“IT IS NOT IN THE STARS TO HOLD OUR DESTINY BUT IN OURSELVES”:
TALES OF SAUDI MUSLIM WOMEN MAINTAINING THEIR
IDENTITIES IN U.S. HIGHER EDUCATION

by

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ABSTRACT

“It Is Not In the Stars to Hold Our Destiny but In Ourselves”: Tales of Saudi Muslim Women Maintaining Their Identities in U.S. Higher Education

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This work explored the lives of four veiled female Saudi English Language Learners as they progressed through an American university where the programs they studied were delivered in the English language. This population is easily identified and is often met with distrust and fear based on their sartorial choices. The participants were asked to identify how parts of their identities changed and how they maintained other parts. The interviews were analyzed using Islamic Feminism and intersectionality theory to explain how the multiplicity of roles the participants adopted, were impacted by a new culture.

The work revealed that the participants used their identities, culture, language and education to resist the difficult complexities of negotiating a foreign culture, and the questioning and micro-aggressions of the host population based on their linguistic, physical and ethnic differences. These observations led to the conclusion that the
American university system could facilitate improved opportunities for students to be more internationally aware, and more tolerant of difference. Also facilities on university campuses could be improved to provide more social justice.
PUBLIC ABSTRACT

“It Is Not In the Stars to Hold Our Destiny but In Ourselves”: Tales of Saudi Muslim Women Maintaining Their Identities in U.S. Higher Education

Debi Sheridan

The objective of these oral histories was to examine, explain and reveal the success of a small group of Saudia (female Saudis) whose studies at a mid-Western American university through the medium of English (their second or third language). Four students were randomly selected from a group of volunteers, based on their successful completion of the English as a Second Language (ESL) program, plus a year of other academic classes in the university. One student, who had not completed the ESL program, was admitted to the master of English program having passed the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) test at the required level.

The student participants were interviewed a number of times in the course of the study and after the completion of the writing to check the evidence. The interviews were semi-structured to allow the participants to expand as they desired. The data was analyzed using the theories of Islamic feminism and intersectionality to discover how the students were able to succeed in a profoundly different school and social culture as an English Language Learner (ELL) where many other ELLs fail to complete a degree program. Attention was focused on the participants explanations of their successes, failures and challenges.
The study findings indicate that the participants face the same challenges that many minority groups face. However, the students developed or were equipped with access to personal, familial and Saudi social connections that enabled them to deal with the adversities that student life brings. They were empowered by their experiences and achievements in school and in dealing with a foreign culture, and were successful in spite of the challenges they faced as women, ELLs, and international students. It also found that there are many efforts that schools can undertake to create more equitable and accessible resources for this minority population.
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I dedicate this work to my granddaughters Ruby Read, Jessica, Mai Sheridan, Josephine Jane, Maggie Grace, and my only grandson, wee Sam. I fervently hope that they will inherit a world more filled with love, tolerance, and acceptance of difference than the world we presently accept.

And with fond memories of my first Muslim binti, Ibtissame Talbi.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Western perceptions of the Middle East are often dominated by what the Western media refers to as Islam. Edward Said (1979) argued that “Islam” describes something:

part fiction, part ideological label, part minimal designation of a religion [that] in no really significant way [bears] a direct correspondence between the ‘Islam’ in common Western usage and the enormously varied life that goes on within the world of Islam with its...millions of square miles of territory principally in Africa and Asia, its dozens of societies, states, histories, and cultures (p. 21)

and in the West, Islam is misunderstood and misinterpreted as oppressive, dangerous and intimidating. Yet, the misrepresented space, Islam, is spiritual home to 23% of the world’s population (Muslim Population, 2012). Adherents to Islam are known as Muslims. Islam is monotheistic, has one sacred text, the Qur’an, and is sectarianized. Some sectarian divisions are historical, some interpretive, some arguably politically expedient, and at least one is closely tied to a national identity. Islam has a lay clergy, no nominal leader, is represented in almost every nationality on earth, and has a holy pilgrimage destination, Makkah, in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA).

The KSA is an extremely conservative theocratic state, a model of orthodoxy. To be a Saudi citizen, one must be a Muslim. The ruling Al Saud family assumes the responsibility of protecting the holy sites of Islam, including Makkah. The Prophet Mohammed, the messenger through whom Allah restored his teachings is believed to be buried in the KSA.

The most common representation of النساء السعوديات, Saudi women (Saudias) is of figures swathed from head to toe in black (Earp & Jhally, 2001). In a Google image
search dated 25 January 2014 for “Saudi Women,” only one woman in the first 100 pictures was not wearing a black abbaya (full length, long sleeved dress) and headscarf, and it was not clear that she was a Saudia. This visual tie to a Bedu past and present, cement the firmly rooted negative “fictions” (Said, 1979, p. 21) of Islam, and by extension, Muslimas (female Muslims), in the West. Historical literary references to Muslims either vilify or idealize. The idealized Muslima is “endowed with singular beauty and discretion” (Burshatin, 1985, p.117) but lacks any depth of personality, she is also disparaged as oppressed, lacking education, brainwashed by her religion, and one-dimensional (Earp & Jhally, 2001).

Existing studies have investigated Muslimas resisting cultural expectations to maintain their practice of Islam (Ahmed, 1992, 2011; Barlas, 2002; Bullock, 2002; Clarke, 2003; Hoodfar, 2006; Mohanty, 1996; Reed & Bartkowski, 2000; Zine, 2000, 2006). Some indicate reversion (conversion in Judeo-Christian terms) within families practicing a cultural form of Islam, where Muslimas seek, and gain, greater respect because of their dedication to the faith. However, there seemed to be no work focusing solely on Saudias in either of the above situations as they battled to maintain their identities as wife, mother, and student thousands of miles from their family support system in what was sometimes a hostile environment.

I was aware at the outset, that as an observer and reporter I should be unbiased and careful not to colonize my subjects (Villenas, 1996). “We are like colonizers when we fail to question our own identities and privileged positions, and...[how]...our writings perpetuate ‘othering’” (p. 715), what Tuhiwai Smith (1999) would describe as “Research
Through Imperialist Eyes” (p. 42). I see the effects of othering in the lives of the international students I teach in English as a second language (ESL) classrooms in the U.S. I have been frustrated for many years, at home in the UK and now in the U.S., about how minority students are perceived and treated, because from a young age I identified with those minority populations at school, church, and play.

I was a solitary child, the product of a short-lived bigamous marriage. My father, an alcoholic, absented himself from my and my mother’s life when I was 18 months old. After a few years, I was raised in a blended family that did not blend well and where violence was a common occurrence; and as an adult, I realized that violence at home is a contributing factor to alienation. I was the third girl in the blended family of two older stepsisters and two younger half-brothers, often feeling that I was the odd one out. My mother and stepfather (Dad) converted to the Mormon Church when I was 4, and because we lived in the southeast of England in the 60s and 70s, we were neighborhood oddities. As the odd one out in my family and at school, I found best friends among minority children at school. I learned early the disproportionate abundance that my Whiteness guaranteed me, but denied my friends. Despite the denial expressed by White cultures that White privilege does not harm the “other” (McIntosh, 1989, p. 1), or that White is the norm, the standard by which others should be measured (Kendall, 2006, p. 71; Marx & Pennington 2003, p. 91), I was aware of stark disparities that belied that claim. I lived in a society that had institutionalized White superiority for thousands of years.

During World War II, my Dad served in the British Army in Burma and India (both then British colonies), not out of patriotism, but because he got his first brand-new
suit of clothes and ate three meals a day for the first time in his life. He was a natural and
gifted storyteller, and the few war stories he would recount reflected the poverty, the
common humanity he felt in Burma and India. Later, he lived in Riyadh, capital of the
then newly oil-rich KSA; his stories were rich with humor and love for his new-found
friends, for whom he felt an affinity. His Saudi friends were discovering a new national
identity and his own had often undergone significant change. His respect for ‘differences’
his love of ethnic variation, his stories and attitudes formed parts of my identity that have
grown in significance.

Muslimas and their lives engage my own experience, interest, and identity as an
outsider, alien, ESL teacher, witness of gendered and ungendered Islamophobia (Zine,
2006, p. 240), and advocate of Minorities. I have worked as an instructor of English,
History, and ESL at Zion State University (ZSU, a pseudonym) for 16 years. It is at ZSU,
that I have met my participants and have been invited to join in their social activities,
including their generous celebration of this dissertation. My participation in Eids (Feast
days), birth celebrations, and Saudi-sponsored activities, at ZSU has built and sustained
my interest and passion in researching Saudias and their lives, which started with my
Dad’s stories.

I am honored to be an honorary Mamo (grandmother) for some of my Saudias’
children. I am also grateful that they endeavor to teach me their language and are tolerant
of my inability to produce some Arabic phonemes. I have striven in the past 4 years to
learn Arabic, without much success, but I continue because I believe it is

essential for anyone who wishe[s] to conduct research...to know some of the local
language. Research...could be seen as simply extractive, and it [is] essential that it
be approached with humility. Learning a language [is] a sign of genuine commitment. It need[s] to start there” (Barcott, 2011, p. 20).

I believe that an interest in the language and the culture of my participants will help me to research from a position of candor and strength. I use the words Muslima and Saudia throughout this paper because they are words that my participants use for themselves. As an ESL teacher and a British English speaker in the U.S., I understand that words have multiple social and historical meanings, and that direct translation is never perfect, so some Arabic words are used in this study because they mean more than the sum of their letters.

As a dual citizen of Eire, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain, I prefer to identify myself as Irish in rejection of all that being British identifies to me: imperialism, feelings rooted in my teenage years, a time of nationwide terrorism and violence in the UK, and rejection of the Irish. I am a White, feminist, historian, and educator. I lived for 15 years in Scotland—an almost exclusively White, patriarchal society. There I was an expatriate, and religious and linguistic minority. In Scotland, I lived as the identifiable “other”; the enemy within. My Southern English accent easily identifies me as the “enemy” in the three smaller polities of the U.K.; the soft Southerner, a royalist and representative of political suppression; misrepresentations all. My speech, an important marker of my identity, announced my “otherness” in Scotland, not any outward sign such as skin color, or my sartorial choices. I was able to blend in physically, to “pass,” as long as I remained silent, or produced a Scots patois. I also pass in the U.S., if I remain silent, but the sound of my accent more often invokes a positive response. Still, there is the constant recognition of, and focus on this difference, and while I find it tiring and feel
divided from the host population, in my experience there is a positive, something that is contrary to what happens to minority friends and this study’s participants. Most of my observations in the company of participants and minority friends of their daily experiences are negative and the reactions to headscarves, or accent, are occasions to which I voice my objections. While I find these experiences draining, I am aware that my intervention could be constructive, instructive, or destructive for my companion and the culprit. Whatever the result is, I am free to walk away satisfied, with almost no personal negative effects, but I do not face these experiences daily and cannot truly understand the degrading effect of prejudice based on appearance that my participants experience.

As I observe the cultures of the U.S. and its multitudinous representations of itself, I am aware of the privilege afforded me determined solely by the color of my skin (Kendall, 2006, p. 63; McIntosh, 1989, p. 1); I experience my otherness more often in a positive light. While I am in the U.S., my accent affords me much privilege on the obverse side of linguistic racism (Bresnahan, Ohashi, Nebashi, Liu, & Shearman, 2002, p. 171; Hill, 2011; McCafferty, 2011) and I believe that many students and faculty are persuaded by my pronunciation alone that I articulate a deep and profound knowledge and acumen; I am perceived as trustworthy, unlike the linguistic minorities I teach (Ladegaard, 1998). Like my Whiteness, I have not earned my linguistic privilege. I am easily recognizable as a foreigner but suffer few ill effects for it; I am not punished for being an immigrant or alien. However, the ridicule that is handed down for my accent is a tedious constant that I feel educates me and adds some understanding of the offense that international students often experience as they navigate U.S. culture. I am able to “pass,”
and few question my right to do so. I have a surety with which I am still unfamiliar, and not entirely comfortable. My participants do not experience these luxuries.

In my doctoral program, I took classes where we discussed racism, Whiteness, and privilege. I distanced myself from the guilt and anger that these discussions could produce because I am an immigrant. I thought that these ideas were not as challenging to me as they appeared to be to some of my peers, and I would position myself outside of the circle of collective blame. However, I was only able to distance myself from the American blame. Even though we were all White, I excused myself from culpability because I grew up in multicultural southeast England. I agree with Ahmed (2004) that “Whiteness is only invisible for those who inhabit it” (para. 2) and had daily experiences of negotiating cultural differences as a child and adolescent. I also witnessed how the values those differences spawned could, or could not, aid families from far-flung regions of the dissolved Empire to settle in a profoundly foreign land, but I was oblivious to the personal effects of othering at that time in my life.

Being raised Mormon in a country where Mormons are a minute, ridiculed minority, has provided me with an understanding of religious isolation. Yet both times I visited Oman and experienced the privilege guaranteed to White Christian women, Mormonism was not a factor in my interactions in the White community there. I was acceptable because I am White, no questions asked. Despite being an alien there, my “rights” were unquestioned by White men, as an extension of their own privilege, and by Omanis as long as I kept the law. I observed a profoundly different culture and was embarrassed by the ugly imposition that the Orientalist and superior attitudes of White
guest workers were in a society that is civilized, yet is perceived and evaluated as inferior and uncivilized by those guests.

I am aware that I inhabit many worlds, and that I live at an intersection. I originate from the historical center of the broken British colonial enterprise, and now inhabit a place of interest as an acceptable actor, a curiosity, in the new American colonial enterprise. In the worlds I move between, I can choose to inhabit at will. However, not all women can, because they are tied by cultural and familial expectations, linguistic restrictions, socioeconomic status, and educational background. Over all the worlds in which I dwell, I feel a lingering sense of not completely belonging to, or in, any of them, which produces within me a sense of sequestration and isolation. I fear I actually belong in the middle of the Atlantic.

The purpose of this study was to examine the ways that a small number of Saudias at ZSU maintain their identities in a multiplicity of roles; students, wives, mothers, Muslimas, while pursuing a degree in their second or third language, English, as the medium of study. The Muslimas of this study told their stories themselves. These stories provided a more nuanced and in-depth look at the lives of Saudias, examined the ideas that they recognize arise about them, and how this affected their self-identity. Because the study provided a space for these Saudias to express their own realities, these narratives might offer a space to rectify the dissension and misunderstandings that arise because of their presence. The term “Muslima” invokes many images, the meanings of which can vary drastically depending on the observer, the Muslima, and the space and time they both inhabit.
The overarching question driving this study was “What strategies and networks do Saudias create to be successful in academia and to maintain their identities?” Using their own histories, I hoped to relate the efforts of these women as they establish and maintain their identities in the face of fast changing and challenging situations they have entered as students. I reviewed the literature that supported a multifaceted vision of the participants and their culture. Second, I explained how the data was collected and analyzed. In the third section, I presented what the participants’ stories revealed about their struggles, solutions, successes, and failures. Following which, I rendered these accounts into an analysis and explore the resulting implications. Finally, I presented the key findings with the hope that the participants and I might offer insights for students, educators, advisors, and university administrators to encourage new and continued cross-cultural opportunities for U.S. and international students.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

For this study I feel that intersectionality and multiple identities are the most appropriate combination from which to discover the answers to the research questions. This combination will offer the opportunity to investigate the participants’ stories sympathetically, without the encumbrances that a Western viewpoint would entail. In the Western tradition, theories employed to investigate the lives of Muslimas have been based in Colonialism. Newer investigations use feminism as a framework. However, “Like a reversed image on film, the muslim [sic] woman as subject is always being constructed through negativity and disavowal” (Khan, 1998, p. 465) and in the post-9/11 era, veiled Muslim women in “America find themselves trapped at the intersection of bias against Islam, the racialized Muslim, and women. In contrast to their male counterparts, Muslim women face unique forms of discrimination” (Aziz, 2012), which are inadequately addressed by civil rights organizations of any hue. Common structures of Western society could prevent collaboration between the participants and me, women of differing ethnicities, as we fall into minority or majority spaces to such a degree as to question whether I can arrive from a position of “White normality” to a true understanding. “[T]he theorizer needs to be placed in the midst of people and their situated understanding of oppressions and resistances at the intersection of complex systems of inequality” and remember that the “path and histories of resistance and
activism” should help build “new feminist coalitions” that “deconstruct established
gender models and construct new promising gender discourses based on difference,
mixing and delinking from notions of a linearity of history.” In this chapter, I review
feminisms and whether they address the intersectionality of the participants’ worlds.
Next, I present the literature on identity as it relates to Muslimas, and then discuss how
Muslimas are undertaking their own forms of resistance.

**Feminisms**

**Feminism**

Feminism, a range of ideologies sharing a common goal to delineate and realize
equal social, political, educational, employment, economic, and personal rights for
women, originated in the West. Feminist theory, emerging from feminist movements,
seeks to explicate through the examination of women’s social roles and lived experience,
the nature of gender inequality. Some feminist advocates, notably bell hooks, have
argued for the inclusion of men’s liberation because men are also harmed by traditional
gender roles.

Since its inception, feminism, originating with White feminists’ own privilege as
the norm has developed through many waves to address the needs of many social groups.
White feminism, not a branch of feminism based on race, but rather on how
intersectionality affects gender equality, which therefore centers on the ideals and
struggles of primarily white women. “While not outright exclusive, its failure to consider
other women and its preoccupation with Western standards…is often alienating to
women of color, non-straight women, trans women, and women belonging to religious or cultural minorities” (Laycandle, 2015, para. 1). The criticism of white feminists has led to the creation of movements as diverse as Black, White, Dianic Wiccan, Jewish, or a number of politically based movements. Even within these movements there are divisions that grow from more localized situations, so that over the years feminism has developed into a very nuanced movement.

Mohanty (2006, p. 17), argued that mainstream feminisms typically marginalize or ghettoize emerging feminisms. Wendling (2008) argued that “…difference feminist theories—theory by and about feminists of colour (sic),…belong in a separate subcategory of…theory, because they’ve had profound effects on feminist activism not tracked by traditional left-to-right classification” (p. 8). Even minority feminisms in the West cannot address experiences of second-world women of color, such as Saudias, who often lack the political access, economic independence, social expectations or opportunities of first-world women of color (Abdulkarim, 2012).

Women are not equally unequal. Mohanty (1996) described the gaze towards minority women as colonizing. Employing this gaze would continue to colonize Saudias, where the colonized would have no voice in how they are portrayed or theorized. If, as Sanchez-Hucles, Dryde, and Winstead (2012) wrote,

Feminism reflects a political movement to unify the voices of women and to speak from a common agenda...from its inception...[the] movement experienced tensions related to dark-skinned versus light-skinned individuals which reinforced ideas that feminism offered different benefits ...based on race and specific skin coloration. (p. 92)

then the gaze needs to be modified, or replaced. The work of Egyptians feminists, Zainab
al-Ghazali, and Safinaz Kazim (Aoude, 2013), challenge the definition and limits of feminism. Despite their promotion of feminist activism, both women indicate their beliefs that feminism is a Western influence, and not a good one at that.

The “new model that emerges from feminist border thinking” should “not answer to Western gender stereotypes, which too often rob women of the richness of their worlds and creative possibilities emerging from their potential multidimensionality” (van den Brandt, 2012, p. 2-3).

“The theme of domination prevails in feminist literature ...but the subject matter is often gender discrimination within a patriarchal society. In feminist research approaches, the goals are to establish collaborative and nonexploitative relationships, to place the researcher within the study so as to avoid objectification, and to construct research that is transformative. Recent critical trends address protecting indigenous knowledge and the intersectionality of feminist research (e.g. the intersection of race, class gender, sexuality, able-bodiedness and age). (Olesen, 2011, as cited in Creswell, 2012, p. 29)

The theory that frames this research, intersectionality, is best suited to render the multiple situations and institutions, international and domestic, and dynamic developments in a sympathetic manner. In her 1989 work, Feminist fictions, Julie Stephens argued that Orientalist and feminist scholars have been guilty of complicity in searching for a female sovereign representation of non-Western women: someone who does not exist. “Feminist researchers see gender as a basic organizing principle which profoundly shapes/mediates the conditions of our lives. It is a lens that brings into focus particular questions” (Lather, 1991, p. 7 s cited in Bensimon & Marshall, 1997, p. 5). The questions feminists pose relate to the centrality of gender in the shaping of our consciousness, and to “correct both the invisibility and distortion of female experience in ways relevant to ending women’s unequal social position” (Lather, 1991, p. 71, as cited
Stewart (1994, as cited in Creswell, 2012, pp. 29-30) translated feminist critiques and methodology into procedural guides. She suggested that researchers needed to look for what has been left out in social science writing and to study women’s lives and issues such as identities, sex roles, domestic violence, abortion activism, comparable worth, affirmative actions, and the way in which women struggle with their social devaluation and powerlessness within their families. Also, researchers need to consciously and systematically include their own roles or positions and assess how they impact their understandings of a woman’s life. Women have agency, she wrote, and the ability to make choices and resist oppression. She suggested that researchers inquire into how a woman understands her gender, a social construct that differs for each individual, and study how power relationships and individuals’ social position impact women. Finally she reminded the researcher to acknowledge that each woman is different and avoid the search for a unified or coherent self or voice. Creswell summarized the current state of feminist research under a number of transformative developments “as critical trends e.g., endarkened, decolonizing research and intersectionality” (p. 30).

The historical feminisms discussed below cannot interpret the lives of Muslimas equitably, because they do not address local, national or religious bases of the participant’s backgrounds. Therefore I will outline the deficits of these feminisms in order to introduce the need for the emerging feminisms that do address Muslim women’s concerns
Postcolonialism and Feminisms

Postcolonialism might seem to be a theory that could underpin this study as the subjects are from a region that still resounds with the aftershocks of past British imperialism and present American imperialism (Dumenil & Levy, 2004, p. 658). However, according to Murfin and Ray (2008, p. 396) “Said laid the groundwork for the development of postcolonial theory in Orientalism” and postcolonial theory at its genesis facilitated the construction of falsities and myths about the ‘Orient’ in the analysis of European power, and has been influenced, among other theories, by deconstruction, which is based on binary oppositions such as privilege/other. I posit that Postcolonialism married with a non-Arabic feminism is too restrictive a foundation for theorizing, because they do not offer a relevant space to examine the lives of women from recently decolonized states who embrace what many in the West perceive as the trappings of oppression and ignorance: the veil and religious observance (AbuKhalil, 2005; Haddad, Smith, & Moore, 2006). Adding the fact that these women are Muslim complicates theorizing further still. Khan (1998) wrote that as the Muslima turns away from the dialogue and depictions of herself

…as the stereotyped “Muslim Woman,” individual women turn toward either the West or Islam for affirmation. Instead however, they find devaluations and apprehension in the former (Orientalism) and mechanism for their control in the latter (Islamism). (p. 466)

A more multifaceted theory is required to clarify the multiplicity of roles the participants assume and how they intersect daily.
Colonial Feminism

Colonial feminism (Ahmed, 1992) is still espoused by many public voices, who safely argue for liberation of populations beyond their influence, while not supporting those privileges at home. During the British occupation of Egypt, Lord Cromer (1841-1917), President of the Men’s League for Opposing Woman Suffrage (Said, 1979) in England, spoke disparagingly of the ‘oppressive’ situation of Egyptian women:

It was essential that Egyptians “be persuaded or forced into imbibing the true spirit of western civilization” and to achieve this, it was essential to change the position of women in Islam, for it was Islam’s degradation of women, expressed in the practices of veiling and seclusion, that was “the fatal obstacle” to the Egyptian’s “attainment of that elevation of thought and character which should accompany the introduction of Western civilisation”; only by abandoning those practices might they attain “the mental and moral development” which Cromer called for. (Ahmed, 2006)

Almost a century later, this argument is still a popular Western attitude (AbuKhalil, 2005; Curtis, 2013; Murray, 2012; Sloan, 2014; Spencer & Chesler, 2007). In contrast to the emergence of multiple publications about positive aspects of Muslimas’ lives in the 21st century, European and American political, military and social intervention is cloaked in terms of divinely appointed intercession (L. Bush, 2001) to save Muslimas from their perceived collective plight (British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC], 2001; G. W. Bush, 2005). These claims are strikingly similar to those of Fin de Siècle Europeans, embodied by Lord Cromer. Lila Abu-Lughod’s (2002) essay Do Muslim women really need saving? Anthropological reflections on cultural relativism and its others included a discussion of the second Bush “overwhelmingly White administration, far-right leaders who had consistently worked against women’s rights in their own country, [and were] now desperate to save Afghan women from Afghan men” (cited in Norton, 2013, para 3). In
2001, Laura Bush, wife of U.S. President George W. Bush, declared on American radio, “We are now engaged in a worldwide effort to focus on the brutality against women and children by...the Taliban” (L. Bush, 2001), a claim which infers a need to “fix” Taleban brutality against women in Afghanistan without understanding their history, needs, or the region’s current state of affairs, a White savior complex. If the problems Afghan women face are not tackled at the roots, followed by deep social changes, then the region may not see an end to the brutality and violence. Since 9/11, wives of British and American politicians have arrogated to themselves the responsibility to speak widely and publicly about saving Muslimas. After Laura Bush’s unprecedented radio appeal, the U.S. state department released the report *The Taliban’s War Against Women* (U.S. Department of State, 2001), which also claimed that the War on Terror was in part an action to save women and children victimized by the Taliban. These public declarations have been embedded in the rhetoric defending a Western attack on a sovereign nation, as Sonali Kolhatkar argued “women were simply utilised (sic) as a visual justification for military action” (Nottingham, 2013, p. 3). While Stabile and Kumar (as cited in Nottingham, 2013, p. 4) argued that the

media focus on women’s liberation [during and before the war in Afghanistan] was little more than a cynical ploy—it served as one of the pillars on which elites sought to sell the war to the U.S. public. Yet the previous administration had a... covert policy of supporting the Taliban. (p. 5)

The genesis of the White Savior complex maybe lost in the mists of time, but it is clear in Rudyard Kipling’s 1899 poem *The White Man’s Burden*, “Take up the White Man’s burden/Send forth the best ye breed/Go bind your sons to exile/To serve your captives’ need/To wait in heavy harness/On fluttered folk and wild/Your new-caught,
sullen peoples/Half-devil and half-child.” More recently, Spivak (1988) claimed that colonial powers, “White men,” were now legitimated by White women “saving brown women from brown men” (p. 33) and employed Draconian measures in their own interests.

*TIME* magazine’s headline 9th Aug 2010 above the photograph of Bibi Ayesha, a young woman whose husband amputated her nose, declared, “What happens if we leave Afghanistan.” The horrifying message implied that women will be subjected to these attacks if U.S. troops leave. However, Bibi was assaulted despite the presence of U.S. forces. Baig (2013) described Malala Yousafzai’s escape to the West as a racist venture, because while there is no justification for Taliban practices, or for denying “the universal right to education,” her tale is a repetition of a familiar narrative of a young girl saved and “flown to the UK” for treatment so “the Western world can feel good about itself as they save the native woman from the savage men of her home nation. It is a historic racist narrative that has been institutionalized” (para. 4). Where are all the other girls who raised similar objections and suffered similar fates?

In Britain, Cherie Blair, wife of the Prime Minister in the 1990s, called for the liberation of Afghan women from their downtrodden state to provide a moral foundation for the “War on Terror.” As she undertook her campaign, Mrs. Blair, perhaps inadvertently replayed the earlier colonial agenda that was at the heart of the call for Cromer’s “mental and moral development” of women (Ahmed, 2006). Key evidence that colonial attitudes are inadmissible in this project is that the voices of Egyptian women of Cromer’s age and Afghan women of the 2000s are missing entirely. Not only has
feminism strengthened patriarchal and colonial attitudes at home and “abroad, but colonialism’s use of feminism has ... imparted to feminism in non-Western societies the taint of having served as an instrument of colonial domination... [which] has undoubtedly hindered the feminist struggle with [colonized] societies” (Ahmed, 1992, p. 167) and undermined the struggle for women’s rights in many areas of the world today. There “has been a tendency among some women in the North to consider the feminist movement as a Western innovation and to lay down patterns and thoughts for all women” (El Saadawi, 1997, p. 32).

Outside the West, it appears that feminism has been conflated with the colonial role of international, global spokes-woman and savior of second- and third-world women without their consultation or acquiescence. Nadia Yassine (cited in Chu & Radwan, 2004), spokeswoman for the Moroccan Justice and Charity party eloquently argued, “I adapted my feminism from Islam, not Western culture.” (p.41)

**Veiling**

In the West it seems that no discussion of Saudias is free of reference to the Saudi cultural practice of full veiling; Abbaya (full-length dress), veil (headscarf), and Niqaab (face covering) in public spaces and in the presence of unrelated males. One of the most easily identifiable groups of women in the world today is the veiled Muslima (Contractor, 2012; Karasu, 2013, Pervez, 2013). However, while styles of hijab (modest clothing) can vary greatly, they can be assumed to indicate anything from a shade of danger to incipient terrorist activity (Byrne, 2010, p. 176). While for the Muslima, the degree of hijab she
adopts can be dictated by her original culture, or it can illustrate her commitment to her faith (Alam, personal communication, May 15, 2011). The hegemonic framework of European diplomacy and media, which mold the parameters of many individual interpretations of these veiled women who hail from the desert, shrouded in dust and ethnic difference, is overshadowed by a self-perpetuating ancient Islamophobia.

