

On Eliot Weinberger

Zahid Khan

Zahid Khan is an aspiring playwright in Boston currently visiting South Asia. He attended the Hay Festival, Dhaka.

Eliot Weinberger came to the Hay Festival, Dhaka, and was primarily introduced to the audience as a teacher and translator. That is a pity, though Eliot rightly should be applauded for work in those areas. However, the man is much more, representing a kind of American intellectual voice and man of letters that is a dying breed in the USA's arid public environment of narrow specialists and policy wonks. More is the pity, therefore, that perhaps hardly in Dhaka's audience could have known, as far as I am aware, of his 10,000 word prose poem published in 2005 - 'What I Heard about Iraq'. It is a compendium of the lies, truths, and propaganda about the Iraq war that were generated by the Bush regime for over two years. It is a celebrated piece now, much in demand in festivals, demos and protest meets, and has even been turned into a play by Simon Levy. I have seen it performed in Boston and it was stupendous experience for me.

Eliot Weinberger's *An Elemental Thing* is a collection of essays, and a strange collection it is. It consists of pieces on a single theme - on one image, idea, object, or name, but working, and re-working that single image or idea to create the effect of multiple looks at the same thing. So, for example, an essay called 'Changs' gives capsule biographies of twenty-

nine men who share the name. 'Lacandons' is a catalogue of dream interpretations from Chiapas, and anaphoric in that nearly every line begins similarly, "If you dream..." An Elemental Thing is a rescue effort, a salvaging of things from remote corners of intellectual history, a prolonged dip into classical times. And as such, deeply fascinating.

As it would have been equally fascinating if the audience in Dhaka could have heard Eliot's poem declaimed on the stage:

I heard the vice president say: 'I really do believe we will be greeted as liberators.'

I heard Tariq Aziz, the Iraqi foreign minister, say: 'American soldiers will not be received by flowers. They will be received by bullets.' ●



Wadjda: 'Don't let the men hear you laughing.'

Waqar Ahmed

Waqar Ahmed is currently nearing completion on a novel and a collection of short stories.

In a clear reference to Vittorio De Sica's famous neorealist film *The Bicycle Thief*, Haifaa Al Mansour structures her movie *Wadjda* around the quest for a bicycle that, like its predecessor, carries implications far greater than we normally associate with such a quotidian object. Yet, while Mr. De Sica's film employs the trope to show the hardships endemic to the lives of the poor in postwar Italy, in Ms. Al Mansour's hands the symbol works toward quite different ends. *Wadjda*'s protagonist, for whom the film is named, is a young Saudi girl who desperately longs for a bicycle with little concern for her family's financial situation or society's norms; it is a quest that can only directly collide against the expectations of women in Saudi Arabia. Older girls in her school are punished for wearing makeup. Her mother is trying to prevent her father from taking a second wife. One of her pre-adolescent classmates is arranged to be married. Nevertheless, *Wadjda*'s singular purpose causes her to disregard the social issues surrounding her, thereby making their presentation even more poignant.

With her breezy doggedness, Waad Mohammed, the young female lead in *Wadjda*, ensures that the first film shot in Saudi Arabia is a good one. Where her mother tries to ward off a rival by using unimaginative tactics such as the purchase of a flattering dress, *Wadjda* is lovably subversive in attaining her goal. She cannot raise the money for a bicycle with her savings, and after a number of small entrepreneurial failures such as delivering letters to admirers who otherwise cannot meet, *Wadjda* decides to enter into a Qur'an contest at school that promises a large cash prize to the winner. With what little money she has, she purchases Qur'an tapes to practice.

In young *Wadjda*, Saudi Arabia is presented with a hopeful vanguard of feminism. Here, Ms. Al Mansour has taken a page out of Iranian cinema which frequently uses children to comment on social inequities. Iranian child films of the nineties (*The White Balloon*, *Children of Heaven*, *Color of Paradise*) were a popular vehicle for directors to circumvent the mullocracy's artistic restrictions. We suspect Ms. Al Mansour had the same idea with *Wadjda*. By shooting through the dreamy lens of its young heroine, the director is able to keep the Saudi government's censors at bay (*Wadjda* was selected by Saudi Arabia as its foreign language Oscar entry). Perhaps the authorities in Iran and Saudi Arabia hope that audiences will take these movies at face value. Razieh in the

The White Balloon simply wants an expensive goldfish. Zahra is worried about her missing pink shoes in *Children of Heaven*. And *Wadjda* schemes to purchase a bicycle. While the film sometimes suffers from hackneyed dialogue bemoaning the restrictions on women ("Don't let the men hear you laughing," "A woman's voice is her nakedness") it does not contain any outright protest language, thanks largely to *Wadjda*'s focused ambition.

If there is one weakness in the film, it is its treatment of South Asian migrant workers. *Wadjda*'s family driver is a Pakistani. Her mother is perpetually late getting ready for her job in the morning. This somehow draws the ire of her Pakistani driver who berates her and repeatedly threatens to quit. In another scene, an Indian worker makes catcalls at *Wadjda*, going so far as to say, "Come play with us! Let me touch those apples." Having lived in Saudi Arabia for over twelve years, I can say without hesitation that neither of these incidents would, in reality, ever occur. Poor South Asian workers could not muster the gall to behave in such a manner towards a Saudi national, regardless of their social or economic class. *Wadjda* is the first film made in Saudi Arabia and it is an important film. In depicting the restrictions placed on Saudi women in the kingdom, Ms. Al Mansour should have remembered that the position of migrant workers there is, in fact, several rungs below them. Instead, in a ploy to lump in South Asian laborers as part of the Male class, she dishonestly characterizes a suppressed class of people with few rights as bullies and perverts.

Despite this curious flaw, *Wadjda* is an achievement on many levels, not least of all because it continues the promising trend of women's liberalization in Saudi Arabia. Today, a woman makes the first Saudi film. In 2015, we look forward to women standing and voting in local elections there. ●

