



## Gender Equality Concept of The #GirlsCan Hashtag in The Film Wadjda: A Semiotic Study of Roland Barthes

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### ABSTRACT

The issue of gender equality continues to receive attention in the media because it is able to represent social reality and shape public opinion in various parts of the world. This issue of gender equality is particularly contained in films that highlight the struggles of women in the patriarchal culture of Saudi Arabia. This study aims to reveal the representation of gender equality in Wadjda through Roland Barthes's semiotic approach with a focus on the hashtag #GirlsCan. The method used in this study is a descriptive qualitative method. Through this method, various films in the patriarchal culture of Saudi Arabia were used as research objects. Research data were collected using non-participatory observation guidelines of film scenes. Research data were analyzed based on denotation, connotation, and ideology. The results of the study show that objects such as bicycles, saving money, making crafts, public speaking, and receiving awards imply the ideology of gender equality. The symbols of gender equality issues emphasize women's ability to overcome social limitations, manage their lives, build independence, achieve achievements, and assert their existence in the public sphere. The film Wadjda plays a role not only as a work of art, but also as a medium for social criticism and a catalyst for discourse on women's empowerment, in line with the message of #GirlsCan.

*Keywords: gender equality, film, semiotics study*

## Konsep Kesetaraan Gender Tagar #GirlsCan pada Film Wadjda: Kajian Semiotika Roland Barthes

### ABSTRAK

Isu kesetaraan gender terus menjadi perhatian dalam media karena mampu merepresentasikan realitas sosial dan membentuk opini publik dalam berbagai belahan dunia. Isu kesetaraan gender ini terutama termuat dalam film yang menyoroti perjuangan perempuan dalam budaya patriarkal Arab Saudi. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengungkap representasi kesetaraan gender dalam Wadjda melalui pendekatan semiotika Roland Barthes dengan fokus pada tagar #GirlsCan. Metode yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah metode kualitatif deskriptif. Melalui metode ini berbagai film dalam budaya patriarkal Arab Saudi dijadikan objek penelitian. Data penelitian dikumpulkan menggunakan pedoman observasi nonpartisipatif terhadap adegan film. Data penelitian dianalisis berdasarkan denotasi, konotasi, dan ideologi. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa objek-objek seperti sepeda, menabung, membuat kerajinan, berbicara di depan umum, dan menerima penghargaan menyiratkan ideologi kesetaraan gender. Simbol-simbol isu kesetaraan gender menegaskan kemampuan perempuan melawan batasan sosial, mengatur hidup, membangun kemandirian, meraih prestasi, dan menegaskan eksistensi di ruang publik. Film Wadjda berperan bukan hanya sebagai karya seni, tetapi juga sebagai media kritik sosial dan penggerak wacana pemberdayaan perempuan, sejalan dengan pesan #GirlsCan.

*Keywords: kesetaraan gender, film, kajian semiotika*

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## INTRODUCTION

Gender equality is no longer unfamiliar today. Many women continue to push for equal rights and access in various areas of life. In society, women often face structural and cultural barriers that limit their participation in public spaces (Nurmalasyari et al., 2024). Various forms of media and cultural works draw attention to this issue. The representation of women, their mobility, and their encounters with patriarchal values have become recurring themes in discussions on gender equality (Jansson & Calderón-Sandoval, 2022). Shifts in traditional views on women's roles have grown stronger and more visible in social life. Many women now demand more equal space in different aspects (Nabila & Yurisa, 2025). This shift appears in digital movements that express freedom and encourage women to claim their rights. The hashtag #GirlsCan is one of the campaigns that reflects this spirit. It first appeared in 2014 through a collaboration between CoverGirl magazine and journalist Soledad O'Brien. It later spread and began to be used in different events, including the International Day of the Girl Child, organized by World Vision (#GirlsCan: Contribution of Azerbaijan's girls and young women is focus of UNICEF/ AFFA youth forum 2018; World Vision Launches #GirlsCan Campaign to Celebrate International Day of the Girl Child n.d.; Matusow, 2014).