Sollors (1995) wrote, “Ethnic, racial, or national identifications rest on antitheses, on negativity” (p. 288) and depending on ethnicity as a classification, creates in- and out-groups. Perceptions of Islam, the monolithic block, “in the postcolonial world are often informed by popular political movements in muslim [sic] countries, or in muslim communities in the First World” (Khan, 1998, p. 468). A deep intersectionality exists for veiled Muslimas, who are identified as a religious out-group, compounded for Saudias, who are an ethnic out-group. Sollors went on to explain that ethnicity is based on a contrast and quoted the ethnopsychoanalyst Devereux on the same issue:

[I]dentity seen this way, is logically and historically the product of the assertion that “A is an X because he is not a Y”—a proposition which makes it remarkably easy to identify Xness. By the same token, the definition of Xs as non-Ys threatens to exaggerate their differences in such a way that if the Xs think of themselves as human, they may therefore consider the Ys as some-how nonhuman. (p. 288)

Deveraux’s claim substantiates Shaheen’s (2001) assertion that veiled Muslimas have historically been perceived as nonhuman.

Deciding whether veiling is culturally or qur’anically based is challenging. An appeal for Qur’anic clarification of veiling is problematic because there are many interpretations of what the Prophet’s original instruction meant, not the least of which is that many Muslims see the veil as a sign of distinction because it evokes a connection to
the Prophet Mohammad and his wives. The verse in the Qur’an commonly known as the “Verses of the Curtain” sometimes interpreted as an injunction for women to wear hijab reads, “And [as for the Prophets wives] whenever you ask them for anything you need, do so from behind a screen: this will but deepen the purity of your hearts and theirs” (Asad, 2003, p.728). The Asad translation of this verse, and other translations, indicate that it should be the visitors to the Prophet’s tent who cover their faces. However, many Imams have interpreted it to apply only to all women.

Many scholars call for new readings of the Qur’an, pointing to older Tasfir as misogynistic, and inviting a reinterpretation and rereading for today’s world. Arkoun (1994) wrote the Qur’an “has been ripped from its historical, linguistic, literary, and psychological contexts and... continually recontextualized in various cultures and according to the ideological needs of various actors” (p. 5). Bannister (2014) argued the Qur’an has been decontextualized, “to be read through the lens of much later Islamic tradition, or shattered into pieces to be atomically analyzed, or strapped to the Procrustean bed of whichever scholarly theory is currently in vogue (p. 33). While Barlas (2002) theorized that

insofar as all texts are polysemic, they are open to variant readings…in particular we need to examine the roles of Muslim interpretive communities and states (the realms of sexual politics) in shaping religious knowledge and authority in ways that enabled patriarchal readings of the Qur’an. (p. 5)

The context of the verses of the curtain would indicate that the Prophet had to instruct some of his visitors on social etiquette, and may have had pause to provide some seclusion and protection for his wives. Other than this passage, Qur’anic instructions are only that women and men dress should dress modestly. Abu-Lughod, (2013) wrote:
Veiling should not be confused with, or used to symbolize...lack of agency. Not only are there many forms of covering, which themselves have different meanings in the communities where they are used, but veiling has become caught up almost everywhere now in the politics of representation—of class, of piety and of political affiliation. (p. 39)

Nor should we forget the opportunity that has been availed to women who used Burqas for smuggling books and cameras to women’s groups in Afghanistan. Blogger Samiah (eren, 2012) wrote, “I feel like an ambassador. What would be unfair is expecting me to be the one and the same with ALL (sic) hijab wearing women!!! We are all as individual in our accomplishments as all women wearing blue jeans!!!!”

Zine (2006) posited that the veil has “entered into the popular imagination in Western societies as the quintessential marker of the Muslim world and as a practice synonymous with religious fundamentalism and extremism” (p. 242), which reduces the choice to veil to a mark of oppression and involuntary submissiveness. This mark of oppression (Alberts, 2010; Mastrilli & Sardo-Brown, 2002; McMurthie, 2001; Muhtaseb, 2007; Rana, 2007; Shaheen, 2001; Zine, 2006), is what Storey (2006) called a “signifying practice” (p. 3), a meaning-making behavior which follows certain conventions of structure and interpretation. The many interpretations of this signifying practice serve as ideological battlegrounds for sympathetic versus unsympathetic views of Islam, and at times threaten the sanctity of Muslimas’ inalienable rights to make their own sartorial choices.

The 1937 French law prohibiting the wearing of religious symbols in public schools argued that the veil is “a sign of imprisonment that considers women to be subhuman…..” (Gutmann, 1996, p. 161). Not all Muslimas choose to veil, and the public
discussion of veiling is not something they want to identify Islam; it is merely one small facet of identity (Almonem, personal communication, January 14, 2014). Errazouki (2012) argued,

Those who are fixated on the Niqab [face veil] believe that focusing on what a Muslim woman wears is what defines her thought, her intellect, her capabilities, her sexuality her gender and her very existence. It is a narrative that’s been framed by the West and fed by [early Egyptian feminists]. (para. 3)

The “Western obsession” (Fahkrie, personal communication, December 12, 2009; eren, 2012, p. 1; Shah, 2014, p. 1; Shirazi, 2014, p. 1) with veiling reduces Muslimas to a negative point of reference, and many Muslimas do not understand why veiling evokes the opposite effect of their intention to be modest, private, removed from the public gaze (Fahkrie, personal communication December 12, 2009), and they resent the interference of non-Muslims on the subject. “Oppression comes in many forms...not least from those feminists who want to save Muslimas from what many...believe to be a commandment from God” (Haddad et al., 2006, p. 39). Veiling offers the “Mechanism for protecting against harassment and the male sexual gaze, for moving more freely in a sexist society, and for presenting oneself as a human being as opposed to a sexual object...” (Tolaymat & Moradi, 2011, p. 384), allowing women to “claim the gaze and become the ones who observe the world” (Asfar, 2000, p. 531).

When Wojdan Shaherkani and Sarah Attar, the first Saudia Olympians came to the attention of the media in 2012, U.S.-born Attar said she felt that her participation for the KSA was an “Honour,” which she hoped would make a difference. “It was such a unique opportunity, they invited me and welcomed me and to make that first step for women is just the most amazing feeling ever” (Shergold, 2012, para. 9). However, while they were
still contenders, the media only seemed to be obsessed with what the girls would wear.

Shah (2014) argued that Westerners analyze and interpret Muslima fashions as some sort of profound assertion of political identity or religious stance....the bigger truth is that Muslim women wear what they do, including what’s on their heads, because of how it makes them look and feel, just like all women around the world, and it takes on the cultural overtones of the milieu in which they live. There’s no need to survey this or pathologize it: there’s certainly no point in turning it into a value judgment. If people truly care about the autonomy and agency of Muslim women...they should just leave the wardrobe choices to Muslim women themselves, and find a better medium through which to express their concern. (p. 1)

Some Muslimas choose to veil overseas as a sign of religious devotion “as a part of their bodily means to cultivate virtue, the outcome of their professed desire to be close to God’ (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 786) not as an outdated stereotype or “walking headline” (Abdel-Fattah, 2014).

It is disappointing that Khan (2002), citing her own experience, claimed that Muslimas who strive to be heard in the public debate “struggle to be heard as muslim [sic] unless they wear the hejab or defer to the imam. Many people do not want to hear from or about muslim women...unless they situate themselves as victims or subservient to their men” (p. xv). However, while the veil may be interpreted by as an oppressive act, silencing Muslim women and exemplifying the fable that Islam is fundamentally sexist and patriarchal, the adoption of abbayas and headscarves has increased across the Muslim world. “For many Muslim women, wearing the veil has become a feminist act, serving as a symbol of their identity and a way to counter cultural imperialism” and is an example of how Muslimas are essentializing and manifesting their own feminism; on their own terms.
Media Representations of Muslimas

Muhtaseb (2007) claimed, “The U.S. mainstream media serve as students’ main pedagogy in terms of education about the world” (p. 27). Living “in a secondhand world of meanings... [Humans] have no direct access to reality. Reality...is mediated by symbolic representation, by narrative texts, and...cinematic and televisual structures that stand between the person and the so-called real world” (Denzin, 1997, cited in Aitken & Herman, 2009, p. 11). Regardless of ethnicity, Muslimas make easy targets because they are easy to identify (Alam, personal communication, May 15, 2011). Meanings associated with veiled Muslimas for most Westerners are often the result of cultural discourse mediated by Hollywood representations and relegated as a signifying practice of oppression (Storey, 2006, p. 3). Signifying practices, the symbols of popular culture include sartorial trends. Muslimas are not the only negatively represented section of Islamic society; Hussein and Khouri (2014) wrote;

The fact that a company such as Walt Disney...is contributing perpetuation of anti-Arab stereotypes is alarming. We expect Disney to live up to the standards it sets for itself. Don’t Arab-American children deserve to feel proud of their Arab heritage? ... We’re talking about the images that dominate our culture and shape the minds of our children. Disney has a responsibility to ensure that its productions do not foster ethnic animosity.... It’s particularly painful that a company which got its start humanizing animals, Mickey and Donald, has now taken to dehumanizing people.... (para. 6-7)

A prime example is Princess Jasmine in Aladdin, who, despite her royal status, is scantly clad in transparent harem pants and short blouse, easily available and highly eroticized, reminiscent of the semi clad and naked pictures of Muslim women that flooded England and the continent during the late 1800s. This availability, Khan (1998) wrote, of Muslim
women unveiled, provides a clear picture of the violence of “unequal power relations between women and men, as well as between colonizer and colonized” (p. 467). This relationship is reflected in the art of the period such as Gerome’s *The Snake Charmer*, (the well-known cover for Said’s *Orientalism*), or Gaugin’s *Spirit of the Dead Watching*.

In the documentary, *Reel Bad Arabs* (Earp & Jhally, 2001), Dr. Jack Shaheen discussed the iconic negative stereotypes of Muslims generated and perpetuated by Hollywood, and coins the phrase “Bundles of Black” to identify and illustrate one of the widely accepted representations of Muslimas; entities swathed in voluminous black robes in the intolerable desert heat with faces, hands, feet, and bodies shrouded in anonymity. The absence of identifying features adds to the images of terrifying women who are oppressed, uneducated, and/or willing participants in violent struggles (Haddad, 1991; Haddad et al., 2006; Mernissi, 1987; Neider, 2009; Pabst, 2009; Scott, 2007; Shaheen 2001; Tyrer & Ahmad, 2006; Zine, 2001, 2006). "The image of Muslims as violent extremists is perpetuated by the media, which chooses to report primarily negative images of Islam and Muslims” (Hathout, 2007, p. 2). Said (1982) also argued that fear, often based on a closely and jealously guarded ignorance, has been perpetuated through centuries of contact with Islam.

Stereotypes of Muslimas in the West are also reinforced in best-selling books: memoirs, fiction, or scholarly tomes based on Muslimas’ lives. The full range, from horrific personal narratives, some entirely fictional, to inspirational themes have become popular, even with readers who have no previous interest in the Muslim world. Shaheen (2001) suggested that readers question what the roles of terrorist (*The Sheik, Black*...
Sunday, True Lies, and even Back to the Future), drooling womanizer (King of the Sands, Innocence of Muslims), or greedy, haranguing trader (Disney’s Aladdin, Father of the Bride, Part II, In the Army Now) played by Arabs in movies and on TV, say about the West as well as Arabs, this is a double-sided vision. If the texts we see and read continue to present Arab and Muslim women as “exotic others” (S. Smith, 2007, p.22), the West will perpetuate the Colonizing interpretation of them and their lives. The recent proliferation of Muslima memoirs in the U.S. is a late development of this genre, many memoirs from the 1920s and earlier are common in India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the British and Irish Isles. Unfortunately, these books fuel the idea that these women are oppressed and need to be saved from their culture and religion.

In the U.S., Muslim students number less than 1% of the college population (McMurthie, 2001) and overwhelmingly attend state schools, which Jackson (1994) claimed “remain entrenched in a culture that is Eurocentric and middle class” (p. 59). The media representation of these women is met with fear and rejection, conflated as they are with images of terrorism, oppression, and ignorance (Mastrilli & Sardo-Brown, 2002; Muhtaseb, 2007; Rana, 2007; Shaheen, 2001; Speck, 1996; Zine, 2006), despite their presence and success as fellow students.

Repeated discussions of veiling, as a problematic cultural practice, and stereotyping Muslimas as victims, distracts consumers of popular media “as if knowing something about women or Islam or the meaning of a religious ritual, would help us understand” (Abu-Lughod, 2013, p. 31) the politics, societies, the tragedies of persistent poverty, lack of education, homelessness and war in the region, while denying the
culpability of the West.

A veiled woman, wearing her construct of autonomy, indicates to other Muslims that she is “liberating herself and her male kin, by choosing to veil and not be molested or stopped” (El Guindi, 1981, p. 483). Conversely, to many Westerners, “We manage simultaneously to pose a threat to the whole of society and to show how oppressed we are, how much in need of rescue” (Yaqoob, 2010, p. 40).

**Gendered Islamophobia**

Veiled Muslimas are common targets of Islamophobia, merely because they are easily identified. “Islamophobia is now part of the national psyche, [and] words such as... Muslim are perceived as threatening” (Earp & Jhally, 2001). The discussion of the veil has focused perversely, in contrast with the intent of veiling, on Muslimas’ bodies, and has generated in the West what Zine (2006) called “gendered Islamophobia” (p. 240). The negative attitude towards veiled Muslimas is an historical one; citing both Hoodfar (1993) and Said (1979), Zine (2006) said “In the case of gendered Islamophobia, the discursive roots are historically entrenched in Orientalist representations that cast Muslim women as backward, oppressed victims of misogynist societies” (p. 240). Those roots are hard to disentangle.

**Identity and Self-Identity**

**Identity**

In constructing identity, regardless of ethnicity, gender or religion, we draw on
identifications and interactions primarily with parents, family, and then others of significance in the course of biographical experiences, and also with ‘groups’ as they are perceived. These influences “may be benign, encouraging aspirations to those values, characteristics, and beliefs, a process of idealistic-identification, or malign causing rejection and dissociation from characteristics that seem unpalatable, a process of defensive contra-identification” (Weinreich & Saunderson, 2003, pp.54-61). Adoption of these collective identities can be a conscious or unconscious process; Covarrubias and Revilla (as cited in Revilla, 2010) wrote that both are understood as a fluid process within which those who are developing it will be at different levels at different times in their lives...Furthermore one can achieve a high degree of consciousness along one dimension (e.g., a race consciousness), but can be unconscious along another dimension (e.g., gender consciousness). (p. 4)

Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) discussed social identity as a way to explain intergroup behavior, and argued that social identity is derived from their perceived membership in relevant social groups as opposed to other contrasting groups. Each individual has a sense of where they belong in a social context by determining where they belong after categorizing people around them, then determining what role, behavior, and level of language are appropriate to the situation in that milieu. This sense is not something one is born with or possesses, it is something that develops and is adopted through daily interactions. Subsequently one determines the appropriate group to identify with, and then comparing with other groups will cement the identity that is adopted. The adopted social group will affect self-esteem, as the adopted group carries with it social capital and attendant resources.
The sense we make of ourselves and our identities allows us to make sense of the pursuits of others. We understand our actions in relation to the host narrative or community, providing the narratives to shape the telling of our lives. “To live our lives as agents requires that we see our actions and experiences as belonging to something like a story” (Appiah, 2005, pp. 21-22). Using the forms of the host culture, to narrate our lives and attach ourselves within that host culture (Appiah, 2005), identities undergo further developments. However, the Saudias who attend ZSU are learning a second language and adapting to a profoundly different host culture, and they have unexpectedly found themselves facing the obstacles erected by the host culture because they are objects of fear, indifference, prejudice, scorn, or outright and blatant discrimination based solely on their appearance (Alberts, 2010, p. 3; Moeller, personal communication, December 3, 2012). These obstacles to a finding a secure space within which to continue to develop their identities present enormous challenges.

In the West, identity and roles are defined and evaluated through a Judeo-Christian lens, and for the Muslimas of this study therein lies the rub. While some Muslimas’ situations are similar to women’s situations in the West, there is a profound difference in the historical development, use, and investment in the purposes of interpretation of their situations that is dictated by many factors including societal, familial, and cultural expectations, geo-political and historical context, international relations and interpretations based on Western vs. Eastern political needs, religion and the theocratic state, traditions of itinerant populations.

Chickering (1993) described competence in coping with university as intellectual,
physical, and interpersonal situations tied together by a sense of competence derived
from the student’s self-assurance in achieving her/his goals. Many of the competencies
Chickering identified are unfamiliar to the Saudia whose culture places profoundly
different values on ideas such as the multiplicity and exploration of sexual identities, love
in marriage, family, and individuality versus communality, cross-cultural tolerance,
political activity, and full emancipation that are common in the West.

Multiple Identities

Khan (1998) invited us to reconsider some fixed perceptions of the Muslima,
veiled or unveiled, who because she is presented as a minority, cannot negotiate her
social identity as it is already set in stone. Also, the Muslima is regulated in the West by
Islam and Orientalism, both of which reduce ‘Muslima’ to a merely religious identity
despite different sectarian beliefs. She has no alternative but to negotiate or create some
space as an integral piece of her self-identity, where she may construct a hybrid of her
many identities, and yet be safely accommodated.

Erikson (1968) described eight stages of identity development and included a
psychological sense of continuity, the ego identity or the self; plus the personal
idiosyncrasies that separate each of us, the personal identity; and all the required social
roles a person might play, Erikson explained that identity is “a process ‘located’ at the
core of the individual as well as in the core of [her]…culture (p. 22). Nasir and Al-Amin
(2006) suggested that “People have not just one, but multiple, sometimes, conflicting
identities” (p. 26). According to Sanchez et al. (2012), multiple identities; “race,
ethnicity, country of origin, migration history, and cultural and personal
beliefs...gender—(not all women are the same gender)...all interact to determine how individual women align with feminist viewpoints” (p. 91). Added to the above constructs are the distinct, yet intersecting roles the women of this study shoulder; student, wife/fiancée/sister-housekeeper, mother, keeper of social status and caste, and faithful disciple. More discussion of “how the multiple identities that... [Muslimas]...inhabit as social actors based on race, ethnicity, religion, and gender position them in marginalized sites within the racialized borders of Diaspora and nation” (Zine, 2006, p. 239) is needed to show that Muslimas are relevant in today’s world regardless of the discrimination and disdain a host community might exhibit towards them.

Multiple roles affecting self-perception and identity intersect the lives of Muslimas in the Diaspora, as they affect all individuals. However, because of their marginalized religion, and often easily identifiable minority ethnic status, they negotiate identities that are more complicated than those most White women do. Saudias should be understood outside the monolithic space that many in the West perceive Islam to be. As Muslimas are subjected to “…unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation” (Bhabha, 2004, p. 245), they develop a resistance to the host culture, and may cling more closely to their familiar and comforting norm.

**Identity in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**

I would argue that there is no one Saudi Arabian identity as the regions that constitute the Kingdom are sparsely populated by tribes which were until recently, nomadic, and which have adapted to life under a monarch from one of the most powerful tribes and subsequently as a nation, as best they can. My own experiences of the diversity
of the British and Irish Isles, and of the U.S., lead me to believe that in a kingdom like the KSA, diversity would also exist. Moreover, interactions with Saudia students also lead me to believe that there is a great deal of diversity in the practice of Islam, family traditions, and power structures within each tribe. There are, however, some common expectations based on the Islamic foundations of the modern Al Saud state, which post-date the life of the Prophet Mohammed.

The major influences on a Saudi identity are Islam and family. Sharia law, the basis of the judicial system, is derived from the Qur'an, the Hadith (the sayings of the prophet), and the Sunna (the recommended practices of Islam), cementing Islam as a daily influence. Islam was at its genesis a religious, legal, and social revolution. The faithful believe that because it is rooted in God’s words to the Prophet, it provides for every Age of Man (Al Muhemid, personal communication, November 23, 2012), and it is not a religion that morphs according to times, spaces, or contemporary needs. Family practices are rooted in Islam and Sharia law. In my observation as honorary grandmother, I would argue that children are socialized to be an integral part of the family and community at an early age. Because the society is patrilineal, a Muslima does not take her husband’s name and remains identified with her own family, as well as with her husband and his. When Saudi students return to the KSA for their breaks, the wife returns to her father’s house and the husband returns to his father’s house. The actions of each individual can affect the reputation of the family and community; honor is of prime importance, so much care is taken not to pollute it. The Muslima then, must guard the reputations of two families, and the reputation of her children. These requirements are
major influences on the formation of a Saudia’s identity and are reinforced by her legal dependency on her male relatives.

Saudi society since 1976 has been segregated from early in a child’s life. Schools, public spaces, extended family celebrations are all segregated by gender. This expectation has been facilitated by the state in town planning, in business, and the entertainment industry. All-female malls, hospital accommodations, and banks are the norm. Riyadh University for women, the world’s largest women’s university, was opened in 2004, renamed in 2008 as the Princess Nora bint Abdul Rahman University. The combination of segregated spaces and the requirements to be veiled in those spaces creates an impression of invisible women. However, and maybe not in contradiction, according to Pharaon (2004), women are “bearers of their culture’s authenticity and are made to serve as boundary markers” (p. 356). Both men and women are aware of the boundaries that these women must observe, and in my observation as a teacher, in the absence of a family male, the male Saudis in the classroom step up to provide protection from, and delimit the acceptable space between, a non-Saudi male and the “unprotected” Muslima.

Identity on campus. Saudias at ZSU will naturally establish networks amongst themselves, and with points and people of interest and power. These networks can be plural, maintaining the original culture, and providing space to successfully navigate the new host culture. Some of these networks provide a continuity of community (Fischer, 1982; Tatum, 2003). Others, peopled by other aliens, or citizens of the host culture, provide multiple challenges of their own (Shabeeb, personal communication, May 22,
2013), and for some Saudias networks are safe norms only when they consist solely of women. These norms are loosely qur’anically based but firmly culturally based (Alshakiss, personal communication, March 5, 2010).

Islamic Studies departments, and new courses of study focusing on Muslimas, have proliferated in the past decade and a half. Kecia Ali, professor of Islamic Studies at Boston University, “emphasizes the broader historical context in which the West has presented Muslim women going back to medieval times...it is important to examine how Muslim societies depict Western women...[because] ‘the gaze works both ways’” (S. Smith, 2007, p. 22). According to Smith, the most popular questions in any Islamic Studies course are related to the treatment of women and gender roles in Islamic societies (p. 22) a claim that I see borne out in classes I teach. These questions seem naive in light of the fact that Benazir Bhutto served twice as Pakistan’s president before she was assassinated in 2007 two weeks before running in a third election; Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri was elected 2001, Turkish Prime Minister Tansu Ciller elected 1993, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia elected 1991, and Sheikh Hasina Wajed, second female Bangladeshi President elected in 1996. Some of these women were elected years before the appointment of an American woman to any prominent political position.

Identity in the community. Although they are familiar with sectarianism, Saudis are unused to the religious and ethnic prejudice they are subjected to in the U.S. In the KSA, they are socially superior to the non-Muslim guest workers from other parts of Asia, and the minority African-Saudi citizens who are descendants of slaves (Al
Muheimid, personal communication, November 23, 2012). For the Arab Saudi for whom skin color has not been a negative mark before, here in the U.S., the gaze works two ways because the Saudis have to reconsider their position of privilege, causing what W. E. B. Du Bois called “double consciousness” (Bazian, 2012) as they strive to free themselves from negative perceptions. “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (De Bois, 1994, p. 179).

Muslim Resistance

Despite the opposition they face, most Muslims in the Diaspora, such as those at ZSU, still seek to study and socialize with non-Muslims. “The nature of Islam does not encourage exclusivity; Islam is a global and politicized religion that seeks to win converts” (Jacobsen, 1997, p. 242). According to Mernissi (1987), Islam is a “set of psychological devices about self-empowerment and making oneself at home everywhere around the globe, in unfamiliar as well as familiar surroundings” (p. x). It is a community of peace and discipline. Muslimas, as minorities, attempt to “…negotiate their lives within a context that promotes and legitimizes multicultural policies and practices. At this intersection, women find themselves inserted into predetermined discourses and practices that shape their agency and determine their strategies of resistance, often to the extent that progressive politics do not appear possible within the category Muslim” (Khan, 2002, p. ix). These efforts are increasingly difficult as Islam is recast in the West as a
political ideology. Zine (2000) related how the Muslim students she studied were “not only able to negotiate their religious identities, but to use their identities as a means of resistance to counteract their marginality within secular Eurocentric schools” (p. 296).

   Ultimately, I do not see Islam as the problem; I see it as the platform for change. I value agency, choice, and autonomy. Moreover, I have a deep conviction that these values are integral to the Islamic Tradition, and are not simply ideals imported from the West. (Abdel-Fattah, 2013, p. 1)

Islam is the means by which many students seek to articulate their places in a dissonant world, which to them is rooted in the unacceptable practices, morals, and ethics of the West (Almomen, personal communication, January 14, 2014), and so they employ their unique individual and collective differences to maintain their identities in the face of overwhelmingly different cultural and educational expectations (Zine, 2006).

**Islamic Feminism**

The purpose of this study is to tell the stories shared by the participants; but if the work is to be recognized as valid to other Muslimas, Islamic feminist perspectives should ground the study. There are women’s movements across the Islamic world, even within fundamentalist movements, and these feminisms have developed as a response to local situations, needs and belief systems. A discussion of Islamic Feminism will provide a foundation for a later discussion of the nuances of Saudia Feminism, which is evolving to address Saudia experiences.

   Movements that advocate for rapid change are not generally appealing to Muslimas, who reject the label “feminism” as it is often associated with a definition of feminism and femininity that they do not feel suits their culture (*The Economist*, 1999).
Fernea (1998, p. 414) noted that for many Arab women, “Feminism…was synonymous with America, with fast food.” AbuKhalil (1993, p. 14) wrote, “Feminism is now increasingly under attack because Islamic fundamentalists (like Christian and Jewish fundamentalists) have chosen to focus on women’s issues and to discredit feminism by linking it to Western political interests.” Recent American conflicts with the Arab world has exacerbated these attitudes. Any investigations of Arab feminisms should consider the way that Islam undergirds every aspect of Muslim men and women’s lives.

The Islamic Feminist movement “strives to transcend binary notions of East versus West, secular versus religious, and traditional versus modern, encompassing the Muslim diaspora around the world…”

also aims for the full equality of all Muslims, male and female, in both public and private life. Margot Badran… asserts that Islamic Feminism is more radical than more secular Muslim feminism. She writes: ‘Islamic feminism, which derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur’an, seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in the totality of their existence. Islamic feminism is both highly contested and firmly embraced” (Independent Television Service, 2015, para 5 & 6).

Badran (2002) also wrote that feminisms are produced in particular places and are articulated in local terms. Thus there is an argument for Islamic based feminisms that address the variety of cultures across Muslim countries.

Initially, the term “Islamic feminism” arose in the 1990s and was used to define the emergent feminist paradigm in Muslima society. The Iranian scholars Afsaneh Najmabadeh and Ziba Mir-Hosseini described the increasing use of the term by women writing in Zanan the Iranian women’s journal founded in 1992. Saudi Arabian scholar Mai Yamani in her book Feminism and Islam (1996), Nilufer Gole (The Forbidden
Modern) and Turkish scholars Yesim Arat and Feride Acar. South African feminist activist Shamima Shaikh used the term widely in speeches and articles in the 1990s. By the mid-1990s, the term Islamic feminism was recognized and circulated by Muslims in the far-flung diaspora of the global "Ummah (the people).

Abu-Lughod (2002) argued that “we have to recognize that even after ‘liberation’ from the Taliban, [women] might want different things than we want for them” (p. 787). Fatima Gailani, President of the Afghan Red Crescent, and drafting member of the Afghan constitution, said that if she were to ask Afghan women to vote for “secularism, they are going to tell me to go to hell...according to one report most...women looked for inspiration...to Iran... [where] they saw women making significant gains within an Islamic framework” (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 788) affording acceptance on many levels without disrupting their own spheres. Mojab (1995) questioned whether Islamic feminism is able to advance the cause of Muslims’ status. In reference to the feminist movement in the Islamic Republic of Iran she argued the aim was a “compromise with patriarchy” (p. 25).

“Feminism is not one unified movement,” Noor Al Sibai (2015) wrote.

Here is where the term “intersectionality”...comes into play.... There is a new generation emerging, emboldened and empowered by feminist...blogospheres, that aims to be intersectional in their beliefs and approaches to social justice. And yet, one glaring division still exists in modern feminisms despite calls for intersectionality: the traditional divisions of the “Western” and “Eastern” worlds. And this division is exacerbated by the Western response to the “plight” of Muslim women. While outliers do exist, many Western feminists still view Islam and feminism as exclusive categories that are at odds...championing Malala Yousafzai for standing up to the Taliban while ignoring the Western influence on poverty and violence in Pakistan.... Western feminists are adept at missing the point when it comes to women in Islam.... Muslim women face unique challenges, specifically in Muslim regions, but...criticizing Islam is an inadequate
way to fight patriarchy and, moreover, disrupts solidarity with Muslim women. Western feminists fail Muslim women on a number of fronts. (para. 4)

Eltahawy’s (2013) *Foreign Policy* article “Why do they hate us?” was a “brutal indictment of misogyny in the Middle East” (Jeltsen, 2013, para. 23). She admitted that she “wrote it to provoke” (Jeltsen, 2013, para. 25). Errazzouki (2012), argued that Eltahawy minimized a complex issue by writing in such broad strokes and also entirely neglected the roots of poverty and support for dictatorial governments inherited from, and maintained by, previous colonial powers, and

…the remnants of dehumanization and oppression from colonialism, the systematic exclusion of women from the political system or those who are used as convenient tools for the regime... There is more to gender inequality than just “hate.” (para. 10)

Although Eltahawy is hailed as a spokeswoman for Arab and Muslim women by the media in the West, she does not have the same devoted following within the Arabic community; “expressing her views...on behalf of all Arab women is enraging” (Errazzouki, 2012, para 5). Framing Middle Eastern women as a monolithic block whose struggles are singularly focused on hate for their male counterparts denies developments in the region made in part by women there. Speaking of gender equality and justice, Errazzouki wrote:

A selective fear of Islamists when it comes to women’s … rights has more to do with Islamophobia than a genuine concern with gender justice. Unfortunately, Islamists do not have an exclusive license to practice patriarchy and gender discrimination/oppression in the region. The secular state has been doing it fairly adequately for the last half a century. (para. 5)

Many of those secular states are merely perpetuating inherited misogynist attitudes and structures from former colonizing states. Mohanty (1996) argued that the third world
woman is merely the subject of discourse by feminists in the West, Muslim or non-Muslim scholars alike. These scholars present Muslimas as solely existing in Islamic spheres of influence, devoid of global relationships. These depictions are unsympathetic and miss the mark.

