



**SSAD**

Stratejik ve Sosyal Arařtırmalar Dergisi

ISSN 2587-2621

Volume 6 Issue 2, July 2022

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Makale Türü/Article Type: Arařtırma/Research

Makale Gönderim Tarihi/Received Date: 09.02.2022

Makale Kabul Tarihi/Accepted Date: 09.07.2022

DOI: 10.30692/sisad.1070916

## **AN EXAMINATION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN SAUDI ARABIA WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF FEMINIST THEORY: THE PERFECT CANDIDATE**

*Suudi Arabistan'da Kadının Statüsüne İliřkin Feminist Kuram Çerçevesinde Bir İnceleme:  
Mükemmel Aday Filmi*

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**Atıf/Citation:** Melis Bakırmekik, "An Examination on the Status of Women in Saudi Arabia within the Framework of Feminist Theory: The Perfect Candidate", *Stratejik ve Sosyal Arařtırmalar Dergisi*, C. 6, S. 2, s.401-419.

**Abstract:** Religion and the traditions and customs that religion integrates into society often feed the patriarchy in the society. The geography where women suffer most from the relevant patriarchal order is the Middle East geography, where Islam and Islamic rules are concentrated. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, is a country governed by sharia, where the isolation of women in society is intense, and where women lack many basic human rights besides their specific rights such as participation in social, economic and political life. In this respect, it constitutes the most unique example of the status of women in Islam. Cinema is a branch of art that has influenced and been influenced by the social view since its existence. From this point of view, cinema constantly reproduces the gender roles imposed by the dominant patriarchal ideology. In the 1970s, with the women's movements that gained momentum, cinema became acquainted with the feminine woman narrative. In this context, the film adaptation of gender discrimination and sharply defined gender roles in Saudi Arabia adds a more specific perspective to the narrative of cinema and women than other examples. In this article, the film *The Perfect Candidate* by Saudi female director Haifaa Al-Mansour, will be analyzed within the framework of feminist theory, in which the manifestation of gender roles in the country in social life.

**Keywords:** Saudi Arabia, Film Analysis, Gender, Feminist Theory.

**Öz:** Din ve dinin topluma entegre ettięi gelenek ve görenekler çoęu zaman toplumdaki patriarkayı beslemektedir. Kadınların ilgili ataerkil düzenden en çok mustarip olduęu coęrafya İslamiyet'in ve İslami kuralların yoğunluklu görüldüęü Ortadoęu coęrafyasıdır. Suudi Arabistan ise şeriatla yönetilen, Müslüman olan dięer topluluklara kıyasla kadının toplumdaki izolasyonun daha yoğun hissedildięi, kadınların toplumsal, ekonomik ve siyasi hayata katılım gibi spesifik haklarının yanında birçok temel insan hakkı konusunda da noksan kaldıęı bir ülke olması bakımından İslamiyet'de kadının statüsüne dair en özgün örneęi teşkil etmektedir. Sinema var olduęu günden bu yana toplumsal bakışı etkilemiş ve ondan etkilenmiş bir sanat dalıdır. Bu açıdan bakıldığında sinema egemen ataerkil ideolojinin empoze ettięi cinsiyet rollerini sürekli şekilde yeniden üretmektedir. 1970'li yıllarda ise hız kazanan kadın hareketleri ile sinema da diřil kadın anlatısı ile tanış olmuřtur. Bu bağlamda, Suudi Arabistan'da yaşanmış ve yaşanmakta olan

cinsiyet ayrımcılığı ile keskin sınırlarla belirlenmiş cinsiyet rollerinin sinemaya uyarlanması da sinema ve kadın anlatısına diğer örneklerinden daha spesifik bir perspektif kazandırmaktadır. Bu makalede Suudi kadın yönetmen Haifaa Al-Mansour'un *The Perfect Candidate* (Mükemmel Aday) filmi, ülkedeki cinsiyet rollerinin toplumsal yaşamdaki tezahürünün ele alındığı feminist kuram çerçevesinde incelenecektir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Suudi Arabistan, Film Çözümlemesi, Toplumsal Cinsiyet, Feminist Kuram.

## INTRODUCTION

The concept of gender is used to reveal the cultural and social definition of women and men as different from biological sex, the way these two different sexes are distinguished in societies and the social roles attributed to them. While examining all these, the conjuncture, religious, social and legal structure of the relevant societies cannot be ignored. In this context, the gender roles attributed to women in Saudi Arabia cannot be analyzed independently of the Sharia laws prevailing in the country. Various rules and prohibitions are applied in Saudi Arabia that determine the social distinction between men and women. For example, while men in the country can have four wives, it does not matter which religion the chosen spouses belong to, but Muslim women can only marry Muslim men. However, every woman in the country, regardless of age, has to have a male guardian. However, it is seen that different reforms have been made in the various rules concerning women over time. For example, the ban on women to vote and hold important political positions in the country was lifted in 2015 with the freedom of women to vote in elections and to take part in the advisory council of the king. In addition, the ban on women driving was reformed and released in 2018.

Women are not the only group in Saudi Arabia where the management approach imposes various restrictions. Likewise, freedom of thought, print/visual press, internet and cinema industry also suffered from these prohibitions for a long time. Saudi Arabia is a country where all kinds of books, newspapers, magazines, visual or print media and internet access are subject to censorship. All media and communication tools in the country are under the control of the Ministry of Interior. Likewise, the works are examined by the Ministry before they are published, their contents are changed if necessary, and they are delivered to the public after these stages.

Cinema creates the reflection of the land where it was born through various means. Even though the connection between the shown and the real is broken, one can have an idea about the society and lifestyles with a single sign. At this point, it is important how the censored phenomenon is represented, especially in closed societies. The concepts within the scope of the representation process are language, signs and images. Hall (2017), stated that the concept of representation is different from projection. Representation involves selecting, presenting, formatting and structuring. The most important point here is the practice of making sense. Meanings are in societal function, not individual.

Cinema's representation of reality is a controversial issue. In addition to films that prefer to reflect reality, there are also films that use cinema as a tool to transform everyday life. Gender roles, on the other hand, are cultural forms that are constructed through various representations in cinema. Cinema, which is not only considered as a means of entertainment, as a form of representation, has the feature of revealing the relations between the sexes in social life, reinforcing the socially and culturally constructed roles, and also being an area where different lifestyles are produced and socialized (Timisi, 2010: 161-186).

