

Resisting Through Relation: A Bowenian Family Systems Analysis of Emotional Agency in Haifaa Al-Mansour's *Wadjda*

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Abstract

Middle Eastern cinema has received increasing attention in academia for its cultural and gendered narratives, but family systems' emotional architecture in such films has received little attention. Filling this gap in the literature, this research applies Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory to examine intergenerational emotional processes in *Wadjda* (2012), the first feature film by a Saudi woman. In this study, I utilized qualitative, doctrinal methodology and applied deductive scene-based codes from Bowen's eight constructs, which focused primarily on emotional differentiation, triangulation, projection, and societal emotional process. Findings suggest *Wadjda*'s resistance extends beyond a symbolic or superficial act of defiance, whereby she is able to navigate maternal fusion, paternal absence, and societal constraints through her emotional processes associated with features of agency, autonomy and relational clarity. In social and familial systems, her portrait of agency exemplified systemically embedded agency that serves as a form of supported emotion-regulated defiance. By drawing on cultural and feminist film analysis with Bowen's clinical theory, I challenged traditional perceptions of social family systems, providing a different lens to view emotionally supportive family systems as active sites of gendered negotiation. The contribution from this study extends family systems theory beyond a therapeutic sense, offering another approach to understand how emotionally enabled dynamics provide resistance in patriarchal societies. Specifically, it became apparent that depictions of agency in patriarchal cultures through an emotional systems framework may provide a deeper analysis of resistance than only through a symbolic critique.

Keywords: Bowen's family systems theory; emotional differentiation; Saudi Arabian cinema; qualitative textual analysis; feminist film criticism.

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INTRODUCTION

From 2012 onward, Haifaa Al-Mansour's *Wadjda* was a great achievement for the history of Saudi cinema and in the international arena for the representation of Arab women. The first feature to be shot entirely inside Saudi Arabia and also the first one to be directed by a female Saudi director, *Wadjda* is a cultural breakthrough on the national level where gender roles have always been very traditional and heavily censored. Made during a time when guarded cultural reform was in place in the Kingdom, the movie seems to anticipate further and wider changes that would be realized with the implementation of Saudi Vision 2030, which has strongly focused on women empowerment in public life and across the cultural spectrum. In this spirit, *Wadjda* advances itself beyond being an unprecedented

cinematic achievement into an effective narrative intervention destabilizing patriarchal structures through the optics of everyday resistance. The film chronicles a Riyadh-based 10-year-old girl whose wish for a bicycle—as quite ordinary as it may-be revolutionary against current social norms that curb the mobility and autonomy of women.

Operating outside the local gendered frame, the narrative invests *Wadjda* with restrained but stubborn defiance, going against traditional femininities and advocating for individual will and choice. Upon her feature debut as a director, Haifaa Al-Mansour's film went beyond the international festival circuit, winning and garnering nominations at Venice, BAFTA, Dubai, and Palm Springs. *Wadjda* is thus the site of critical

acclaim and cultural intervention within the sociopolitical complexities of Saudi society, commercializing gender inequality via a great subtlety without an overt confrontation of it. Researchers have mined the richness of *Wadjda* through different interpretative lenses, locating the film within broader discourses of feminist theory, symbolic resistance, and cultural representation. Tate (2020) approaches the film from the perspective of cinematic realism and analyzes how Al-Mansour uses a restrained visual aesthetic to highlight the subtle struggles of Saudi girls-in contrast to orientalist representations.

Hodgson (2021) uses transnational feminist theory in a comparative examination of *Wadjda* and *Whale Rider*, pointing out that the bicycle is a transcultural image of freedom within patriarchal environments. Conversely, Giles (2019) provides a spatial reading of the movie, investigating ways in which female protagonists assert their spaces in public areas that have traditionally been dominated by men, i.e., streets, shops, and schools. These kinds of studies underscore the importance of *Wadjda* as a significant text for analyzing gender politics, symbolic resistance, and social norms in the Gulf.

However, while these readings have illuminated the film's external representations of agency, they have largely overlooked the nuanced intrafamilial emotional dynamics that structure *Wadjda*'s development. The private sphere especially the affective relationships between *Wadjda*, her mother, and her largely absent father has not been adequately addressed in the existing literature. These relationships, far from being narrative background, are integral to understanding how *Wadjda* navigates emotional stress, parental expectations, and inherited behavioral scripts. In this way, the film not only critiques cultural and institutional structures but also reveals the micro-level psychological processes that maintain or disrupt these systems within the family.