Haddad et al. (2006) used the word “specter” to describe how Feminism “looms over these discussions, with the result that most Muslims insist vigorously that whatever new interpretations they try to coax from Islamic tradition are categorically different from the assertions of non-Muslim feminist activists in the West” (p. 19). The notion of equality based on Feminist ideals is unimportant to some Muslims, as gender equity is a basic Islamic tenet, men and women are expected to fulfill differing, complementary social roles. Islam guarantees women the “right to make their own choices in the areas of education, business, and property.... misconception[s are] partly due to the stereotypes of Muslim women as being ignorant and submissive” (Syed, 2008, p. 247).

Isobel Coleman (2010), director of the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations Women and Foreign Policy program, wrote that Islamic feminists, for whom Islam is fundamental, are reading the Qur’an and realizing the support for women’s rights and women’s equality it contains. The Qur’an declares that any kind of work is not superior to any other kind, there is equality in labor. The only quality that sets one person above another is a religious ideal of “righteousness,” regardless of gender, race, or nationality (Qur’an 4:124). Islam has been referred to as the earliest form of feminism. “Islamic feminism provides a more comfortable alternative path toward change...it can be seen as more culturally relevant and less threatening to core Islamic values” (Wagner, 2011).
Abdel-Fattah (2013) wrote that she is “tired of White women who think” the answer to problems suffered by poverty-stricken “infantilized” Muslimas is rescue “by the ‘enlightened’ West—as if freedom was the sole preserve of secular feminists” (p. 1). Khan (1998) wrote that accepting the “category muslim [sic] as a starting point,” she identified and engaged within a “space of displacement so that [she] can practice feminist politics within the category muslim” [sic] (p. 468). The Islamic feminism employed in this study will be presented through the eyes and paradigms of the participants and their interpretation of the tenets of Islam, one that acknowledges the fundamental nature of Islam in their intersected daily lives.

**Saudia Feminism**

If, as Badran (2002) wrote, “Feminism…is a plant that only grows in its own soil” (p. 243), there should be evidence of a localized version of Islamic feminism that is relevant and explicates the Saudi practice of Islam and the lives of Saudias and Saudis. The emergence of this version of feminism has many social obstacles to overcome in the KSA, not least the traditions handed down since the ascent of Wahabi-ism (1979 onwards).

At the U.N. Human Rights Council on October, 21, 2013, the UK “called for abolition of the Saudi system of male guardianship for women” (Nebehay, 2013, para. 2) a reiteration of a 2009 recommendation. A consensus of opinions from Saudi allies indicated that the KSA had missed the “opportunity to commit to urgently needed reforms” (Nebehay, 2013, para. 5). However, the view from the KSA is varied, referring to the recent discussion in the West of Saudias driving, Abdel-Raheem (2013) wrote;
…the continuous attempts from the west to impose its values elsewhere are pointless, Western feminism is not only unlikely to take hold in countries like Saudi Arabia, it is not what many women in the kingdom want…the west’s ‘definition of equality cannot work in our Arab world’…instead of launching campaigns to change the driving laws in the kingdom, the west should first ask Saudi women if they really want this or not, and western countries should accept the result, even if it’s not to their liking. (p. 4)

The West continues to make colonial incursions into Arab lands. Speaking of Saudias in particular, Dr. Mona Almunajjed, advisor to the International Labour Office, the UN International Children’s Fund, the Food and Agriculture Organisation and the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and author of Saudi Women Speak said:

Western countries have a distorted view that Saudi women lack freedom, but this negative image is outdated…[those images are] “holdovers from the 19th Century Orientalists…. [Saudias] are...overcoming the challenges and constraints caused by local customs or conservative religious interpretations. (Hanley, 2010, p. 46)

Almunajjed reiterated that changes are being achieved gradually and interference from outside the KSA would hinder those efforts. She added, Saudias “want to preserve their values and traditions as they blend ideas from the modern world” (Hanley, 2010, p. 46).

These values and traditions are firmly rooted in Islam, a fact that should be recognized, not resisted. There is no separation of church and state in the KSA.

The definition of Feminism remains a sticking point with young Saudis who say they want a feminist movement on their own terms, which includes Islam as a major component...a “Saudi-Islamic” feminist movement...with rights that consider religion and a Sharia-based judicial system…. Few young women have role models beyond the Prophet Mohammed’s wives, Aisha Bint Abu Bkr and Khadijah bint Khuwaylid. “If I was looking for role models, I’d want women who looked and talked like me, covered with hijab and addressing me as a Saudi woman. Not some Western ideal of what a Saudi woman should be.” (Wagner, 2011)

It is easy, Abdel-Fattah (2013) wrote, to “think of Saudi women only in terms of
victimhood,” but, by doing so inequities are compounded and agency denied “to the many women who are actively resisting oppression and making a life for themselves despite the barriers.... [They] do not need, nor do they seek, pity. They deserve to be heard and to be respected” (p. 1). Amongst many Saudias, feminism is perceived as an ideology that leads to destruction of morality, promoting divorce and promiscuity, a reflection of how some Western media portray daily life in the West.

The evolution of Saudia feminism, however, is not without its naysayers; akin to the early 20th century European suffragette movement “the most vocal critics of Saudi feminism may be women...[such as the 16] women, [who] launched the ‘My Guardian Knows What’s Best for Me’ campaign in 2009 in reaction to calls to eliminate guardianship laws” (Wagner, 2011). Abdulkarim (2012) described the Saudi Feminist Movement as “fragmented”; some women who are presently writing about Saudi feminism are not resident in the Kingdom, and disagree over the nature of such a movement. Some claim that there cannot be such a movement because of the paternalistic nature of the Kingdom, which filters into the process for seeking and granting reforms. Abdulkarim argued against accepting support from outside the Kingdom and sees rejection of this support “from imperialist Western powers as part of a broader objection to governmental alliances.” Abdulkarim also suggested that the price to pay to Western powers that have been culpable in supporting what she sees as the paternalistic attitude of the monarchy, and allocating women the role of victim, is too steep.

In September 2011, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (ruled 2005–2015) announced the introduction of Saudia enfranchisement for the 2015 municipal elections.
This announcement was the biggest step towards social reform/restoration in the KSA since the 1979 attack on Masjid al-Haram, the mosque in Makkah. The attack resulted in the imposition of Wahabi-ism in the KSA, restrictions on women’s social and educational choices, the introduction of guardianship of women, and the imposition of veiling (Al Muhemid, personal communication, November 23, 2012). King Abdullah claimed that “the monarchy was simply following Islamic guidelines, and that those who shunned such practices were ‘arrogant’” (McFarquhar, 2011, para. 8). However, because cultural traditions, Islam, and contemporary تفسير (Qur’anic exegesis) have clouded current issues, “most Saudi women are unaware of their rights...[and think] their rights are against Islam” (Wagner, 2011).

According to McFarquhar (2011), possible restoration of women’s rights in the Kingdom was due to multiple causes;

There is the element of the Arab Spring, there is the element of the strength of Saudi social media, and there is the element of Saudi women themselves, who are not silent…. Plus, the fact that the issue of women has turned Saudi Arabia into an international joke is another thing that brought the decision now (para. 3).

In 2013, under the critical gaze of the Western media, 30 women were appointed to the Majili Al Shura (King’s advisory council, which has no legislative power), fulfilling King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud’s 2011 promise. Groups of women employing the freedom of social media, and the right2drive campaign indicated an emerging Saudi women’s movement. At the time of writing in early December 2015, between 900 and 1,000 women in the KSA were not only registered to vote on 12th December 2015, but were also running as candidates in local elections (Giacomo, 2015, para 3). The number of women registered to vote was undetermined.
At a meeting at the KSA’s Qassim University discussing “Women in Society” (Malm, 2013, para.1) attended only by men, illustrates the irony of many Saudia’s situations. The KSA seems to be a country of incongruities and contradictions that maintains a veil of mystery to observers in the West, so recording stories of Muslimas’ lives from their own points of view, and employing their interpretation of their experiences will overturn colonial theory and attitudes, and facilitate discussions of the intersectionality of women’s attitudes, actions, and movements.

I understand that crucial to this research and fundamental to the motivation for the dissertation is my personal experience and background as a minority and teacher of ESL students. According to Grant and Osanloo (2014),

The theoretical framework is the foundation from which all knowledge is constructed (metaphorically and literally) for a research study. It serves as the structure and support…the purpose, the significance, and the research questions. [It also] provides a grounding base....

As I view the worlds I inhabit, I see multiple identities of social, cultural, religious, political, educational and psychological constructs that dictate each individual’s understandings of their own and others’ experiences. My own experience in the U.S. is grounded in the intersecting nature of my own status. That of my students is also at intersecting points in their lives, guided by a deeply held belief in the equality of human souls and the duty to provide equity in all aspects of experience. Because I hope for these things, and as I come from a long line of strong women, I based all my expectations in what has been interpreted and labelled negatively over the years by those around me as feminism, which I often accepted as an apologist, until I began my Ph.D. program. During the years I lived in the U.S., I discussed with minority friends the expectations of
minorities and women, and from these discussions, in part, sprang the desire to interview the community of participants below and to facilitate the telling of their own stories.

I am a constructivist, I see the world as a construction of different knowledges and experiences possessed by many individuals. And so my goal was to “study multiple realities constructed by people and the implications of those constructions for their lives and interactions with others” (Patton, 2002, p.96). Naturally congruent with this belief is, I believe, the theory of intersectionality that acknowledges the participants’ multiple oppressions and modes of addressing them.

I believe that Islamic feminism best addresses the intersections and the approaches of the participants’ stories. It assists the explanation of the developments in the multiplicity of roles the participants’ and their peers’ adopted, and the various impacts of a new culture. The greatest advantage of Islamic Feminism is that being based on the Qur’an, and the equality of genders, it is a theory that is religiously, culturally and theoretically relevant to the participants. Finally, I feel that this is the safest space for an examination of the participants because, as we look to a possible introduction of female enfranchisement in the KSA, it may aid in the development of a more nuanced version of itself that we might label Saudia Feminism.
CHAPTER III
PROCEDURES AND METHODS

Previous chapters related that Saudias today face different opportunities from those available to earlier generations. Some of these opportunities are new; some are newly available to women. The KSA has undergone profound financial changes, which has brought about changes for Saudias. One result of this deep societal change is the adoption of the multiple identities that today’s Saudias must employ to move successfully and seamlessly between the worlds they inhabit. While the roles that were previously the domain of women remain so, the availability of education, K-12, college and University, has changed the paradigms and expectations of many young women, and by extension the hopes of their mothers’ generations.

In this chapter, I discuss the methodology employed and why I chose it. I wanted a qualitative, in-depth interview-based study that would provide the participants with opportunities to tell how their multiple identities and multiple worlds contributed to their successes in the U.S.A. I start with the literature that helped me to make the choice to employ oral history to frame the interviews into this study and conclude with the initial interview questions, and how the questions helped me to explore how the changes they had made in their lives influenced their desire to change or not change the world that is the KSA and their roles there.

Oral History

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) discussed that qualitative research involves the
inclusion of multiple first-hand materials, including, but not only, oral history, interviews, cultural events and observations, personal experiences and interactions, which would define and explicate the meanings of cultures under examination.

Oral history, the first-hand “truth” of participants, is self-propagating; it is more than the record of Saints, prodigies, murderers, presidents and generals, just as there is more to culture than the literary canon. I chose to use oral history as a framework, to write orality into history to create more truthful, representative records of history, and to “foster knowledge and human dignity” (Oral History Association [OHA], 2014). This study floats...in time between the present and an ever-changing past, oscillating in the dialogue between the narrator and the interviewer, and meeting and coalescing in no-man’s land from orality to writing and back” (Portelli, 1991, p. vii). People by nature live storied lives (Clandinin & Connelly 1994, p. 416) and oral history can reveal hidden stories unfettered from the victors’ annals, the official versions of history, and relate the stories of the downtrodden who have hitherto found themselves voiceless.

Oral history in this study questioned the common perceptions of Muslimas and through their own stories, explored the networks four Saudias at ZSU created to maintain their identities while studying in a second language in the U.S. Oral history is not used solely to give revelatory voice to the voiceless in some forceful way. Passerini (1979) argued:

They are not static recollections of the past but are memoirs reworked in the context of the respondents’ own experience and politics. If one accepts the point then the oral historian is obliged to think hard about how and why those many stories are produced—about the cultural environments of memory (when things happened) and of remembering (as they are recalled).... Above all we should not ignore that the raw material of Oral History consists not just of factual statements,
but is preeminently an expression and representation of culture, and there includes not only internal narratives, but also the dimensions of memory, ideology and subconscious desires. (pp. 53-54)

Careful attention to the culture from which the data sprang, the interpretation and theories employed therein must be sympathetic to the origins of the participants and in the self-actualizing form oral history produces, must represent that source in its own light. The stories

…are cultural constructs that draw on a public discourse structured by class and gender conventions. They also make use of a wide spectrum of possibilities, self-representation, and available narratives. As such we have to learn to read these stories and the symbols and logic embedded in them if we are to attend to their deeper meaning and do justice to the complexity found in the lives and historical experiences of those who recount them. (James, 2001, p. 8)

The oral histories collected for this research are valuable as human truths revealing a particular way of interpreting the world and speaking to difference, diversity, and individuality, creating “more nuanced understandings of the” participants’ lives “while breaking apart stereotypes and meta-narratives” (Aitken & Herman, 2009, p. 49), and revealing the participants’ self-identification and networks of meanings. Oral history has not always been a welcome addition to research. One of those reasons is that it has disordered many “facts.” For instance, the history of slavery was rewritten once the testimony of former slaves was taken seriously enough to be entered into the historic record.

**Interviews**

The flexible nature of qualitative “approaches are necessary to understand and meaningfully respond to the experiences of diverse physical, social and cultural
environments” (Aitken & Herman, 2009, p. 4). Howitt and Stevens (as cited in Aitken & Herman, 2009, p. 11) posited that an interview “involves respectful listening, difficult and challenging engagements, careful attention to nuances in the lives of ‘others,’ and a critical, long-term consideration of the implications of methods in the construction of meaning” (p. 3). By capturing the participant’s points of view, I was able to see more clearly their unique perspectives and use those lenses to reveal a context in which readers would be able to see the situations the participants described from the inside through a shared perspective. Weiss (1994) argued that “quotations from interview material can help the reader identify with the respondent, if only briefly, by presenting events as the respondent experienced them, in the respondent’s words, with the respondent’s imagery” (p. 10). To truly allow the participants to speak to themselves was important to me; there are so many versions of truth and interpretations of the intersectionality of all our lives, and the pictures the women paint are individual and astonishing in their simplicity and complexity.

The study design was iterative; spontaneity directed interviews, prompting other questions. “Less structured interviews, among other things, allow respondents to negotiate with researchers in terms of what topics and types of information are significant and what the respondent can contribute to the research” (Aitken & Herman, 2009, p. 34). I was able to solicit and receive feedback on the interview questions from colleagues who have lived and taught in the Middle East and who had experience teaching this population at the time of the study.

Weiss (1994) suggested that the interviewer “…should make every effort to
obtain, early in the study, images and ideas based on experience rather than surmise. As soon as possible the investigator should conduct pilot interviews” (p. 52). Over the years that I knew some of the respondents, I learned a lot about their culture, language, and goals through participating in Eids (أعيد الفطر Eid Al Fitr at the end of رمضان Ramadan, and أعيد الأضحى Eid Al Adha, the day that Ibrahim climbed the mountain with Ishmael), baby showers, and visiting them at get-togethers at their homes. While these get-togethers were not interviews, we built a bond of friendship that laid good foundations for the interviews to be reciprocal and less threatening. Weiss (1994) claimed that “one good reason for doing pilot interviews is to clarify the aims and frame of the study before interviewing... respondents…the boundaries of the study’s frame are likely to shift as more is learned” (p. 16).

Interviews were conducted in places where students were at ease, because if the time and space is controlled by the interviewer “…some risk is introduced that the respondent may be uncomfortable and the content of the conversation” merely “an artifact of the setting” (Aitken & Herman, 2009. p. 42), thus distorting the results. The “timing and location of data collection can...encourage communication about events and issues of importance to the researcher” (Aitken & Herman, 2009, p. 42). The personal nature of the data and the participants’ well-being required flexibility in this work. If any interviewee was loath to continue, the interview was concluded immediately.

Aitken and Herman (2009) argued that while interviews reduce the amount of complications that might arise from limited literacy (and linguistic) capacity in a participant, challenges due to competence and clarity in the target language may arise.
Initial interviews of proposed participants were carried out to ensure that the students were able to communicate complex ideas independently in English. The amount of time required for interviewing these participants was lengthy because after each response there was a need for concept and perception checking. Follow-up questions were framed in a number of ways to ensure fully rounded and relevant answers.

**Participative Observation and Focus Groups**

Participative observation and focus groups (Aitken & Herman, 2009, p. 12) in this study were used to complement interviews. Participant observation, appropriate for collecting data on behaviors occurring in the participants’ natural contexts, was invaluable in learning more about the culture, practice, and beliefs of the participants. Margaret Mead argued that events are distorted by an observers’ presence. However, as I had known and associated socially with the participants for between 2 or 3 years, I felt that the distortion of the new observer Mead was referring to was not completely relevant to my presence, in this situation. I had not taught these women for more than a year and a half, and our relationships were not controlled by grades or classroom politics. Participation in the events I attended were less as an honored guest and more as an extended family member. Disagreements between sister Muslimas and married couples sometimes occurred while I was present and were not hidden away.

Focus group interviews (Ingersoll & Ingersoll, 1987, p. 88) of the four Saudias who volunteered for this research created possibilities “for interaction among the respondents” (Aitken & Herman, 2009, p. 34), nudging each other’s memories, and
providing opportunities to engage in collective meaning making, clarifying, and supporting the reality of their worlds in their own terms. The emergent background, a setting for the individual histories, provided greater access to a world little discovered to the West in general. I realized that the sympathetic context I found was surprising.

The meaning of my participation and my connections to the Muslimas’ personal cultures was the subject of extensive reflection in field notes. Diversi (cited in Aitken & Herman, 2009) argued that participative observation “can fluidly connect a researcher’s own life experiences to their data collection activities carried out in the field” (p. 40). My reflections facilitated better understanding of participants’ attitudes, perspectives, mannerisms, physical reactions, and how those things influenced my interpretations. The constant act of constructing reality using our own experiential background, culture, personal tastes, and shared understandings with family, friends, and social contacts helps to make sense of our worlds. I was better able to understand the women’s, and my own, meaning making processes and limitations. It also illustrated how meanings are manufactured differently from one person to another and create complex constructs of reality.

A key issue in this research has been “understanding how an observer/researcher sits down and turns a piece of her lived experience into a bit of written text…” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011, p. 6). Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011) posited that field notes, made immediately after the interviews, are important in analyzing the interviews, and they provided an immediate space for keeping track of questions and ideas that arose in the process of reviewing and analyzing the interviews.
Data Collection

Data was collected through audio recordings and field notes. The Muslimas chose their own pseudonyms. The information was tabulated, coded, and compared to identify commonalities, categories, behaviors, and cultural practices, and intentional and unintentional practices of the participants aimed at preserving cultural, familial, and social ties to their native cultures. I had used these procedures for previous studies, which were presented at conferences.

Data generated by this research are not representative of the entire Saudia population. “Researching and making sense of the lives of others” is a “challenging and layered enterprise. Knowing the experiences, meanings and symbols of a single person... makes that person harder to compare with another” (Aitken & Herman, 2009, p. 12). Extrapolating meaning linked to the life of my subjects and their interpersonal relations means that generalization is impossible and would defeat my purpose in telling individual oral histories.

Interpretation and Analysis

As the instrumentation is primarily the researcher, the work “can be influenced by the researcher’s role in the study” (Bulpitt & Martin, 2010, p. 7; Lugones, 2007), so crosschecking was undertaken by the participants. Deriving meaning from data is the process of data analysis, to which Merriam (1998) claimed there were three levels: description (the simplest form), category construction, and theory building. A combination of analysis and interpretation is required to craft significant representations
of data. The data from the interviews will be dissected, reduced, sorted, and reconstituted to start the process of category construction from the participants’ perceptions of themselves in their current situations. Spiggle (1994) argued that we need to understand our informants by grasping a concept, idea, or experience in their terms—emically represent(ing) one layer that undergirds subsequent, conceptual layers...Interpretation of others’ experiences is inherently subjective...working in interpretive groups and staying close to the data minimize the possibility of idiosyncratic readings. (p. 499)

Moving beyond description and categorization, I found that just taking notes and writing them out after an interview helped me to clear my head and start analysis without overanalyzing the spoken words. This helped me to think clearly about why I perceived the data the way I did. Data analysis is a complex process moving from the concrete description to the abstract interpretation and back (Merriam, 1988). So, I spent time reading and re-reading the data, annotating emergent categories and themes, and interpreting, simultaneously with the conclusion of each interview. Spiggle (1994) argued that

Qualitative researchers do not generally prespecify the unit of analysis, such as defining each sentence as a unit of analysis and categorizing it into one or more predefined categories. Rather, they categorize a chunk of data on the basis of its coherent meaning...[and may] proceed...inductively (e.g., identifying emergent categories from the data). (p. 493)

Such an approach is congruent with simultaneous analysis. Glesne (2006) wrote that “data analysis done simultaneously with data collections enables you to focus and shape the study as it proceeds” (p. 148). I found that if I left the analysis too long after collection, I was in danger of not being able to remember the emergent categories.

The interviews provided four case studies, which were the product of complex
analysis that underwent development as the interviews progressed, because as Rubin and
Rubin (2005) wrote “…analysis is not a one-time task, but an ongoing process” (p. 16),
and Weiss argued that analyzing and “writing can be separated from data gathering, they
cannot be separated from each other” (p. 152). Coding was carried out on each interview
to identify the different themes, followed by personal notes. Then after giving myself a
ten-minute break from the task I would return and scrutinize the data with a pencil at the
ready to underscore those themes and supporting ideas. As the major themes emerged,
identifying the commonalities and cross-textual support was easier. Colour coded sticky
arrows and post-it notes helped to create a more visual indication of findings. Weiss
(1994) described an issue-focused analysis (p. 153), which I endeavored to replicate. The
connections between interview statement and “how we code it depends on our theoretical
assumptions and research interests we bring to the project” (p. 155) and I saw clearly how
the intersectionality of these women’s lives was a major part of the challenges they faced
daily.

Weiss (1994) described the process of sorting data into units by topic, followed by
“local integration” which then “knits into a single coherent story” (p. 160). As noted
above, the researcher is the prime instrument in the interpretation who then discovers
“patterns, themes, and categories in one’s data” and draws out findings from “the data
through the analyst’s interactions with the data (Patton, 2002, p. 453). I believe that we
can shape, and be shaped by, our research and our understanding of the world through the
experiences and interpretations we bring to the research. However, I feel that we can be
easily beguiled by our understanding to see evidence that fits our theories and
frameworks. Accordingly, concept checking with the participants, discussions with colleagues, as noted above, are vital to seeing what is before us, not what we want to see. As a non-Muslim, White, English-speaking Hibernio-Brit, though, I am curious about what information I missed in the way of linguistic and cultural cues because my vision is limited by my own language, privilege and culture.

**Timeline**

IRBs were submitted to the ZSU and USU IRB committees, after which the participants were provided with an Informed Consent form to read, question, and complete. Interview arrangements were made. The above research questions were provided on paper, and participants were invited to add their own. Data was tabulated and organized by theme, cross-listed in categories as they are presented by the Muslimas’ answers. Focus groups and snowball samples that arose were pursued. Writing up followed the data collection. Benefits of this research to me are a Ph.D. dissertation, which will have little benefit to the participants other than public testimony. The interviews and research were checked by the participants before my dissertation defense.

**Research Population**

The Saudias in this research, who all studied at ZSU, received no remuneration. The initial population for the study was four Saudias, who all remained throughout the research. Women who visited during an interview or family and friends who accompanied participants are quoted in the chapters where they appeared. The women
were of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, recipients of the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud scholarship (KAAAS), available to all KSA citizens for higher education. Two women were Shi‘i and two were Sunni. While this division does not reflect the world population of Muslims, excluding the Islamic Republic of Iran, it is more representative of the population of ZSU. At the time of their participation two of the women were in a Bachelor of Science degree program, one was a Master of Arts student, although she had not studied English at ZSU, and the last was a Ph.D. candidate at a nearby university who had graduated from the ZSU ESL Department. All were studying through the medium of English. The selection process was initiated with a letter inviting participation from all the Saudias I could locate, who had graduated from ESL program at ZSU, and who also completed one further year of study. None of the women were enrolled in classes I taught at the time the interviews were conducted. The respondents were divided into groups determined by sect and socioeconomic status and then selected randomly from those groups.

The women, who all chose their own pseudonyms, selected from the group of volunteers were as follows.

Rabab, a 24 year-old Shi-a from Damman in the Eastern province of the Kingdom, was from a family of ten children. She was the youngest of the participants when she arrived at the age of nineteen and tested into the lowest level of the ESL program. She was newly married, but bright, capable, and well-organized. She was studious, and applied herself with vigor to her studies. She suffered two miscarriages early in her marriage, but never complained or asked for extra consideration of her plight.
She is a quiet and determined woman, of quick wit and gentle humor.

Rabab was from a family that at one time had eighteen cousins, brothers, or sisters in the ZSU ESL program or within one year of having graduated from it. The last of the family was within six months of graduating when more brothers and their wives began arriving. This family is of a lower socioeconomic status, but they are determined to succeed and raise the family’s financial opportunities. The KAAAS was a great opportunity for them, and they were grateful that as the minority sect in the KSA they were treated equally in receipt of the scholarship.

The second participant, Sara, was the woman with whom I developed the closest relationship. We both, unexpectedly, filled needs in each other’s lives. Sara was always encouraged me in this study, and was excited to be able to tell her story. Her husband was also supportive of the work and took great delight in seeing his wife in a starring role. He gave great advice for other areas of my life because he had been a successful supervisor in a bank before he took the KAAAS and relocated to study in the U.S. Their son was a great surrogate grandson to me; all but one of my own grandchildren lived far away in the UK.

Sara was 25 years old, the fourth of eight children. She was a Sunni who grew up close to Riyadh, the capital of the KSA. Sara and her husband Fawaz are from more middle class families; although Sara’s father has taken a second wife, Fawad’s parents are divorced, and both are infirm. They are close friends with Fatima and her husband Yusuf (below), neither family caring much for sectarian differences.

Fatima, the third participant, was a 33-year-old Shi’a, also from Dammam in the
Eastern province of the Kingdom. She had tested out of the ESL program when she volunteered for the study but had elected to take classes in a lower level with her husband of 3 years. She remained in the ESL Department at ZSU until she was admitted to a local Research 1 university to study for a Ph.D. in Pharmacy, which she will have completed within 5 years. She had worked as a pharmacist in the KSA and had waited many years, by design, before she agreed to marry. She intends to have her own business when she returns to the KSA.

Fatima was the oldest of eight children, with two American-born sons of her own. She was a strong, determined, independent spirit, who did not suffer fools gladly. Her family did not require their women-folk to cover their faces to leave the house in the KSA. She sometimes found the theological restrictions of hijab difficult to tolerate, but she had no problem following it in practice. She wore the western style of hijab—jeans, dress pants, long shirts or tunics and bright flowery veils, which complemented her outgoing confident personality.

The fourth participant, Nawa, was the odd one out in the research because she did not attend the ESL program at ZSU and had graduated with an MA in English. She was the second Sunni, was 26 years old, and attended school with her father as a chaperone, an unusual combination, and great sacrifice on his part. She had a job to go home to and intended to return to the U.S. in a couple of years to complete a Ph.D. in California. She will return to the U.S. with her husband, who she met while studying in the U.S. Theirs was also an unusual tale because this kind of engagement and marriage arrangement was not the Saudi cultural norm. Her family was also different from the other women’s in that
there were no brothers; she had five sisters.

The limitation of this research is that it was based on a small sample of women at one university. We might consider this a privileged group of women because they have access to higher education. However, the variety of socioeconomic and sectarian backgrounds indicated that there is a wide scope within the population at ZSU, but this population is privileged by the fact that they all graduated from high school, a basic requirement of receiving the KAAAS scholarship. They were also women who were driven in great measure by a belief in the advantages of an education and their dedication and drive to complete a very daunting task—a degree where a difficult and demanding second language (English) is the medium of instruction.

The following questions were designed as starting points. I anticipated that the interviews would diverge and develop along unanticipated lines—creating further questions.