Discussions of gender equality often draw on theoretical frameworks developed by feminist and social scholars. Judith Butler and Raewyn Connell explain that gender is not rooted in biological aspects. Gender is formed through ongoing social processes (Butler, 1999; Connell, 2009). This perspective opens space to reconsider patriarchal norms that restrict women. Media representations, whether in films or in digital campaigns such as #GirlsCan, also shape public understandings of gender. Media can strengthen women's empowerment by presenting narratives that challenge traditional stereotypes (Song, 2025).

Given the crucial role of media in shaping and reflecting social realities of gender, the hashtag #GirlsCan has emerged as a digital slogan that developed into a symbolic movement. This movement promotes gender equality by emphasising women's rights to access equal opportunities in public spaces (#GirlsCan: Contribution of Azerbaijan's girls and young women is focus of UNICEF/ AFFA youth forum (Matusow, 2014). Its spirit is reflected in various forms of media representation. One of them appears in the film *Wadjda*, written and directed by Haifaa Al-Mansour and produced by Roman Paul and Gerhard Meixner. The film premiered at the Venice Film Festival in 2012 and was released internationally in 2013 by Sony Pictures Classics (*Wadjda*, 2013).

*Wadjda* became the first feature-length film fully produced in Saudi Arabia and directed by a woman. Its story follows a young girl, *Wadjda*, who tries to buy her dream bicycle while facing social rules that restrict her mobility. The film won several international awards, including the Cinema Avvenire and the CICAIE Art Cinema Award in Venice, as well as awards at the Dubai International Film Festival (Amalia Hasan, Kuswardono, and Rahmawati 2022; Fikriyah and Muassomah 2025). The film's visual symbols, such as the bicycle as a symbol of freedom and the tension between tradition and modernity, make it a powerful depiction of the struggle for gender equality in a patriarchal culture. This aligns with the spirit of the #GirlsCan movement and shows how values of gender equality can be expressed through visual media.

Roland Barthes, in his semiotic theory, views signs not only as carriers of denotative meaning but also as bearers of connotative meaning that construct myths in society. The basic concept of this theory is the two-stage reading of signs, namely, first-order signification (denotation) and second-order signification (connotation), which then form myths or ideology (Barthes, 1974; Berger, 2014). The main elements of Barthes'



theory consist of the signifier, the signified, and the sign (Barthes 1957). Through Barthes' perspective, hidden meanings and messages in popular cultural works, including films, advertisements, and mass media, can be revealed in depth. However, interpretations of these meanings depend heavily on the researcher's point of view, opening space for subjectivity in analysis (Lustyantie, 2012).

Although previous studies have examined *Wadjda* from various perspectives such as feminism, narrative structure, and sociopragmatics, none have systematically analyzed how the film's visual symbols represent gender equality in line with the contemporary #GirlsCan movement through Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. The relationship between visual representation in film and digital movements remains underexplored, particularly in understanding how denotative, connotative, and ideological meanings in visual symbols challenge patriarchal norms and relate to women's empowerment movements. This research fills this gap by examining: How does the film *Wadjda* represent gender equality through visual symbols in alignment with the #GirlsCan movement when analyzed using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework.

This study aims to reveal the representation of gender equality in the film *Wadjda* through Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis with a focus on the #GirlsCan movement. Specifically, this research identifies and interprets the denotative, connotative, and ideological meanings contained in the visual symbols that appear throughout the film. Through the examination of key scenes that depict struggles for freedom of movement, economic independence, and access to public spaces, this study demonstrates how these visual elements construct narratives of gender equality that align with contemporary digital activism in promoting women's empowerment.