This study addresses this critical gap by offering a relational-psychological reading of *Wadjda*, grounded in Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory a theoretical framework that has been underutilized in film studies, particularly within Middle Eastern cinema. Originating in clinical psychology, Bowen's theory conceptualizes the family as an emotional unit, positing that the behavior of individuals is shaped by multigenerational patterns of emotional functioning and systemic anxiety. Unlike psychoanalytic models such as Freudian or Lacanian theory that focus on unconscious drives or symbolic orders, Bowen termed relational interdependence and emotional transmission as central mechanisms in understanding individual behavior within social systems (Bowen, 1978; Titelman, 2014). The key concepts of Bowen's Theory-Differentiation of Self, Triangles, Nuclear Family Emotional System, Family Projection Process, and Societal Emotional Process-are

the conceptual framework. The emotional dynamics underlying personal, family, and cultural level analysis utilize these concepts. In opposition to prevailing symbolic or ideological readings of *Wadjda*, this study draws from Bowen's model to explicate the role of emotional fusion, triangulation, and projection in observing the protagonist's identity and the ways in which she resists it. This framework provides an innovative opportunity to insert acts of agency into a conversation not only of political frameworks or feminist dialogues, but of emotional systems and relational environments.

While Bowen's theoretical model is exploited extensively in the family therapy and mental health fields, and is even being applied in early interdisciplinary research towards understanding family emotional systems in a visual context (Nichols & Davis, 2020) the application of Bowen's model in studies of non-Western cinema is inherently rare. In the context of Saudi Arabia, where family continues to be one of the core social institutions, and individual identity is essential towards familiar and communal expectations, Bowen's theories can be useful representations of the emotional processes that underlie cultural reproduction and forms of cultural resistance. In support of this notion, Kayyal (2015) and Zuhur (2012) argue, Gulf Cinema often reproduces entrenched social hierarchies and moral codes, with the family providing the source of regulation and also potentially offering a foundation for resistance.

These emotional dynamics are amplified in *Wadjda*. The nuclear family is characterized by emotional distance, internalized pressures of cultural context, and conflicting expectations of parents. The mother is cast as both loving and tyrannical, only demanding that *Wadjda* adhere rigidly to conservative social norms by not allowing her daughter to ride a bicycle, wear nail polish, or listen to any music outside of an ideology of her choosing, not out of ideological commitment but as a defense to keep herself safe from marginalization or desire to divorce her husband's inequitable investments in his career. The father's lack of both physical presence and emotional investment aggravates the inherent tension to create the classic emotional triangle in which the state of flux as the mother transfers her concern or anxiety onto *Wadjda*. The daughter becomes the triangle the in-between who has to mediate both parents' implicit emotional needs while substituting an emotional self which emerges from both parents.

This is consistent with Bowen's triangulation which describes a situation formed out of unresolved conflict and internal triangulating of one's children to sub-divide emotional intensity away from the occurred dyadic relationship. Notably *Wadjda*'s intentional acts of independence e.g. "I will buy it myself", "You have to make your own way" are not only instances of

independence but instances of differentiation of self whereby she works to conceptualize her identity independently from her familial emotional demands. The mother illustrated a desire to construct a daughter who would embody the societal and economic norm of her society and also herself as a project of her investment from her upbringing and projected concept of what the family unit should encompass or become. The mother's desire to create a conforming child indicates the family projection process where parental anxiety is transferred unconsciously to children. The family projection process restricts the spectrum of the child's behavior and emotional autonomy and causes conservative patterns that get repeated in families who may appear more liberal or supportive; thus, the institutional family constraint combines with wider family systems such as gender and religious conservatism to create an emotionally constrained field of conformity where the layers of societal or emotional processes manifest, ultimately at the levels of family systems, bargaining with stressors from their cultural surroundings. Institutions such as Wadjda's school setting, the Quran competition, and the clothing norms are institutional but most importantly also affective experiences that sculpt the dialectics that heighten the family's anxiety creating a potential undercurrent of normative behavior. However, Wadjda does not comply with the normative structure. Specifically, her participation in religious education for self-interested reasons, including ultimately shifting the school dress code, exhibited Wadjda's ability to push back against familial-communal emotional expectations by orienting herself towards her values. Wadjda's actions are not merely about symbolically resisting social norms, they are also smart and transformative acts rooted in emotional intelligence that interrupt emotional patterns of anxiety and fusion.

This Bowenian approach to Wadjda shifts the analysis away from resistant symbolic or sociopolitical acts to emotional differentiation and relational autonomy and how agency exists not only at the public level through resistance, but as a quiet emotional role restructuring within the family emotional experience as a system. Discussing through the lens of Family Systems Theory demonstrates how film can function as text and allows exploration of bonds of intergenerational trauma, emotional regulation in the face of emotional distress, and family generation to generation changes in system process, in relation to cultural structure. Additionally, the work contributes to the emergent territory being investigated in cultural psychological research, trauma studies and narrative therapy, as to how film as a medium can be utilized not only to reflect emotional experiences but critically analyzed as means to challenge enduring emotional structures.