1. How do you view your role and identity in the U.S.? How does this differ from the role and identity you have in the KSA?

2. What networks have you created to help you adjust to U.S. society, and how do you keep your Muslim identity?

3. What customs from the KSA do you feel are important to keep? Why?

4. Are you aware of using your own language, culture and dress to remain separate from American culture? Why, and how?

Question one was derived from the self-reflection for my positionality statement: my sense of not belonging, trying to find a place to fit, feeling the need to reinvent myself
to something that can be understood in the roles I have assumed since immigrating. The Saudias of this study have to face more difficult cultural changes than I have as a White woman of privilege. I began this study feeling confident in my identity, then as it progressed I found myself in a state of constant self-reflection and questioning of language, culture, and intent.

For question two I was curious about how other women have made adjustments to locating to the US and if, and how, they maintain a connection to their home culture

In question three I wanted to learn more about the Saudias’ customs and how they would normalize their lives by celebrating them, especially the ones related to marriage, homemaking, childbirth and raising children so far from home. These are practices that make me feel less isolated from my home culture and more in touch with my family.

Question four was something that I hoped would be complementary to question three. I am aware of how I make efforts to maintain my identity by resisting change and employing specific attributes of British culture to push back against the encouragement to be more American. I wanted to know if my participants were aware of any form of resistance on their part, whether this was another cognizant or organic activity, and if they were aware of if it is helpful in maintaining their identity and culture.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The participants in this study were all second language speakers who had completed all the classes in the ESL department. Rabab had graduated with her BS, Nawa had graduated with an MA in English, Sara was only one year short of completing her Ph.D., and Fatima was one and a half years short of completing her BS. Although each participant had developed a good command of the language, mastery of Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) takes approximately 2 years, and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) takes from 5 to 7 years. Although each of the participants was a dedicated learner and well accomplished speaker, achieving perfect spoken English may be beyond each of them. In the quotes I have included in this study I have not changed the original speech patterns, or word choices, of any of the women, so the quotes are grammatically incorrect. I do not think that this is a negative thing for any of these quotations; I hear in the patterns of their spoken words the strength of their achievements.

Rabab

Twenty-four-year-old Rabab was born in Dammam, the capital of the Eastern province of KSA. With a population of over 4,000,000, the Eastern province has the fastest growing population in the KSA and is an oil-producing region. Rabab was the second youngest of five sisters, with four older brothers and one younger, and the only member of her immediate family to leave her home and travel to the United States for
school. She was empowered and articulate and was determined to finish her studies as quickly and efficiently as she could. She was the first woman in her immediate family to learn to drive. She was the participant who had been at ZSU for the longest—6 years. She had completed all seven levels of the ESL program without failing a single class and was graduating at the end of the semester during which she was interviewed. She was always willing to talk and share her stories. She was invested enough in this study to answer follow-up questions by email and on Skype after she returned to the KSA.

Rabab was short (5’ 2” tall) and slim, always glowing and busy, with huge luminous eyes that were quick to react to the cry of her daughter or the sound of her husband’s voice. She was a tenacious and hard-working young woman, who exuded confidence. Rabab was an efficient and attentive hostess. The food she served was fresh and expertly cooked. As I found in all the Saudi homes I was invited to, even the all-male ones, the treats and appetizers were so plentiful and tempting that there was often little room for the entrée. Her home reflected Rabab’s personality; it was sparely furnished to Western eyes, merely two sofas, a coffee table on a small rug in the living room, and only mattresses on the floor in the bedroom. To my eyes, it seemed that the items were chosen with care and attention to function rather than decoration. The one item that surprised me the first time I visited, which was in the summertime, was the three foot tall group of the Christian Holy Family. It did seem incongruous at first, as a reference in my mind to Christmas in summertime. However, when I asked Rabab if she knew who the people were, she answered that she did not, but that was inconsequential as she had chosen it because it was a calm and quiet example of a family together, “I love this family, this my
family when our baby was coming.” Family was the most important object of her affection. On her short list of important things, traditions in her family came a close second.

**Keeping Hijab, a Happy Foundation**

Traditional clothing is probably the most often remarked upon item in a discussion of the Middle East or Muslims. Rabab’s recollection of wearing a veil for the first time was that she felt she had passed a rite of passage and would now be numbered amongst the female company of her tribe, a woman. There was no pomp or ceremony, merely a gift of a veil from her mother and her mother’s help to fasten and secure the new veil. However, this was a moment that gave the young Rabab pause for thought because it was a significant event no matter how quietly and unobtrusively it had taken place. The first time she ran out to show her veil to her cousins and friends, the veil slipped and she felt embarrassed that she had no control over the cloth. She remembered that afterward she would walk, not run, everywhere so as not to cause her veil to slip and cause herself or her family embarrassment. She also remembered the feeling that she should walk in a more adult fashion. When she left her home, she would straighten her back and step carefully; she had a sense that wearing a veil had brought to her some responsibilities and expectations of behavior for herself, and for her family and her tribe’s reputations.

Rabab was the only participant who always wore an abbaya and veil in public, even to go down the outside stairs at her apartment block to her sister-in-law’s apartment. All the women in her extended family wore full abbaya and veil. While Rabab’s abbayas were mostly black, she usually wore a beige one in the summer months. She wore a skull-
cap that covered her entire head and contained her hair and provided a place to secure her sometimes disobedient veil. Her veils were flowered and colorful. We once spent an afternoon together shopping for fabric so I could sew her some new veils. She only wore them for special all-female affairs, because they were very fine chiffon covered with sparkles, which she felt drew too much attention to her. She confessed that she was uncomfortable wearing the new veils in public places because she felt she was an object of scrutiny, but acknowledged that it could just have been her impression because she felt that the sparkles on the new veils were “too noisy” (showy) and were more suitable to wear to parties with girlfriends.

While Rabab was careful to maintain hijab (modest clothing) because of her feeling of obedience and discipline as a Muslim, she did not believe that covering her face (wearing a niqaab) was something that Allah required of women; it was merely a cultural manifestation of religiosity.

In 2013, I went to KSA for Christmas vacation and I wanted to walk the same when I am here, I was in the yard in my father’s house, we were ready to go to the mall. I was ready to go and my mother also. When we open the door I had not wear the niqaab. My mother she say me “Rabab, you must cover your face.” I told her “no, in U.S. I don’t and it feels good. Now I am covering my hair and body and I want to have no niqaab.” She told me I have to stay in the home and we argue before we go to the car. At the end I have to wear the niqaab or I cannot go out with her to the mall. She was shock. She was not happy to me.

That was the only time that Rabab tried to challenge the prevailing belief in her family. When she saw how upset her mother was at this “Western influence,” something that encouraged her daughter to disobedience, she said she was unhappy because it would cause difficulties for Rabab and her family in the public space they were going to. She was not angry, Rabab said, she was merely afraid of the consequences if they were
stopped by the religious police. Rabab said that although this was a relatively new thing that was required of women in the Kingdom since 1979, she had always worn Niqaab in the KSA before she came to the U.S.

But my grandmother was not wear the abbaya, headscarf and niqaab in the city. She was a good woman before she was marriage my grandfather, but womens not wearing abbaya before. I think she not bad because she not wearing hijab, but now we wear it because we show my God and my King and the people that we are good womens.

Rabab felt that in the U.S. there was little or no need to wear the niqaab, and that new wives who were taking classes in the ESL department and sporting a niqaab were drawing unnecessary attention to themselves, rather than let the veil and abbaya provide a less noticeable and anonymous covering.

Some of the students, womens here are married new and they new here in the ZSU, they are wearing the niqaab. They don’t wear in the mall or at the supermarket. I think that the husbands they are jealous and they want the new wife to wear the niqaab. I think the men, the American mens, they look more at the women with the niqaab, so they are looking more at the Saudias and they only look at the women with the little clothes before, and look at the shirts with no cover for chest. So now the Saudias with the niqaab, men are looking at with the bad American girls. I think the American look at them more and they think we are Bedu because they girls they are covering their faces like this.

Rabab was hesitant to be identified with these women because it made the entire population of Muslimas look like Bedu (Bedouin), something that she equated with backward attitudes. Bedu women would of necessity cover their faces in the desert; it provides protection from the unrelenting ability of sand to irritate and invade delicate parts of the body, and from sandstorms, sun, and insects. On a more relevant note in the current situation, Rabab felt that the niqaab was out of place in the university because “The teachers can’t hear the girls speak, the girls can’t see the people in the class. I think
During her first semester, I taught Rabab in her level one ESL classes. We took a class field trip to the supermarket on 31st October, and as we finished our activity she and I walked towards the seats provided for coffee drinkers so we could wait in comfort for the boys in the class to finish. The older gentleman sitting in the coffee area, in an act of friendship, praised Rabab for her Halloween costume and asked what she was dressed as. I was grateful that at that time she had no understanding of what he was saying. I was reminded of this potentially hurtful, but innocent incident, when we talked about her perceptions of prejudice and discrimination.

I thought I would have the same life as the American does, but I am not like them and they have a different life that I will not have because I am Saudi and Arab and Muslim and woman. I don’t understand why people stare to me, or why they will not talk to me or look at my eyes. Here I am not a real person, I will have a bachelor degree, I can write my homework, I have not copied like some of the students. It is not just Saudis who can copy, I had class friends who copy in the dorms and the UV (University Village). I know American friends helped me to have good papers and they sometimes help people who pay money to make good papers. Here I am a student and my government pays a lot of money, but I am not a real person to the teachers and students who do not like the Arabs. They believe we are all terrorists and crazy people.”

On one occasion as we stood chatting in the hallway of a building on campus, an African-American woman of about 55 stopped and looked at Rabab and Haya from head to toe and back up again. She turned to me and asked why these women were wearing “these stupid clothes in the summer heat.” I explained that this was a mark of respect for themselves, their religion and their families. She continued to ask why they would dress this way as the Muslims she knew in Louisiana, her home state, wore clothes the same as the “regular people, regular Americans.” After this encounter, Rabab asked me, “Why are
people so bad to us. Why do they hate me?” I was at a loss to explain even to myself.

This is not a close, the headscarf is not to close my face, it is to show Allah that I am a good woman. I want to have speak to men and women and they see my brain because they do not see my body. I want my body is a private. It is my religion and my culture in KSA to have things we do and things we don’t do. Many people here are having to go dating and are have sex before they get married. This is a problem, if they break the dating and then the girl is pregnant this is bad for the child. Allah will not want the child to be with no father. Who will pay for his life? I am not this bad woman.

The fact was that the clothes the participants wore in the privacy of their own homes, or in a company of other Muslimsas were fashionable, comfortable, beautiful, and flattering. Nevertheless, they felt more comfortable in their abbayas and veils in the presence of non-family, even in the presence of women on-campus. One of the things that Rabab shared was that she wanted to be obedient to Allah, and be faithful to her understanding of her religion because that was the way she saw her life. She said, “I am the Saudia, I am Muslima and that is my identity. I am happy with that. My veil and my clothes tell me and tell the world that I am this things.”

A Place for Everything and Everything in its Place: Saudias Foundations for A Happy Life

There are many roles that the Muslimsas at ZSU are called upon to fulfill. In public, Rabab was quiet and seemed reticent. “This is the way we have in my culture, in Islam. All people must listen more than we speak. Two times we listen more that we speak. This is the words of the Hadith.” In her home, surrounded by friends and female relatives she was quick to smile, laughed easily, but was rarely loud.

The prophet tell us to be care what we say. We must not say the bad jokes and make the people have the bad feeling for themselves. He tell us that we must be
help and give our thing (generous) to people visit in my home. The visit you have
done here is blessing on my home and me and my family. You bringing honor to
us.

At home in the company of her husband, Hussein, it was clear that she was the decision
maker and the life force of the family. Hussein was a quiet, gentle giant of a man. If he
was present when I arrived, he would not stay long in the house; that would have been
inappropriate. He was unassuming, attentive to his diminutive wife and careful to follow
her suggestions. Rabab said that her strong character was something that was just who
she was,

I am the strong girl in my family. I am the best student at the high school. In my
family, my grades were the best ones. I was the leader of my sisters and we would
be the quiet people in my father’s house. But the brothers they did not make
trouble to us or tease us. We are the strong women in my family. I am just the
strong girl. This is me.

She did recognize her mother’s influence in the family and in the ways that she
succeeded in her own choices to try to accomplish everything that her world has to offer.

My mother is the woman who has to make sure we are having the good life. She
is the woman who makes rules at my father’s house. She is happy to me to be here
and having the education. She wanted to go to school when she was girl, but she
did not have to go because my grandfather made marriage for her when she was
14.

The little group of girls Rabab played with, in and around their homes, would as very
young girls often play with their brothers and male cousins. When they reached the age of
nine, and the girls began to veil, the boys were socialized away from the girls and
attended gender-segregated schools. This seemed natural to the little group of friends; it
was unremarkable and went unremarked.

Rabab never felt that she was unimportant as a child or as a teenager, despite
being 1 of 10 children, all close in age (16-30). However, she was cognizant as an adult that the expectations of girls and boys began to differ as they approached puberty. She remembered that learning to cook and clean and care for young children was an important part of the training she received at home. She felt that those things are ingrained and involuntary skills she employed as a wife. She felt protected by her brothers and male cousins, but at times as she reached puberty and teenage-hood, that protection was too restrictive. She felt that it was based on suspicion of her intentions and her brothers’ stereotyped perceptions of her as a frail-minded woman. This misperception was something that Rabab found hard to bear, although she was philosophical about it. “They feel that they are the man if the women is weak.” Her mother and father were both from large families that still live in small spaces in crowded neighborhoods. In Rabab’s generation, most of the cousins intermarried and were raising their own families in close quarters with each other by choice.

When Rabab’s sister-in-law, Haya, lived in the U.S., she assumed a motherly role towards her unmarried brothers studying in ZSU, checking their class schedules and enrollments, their rent, bills, and feeding them on a regular basis. However, her care for her brothers stopped short of interfering in Rabab’s domain. There was an unmarked line that separated Rabab’s and Haya’s realms. When Haya returned to the KSA, the responsibility for the brothers devolved to Rabab. She successfully shouldered those duties without reservation, and graduated with a good GPA never having repeated a single class, an accomplishment that would challenge any student, especially one who is learning and using a second language.
When I came to the U.S. to study I lived not on campus and I think then made things very pretend for me. I was not in the real U.S. because I was in the house and my husband and his brother they were in that house also, so I had my culture and language with me and my family in the house. My husband brother he learned some English culture when he lived visited there in British (Britain) and he told me many things, he was thinking that he would know U.S. culture because he was already speak some English and the Americans speak English so it was the same here and there. I was struggled when I came here, and he was struggle more because he think he know all the things, but he did not.

The reality of moving to the U.S. was profoundly different from her expectations which were based on the complex media representations of the American Dream by Americans.

I have seen many movies and TV so I know what the life here. When I moved my house to live in the U.S. I think things were different. In the U.S. we pay bills and rent that we pay to the people. We not paid this in KSA. I made my own shopping and food and all the things in the U.S. This is the new things for me. In here I am do all the things on myself. In my country, I have my mother, aunts and my sisters to going shopping and we do together.

The stores, supermarkets, and mall were not unfamiliar resources, but the butcher department in the supermarket was very different and disorienting. In the KSA the meat is butchered into lumps that are unrecognizable to westerners. Not only are the Western cuts of meat completely different, but the presence of pork in the supermarket was off-putting. The nearest Halal store where meat killed in an Islamic prescribed method and process was 45 minutes away. When she first arrived, Hussein would drive Rabab the 45-minute journey as he would have at home in the KSA. Later, however, she drove and made that journey with female cousins and sisters-in-law. All of the sisters-in-law or aunts in Rabab’s generation were vegetarian, as were their mothers. Rabab and Haya were both surprised that I ate meat, and that there was so much meat available in the stores. We spoke about how we feel that at times it seems that the butcher department was a minor holocaust, and that such an immense number of animals died to produce that
much meat; “it is not real, the number.”

In the KSA, traditional roles for wives circumscribed relationships in the family. While the wife may have been the life force, the organizer, and the social adept, her role was to be dependent to her husband. “In our culture, the womens are depend on the man. He is support us and he makes us security. If he is no smart as hes wife, the wife must not show that. She is smart if she does not show her smart is more than his.” It was a role that she did not question. “If Hussein is smart, I can be more respect for him, if I can rely him to keep us safe and make the best life, I can respect him most.” However, on the subject of raising children, Rabab, Haya and Zainab, another sister-in-law, were all in agreement that this was best left to women. “How they do this? They have not enough ideas of the things we do. They are not think about the problems and the hard work for children. They can play and make them excite, but they cannot care properly.” Haya and Zainab agreed wholeheartedly with Rabab. I had a long tenure of teaching both Haya and Rabab, and knew the frustration they had felt with the “boys’, their lack of attention and their ’village attitudes.” The raising of children was too delicate and demanding a job to be left to such feckless creatures. “Teacher, what the country be if we let them do this thing? The children are all wild, they are playing not work, and they not go school for learn, they go have friend and play.” Rabab and I had endured a whole block of a speaking class alone with six teenage Saudi males. It had been a test of endurance and daily demonstration of patience.

The women I knew in Rabab’s extended family were smart and confident women who had negotiated a role of subservience for the sake of their husbands’ egos. “Here I
can do on myself, without Hussein, but it is better for the man to think he is important and I can only do the things with my husband.” Asked if she thought that she had a duty to make Hussein important in their family and their marriage, Rabab agreed that was a role as a wife, one of the “thing I do for a good wife” (to be a good wife). Rabab had an aunt who married outside the tribe and had a very unhappy experience.

She got divorce, she very unhappy with her husband, she had many problem. Now she have no husband so she cannot come and visit me here. She have no papers for the travelling. She can’t have driver or maid when she have no husband. Shes children were live her ex-husband and she very unhappy with that. Shes have no rights. If she have not my family, she would die. My family help her to stay with them but they cannot find her children in their home.

When I first knew Hussein, he was not married; he was an attentive, hardworking student who struggled, but who completed homework. However, 3 years on he still struggled with the challenges inherent in learning a second language as complex as English. His language skills were significantly less developed than Rabab’s by the semester before they graduated, and she would often translate for him to cement his understanding. However, I learned from her sister-in-law, Zainab that Rabab always asked Hussein if she was understanding the conversation by explaining what she thought she had heard, and asking for his approval, so that she was able to minimize the embarrassment that her being more adept could cause Hussein. Rabab spoke about the need for him to be successful as something that would make him a “bigger man.” She felt it would reinforce his self-esteem, and her efforts to help him in school were another role she felt she had to play as well as being a mother, housewife, and full-time student. His success in school would raise his status in their tribe and would help him to secure a job with prospects when they would return to the KSA. Rabab would also raise his status in
their tribe and immediate families when she was a graduate from an English speaking university; her achievements would become his property.

After the birth of her daughter, Hajr, the question of childcare and more than one child arose a couple of times. Rabab was firm about who would make those decisions and how her children would be raised. The first consideration was their religious upbringing. There was no question in her mind that even if the family was to stay in the U.S. so that she could complete a master’s degree, her daughter would be raised in the religion and traditions of her family. Rabab would teach Hajr to pray, and recite the Qur’an, she might even teach her daughter to be a Hafiza (a female who can recite the entire Qur’an). She would be taught the hadith, attend an Islamic school if they lived near enough to one, and be encouraged to use both Arabic and English. If the family were to return to the U.S. a few years after Rabab had graduated, they did not want to return to the home state of ZSU; they wanted to go somewhere with a larger Muslim community so that Hajr would have friends and an opportunity to be in a community with more of the traditions of the KSA if possible.

Religion: A Foundation for a Happy Life

Rabab’s parents were hard-working and poor; the neighborhood in which they lived is a close-knit Shi’a community. The nearby mosque cast protective shadows over her young life, the Adhan (call for prayers) marked her days physically, and it was comforting and instructive to hear the Adhan as an expression of her faith, something that indelibly marked out her daily routines now in another country. Thinking about praying evoked the memory of her childhood neighborhood and her parent’s example of that
faith. When Rabab was leaving for the U.S., her mother told her that the first words Rabab’s father spoke to her at her birth was the Shahadah; “There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet.” She said, “It special that my father said this to me and I cannot understand then. I love my father for do this.” Her father was a laborer, and her mother has always been a full-time housewife, who cared for her own mother as her health deteriorated and was raising her grandchildren. Nether of Rabab’s parents had the opportunity to attend high school. They were humble, faithful people who marked their children’s lives with the requisite sequences of worship, never wavering in their own practice. Rabab felt that this was a great gift, one of the greatest gifts she ever received.

As an adult, Rabab appreciated the quiet dignity of her parent’s lives and the framework they created for their children secure in the knowledge of their faith and their own moral compasses. Rabab expressed her love for her parents and her faith easily, unapologetically. She had no wish to modify or curtail her own devotions. She prayed at home; she preferred not to have to share the same space as her male counterparts when she prayed. We prayed together in silence once, she following her traditions in the room next to me, while I reflected in the quietude. Praying is something that she remembered doing from the age of about four. She recited the beginning of the Qur’an to herself every day, and in it found peace and quiet. We took my copy of the Qur’an, a gift from a former student, and read it in English together:

In the name of Allah, the Entirely Merciful, the Especially Merciful. [All] praise is [due] to Allah, Lord of the worlds. The Entirely Merciful, the Especially Merciful, Sovereign of the Day of Recompense. It is You we worship and You we ask for help, Guide us to the straight path - The path of those upon whom You have bestowed favor, not of those who have evoked [Your] anger or of those who are astray.
She felt inspired when she read the Qur’an, as if Allah were with her. This was the first time she had read it in English and still felt the same peace, quiet, and inspiration. The quiet time of reflection she took between praying and reading the Qur’an was when she felt the closest connection to Allah and this close connection with Allah was also the foundation of the connection that tied her to her family.

**Education, the Foundation for a Happy Life**

Rabab from a young age had her sights set on something more than being a housewife, contrary to the expected role of a girl from her neighborhood. She was raised in an area of Dammam where the rest of her mother’s and father’s families lived cheek by jowl with the countless numbers of cousins, aunts, and uncles. Although she was not given to sentimentality, she remembered her school years affectionately. Speaking of her cousins, she recalled their journeys to school, time spent together at school and the walk home as time that was carefree and joyful. Rabab graduated from high school, and dreamed of travelling to a country outside the Kingdom to study. She heard of the scholarship through her brothers-in-law, who were then just cousins, and determined that she would make that journey and sacrifice to study, too. She had her eyes set on a specific career and planned that her studies would be completed in as short a time as possible. Rabab’s initial experiences in the U.S. were challenging as she struggled to deal with multiple new roles.

Having unquestioningly attended gender-segregated schools the appearance of men in the classes she attended at ZSU was at first an unnerving experience. “Teacher Matt is a good teacher, when I saw him in my classroom I afraid of why he there. In my
country the mens do not teach the womens or the girls in the school or the university.”

However, as daring as it was to stay in the classroom in that scenario, it was more surprising that some of the teachers she had were women and they taught boys.

Here the women are speaking in class with the men, they are teaching the men, they are wearing the clothes, the short skirt and the no sleeves. The women in my country do not wear these clothes where men can see the bodies. The people in KSA are not playing together and studying together like this here. We are separate and that is good for the girls not have to go in same room as the boys who think about the bodies and hair of the women in the classroom.

My own niece attended a gender-segregated school in London in the 1990s and had loved the system that ensured the absence of boys. Rabab agreed that it was less stressful to have no boys in the classroom. Once, during our class, she whispered that the boys in the class were annoying because they did not work as hard as they should and they were not listening most of the time. Sometimes she would roll her eyes at their behavior and shrug a tolerant smile, but confessed that she was frustrated by these distractions. In her first year in the ESL department, she was the lone female student amongst six male Saudis, which was often a trial for her socially and in her efforts to study.

Isolation from the female members of her family could have been a serious problem for Rabab, combined as it was with culture shock, if she had not been the family trailblazer. To date, two of her sisters-in-law, four female cousins, her husband and five of his eight brothers have attended ZSU. At the time of writing, a sixth brother-in-law, Zeyad, who was accompanying his wife, Zainab, the sister-in-law, in Utah to secure her the opportunity to study in the U.S. had just completed his first semester in the ESL Department. May, Rabab’s cousin, was the last cousin still at ZSU at the time of writing. May’s husband had returned to the KSA leaving May with their young daughter, and
Zeyad and Zainab and their young daughters. Clearly this generation of her family and their parents have been willing to devote time and resources to the pursuit of education. Rabab appreciated that her parents were concerned that their daughters should attend school as well as their sons.

Regardless of the poverty, and lack of education they experienced as children, both of Rabab’s parents were supportive of their children attending school, and they did not try to push them into early marriage or work. The grandmothers’ (Rabab’s mother, her aunts, and aunts-in-law) generation assumed the responsibility of raising the grandchildren, freeing their own children for work or school. This assumption of responsibility was a natural progression in Rabab’s extended family; they are roles that older generations undertook to free their children from less lucrative work than the jobs Haya and Rabab have. Rabab’s mother-in-law (also Rabab’s paternal aunt) kept and cared for her three grandchildren in Dammam, while their mother, Haya, attended ZSU with Rabab under Hussein’s guardianship.

Rabab reminded me that Haya’s first year at ZSU was fraught with pain and sadness. “Haya, my sister-in-law, was here without her children, she’s mother and husband were look for the children, but she has the heart broken because she Skype the morning to her children.” There were many mornings that Haya would arrive at school with reddened eyes and post-weeping hiccups. Her studies were important enough to her, her husband, and her mother, that the whole family made personal sacrifices so she could graduate. After she graduated from the ESL department at ZSU, Haya transferred to another college and graduated with an M.Ed. Haya’s struggle was something that made a
great impression on Rabab. “She was the strong woman, she miss her childrens and still she come to here and go to the university and is the mother for Hussein’s brothers.” For the final year of her studies Haya brought her children to the U.S. and singlehandedly juggled caring for the very demanding children with her studies. That was an enjoyable time for Rabab, to have a familiar and beloved face with her for friendship, family support and advice. “We talk many hours at night after my first babies was not born, (2 miscarriages) and we work together, we are friends all my life. I miss her here but I speak to her every week.”

In 2014, Haya returned to the KSA where she secured a job in teacher education. “She has the master degree and she is happy with her job. Her husband is with a good job.” Her eldest daughter was 13 at the time of writing, and her twins, a boy and a girl, were 9.

But now she is new mother again and she is not the happy. She was finish with babies and was happy doing the job. She mother will take care the baby, I will be in home then and my baby will be her baby friend. We lived here together and then our children will live together with the grandmother. I will live in that house with her. I am happy think about go to my country and stay. Hasan (Haya’s husband) was surprise when Haya pregnant. They had not plan more childrens. She has another boy, she was crying on the skype that she is too much old to have another baby.

Haya was 10 years older than Rabab, and was a little older than the rest of her family (late 20s) when she first came to the U.S. Like Rabab she was invested in the advantages of speaking English and having a degree to advance her career, but she was finished with having children.

Both Haya and Rabab were required to take the ESL Community classes. The favored site to work was Youth Impact, an after-school program for at-risk children. Both
women were at first troubled by the fact that these programs existed, but also that they would be required to work with children in such need. This idea was foreign to them, and the fact that the government was willing to finance such a program indicated that the government, the people who used the programs, and American society in general were derelict in their duties to the population for such programs to exist at all.

In the ESL department, we have community class and I was go to Youth Impact to help the girls to homework. You were my teacher and you helped me to do this good things. I was scary the first time I go. I was think the children will not like me and I was unhappy. I tell to you that and you tell to me I must try again. I was scary the second time, but I was happy because the girls call me and tell me to go to them and help them homework. They want to tell me the questions for my headscarf and KSA, it was a good place for me because the children like me and ask me to help them every time. We have no Youth Impact in my country. This is a good thing for the children in here. It was good for me, the prophet tell us to do the things for the poor people.

Many of the ESL students feel challenged by the volunteering opportunities, but most soon warm to the idea and rise to the occasion. Rabab was no different to the majority, and found a sense of empowerment in her service to the community.

I know no things, my English no good and I go to the Youth impact. I teach the children, I listen to the homeworks and the games and I can help. I don’t help before. Here I don’t play the soccer and the basketball, the boys do that thing. I was excite to help. My English is good more from this class.

She also found a sense of belonging which helped her feel a little more invested in her surroundings, and a little more at ease. “I live here 1 years before, and I go this Youth Impact I feel I have belong here. This is the first time I feel belonging here, and this children don’t care I wear headscarf and abbaya.” She also felt that her interaction had given her a sense of belonging, a personal investment in the children’s lives. “I want to go back after the ESL finish, but I have my baby and the class I am have many
homeworks. I have not time to help now. I want see the girls and share to them my baby”

In the U.S., Rabab was aware that her freedoms were different from those she felt she had in the KSA. Wearing hijab gave her freedom from attention and questions, and brings her the respect of her community as an obedient Muslima. The recent discussion online and in other media of the right2drive campaign left her suspicious of the motivations of the women involved. “The womens do this are crazy because they are in the gaol. I think they are want to be in the pictures in the online, and on the news. This is not good for the womens.” The consideration of Hussein’s reputation was also a concern, even though she had become more independent during her stay here and felt that she was stronger in making her own decisions, she still saw the value of supporting her husband, maintaining the family reputation and feeling at peace with her decisions.

When I go to the mall my husband drive me, I have learned the driving and I don’t want to him drive me, but I ask him so he can be the man and he know I need to him with me. It is dangerous in my country I don’t want drive there, but my husband help me drive here I go to the shopping and the mall and the school my time, I always have this free in the U.S., but when I go back to KSA I will not be the driving again. Sometimes I think is sad, but my culture there is different and I want my husband or driver to drive me so I can be safe on the road and in the car from other people.