The results of this study provide both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, this research enriches the field of semiotics by showing

the connections between visual signs in film and contemporary digital movements, thereby expanding the analytical framework of Roland Barthes' semiotic theory in the context of gender studies and media representation. Practically, this research can serve as a reference for filmmakers, educators, and gender activists in creating content that advocates for gender equality. In addition, this study also provides guidance for designing multiplatform campaigns that integrate visual representation with digital activism, thus contributing to broader efforts in promoting women's empowerment through various media platforms.

Film is an effective medium for voicing issues of gender equality and depicting social realities (Sarwoko et al., 2022). This phenomenon appears in several previous studies that examine films and relate them to the concept of gender equality. Examples include the study by Alviyanti & Siraj (2023) on Analysis of Gender Equality in the Film *Barbie The Movie*, the study by Pratiwi & Angela (2024) titled "Perempuan dan Politik: Analisis Kesetaraan Gender Dalam Tayangan Film *Barbie Tahun 2023 Dalam Perspektif Feminisme*", the study by Hakim et al. (2024) on Semiotic Analysis in Understanding Gender Equality in the Film *SELESAI*, and the research by Rosyadi (2024) on the Representation of Female Stereotypes in the Film *Kartini* (2017). Previous studies have also examined the same object, the film *Wadjda*, though from different perspectives. These include Nabila & Yurisa (2025) with their focus on Cultural Representation and Women's Issues in the Film *Wadjda: A Feminist Perspective*, the study by Fikriyah and Muassomah (2025) titled *A Mirror of Saudi Social Reform: An Analysis of Haifa al-Mansour's Film "Wadjda" Using Tzvetan Todorov's Narrative Theory*, and the study by Amalia Hasan, Kuswardono, and Rahmawati (2022) on *Speech Acts and Language Variation in the Film Wadjda: A Sociopragmatic Analysis*.

As previously mentioned, this research shares several similarities with earlier studies that examined gender equality issues through media representations. The film *Wadjda*, which serves as the main object of

this study, has been analyzed using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. Prior studies include analyses focusing on cultural and ideological representation in Wadjda (Ridwan, 2024), as well as a study examining semiotic symbols in the dialogues of Wadjda's mother (Imanda & Khoiroh, 2024). The use of Barthes' semiotics in film analysis has also been applied to other works, such as research that explored denotative, connotative, and mythic meanings in the film *Bintang Ketjil* (Wibisono & Sari, 2021).

However, this study expands on previous research by connecting the film *Wadjda* with the digital movement #GirlsCan, using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework to reveal the implicit representations of gender equality in the film. The combination of semiotic analysis with contemporary social context is rarely found in similar studies, providing a new perspective that enriches discussions on women's representation in popular media and contemporary digital activism.

## METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach aimed at understanding social phenomena in a deep and contextual manner (Sugiyono, 2017, Razak, 2017, Mahsun (2014). The phenomena are understood from the perspective of the participants to describe the research object systematically and factually (Bogdan & Biklen 1992; Yuliani & Supriatna 2023). Through this approach, symbolic meanings in the film are interpreted based on the viewpoint of the subjects being observed.

The focus of this study is the representation of gender equality through the hashtag #GirlsCan in the film *Wadjda* (2013) using Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis (Barthes, 1957). The entire 98-minute film *Wadjda*, directed by Haifaa Al-Mansour, serves as the main object, while the subjects include the main character *Wadjda* (Fikriyah & Muassomah 2025), scenes depicting the struggle for gender equality, and visual symbols such as the bicycle, clothing, spaces, and body gestures that represent gender constructions within

the patriarchal cultural context of Saudi Arabia. The observation period corresponds to the research schedule, approximately from July to November 2025.

The primary data source in this study is the visual elements of the film *Wadjda*, supported by books, scholarly articles, news articles, industry magazines, and other relevant documents. Data collection uses a non-participatory observation technique by repeatedly watching *Wadjda*, taking notes on visual elements related to gender equality, and classifying them thematically into Barthes' analytical table, which includes denotation, connotation, and myth formed from visual signs. Data validation is conducted through increased rigor by repeatedly watching the film to ensure observational accuracy and deepen the interpretation of symbolic meanings. This technique ensures that the data collected are consistent and can be analyzed contextually.

