Modernist Saudi Cinema: A study of four films as reflections of the individual and society

Menia Mohammad Almenia
Associate Professor of English Literature and Criticism, Department of English Language and Literature, College of Languages and Humanities, Qassim University, 4518, 1 Buraidah, AlQassim, 52571, Saudi Arabia, ORCID ID is: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1401-2796

Abstract
The past decade has seen a steady movement of Saudi cinema from marginal to global visibility, signaling broad socio-cultural transformations within the Kingdom. This research analyzes through a modernist critical framework four contemporary Saudi films as key sites of narrative agency, ideological negotiation, and self-representation. Wadjda, Barakah Meets Barakah, The Perfect Candidate, and Scales are analyzed in this study textually and contextually. The study is unique as it goes beyond treating Saudi cinema as a peripheral cultural phenomenon to explore how it treats the constructs of identity, gender, religion, and modernity amid a rapidly shifting political and social landscape. Each film included in this study articulates a distinct strategy of cinematic self-fashioning: Wadjda highlights female resistance through childhood agency, Barakah Meets Barakah examines romantic intimacy under social censure, The Perfect Candidate critiques women's political participation, and Scales explores patriarchal sacrifice and collective memory. The narratology moves from externally imposed stereotypes to internal growth of characters that highlights the conflict of tradition with modernity, visibility with restriction, and global circulation with cultural sovereignty. This study positions Saudi cinema globally and locally, asserting that contemporary Saudi films serve as modernist cultural texts that mirror and reshape social realities. It highlights cinema's dual role as a reflective medium and a transformative force in expressing modernist identity and cultural self-representation.
Keywords: Saudi Cinema, Modernist Films, Arab National Cinema, World Cinema, Gender Representation, Cultural Sovereignty, Visual Culture, Critical Narratives

1. INTRODUCTION

Saudi cinema has grown rapidly in the last ten years transforming from being entirely non-existent into a tangible cultural presence on the regional and international film arena. This development is an indication of new trends in cultural policy and artistic production in the Kingdom. Saudi cinema is a significant system of cultural communication and identity-forming mechanism that utilizes visual, linguistic, and narrative modalities (AlShubaily, 2025). Film as a mirror of culture is also important in the expression of social values, norms, and identity. Culture negotiation and societal transformation in modernizing countries such as Saudi Arabia are visible in the domain of cinema. The film narratives demonstrate a continuity of negotiations among tradition, modernity, and globalization. This visibility of culture and interpretive dialogue within the contemporary media landscape is reinforced by such representations (Foley, 2025).
Traditionally, institutional and social limitations restricted cinematic expression and creativity in Saudi films to a great extent. Along with reforms that have contributed to the emergence of the industry, filmmakers have found it conducive to explore hitherto taboo themes of

identity, modernity, and tradition (Idrissi et al., 2025). The new productions in Saudi cinema reflect a transition from externally imposed images to those closer to home (Hajjaji et al., 2024).

Wadjda and Barakah Meets Barakah are representations of changes in the daily lives of the people in the Kingdom. These movies showcase for the first time the needs of individuals, gender interactions, and societal conflicts, issues that had never been explored in Saudi cinema. The Perfect Candidate and Scales explore the theme of political involvement and symbolic opposition, enlarging the scope of Saudi cinema. These films have been features at international festivals, which signals the entry of Saudi cinema into other countries as an artistic expression (Bakirmekik, 2022).

With growing viewership of Saudi cinema around the globe, there has been the fictionalizing of the stereotypical representation of the Kingdom as simplistic in the foregrounding of complex self-representations. These types of films can help change the world's perception of Saudi society and its intricacies. The positioning of Saudi cinema within the wider scope of world and modern cinema helps to establish that these works are not isolated curiosities but important cultural documents that can be read as mirrors of national identity and consciousness (Nabila & Yurisa, 2025). Figure 1 illustrates how Saudi cinema has evolved, as the institutions that used to restrain cinema have given way to greater freedom of expression. It brings to focus significant movies and common themes such as gender equality, tradition vs. modernity, civic participation, and empathy between cultures.