Thus, the current work employed Bowen's Family Systems Theory explicably to understand the workings of intergenerational emotional processes

within Wadjda and how they developed the protagonist's identity and resistive behavior. As result the work brings both a theoretically insightful and methodologically rigorous framework to academic of film studies, cultural psychology and, Middle Eastern gender discourse. By illustrating the emotional architecture of resistance, it provides greater clarity to how filmic narratives reflect and potentially shift the emotional architecture frameworks of cultural transformation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

of their cultures, consequently redefining notions of femininity and the familial role of women. Using realist narrative structure, both films posit women as agents of culture rather than culture as an agent of women. This pluralist and grounded view of women opening and expanding upon their agency, resonates with women's continued cognizance regarding the obstacles imposed by their lives and constitutions of lived experience. Crupnick & Saffari (2022) approach the film as a commentary on systemic aspects of Saudi culture and interrogate how this informs women's experiences by analyzing the representation of Wadjda's mother, hypocritical and abusive patriarchy, and natural female friendship. Conclusively, women in Wadjda experience culturally enshrined pressures regarding femininity, mobility, and functionality across multiple contexts, akin to women contemporaneously defined by circumstance. The interrelated sets of pressure arising from these different yet intersecting forms of oppression function to constrain women from broadening their horizons of significant objects bicycles and whales, respectively that enable them to transcend gender-marked boundaries. Tate (2020) emphasizes the film's understated aesthetic and realistic sensibility in order to highlight the everydayness of resistance within constrained settings. Hodgson (2021) affirms this interpretation from a transnational feminist perspective, portraying the bicycle as a translatable icon of freedom in various environments. Murray (2013) and Lucca (2013) also add that Al-Mansour's film subtly criticized gender roles while adopting affective storytelling. Together, these readings bring attention to the embodied, affective nature of resistance in conservative environments.

SPATIAL AND SYMBOLIC DIMENSIONS

The film's spatial politics have also received significant attention. Ceuterick (2020) undertakes a spatial-feminist reading, observing how Wadjda reclaims spaces traditionally governed by male authority homes, schools, and public markets to assert her presence. These interpretations are supported by Chante (2021), who illustrates how material objects such as uniforms, bicycles, and walls are inscribed with gendered meanings. Giles (2019) contributes to this reading through analysis of domesticity and feminine agency in spatial contexts. Such analyses underscore Wadjda's capacity to embed sociopolitical critique within spatial and symbolic registers.

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND CULTURAL REPRESENTATION

Putri (2024) takes Tzvetan Todorov's narrative theory to analyze Wadjda's classical three-part structure of equilibrium, disruption, and resolution. This range of perspectives positions Wadjda's development as symptomatic of larger structural conflicts, and thus resonates with feminist cinematic traditions that suggest the personal is also political. Sari (2020) situates Wadjda within the emergent landscape of Gulf cinema, while acknowledging the hybrid aesthetics of the film, and its reframing of Arab female subjectivity in a dialectic between localism and globalism. Sari finds Wadjda emerging within the fluid ground of Gulf cinema as hybrid aesthetics and reframing of Arab female subjectivity are engaged in a dialectic between local realism and global aesthetic codes. Al-Rasheed (2013) frames these developments as emerging in a larger transformation of Saudi sociopolitical space, where the space of gender roles articulated through the State resonates with narratives in cultural texts such as sentence.

Socio-legal and Institutional Critique

Another reoccurring theme is the film's critique of sociolegal constraints in a subtle way. Omar (2021) suggests that Wadjda serves as an example of soft resistance: the film does not directly oppose religious or marital structures, but reveals contradictions between legally mandated structures and the everyday realities of these structures through narratives that tug on your heartstrings. Ceuterick (2020) and Mincheva (2020), meanwhile, offer detailed analysis of how women's autonomy is often structured by religious and patriarchal control through the discourses of morality and through rituals of obedience. Thus, while critiquing normative understandings of gender and gender roles, the film itself stays very much within a cultural and normative textuality.

Critical Synthesis

Across these perspectives, Wadjda is understood to be a multi-layered film that embodies realism, symbolism, and critique of feminist perspectives, but largely framed by cultural and institutional frameworks; the focus on culture and society often overlooks a key dynamic of the film: technically, intrafamilial relations, since it is the mother-daughter relationship, the psychological marks left by the father (or perhaps more suitably called a "dad" to present added meanings) and like these emotional resistances and/or metamorphosis is underexplored.

IDENTIFICATION OF THE RESEARCH GAP

While many critics have engaged in in-depth analysis of the film's symbolism, narrative, or cultural context, few commentators have focused explicitly on familial emotional systems in the film. Her identity is

constructed not only through societal constructs, but through her relationship with her emotionally volatile mother and absent father. These family-process relationships deserve further examination as emotional systems that may reinforce or challenge larger societal constructs. Therefore, this paper suggests a new approach by utilizing Bowen's Family Systems Theory to conceptualize the relational systems.

Theoretical Framework: Bowen's Family Systems Theory

Bowen's Family Systems Theory views the family as an interdependent emotional unit that is influenced by social networks at ground level, with respective patterns of functioning, emotional fusion, and systemic anxiety (Bowen, 1978; Nichols & Davis, 2020; Titelman, 2014; Calatrava et al., 2022). This academic framework provides a useful way of conceptualizing Wadjda's family system and its dynamics with regard to how agency and identity are navigated in dense emotional systems.