Data analysis follows the Miles and Huberman model, which consists of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (B. M. Miles, Huberman, and Saldana 2014; M. B. Miles and Huberman 1994; Ferdianto & Yesino 2019). Relevant data related to gender equality are selected and organized into Barthes' analytical table to facilitate understanding. The results of the analysis are presented systematically and then concluded to identify how the symbols in *Wadjda* represent the struggle for gender equality associated with the #GirlsCan movement.

## RESULT

The results section presents the data in the form of scene excerpts and semiotic tables based on Roland Barthes' framework, which include the denotative, connotative and ideological meanings of each visual sign in the film *Wadjda*. The data come from six key scenes that represent gender equality in three thematic areas. These include freedom of movement, economic independence and access to public space. All findings appear without interpretive explanation. This section focuses

only on the visual elements and their classification in the tables so readers can view the data objectively before moving to the discussion section.

### 1. Representation of Freedom of Movement

This scene captures Wadjda's physical interaction with a bicycle. The visual elements observed include the bicycle as the main object, Wadjda's gestures, and the surrounding spatial context.



Figure-1  
 Scene-1 00:12:56–00:13:02 (5 seconds) Wadjda Touching the Bicycle

Table 1 presents the semiotic analysis of these elements at three levels: denotation, connotation, and ideology.

Table-1  
 Denotative, Connotative, and Ideological Meanings in Scene 1

Kinds of Meaning	Description
Denotation	A young girl wearing a hijab is holding a new bicycle that is still wrapped in plastic.
Connotation	A desire for freedom and a struggle against the norms that prohibit girls from riding bicycles.
Ideology	Women have the right to move freely and make their own choices without being restricted by gender norms.



Figure-2  
 Scene-2 01:33:07–01:33:14 (8 seconds) Wadjda and Abdullah Riding Bicycles

Table-2  
 Denotative, Connotative, and Ideological Meanings in Scene 2

Kinds of Meaning	Description
Denotation	A boy and a girl are riding bicycles on the city street.
Connotation	Equality in the freedom to move and engage in physical activities, as well as resistance to the prohibition against women riding bicycles.
Ideology	Women have the right to the same freedom of movement as men in public spaces.

### 2. Representation of Economic Independence

This scene shows Wadjda engaged in financial management activities. The visual elements include money, personal belongings on the table, and Wadjda's focused gestures. Table 3 organizes the semiotic analysis into three meaning levels connected to the theme of economic independence.



Figure-3  
 Scene-3 00:14:17–00:14:19 (3 seconds) Wadjda Counting Money

This scene shows Wadjda engaged in financial management activities. The visual elements include money, personal belongings on the table, and Wadjda's focused gestures. Table 3 organizes the semiotic analysis into three meaning levels connected to the theme of economic independence.



Figure-4  
 Scene-4 00:14:38–00:14:49 (11 seconds) Wadjda Making Bracelets

Table-3  
 Denotative, Connotative, and Ideological Meanings in Scene 3

Kinds of Meaning	Description
Denotation	The activity of saving and counting money.
Connotation	Managing money from her own efforts. Being diligent in planning and organizing her finances helps build her independence
Ideology	Women are capable of planning and managing their finances to make decisions about the results of their work and to achieve their dreams independently.

### 3. Representation of Public Space Access and Achievement

This scene records a formal public presentation in a school setting. The visual components include Wadjda's position on stage, the audience arrangement, and the spatial dynamics between speaker and listeners. Table 5 presents the semiotic breakdown focusing on meanings related to public space access and women's visibility



Figure-5  
 Scene-5 01:18:57 - 01:20:18 (1 minute 21 seconds) Wadjda Facing the Audience

Table-4  
 Denotative, Connotative, and Ideological Meanings in Scene 4

Kinds of Meaning	Description
Denotation	A young girl is performing in front of the public.
Connotation	The courage to speak in public shows that women can lead and express their opinions clearly.
Ideology	The view that public spaces do not belong only to men, and that women have the right to have a place and contribute within them.



