

cinema



* Waad Mohamed is the bicycle-loving heroine of *Wadjda*.



* Haifaa al-Mansour... beyond the veil, behind the camera.

Wheels of change

Wadjda is the first ever film to be shot completely inside Saudi Arabia and treats a challenging subject in a subtle way. **By Gautaman Bhaskaran**

The Venice Film Festival must be given the honours for getting in the first ever Saudi Arabian movie, *Wadjda*, helmed by a woman, Haifaa al-Mansour. Also, it is indeed the first ever to be shot completely inside the country, and the work premiered last week in the Horizons slot to an overwhelmingly packed house.

Unfortunately, al-Mansour's trip to Venice was briefer than lightning, and she gave no interviews. There was not even a press conference. The reason for her quick exit was that she had to be at the Telluride Film Festival where too *Wadjda* was being shown.

However, she had spoken to the media earlier, and here are some quotes. "I feel so proud honestly to have made the first movie ever to be shot inside Saudi Arabia... It was an extremely difficult experience, but still, it was very rewarding and it says something about the country — that the country of Saudi Arabia is opening up, and that there is a place

for arts to grow, and that there is a place for women."

Despite all this, al-Mansour had to face several social challenges.

The ban on men and women mingling locally made it awfully difficult for her to direct male actors in outdoor scenes. "I had to stay inside a van and talk through a telephone sometimes or through the producer," she said.

The film captures the social mores of Saudi Arabia. It traces the life of 10-year-old Wadjda (Waad Mohamed), who wears sneakers beneath her abaya and is so vivacious and plucky that she just about breaks every rule in the community.

Her dream is to own a bicycle. But this is considered sacrilegious in a community which believes that a girl could lose her ability to conceive if she were to ride one.

However, *Wadjda* does not take no for an answer, and her determination stems from her other resolve, which is to beat a neighbourhood boy, Abdullah (Al Gohani), in a bicycle race. Seeing her struggle, when he innocently offers her his own cycle,

she quips, but then how could we have a race.

Wadjda's mother will not give the money for the cycle, and so the little

girls begins to run errands in school, like helping deliver love letters that older girls write to their boyfriends. She makes quite a pile, though not enough to buy that cycle. However, a Qur'an recitation competition at school comes like a blessing with huge prize money, and Wadjda prepares for it with diligence, eventually winning it.

A sub-text in the movie relates to Wadjda's rather liberal mother and her failing efforts to stop her husband

from marrying a second woman. But Wadjda is unfazed by all this, and single-mindedly devotes her attention to getting the bicycle from the shop. She charms the shopkeeper to reserve the bike for her.

The story is narrated with simplicity and is bound to evoke a debate both in the Middle East and elsewhere.

However, societal anger against the work may not be as bad as expected, given the fact that al-Mansour, who wrote the script, addresses the theme with admirable restraint; it could have easily gone overboard with melodrama.

The director handles some of the pivotal scenes with finesse. When a classmate of Wadjda's pulls out pictures of her wedding during a Qur'an class, the teacher merely smiles and wants to know the groom's age. When the girl says 20, the teacher smiles understandingly and says that such photographs are not allowed in school.

There are no harsh words here, no homilies... al-Mansour has brilliantly caught the trace of change in Saudi Arabia.

Although, the movie may be somewhat formulaic and not impressive in production values, there are a number of moments which are pretty interesting.

Wadjda may not be great cinema, but it succeeds in driving a hard message quite effectively.

So, where is Haifaa al-Mansour — who has made previously three short films and a documentary — going to exhibit her *Wadjda*?

There are no cinemas in Saudi Arabia. She says it will be distributed as DVDs and also shown on a Saudi television channel.

A plot that seems to have lost currency

Another woman director who made waves at Venice was India-born Mira Nair. Her movie on Islamic fundamentalism had not only a warm response from critics and others but got a standing ovation.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist, which opened the 80th anniversary of the Venice Film Festival, looks at Muslim radicalism from a new perspective. In fact with a lot of sympathy and compassion for those who, like the movie's protagonist, is pushed into radical thinking by America's often inconsiderate and ruthless ways of dealing with terror. Five-time Venice veteran Nair — who's *Monsoon Wedding* won the Festival's top Golden Lion Award in 2001 — tells us the story of Changez (played by Riz Ahmed), a young Wall Street financial analyst and his soured American dream. Nair's hero is a modern-day yuppie who flies to America to excel both intellectually and financially.

Adapted from Mohsin Hamid's Booker-shortlisted 2007 novel, Nair's latest work follows the life of young Changez, who leaves his family and home to study at Princeton, and finally lands a plum position in a top American firm as an analyst.

But 9/11 changes just about everything. Changez's love for America soon turns bitter. Arriving back in New York from the

Philippines after an official tour, he is strip-searched.

The humiliation becomes unbearable when his American girlfriend, Erica (Kate Hudson), herself getting over the tragic loss of a boyfriend, displays shocking insensitivity in her art exhibition, where one of her messages reads, *Down with the Burka*.

Changez throws away an extremely lucrative job and returns to Lahore in Pakistan to take up teaching, completely disillusioned with a country that rejects him after welcoming him initially. But life in Pakistan for Changez is not going to run placidly, and the film begins with a verbal confrontation between Changez and Bobby (Liev Schreiber), an American journalist/CIA agent, who is asked to help when a US academic is kidnapped. Bobby believes that Changez is involved in the affair, conveying what Nair describes as mutual suspicion between the Indian sub-continent and Western world.

Arguably not Nair's best shot, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is a little too long with uneven performances (especially Hudson) in a plot that may have lost its appeal with time. Religious extremism may still be an issue troubling most of mankind, but 9/11 could well have faded from memory. The narrative is often laborious, and what could have been an intimate story opens up into an unwieldy canvas with far too many characters.