Figure 1: The Rise of Saudi Cinema, From Restriction to Global Engagement

The research aims to focus on contemporary Saudi cinema, which includes Wadjda, The Perfect Candidate, Scales and Barakah Meets Barakah, to explore how they construct self-representation, and negotiate socio-cultural and gendered identities within a modernist theoretical paradigm. The research explores how modern storytelling strategies shape cultural

and national consciousness. It also investigates Saudi cinema's positioning within the world cinema discourse.

1.1 Research Questions

1. How do contemporary Saudi films build narratives of self-representation in reaction to long-standing stereotypes?
2. In what ways do Barakah Meets Barakah, Wadjda, The Perfect Candidate, and Scales articulate competing visions of gender, citizenship, tradition, and modernity?
3. How do Saudi filmmakers deploy realism, romance, satire, and allegory as modernist narrative strategies?
4. How does Saudi cinema negotiate insider cultural knowledge while simultaneously addressing global audiences?
5. What role does cinema play in shaping emerging Saudi national consciousness within world cinema?

2. RELATED WORKS

Saudi Cinema Scholarship

Textual and critical analysis of the film were applied to examine the manifestation of social development and state-artist relations in Saudi cinema (Killick, 2025). The strengths of the film Naga by Meshal Al-Jaser are its unique narratology, use of symbolism, and multi-genre aesthetics with reference to the themes of religion, nationalism, and social liberalization. The film is set in the framework of cultural and economic reforms in Saudi Arabia.

The research adopted in-depth and semi-structured interviews with Saudi moviegoers to highlight the factors that affect the preferences of the audience and analyzes the relationship between cultural norms and movie-viewing experiences (Al Doghan & Ghouri, 2024). The study concluded that tension between globalization and tradition is obvious, while the key driving force that takes people to a movie are technology, immersive experiences, and cultural importance. However, it is possible that data in this study carried subjective bias due to the qualitative approach. Moreover, small sample size reduces the generalizability of the findings of this study.

The research employed a qualitative interpretive design utilizing descriptive analysis to examine how factors such as socio-political, religious, and cultural affect the development of mass media in Saudi Arabia (Muyidi, 2025). The analysis demonstrates that Saudi media is balanced in terms of modernization and maintenance of Islamic identity, technological development and control aimed at advancing national unity without compromising cultural portrayal. The study findings are again not widely applicable due to qualitative analysis of secondary which restricts empirical confirmation.

Arab National Cinema

The research thematically analyzed seven articles to identify the representations of Islamophobia and nationalism in Egyptian cinema and determine how filmmakers captured social complexities to shape the discourse (Bajuwaiber, 2024). Findings showed that Egyptian cinema creatively eulogizes empathy, breaks stereotypes, and changes social attitudes. Nevertheless, small sample size, use of secondary data, and absence of audience analysis limits the generalizability of the findings.

Quantitative content analysis was conducted in the framework of the Securitization Theory with a sample of three Hollywood movies to analyze the representation of Muslims (Khan & Umbreen, 2022). Accounts of security framing in American Sniper, The Dictator, and Cleanskin depicted Muslims as security risks, the most extreme projection being in The Dictator. However, small sample size, narrow range of viewing, and use of coding as a method of interpretation and analysis limit the generalizability of the results of this study.

The research employed critical and theoretical essays and interviews of postcolonial intellectuals in transnational screen culture to determine the role of postcolonial intellectuals as filmmakers and as filmmaking objects of transnational screen culture (Ponzanesi & Mendes, 2022). Results showed that intelligentsia redefine the theory and practice of postcolonialism by informing visual aesthetics, political language, and cultural representation, but the study gives little empirical insight into audience perception or social effect.

Quantitative surveys were used to evaluate narrative identity and cinematic self to explore the regulation of identity and self-instability connections (Dirghangi & Wong, 2022). Findings showed that during uncertainty cinematic identities improve self-clarity, resilience, and emotional stability although interpretations of causality and generalizability are restricted by self-report measures, cross-sectional design, and poor demographic diversity in this study.