The aim of this study is to reveal how women are represented in Saudi cinema and how the censorship that is expected to be applied in terms of social norms is realized or not. In this context, the study seeks answers to three questions:

1. How is the woman represented in the movie that is the subject of the study?

2. How was the censorship applied to the representation of women manifested in the film inquestion?
3. Are there any similarities/differences between the gender codes of the society where themovie was shot and the gender codes shown in the movie?

The study is limited to the cinema of Saudi Arabia, where the film industry has not developed due to the constraints of the administration. Another reason why the study is limited to Saudi Arabian cinema is that there are different approaches to women and their representation in the media in other Arab countries and it is not possible to talk about a common representation. In the study, the film *The Perfect Candidate*, in which a Saudi female director opposes social roles through a strong female figure, will be analyzed.

The film *Perfect Candidate*, which is the subject of the study, will be examined in the context of radical feminist theory, with the method of feminist critical discourse analysis. The reason why the film will be examined in the context of radical feminist theory is that patriarchy is seen as the reason for the subordination of women in the radical feminist approach and it is argued that the sexist system can only be destroyed by a radical change.

In this study, the characters, themes and concepts in question were determined as “the positioning of women as secondary characters”, “determination of the status of women by men”, “isolation of women from social, economic and political life” and “reproduction of gender roles, which are the dominant subject of feminist film criticism and the film content was also analyzed in this context. Feminist critical discourse analysis does not have a methodology that points to a specific and single process. In this respect, the focus is on micro structures such as dialogue, character and word choice rather than macro structures such as thematic and schematics in film analysis.

The study is important in terms of revealing the social role of women in Saudi Arabia and the representation of this role in the movie *The Perfect Candidate*, which is one of the rare films coming out of an underdeveloped industry. On the other hand, the scarcity of studies on the field in Saudi Arabia, a country where there are very few examples in the field of cinema and a country that creates a regime of oppression on women with religious administration, is important in terms of contributing to the relevant literature qualitatively. However, another importance of the study is to reveal the censorship applied to the representation of women in this film, which was shot by adhering to the political regime in Saudi Arabia. The sample of the study is the movie *The Perfect Candidate*, shot in 2019 by Saudi director Haifaa Al-Mansour in Saudi Arabia. The data used in the study were collected by watching the film recording and deciphering it. Relevant representation and censorship scenes were determined and analyzed. The sources of data used for the theoretical basis are theses, articles, journals and internet pages. For the study, firstly, the archive was scanned and the related movie was obtained by scanning on Google.

In the first part of the study, the place of gender and women in Islam will be examined in order to put the integration of gender roles into cinema in terms of the subject we discussed. In the second part, the place of women in social, economic and political life in Saudi Arabian society will be discussed. In the third part of the study, the feminist approaches that make up the analysisprocess will be explained. In this context, feminism as a concept, the birth stages of feminism, thechanges it has experienced in the future and new dimensions that are articulated to the concept will be examined. In addition, the radical feminist theory based on the analysis of *The Perfect Candidate* will be discussed. In the fourth and last part of the study, the film *Perfect Candidate*, shot by Saudi Arabian female director Haifaa Al-Mansour in connection with the aforementionedconcepts and approaches, will be analyzed within the framework of the aforementioned feministtheory.

### **Islam and Gender**

The role of religion is of great importance in studies on gender relations in Muslim communities. Feminists and anti-feminists debate the extent to which Islam allows women's liberation.

Opinions in the related debates vary between gender-discriminatory approaches that are touted as dictated by religion and progressive approaches to the history of Islam.

The Islamist approach argues that the initially egalitarian message of Islam was later distorted in various ways as a result of the emergence of the class system, the triumph of patriarchal interests, or the reactionary cultural resistance against imperialism and colonialist dominant powers. Others claim that Islam is essentially patriarchal and anti-women's rights (Kandiyoti, 1997: 84). After the spread of Islam among many nations, the view that women's freedom and equality lost their former power was prevailed by some. Some Islamist sections see the reason for this, not Islam itself, but those who practice it wrong.

It is reported that there is no difference between men and women in Islam, and both genders are equally responsible for God's commandments and prohibitions. According to Islam, both men and women have to serve God equally. Considering the fundamental rights and responsibilities, it is stated that there is no difference between women and men. Despite all this, in practice, women are separated and subordinated to men. While doing this, societies try to verify it by referring to the Qur'an and hadiths.

Although it is stated that God stands at an equal distance from men and women in Islam, it is seen that practice today is different from theory. Today, millions of women belonging to the religion of Islam are oppressed on religious grounds. While women living in Western countries were able to have basic human rights such as freedom and equality after the Second World War, these two concepts still seem to be a difficult goal for women living in Islamic countries.

The system of beliefs, values and traditions prevailing in the Middle East leads to the consolidation of the patriarchal structure. It is seen that the roots of the patriarchal structure existing in the Middle East go back to pre-Islamic times. Some religions affect the value system of the societies in which they spread. The religion of Islam can also be cited as an example of this judgment because Islam also accelerated the rooting of the patriarchal structure in the geography where it spread. Legal regulations based on the interpretation of the Qur'an also expose women to serious oppression policies (Kazemi, 2000: 453-466). When the relationship between gender discrimination and the state is examined, the efficiency of women in economic life also becomes an important parameter. Because it is unthinkable for women, who cannot participate in economic life and therefore do not have economic freedom, to fight for equal rights.

It also seems difficult to embrace Western feminism views in Middle Eastern societies, where gender discrimination has deepened and needs to be examined in relation to many facts. For example, according to the Western Radical feminist approach, women have a say over their own bodies and it is emphasized that if they are subjected to violence, they should avoid this violence in various ways. However, institutions such as family and religion, which have become a priority in the Middle East, make this escape impossible. It is an unacceptable phenomenon for a Muslim woman to leave her home even if she is exposed to violence, and to refuse to be under the control of a man from her family (Çağatay, 1990: 305).