Picture-6  
 Scene-6 01:22:45–01:22:51 (6 seconds) Wadjda Receiving a Gift

This scene captures a ceremonial award presentation at school. The visual elements include symbolic objects such as the book award, interpersonal interactions between teacher and student, and the formal institutional setting. Table 6 outlines the three levels of meaning identified in



this scene, particularly those connected to achievement and public recognition.

Table-6  
 Denotative, Connotative, and Ideological  
 Meanings in Scene 6

Kinds of Meaning	Description
Denotation	The awarding of a prize or recognition at a school event.
Connotation	Public academic recognition that the learning abilities of female students are acknowledged as valid.
Ideology	Girls' education is viewed as important within the social structure and becomes the foundation for strengthening their roles in public spaces.

**DISCUSSION**

The discussion in this study applies Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, which interprets signs through three levels, namely denotation, connotation, and ideology (Barthes, 1957). This framework is used to analyze each scene and explain how visual objects and gestures construct social meanings that extend beyond their literal appearance. These findings are then connected to the #GirlsCan movement, which emphasizes girls' rights to mobility, decision-making, and participation in public spaces as reflected in its digital campaign (Matusow, 2014). This connection strengthens the argument that the visual symbols in the film *Wadjda* represent values of gender equality aligned with the spirit of #GirlsCan.

Scene-1

The scene of Wadjda holding the bicycle is a strong visual representation of a girl's desire for freedom and mobility. At the denotative level, the image shows a young girl wearing a black hijab holding the handlebars of a new bicycle, looking at it with admiration and a desire to ride it. The connotative meaning is much deeper. Barthes (1957) explains that a sign does not stop at the

level of denotation but builds broader social meaning. In the cultural context of Saudi Arabia, the bicycle becomes a symbolic manifestation of freedom that is forbidden for girls because it is a vehicle ridden according to one's own will. This prohibition reflects patriarchal control over women's bodies and movement, based on the ideology that women must be protected and confined to the domestic sphere.

Wadjda's gesture of holding the handlebars becomes an act of resistance, showing her desire for the same freedom of movement that boys enjoy. Her gaze, filled with admiration and determination, reflects the emotional complexity of a girl's struggle against patriarchal cultural restrictions. The ideology that emerges is that women have a basic right to freedom of movement and to make their own choices without being limited by discriminatory gender norms.

This representation aligns with the concept of #GirlsCan, which emphasizes that girls have the right to move freely and shape their own choices. The scene not only portrays Wadjda's personal desire but also symbolizes the broader efforts of girls to reclaim their rights over their bodies and spaces. The bicycle becomes a clear symbol of how girls can construct their own freedom and empowerment.

Scene-2

Wadjda, wearing a black hijab, is seen riding a bicycle alongside Abdullah on the city street. The background shows urban buildings with bright lighting, giving a sense of freedom. Denotatively, the scene depicts two children riding bicycles in a public space. Connotatively, Wadjda's action of cycling conveys resistance against patriarchal rules that limit women's mobility. In Saudi Arabia (Al-Tayyar et al., 2021), women riding vehicles on their own, such as bicycles, are considered to cross social norms. Therefore, the bicycle in this scene becomes a symbol of freedom and self-control for women. The visual placement of Wadjda and Abdullah side by side conveys the message of gender equality itself, that women are capable of and have the right to engage in the same activities as men. It serves as a strong representation of the

#GirlsCan idea, emphasizing that women have the right to enjoy freedom of movement just like men.