The research conducted qualitative comparative analysis of Romanian fiction films produced between 1990 and 2021 to analyze the portrayal of national minorities by minority filmmakers (Iftene, 2024). Results indicated a trend towards self-representation of the minority directors and relocation of the narrative and debate of stereotypes, yet limited scope of the selected films and lack of audience analysis restricts the wide application of results of this study.

The Saudi films Barakah Meets Barakah and Wadjda are samples of modern cinema that portray ordinary lives and social change in the country (Fikriyah & Muassomah, 2025). They present individual aspirations, gender relations, and social conflicts in a manner that was never witnessed in Saudi film industry in the country. However, this study lacks audience evidence. Gender and agency are also central topics in these films, as they demonstrate how people cope with changing cultural demands (Almutairi, 2025). This can be associated with the larger debate concerning gender, tradition, and modernity within Middle Eastern film studies. Even so, the study overlooks regional diversity and long-term social impact.

World Cinema and Cultural Translation
The study applied theories of cultural imperialism and representation to the study of television, films, and digital media to discuss how media constructs and offers intercultural perceptions and cultural identities to the world (Wheatley, 2024). Results indicated that media strengthened cultural norms, facilitating cultural exchange worldwide and strengthening stereotypes, but theoretical deliberation and case study findings in this research do not allow comprehensive validation of results and their generalizability. Categorically reviewed relevant research articles published since 2006 and synthesized their main findings (Al-Malik, 2025) to aggregate academic views on transnational cinema and analyze its contribution as a cultural interlude in world filmmaking. Results indicated that transnational cinema enhances cultural hybridity, changes the representation of identity, and increases global impact via co-productions and

digital channels. This study is, however, restricted by the small sample size, limited time range and absence of primary empirical data.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study takes a mixed-methods approach that combines textual analysis, contextual reading, and comparison mapping of themes. This methodology provides analytical depth and consistency by placing films in socio-political, cultural, and global contexts at the same time.

3.1 Textual–Contextual Film Analysis

The research employs the textual analysis approach to evaluate narratology, visual style, symbolism and thematic focus in the selected films. It discusses through detailed comparison how gender, agency, and social change issues are expressed by the cinematic form.

- **Close Film Analysis (Textual Analysis)**

Close film analysis helps identify the relationship between cinematic form, cultural representation and social critique. These comparisons are presented in Table 1 to highlight the impact of romance, political drama, allegory and realism on contemporary Saudi film making.

Table 1. Comparative Overview of Narratology, Aesthetic, and Thematic Features in Selected Saudi Films

Reference	Film	Narrative Structure	Character Construction	Cinematography	Symbolism	Genre & Thematic Focus
(Omar, 2021)	Wadjda	Linear narrative emphasizing everyday life and social restriction	Centers on Wadjda's agency and determination, highlighting subtle female resistance	Natural lighting and tight framing reflect domestic and public spaces	The bicycle symbolizes freedom and personal autonomy	Social drama and coming-of-age film addressing gender norms
(Carew, 2016)	Barakah Meets Barakah	Alternates between private and public perspectives, revealing social tension	Represents urban youth negotiating intimacy under conservative norms	Vibrant cityscapes and dynamic camera movement	Public spaces and social media motifs critique performativity	Romance and social satire critiquing surveillance and relationships
(Carew, 2021)	The Perfect Candidate	Linear and politically driven narrative focused	Portrays the protagonist as a symbol of political	Medium and long shots situate the individual struggle in a social context	Campaign imagery and voting scenes emphasize civic	Political drama with social commentary on

		on civic participation	empowerment		engagement	women's rights
(Wijayanto et al., 2021)	Scales	Allegorical and episodic structure rooted in myth	Characters function as symbolic archetypes of gender and power	Stylized visuals with light–shadow contrast and slow motion	Scales, sacrifices, and rituals reflect patriarchal oppression	Fantasy, myth, and psychological drama critiquing social norms