It is relative to argue that the religion of Islam has dynamics that support gender discrimination. While some argue that gender roles are shaped by religion and that religion is the real cause of discrimination, others argue that this situation is revealed by those who interpret it independently of Islam. When the Middle Eastern communities are examined culturally, both before and after Islam, it is clear that basing the women's problem only on Islam will not be enough.

### **Status of Women in Saudi Arabian Society**

It is observed that the position of women in Saudi society, especially in the public sphere, is complex. The concept of male guardianship has been and still is one of the strong norms for Islamic women in Saudi Arabia. This concept has become an area of interest that needs to be studied for educated women. Every woman, regardless of age, is required by law to have a male

guardian. For a long time, women were not allowed to participate in the elections. But recently, the king has announced that women will be allowed to be candidate and vote for the advisory council in local elections.

The power imbalance between men and women in Saudi Arabia is not specifically stated in the country's laws, but rather embedded in social and governmental structures and practices (Doumato, 2010: 2-30). Women in the country do not have any access to the justice system, so they are subordinate to men in terms of their duty to represent them. Their current concern with system criticism also relates to their education. Another area that needs improvement regarding the status of women is the general freedom of women in the country. Because the current restrictions also cause them to be unable to go out of the personal space they have created at home and to access educational opportunities in connection with this.

In addition, women's participation in decisions within marriage is also limited by family members. This situation also prevents women from participating in society and playing a vital role in society. Women in Saudi Arabia lack equal access to employment and economic opportunities, as well as the extent to which women manage their own wealth is limited by social and religious factors ((Doumato, 2010: 2-30).

Some vital practices differ in various parts of the country. For example, what is considered normal in Jeddah is unacceptable in a more conservative city. The fact that some regions are more open to human contact due to religious tourism is accepted as an impact factor in stretching the traditions.

In the 1950s and 1960s, women in the country had a more equitable position compared to the following period. Restrictions on women in Saudi Arabia have changed over time. This is because the respect for the traditions adopted at that time showed less conflict with the social place of women. When the 1970s were approached, a sharp change was observed in the management understanding of the country and this change also affected the social life. In this period called "Sahwa", a series of laws that were especially involved in women's attire, known as "black abaya" and obliging outerwear, came into force. These laws, determined by a religious committee, turned into radicalized sanctions over time.

The political and social structures adopted by countries governed by sharia law, such as Saudi Arabia, are based on male-dominated views, and female leadership is unlikely to be defended. Sharia laws and tribal culture define gendered roles in Saudi society (Leslie, 2014). These cultural roles and practices of tribal culture have caused women to experience gender discrimination in various areas of society and shape their position in society.

The participation of women in business life as well as social life is very limited in Saudi Arabia when compared to other countries. For example, it is known that women make up only 21% of the Saudi workforce (Saudi Gazette, 2008). However, it is thought that the position of women has reached a higher point with the increase in women's participation in higher education in the country and the implementation of current changes. Yet it is clear that women in Saudi Arabia still have very limited political and social rights.

### **Historical Development of Feminism Concept and Radical Feminist Theory**

Although feminism is a concept from the 20th century, its real existence is based on the struggles that ignited ideas such as freedom and equality that emerged with the French Revolution in 1789. The progress of industry, science and technology, the dissolution of feudalism, the concentration of the population in certain centers, and the widespread involvement of women in business life resulted in a change in traditional ties and mentality (Kaplan, 1999: 6).

While the bourgeoisie was calling for freedom at the same time, this led to another exploitation. In order for labor to be sold in this new market, feudal relations had to be broken. This situation

indirectly created a form of oppression for women and closed them to the private sphere created by capitalism. In this period, women who shared the views that would form the basis of feminist thought and started to think about politics, art and science formed the first steps of feminism. At the same time, women belonging to the working class are considered as another group that takes this step. In general, the women's movement, which was started with the aim of equal rights, is accepted as the beginning of feminist thought.

Robert Dictionary defines the word feminism as a doctrine that envisages expanding the role and rights of women in society (Mitchel, 1984: 17). Focusing on the political aspect of feminism, Çaha (1996) defined feminism as a political movement that basically aims to change the power relationship between men and women. Çaha has questioned the relationship between men and women in a wide range from family, education, business world, political life, culture and history. (Çaha, 1996: 41). Similarly, Mitchel (1984) evaluated feminism as an ideology that could guide women's liberation.

In the old periods of history, women, who could not even be treated as second-class people in some places, on the condition that they differ according to the societies, started to raise their voices in England in the 17th century (Mitchel, 1984: 25-33). In mass and institutional terms, women began to defend their rights in the 19th century, which was the pinnacle of economic and political transformation. In the aforementioned period, European women were the first group to raise their voices by participating in political and social movements. Because with the Industrial Revolution, industrial capitalism and the transition of the political orders of the states to representative democracy, the situation and position of European women have been deeply shaken. With the decline in the economic and political importance of the family, the necessary environment for feminist reaction has been created (Jaggar, 1988: 3). All these developments have led to the emergence of feminism as an academic discipline that seeks answers in order to address women as a political and economic problem and to solve this problem in the process.

Alliances emerged between communism, socialism and feminism, which led to change in Europe in the 19th century. Since this period, an organic link has emerged between the women's rights struggle and the socialist revolutionary movements. This explains why feminists often feed off of left-wing ideology. Because, according to feminists who claim that women's liberation is "a social revolution problem", the main reason for women's negative situation is institutions such as family, private property and the state, which are on the target board of left-wing ideology (Reed, 1985: 93-94). Feminist thought became stronger as it spread, and as it got stronger, women began to exist in social, political, academic and religious environments. In the following process, associations related to the subject were established and publications were started.

Right after the First World War, women in Western countries gained the right to vote and be elected, and they began to become an important actor in both national and international politics. Because, sexual romanticism, which emphasizes the "superior features" of women, has left its place to the current of sexual rationalism, which argues that women are not different from men and therefore there is no rational side to the oppression of women (Jaggar, 1988: 5).

After the 1960s, feminist movements began to change dimensions. First of all, sisterhood, which is built on a relationship of solidarity and support among all women, has been put forward as a unifying ideology (Mitchel and Oakley, 1984: 11-12). In addition, in the years when the freedom struggles of blacks, The Third World, homosexuals and other oppressed, victimized or deprived groups were popular, feminists also increased the women's liberation and liberation movements by expanding them in terms of meaning and scope (Jaggar, 1988: 5). However, despite the new dimensions they gained, feminist thought in this period was fed by left-wing movements that emphasized the concept of freedom, similar to previous periods.