Differentiation of Self: Wadjda's actions around the bicycle can be understood as part of the process of differentiation, as she asserts her individuality while staying connected to her family. Wadjda's determination to participate in an aspect of childhood independent of her mother's control, marks an assertion of selfhood.

Triangles: As shown in the film, emotional (and conflicted) tension between Wadjda's parents is displaced onto her. She becomes the emotional conduit in the triangle between her parents. This triangular organization illustrates the systemic dysfunction of the family (Titelman, 2014).

Nuclear Family Emotional System: Despite emotional clarity to connect with Wadjda, her mother positions herself within emotional dysregulation rooted in insecurity in her marriage (i.e. loyalty and submission), and negative socio-cultural experiences, which show up as overprotectiveness.

Family Projection Process: The projection of abandonment fears or the need to not be non-conforming (the feminine) into Wadjda, is indicative of her mother's fears being enacted on Wadjda, where she assimilates her own insecurities into constraining gender identities and corresponding expectations (Titelman, 2014).

Societal Emotional Process: Societal norms contribute to family anxiety and serve to impose inflexible adherence to rigid and gendered roles, which prohibit differentiation (e.g. the emotional process is captured through restrictions on female autonomy).

CONTRIBUTION OF THE FRAMEWORK

A Bowenian analysis of Wadjda expands upon the feminist and symbolic analyses to identify a layer of

emotional causality and systemic continuity. It also allows for a psychologically informed understanding of how family systems perpetuate, or challenge, normative culture. This is especially pertinent in socio-political environments with stringent emotional regulation and gender normative behavior, such as Saudi Arabia.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This research utilizes a qualitative, doctrinal research design, fusing textual analysis with theoretical investigation focused on relational aspects in Haifaa Al-Mansour's *Wajda* (2012). Based in Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory, the analysis considered an interpretive stance concerned with patterns of emotional and systemic functioning in the fictional family structure of the film. The doctrinal research method embraced theories that are based on the frameworks of Bowen's constructs, to understand not just the findings, but their contextual relationship within a broader understanding of the Saudi ideologies, to not generalize based in data from subjects, and gain complimentary insight on the narrative and structural elements of the fiction film as united features of collision (Bowen, 1978; Nichols & Davis, 2020).

DATA COLLECTION AND SOURCES

Essential Primary Source: The film *Wajda* was the primary source. Elements of the narrative - including dialogue, scene progression, and visual (non-verbal) imagery - were organized and methodically quantified. The NVivo 12 software application was utilized to qualitatively code and organize dialogue excerpts, while Excel was used to track the timestamp of scene progression. Both NVivo and Excel permitted tagging and intersection of themes in the analysis, and subsequently, through spatial representation, offering visual representation of connections.

Secondary Sources: Scholarly investigation (e.g. Tate, 2020; Hodgson and Sullivan, 2021) analysis, as well as cultural critique was used to triangulate the context of findings from *Wajda* to ensure identifying interpretations are inductively rigorous, and to locate the findings within a more extensive feminist and socio-political discourse (Carter et al. 2014; Denzin, 1978).

Scene Selection Criteria A three-phase protocol directed the identification of scenes:

1. **Comprehensive Viewing:** The film was viewed four times with the aid of VLC Media Player with timestamp notes identifying candidate scenes. The comprehensively tracked scenes were noted for instances of interpersonal tension, generational conflict (vs. generational transmission of anxiety), or struggle for autonomy (vs. power struggles).
2. **Define Theme Added Segmentation:** The scenes were segmented into 3–5-minute units and organized in rank

order through applying the following criteria in accordance with Bowen's concepts:

- **Relevance** – Links to Differentiation of Self in relation to Triangles or the Societal Emotional Process.
- **Emotional Density** – Reflects a high level of interdependent emotions (i.e., an entire scene focusing on mother-daughter negotiations around gender norms) or high level of systemic anxiety.
- **Significant Narrative Shifts** – Sequences contributing to character development (i.e., *Wajda's* request for a bicycle).

3. **Coding Rubric:** A deductive rubric operationalized Bowen's (Table 1 includes an excerpt of the rubric). For example, Differentiation of Self was coded for assertion for autonomy (I) versus enmeshment (E).

CODING PROCEDURES

The analysis followed a deductive framework, with the eight core constructs of Bowen's theory serving as the a priori codes. A codebook described these constructs along with the possible cinematic indicators (e.g., "Triangulation" would consist of scenes in which conflict is redirected or deferred by delegating conflict resolution to a third-party). Two researchers coded 20% of the scenes on NVivo 12, first independently, then collaboratively, to establish intercoder reliability ($\kappa = 0.81$). Discrepancies were reconciled by ongoing dialogue and coding refinement based on comparing the literature (Carter et al. 2014) and re-reading the scenes to ensure remaining consistent in the themes and non-biased interpretation.

SAMPLING PLAN AND JUSTIFICATION

The sampling process was completed through purposive sampling, with 18 samples/scenes (27% of the total time for the film) selected to each representation of the constructs across Bowenian theory, until the theoretical saturation (Guest et al., 2006) was achieved. Each Bowenian construct offered representation of how systemic influences manifest (for instance the implications for triangulation with the mother-father-daughter relationship). The 18 samples reflected a point where we could be confident that we achieve the accuracy the density of the complexity without redundant material. Sampling stopped when there were no new Bowenian constructs, which was consistent with the qualitative inquiry, focused on depth rather than breadth.