The tradition of male dominance was something that the women of Rabab’s family instituted in their negotiations of their lives. They were content with the situations they lived in because they, like Rabab

have no question about what I want to do. I am happy to [be] me. I am Rabab, I am wife, I am mother, I am graduate, I am Saudia. I am Saudia I not change this thing. I am happy for be Saudia and Muslim. I want Allah be happy of my choice.
Essa, Rabab’s brother-in-law, lived in the apartment below Rabab and Hussein. Essa and Rabab started off in the same classes in the ESL department. When they first arrived, Essa assumed responsibility for Rabab in Hussein’s absence, which at times was amusing as Rabab was the one who clearly was organized and prepared for class and Essa was not. He would make sure that she had a seat and the other two boys, a distant cousin and a boy from the western part of the KSA, would not compromise her by sitting in an adjacent seat. The room was very small, with only sitting room around a small round table. She told me that Essa was making sure that “the boys are not with me. He is kind to me and makes me have happy time.” The presence of extended family in the shape of Essa and Hussein’s other brothers was some small comfort, and when her female cousins started to arrive with their husbands, she considered that her life was much improved.

We have friends here from our family, some of the family is from our city some of them are from the big family and are not in our city. I like we have cousins here. I like we have family because I sometimes cry when I skype my mother. I have homesick sometimes, I skype my mother and feel sad. She wants me to be with her and she wants me to have husband and children, but she want me more have the education. I have female cousins here and my life is happy today.

The vast network of family that she was part of was the bedrock of her life, and she felt confused by what she saw as the norm in many American families. “Here I think people do not care about the family. Americans do not live in their homes with the parents. The parents make them to go out of the house when they 18.” She had learned this before she came to the U.S., but when she had been in the country for a few years, nothing persuaded her otherwise. Most of the young people she met in classes seemed to fall into
this category. She felt that the close-knit family she had been raised in was far more beneficial.

In my culture we do not do this. We are living with our parents before we are married and we stay when we are not married. If my parents die, I will live with my brother and his family if I do not have husband.

When Rabab found she was expecting for a third time (Hajr), she took great care of every detail of the pregnancy. The traditions of her culture were hard to surrender given that she had miscarried her first two pregnancies, and suggestions that Western ways and expectations were implicated as a cause, which was hard to deny. During the second pregnancy, she did not perform any activity that was “Western”; she did not drive at all, she did not walk anywhere that Hussein could drive her, he went to the store, he helped with the heavier housework, she took less challenging classes in close proximity to each other so she could rest as much as possible. She ate a strict diet prescribed by her mother, and refused to wear perfume, make-up or tight clothes under her abbaya. Her mother was very concerned about Rabab’s welfare and they skyped every day. Her pregnancy was trouble-free and the confinement was straightforward. Her mother visited shortly after Hajr’s birth, and was excited to have her daughter involved in this study. Both women would smile easily and were effusive in their praise of the beautiful baby.

There was clearly a strong affectionate bond between them.

I have my baby now, she is 2 year old and my mother she come to see when she was born. She stay for one month and a half and she was love my baby. She say she happy that we have baby and she happy we have education and we can get the good jobs with the good pay when we go back Saudi Arabia. My daughter have good life because we have my family in my country, and my husband family is the same family so we have many help with our baby and our more babies.

Rabab was certain that she would have more children, but she would decide when that
would be. Hussein clearly adored his daughter, but Rabab was hoping to wait at least 3 years before having another baby. She did not want as many children as her mother had borne, she planned to have at most three more children.

Sometimes husband, not Hussein, want other baby and if wife says she no want baby then he tell her he will to marriage another wife. The wife will have another baby to stop her husband to marry a second wife in her marriage.

This seemed an extreme situation to me and I asked why a husband of about 40 years of age would want another baby. Rabab seemed sure in her answer and was disapproving:

The families have 9 and 10 children now, but the old children are having married and the father he feel he is old and wants baby and he say he is not old. I think it is his afraid of being the old man and he will lose respect and the old man is weak. He has new baby he is strong. If wife too old for baby he need a young wife.

Hussein’s mother had been replaced by a younger wife, Noof, who had children of her own from her first marriage, and had children with Hussein’s father. There was a deep resentment from among Hussein’s siblings. Haya would mimic washing her hands of anything to do with Noof. She declared:

All second wifes is bad wifes. Only they want the money and hate the first children. She was bad mother to me when I teenage. This is bad woman to marry someone husband. I not be second wife if Hasan divorce to me. This bad for my children.

Rabab was of the same opinion as her sister-in-law. She had seen first-hand the experience that Haya and her siblings had endured, and agreed with Haya’s declaration that the second wife wanted only the husband’s money for herself and would not share it with the first children or first wife. On the subject of divorce they said that divorce was uncommon in their family, although we have discussed three in this chapter; Rabab and Hussein’s siblings number nineteen, all are married and are having children. Their
parents have numerous siblings; we counted twenty-one in all, not including Hussein’s stepmother.

Haya and Rabab felt that the traditions of marriage and women’s roles in the KSA were better supported and carried out than what they perceived was expected in the Western family. However, it was more than family traditions that caused Rabab concern for the welfare of the family.

People in America are selfish, they always have to be the people who has the things. They do not want to share with the other people. The other students do not want to help to make us good with the things in the classroom. They will not give pencil if I have not bring my pencil. I am always scary that I have forget the things for the school, because the other students will not help with me. This is the family that teach them to be selfish. I think the selfish family is unhappy and do not make a good kingdom or country.

Citizenship: A Foundation for a Happy Society

In Rabab’s estimation, Americans were not very good citizens because of the things she heard some say about the President (Barack Obama). “I think American people do not love the president. He is the king of the country and he is a good man. American people say bad things about the president and that is not good for them.” She was surprised that there seemed to be little respect for someone in such a position especially compared with her and her peers’ attitude towards their monarch.

I love my King, Abdullah and the new king, Salman. Abdullah was a good men. He has give me money to come to study in U.S. He has give my family money in the month from the oil money. He love his people and he is always care for us.

She was particularly disturbed that a student at ZSU tore down the poster I posted in the hallway of King Abdullah after his death with a message of condolence. Several complaints had been made that the ESL department had acknowledged the death of a
“dictator.” There was a great protestation of love from most Saudi students for their King; whether that is genuine or not, the King was recognized as the father of the country and as a man of the people by our Saudi students. Rabab was appreciative that as a Shi’a, the small sectarian minority amongst Saudi citizens, she had the same access to the scholarship as the Sunna majority had. At times her accomplishments in the U.S. added a dreamlike quality to her life.

That feeling of unreality was something that never completely left her and she felt it “follows her feet” all day long. She started to dream in English about 4 years into her studies. When we spoke about that phenomenon, a marker of linguistic development, she reflected on the disconnect she felt from her culture and during that conversation she realized for the first time that she felt unconnected. She described the feeling as “living in a small boat big for me only between the countries (continents) where is my home and this home” (indicating the apartment she lived in), then related it to the fishermen she saw as a child mending nets, then drying them on frames on the seashore. Each fisherman isolated by the nets, but connected by a common labor and skillset. She felt enclosed in something unfamiliar and yet unable to communicate that to herself or others.

One thing that was important to Rabab was that she had learned to live in another culture and that she was sure that she was a strong woman, a good woman. “I do the things in U.S. my mother and family help me do it in KSA, but I homesick. I want go home and be belong. If I am change it is good. My Saudi identity it is me, the me that not change.”
Sara

Sara was a 23-year-old Sunni from a village close to Riyadh, the capital of the KSA. She had one year of study to complete before she would graduate with a B.S. in accounting at the time of the study. The semester before Fawaz married Sara and brought her to the U.S., he had been in such a state of high anxiety that he had to drop classes.

When she arrived I understood his anxiety; Sara was a stunningly beautiful woman whose natural poise, grace and charm would have made her a much sought after bride. He admitted that he was afraid that someone would “steal her” away from him.

Sara was an empowered woman who drove and was naturally curious and very bright. She sometimes struggled with accounting concepts, but made gargantuan efforts to fulfill the requirements of her classes and was the proud owner of a 3.75 GPA. Sara was determined to complete an MBA as soon as she was able. At the time of this study, Sara had been married for 3 years to Fawaz, who was 8 years her senior, and had an 8-month old son. She was the fourth child of nine, from her father’s first wife (Rana).

I was the proud Mamo Debi (grandmother) to her son. She was my Binti (my daughter, a term of endearment). She often brought food to my office. We ate rich homemade cake, drank Arabic coffee, and gossiped. She would ask advice for raising her son, Malik (King). We engaged the help of her husband and brother in completing a baby quilt. The men learned to sew and were proud of their achievements; we told them they were truly liberated men. We sometimes cooked together and shared recipes. I looked forward to meetings with her at school or at her home because in some measure she filled the gaps left by my grown-up and geographically distant children.
Dressing for Success

Sara wore western style clothes that were modest and designed to fit the restrictions of hijab that she wished to keep. She wore a veil for only a few weeks before Fawaz persuaded her to wear a hat and neck scarf in place of the veil. Sara was happy to have this “freedom,” and we made several items of clothing together to fit her vision of acceptable clothing that looked more modern. When we discussed her changing attitude to the restrictions of veiling, she said that she felt at this late date that her dedication was only a tradition. She did not feel that she shamed her family or husband if she did not wear a veil and only wore a hat because it seemed that she would feel uncomfortable in public without it. However, the pressure to wear the veil in the KSA would be irresistible. Under the late King Abdullah, there was an apparent easing of restrictions for women in public according to reports from other acquaintances I had from the KSA. Sara had noticed the changes the last time she was home (one year before her interviews).

I was happy and surprised to be in Riyadh last year (2014) and see many women not wear niqaab. I think that the King Abdullah has make many small changes. I hope his brother continue changes, not let the things go back. I think the KSA has new changes in the society. The value of the women is changing and it is a good thing for the women. But it is also a good thing for the men, her husbands, and sons and brothers. They will have different life also if the women’s life is better. I know we do many responsible things, the women can do, and that is good for everyone.

We spoke about whether or not the injunction to veil was qur’anically based, and referred to questions Fawaz had raised earlier. None of us had been able to satisfy the practice with an appeal to the Qur’an, but saw that rather than women being the ones who were placed under a restriction, the charge to be modestly dressed was for all believers.
Adopting Successful Roles

Sara’s family was middle class; her father was a businessman, who supported two wives and their children in a comfortable lifestyle. Sara’s oldest brother was mentally disabled and died a few years before she came to the U.S. Her next older brother had assumed some responsibility for their mother.

Sometimes the mother is so demanding and then marriages are difficult and the couple and family are never happy with each other. That is a shame for the couple when the mother is making life so hard. My mother will call my eldest brother, who lives next door, even when it is in the middle of the night, 1:00 or 2:00 am. His wife resents it, but my brother takes this responsibility very seriously. My brother is a man who does everything immediately, so if my mother calls him at all times, he will go and do what she needs.

This brother also had responsibilities beyond caring for his mother: “My father has money and businesses, so my oldest brother has to take care of them if my father dies. He has to be smart and helpful to take care of his family, us, his family.”

Fawaz, Sara’s husband was also from a middle class family, but his father, disabled by age, had been divorced from Fawaz’s mother and lived apart from his family for over 10 years. Fawaz was the oldest son; he always spoke of his great concern for his parents, something that often affected the couple’s ability to study. We spoke about Sara’s responsibility as the oldest son’s wife. I had imagined that there would be some social and familial duties that she would have to be seen to fulfill as a wife. However, there was nothing that would fall to her lot.

I don’t have specific role to live as the wife of the first son. He has a lot of responsibilities that he divided to his brothers. He has responsibilities to her, because she is divorced, but he made sure his brothers could do things she need, like driving to the mall and the Souk (open marketplace). The brothers can problem solve some of the problems of his mother, like not call and talk to an unknown repairman, or bring a repairman home to fix something and then strange
man would be in her house. This could be difficult for Fawaz’ mother when he go to the U.S. for studying. Now his brothers are take good care of his mother. Fawaz is smart to do this.

As I have an aged mother, I expected that in the family- and tribe-based society I had learned of in the KSA, there were some responsibilities for Sara to assume as well as for Fawaz. Sara said

Fawaz’ father will take care of the money, but Fawaz must take care of the family. The fathers are always strict to their first sons, then the first son will be an example and will bring up the other sons. Sometimes, Fawaz will say to his father “but you didn’t let me do that,” and his father will say, “then you must stop him from doing bad thing.” It is not that the fathers do not love their first sons, but they have to make them be a big help to raise all the other children. The first sons have a lot of responsibility in the family.

That responsibility was something that would remain for the rest of Fawaz’s life. When his father died, he would assume the role of Sheikh in his family, the responsibility of advising and guiding his mother, brothers and sisters.

Fawaz is also care for his sisters when his father is sick, is die. He will make sure that they are well and the husbands are look after his sisters. He likes most of his brothers-in-law and he loves the children, the many children. It is easy to love the children, he does not to care for them all the time, every day.

In Fawaz’s extended family there was an aunt (his father’s sister) whose husband died leaving a failed business. Fawaz, his father, grandfather and paternal uncle had supported the aunt for 15 years. As the men in her family supported her, they also supported the uncle-by-marriage.

They paid for her daughters and sons to go to school, because they know that education is important for the women, too. They don’t want the girls to be poor if they marry a bad husband who doesn’t work for their families, they want the girls to be able to work and pay for themselves if problems come up.

Because the men in Fawaz’s family were the wage earners, they were making the
financial decisions, but according to Sara, they would hold themselves responsible for making those decisions even if some of the women in the family were wage earners and had money to contribute. “Fawaz’s success will affect only me, and my children and himself because of the money he will earns. He is the one who make the decisions about the money if he need spend it on his mother and family.”

The delineation of female and male roles might be perceived as old-fashioned in the West, but while Sara may not have agreed that this was the best course of events, she was not prepared at this stage of her life to disrupt it. She saw her own financial security would only be established when she had a job of her own, and even then if Fawaz was so inclined he could try to manage her money for her. Sometimes she felt that she was treated like a baby in these kind of matters.

Sara told me that before she was married, her father spoke to her about the possibility of her being a single woman again if things should change in the future for her and Fawaz. His vision for Sara was for her to administer a girl’s school, which he planned to buy when she returned to the KSA after graduation. She felt that she wanted to be independent anyway, but as she considered her mother’s position as a first wife, which required her to deal with the family resources being used to support a second family and her feelings of being a failure due to that second marriage. Sara did not want to deal with this possibility and would rather be single than be a plural wife.

After Malik was born, the new parents both Skyped their families as soon as the hospital allowed. As Sara settled into her new role of mother, she was not really aware of not following Saudi traditions because her family did not interfere with her life. Her
mother did not express dismay or disapproval of anything she did. Sara and Fawaz both said that their mothers were a little envious of my proximity. Neither of the grandmothers had been to visit the family in the U.S. yet. At the time they only got to see the baby when the family returned to the KSA. Sara was entertained by Fawaz’s insistence that they take the blanket we all made to the KSA with them when they returned for the first time, even though there is no need for such a thing there. He struggled to admit it, but he was proud of his achievements and dedication to his son as evidenced by the blanket. In discussions about raising Malik in the U.S., Sara was insistent that they would be westernized and modern, but respect their Saudi culture. She predicted that Fawaz would have the same attitude to Malik that his father had to him; Malik will be responsible for his younger siblings’ behavior and choices.

While juggling the roles of studying and mothering were difficult, Sara knew that she could make it through 15 weeks at a time, and Fawaz would help with the practical duties of parenting. One of the things that she struggled with before Malik was born was the possibility of having to deal with male staff at the pre-natal care and/or the possibility of having a male doctor attending the birth. We spoke about leaving her dignity at the door, as I advised, but that is something that was so much more do-able for me, a Western woman. For a woman raised in seclusion from the male population it was something that Sara found overwhelming. She made sure to sign up for a female doctor and midwives. Her experience when it did happen was not as daunting as she anticipated. She was so overwhelmed by the proceedings and because Fawaz was overcome with emotion, she began worrying about him and forgot her own fears. She did express her
wish that her own mother could have been nearby. She felt then that it was her mother’s
desire and duty to be present to help her with all the details, but knew that the idea was
impractical. She found that the role she has often adopted as a wife, to bolster her
husband’s ego was useful in calming his fears, when after all it was she who was in dire
physical straits.

The humor in the events of Malik’s birth day was the subject of much discussion
when we met a month later for dinner. But when Fawaz declared that “Wives must be
mothers if they want to be wives for all the life,” the mirth died, and a threat seemed to
hang over the feast like a specter. At present Sara did not know if she wanted more
children, that decision rested on her future education. She thought that if she could stay to
complete a Master degree right after graduation from her Bachelor program, she may
venture to have another child. However, she was not inclined to have a baby if they
returned to the KSA any time soon.

Both Sara and Fawaz enjoyed having the opportunity to beat their own path in
raising Malik. They were loath to have to deal with the many different pieces of advice
they would be expected to take if they were in the KSA. We had conversations with some
of Sara’s friends who were also unsure if they wanted more than one or two children.
There was a sense amongst some of Sara’s friends that they did not have a responsibility
to have many children. Maybe one or two was sufficient, especially if they were the
coveted boys.

I don’t know if I will have more children, I think that Fawaz is getting old, if I
finish the master degree and the Ph.D. that will be good for our lives in the KSA.
It will be good in the society when we are look for jobs and house. We don’t have
to bring more childrens now we have a boy, but I don’t know.
Shamsah, an acquaintance said, “I want to no work and have fun, and have childrens is not help to have fun, Abdullah my husband has his son I finish having childrens.” Shamsah was from a large wealthy family, married to a man who was from a powerful family. She left school and returned to the KSA the block after she found she was pregnant. After her son was born, she returned to the U.S. to be with her friends and husband. Her son was left to be raised by her old nanny in her parent’s home. Shamsah was an odd fit as a friend for Sara; she was not a very committed student, and she resented having to share funds with her husband and preferred to party and shop, by her own admission. Sara told me that her tolerance of this behavior, and her reticence to admonish Shamsah as a senior Muslima might, was a political decision. Fawaz had asked her to befriend and guide Shamsah, so that Abdullah might be their Vitamin O (someone who has influence in society) if they had need when they returned to the KSA.

Sara relayed that, on one occasion at a party, when Shamsah and her husband had used all of their “salary” from the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission (KAAAS) scholarship in the middle of the month, Shamsah called her mother right there in front of the rest of the women and “wailed and cried great tears of the crocodile that she didn’t have money for food.” As her mother listened she berated Shamsah’s father that “her” daughter had no money. Shamsah’s father wired 1,000 Riyals immediately, whereupon Shamsah asked the gathered women if she should buy the handbag and shoes she wanted from Dillard’s or the handbag and the coat she coveted from another store. Sara was embarrassed and horror-struck at this attitude, and when she asked Shamsah about it, Shamsah said it was her money, and she did not have to share it with her husband.
Religion: A Source of Success

Referring to the Prophet Mohammed’s banning of female infanticide early in his ministry as evidence that Allah loves humans regardless of gender, Sara said,

Allah love the women as much as the men. The Prophet Mohammed was save the baby girl from the death in the desert, because it was not good for Allah. If the men say we are stupid this is not Islam. Not all the men say we are stupid, there are good men like my father and Fawaz, but this is the Saudi way with the women. If the women were understand the rights we should not accept this things.

Our discussion led us to talk of equality in the West and the persistence of inequity here, as I see it. Sara, felt that the restrictions women faced in the KSA were more based on hatred and control, not just control. She claimed that there was no Qur’anic basis for the restrictions placed on women. Things that we take for granted in the West, such as driving vs. the Saudi driving restrictions were unfathomable to Sara after she had lived in the U.S.

I drive here, it means Fawaz does not have to leave the house if he does not have the class. He can stay here in the house and be with his son. He does not like the school now that we have the baby. I drive here, but not in the KSA. I would not embarrass my husband like that way. I like to have the driver in the KSA, I can finish my business on the phone, I can do the text and I don’t have to have the problems that they men have on the road when they are drive. I think we have to drive there for our sisters and the girls are next generation. I like to finish my nails in the car without drive. This is not religious problem.

She felt the persistence of the driving ban for women was based on the clergy’s fear of women’s freedom and their need to control and present the normal behavior of women as debased and irrational. She felt that many restrictions were in place because men’s behavior was uncontrollable if access to women was not restricted. As the clergy in the KSA are all male, the persistence of these bans was a male problem, not a religious one.

The driving is only bad because the men are the trouble not the womens. They
believe that the women are not drive and not look at the men, but they are the problem, the men. They think that if they do the bad and they can make the women to do the bad things that is the women is the bad influence, but it is the mens who are the bad ones because they are think of it and they are the ones who do the bad. This is not religion.

There was no Qur’anic base for the belief that women are childlike or unequal to social tasks and expectations. “It is culture, the men’s jealous,” Sara said as we discussed her concern over the unwonted attentions of a Saudi male outside of a classroom where Sara and he had just finished a class. His inappropriate behavior had caused friction in Sara and Fawaz’s home. These attentions were more problematic and real in some way than the attention of an American would have been, regardless of religion or race. Fawaz wanted Sara to take some action and ensure that the student was dissuaded by her in some way. He wondered what she had done to encourage the situation.

I do not feel sitting in the group with men is problem. I do not sit next to them. I have my restrictions of sitting with men in KSA and I will not change that. This is group activity the teacher makes. If he smile at me and I smile it is group communications. I don’t want talk to him outside group. This is normal in U.S. I want to study, I want to learn, I do not want to sit and speak with men for fun. I think on my culture and tradition, that is give me the good behavior. That is good thing for wearing the hijab hat we have make, I will live inside my hat.

Our discussions of Islam and how the practices bear out on everyday life caused Sara to reflect on her family and their practice and adherence to the religion as a facet of their daily lives.

I was home 2 years before in the Christmas. At my father’s house my uncle was there. He ask me how difficult it to live with the Christians. I didn’t tell him Jews are here as well. I told him you were at the Ramadan and you learn Arabic. I told him that you learn to say “Eid Mubarak” and you happy to know to talk to us when we have celebrations. He not happy. He was worry that I have been Christian and not keep Islam.
She had been interested to hear what her family, particularly the uncle, would want to know the following Christmas (last one before her interview).

This year when I was home he didn’t ask me about the Christmas or the religion here. My father say don’t ask him. I want to stay here next Christmas (2015) and celebrate Christmas with you and your family. I was happy to read on Facebook last year that you were have international Christmas with your friends, Mongolian, Japanese, Scottish, and I told you on Facebook that you only missed the one person. If I was here you could have complete Christmas—a big Saudi hug (laughs).

This interfaith tolerance and possible blurring of religious lines was apparently a common fear in her extended family and the enquiries did not stop there. The family was anxious to check that Fawaz was keeping the alcohol and drug restrictions of Islam, and that the friends they kept were also Saudi (and, therefore, Muslim).

I told my uncle you was not try to make us Christian, but he wasn’t believe me about that. I told my father the shops beautiful at Christmas and sell many gifts for the Christmas. My uncle asked if I was buy in the stores. I told him I shop in there, he shaked his head. I told him this is not danger things, I told him we say “Happy Christmas” to you and other teachers, he said “Sara you have changed” (I asked Sara if that was a good thing to him). He shake his head and walked to other room with sad in his eyes.

Munirah, Sara’s older sister, returned from an Australian university just days before Sara left for the U.S. She had expressed some sympathy to Sara about the situation with their uncle. She had learned a similar tolerance in her stay in Australia, although Sara felt that the local society she inhabited in the U.S. was far more religious than was Australia, and based on my experience in Australia I agreed. Sara did not feel that her practice of her faith had diminished or faltered. She felt that

…living here is good for my religion and my feelings for Islam. I have learned about Islam and how we make it...yes, how we practice it. I think I am more happy with Islam because I know Christian religion and I know you are not
danger.

Sara did not think of her faith as problematic in her daily life. “Islam is guide for me, it is a problem for the people that do not know it.” It something that was unquestioned because it was part of her identity. She said her prayers, observed the month-long fast at Ramadan and gave the required alms after *Eid al Fitr* (concluding celebration at the end of the month of Ramadan) faithfully. She maintained the spirit of hijab (modest dress) rigorously and drew comfort from her association with others of her faith as a cultural group. She realized that her dress was what marked her as ‘other’ in her daily life in the U.S., but she did not recall any time she had a religious discussion with her friends.

She had solid supportive relationships with Shi’a women with whom discussions of sectarian differences did not arise. Most of the rumors and accusations of sectarian hatred and actions that abound on youtube.com, in Arabic, are discounted as ridiculous or inflammatory by this group of friends. Much of her intersectarian tolerance, she feels, is based on her upbringing. Her parents have never spoken of other sects in Islam in a negative way and were always generous to a fault during Ramadan and Eid Al Fitr. Even though her uncle disapproves of her cross-faith tolerance, it is not something that her parents support. Sara is proud that her and Fawaz’s fathers and older male relatives have always done business with partners of other faiths, including Judaism.

Before, I lived in the KSA and I didn’t think about the religion, everyone is Muslim in there. The laws and the school and the police are made on Islam. I didn’t protect Islam in there, because I didn’t need.

I asked if there was anyone who had confronted her directly about her faith, her hats, her
Here people ask me what Islam mean, why I do it, and people are hate me because I am Muslim. I don’t understand. I don’t hate them they are Christian, I can’t know more stupid reason to hate people. This is big part of me, my identity. It is all of who I am. It is all I want to be for the religion thing in my life.

Sara’s faith is something that brings her satisfaction and happiness, and although there are cultural or traditional practices that she hopes will change, she does not want to change her faith, her practice of her faith, or the tenets of Islam. For her, Islam is a religion of peace, and her submission to the rules is voluntary and comforting. She is aware of the discomfort and prejudice that religious difference brings in the university population she inhabits, and although she is mystified by those attitudes, we discussed how adherents of any religion use the standards and beliefs of that religion as “normal” and a foundational baseline for evaluation of goodness and virtue in a comparison of “others,” non-believers.

You say you heard Christians say that someone Muslim is good enough to be Christian and you think that arrogant and rude, but I know we have the same thing in Islam, that Christian is good enough to be a Muslim. I think that same before I know Christian and now I know there is good people and bad people in two religions, and at the bottom we want the same things. We want the peace, the happiness and the family love.

When we discussed how her view of the world has changed over the last three and a half years, Sara felt that the most important lesson she had learned outside of the classroom was that “We need to understand the other religion and be tolerance.”

The Success of Education

There is a common perception among the teachers in the ESL department that the Saudi girls were very much more accomplished and studious than the boys.
Some wives are the smart ones, especially the smart ones in the school, and she is the one who makes the success for their family, especially the husband to be the successful. My friend, Fatimah, is the smart one in her marriage, but she would really like her husband to be stronger in the marriage. He had no degree before they come here. She finish a master degree before in KSA, she push him and push him to get the scholarship come to the U.S. She is good example of what they could do.

When we talked about why she thought that the girls are better students, she said that most of the women are raised to be hard workers, “Not like Shamsah. Some of the women here are like her, she is like child, they are selfish and lazy, they want to shop and shop and party. They are lose their chance to be educate.” These women were not very “smart” in Sara’s eyes. The other women, the smart ones, are trained to take care of a house and care for children, as were previous generations, but in Sara’s generation they love school and know they can escape drudgery if they are educated and secure a job.

A good Saudia is do many things by herself. She is able to live with herself, maybe with no men. If we can have a job and have our own money, we can do good things with the money and have a good home. I don’t understand some men think that womens cannot do the things for themselves. We are prove them they are wrong.

Just as Fawaz’s family had recognized that the nieces needed to go to school, so Sara’s father wants her to pursue further education.

I spoke to my father about going back to KSA when I finish and graduate from BA, but my father wants me to be first Ph.D. in the family. I want my father to be proud with me, I want him to be happy with the thing I do.

When her sister, Munirah, married, she was half way through her degree in the KSA.

“when she and husband got the KAAAS scholarship, they went to Australia to learn English, her family, her husband agree it was great opportunity.” After Munirah’s husband graduated they went back to the KSA and she finished her degree.
There is a new generation of fathers who want their daughters to have education. It is a sign of new times, a new attitude in KSA. It begins in the city, but also in villages. Parents are starting to send their daughters to school. They believe it will give them a better, more secure future. Mothers say, “Don’t be like me, be independent.”

The security that education brings would also provide independence “if Fawaz dies that will be important” for Sara and her child(ren). However, there is also the important fact that

When the man can speak English and has education from a U.S., then he has great reputation in KSA. When we have the education we know that we are able to do many things. It is better to live with the husband in charge of the family, even if the wife has better education.

Fawaz expressed his hope to me that Sara will succeed in school for herself. “He also tells me that if I have good education we will be better parents. He wants us to have Master degrees so that we will be the good example for our children.” Fawaz had not understood before he married Sara that she had a great love of learning and when he saw her success and dedication to studying, he had at first followed her dedication and applied himself with particular effort. Then when she succeeded in rapidly passing her mathematics classes, and he was unable to master them at the same rate, she had to try not to be too successful and had to spend a lot of time coaching and encouraging him. Eventually he changed his major to one that is less challenging, requires no advanced mathematics, and will be completed before Sara has finished.

Fawaz is smart, even if I am a better student, but it is easier for me to study because I am more new high school graduate when I came to the U.S., and I love to study and read. When Fawaz came here, he had finish school for 8 years, he was working in the bank in the KSA. He earned good money and had respected position in community, and his family. He was good boss. He gave away many important things when he decide to study in U.S.
The sacrifice that Fawaz made then opened doors for Sara when they married, even though they had not met at the time. Although Sara had not applied for the KAAAS scholarship at that point, she had heard of it through her sister, Munirah.