There is no single and universal definition of feminist theory. This is because the relevant thinking is integrated with many fields. Groups with different perspectives presented various perspectives

on the theory. Feminist thought is basically a rebellion against gendered culture and patriarchy. Since its emergence, feminist thought has continued to serve women's struggle by interacting with Marxism, liberalism, existentialism, radicalism and local culture.

Radical feminism sees patriarchy as the reason for the subordination of women and argues that the sexist system can only be destroyed by a radical change. Radical feminists think that patriarchal thought determines the relationship between the sexes and argue that an economic or political revolution place will not be enough to resolve the existing segregation. Radical feminism focuses on changing the moment rather than saving the future. It sees the institution of marriage and the family as the center of the patriarchal system of thought, and argues that domestic relations should be placed on a more democratic basis. According to radical feminism, the way women and children are oppressed are similar to each other. Capitalist and patriarchal societies strengthen the emotional bond and economic dependence of children on the family and thus weaken the children. Since the class oppression of women and children is surrounded by the literature of cuteness, it is more difficult to fight against it than against open oppression (Firestone, 1993: 99). Radical feminism unites the purpose of these two groups, which are oppressed by patriarchy, and attributes their liberation to the overthrow of patriarchy.

Another issue that the radical feminist approach emphasizes is the transformation of the female body into a commodity through patriarchal control mechanisms and the pornographic representation of the female body in the media. This approach opposes the objectification of the female body and seeks solutions for it. MacKinnon (2003: 132) reveals acts such as rape and pornography that evaluate the female body as a usable object as male consciousness that defines female sexuality. While the radical feminist approach focuses on the differences between men and women, it gathers all women in a single denominator. There is a universal nature of femininity in the basis of the radical feminist approach, which ignores the concepts such as culture and class, which are considered in other theories.

### **Analysis of the Perfect Candidate Film in the Framework of Feminist Theory the Identity of the Movie**

**Film Title:** The Perfect Candidate

**Construction Year:** 2019

**Country:** Germany – Saudi Arabia

**Produced by:** Haifaa Al Mansour, Gerhard Meixner, Roman Paul

**Directed by:** Haifaa Al-Mansour

**Written by:** Haifaa Al-Mansour, Brad Niemann

**Running time:** 101 minutes

**Language:** Arabic

**Starring:** Mila Al Zahrani, Nora Al Awad, Shafi Alharthy, Khadeeja Mua'th, Mohamed Othman, Nojoud Ahmed, Dae Al Hilali, Tareq Al Khaldi

### **The Story of the Movie**

Meryem, the main character of the movie The Perfect Candidate, whose main theme is gender discrimination in Saudi society, is a doctor. The movie starts with the scene where Meryem drives alone to the clinic where she works. When she reached the clinic, the striking thing is that the clinic road is broken and muddy. In fact, this is what forms the basis of the main character's story. Meryem is a character who suffers from various discriminations and narrow-minded reactions specific to the society she lives in during her doctorship, which is also considered a respected

profession in the society. She wants to take advantage of an opportunity to get rid of this society and discrimination in which she is stuck. This opportunity is a conference held in Dubai. Meryem thinks that this conference will create a job opportunity that will enable her to live in the social conditions she imagined in the future and to leave her town.

Meryem goes to the airport to go to the conference, but she has a problem with her travel permit. As it is known, every woman's travel opportunity in Saudi Arabia depends on the permission of her guardian. At this point, Meryem tries to reach her father, who is her guardian, but fails. Meryem, who does not want to say goodbye to her dream so easily, goes to another relative's office to ask for help. While talking to an officer who works here, the officer asks her if she is coming to be a member of the city council. Meryem, who did not have such an idea before, is surprised by this question, but gives a positive answer to the question. Meryem, who is in a good and respected place in her profession, has her own reasons for being warm to this idea, which she had never thought of before. When she is a candidate for the municipal council, Meryem's starting point is to have her way to the clinic where she works. However, in the process, Meryem's purpose will gain new dimensions, and parliamentary membership will become a key for her to be able to do her job properly, to see the value she deserves, to be heard, and to say "I'm here too" as a woman in a male-dominated society.

After she applies for the membership of the city council, a struggle begins for Meryem to make her voice heard, sometimes against those closest to her, and sometimes against the conservative and patriarchal segment. During this struggle, we see that Meryem does not give up on her character and beliefs, even though she knows that it will put her in a difficult situation. In her election propaganda during the candidacy process, Meryem argues that her election will benefit not only women but also everyone. But it is not easy to fight this struggle in a society where patriarchy is deeply rooted. During the film, it is seen that not only Meryem but also her father, who is a musician, is in a difficult situation from time to time in the face of established social norms. This situation shows the audience that various traditions adopted by religion in society are not only restricting women.

Meryem, whose mother has passed away, lives with her two sisters and father. Meryem's mother was a singer before she passed away. Meryem sees her candidacy as a member of the city council completely different from her mother's singing and gets angry when it is compared. However, what they both try to do is similar in terms of rebelling against social norms, the view of women and existing traditions. Meryem will understand this fact, which she has been against from the beginning, when she learns that she was not elected as a council member at the end of the film, and after this realization, she finds herself singing at her relative's wedding. The movie ends with a scene that shows the change that Meryem tries to create has begun.

### **Analysis of the Perfect Candidate Film**

The movie begins with the main character Meryem, who is a doctor, driving to the clinic where she works. As is known, women are prohibited from driving in Saudi Arabia until they are released in 2018. In this sense, it is seen that an achievement on behalf of women is preferred as the opening scene of the movie. As Meryem gets out of her car and enters the hospital, she can hardly walk on rough and muddy roads. When she enters the hospital, looking out the window, she sees that a patient who was taken out of the ambulance is being brought to the hospital with difficulty by three people. This is the second emphasis on the bad road that is the starting point of Meryem's story. When the patient on the stretcher is brought to the clinic, Meryem goes to take care of him. When she asks the patient's name, the patient turns to his grandson without dealing with Meryem and says, "Didn't I tell you not to bring me to the hospital where there is haram? The one whose chief is a woman will not be without trouble." This answer given by the patient clearly shows the point of view of the majority of the society living in Saudi Arabia on women and their position in economic and social life. While the "women" approach in Saudi society is



reflected in the film, it is seen that an open and direct expression style is used, not implicit signs.