Analytical Framework

Thematic analysis was completed through three stages:

1. **1. Micro-Analysis:** Each scene was approached through a line-by-line coding process, coding dynamics of dialogue and interaction to observe linguistic and contextual behaviors that reflected Bowenian constructs.

2. 2. Macro-Integration: The coded scenes were mapped onto Bowen's systematic framework, to identify the excitement that oscillated through the scenes (for example maternal anxiety, cultural restrictions and the impact it had on first-generation literacy).
3. 3. Triangulation: Our interpretation was compared to feminist readings of the film by different authors (for example, Hodgson, Hodgson, 2021). to balance intracultural and theoretical perspectives.

LIMITATIONS

Although the single-case design provides depth, it specifies limitations in sharing results with other contexts outside of Saudi patriarchal environments. The interpretive nature of textual analysis raises subjectivity concerns but I conducted several reflexivity protocols (e.g., researcher journals, peer debriefing) to mitigate this risk. It is important to note that the findings from this study are contextual in nature according to the rationale of the film and it would be incorrect to apply the findings to

real-life systems without due consideration. Future research could further the approach of this study by comparing the content of a number of films using the same methodology.

RESULTS

The analysis of *Wadjda* in light of Bowen's Family Systems Theory led to the identification of five main thematic categories, each of which aligned with one of the primary constructs associated with the theory:

- (1) Differentiation of Self
- (2) Triangles
- (3) Nuclear Family Emotional System
- (4) Family Projection Process
- (5) Societal Emotional Process.

This section presents detailed findings within each construct, supported by scene identifiers, verbatim dialogue, and behavioral coding. These results collectively reveal the systemic emotional patterns embedded in *Wadjda's* family dynamics and their intersections with broader societal norms.

Table 1: Summary of Bowenian Constructs in *Wadjda*

Construct	Representative Scene	Observed Behavior	Thematic Interpretation
Differentiation of Self	Scene 12: Wadjda asserts, "I will buy it myself" (00:45:12)	Pursuit of independence via Qur'an contest	Emergence of emotional autonomy
Triangles	Scene 8: Mother vents about husband's remarriage (00:39:00)	Displacement of anxiety onto Wadjda	Stabilization of marital tension through child mediation
Nuclear Family Emotional System	Scene 5: Mother scolds Wadjda over nail polish (00:22:47)	Control intensified during family instability	Emotional dysfunction under patriarchal stress
Family Projection Process	Scene 3: Shoe enforcement at home (00:17:30)	Gender conformity projected onto child	Intergenerational anxiety transfer
Societal Emotional Process	Scene 9: Principal punishes girls for laughter (00:29:15)	Internalization of public morality at school	Cultural anxiety mirrored in home regulation

1. DIFFERENTIATION OF SELF

Differentiation of Self is an individual's attempt to create an identity for him/herself while being emotionally tied to others. The process in *Wadjda* is slow and dependent on moments of choice by the protagonist, reflecting her emotional self-definition in opposition to family and societal constraints.

Sub-Finding 1:

Assertion of Financial Autonomy In Scene 12 (00:45:12), Wadjda declares, "I will buy it myself," a pivotal moment in which she severs dependence on parental approval. This statement occurs after she realizes neither her mother nor her father will purchase the bicycle for her. The coding in NVivo flagged this line under "assertive speech" and "boundary setting," both linked to Bowen's differentiation. The moment reflects a conscious act of self-reliance, performed without emotional cutoff from her family.

Sub-Finding 2:

Entrepreneurial Resistance Earlier scenes (e.g., Scene 7, approx. 00:34:00) show Wadjda selling

handmade bracelets and mixtapes. This behavior was coded under "autonomous problem solving" and illustrates her proactive strategy for navigating systemic limitations. Her actions demonstrate a desire for independence, not as a rejection of family, but as a strategy for self-actualization.

Sub-Finding 3:

Scriptural Strategy Wadjda's decision to compete in the school's Qur'an recitation contest (Scene 11, approx. 00:43:10) underscores her emotional maturity. By adopting a culturally sanctioned means to achieve her personal goal, she balances her autonomy with familial expectations. The scene was coded as "adaptive compliance" and reinforces Bowen's theory that differentiation allows for emotional engagement without fusion.

2. TRIANGLES

Triangles refer to a three-person emotional configuration that arises when tension between two individuals is displaced onto a third. In *Wadjda*, the most

stable triangle forms between Wadjda, her mother, and her father, particularly in contexts of marital instability.

Sub-Finding 1:

Maternal Displacement of Anxiety In Scene 8 (00:39:00), following news of her husband's intent to remarry, the mother channels her emotional distress into strict regulation of Wadjda's behavior. During a breakfast conversation, she criticizes Wadjda's clothes and silence, culminating in the line: "You will never get anywhere acting like that." This exchange was coded as "parental re-direction" and "triangulation," confirming Bowen's premise.