3.2. Contextual Reading

The contemporary movie industry of Saudi Arabia is embedded in the socio-cultural and political transformations. Given the reforms envisioned in Vision 2030, Saudi filmmakers could leverage prevalent social issues like religion, gender, and social transformation to portray a society in transition through the creative medium of films. At the same type, they established a delicate balance between institutional frameworks, regulatory norms, cultural traditions, and creativity. The inclusion of Saudi cinema in international film festivals is proof of the popularity and reach of Saudi films, gaining them a foothold amidst the cultural diversity that is a benchmark of international screenings. These festivals provide cross-cultural communication that adds symbolic and economic value to Saudi films outside of the country (Shesha & Yusuf, 2021).

3.3. Comparative Thematic Mapping

The study uses comparative thematic mapping to identify and trace motifs in The Perfect Candidate, Scales, Barakah Meets Barakah, and Wadjda. The themes of mobility and restriction, romantic visibility, institutional power, mythic sacrifice, and feminine agency are predominant that can be analyzed to examine how narrative structures, development of characters, and use of symbolism are expressed in terms of socio-cultural and political dynamics within Saudi society. The issue of mobility and restriction is discussed by means of sexualized representations of spatial constraints, whereas romantic visibility underlines the bargaining of individual desire in public and private domains. Institutional authority is studied using images of state, social, and familial power with mythic sacrifice prefiguring allegorical forms of critique of moral and patriarchal conventions. Feminine agency is followed through the actions of the characters and narrative lines, which dispute or bargain with societal boundaries. This thematic mapping methodology is based on previous research on gender portrayal in Arab films which guarantees methodological rigor and allows for systematic comparisons between films (Alardawi et al., 2023).

3.4. Saudi films vis-à-vis world cinema

Saudi cinema can be placed in a wider tradition of modern, non-western cinema that follows local themes in contrast to the often-exaggerated versions of typical American values and life portrayed in Hollywood productions. In contrast to world cinema, the former are seen as transnational while the narration reflects sincerity to local culture and aesthetics, but themes are internationally identifiable. Contemporarily, Saudi discourse reaches global viewers through global circulation systems like international festivals, co-productions, and OTT platforms as facilitators. Non-mainstream cinema though authentic, face challenges in market penetration and cultural re-translation to enhance and modify culture specific voices.

4. From External Gaze to Narrative Agency

The shift in Saudi cinema from images imposed from the outside to storylines created in-house and based on regional realities and cultural experiences is examined in this section. It brings attention to the attempt of modern filmmakers to subvert stereotyped representations by taking narrative independence through self-representation in the film.

Emergence of Local Filmmaking

The potential response to these external stereotypes has been the rise of a new generation of Saudi filmmakers whose productions proactively address mainstream discourses through local voices and lived experiences. The films included in this study break monolithic representations, emphasize local contexts, yet are identified with by international audience. They build counter-narratives that challenge foreign representations of self-constructions rather than a passive adoption of foreign stereotypes (Nashef, 2022).

• Stereotypes in Global Media

The Western media traditionally show Saudi Arabia in reductive and stereotypical ways which are inclined towards the themes of oppression, gender inequality, and backwardness of the Saudi culture as part of the orientalist narrative. These representations not only do no service to local voices, but they are also present Saudi society as one monolith in which the convoluted social realities are flattened into exoticized tropes and fictitious ideas. Critical films and documentaries about these tendencies suggest that these expressions are politically motivated rather than being based on the authentic experiences of Saudis and they present the internal cultural dynamics in a distorted light. Literature on the media representations of the Arabs and Muslims reveals that the outsourced films often distort the different communities by portraying them as stereotypical, simplified figures, which in turn, shapes how audiences across the globe perceive them (Loubna, 2025).