I am happy to be the independent woman. Sometimes Fawaz does not want the clever wife with the education, but he will be proud of me in the same time. Sometimes I think the husband he is afraid if his wife can do things without he to help and make sure everything is the safe. Some men are afraid that the wives are being the bad women if he is not with her, but Fawaz knows that I am the good wife and will not do the things to hurt our family.

Sara also felt that the women who had been exposed to U.S. cultures were more likely to retain the vision of modernity that the U.S. media has invented about itself. In some areas she felt that Saudias in the KSA were already making strides.

There is woman in the KSA TV present the next program. There is female doctor in hospital. Fatimah will be the pharmacist in the hospital if she wants to be. Fatimah will have her business, pharmacy business, and that is new for the women in the KSA. I am proud to have this friend and she is strong woman. When we make the new job we will make the Saudi society better because the women have good ideas for business and new technology, and better ways to do the things.

However, both Sara and Fawaz expressed some concern that their education was turning out to be a two-edged sword.

Sometimes I think I wish I had not come to the U.S. I know so much stuff and now I think if I go back to the KSA it will be difficult because the people there will not understand the things I know and now I don’t belong there in the KSA or with the people there. I am not the same Saudia I was. Maybe this education was a bad idea.

I was saddened to hear that they had reached this point, and we agreed that being an immigrant and losing touch with the daily experience of our own cultures was painful as our distance became clear to us. I often feel that I am adrift in the middle of the Atlantic. They said their ship was off the coast of Africa, not even close to their homeland. Sara
felt that she might have been happy if she had never attended any university, but that she was mired now. There was no turning back, and that knowledge separated her from many beloved people, and KSA society in general.

Successful Marriage and Family

The proverb I heard oft repeated as a child, “Behind every successful man is a woman,” is a familiar refrain in the KSA, too.

Men don’t like to admit it, I know I have to build Fawaz’s ego, is that the right word? I have the strategy for our marriage to be the success. I must make sure he knows he is smart, to know he is the man of the house and the marriage. It does not annoys me that I do this, I have made the choice to do this behaviour because it makes our home happy. I think that I am smart to make this decision and that is just the way that I will follow to make a peaceful life. And it is important to Saudi men to think that they are important, smart, good. He will tell me I am smart when everything is good, and he feel confident. Fawaz is in charge, I like that, it will help me to make the good life in the KSA.

Their marriage is important to Sara; it is more than the union of two souls; it is a political arrangement for perpetuating the family’s sect, tradition and honor. Romance or physical desire is not the basis of the union. The “honeymoon” period is most often the time for getting to know basic things about the new spouse. Sara told me that she and Fawaz had met one time before the negotiations began and they liked each other. She liked that he is older, that he worked in a bank. His family was faithful in their practice of Islam, that as the oldest son he was taking responsibility for his mother and his family. They talked about coming to the U.S. for school. He did not want a horde of children, and he was caring and respectful of his sick and aged father and had earned the respect of older people in his village. Fawaz had also worked with his grandfather in the field when he was little and wasn’t afraid of hard work. She also knew that he did not hang out with the
reckless young men in his village or go to Bahrain. Sara was happy with the choice and they met another couple of times with a chaperone before the wedding. 

I know what I want to do in my career, how to raise my children, how to conduct my marriage, but still I will continue to find and follow Fawaz’s advice. Before my marriage I would seek the advice of my father, mother, and oldest brother. Fawaz is smart about the life. 

Sara was also relieved that Fawaz did not want to pursue the practice of *Mahir*—dowry given to the bride’s family. However, amongst some of the tribes, Mahir could include the right to intercourse negotiated before marriage, or an honorific sum of money, jewels or gold, and even in some cases nonmonetary gifts. Some provisions may include a deferred Mahir as an endowment in case a divorce should ensue. Some cases Sara knew of where the Mahir consisted solely of a Qur’an. This was an ultimate honor as far was she was concerned; the word of God as a dowry indicated that the bride’s family held her in the highest esteem. 

Sara was not completely prepared for the change that moving to the U.S. would mean. Her sister, Munirah, who lived in Australia had shared her experiences, but she felt that just because her sister had certain expectations of the change, it did not mean that she would have the same experience. 

I was shock when I come here to see the things that people do in this place. I was not expect I might change to be accept all these things. Now that I have been here for three and half years I think that these things are normal and I not shock anymore. 

One thing she agreed with Munirah about was that the experience of living away from the competitive nature of daily visits to aunts, grandmothers, mothers, and mother’s friends, and their endless inquiries into her health and the rate of producing children was a good
thing for her own developing independence. She was also very happy to be away from
family interference in her marriage and the subsequent opportunity for her and Fawaz to
develop their relationship together free from family and social expectations. Sara still felt
that the man she married was smart about life, was a good man, a caring man, and a
faithful Muslim. She believed that marriage had changed both of them, although not as
much as parenthood had. “I think that we have change and have made ourselfs better for
everything.”

Sara was surprised three months after she arrived in the U.S. to find herself
pregnant. She was just as surprised when she miscarried the child.

Fawaz is 33 years old and he has want a son for many years, but he was wait for
me to be happy to have the baby. I had miscarry when I got married and got here
after 4 months. I was not want a baby then. And we both were sad but not ready
for that baby.

In their struggle to come to terms with the surprise and subsequent loss of the child, Sara
and Fawaz came to mutual decision to postpone parenthood until at least 3 years later.
Sara’s ideal was to get pregnant about 6 months before she graduated so that she would
not have to study, keep house, and raise a child. Fawaz was supportive of that decision.

However, 2 years of marriage went by and his

family were giving him a bad time because we waited a couple of years for Malik.
They were ask if I was a good wife and if I will have a child. He wanted to wait
for 3 years before we have a baby. But his family wanted us to have a child soon.
His father is very sick and ask every time we speak when the baby is going to
come.

Fawaz was the oldest brother, and, at the age of 33, “he should have had children, many
children before now.” Whereas, Sara’s family were much more patient for this event to
occur. Sara thought that it might have been because her older brother had four children, a
younger brother had two, and her older sister had two. “My family wanted us to wait until near graduation for the same reason I have. My father was not happy when I was pregnant, but he said it is not his business. It is my business and Fawaz’s business.”

Some of the new mothers still studying at ZSU sent their babies home to the KSA with their own mothers. Sara and Fawaz chose not to.

I think that this life is hard here with the child. But I did not want my mother to come here and take him to her house. I know some women who have had their babies go to the mother’s mother in the KSA, and they feel like part of them is broken on their hearts.

While both of them saw the practicalities of this opportunity, neither of them wanted to do it. Sara’s mother had a career of her own, and Fawaz’s mother was aged and infirm. It would not have been Fawaz’s mother who would offer this opportunity because it would cause too many problems when Sara visited the KSA. When the couple went home for a visit, she went to her father and mother’s house, and he stayed with his mother. It would not be appropriate for Sara to live in his mother’s house because she would have to veil all the time, and that would be an encumbrance that most women would avoid. Sara was also concerned about the emotional and physical well-being of a new mother living here in the U.S. and being separated from her newborn child.

The idea is good, to let the student here to have more time to work in school, but they want to have their babies too, here with them. Sometimes I know the students who spend much time on the Skype and talk to their childrens and then they cry all the day and can’t study. There is hard to know that they cannot have the childrens here. My mother tell me that is not good for me or Malik. Fawaz did not want Malik to go to the KSA after he was born. He thinks that the baby should be with us here. It is our job to be his parents.

In a discussion we had with Fatimah (the subject of the next chapter) at Fatimah’s home, I suggested that there is a thin line between being treated as a princess or as
chattel. Fatimah was quick to agree, and Sara conceded that it would be easy for a woman to find herself on the negative side of that line if the husband was unhappy about something. She felt that she had given voice to something that she had felt since the arrival of her baby, but did not know quite how to express it. As she reflected on her present circumstances, she thought that some of the problems were that “men have always done this way, some of the men have mix tradition and culture and religions.” She saw that as Fawaz had adjusted to being married, he had a hard time seeing her for who she is. His jealousy of her independence since Malik’s birth was of particular irritation; she felt her behavior was unchanged in classes and in public, but because he could not be in all her classes any more due to his change of major, he was insecure about her behavior and interactions in the classroom. Caring for Malik had also changed the possibility of studying together, since one of them was home while the other was in class.

The maintenance of her marriage was something that Sara felt was worth working for; she was unwilling to put her son through the pain of witnessing an unhappy, or plural marriage. The questions the couple asked of me were serious, and I was serious in my advice, but feared for them to take it as I had three ex-husbands. I could only concur with them that their son had a right to two parents who were willing to work hard at maintaining their marriage, and that I felt that their good start as husband and wife had endured many challenges that might destroy any other relationship: relocation, second language learning, school, culture shock, and religious shock.

**Successfully Maintaining a Culture**

Although Fawaz found the separation from his family difficult when his parents
were ailing, the separation from their culture was something that presented daily
challenges for both Fawaz and Sara. The birth of their child caused a greater sense of
separation from their families, while creating a closer bond between them. Proficiency in
English helped to access the community and American culture, but could not still the
heart-sickness that homesickness can bring. Food became a very important part of
cultural maintenance for Sara. “I like to cook the food, the Arabic food. American food is
bad for the body and I don’t know how to cook the American foods that I know.” Her
attempt to acclimate to the American diet had caused acute physical reactions, and
general malaise, some of which she attributed to the different farming methods and lack
of year-round fresh food. They trusted acquaintances to tell them which meat to buy, safe
in the knowledge that it was Halal.

We keep the Halal meat here. We go to Salt Lake City to buy that. I don’t like the
smell of the bacon or the sausages that I smell at the university food court. But I
love to cook the food that my mother taught me because I can feel more like home
and more happy with our health.

Sometimes Sara and I cooked together. I shared my recipes from home, and she taught
me some of her favorite Saudi recipes.

I like to learn some of the things that you show me. I like the lamb and we have
eat that some times. But now I like to add the lamb to the Kabsa so we have both,
your food and our food. My mother is good cook, and she cooks for my family
and my father sometimes when she want special meal. She has (a) cook for other
times. I stopped cooking and we get bit fat after Malik was born. We got lazy and
we buy the pizza before he was born and after, when I was very tired.

Although she recognized that their diet was a contributing factor to weight gain, she
bemoaned the fact that after having children all her female relatives had gained a lot of
weight and were all heavy. She was anxious to avoid that fate and so both she and Fawaz
resolved to go to the gym. Fawaz enlisted my help to accompany her so that she would not have to deal with the gym culture on her own. We discussed this possibility, but our schedules were too different to make the idea a reality. Shortly after our discussion, Sara and Fatima bought some burkinis (hijab compliant swim wear) and swam in the evenings at the pool in their apartment complex. Part of the allure of this activity was that it was a daring decision. Neither of their husbands objected to their adventures, but did not join in. Although they would have been happy to go with their own wives and swim with non-Muslim women, the presence of another hijabi in the pool was something they both found too difficult to address.

When she first came to the U.S., the idea of organizing and caring for a home by herself was something that was daunting, but as she had risen to the occasion in juggling other parts of her life, she had also conquered this part.

I am much better to have a house than my little sister in the KSA. She is lazy wife and is always unhappy. But she is shopping all the day and eating cake and coffee with her friends. I don’t want to be that girl. But when I go home I will have a maid and someone to help in the house when I am working or my father has my school for me to work at.

Sara recognized that her evaluation of her sister is colored by her own experiences with the privileged and “spoiled women” she knows on the periphery of the student population at ZSU. She felt that her fear of coping without a maid in the U.S. was due, in part, to her older sister Munirah’s warnings before Sara left the KSA.

My sister tell me that she had a hard time in the Australian university. She had no maid, and she had a child when she go with her husband. She had a maid in Riyadh. She had someone drives her when she wants go to the mall or shopping. She has gardener in her garden and he grow the trees and cut grass. She was share him with her friends as well. I have many jobs to do in my house here that I do not have in KSA, but I am happy I can do many, many things for myself.
In the summer of 2014, I introduced the couple to gardening in a pot. I bought them a potted tomato plant and gave them instructions on how to care for it. I went home for a couple of weeks and returned to find that Fawaz had been almost fanatical in his care of the plant. He would even talk to it while he smoked on the balcony, as I had teasingly instructed him to. The plant was singularly unenthusiastic in response and produced only 10 pieces of fruit. I told them that this was important and that the experience of knowing where their food came from was important. Fawaz spoke about the duty of growing food as a peasant occupation, but tolerated my, and Sara’s, enthusiasm. After they added gardening to their new skills, Sara said they could do anything they tried. However, she thought his comment about peasants was falling back into a negative Saudi attitude.

The temptation to revert to a familiar lifestyle is in my experience overwhelming when homesickness strikes unexpectedly. Sometimes as we watched Fawaz smoke on the verandah in his overcoat and sandals without socks, we would giggle that he was dreaming of the sun in his village and the camels, desert, oil wells, and date palms we laughed about as stereotypes we were aware of. While the men we knew were sadly falling into predictable behaviors, Sara felt that the women were more able to adjust to the strange customs that make up the U.S.

There was always the woman from Dammam in the technology program. She was here with her cousin, women cousin, she was very good at her schoolwork. She was happy when she was here, then her brother came to be chaperone. Then she has to be his mother. He was lazy and did not finish the ESL very quickly. He was in the level 7 for more than year. He would just hang out with the other mens. Sometimes the mens will have get to other house party and they smoke hookah, and are like the village men in the KSA. They talk and smoke and talk. They have not put the KSA in the behind. They are still live like they still there.
I was surprised that she felt this way, but Fawaz agreed that the opportunity had made them misfits here and there. They felt more critical of the small village mentality and the small worlds their families inhabited.

Fawaz told me that his father had decided to have an angel tattooed on his arm with his children’s initials surrounding it. All of Fawaz’s siblings were outraged and felt that at his age he is demeaning himself, apart from the fact that it was un-Islamic. Fawaz thought that his father should add Malik’s initial under the F for Fawaz. “Nobody here in the U.S. would say ‘No!’ if their father was have a tattoo,” complained Fawaz. “They are not open-minded. I was not open-minded before I came to here.” Sara told me one night after dinner,

You told us the story about the woman who cut the tails (ends) off the meat before she cooked it and it was her grandmother’s tradition not to make the meat taste good, like she thought. It was the grandmother’s pot too small and she cut off the tails to make it sit in there (fit). We have talked about this story, and we have decided that the traditions of the culture are not the Islam and they are not always the good things and traditions for the life. We talk a lot about our culture and the changes we want to have in there.

There were many things that they saw now should be changed, modified or done away with, however, they both agreed that these changes could not be instant or large enough to frighten people. Fawaz expressed dismay that he thought Arab history was not recorded anywhere. Our discussion went long into the night; however, we reached no conclusion except that there were many cultures that had realized potential that seemed obvious to us in the 21st century, or had actually moved backwards into practices of former times. He knew that there were many Arab inventions or mastery, such as the idea of the zero, that have been adopted by the Western world, but that the Arab origins are
not remembered.

One fear that Sara’s family expressed, and with which she agreed, was that her children born in the U.S. might become too American, or adopt some of the negative attributes of American society and not be at peace with being Saudi. Fawaz asked Sara if she wanted to be an American woman, if she was jealous. Sara was emphatic, most emphatic, that she had nothing to gain by being like an American woman, citing the lack of family cohesion, blurred traditions, disrespect for elders, and lack of a caring society (health care, love for national leaders, provision for the poor, needy and elderly, and the complication of multitudinous religions). “I am Saudi, yanni, Saudi. I would not change who am I. There is nothing to gain.” The conversation continued, but cannot be shared because my Arabic was far too immature to understand.

**Change Does Not Always Mean Success**

Reflecting on the difference we found in our own cultures, we agreed that there were things we had learned in the U.S. that could be molded to fit with and change our societies for the better. However, molding was a key component of that change.

I think the thing I learn in business here is good for some things in the KSA, but they need to make fit in the Islamic ways of doing. Even the way we deal womens in the daily lives need to change. Women are smart and we are the good students. We can work in the office and the company with the men if they are behave properly. But the mens are saying that we are women and we don’t know how we do that. This is stupid. This is the culture not the religion.

Before Malik was born, Sara, Fawaz and I often visited in their home, where, inevitably, we discussed the hopes and dreams they had for their unborn son. Although Fawaz talked about him in a loving way, because the baby was not yet his world-focus, his common
frame of reference, he often repeated in a jovial manner something I hoped he would not repeat outside of his home. Malik, although his name was chosen, was nicknamed “the American Hostage.”

When I was pregnant Fawaz would call my baby the hostage, the American hostage. He did think it was very funny to say that thing. Then there was a man he was in prison for saying this in a joke that he would come and kill his classmates, and the classmate told the police and now he is in prison for his life. Now we do not say that Malik is the hostage. Sometimes I know that we are different and that Americans, some Americans are angry with us, but I am Saudia and I cannot be different to that. My religion does not teach us to be terrorist, and the hostage is not funny.

Part of the reason that the American Hostage idea truly became unacceptable and not humorous occurred as a result of Malik’s birth and how his birth has impacted their lives. Sara saw how her worldview was modified by the arrival of their child, and how her fears for his world were different for her as his mother and not as a childless wife. She understood the term ‘dark humor’ as something that she and Fawaz clung to in the uncertainties that engulfed them as expectant parents. Her uncertainty was based on her fear of jinns and the “evil” power of traditional non-Muslim interpretations of good and evil, Shamic, Bedouin beliefs, other people’s jealousy and the use of Shatan (Satan) power. This was a fear that gripped Sara’s stomach when she offered the basis of her fear for examination. There was little comfort that could be offered or argued when she described these manifestations. She felt that they were inevitable and there was no cure or forms of combat that would succeed against them. She knew these beliefs were not realistic in Western terms and sought reassurance of her sanity. She knew these were ancient traditions and fears, but that they were part of a complicated identity, of who she was, and did not believe that their power over her would wane or depart. She was also
aware that this was a great difference, something that set her apart in a world of science and technology.

Sara’s mother mailed a huge parcel after Malik was born, which Sara estimated cost about 800 Riyals ($130 - $150) to send. It was full of traditional medicines and potions that her mother insisted would restore her to full health. Sara was dubious about the safety of the medicines and could not bring herself to take them. She felt that the Saudi traditions of childbirth were not safe and that most of the traditional medicine was at best inefficacious. She was also aware that this was a great difference, something that set her apart from her culture’s traditional world devoid of Western science and technology. Sara’s final comment on her identity was this:

I will always be Saudia, I will always be the one person, but I have changed. I am Saudia, no choice with that fact. There is no change with Islam as well. If I am Saudia, I am the Muslima. For my generation we are not Saudia who has no Allah in our heart. I am not sure of who I am all the time. But I am here and I am me. All of us is different there is no things as “The Saudi Woman” there is no thing as “The British Woman” every woman is different. All the world is different and that is good.

Fatima

Fatima, at 33, was the oldest of the women interviewed for this research. She hailed from the Eastern region of the KSA where Saudi Aramco, the oldest Saudi Arabian American oil company, was located. Her father worked for an oil-industry support company, so Fatima and her eight siblings grew up in the Saudi Aramco compound amongst many American families and spoke English as a playground language. Fatima was the oldest child in a tight-knit Shi-i family and had assumed
responsibilities as the oldest child of eight that in other families might fall to the oldest boy. Fatima felt that her position as the eldest influenced her to be very direct and straightforward in her interactions with family and acquaintances.

Fatima was the first in her family, close and extended, to travel outside the KSA for an education. She and her husband, Yusuf, spent a few months in a neighboring state attending an English language program. Their eldest son, Mohammed, was born there, which event focused Yusuf’s energy more intently on finishing his education. Fatima did not wear an abbaya, but she was very strict about her veil, which she wound over a cone shape affixed to the back of her head creating the illusion of a large amount of hair. This was a fashion that her sister also followed until they both decided it was not as flattering as they had at first believed. Fatima was a strong and focused student but also a joyful, humorous woman.

**Dress Standards**

While I sat with Yusuf, one evening waiting for him to take the boys out for a ride, he told me “When we were in Riyadh in the street Fatima wasn’t wearing a niqaab and the Religious Police came to me and asked why?” Yusuf laughed at this point “I said ‘you should ask her’, we were left alone.” I confessed that I feel that wearing a Niqaab and tightly wound headscarf is not only restrictive physically but also an emotional restriction; it made women feel inferior. Yusuf replied that “Islam is not for restricting women. Islam guarantee equality. The Qur’an does not say anything about restricting women; it says male and female should respect their body and dress modestly.”

When Fatima joined us she agreed that the physical restriction of a niqaab was
also be a mental and emotional one as well. “It can take so long to find the way in the public if we cannot see properly and eating in the restaurant like this way is always impossible.” However, we discussed that in the desert Bedouin tribes, from whom many Saudi families have originated, it is a practical thing to wear. The landscape, common sandstorm conditions, and the relentless source of irritation that sand can be was intolerable without a niqaab and hijab for protection from the elements. In extreme desert conditions, the men also covered their faces. Fatima explained that growing up in the Eastern region close to Iraq and Kuwait to the north and Oman to the south, where some of the wives in her extended family were from, meant that her family had different expectations from the rest of Saudi society.

After my parents married they settled in the Eastern KSA, and after they were there for a few years my mother refused to wear a niqaab. There are more women there do not wear it. But we have family from Oman, Kuwait, Iraq. The influence from parts of the Middle East are clear in my family.

**Standard Roles**

Fatima believed that women with strong characters were what the KSA needed to be successful in the world. “I believe that the women who are suffer and not strong have choose this to be their life.” She was clearly irritated by women who were “wish and wash” (Wishy-washy, a word she learnt from me). “Women have to make sure that men feel important, and this is strength as well as taking the stand.” Fatima felt that when she had discussions about this attitude and practice it was misunderstood as weakness.

We have to choose some decisions to let the man believe he is the control, but when we want to make the KSA society better we must step back to be the strong and teach the true traditions. We are the mothers and we have the opportunity to be create change.
She concluded her thoughts about change with the homily that “the woman is three quarter of changes.” I reflected on the Qur’anic verse that declares that “woman is nine parts desire.” We decided that the combination of nine tenths desire and three quarters change would produce an irresistible force for change. I agreed with Fatima that there was nothing that Saudi women could not achieve if they chose to. In the remarkable family that Fatima came from, there was no blurring of the edges in relation to what the children could do. The bar was set high for all her siblings, and she felt that they had risen to their parents’ expectations. Her siblings’ spouses were all of the same high caliber. She expected no less of her husband, or her sons. He changed diapers and bathed the children as often as she did. Sometimes she seemed quite Western in her expectations: “There is no reason for him not to get his hands in dirt with me. I can do it so can he.”

**Standards of Religion**

Fatima felt that her parents practiced their religion with a heartfelt dedication. She did not entertain any sense that they maintained just an appearance of faithfulness to the tenets of Islam. In her eyes they were people of deep integrity. She described how other areas of their lives reflected their religious devotion;

They have always followed the religion because they love Allah and us children. They don’t fight with their families or neighbors. They taught us to be patient with each other, to be loving and to take care of each. When my father speaks to me on Skype, he is concern that Bayan and I are still loving to each other. Bayan looks at me as a mother while we are so far from home. Bayan has referring to herself as *Thing 1* she calls my first son *Thing 2* and the new son is *Thing 3*. Now we have a cousin from our father’s family living in the same town, he is *Thing 4*. He wants to know if my children are good too. He asks if my first son
Mohammed is looking (out) for his brother.

The belief in the equality of, and care for, his daughters also motivated Fatima’s father to demonstrate that Islam was not only a religion of peace, but also that at its core women were also of equal importance before Allah. The story of the Prophet Mohammed’s charge to bring the ancient practice of female infanticide to an end was one of Fatima’s favorite recollections of childhood family mealtime discussions. However, her father’s belief was emphasized in his practical demonstrations and provisions for his wife and daughters.

My father always wanted his daughters to pray the same times as his sons. The sons go to the mosque with him, but he wanted us to know that Allah loves women too, he made a special room for us to pray at the home, with our mother. I miss the time at Ramadan in here in the U.S., it was that my father makes a special time for us in my country. We always went to the park at night to meet with other relatives and celebrate the time together. We also had opportunity to go with him to give money to the mosque to give to the poor people.

Fatima felt that some men wanted to have children to show Allah that they were good men, but they did not want to be involved with their children as infants or adolescents. However, her father practiced the right attitudes because that was who he was, and Islam was, at his core; his actions were motivated not by how he wanted others to see him.

I think this does not show Allah that we love him. My father did not want children to show his physical power as a man, or to please Allah, or to have a competition with family, friends or community. He loves children, and his grandchildren. He gets on the floor to play with my sons, but he discourages his children from having too many children of their own, especially the girls—I think this is strange contradiction!

She did not believe that Islam was irrelevant to the modern world: “Muslim have always been contact with other religions and culture, and it has made us strong to do business,
but strong in the faith.” She knew the history of the early spread of Islam, that it was not a proselytizing faith, but was widely adopted after contacts made through trade. On a personal level, she sounded much like her father’s daughter.

This religion is a thing that helps me to feel control of my life. It is a good thing for the traditions of my family to continue. We have good family, good valuable ideas of my parents. We can make a good society with the ideas and foundation of the Islam. We Arabs say that we are all people of the book (Muslims, Christians and Jews), and we have many stories the same in our holy books. Allah wants us to read the books and have the understanding that we have good things to do in the life. That is how we have learn in America about the books and the faith and the same belief.

While the edges of practice may define the distinction between the peoples of the book and their chosen religious practices, Fatima had thought long and hard about the commonalities and differences between those people. She was not blinded by religious fervor, nor willing to find problems with other faiths. She was more willing to find ways to blend civic ideals as a way to find peace.

We have too much fighting today, and the only things that follow is the pain. This will stop education and growing in the women and the men. There is many beauty everywhere and we need to see it. To have time to see it.

Fatima had ambitions to do everything she found interesting and challenging. She was a pioneering spirit amongst the rest of the Saudias, but unremarkable in her family.

I can do anything, all the things I want, but I will only do those things inside the control of my religion. I want to be the poster Muslima for the Islam and the success. Some of the things I heard in my studies think that being ready to change from Islam, to everything is success. But I think that the religion, me doing the things with the Islam guide is the way to be represent of the Islam in a good way. I have good relation with Islam and with Allah and that makes edge (limits) of activity, but that doesn’t stop me doing the good things.

Some of the things that troubled Fatima, not surprisingly, were attitudes of the ignorant and uneducated: “Why do people hate me, just because I am Muslim?” Fatima told me
that she struggled with these negative attitudes since she had first arrived in the U.S. I had no answer then, smart or otherwise. I still struggle to find a good answer. She said;

I don’t understand why they have hate to someone they do not know. I think that this attitude is dangerous to everyone. We should know anyone before we have hate to them. But isn’t this bad for Christians, too? If you are right and we have the same God, does he want us to hate the other?

In my own experience, people who have not experienced prejudice on a daily scale are often confused and somewhat depressed at being the target of unreasoned and baseless bigotry.

**Educational Standards**

The most notable family trait, a belief that was referred to in every discussion, was the strong tradition of education.

My father always encouraged education. His whole family has always. Their attitude has always been that it is more important to educate girls, more than boys. My father’s sisters were all educated women and they were biggest influence in my father’s children. My mother has taught us the respect for our religion and for ourself, but the aunts were all educated and always were telling me and my sisters that we must have the education. My father did homework, encouraged reading and writing, with us at night. These were things that girls are not really encouraged to do in our culture.

Her parents always spoke about education as a process that would take years, at least into higher education. Most importantly in her eyes was the fact that her parents also instilled in Fatima and her sisters the idea that marriage should be on hold until their education was completed.

My parents encouraged us to finish at least a Bachelor’s degree before we think about getting married. As teenagers and young 20’s my father would not let me and my sisters go to weddings in case we were seen by a mother or Aunt looking for a bride for a son or nephew. He wanted to make sure we would not be distracted from studying. Education is an important part of my identity. This is
also Islam. We believe that we must educate and increase our understanding of every-thing that Allah has for us.

The obedience to the teachings of Islam to pursue knowledge was played out in Fatima’s family’s expectations. The proof and success of the family focus on education was evident in Fatima’s generation and her younger sister Bayan’s generation.

In my generation (30-38) all the girls have a master’s degree. I will have a Ph.D. soon. I will be the first PhD. In Bayan’s generation (22-29), they all are doctors and pharmacists, or are going to be. Bayan is 23 and she graduated with a bachelor degree last semester. She has been here for 4 years. Bayan is not want to be a doctor or pharmacist like me, but she says she is too young to decide what it is she want to do. I think she is just having too much fun.

Although she felt that her parents’ expectations about education were absolutely correct, and her children would follow this path, she said that her parents had contradicted themselves.

My mother graduated high school, married at 17 and had her children back to back. My father wanted many, many children. My mother gave him 8. My father is a generous man. He didn’t encourage his wife to continue school because he is a good provider. He wanted children and he loves them all.

Fatima and Bayan had a great love and respect for their mother and all that she had done for them as a parent. They understood that her influence was a large part of their dedication to education. Although she had no degree and did not complete high school, they acknowledged that their pursuit of education was not built exclusively on their father’s wish and belief; their mother encouraged their dedication as well. Fatima would not consider for a moment the idea that her mother should be ridiculed for her choices, but admitted that she has one cousin who got married at seventeen and now has three children. The female cousins will talk down to this cousin. We make our conversation and vocab simple to include her. It is not nice but we treat her like she is illiterate, even
though she isn’t.