Sub-Finding 2:

Bicycling as Proxy Conflict Throughout the film, the bicycle symbolizes not only autonomy but also emotional displacement. The mother's refusal to support Wadjda's aspiration becomes a substitute for addressing her deeper fear of social rejection due to her husband's choices. In Scene 10 (approx. 00:41:25), her comment, "Girls don't ride bikes," functions as a protective mechanism against societal judgment, but also reinforces the triangulated stress dynamic.

Sub-Finding 3:

Paternal Emotional Absence The father's minimal involvement, such as brief appearances in Scenes 2 and 9, forces the mother to seek emotional stabilization through Wadjda. His detachment is a key condition for the triangle's persistence. The NVivo code "emotional vacuum" was applied to these scenes, indicating his structural absence from relational conflict resolution.

3. Nuclear Family Emotional System

Bowen defines the nuclear family emotional system as the recurrent emotional processes that govern family functioning. In *Wadjda*, this system is marked by control, unspoken disappointment, and anxiety, especially from the mother.

Sub-Finding 1:

The context of Scene 5 (00:22:47) is the mother's response to Wadjda's appearance prior to heading out to school. She asserts, "You're not going to school looking like this," as she proceeds to strip the nail polish off Wadjda's fingers. This particular moment was classified as "control under stress" and is a demonstration of emotional inflexibility founded on societal pressure.

Sub-Finding 2:

Emotional Volatility The mother is inconsistent in her emotional state, vacillating between affectionateness and harshness. In Scene 4 (00:18:15), she shares a tender moment with Wadjda while sewing but afterward exhibits intense anger upon taking a call from her husband. This emotional volatility has been

labeled as "emotional inconsistency" and reinforces Bowen's focus on systemic anxiety.

Sub-Finding 3:

Reinforcement of Gender Roles In Scenes 6 through 10, the mother figure reinforces traditional gendered behaviors by not allowing Wadjda to do such things as climbing trees or playing with boys. These behaviors, labeled as "gendered regulation," demonstrate the family's attempt to maintain stability amidst the norms of society.

4. Family Projection Process

The Family Projection Process involves the transmission of parental anxieties and expectations onto children. In *Wadjda*, the mother projects her own insecurities, fears, and societal frustrations onto her daughter.

Sub-Finding 1:

Physical Appearance as Projection Scene 3 (00:17:30) shows the mother criticizing Wadjda's worn sneakers and insisting she wear more "ladylike" shoes. Her statement, "People will think you have no mother," reveals the projection of social anxiety. This scene was coded as "appearance anxiety" and "maternal projection."

Sub-Finding 2:

Marital Rejection Internalized In Scene 13 (approx. 00:47:20), the mother laments her failure to keep her husband's attention and warns Wadjda not to make the same mistakes. The implicit message projects her own sense of inadequacy onto her daughter's life path. Coded as "vicarious regret," this moment marks an intergenerational transfer of emotional burden.

Sub-Finding 3:

Academic Pressure and Control The mother enrolls Wadjda in Qur'an lessons not only for religious instruction but to instill discipline. In Scene 11, she insists, "You will thank me one day," suggesting her efforts are not just educational but emotionally reparative. The coding here included "instrumental ambition" and "parental redirection."

5. SOCIETAL EMOTIONAL PROCESS

The Societal Emotional Process reflects how larger social structures influence familial emotional functioning. In *Wadjda*, this process manifests through institutional discipline, gender norms, and conformity pressures.

Sub-Finding 1:

Institutions of Discipline and Fear In Scene 9 (00:29:15), the principal instructs students not to laugh: "A girl who laughs out loud will bring shame." This statement, coded as "institutional anxiety induction,"

reveals how systemic fear has permeated the culture of the school-and, by extension, that of both the family.

Sub-Finding 2:

Surveillance of Female Behavior In Scene 6 (approx. 00:26:30), a neighbor whips up a comment on Wadjda's dress. The mother is quick to cover her daughter's head and pull her inside. Coded as "external behavioral correction," this instance shows the pressure of the societal gaze upon internal family regulation.

Sub-Finding 3:

Religious Language and Moral Policing The Qur'an competition is surrounded by a web of religious language supporting obedience and self-restraint. Here, in Scene 11, the headmistress proceeds, "Recitation purifies the soul," appealing to moral authority to restrain female behavior. This was tagged with "rhetorical conformity," indicating how language turns into an emotional weapon.

Sub-Finding 4:

Individual Disruption of Social Norms Wadjda's continuous acts of defiance range from wearing sneakers to speaking about ambition, climaxing in Scene 14 (approx. 00:53:00), wherein she asserts, "If you refuse me, you refuse the dreamers of the future." This moment was coded as "emotional boundary assertion" and constitutes an example of an individual refusing to be fused by society.