In the continuation of the scene, while Meryem is examining the patient, the patient cries out, "Don't look into my eyes." Because, according to the common view in society, it is haram for women to look directly at a foreign man. After the patient says to his grandson, "Tell her not to come near me", his grandson says, "She is the only doctor here, let her look". Although Meryem is the direct target of all this discrimination, she ignores this situation and does her job. After Meryem touches the patient during her examination and ignores the negative reactions of the patient, the patient for the first time directly targets Meryem and shouts "Don't touch me, don't look at my eyes". However, this persistent resentment of the patient is not enough to stop Meryem, and she asks the other people there to hold the patient in order to do her job. Just then, a male doctor comes out of his room and says to Meryem, "What are you doing? Can't you see you're overwhelming the patient?" Meryem answers, "I'm doing my job, I'm taking care of the patient". The doctor, who was not satisfied with the answer he received, says angrily, "The patient does not want a female doctor. We arrange male nurses. He gets more comfortable with them," At this point, it is seen that Meryem, who faced enough difficulties as a female doctor, was also mobbed by her colleague. The common focus behind the behavior of the patient and the doctor towards Meryem is the anger against a female figure in business life. At this point, it is shown that the relevant discrimination is made regardless of economic status or educational status. Later, Meryem goes to the doctor without reacting to the incident and says she wants to take a few days off. The reason she asked for this permission is to attend a conference to be held in Dubai. The doctor, on the other hand, replies, "We are in a difficult situation, we have a staff shortage." Meryem shows her reaction to the event for the first time and says, "You can manage with male nurses you are very comfortable with, they are enough for you." Considering that the doctor she received permission from is in the management staff of the clinic, it is seen that Meryem has a structure that does not spare her words and can defend the values she believes in against anyone.

In the next scene, Meryem talks to a staff member on the phone about the need for improvements in the current situation of the hospital. She states that the beginning of this improvement is the asphaltting of the broken road of the hospital. It is seen that the person speaking on the phone approaches Meryem more moderately than the characters we have encountered so far. However, he rejects Meryem's request by stating that the paving of the clinic road is not urgent for the time being.

The next day, while giving Meryem the documents necessary for her trip to Dubai, her father says, "Your husband must take care of these matters." Here, the movie draws attention to two things. First of all, as a person who continues his profession as a musician, which is not welcomed by the society, and whose two daughters work in jobs of their own choosing and actively participate in social life, the father tends to maintain the current understanding consciously or unconsciously. The father normalized and adopted the obligation for women to travel with guardian consent. Secondly, it is emphasized that the father has the understanding that "women should get married when they reach a certain age", which is mostly specific to eastern societies. As it is known, in patriarchal societies with strict traditions and customs, marriage is a symbol of status and success for women. It is seen that this is what the father expects from his daughters.

Then comes Meryem's scene at the airport. While talking to the officer, Meryem learns that the travel permit given to her by her father has expired. Meryem tells the officer that she has the permission documents with her, and the officer informs that such documents will now be obtained electronically. It is shown here that technology has begun to be used in the conduct of various businesses in Saudi Arabia. The development of technology brings globalization and development. However, the fact that the document to be obtained in the electronic environment is the guardian document allowing a woman to travel shows a paradox. At this point, it is seen that the two developments do not progress in the same parallel.

Later, Meryem goes to meet with a relative who is the manager to help her with the travel permit. The officer there says that the manager will only meet with the candidates for municipal councilors that day, but if she makes an application, she can meet. Meryem, on the other hand, makes her application even though she had no idea. It is seen that the official made the recording of Meryem reluctantly. Meryem enters into a meeting with her relative. When her relative saw Meryem's application, he says "I can't believe you're applying for this job among all the people! So, of course, we want women to apply, but as your relative, my advice is: this job is very difficult." This is an expression of the attitude taken against a woman's participation in political life in the country. At the same time, her relative rejects Meryem's offer of help for travel permission. Later, Meryem is called to the hospital for an emergency. At the entrance of the hospital, it is seen that the patients are tried to be transported on the muddy road with problems. This is the third emphasis on the hospital's road.

In the evening, Meryem goes to a wedding where her sister is in charge of filming. It is seen that there are no men at the wedding according to tradition and women have fun with their hair open. While Meryem's sister is busy adjusting the camera, a wedding guest warns her not to take pictures. When her sister says, "I'm only going to shoot the bride," the guest scolds again, "Look at me, don't turn the camera on us." This is the expression of a problematic norm that is easily adopted even by women in society. Then the bride enters the wedding hall with the groom. It is seen that all the guests cover their hair before the groom, who is the only man in the wedding hall, enters the hall. After the wedding, Meryem tells her sisters that she is a candidate for the city council so that the way to the clinic can be fixed. While her older sister walked away saying "Are you serious", her younger sister says, "I thought we were saved now. The gossip and mockery of my mother's time will begin again." Meryem says, "It's not the same thing. I am a doctor, not a singer." The reaction of her older sister, who would later give a lot of support in election propaganda, was astonishment. It is clear that her younger sister does not support this initiative. It is seen that Meryem's younger sister is afraid of the social pressure on her mother, who is a singer. Meryem herself, on the other hand, does not approve of what her mother did in different ways, but with the same purpose, and in a way underestimates her, although she acts in a contrary way to the female figure formed in the society and aims to create a change. This speech shows that the culture one has will inevitably affect people's view of life, even if it is challenged in some respects. While Meryem's elder sister Selma and younger sister Sara were talking about this candidacy among themselves, they emphasized that their father would be unresponsive to Meryem's candidacy due to his profession. Here, it is understood that the two sisters did not approve of the father's work. Likewise, when he learns about the candidacy, he does not react to the contrary. Although he expresses dissatisfaction with the situation while talking to his colleague, he prefers not to interfere with his daughter.