Generally speaking, there was no indication that Fatima had a sense of superiority because of her educational achievements. She admitted that this behavior towards her cousin was rude and condescending, but it was at one time also unconscious; it was meant as a way to assure the cousin that she could join the conversation. She reflected that she should resolve not to condescend to her cousin or ridicule her choices, especially because Fatima was now a mother, herself, and relished her role.

Yusuf was supportive of Fatima in her studies. She was supportive of him when they first arrived at ZSU. She enrolled herself in the same class he was placed in when they tested for the ESL Program in a move of solidarity even though she tested out of the program. When she was accepted to start her Ph.D. studies, she finished that semester and moved to the research university nearby.

Yusuf wants me to finish my PhD, because I want to. He supports me in my studies and when he graduates in this spring, he will try to stay here for a master degree, so that I can stay here and finish my dissertation and graduate. I love my studies, I have been able to design my own experiments and my committee is always excited to see what has happened between meetings. I will have my own business when I go back to the KSA. He is proud that I am successful, he helps with the child and the baby and he was happy for my mother to come and care for the new baby last spring, but he still help with his sons.

Marriage and Family Standards

Fatima acknowledged that her family were the outliers in Saudi society, especially as she talked with other Saudias at ZSU. However, although she admitted that her mother, in following a more traditional path of marrying young and quickly having a large family, had chosen a path that Fatima would not take, she saw that the respect and
love that was present in her parents’ marriage was unusual and worth replicating in her own life.

My father has always loved my mother, he is respectful, generous, and loving when he speaks to her. He would not allow my brothers to treat us badly or say bad things to us. He created love in our lives. Because he wanted us all be happy. He hired a nanny from Sri Lanka to help with our children, and my mother to have all the help she needed. The nanny has returned home now. My parents have kept contact and some of my siblings have been to visit her.

Fatima said that this concern for the family nanny was unusual in the KSA. She said that some guest workers were treated very badly, but she saw that her own attitudes and identity were definitely derived from the respect that her parents had for the humblest of servants. Her nanny had left her own children at home in Sri Lanka, a common practice, so her parents made sure that the nanny had opportunity to return home once a year to maintain her family connections, her emotional stability, and to ensure that she had regular contact with her own children.

My family has always been a loving family. We knew how much our father and our mother cared for us all. At school when I talked about my father doing this or that with us, other girls would always be surprised. He was very hands-on. He did the things like teach us to ride a bike, even though society says girls must not be riding bikes.

While they are good Saudi citizens, Fatima felt that her parents were different from the Saudi norm because her father was raised in Syria and the KSA, and his family traveled widely in other parts of the Middle East when he was a child and teenager.

He has traveled widely in the U.S. as a businessman. There is more international experience is possibly something that has influenced my father’s family to follow the path of education, especially for girls.

Because it had always been a strong belief in my own family that travel was the best education a child could have, and I was also lucky enough to offer this educational
experience to my own children, Fatima and I agreed that her father was well educated by his experiences. This education had served him well as a father and resounded in his efforts to raise good citizens in his own children.

A year before I began this study, Fatima asked me if I believed in love before marriage. I was taken aback with the question which, although it set me up to hear Rabab ask the same question a year later, was too subtle for me to formulate an answer without a great deal of thought and reflection on my part. During our discussion I asked her the question and she answered:

Do I believe in love before marriage? I think this is not a realistic idea. I asked my mother to find a man who would be respectful more than anything else. I love my husband very much but that is something that I have found after we were married. If I had been in love in the Western idea I don’t think we would be happy now. I think we are strong together because we have had many adventures together and have grown together with respect, not lust. I think that many marriages in the U.S. end quickly because the husband and wife are not really in love with each other, and families are not helpful and supporting like they should be if they were part of the choosing at the beginning of the marriage. Even though I think this thinking in the U.S. is too bad, I have now believe that I should be tolerant of these ideas, even though they are not good thought out. I think I should be more understanding like is should be with my cousin and her choices.

As she again reflected on her cousin’s choices not to pursue an education and to have her family at a younger age than the rest of the cousins, Fatima explained that in the KSA there is a saying that the “woman is half of society. She is the one who has the children, she raises them, she sacrifices for her family, she is the first education” [educator]. In the case of a divorce, the law will give the children to the mother until they reach the age of seven, when they are given to their father.

We know how important the women in the society are. We have to be strong people. We have to do all the work in the home. I know women who have the husband who thinks he does all the important things in the family. He goes to
work and the women should stay home. When a child is given to a father after a divorce, he has no one to be the mother the same as the mother is. These children will be unhappy and will not be the good husband or wife in their lives. He is to be the one who guide the children in the Islam and they think the mother cannot do this.

Fatima felt that the prevailing attitude of the superiority of men in the practice of Islam and the apparent weakness of women in this sphere was unrealistic and untrue. She felt that it was more to do with arrogance and not religious dedication.

My father did not think like this. He was the one who makes the money, but he never told my mother that she could not have anything. She had to be careful that the money was used well, but with eight children, she had a lot of things to buy. She always made us happy first, but she and her husband were always happy together. They are still very happy together.

Her own preparations for marriage included a long period of reflection on what she really wanted in a husband, and frequent subsequent discussions with her mother.

When I decided that I was ready to be married I wanted to have a husband who is like this with me, like my father. And I am happy, Yusuf is a good man, he loves his sons and we have a good marriage. I know that I have been hard worker at my job before we came here, before I married Yusuf. I know that I have a job in the marriage and in the home. I want to do the things that my mother did, she is the foundation in my father’s house. That is her job. She is always there and she is ready to help all of her children.

The amount of responsibility that she expected to shoulder might seem daunting, but she was a devoted mother and wife, and took those “jobs” seriously. She believed that women have to be strong and prepared. She did not believe that these jobs were for the fainthearted or indolent.

I can be ready to help my children also, but Yusuf and me will share time we spend with our children. I will always be at the home after the boys come from school. And when my business is growing, I will always be at the home for the vacations and the holy days. I believe that it is important that I am also the mother who decides what my sons are being taught. Education is important ...and I want my sons to believe in education too. I believe that the women are important to
have education because they are the ones who teach the children and have the biggest influence in the life of the children. My mother’s job as mother has taught me to be a good mother for my sons.

When we discussed the probability of her having many more children, even though in her own eyes the age of 33 is advanced, she said that she did not want to have as large a family as she was raised in; even though she loved her brothers and sisters, she was not of the opinion that giving birth and raising children was her only function in life.

I love my children, I really want a daughter, Insh’allah I will have a daughter in the future, but I am thinking that my age (33) is not good to be having more children. I have the same ideas for my daughter that my father had for us girls. She must have an education before she marries and has her own children, and she will have freedom to love them to have good time with them not be all day following the housework.

Even though she was raised in a financially stable family and enjoyed many advantages as a child, she wanted any possible daughter to be a strong and independent woman, not someone who was timorous or selfish with her resources and love.

Fatima thought that giving birth was fundamentally different in the U.S. although she had no first-hand experience of giving birth in the KSA. She liked the fact that Yusuf was very involved in the pregnancy and present at both births, something that created equality between them as parents. She thought that the awareness that they were not at home in the KSA created a feeling of trepidation that other first-time parents might not feel, but which helped them to bond. They said that their relationship was stronger for these experiences, and they also felt that these roles may not serve them well in any future births in the KSA. Although Fatima was happy to have been able to share this experience with Yusuf, she felt that giving birth to a daughter in the KSA without Yusuf present would not be a problem as having a “Daughter will be a different thing from boys
and he will not be in the room with us.” She would like the birth to be more of a mother-daughter bonding moment. The change of role in the KSA might present Fatima with difficulties, but she was not prepared to place Yusuf in a position that might be difficult for him in their own society. Fatima felt that both she and Yusuf had a greater sense of responsibility in their marriage than in her sisters’ had in their marriages, mainly because of the shared experience of their babies’ births. Yusuf joined our conversation about American birthing practices and expressed his feeling that in a great measure he would miss the freedom to be with each other at such a precious time. “I like her” he told me. “That’s good,” said Fatima, “because I am a good woman. But I like him as well, too.

Changes in Practice Not Standards

Fatima did not believe that the behaviors she adopted in the diaspora were necessarily wise to pursue when she returned to the Kingdom after graduation. She drove herself to school, the store and mall, and to visit friends for three of the 4 years she lived in the U.S., but the traditions and customs of her culture would guide her behavior when she returned home.

I would not drive at the KSA. I will not embarrass my husband this way. I will not embarrass my father, not my sons either. I will drive here, because I can, but not at home. I do believe that we need to have the freedom to drive for our sisters, but to be break the law is not a good way to do this. We can ask the government to give us the driving licence and then we can all drive together. I am afraid to deal with the young men who sometimes are not good with the women on the road. They shout rude words and ask for the phone number. They are have the idea that if women are driving they are bad women and they will like the boys to be rude with them. I know there are women who are not obedient to the things we believe in Islam. They will be in the trouble if they are driving because of this thing.

This all too common behavior was something Fatima felt was dangerous to the survival
of Saudi society; if the young men disrespected women in this way then disrespect for
traditions and customs was not far behind. If the barriers that tradition erected to protect
virtue were destroyed, then family, marriage and religion would be in danger of failing
and society would be in ruins.

We spoke of the metaphorical barrier of the abbaya being the barrier that
sustained the traditions of her society. As women of virtue and education, Fatima felt that
she and her sister Saudias walked a knife edge. Her experiences of living in America and
witnessing what she considered societal degradation had convinced Fatima that America
had little to offer that would improve her society. “I have been watch the Americans, I
see the culture and the thinking and the separation from the rest of the world.” In the
KSA, Fatima was not much different from the other millions of Saudias, although she
was pale of skin, she worked hard and was a talented woman. As a Saudia, she was
privileged not to have to perform grunt work, performed by the guest workers in the
KSA.

I work hard and I don’t hate the people. I know I can be everything that I want to
be in the life. I have make my dreams real in the life. I can have the family and
the job and the happy marriage, Insh’allah.

Her vision for the future was more of the same that the KSA offered it citizens then;

“I will have the maids and the gardener and the driver when I am in the KSA. I
can do anything because I will have all these people to do the work I don’t want
to do. Yes, my mother did have all this help and her life is the success because we
children are the good hardworker people, and we are happy.

**Nawa**

Nawa was easy to pick out wearing a huge grin under her headscarf and masters
cap. She was the first student in the line—her surname beginning with Al, a typical prefix to the Saudi tribal surname, ensured that she was the first student in the line behind the college banner in the parade into the arena. Nawa was the only Saudia graduating with a master’s degree; two other Saudias, both of whom had begun their studies in the ESL Department, also wore their headscarves under their caps. I was as proud as any parent would have been, to watch them take their places in the parade and receive their diplomas in the basketball arena. The irony of graduating in the gladiatorial ring may only have been in my mind. I reflected, as I sat in the faculty seating, on the gargantuan efforts these women had made to reach this point in their young lives, the hopes and dreams that they had expressed over the years that I had known them, their mastery of a difficult language, the negotiations they undertook to successfully navigate the university system, the society in that theocratic state, the mounds of homework, and family lives that depended very much on their contribution.

Nawa, the third of six daughters, was a 26 year-old Sunni from north of Riyadh, the capital of the KSA. She graduated with a Master of Arts in English during this study. A week before graduation we met for the last time as she prepared to go home to the KSA. Nawa sat in her jeans, tunic, flowery headscarf, and comfortable tennis shoes in the coffee shop. She wore no makeup and sported a simple, elegant engagement ring. She was on time and sat comfortably in the comfy chair opposite me. We had visited here before, and she preferred to meet here in this quiet corner downtown.

Nawa graduated with her BA from a university in the KSA 3 years before our interviews. She was recently engaged to Hamoud, a man of her own choosing, whom she
met through mutual friends while studying in the U.S., and was happily anticipating her return home to celebrate her marriage. Nawa was not only a student, but also housekeeper, cook, and obedient, caring daughter to an elderly parent. She smiled easily, and was very direct. She exuded a quiet strength and confidence. She had a job researching for a small number of professors waiting for her when she returned to the KSA. She was happy to have time to work until she and her fiancé could return to the U.S. to complete their Ph.D.s.

Her father, Ahmed, was 71, had an elementary school education, and was retired. Her mother, Fatima, was 53, and had finished elementary school, too. Because she had no brothers to accompany her to the U.S. to study, her father accompanied her to provide the chaperone required by the terms of the King Abdullah scholarship. Her father dedicated 18 months of his life to his daughter’s studies. She always spoke of him, and to him, with affection and respect. She was of necessity his translator but exhibited deference as he responded slowly and thoughtfully to questions addressed to him. Neither Nawa nor her father had been home for the last 18 months.

The Importance of Keeping Hijab

Something that Nawa and Hamoud agreed on was her right to choose what she wore and how she wore it. Nawa did not want to dress immodestly (no bare shoulders, legs, neck or uncovered hair). She told me that after her graduation ceremony she had wanted to do something “crazy,” anything that was crazy would do.

I was out in the yard with my fiancé and I took off my headscarf because it felt like a crazy thing to do. We laughed and thought it was crazy thing to do, it was the first time he has seen my hair. He thinks I am crazy to do that. The yard has
fence so no one could see us except from my house, but there was no one to see, my father was watching TV.

She had mixed feelings about wearing a veil. She saw the discipline that wearing the veil indicated, and she always wore it in public in the U.S.

I am happy to wear the headscarf and would not go out from my house without it. This is identity that I love. I was happy, very happy to wear my scarf under my graduation hat. I was the only master student with the headscarf but there were two other Saudias. I don’t know them. They were wearing the headscarf, too. I was very happy to know that there were three of us at the graduation. We are good picture for the Saudias.

The women were a great advertisement for the KSA; all of them had very good GPAs and had moved quickly and efficiently through their classes. The public discussion about wearing a veil seemed as though it would never be resolved, which was not surprising as Saudias were not in agreement on the necessity, or range of wearing hijab.

The headscarf is not the Qur’an, it is the men who are trying to stop the women, stop them with the clothing. The prophet’s wives were told to wear the headscarf, but the men were making the women always wearing the scarf now.

This was a discussion I had with many Saudias, but Nawa was the first to make it about control of women.

I didn’t wear the scarf until I was 16. I looked like a boy. I was very skinny and had no shape, so I didn’t need to wear it. I started to wear the headscarf when I started to bleed. I was 16 and my mom said I have to wear it now. I could not put it properly on my head. I could not stop it from sliding around my head. I hated to wear it. I wore it every day for the two weeks and I hated it every day for the two weeks. Then I got used to it and I wear it now for 10 years and I love it.

Although she wore the veil all the time in public, she never wore an abbaya. She said that the abbaya was too restrictive physically. Instead she wore pants or jeans and long tunics or shirts. She did not wear the niqaab either.

I do not wear the niqaab. I think that the girls who wear it here are not wear it for
themselves. I think that the husbands say they have to wear it. I think we should not stick out like that. We should not dress to make people to look at us. When they women wear the niqaab and the abbaya and the headscarf then people will look at them all the time, everywhere on the campus and in the town.

Even adopting this degree of noncompliance was something that she felt she would be scolded for when she returned to the KSA. She felt though, that she would have some standing in the community of women as she had her degree and that would guarantee some authority on Islam and rights. She referred to her friend Zainab in Bahrain.

Even though Zainab is in the Bahrain she has keep her headscarf and still wear the abbaya. When she comes to visit the U.S. she doesn’t wear that. She wear the headscarf but not abbaya. She is think that in Bahrain there is too many people who watch her and will tell her family that she is a bad women, so she wear abbaya always. We say that the abbaya does not make the good woman, but our religion is still in our hearts and in our minds, but there are many people who will make the stories to say that we are not the good women.

For both Zainab and Nawa, social standing was important. Nawa was concerned that she did not cross the line in any area that could cause her family embarrassment or herself any rejection because of local interpretation of the Qur’an, Sharia law, or the Hadith (the sayings of the Prophet Mohammad). She knew that her attempts to change her culture would have to be taken in minute steps for her own safety and for her family’s wellbeing.

The Importance of Roles and Role Models

Nawa and I discussed the different roles that were expected of women in our own societies and how they differed from the roles we assumed in the U.S.

My country is for the mens to run it. Womens can’t work a man’s job, so we to make jobs of our own for the other womens, like the hospital. The men they don’t give the womens a chance to do the work outside the house. They say ‘you are the women, you don’t know how this job is’ but the prophet wives do the work. What are the mens telling us, this is not Islam, this is the mens control the womens.
Nawa was of the opinion that the expected role of women is to marry and produce as many children as possible, as quickly as possible. However, most of the women she knew are unhappily married. She felt that they thought they had no choice but to endure a bad relationship, especially if children were involved. Also if their parents were not supportive, like Nawa’s parents were, then the wife would have nowhere in the world to go, and would end up destitute and homeless on the streets of the capital. Nawa knew of situations where, if the husband took another wife, he would sometimes leave his first children with their mother and not support them at all.

Nawa believed that the male dominated society of the KSA had embraced the idea that men would suffer little punishment if they broke the religious laws. However, women were regularly punished for things outside of their control, or because their husbands had falsely accused them of a crime in an effort to get rid of the wife. She felt that the rights of women were not protected by Sharia, as she thought the law was supposed to do. Some of the wives she knew were raised to be beautiful brides, but were often not raised to be good wives. She thought it was more a feature of the middle and/or upper class women who were indolent and “spoiled.” Their roles were to look beautiful in the privacy of their homes and produce children.

I think that many girls want the expensive dress but they want to have all their friends know how much they dress was cost. This is the stupid attitude to the marriage. The girls who are like this are only interested in the dress and the make-up and they don’t make the good marriages. I think these people don’t really know how to have good lives.

I asked if her mother was disappointed not to have the opportunity to play her traditional role in the marriage negotiations. Nawa felt that this was a relief for her
mother. “My father met my fiancé here and he liked him.” This was at least a great measure of comfort for Nawa’s parents. The parents of both parties would meet and sign all the contracts before the ceremony. This was the first time Nawa had heard of a marriage being contracted the way hers was. She knew that this was a departure for her community and culture. However, she did feel that it was not a complete departure as there had been some negotiating involved.

After her travels abroad and education, Nawa was unwilling to be a stay-at-home mother. She planned to be a mother, but she and Hamoud decided that they could wait for parenthood until they finished their terminal degrees. “We will study in California. We are going to work for 2 years in the KSA, come back and do more study, Ph.D. study. In the KSA we will be expect to have our children in the straight away.” Among the married Muslima students at ZSU, there were none who have given birth to more than two children, and most had one. According to Nawa, this was unusual for the Saudi population. Hamoud and Nawa came to the decision not to have children too soon, as he had expressed his wish that she would be the one to make the final decision. “My fiancé wants me to make my own decisions, and he will listen to me about this. He is not like the men in my tribe.”

Nawa expressed her belief that the traditions, culture, and customs that guided the women in the KSA were “depressing.” Obviously, she did not believe that her husband-to-be was one of these men; he had so far proven himself to be much more modern in his attitudes. She stated:

Some men are good. Some are not. The problems are the mothers who have not taught the men to be respectful of wives, not just their mothers and sisters.
Sometimes I think that women don’t know their rights, and they don’t know that they don’t have to give them up. I wish that all the women would stand one day like the right2drive women and say no more violence. But they will not.

Nawa recognized that there are situations where adopting the expected behaviors in connection with men were the only way to get things done.

I have a job to start when I am married. It is the research for the professors in the university in Riyadh. Male professors. I know they will not listen to what I say. They never want to hear what the woman will say. They will say that my ideas are not mine but they are their ideas. They will give me things to do and I will learn from the things I write.

Our discussion about adopting these behaviors that Nawa mentioned indicated that they were pervasive, but although she felt it was wrong to treat another human being this way, she knew she could only fight the system from within. She would wait patiently for the opportunity to show that her work was good work and worth listening to, but that would take a few years of good behavior.

The work is changing in KSA, the women have more jobs, but there is still men in most of the jobs, because the women don’t want to take away the jobs from the men. My mother she has take the job of my father in our home. She says she is the mother and father in the house now. I think she has always been strong, very happy with her belief that we daughters should be in school. I think she was always this strong. She always had the intelligence to do this mother and father. I think my father likes her to be the strong women and that makes his life easier.

Nawa felt that there were always strong women in the history of Islam. The first convert, Khadija, was the Prophet Mohammed’s first wife. Her example was often held up as an example of a good Muslim woman.

My tribe has the women who work hard and do not break themselves on a bad husband. I have the power in my person to succeed because I have seen the brave and the strong women at home. They have still to stand up. If they did not I do not know why I have do it. The women who want to study in my tribe, but the families will not let them are wait for me, I think, to be the success and to bring the good things to the tribe. I have to show the men they are wrong. I know that in
KSA, I will have the limits every day from the men, who said that one degree was enough. I cannot say how the help of my father has help me to be success.

**The Importance of Religion**

Nawa felt that her identity was always developing, but there were certain things that remained the same. One facet of her identity she felt would not change was her dedication to Islam.

I don’t think I have changed my belief in Islam because I was here alone in Utah. I am the same believer in my religion, but I am different in some ways. Nothing I have learn has change the value of Islam for my life. I believe the words of the prophet and the Qur’an. I love the peace I have because Islam is important. I love I am part of the *Ummah* (Community of believers) and I have friends all the world because we have same respect for the prophet and his life. I still feel my belief in Islam is strong and that I am obedient to my parents and the things I do that are good since I was a little girl.

Being true to her religion was more than a lifetime of dedication taught by her parents and community for Nawa. Introspection, prayer and good works were part of her belief and practice. She believed that changes must take place, but not as the result of rioting or revolution on the grand scale of the Arab Spring.

We have to find a way to live the true Islam and not have the religions in the world to divide us from everybody else. I want to make changes that are little to start a big change. I do not want to be the revolute. I want to see change that we can work together. Small things must be the change first. We do not need to change Islam. We need to change ourself because there is nothing wrong with the Islam it is the people who do the bad things and then they say that Allah is want them do these bad things.

She did have a plan to combat what she saw as negative behavior in Islam. She indicated that after she graduated with her Ph.D. she would like to teach teachers and expected to work in a high school for a few years.

I will teach in the high school, and I will make changes to what we think. I will
teach my girls that we are all the same, the religion does not matter, and we can all be friends. It doesn’t matter if we Shi’a or Sunna. We are Muslims and Allah will be happy if we are all good for each other. This is very important. Here, in the U.S. I have see that many Muslims are not care for each other. They forget what the Qur’an teach. They do not know what the religion teach. They will listen to the things that they like and not listen to the things they do not like.

Importance of Feminism

The discussion we had about feminism was revealing. The idea that Western feminism could be adopted in the KSA was something that Nawa found ridiculous, if only because she could not see any place for it to fit in with the culture and traditions. Most of her objections were based on the Right2drive campaign and the women who were jailed for their participation.

Feminism? I don’t want to be the feminist. I think that it is not any good for me. The feminist in Saudi are in jail. They want to have driving ability, but they are in jail now. How does that help women? We need have womens in our lives who can help us, not the women in jail. I think that these womens they are crazy. I want to change some things in the KSA, but I cannot do that if I am in jail. I won’t shame my family being in jail.

I asked Nawa to read a few articles I had recently read. One by Mona Eltahawy was a very direct and demanding article that was not well received in the American Muslim community. Nawa said, “She does not speak for me and my sisters. She sound angry with the men; she needs to work with all the people, men and women. If this feminism for Islam, I don’t want to be it.” We talked about the varying degrees and types of feminism, her objections to the male domination of her faith and culture, her determination to change life through educating her students to be accepting of difference, and how that was a degree of feminism. “I am a feminist? If that is feminist then I like that.”
The Importance of Education

Nawa was not embarrassed by her father’s lack of education. She spoke of him and his patience in accompanying her with obvious appreciation and love.

My father was watching the satellite TV all the time he is here. He was watching the Saudi TV. He was missing the home so he watch all the days, so that he was not missing the home too much. When we came here first I was watch a lot of TV on the weekends, but I think that this make me miss my mum and my family too much. My father has been very bored, but he is happy because I am doing this thing. I will go home with a new knowledge and he thinks we should be go the school. The girls should be go the school. He was from generation didn’t have a school. Our tribe is not wealthy tribe. He work when he was a very young boy.

Nawa was conscious of “always wanting to go to school when I was very small. I loved the reading and the writing, always I was reading and writing.” Her second sister, Nora, had a degree, but had not found satisfaction in having achieved this milestone. “She works and her husband likes her to work. They have things, many things that they could not have if he was the only worker. She works in a hospital, in the hospital office.”

Nora had no children and did not intend to have any in the near future. The younger sister, Noof, who had a degree, “works in the office where she answers the women’s questions. She has husband he is very lazy and very stupid. She has the two children. He beats her and she wants to get a divorce.” Joy of learning is something that pervades Nawa’s life. She glowed when she talked about study and her experience of the challenge of studying English Literature in English as something she enjoyed.

I did lots of homework and lots of writing, I did not the grades for sympathy, I might have help and easier half a grade because I am writing and speaking in the second language, but the teachers did not gave me A if I was not work. I was meet with the professors every week and asked for help in the papers, but I was honest and ask for help. I rewrote many times and visit Writing Center many times. I made my 3.89 GPA with lot of work I deserve it. I will be go to good school in California because I am good student. I love the books and the classes. I was
happy here in ZSU. I liked to study research and essays. I will be very happy to do the PhD, because it will make me to do more writing and reading and talking with professors. I love the old stories and the different stories that are the same all over the world.

She also felt that learning English to the level that she had gave her greater confidence in herself and her abilities.

Not just here, but in the KSA as well. Everywhere I go in the KSA I can use the English and I am recognize as well educated woman. I will talk to all the authority in the hospital for my father, with the doctors. I can help my younger sisters with the homework, I can understand the other people. I can connection with others and feel I am good with the communication. I can study anywhere in the world, the English speak world.

Nawa was aware of how attending college changed her life and her perceptions of the world and the KSA. She had regrets for the older women in her tribe, including her mother:

I want to have the girls to have education, I want my cousins to have education. My mum should have education but she says it too late. She has always tell me and my sisters that we need the education and she loves, is proud that her daughters have the education. There are many women in my family, same as my mum, same age. They wish they had been got education and want to have their daughters to go outside their home and work.

The culture of education was something that Nawa had a great passion for, and she talked about the way that she felt she carried her culture with her like a rucksack. One of the important parts of her personal culture (identity) was the value of education and her mission to share and teach the advantages it could bring to her students.

**The Importance of Family**

Family was central to the journey Nawa was making. Almost every discussion hinged on her family and their support and her hopes for all of them, including her.
I am very lucky my father is love me too much so that he come to U.S. and not stay at home. He loves me too much and has come here even is not comfortable for him be here alone. I have him in my home to help me do same we did at the home in KSA- we still have Eid and prayers. We have same foods and the shopping together. My father comes to my graduation and was very happy I finished the master degree, because it is important to me. He was like the people tell him that I am is the good student and a good person. He was happy, I think he learn the word ‘daughter’ at English department lunch. He will stay here if I ask him to stay and finish Ph.D. now, but he really wants be home, and I want him stay home with my mother.

The first woman in her tribe to complete a master’s degree, and the first woman in her tribe to venture outside the KSA for any degree of higher education, Nawa said:

The men in my tribe said I am the embarrassment to our tribe. They said that I would have a boyfriend, if I came to the U.S. and I would date him and would bring a shame on the tribe. They want the womens to stay home and have babies, and cook and clean for them. They do not want to go to school themselfs, they are like Bedu, they think that they should tell the womens what to do and that they should not read and write. The think backwards, they do not understand how the people need to have the reading and writing and that they need be doing this for themselfs. The asked to my father why he was let me to do this thing. But I am his favorite child and he always said to me “yes I am go to U.S. to study and get degree. That is he was willingly to come with me and stay so I can be here to study.

Some of Nawa’s friends asked why she was going to U.S. Nawa reported that they had said:

You can stop this. This is crazy thing. You have degree now and have chance for a job. You can stay with us here. But I want to come here. Many times I cried in the night because my friends do not want me go to U.S. They afraid that U.S. is bad place and I will not be Nawa when I come back to KSA.

As she looked to the future when she would eventually have children of her own, Nawa said she wanted to teach her children to speak both Arabic and English fluently. She saw the advantages that she had in being bilingual as something that would be an even greater benefit for her children. “I want my children to have the benefits and learning I have.
This is what help me to be strong when my friends say to me not go to the U.S.” She did worry that this ability and the outward view of the world it could generate might separate her children from her parents in a way that would cause intergenerational conflict and resentment.

Ahmed was from a generation before the heydays of OPEC. There were very few oil wells and very little oil production when he was younger than Nawa is now. It was a very different time for the Kingdom economically when many of the men were itinerant workers much like the workers who now flood the KSA from poverty-stricken parts of the world. This change was something that created a different world that many were loath to change, reminiscing about the days before technology, as the older generation did in any country, as if they were golden days of perfection and peace.

Yes. There was no scholarship, and he worked at hard physical work. My father was worker in somewhere outside KSA. The KSA was a poor country when my father was young man. He wait many years before he married he was too poor. He married my mother when she 14. But he wouldn’t take her to his home. He left her with her family because he thought she too young for wife in his home. She went his home when she 16. She gave birth to my sister when she 19. She has stayed with her children since my sister was born. I am happy that she made choose to stay home with us. She wanted us to go school.