#### Scene-3

The visual of Wadjda's hands counting her savings shows her independence in managing money and making decisions based on her own efforts. At the denotative level, the scene shows hands counting banknotes on a table filled with handmade bracelets she created herself. The connotative meaning reflects Wadjda's ability to manage the money she earns, challenging the assumption that girls are less capable in financial matters. The money she counts is the result of her hard work from selling her handmade crafts, which demonstrates independence and a clear sense of purpose. Her careful counting gesture indicates deliberate planning. Wadjda has a clear goal and tracks the progress of her savings. The colorful bracelets on the table highlight creativity and entrepreneurial spirit.

The ideological meaning suggests the belief that girls are capable of taking control of their lives through effort and planning they build themselves. This representation aligns with the message of #GirlsCan, which emphasizes that regardless of social or financial barriers, girls have the capacity to take control of their own economic situations, create strategic plans, and work consistently to achieve their goals.

#### Scene-4

The visual portrayal of Wadjda in the scene above represents the spirit and ability of a young girl to manage the results of her own creativity. Denotatively, it shows a girl making thread bracelets on her study table. There are also music tapes and a notebook she uses to record the sales of her crafts. Connotatively, it reflects an effort to challenge the belief that women must depend on men by highlighting economic independence. It shows Wadjda's ability to create something from her own skills and turn it into a source of income. This scene shifts the idea that women are not capable of managing money. The ideology that appears emphasizes that women can use their

creativity and their own work to build economic independence. The #GirlsCan concept is clearly visible in this scene because it shows Wadjda's independence and entrepreneurial ability. She earns her own money without relying on men, manages her business in an organized way, and turns her crafting skills into a source of income. It reinforces the idea that girls can earn their own money from an early age, which becomes an important first step toward gender equality.

#### Scene-5

The visual depiction of Wadjda in this scene represents the spirit and ability of a young girl in managing the results of her own creations. At the denotative level, the scene shows a young girl making handmade thread bracelets at her study desk. There are also music cassettes and a notebook used to record the sales of her crafts. The connotative meaning reflects an effort to challenge the idea that girls must depend on men in achieving economic independence. It shows Wadjda's ability to produce something from her own skills and turn it into a source of income. This scene shifts the assumption that girls are not capable of managing money. The ideological meaning emphasizes that girls can use their creativity and their own work to build economic independence.

The #GirlsCan concept is clearly reflected in this scene because it highlights Wadjda's independence and entrepreneurial ability. She earns her own money without depending on men. She runs her small business with an organized and structured system and turns her crafting skills into a source of income. This affirms that girls can earn their own money from an early age, which becomes an important first step toward gender equality.

#### Scene-6

The scene shows a female teacher handing a red-covered book to a female student on a stage. The teacher holds a microphone and gives the award symbolically. Wadjda receives the book with both hands. The dark background directs the viewer's attention to their interaction. Denotatively, the scene depicts the giving of an



award at an official school event. The book serves as a symbol of academic achievement. The stage emphasizes that the event takes place in a public school setting. Connotatively, it emphasizes that girls' achievements are valued openly. The book given as a prize represents the student's intellectual ability. The female teacher offers support to the student, creating an intergenerational bond between women that strengthens one another. This scene aligns with the message of #GirlsCan, showing that girls can achieve academic success, receive recognition in public spaces, and deserve acknowledgment for their efforts.

## CONCLUSION

This study reveals the representation of gender equality in the film *Wadjda* through Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis with a focus on the #GirlsCan movement. The findings show that visual symbols such as bicycles, saving money, making crafts, public speaking, and receiving awards convey a strong ideology of gender equality. The bicycle represents freedom of movement and resistance against patriarchal restrictions, while independent economic activities demonstrate women's ability to manage finances without depending on men. *Wadjda's* presence in public spaces through speeches and receiving awards affirms women's right to contribute and be recognized in the public sphere. The film *Wadjda* serves as a medium of social critique that voices women's empowerment within the patriarchal culture of Saudi Arabia while being a meaningful cinematic work of art. The visual representation in this film aligns with the spirit of the #GirlsCan movement, which emphasizes that women have equal abilities and rights as men to make life choices, achieve accomplishments, and be present in public spaces.

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