• Cinematic Self-Representation

Modern Saudi filmmakers are the drivers of narrative agency in the rebuilding of national and internationalized image of Saudi society. Through the expression of their individual and community subjectivities on the screen, these auteurs transcend the aspect of being reactive in their act of storytelling to a proactive articulation of culture to create films as mirrors of intricate social dynamics, gender relations, and daily life experiences of the Saudi people. Further, such practices ensure that Saudi cinema gains independence from a stereotypical approach in the treatment of Saudi culture and identity through subtle narration (Rahmouni, 2025). Figure 2 depicts the transition of Saudi cinema from depiction of imported stereotypes to localized storytelling of oneself, the cultural self-image of the nation in the domain of cinema, and the role of cinema in reviving national identity.

Figure 2: Narrative Shifts and Cultural Agency in Saudi Cinema
Source: Author

4 . Key Findings

The findings in this study demonstrate how contemporary Saudi cinema contributes to cultural self-definition, social negotiation, and construction of national identity within the global film discourse.

4.1 Shift from Stereotypes to Internal Narratives

The selected movies indicate a definite shift in the imposed images of Saudi society to authentic ones based on local experiences and social realities. The emphasis on real-life, personal conflicts, and limitations of institutions is prioritized in Wadjda, Barakah Meets Barakah, The Perfect Candidate, and Scales rather than sensationalizing the cultural restriction as 'the' image. Focusing on the subjectivities of individual persons, these films build up internal stories of social transformation, generational conflict, and emerging identities in Saudi society. This transformation allows the Saudi cinema to act as a self-defining tool and not as an observation tool (Yousaf et al., 2020).

4.2 Cinematic Strategies

Wadjda is based on social realism and child-centered narration to predict gendered mobility and day-to-day opposition faced by children, especially girls. Barakah Meets Barakah unites the elements of romantic comedy and digital outreach to discuss intimacy in a surveillance state. The Perfect Candidate embraces political drama and institutional realism to explore power structures in bureaucracy. Scales uses allegory and symbolism to handle the theme of patriarchy. Seen together, these strategies highlight the role of genre, visual construction, and story structure in social commentary (Sakr, 2025).

4.3 Gender, Modernity, and Cultural Sovereignty

The issue of gender becomes one of the major points of negotiation between modernity and tradition throughout the films. Protagonists in the selected films in this study are epitomes of individual assertion in the face of discriminatory family values. Instead of showing modernization as mere westernization, the films show that modernization is a locally negotiated process influenced by cultural values and collective memory. This negotiation is an attempt to establish cultural sovereignty where social change is conceptualized as indigenous thought and not as ideological thought. In turn, gender representation turns into an instrument for expressing social reform as well as cultural continuity (Al-Maliki, 2025).

4.4 Saudi Cinema's Role in Shaping National Identity

Together, these movies can add to the formation of a modern Saudi national consciousness through the means of different picturizations of society. In this context, Saudi filmmaking serves as a type of cultural discourse that determines self-representation, enhances independence of the narrative, and defines the image of the Kingdom in the world film arena (Alhumaidi, 2025). A conceptual visualization of the key aspects of analysis in this study is shown in Figure 3 to demonstrate the interconnections between transformation of stereotypes, film practices, gendered negotiations of modernity, and national identity construction in modern Saudi cinema.

Figure 3: Conceptual Framework of Key Findings in Contemporary Saudi Cinema.
Source: Author

1. Thematic Mapping

Thematically, textual and contextual features are inextricably connected sets in the selected movies as presented in Table 2 and Figure 4. Narrative structure, characterization, visual style and symbolism combinedly give meaning to social change and identity. Global circulation, institutional structures and sociocultural development determine cinematic representation at the contextual level.