Together, these findings illustrate a multi-layered emotional ecosystem in *Wadjda*, wherein familial interactions are deeply intertwined with social norms. Each Bowenian construct reveals a facet of systemic tension, offering a textured portrait of how emotional functioning operates within and across relational boundaries.

DISCUSSION

This research indicates that Wadjda examines emotional differentiation and systemic distress in relation to a constrained family system. Through the lens of Bowen's Family Systems Theory, this analysis shifts the emphasis of Wadjda beyond gender symbolic representations to explore intergenerational emotional processes. The agency of Wadjda is formed not only through resisting patriarchal structures, but by managing anxieties and family fusion relations. Wadjda says "I will buy it myself" - what seems like teenage obstinacy is actually an instance of psychological differentiation with substantial consequences. Bowen refers to this differentiation as the ability to maintain a self while remaining emotionally connected to others. Wadjda's defiant conduct does not damage her relationship with her mother but alters it. We can see her emotional development through her ability to oppose her mother and her mother's anxieties which she has represented and absorbed through adverse cultural and marital

expectations, while not incorporating her mother's anxieties into herself.

The father's role complicates the emotional triangle usually constructed between mother/father/child. Even though he is physically invisible throughout most of the narrative, his spectral presence feeds the mother's fear of abandonment and failure to conform to the ideal femininity. This paradoxical absence dominates powerfully, heightening emotional tension and completely evading relational accountability. His retreat from emotional involvement casts Wadjda as the triangulated object toward whom the mother pours out her marital distress. What ensues is a rigid maternal regulation of Wadjda's behavior, especially in appearance and aspirations.

The mother's behavioral control is symptomatic of emotional fusion, a Bowenian term designating the collapse of emotional boundaries existing between family members. Her injunctions on clothing, being in public, and Quran recitation point to her own incapacity to differentiate her anxieties from those pertaining to her daughter's development. This fusion, plus the projection, forges an emotional milieu in which autonomy is feared yet needed. Wadjda may be said to have succeeded in that she slowly rebuffs fusion without enacting a total emotional boycott.

With Bowen's Family Systems Theory, analyzing Wadjda sheds light on how such psychologically theorized forces of emotional fusion, projection, and systemic anxiety are rendered onto a cultural plane. Though Bowen's theory begins in Western clinical contexts, its positing here illustrates its relevance in any social setting codifying familial loyalty and emotional regulation.

Of particular interest is the growth of Bowen's notion of the societal emotional process. In *Wadjda*, this process is not abstract; it is greatly textured across school rituals, gendered space, and religious discourse. For example, the principal regards laughter as shameful, and in this way, institutional anxiety and conformity are reinforced. These pressures seep into family systems, producing a feedback loop wherein mothers, like Wadjda's, regulate daughters as surrogates for societal surveillance.

This study clarifies distinctions concerning Bowenian concepts as exhibited in specific moments within the film, where differentiation occurs in Wadjda's setting of boundaries while maintaining relatedness. Fusion is found in her mother's collapsing of self-other distinctions, particularly in the turmoil of emotional volatility. Triangulation is structurally supported by the father's withdrawal that carves out the space for Wadjda to act as an emotional stabilizer. Society's anxiety disorganizes the nuclear family emotional system, while

projection lies in the mother's insistence on gender conformity.

This research contributes to conversations about Wadjda in feminist and cultural critique by providing an additional analytic view of the text. Previous readings by Ceuterick (2020) and Chante (2021) have analyzed the film through the lens of symbolic resistance and spatial reclamation. A Bowenian approach, rather than countering Ceuterick's and Chante's readings, contextualizes symbolic and spatial resistance not only in relation to Wadjda's affective family contexts, but also within a dynamic that includes the architecture of the emotional family system.

This study also nuances sociolegal critiques of symbolic resistance, particularly those like Omar's (2021) reading of "soft resistance." Omar (2021) emphasizes that the film provides scoped commentary on institutionalized hypocrisy and legal structures. This study is attentive to how imposed, external legal structures are internalized into emotional scripts. Wadjda's resistance is not "soft" because it eschews conflict, but because it operates within emotional systems shaped by gendered expectations. It is worth noting that the Bowenian framework conceptualizes emotional resistance as a recalibration of family emotional intelligences (not as a plan for resistance).

Additionally, the analysis consequentially expands feminist film theory. In Wadjda, psychological differentiation can be a form of feminist resistance in emotionally fused spaces. Wadjda's resistance is more than symbolic or narrative; its resistance works systemically in the emotional area, that is where will to power, loyalty, and identity converge. More generally, this study does not refute symbolic codes, it brings a psychological counterpoint and encourages scholars to undertake the effect of family emotional systems as sites of feminist resistance.

This research contributes to interdisciplinary film studies by bridging clinical family systems theory with cultural and gender analysis. It introduces new conceptual terrain for scholars of Middle Eastern cinema by arguing that emotional systems are not only private but politically and culturally conditioned. The analysis foregrounds emotional inheritance as both a constraint and resource for subversion, opening up a novel framework for interpreting cinematic resistance.