That same night, Meryem talks to her sister Selma on the roof of the house and asks her what she thinks about it. After a short silence, Selma says that Meryem needs to think carefully. While Meryem is talking to her sister about an old memory with her mother, she says, "How embarrassed I used to be when my mother put me on stage to accompany her. I felt like freaks in a circus. It would seem as if all our relatives were looking at me." The depiction of 'freaks in the circus' here shows Meryem's perspective on going on stage. This answer shows that although she is different herself, Meryem's perspective on what is "different" is shaped by the influence of culture. In response to this, Selma asks; "They were already looking. Are you ready for them to look like that again?" Meryem says, "No. But it's not something as stupid as singing. I just want to work in a good place. I will show them what I can do and they will bring me to a better position."

What Selma said about her relatives in this dialogue shows that Meryem will face not only the society but also her relatives in this struggle. However, Meryem thinks that they will not approach her as her mother because Meryem is a doctor while her mother is a singer. From Meryem's answer, it is understood that her initial aim was not to change the perception of women in society, but to fight for more individual purposes. But in the process, she will understand that changing

her own position is no different from changing the position of women in society. When Meryem goes to the hospital the next day, she announces her candidacy to her colleagues. "Is it something about women's rights?" her female colleague asked. Because if women are making a breakthrough in such societies, in their view, it cannot be for "everyone", it is only about women. Meryem asks her friends to vote for her. "Don't count me out, I don't like getting involved" one of her friends replies. Here, it is seen that the participation of women in political life is not difficult only at the level of the elected. Voter women also have difficulties in participating in political life, and they see this as "a job that should not get involved".

In the other scene, Meryem goes to the old patient who is seen at the beginning of the movie and does not want her. She greets the patient, and the patient's response is to turn her head to the other side. He tells Meryem, the granddaughter of the patient, that she does not have to take care of them, that male nurses can also take care of them. Meryem, on the other hand, says that male nurses misdiagnosed his grandfather and explains that she should take the patient into surgery. The patient, on the other hand, maintains his initial attitude and gets angry with Meryem and tells her to leave. The patient's insistence on not accepting this when Meryem is the only doctor who can operate on him in the hospital shows how difficult it is to change the prevailing approach in society. As a matter of fact, his grandson finally convinces the patient to have the surgery. The only condition of the patient is to be given anesthesia before Meryem touches him.

That same evening, Meryem learns that her candidacy application has been accepted. Together with their sisters, they begin to talk about what they will do during the candidacy process. "I don't know how I doubted you. How could such a thoughtful plan fail?" her older sister Selma says, when Meryem explained her plans and research about the campaign process. At this point, Meryem got the support of Selma and they decide to prepare a campaign video together. While the three siblings are filming the campaign video, the youngest sister Sara tells her sister Meryem that she must cover her face during the video. Meryem appears to be reluctant to do so because she left her face uncovered while she was preparing for the video shoot. Meryem covers her face, on the basis of this move, there is a desire to attract her sister, whom she knows that she still does not like her candidacy. In her speech in the campaign video, Meryem includes the following words: "Change is a big word. And the only way to make our voice heard in the parliament is through elections. I promise you all that if I am elected, I will ensure that asphalt is poured on the road leading to our clinic. This is my dream project and I will never give up on it. Give me your votes. Help our beautiful town thrive." As can be understood from this speech, there is no female emphasis in Meryem's candidacy.

After the campaign video is shared, younger sister Sara reads Meryem's comments about the video. In this scene, Sara sadly says that there are many bad comments and she does not try to motivate her sister in the face of these comments. Because even though she helped her sister reluctantly during the campaign, Sara continues to have a negative attitude towards her candidacy. Although Meryem emphasizes that she does not listen to what is said and that her sister should not, Sara insists on reading the bad comments. The comments Sarah read to Meryem include the following statements: "When did we ever allow women to talk so nasty? Shameless!", "Doesn't she ever blush when she presents herself to men like this? When they humiliate her, she will see how the campaign is done!" The first of the aforementioned comments was made by a woman. The "nasty speech" in the woman's interpretation is a woman's attempt to break down the rigid traditions of the society in which she lives, to rebel against the traditions, and to try to create a change. The target is not the candidacy of Meryem, but the effort to change the status of women in society. What draws attention here is that patriarchal society codes are also adopted by women, and moreover, they are supported.

In the second interpretation, a woman's attempt to express herself in front of the community was presented as a disgraceful act. According to this approach, which seems to be quite common, a woman should be ashamed the moment she leaves the social roles imposed on her. A woman

should only act in accordance with the roles deemed appropriate for her by others, otherwise it is unacceptable. At the same time, there is a prevailing opinion that Meryem will be humiliated in front of the society because she goes out of this role. Because according to them, those who support the social role assigned to women and live their lives accordingly are similar and many. Meryem is alone

Despite all the obstacles and disheartening objections, Meryem is determined to carry out the candidacy process properly. In this context, she organizes a fundraising event with the financial support of his sister Selma. This is an event where all the women in town are invited. She manages to gather the desired crowd on the donation night. During the event, Selma asks Sara to help with something. But Sara's reluctance shows itself here as well, and "I don't want to be a part of the campaign or this ridiculous Show" she says. According to Sara, it is a dream for a woman in this society to achieve what Meryem dreams about, and what her sisters are trying to do is a source of shame for her.

