nature so there is only so much the government can do. It's not a political matter."

A Daily Mail Reporter said on July 8, 2012:

A Saudi Arabian princess has caused a potential diplomatic row by seeking political asylum in the UK because she fears for her safety in her home country.

Princess Sara has accused senior Saudi officials of plotting to kidnap her and get her back to Riyadh, following 'baseless' claims she has sided with Saudi Arabia's political opponents.

She said she wants to stay in the UK as she has been assaulted, threatened and persecuted by her family and members of the Saudi authorities

The 38-year-old also says there have been abduction attempts made against her children, all for political reasons.

Sara is in the UK since 2007, after falling out with her 80-year-old father, Prince Talal bin Abdulaziz al Saud.

She has also been locked in a long-running inheritance battle with her brother, Prince Turki bin Talal bin Abdulaziz al Saud, over their dead mother's £325 million fortune.

Princess Sara said in a statement:

All I have ever sought is my legitimate rights, so that my children and I can resume our lives with dignity and I can resume my civil society and development work.

Princess Sara told the Sunday Telegraph the incident which saw her fall out with her father 'shook her world', but would not reveal more details about it.

Describing their relationship, she said: 'Everything goes back to a certain aspect that I don't discuss in public. Something happened with my father and he didn't take it lightly.

He retaliated against me and wanted to crush me. I had been his closest; I had been his favorite.

(Courtesy : Countercurrents)