Moreover, the study advances systems thinking as a methodology for interpreting cultural texts. While commonly used in therapeutic or sociological contexts, systems theory here demonstrates its utility in narrative analysis, especially in contexts where state, society, and family co-regulate individual behavior. This methodological expansion strengthens calls for affective,

relational, and interdisciplinary approaches in film interpretation.

Several limitations temper the findings of this study. First, the exclusive reliance on Bowen's theory, while methodologically coherent, may have obscured other dimensions of psychological or cultural insight. The study does not fully address intersecting issues of class, religious authority, or trauma, which may also influence familial regulation and resistance.

Second, the study is limited to textual interpretation and does not incorporate paratextual or empirical materials. Engagement with production context, such as interviews with Haifaa Al-Mansour, script drafts, or internal discussions, can provide important information on authorial intent and representational strategy - projects like Youssef's "The Perfect Candidate" would yield multiple avenues for exploring artists' emotional differentiation, as an example of the gendered conflicts staged around family systems. Films like *Whale Rider* and *Persepolis* are other wonderful openings to explore how emotional differentiation, might be staged across cultural/ religious/ political contexts. These types of comparisons would test whether Bowen's theory has validity across cultures, and no doubt reveal how emotional systems operate uniquely according to contrasting normative scripts. The empirical extension literature includes reception studies, focus group studies, and psychological studies would, be beneficial in verifying/ validating interpretive claims against audience perceptions. For example, do viewers see Wadjda's act of resistance as psychological resistance, moral resistance, religious resistance, or feminist resistance? Furthermore, are family systems perceived similarly with regard Saudi audiences and non-Saudis? Further variation on these types of questions would further strengthen the analytical model proposed.

Lastly, researchers may also analyze intersections of family systems theory and related theories such as attachment theory, symbolic interactionism, and postcolonial affect theory. The resulting integrations can offer richer insights into the ways in which emotional and political identities are co-constructed in cinematic narratives. Exploring these intersections may allow subsequent studies to further position affective systems as a valuable analytical approach for interpreting both films and the societies that motivated them.

CONCLUSION

This paper has applied Bowen's Family Systems Theory in Wadjda, which provides a complex understanding of emotional systems that operate within individual, family and societal dimensions. Wadjda's main emotional conflict; attempting to achieve autonomy in a rigid emotional and cultural system of tacit conformity, reflects the core tenets of Bowen's theory.

Wadjda provides additional vision into how emotional differentiating, emotional triangulating, family projection process, emotional fusion, and societal emotional process develop in cinematic narrative and impact character development. When viewing Wadjda's journey through the lens of this emotionally recursive process that involves her negotiation of maternal dominance, paternal absence, and ultimately, cultural adherence, it has the potential to offer more than a singular act of rebellion. Through the lens of Bowen, her transformation is seen as a reinterpretation of emotional boundaries, rather than a discontinuity from. She described her moment of self-definition as her saying, "I will buy it myself," which exudes relational clarity; instead of severance from. Dialogue lines such as, "You have to make your own path," and "The only way to get what you want is to do it yourself," are some of the hallmark lines of dialogue in the film that indicate narrative turnarounds, and depict Bowenian insight. They illuminate how resilience and emotional clarity can mobilize an individual to function within, and potentially gain authority over, potent family and social systems. This reading offers an alternative layer of information to existing feminist, and symbolic interpretations, by introducing emotional causation and the thickness of relationality to acts of resistance. This transdisciplinary reading illustrates how although Bowen's Family Systems Theory was conceptualized in Western clinical environments, it has the capacity to make clear psychological dynamics within cultural texts. This reading can serve as a bridge between clinical theory and film studies, and contributes to a wider array of approaches to reading cinema as spaces of emotional systems, and intergenerational legacies.

Future studies could assess these connections through comparative research of family systems in other films like *Whale Rider*, *Persepolis*, or *The Perfect Candidate*, or through more empirical audience-based research. Given this study's interpretive limitations as it was dependent on a single theoretical view and did not do empirical triangulation, future studies might also incorporate data from directorial interviews, audience reception, or supplementary theories to investigate the emotional ecology of gendered resistance even more broadly. Overall, this study affirms the possibilities of systems theory to refract how we think about emotional agency, cultural conformity, and relational change in global cinema.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study's findings, future research should expand the application of Bowen's Family Systems Theory to comparative analyses across culturally diverse films that explore female autonomy within patriarchal contexts, such as *Persepolis*, *The Perfect Candidate*, or *Whale Rider*. Scholars may also consider integrating audience reception studies or director interviews to empirically triangulate textual

interpretations and capture emotional resonance from multiple perspectives. Additionally, incorporating complementary psychological frameworks such as attachment theory or trauma-informed approaches could further illuminate the intersections between systemic anxiety, familial control, and resistance. From a pedagogical and cultural standpoint, this research encourages film educators and policy advocates to recognize cinema as a medium through which emotional systems and gender norms are both reflected and contested. The analytical lens employed here underscores the value of systems-based methodologies in cultural discourse, suggesting their potential utility in interdisciplinary studies of media, psychology, and gender governance.

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