Various events such as raffles and fashion shows are also held at the donation night, which is made up entirely of women. Then Meryem makes a speech. She begins her speech with an introduction to why they are there. Meanwhile, it is seen that most of the women gathered in the hall were talking among themselves and not listening to Meryem. Meryem realizes that she is not listened. At that point, he switches to an impromptu speech to attract women's attention and, "How would you feel if something happened to your child and you couldn't do anything?" she asks. After this question about the children of the people in the hall, Meryem attracts the attention of all women and everyone starts to listen to her in silence. Continuing the speech, "Imagine for a moment. Your child has had an accident, is lying on the floor, is bleeding. You get in your car and try to catch the emergency room. But when you reach the door of the clinic, you see that the road is under water. You sink deeper into the mud with every step you take. 'Help mommy, it hurts so bad!' your child shouts. But you can't do anything. If I win the election, I promise you my priority will be to get them to pave that road. Vote for me so that when something happens to your child; You can say, "Yes, if something happens to you, I can help you." The whole hall listens to Meryem's speech until the end and applauds impressed. The remarkable thing here is that Meryem has deciphered the codes of the society she lives in. The women in the hall do not have any political, economic, legal or social expectations, they have learned to be content with what is taught and given to them. Instead of impressing them with a promise they never intended, such as making their voices heard, Meryem preferred to impress them through the concept they are most familiar with: motherhood. She impressed the community with the most important thing they knew and blessed to do, their motherhood, and asked for their vote. As a matter of fact, it is clear that women were affected by their expressions after the donation night. The answers given to Meryem, who stated that she was waiting for their votes while sending the guests off after the donation night, are as follows: "My husband will cut me off, but I ask", "I'm not voting, but good luck." As can be seen, even the voting preferences of women are determined by the patriarchal system. Meryem thinks that the women who listen to her are affected, but she also understands that this effect will not be reflected in the voting behavior. When faced with this reality, he realizes that trying to attract women to his side is insufficient and aims at those who do not think like him.

Meryem's next move is to participate in a television show. As she took it to put on her veil before she appeared on the Show, "I'm proud of you. I didn't expect you to be so responsible. I had my doubts but you convinced me" her sister Selma says. In the face of her sister's words, Meryem confidently smiles and gives up the veil in her hand and gives it to her sister. This is a sign of change for Meryem. "Naturally, as a woman, you have many subjects that you are particularly interested in," the presenter of the television program tells Meryem. When Meryem wants to talk, he does not allow and says "For example, the gardens." Here, we come across a male presenter who tries to dictate that a woman who wants to be a city council member will be interested in certain topics. The presenter then asks, "Do you think your nomination made all the women happy?" Here, it is seen that the presenter is trying to corner Meryem by asking a question she

knows the answer to. Because there are also women among those who seriously criticize Meryem. Women are also a part of this society, a mirror of this culture. "I hope my candidacy made everyone happy" Meryem says, but the presenter would not be happy with this answer. "I think, frankly, we can say that your candidacy is more of a concern to women," the presenter says. The words of the presenter here are the expression of gender discrimination. According to the dominant view, when a man is a candidate, he has projects for everyone, when a woman is a candidate, she is obliged to produce projects specific to women only. Because the important thing here is not the membership of the municipal council, but the genders. Here, for the first time, Meryem talks about a purpose she has never mentioned before about her candidacy, and, "My nomination is in everyone's favour. That's why I decided to take part in the election. To initiate change in my town. This change can be a way of repairing, or changing our old-fashioned, often negative mindsets," she says. For the first time since the beginning of the movie, Meryem makes a change emphasis. The necessity of change has become a necessity after Meryem's difficulties in the candidacy process. Because as a woman, even trying to correct her clinical path actually depends on other parameters. Meryem understood that there were much bigger problems that were not visible under the specific goals she was trying to achieve, and she felt the need to express this. She saw the fact that the premise for a woman to have a say only in her own area of responsibility is that she can have a say everywhere. When the presenter asked what the mindsets Meryem emphasized on change were, "The mindset that refuses to see me as a real candidate because of my gender" she answers.

In the next scene, it is seen that Meryem is in the hospital. While looking at various documents, she hears the voices of her colleagues talking in the background. "Has she taken off her veil? I would have taken it out too, but my family would kill me," one of his colleagues says. Here, it is understood that there are other women who want change in the society, but they do not dare to do so because they are afraid of the rigid views of the society they belong to. Another female colleague congratulated her, and, "I was proud to be your colleague," she says. Her colleague also says; "Dr. Even Ghazi talks about it. You really showed initiative, he says so." After these words, Meryem's belief in change is reinforced.

The positive reactions that Meryem begins to receive from her environment give her the strength to confront opponents and persuade them. Meryem asks her father for help to gather the dissident men to listen to her, but she does not get a positive response. Not giving up, Meryem seeks help from Omar, the grandson of the patient she operated on. Because Omar's grandfather is also an opponent and he knows the environment. While Meryem is about to make a speech, Omar asks her to give him the paper with what he has to say so that he can read to the opposition. However, Meryem wants to impress the opposition directly by appearing in front of them. When she insists, she gets the answer, "These are the laws." Omar's answer shows that many backward practices adopted were legalized by law. In return, Meryem decides to make a speech by video conference method. Meryem begins to give a speech to the guests from behind a curtain. While she was explaining her promises that started with the construction of the hospital road, "We know you and your family. We know you're a musician," one of the guests says. This answer of the invitee indicates a prejudice. As emphasized before, her mother, who was a singer, was ridiculed by many, and what she was trying to do was trivialized. It has even been marginalized by some. Meryem is now being criticized over the status her mother tried to have.

Another guest says, "We do not choose women, women's place is at home. You know that too." Here, the social role assigned to women is revealed. Meryem is trying to get out of this role and this cannot be allowed. Thereupon, the guests begin to vacate the hall. Meryem, on the other hand, does not give up despite all the sarcastic and harsh responses she receives and enters the hall. She silences everyone and says, "I am a candidate and candidates deserve respect, male or female." What Meryem is trying to do here is to explain that she deserves respect for her position, regardless of gender. Then she says, "I'm not a singer," in reference to the person who calls her a "musician". Here, her anger at the fact that her family's profession is equated with her own

profession can be seen. For her, social change and the status of women can be achieved not with unimportant professions, but with respectable professions. While she stands behind her own struggle, she belittles her mother's struggle.

The next morning, Meryem learns on the radio that the road to the hospital has been decided to be fixed. She says that the thing she stressed the most towards people from the beginning of the candidacy process would be to fix the road to the hospital if elected. Meryem, who was denied this request as a doctor while she was working at the hospital, sees that her request was taken seriously when she became a candidate. This is also her only concrete promise to the public. Therefore, it is possible to say that this decision was taken against her candidacy. The realization of Meryem's sole purpose, which led her to take this path, does not make her happy. Because now she wants more than that. When she goes to the hospital, she sees that the asphaltting works have started. Her colleague, who said that she supported her before, says to Meryem "Well, you ran a great campaign anyway." Now those who support Meryem also think that she has no chance.