Table 2: Thematic Mapping of Textual and Contextual Dimensions in Selected Saudi Films

Theme	Sub-Themes	Analytical Focus	Key Findings	Interpretation
Textual Analysis	Narrative Structure	Examines linear, political, and allegorical storytelling patterns.	Films employ diverse narrative forms to portray social restriction, civic participation.	Narrative techniques support internally generated storytelling.
	Character Construction	Focus on agency, empowerment, and symbolic roles.	Female protagonists challenge institutional and societal barriers.	Indicates shifting gender discourse and emerging agency.
	Cinematography	Use of lighting, framing, stylized visuals, and spatial representation.	Visual composition reflects public surveillance, and symbolic struggle.	Visual language reinforces socio-cultural commentary.

|	Symbolism	Objects, rituals, and imagery conveying deeper meaning.	Bicycle (freedom), campaign imagery (political voice), scales and sacrifice (patriarchy).	Symbolism functions as indirect cultural critique.
	Genre & Thematic Focus	Social drama, romance, political drama, fantasy/allegory.	Genres are strategically used to address gender norms, intimacy, power, and tradition.	Genre diversity strengthens postcolonial expression.
Contextual Analysis	Socio-cultural Transformation	Impact of reforms and changing societal norms.	Films reflect a society negotiating tradition and modernization.	Cinema acts as a mirror of social transition.
	Institutional Frameworks	Role of policy, regulation, and cultural governance.	Creative expression expands within structured regulatory environments.	Shows balance between cultural control and artistic growth.
	Global Circulation	Film festivals and international exposure.	Saudi films gain recognition beyond national borders.	Enhances cultural legitimacy and transnational presence.
	World Cinema Positioning	Placement within Global South / Third World cinema discourse.	Local narratives interact with global audiences without losing authenticity.	Positions Saudi cinema as both resistant and integrative.
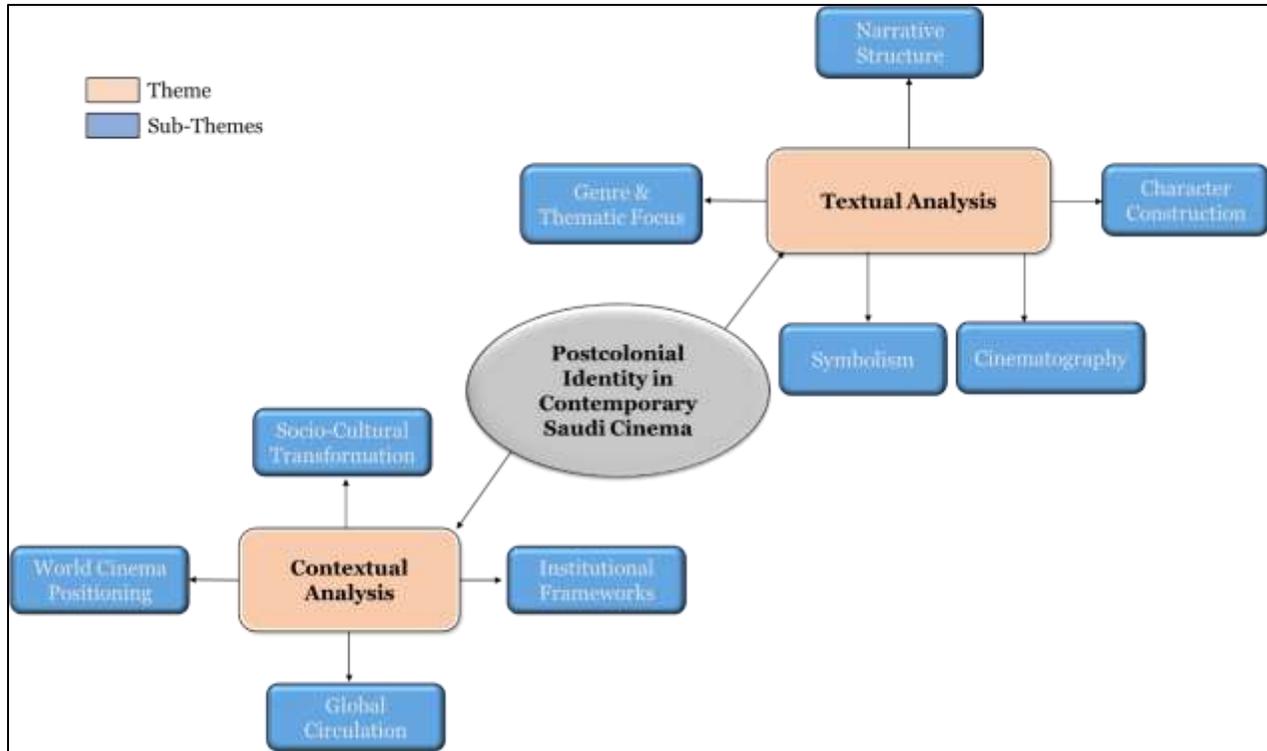
Figure 4: Thematic Structure of Modernist Representation in Saudi Cinema.