After his tour is over, her father returns home. During his conversations with Meryem about the campaign, he asks why she continues the campaign even though the road is paved. "Because I want to show that they can't beat me," Meryem replies. This is the expression of the transformation from a doctor whose candidacy purpose was to make the way to the hospital, into a doctor who now aims to be visible in public. Then; "For the first time in my life, I feel like I'm more than a wedding singer's daughter," she says.

Meryem learns from Omar that she could not be elected as a Member of the Municipal Council according to unofficial results. In the news video she watches, she sees the speech of her opponent who won the election. "I would have laughed if you had said a year ago that my opponent would be a woman and our vote rates would be this close," her opponent. Considering the roles attributed to women in Saudi Arabia, it does not seem very likely for a woman to participate in politics. It is almost impossible for a woman who enters a race with a man to get a vote close to her. But with her determined struggle, Meryem turned this seemingly distant possibility into reality. She made her presence felt as a woman and her promise was fulfilled by those who wanted to lessen her claim in the election. After hearing the decision, Meryem goes to her cousin's wedding and sings on the stage. Meryem has done what she despised from the very beginning. In the end, she saw that she exhibited similar characteristics with her mother, whom she was ashamed of being seen as equal, in terms of challenging gender roles, and she made peace with this idea. Meryem understood that being a woman in this society is not related to a prestigious profession or enterprise, through her experiences during her candidacy. The path they follow with their mother is different, but the path they try to reach is the same. Mary's unplanned appearance on the stage and singing is an expression of this realization.

The next day, Meryem goes to the hospital. Her colleague tells her that there is a staff of 10 in a hospital in Riyadh and asks if she will apply. Riyadh is a more cosmopolitan city than other parts of Saudi Arabia. Meryem says she will not go, she has a lot of work to do here. This means that Meryem will continue her struggle to create change in the town, which she describes as "hidebound".

Finally, Meryem goes to the old patient she has operated on. It seems that the patient did not resist this when she examined him. After her examination, the patient, who could not bear to even look at him eyes at first, "I voted for you. You are a good doctor. You saved my life, I almost died. Why didn't they take you to the parliament? You were right. You are a great doctor. You are our hope for the future," says to Meryem. Meryem understands that with this reaction of the patient, she started the change. The movie ends with the scene where Meryem drives on the paved road in her car.

## CONCLUSION

Ideology and discourse are tools for the maintenance of social norms. Cinema, on the other hand, offers a rhizomatic area where social representation is conveyed (Öztürk, 2019). One of the concepts within the scope of the rhizomatic universe in cinema is gender. Cinema is an important and effective tool in the construction process of women's and men's identities. In addition, it plays a role in conveying the existing social image and discourse. In this context, feminist discourse is important in order to understand the production processes of identities and meanings. For this reason, the method used in the analysis of the movie *Perfect Candidate* has been the method of feminist critical discourse analysis in the context of radical feminist theory. Thus, it has been seen that the film contains a language that questions masculine ideology and discourse.

The female identity represented in Haifaa Al-Mansour's films is positioned against a patriarchal society with religious requirements and the influence of current culture. In the movie *The Perfect Candidate*, the story of Doctor Meryem, who accidentally finds herself in a race for the city council, is told. Meryem is one of the three daughters of a family that works as a musician in a closed and conservative community where music is not welcomed. In this sense, it can be said that her family has a different mentality from the community they belong to. Contrary to the common view in society, Meryem is also in the social life as a woman. Meryem decided to participate in political life in order to ensure that the broken road of the clinic where she worked was repaired. The film tells about the negative feedback Meryem received from both her close circle and the majority of the society, and the obstacles she faced during the candidacy process because she was only a woman. In the movie, Meryem confronts the gender discrimination in the society she lives in more closely in the face of the obstacles she is exposed to. In this context, the membership of the municipal council has now started to bear the nature of a rebellion against the patriarchal and bigoted society in which she is angry, rather than fixing the road to the hospital for Meryem. In many parts of the movie, it is seen that there are people who criticize and belittle what Meryem tries to do, regardless of gender. It was also emphasized in the film that some women who supported her could not embody this support because they were afraid of their husbands. This shows that women in Saudi Arabia, who expressed their opinions to change the position of women, could not put it into action due to the pressures of the society. The fact that Meryem could not win the City Council Membership despite all her struggles is an emphasis on the realism of the film. Because in communities with strict and deep social norms, change does not occur in the short term.

At the end of the movie, an elderly male patient who does not want Meryem to take care of him says that he gave his vote to her is the main conclusion to be drawn from the movie. Because with her struggle and determination, Meryem could not win the parliamentary membership, but she succeeded in creating a change in an oppositional person who seemed the most rigid. This has been the greatest gain she could have achieved in the short term and her hope for the future.

The film has a didactic language of expression in many aspects. At the same time, it is important in the international arena as it is a cinematic example of the segregation and subordination of women in Saudi society. The film is also important in that it was shot by a female director in a country where there are women who have not yet made any gains in many respects.

Meryem, the main character of the movie *Perfect Candidate*, represents a self-confident female character who considers it necessary to have a status in order to break the prejudices about the place of women in society, defends the values she believes in, and does not give up despite all obstacles. We understand this from the fact that she continued her candidacy process despite the negative reactions she received from her environment, that she tried to express herself by appearing in front of the opponents regardless of the insulting comments made about her, and that she decided to stay in her town and continue the change she started after she was not elected a city council member.

The censorship applied to the representation of women in Saudi Arabia is directly and clearly manifested in the film. We understand this from the fact that in the scene where Meryem stands before the opposition and asks for votes, the community exposes her to videoconferencing from behind a curtain. The attitude of the patient, who does not want Meryem to look at in the first scene in the hospital, represents the basic point of view underlying this censorship.

The gender codes of the society that the movie is about and the gender codes shown in the movie are similar. The aim of the movie is to reveal these codes. In this context, there is no element that contradicts the truth. In this sense, there are also characters that are represented differently from the dominant gender codes. The most important example of these is the main character Meryem and her sister Selma, who supports her. Haifaa Al-Mansour has criticized the dominant masculine ideology and patriarchal structure in her movie. In this sense, the Saudi female director has fictionalized her character as a subject who can stand on her own feet and engage in the struggle to create a change by ignoring all norms.

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