2. DISCUSSION

The study shows that modern Saudi cinema can be viewed as a critical instrument of contemporary self-representation for filmmakers in active re-negotiation of identity, gender, and social order. This finding supports earlier studies that identify Saudi cinema as a space for modernist cultural negotiation and self-representation (AlShubaily, 2025; Foley, 2025). In Wadjda mundane practices, mobility, and agency of childhood are symbols of resistance to societal restrictions. Through foregrounding of everyday experiences, cinema reinvents the independence of women as a socially constructed and culturally relevant practice and not an immediately personal issue (Fikriyah & Muassomah, 2025; Almutairi, 2025). Similarly, Barakah Meets Barakah places intimacy amidst digitally mediated and watched spaces, exposing the interference of technology in the sphere of emotional expression and social control. It uses both humor and romance to criticize the concept of social policing and, at the same time, negotiate cultural legitimacy (Carew, 2016; Al Doghan & Ghouri, 2024). Political participation is the key narrative agenda in The Perfect Candidate to explore the use of institutional power and gendered exclusion. The movie depicts the civic participatory experience as a slow and challenging activity and highlights how females negotiate administrations and societal pressures. This reflection is consistent with postcolonial views, according to which political agency has historically been situated and negotiated culturally (Bakırmekik, 2022; Killick, 2025). Scales makes this negotiation go into a mythical and symbolic space using allegory. The film scrutinizes the authority of the patriarch via the theme of sacrificial rituals and collective memory which depict how gender oppression is normalized through cultural discourses, and the immunity of the oppressor. Personal realm in the movie is shown as a reflection of a broader message for social change (Wijayanto et al., 2021; Iftene, 2024). Saudi movies picturize authentic society and individuals which are way different from the stereotypes, but the

narratology is such that a balance between the specifics of the culture and global accessibility is achieved. In addition, the results suggest that modernity, cultural sovereignty, and gender are closely intertwined constructs. The female protagonists always exist in the space between traditional and reformative as the processes of social change are negotiated in the lives of ordinary people through restructuring of institutions forced by opposition whether symbolic or tangible. Through these representations, Saudi cinema is gradually creating national consciousness and changing the perception of the Kingdom in the international visual culture.

3. CONCLUSION

This research has explored contemporary Saudi film as a lively foreground of modernist self-representation in terms of identity, gender relations, and cultural authority. It has demonstrated that Saudi filmmakers transcend the stereotypes present in the outside world to create authentic stories that capture prevalent social realities and change. Textual and contextual analyses indicate that different film genre such as realism, romance, political drama, and allegory, can be utilized strategically to convey the message of mobility, intimacy, institutional power, and feminine resistance. The narrative and aesthetic affordance of cinema allow filmmakers to express criticism of patriarchy, social monitoring, and political marginalization and remain culturally legitimate in global circulation. In addition, the analysis sheds light on how Saudi cinema influences the formation of national identity and captures culture. In this role cinema becomes an ideological production and social commentary on individual, social, and political spheres. It weaves modernity, tradition, and sovereignty into the fabric of an ongoing process of social evolution.

Limitations
Though a unique addition to existing literature on Saudi cinema, the inclusion of only four films is a limitation in this research. Audience feedback, industry trends and regional comparison can be incorporated in replications to add to an understanding of the social impact of Saudi films.

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