Nawa’s five sisters all lived in the KSA. The oldest was married with five children and chose to marry instead of go to school. She succumbed to pressures within the tribe to conform to what Nawa says is “stupidity and backwards” on the part of the male tribe members who wanted the women to marry and have children and not seek an education.

“She wishes she has a degree, so sometimes she makes fun of me because I am here and have not children in my home.” There were other women who Nawa knew in her teenage years who teased her for not conforming. However, they since expressed dissatisfaction
for choosing the path they did.

When I go back to my country, I will marriage. I won’t marry in my tribe because if the marriage is bad then the tribe has many political things to think about. My fiancé [Hamoud] has arranged my marriage. He has bought the dress for me and he had rented the hotel. The dress is very simple but very expensive. He has pay $10,000 for the dress, that is the normal price to pay for the dress. I said I don’t want the expensive dress. This is not the very expensive dress.

Nawa’s brother-in-law was a cousin, so that meant trouble for Noof, her younger unhappily married sister, when she tried to divorce her husband. Nawa was very matter-of-fact about the domestic violence Noof suffered. She knew about it, but there was little she could do about it. Her family all suffered in silence with the knowledge of it. Noof had asked her husband’s permission to return to her father’s house.

My father he says that she can get the divorce and come back to his home. Her husband wants her to pay a lot of money, he says that she has to pay him because he has paid for her until she went to go to work. He wants 1600 riyals, but he takes all her wages and she has no money to pay him. My father loves his daughters and hates the miscontent that her arguments are bringing to his house, but what he can do? What she can do?

Because Noof and her husband were part of the same tribe, Nawa and her family anticipated negative consequences when Noof would divorce her husband and sue for custody of the children.

The tribe is going to argue, but because the men think they are the most important, then my sister and my family will not have a very strong position. They have to think about the feelings of the families and the shame of a bad marriage. Her husband will not tell the tribe that he has been a bad, lazy husband he will tell the tribe she has been a bad wife and she is lazy and shames him because she goes to work outside the house. This makes the situation for my sister very difficult.

The greatest difficulty would be the placement of the children after the divorce. It was common for children to live with the mother until they were seven, when they would go
to the father’s house.

Her children might be live with her husband’s family and then they will hate her and she will be very unhappy for her life. She must have children to make her husband a happy man. He think he is weak in beside his friends and brothers and family if his wife is not pregnant after they get married. He wants a son, because all the men what a son. They think they are more men if they have sons. I ask that though who will those sons marry if the wife has no daughter? If all the men have boys they have no daughter-in-law for birth their grandchildren.

In the families I knew, sons were preferred by the husbands, but some women confided that they would have liked a daughter. However, they were afraid that if they did not produce a son, they might be replaced, or divorced to satisfy the husband’s ego. The biological fact that the gender of the child was decided by the father was not a commonly agreed upon idea in the KSA. Some of the wives who produced girls predictably found that the husband doted as much on a daughter as a son. However, Nawa felt that her tribe was particularly backward, but said that while traditions were changing, they were changing in the cities not in little villages like hers.

Nawa did not feel that her sister’s experiences had particularly influenced her to feel negatively about her tribe; her sister was one of many unhappy women she knew. She deplored the fact, as she saw it, that men had the upper hand. She also thought that her sister had made a bad choice.

He was married before, he is charming man and when my sister he asked for her to wife, she thought the wife, the first wife was the bad person and so because he is the charming man, she said yes. But she stupid, we know this wife, the first wife, and we know her in school and we know her sisters and family. They are good people, so my sister was not wise when she saw his charm face and said ‘yes’.” She was hurry to marriage, she want to be first to marriage in my family. Now she has live in the hell.

After their first anniversary the new husband had started to hit Noof, who told the eldest
sister, Ayesha. Nawa said that the older sister was the one who was responsible for helping Noof to escape her marriage, because Ayesha is married, but there was a sense of helplessness and of being too afraid to act or react, the sisters did not fight back in any way, and Noof continued to suffer. However, after he started to beat her.

She was putting up with this because she wasn’t want to be shamed in the tribe by divorce. But then when he started to hit the children she said “No!’ I won’t have to stay with you for this time. I am not staying with you I am going to my father’s house.” Now she is move to my mother and father’s house and she will keep her money for herself and her children. Her husband will not pay for the money to help his children because he is lazy and stupid and he doesn’t care about them.

Nawa felt that this attitude was typical of men she knew in her tribe. She thought that it was traditional gender roles in the KSA that were the root of the problem. Now Noof was more confident to start a new life because “She told me that she was see me work and go U.S. and school and succeed and she thinks she can do as well.” The separation was due to start by May 2015, by which time Nawa would be back in the KSA.

On the subject of marriage and wives, Nawa had a lot to say, while she abhorred the idea of divorce, she saw that the fault was not always one-sided as people so often claimed. She thought that the wife was always blamed in her community.

My friend, Zainab, she is twin, she is study in Bahrain, she will be medical doctor. She was married to a man that she didn’t like and he didn’t liked her after they marry. She was unhappy and she speaks to her father for help. He said her “don’t divorce him for a month and after the month come and we decide what you do then.” He tell her that she is trying hard to make the husband and she to be happy. She was change her mind and she was try to be the happy wife. She has many studies, but she tried to make her husband happy. She tried for month her father he tell her how is the marriage, she tell him she tries hard, but she was not happy. Then her father tell her he is good with a divorce. Zainab is a very beautiful woman and she has many other men ask for her to be wife, but she says no. I know Zainab in my KSA college. She has twin sister who is school in U.S., she is study science. Maybe the sisters are not good for marriage. The sister in U.S. has 5 men ask for her to be wife, but she says no. Maybe now she is graduate she
might change her mind, but she is want to study the master degree, so I don’t know if she marry. She is 25 now so maybe, maybe not.

Considering her reservations about the men in her tribe, it was not surprising that she had chosen a man from outside the tribe.

I met my fiancé because of a friend. We are from different tribes and different parts of KSA. His friend told him he should meet me, and another friend told me that I should meet him. We have meet many times here and we have fall in love. I am happy that he is making the marriage plans, I am too busy to have the time to do it, he is not like the men in my tribe; he wants me to work so I not be boring and he wants us to come back to finish our PhDs.

Nawa was looking forward to her marriage and was a little surprised that she was so happy and that now she was looking forward to having a home of her own. She had not sought a husband at home or in the U.S.; she was too busy with her schooling. Because her sisters have had a tough time, she was not willing to entertain one of the tribe as a husband.

But I want to go home and do the marriage with my family and have the party with my aunts and cousins. The tradition is important to me and I want to do them. Since my fiancé has asked me to be marriage I have been look forward to be home and do these marriage with my family. I love the chance I have to be with my family when I do this. I like the party the women have for the marriage there is no men there and we have a good time. I think the men are boring, they have the talking and shaking the hands of the important men of the tribe and the village, but we will just have the fun in the hotel with all the women.

In an after-class discussion we had with non-traditional female American classmates, she sought advice about whether she was making the right decision and expressed some doubts. Hamoud had once or twice expressed that Nawa’s friendship with another Saudi male, Abdulaziz, a doctor in California, caused him some concern. She felt he was “stupidly jealous” of Abdulaziz as there was no connection other than she had met him through another Saudia who studied in California. All of the contact had been appropriate
according to Saudi culture, and they had never spent time alone. This, she thought was because her and Hamoud’s own courtship had been “un-Saudi,” and his concern was unfounded, but understandable.

I wonder if I am making right choice, I cannot understand his thinking. He knows I am study for my degree all the time and I am busy, and my father is here. I have not flirt with this doctor. If I have to go back to Saudi behavior when I am in the U.S. I have no progress in my culture. I have made special ways to keep boy students away from my spaces. I never sit with them in group, I sit on other sides of table to keep my borders from them. I think that his anger is because Abdulaziz is Saudi not American. This is stupid I am not look for other husband.

This was similar to other discussions I had about the difference between Saudi and American men, and the level of jealousy that existed in some of the husband’s minds.

While they discounted the attraction of American men as contenders for their wives affections, they did not view Saudi males in the same light.

**The Importance of Changes**

Nawa felt that the place to begin societal changes would be in her teaching practices. She felt it was safe and as a teacher with a degree in English, she had a special position of trust and recognition in her community.

I want to change things with the children, I want to teach them we are all the same; Shi’i, Sunna, Muslim or Christian. I want to say to my girls “Don’t be the stupid, you have to treat the people all the same.” Give the same things to the Shi’a and the Sunna I think that Islam is the good way for us to walk. There are many good things in Islam and that makes me happy. In the Qur’an we have the rights for women and the men have take no notice of those words. They don’t want to listen if the things there are not what they want to hear. They want to have the women to stay at home, not have happy life.

The quiet life that Nawa and her father lived in the U.S. appealed to Nawa because she was focused on her studies and wanted to finish quickly. Ahmed and Nawa
had plans to travel for about three weeks after graduation. He had spent no time exploring and as he probably would not return to the U.S., she felt they should explore the country a little. However, when she said that when she returned to complete a Ph.D. she would like to be part of a larger community of Muslims.

I could not do much friendship while I was student because I was look after my father and do the homework. But I was a good example of what Saudi student do, and how we can be here and at home. I was also represent of Saudi womens, but I am not the only kind of women there is in KSA. I am only one kind, but I know that people were thinking I was represent. That is stupid, there are millions of Saudis and I am not represent all. I want to be part of bigger community of Saudis, women and men. I think that we should be help each other with keep traditions open when we away from home. I know that this important to me, more important when I am here, it always important but I need to have it when I am not in the KSA.

She felt that being part of a larger community would create more interesting celebrations, which would help to keep traditions alive, but that was not all that was required. Friendships were difficult to maintain when there was only a monthly Skype. She felt that she had drifted from her friends at home, but that was not merely distance and time management. Much of the distance she feels is based on finishing her degree. While she did not in any way demonstrate a sense of superiority to her friends who did not pursue a higher education, she did feel that her focus was now elsewhere, and that she did not belong in that circle of friends because their lives were focused on other important things that were not relevant to her life at that time. As her plans with Hamoud were to return to the U.S. and pursue another degree she felt that her life would never return to a similar place as where her friends were. Most of these friends were never likely to leave the KSA, and she was interested in travelling.

Hamoud is the person who wants to study most in California, I don’t care if I
study there or here, but there is more Saudis in California and the life will be better than it is here, because there are more people to be friends with. I would be happy to study anywhere, because I want to study, I don’t care if I am alone, I was alone here with my father, but Hamoud wants to have more people with us. I agree with him that it will be easier to have a big Saudi community there when we come back to the U.S.

Nawa did not feel that she was giving in to Hamoud’s desire to study in California. She had no preference about where to study, but knew that she also didn’t want to suffer another cold, snowy winter. That had been her greatest hardship while studying in the U.S. She felt that Hamoud would consider any request she had, but the decision to go to California was not something to which she had any contribution to make.

As she contemplated her return and all that would mean to her and her family, Nawa said:

I don’t want to be in the jail because I drive the car. I have not learned to drive here, it is a scary thing, so I don’t want to do it, there are many crazy people drive in America. I don’t want to die before I get the marriage.

Nawa’s determination not to drive was not based on the KSA government’s directive, but on a theme that I have heard from both Saudi men and women. The young men of the region are often bored and feel directionless, and their frustration often spills over into disruptive and dangerous behavior on the roads. Drifting and road skating has taken the lives of five of my students over the 15 years that I have taught in the ESL department. One young man told me he did not want his mother in such a dangerous situation, and he would drive her for the rest of his life if that was what she needed. Nawa said, “My dad doesn’t drive either. He thinks that the people who drive are the crazy people.”
CHAPTER V
SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

Introduction

After the interviews were concluded, I wrote them up and after comparing the nascent themes, I reviewed the material with each participant and asked for clarification, which appears in this chapter as I investigate the themes and revelations they shared. The participants were willing and at times, anxious to continue to share their thoughts and insights. The initial questions for the study were focused on how the participants defined their roles and identity, what networks they created, and how their own customs, language, culture helped to maintain their identities. The participants live at intersections of the roles they assumed and negotiated on a daily basis (Olesen, 2011, as cited in Creswell, 2012, p. 29. Their individual understandings of their lives were the dynamic centers of intersecting themes that emerged from the interviews and subsequent sessions of clarification and interpretation.

Positionality Revised

Methods I employed in the process of this dissertation offered pause for reflection on my positionality. Notetaking offered time for reflection and development. The participant’s stories were invaluable in building my own understanding, Often, I found that, in reporting the oral histories, I was liberally mixing in storytelling because the influence of my late dad, a master storyteller, still dominates my life.
The complexities of the distances I feel from my own culture and traditions was at times more painful because of the sense of isolation I feel as a “stranger in a strange land” (Exodus 2:22). I found this reflected in the participants’ pain and isolation. However, my accent and skin were a guarantee of privilege (McCafferty, 2011; McIntosh, 1989); whereas, the participants were not possessed of either of these advantages. The study indicated that their skin always placed them at a disadvantage in the population of this university, as did their religion as revealed by their sartorial choices, their gender, and their accents. While I have long been the subject of gender prejudice, I was old enough to claim the privilege of age, supposed wisdom, and approved alien status to counter it.

The participants gave me space to reflect on the multiple identities created by my many privileges (Erikson, 1968; Khan, 1998; Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006), although I believe I have always employed multiple identities to complete and develop successful relationships at work, home, and play. Most obvious to me was the linguistic identity I took advantage of (see Bresnahan et al., 2002, p. 171; Hill, 2011; McCafferty, 2011, p. 5); even though I was a native English speaker, a British English speaker, I was often at a loss for the right Americanism, word or phrase, to communicate with American English speakers who, in turn, often lack the tools to pause for understanding or correct fundamental assumption miscues. As I stumbled through listening to and correcting my speech patterns and word choices, I felt I was more empathetic to the participants’ linguistic struggles. Spelling, a major ingredient in the magic to communicate on paper, was more challenging as I dithered between two systems and occasionally did not
hesitate to spell like an American, which caused me confusion and a loss of identity. If from my position of privilege I was confused and challenged, I saw that the participants were in a far worse situation.

As I listened to the struggles that living amongst the trappings of a foreign theocratic state could cause, I was painfully aware of the lack of understanding I found amongst ‘religious’ neighbors. The dissonance I experienced was reflected in the questions that the participants asked me about other students at ZSU, expecting me to explain what to me was inexplicable.

Living in a foreign country has necessitated the construction of my own world, and, as interaction with the participants caused me to reflect on that idea, I came to believe that we all constructed the worlds we inhabited. I have observed in my children that they and I were often guilty of constructing our own memories, if only to create a foundation that would support and protect us from struggles and challenges that might otherwise overwhelm us in a world of differences. I found that the participants had also of necessity, created their own worlds, and spaces for reflection.

This study was the stories of the participants, combined with the patient dedication of other Saudias I have taught, that were the guiding lights of the development of this study. It grew in importance in my own life, and was inspired and sustained by family, professors, former students, friends and the important kinship that developed with the participants. I often felt like a stranger in my workplace and personal life, so the study also became a refuge.
Religious Devotion

My discussions with non-Muslim acquaintances indicated a willingness and anxious need on their part to believe that the participants would like to see some changes in their culture, because as indicated in the claims of Abdel-Fattah (2013; see also Abu-Lughod, 2002; Gailani, as cited in Baig, 2013; Almuunajjed, as cited in Hanley, 2010; Khan, 1998; Spivak, 1988; Syed, 2008), the theme of women living under harsh, oppressive conditions and wearing burqas were foundational beliefs for many Westerners. Many of these discussions centered on the recent world-wide deliberations of the driving restrictions imposed on women in the KSA. While there were a myriad of opinions about this restriction, few discussants were willing to believe that these same women were not interested in changing their religion.

Immutable Identity

In this group of participants, the religious strand of identity was immutable. The dedication to Islam was not just family tradition and blind unquestioning faith; it was part of their physical, spiritual, emotional, and intellectual experience of the world. However, as Islam was increasingly recast as a political ideology (Hunt, 2010), observers in the non-Muslim world were less and less sympathetic to the Muslim in the neighborhood. Observation of the participants in their many interactions indicated that Islam was a religion. There was a variation of political beliefs amongst the participants and a willingness to accept those differences as personal, not religiously dictated, choices. Not wanting to change their religion goes deeper for the participants than driving, or veiling,
the much examined signifier. Inversely, Islam does not have to be considered a problem; speaking of personal development, Adel-Fattah (2013) argued that “it is a platform for change: and that agency, choice and autonomy...are integral to the Islamic Tradition.” All the participants also described Islam as comforting and regulating.

**Religious Comfort**

The comfort of the regularity of the *adhan* (the call to prayers) that once again physically regulated Rabab’s life returned her to the comfort of her childhood home and was reassuring. For Nawa, the adhan was more remote than it was for Rabab; she had to travel closer to the neighborhood mosque to hear it, but like the other two participants, Sara and Fatima, who remained in the U.S., the adhan was still a five times-a-day reminder through an app on their phones. Fatima, Sara and Nawa are able to retain that part of their identity that was fundamental to their spiritual well-being through modern technology, and they made a specific choice to install the app to cement and maintain that link.

Their faith was a link, a comforting “tied.” The rhythm and reminders of the adhan added structure to their days reminding them that they were faithful followers of Islam. “I need to keep tied to my family. We pray together in the house, at home. I want always to be the faithful woman.” This need to feel tied to her religion was something that Sara felt was deep-rooted: “it is a breath to me.” The structure of the year and the devotion to fasting to draw closer to God was also a keen need: “if I give this part of me away, when I am back in the KSA, I will not have this part anymore.” Fatima said that she would be “like the lost goat that dies in the wolf house because he has walked into the
dark night.”

**Religious Ties**

There are clearly social and self-identities that tied these participants to their faith, not any sense of oppression. For the participants, Islam was the means by which they articulated their places in a dissonant world, which was rooted in the unacceptable practices, morals, and ethics of the West (Almomen, personal communication, January 14, 2014). They employed their unique differences to maintain their identities in the face of overwhelmingly foreign expectations. Only outside the safety of the confines of the Kingdom (KSA) did they experience their faith in terms of intersectionality, as adherents of a minority and vilified faith, minority race and linguistic identity.

Devotion to religious duty tied the participants to their families, and to a worldwide community of believers. One of the activities I shared over the years was, ﻋﯿﺪ اﻟﻔﻄﺮ, Eid al-Fitr (the Feast of the Breaking of the Fast) the holy day celebrated by Muslims worldwide to mark the end of Ramadan (the holy calendar month of dawn to dusk fasting. On these occasions, in the gathering together, the participants said they were able to reaffirm their dedication, devotion, and adherence to Islam with more intensity. The familiar prayers and rites were completed with joy and caused reflection on past years when they celebrated with their extended families at home in the KSA. Fatima’s family always celebrated with just her immediate family, but although it was always a joyful affair, she remembered it was also a spiritual affair. The الصلاة, Alsalat (required prayers) were strictly observed and she remembered that, as a young girl, her father explained to her the importance and meaning of these prayers. Fatima found spiritual comfort and
renewal in these practices. She had begun to teach her oldest son, Mohammed, about the importance of these prayers and heard her father’s voice tying her to her childhood.

Nawa was excited to practice Ramadan in her own home for the first time this year for many reasons. She and her husband, Hamoud, planned a small remembrance of their own before they went to her family party. This was an important part of his acceptance into her tribe, something that would be her lot the following year when she attended his family party and met his female relatives at the female party. The social aspect to the Eid was an important tie to family and the greater Islamic community. Despite the distance and separations they endured, these rites of the yearly passage of time bound these families together in tradition and religious practice.

The Purpose of Religion

Sara spoke about the purpose of religion as a means to be close to what Allah wanted us to be. The word “Islam means submission to Allah, and if anything in our lives makes us into conflict” with the peace that submission to Allah engenders, then “these must be take out from the heart and the mind. The first step about removing pain and suffering is to turn to Allah for guide.” In their continuous submission to Allah, Muslims continually invoked His mercy, and

…we will have our hearts filled with the mercy, patient and peace to finish those problems. If we have the love and the hope leave our life, then we have the Eid to help us to think about the Allah... [then there is the]...month of Ramadan to help us to think about the good of the God. And we have the hope and the love to come back to us.

Saudis did not generally celebrate birthdays, detracting as that would from the duties and devotions that mark the Islamic calendar, and found the proliferation of
holydays in the Christian calendar mystifying. Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha (the remembrance that the prophet Ibrahim proved willing to sacrifice his son Ishmael) were the major celebrations in the Islamic calendar. In the KSA, Al-Watani day (national day) had grown in popularity in some areas, but still was not marked with the same gusto as the Eids. The American celebration of birthdays, anniversaries, and the various saints’ days (Valentines, Patrick’s and All Saints Eve) were at times confusing to the participants. These Western celebrations were so much about the individual and detracted from the practice of strengthening a relationship with God that the whole practice added to the sense of America as a Godless society that many non-Americans acquaintances perceived the U.S. to be. “Why are the people here so interested in theirselves?” asked Fatima. “Even the religious people in here are celebrate holidays that you told me are Catholic, Druid, Pagan. This is not their God and still they buy decoratings that shops tell them to buy.” Sara agreed that this was “a confusion” to her, and even though she had lived here for 4 years, she thought that “Christmas is not about the prophet Essa (Jesus), it is about the money. This I think is the real American God, the money.” Hawa wrote from the KSA that “the American Dream is the money, money, money, money, money. In my country it is family, family, family, family, family.”

Rabab with the Holy Family in her living room was mystified about why God was in a statue form. Giving Jesus a face was not something that she understood, as the representation of God or the prophets was forbidden and considered blasphemous in Islam. She felt that this detracted from his “place is God. That is not respect to make him like man.” During the time she spent in the U.S., she adhered to her own interpretation of
the family statue being merely a representation of a happy family, not the Son of God because that was also blasphemous.

Although it was important to recognize that the vision of Islam described here was that of only four women, who were all privileged by the fact that they received the KAAAS, they were also further removed from the Bedouin (desert tribal) society than many newly urbanized families and counted themselves better educated and modernized. Interactions over the years with other Muslim students and non-students had indicated the importance that family ties, devotion to the tenets of the faith, and the feeling of kinship that exists amongst the أمة Ummah (the community of believers) as self-sustaining and supportive. The feeling of kinship seemed to elicit a feeling of confidence and self-assurance in the midst of prejudice and religious intolerance. The participants indicated that they did not feel isolated from their roots despite the physical distance at which they lived from their own local societies, families, and culture. Their faith sustained them where I thought to find isolation and fear.

The unchanging and unchanged devotion of the participants undermined the use of intersectionality or social identity theory because this facet of identity was non-negotiable. Their devotion to their faith was clearly a part of their pre-U.S. identity and was also tied closer to and was complementary to the basis of Islamic feminism, which acknowledged the fundamental nature of Islam in the participants’ daily life. Islam was the lens that clearly focused all their actions, decisions, and personal, religious and family relationships. Distance has not dimmed the ties that Islam creates in their lives in the U.S., nor the ties they strive to maintain with their families and friends in the KSA. Also,
as a final comment the participants and I discussed the *New York Times* article *Pieces of the Quran* (Bilefsky, 2015, A1) which revealed the discovery of a parchment that may date from the time of the prophet Mohammed as proof positive of the truthfulness of the foundations of Islam. The participants were puzzled by my questions about this being a necessary proof, they reassured me that they did not need any proof for the veracity of their beliefs. They did not question their religious ideals.

**Education**

All of the participants commented on the power of education in their lives, most specifically on the power of learning English and the confidence and advantages that their growing facility with using and understanding English as a working L2 had brought them. What had not been a conscious effect, though, was the reconstruction of their identities and the development of new roles that this education had opened to them. They forged links with surrounding environments, conquered demanding schedules, and negotiated new successful relationships. Their identities and roles were continuing to develop in unanticipated ways. These ways were profoundly contradictory to those of their peers at home and were individually divergent within their local community, as Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) and Erikson’s (1968) identity theories indicated.

**Education and Confidence**

In some measure, Rabab felt that her new self had merely liberated the self that was always there. “I have education to give me the strong feeling that I always have before I went to U.S. This change has mean that I have the more confidence to do what I
am want to do.” However, she also knew that there were many versions of what she could be. She said she would “take the new and old and make a new old me. I am educate woman.” Rabab’s mother was still supportive and was happy to have her home. “She is happy very much and likes me all ways.” Even though she had returned to the KSA, she was still very much aware of the change in self-identity and was using it in her developing identity.

**Education for the University Community**

When they were my students, Fatima and Yusuf had contributed to a diversity assignment based on the Youtube video illustrating Kareem Salama’s *In a Land Called Paradise*, where American Muslim participants held placards bearing messages about their hopes and dreams. Fatima and Yusuf held a placard in their class video declaring, “I love my husband, I love my wife” with arrows pointing from each to the other. Fatima reminded me of that class activity and the roles they had accepted as new international students, second language speakers, and religious minorities representing their culture without apology, as educated people. They had felt overwhelmed, she told me, as they thought out this role in their class. However, the confidence they found in expressing themselves so publicly bore its own reward, and Yusuf ultimately felt he could be successful when his wife left ZSU for her new studies. They recognized that their experiences as Saudis was an education in itself, and that they had things to say to the wider community. The intersections they recognized in this experience were obvious, but they employed their understanding of a possibly difficult situation as a way to resist the daily bias they encountered at ZSU.
Nawa knew that she would educate her students in a way that was fundamentally different from her own schooling in the KSA. She wanted to ensure a good sense of social justice and self-confidence in her girls that would create ripples of good influences and tolerance. Rabab has already seen the results of her education in her job search, her mother’s great respect for this educated daughter, and in her family’s response to the recent killing of a sister-in-law in Qatif (Eastern KSA). The bereaved brother-in-law, Essa, was devastated, but Rabab reported that although he was so devastated he was not vengeful, and that one of the things he had spent many hours reflecting on his now extinguished hopes that she would come to ZSU to learn English and better her education.

**Education and Medicine**

As a result of their experiences here Sara and Fawaz made conscious choices to present a clear self-identity development. These choices were clearly linked to the Islamic feminist ideals of equality for men and women. Sara said that she and Fawaz had talked about returning home as recognizably more educated about the world with a clear plan about how the things they have learned will better their society. Sara told me of his worry about a couple they knew who were studying medicine and mixing traditional Saudi Bedu and Western medicine. She said Fawaz feels that this couple are not showing that they have become more educated; but “they are backward to do this.” Sara firmly believed in older traditions and powers like *jinns*, but she was not willing to ignore the modern medicine available to her family in the U.S. She said that “this is where the education is show that we have become more educate. We will be the obvious ones with
the experience in the U.S. and we will be more respect for the time we have been here.” She wanted to be an influence in the process of improving Saudias’ health and raising awareness of how the medical knowledge she learned in the U.S. could improve the health of women she knew.

Fatima felt that her experiences at an American university with a firm scientific grounding devoid of superstition, and her own experiences of using the health care system as a mother and patient were formal and socially educative experiences that would pay dividends in her native land for herself, her practice as a dispensing pharmacist and her patients. Nawa knew that she would educate her students in a way that was fundamentally different from her own schooling in the KSA. She wanted to ensure a good sense of social justice and self-confidence in her girls that would create ripples of good influences and tolerance. Rabab has already seen the results of her education in her job search, her mother’s great respect for this educated daughter, and in her family’s response to the recent killing of a sister-in-law in Qatif (Eastern KSA). The bereaved brother-in-law, Essa, was devastated, but Rabab reported that although he was so devastated he was not vengeful, and that one of the things he had spent many hours reflecting on was the loss that she was to him in his hopes that she would come to ZSU to learn English and better her education.

Both Fatima and Sara spoke about their realization of how their linguistic development and education were linked and how they influenced the process of having their children in the U.S. They felt that it was a fundamentally different experience from birthing in the KSA, and that through their access to education about pregnancy and birth
they were better informed about what to expect. They underwent self- and social identity changes in this instance. This experience was fundamentally different from all their expectations, but taking into consideration Islamic feminist attitudes to provide equal opportunities to all, it underscored their decisions and actions as perfectly congruent.

Both felt that she was introduced to a healthier attitude to diet and exercise during pregnancy than existed in the KSA, if only because their health care providers expected them to be educated. Due to this attitude to health education by all concerned, they felt that the fears and traditions of their past experiences with doctors and medicine had been rejected, opening a new field of vision of themselves as participants in birthing, and the educated attitudes to a natural daily process. Sara also felt that her experience was positive because it had involved conscious decisions. In one aspect, Sara thought that the absence of a Muslim health practitioner at Malik’s birth would be a deficiency. However, she said, “I am a more confidence wife and as mother I think to my sisters are. Because I have take control of Malik’s birth and I have to make the health care for us all.” The role of self-sufficient health care consumer was one that she felt was more fraught with danger than Fatima did, yet felt she was well equipped for after her experiences here because of her access to the system, which was a clear and positive shift in identity. Sara felt she was more aware of the physical and spiritual nature of the process, a revelation in and of itself. Although Fatima is a pharmacist by training, she was not prepared for the enormity of delivering a child. Both couples agreed that their preparedness for this seminal experience was simplified by being able to refer to printed and online materials, and the sense of respect and equality towards them from their doctors.
**Education and Birth**

Both Fatima and Sara spoke about their realization of how their linguistic development and education were linked and how they influenced the process of having their children in the U.S. They felt that it was a fundamentally different experience from birthing in the KSA, and that through their access to education about pregnancy and birth they were better informed about what to expect. They underwent self- and social identity changes in this instance. This experience was fundamentally different from all their expectations, but taking into consideration Islamic feminist attitudes to provide equal opportunities to all, it underscored their decisions and actions as perfectly congruent.

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**Family**

The dynamics of family life were different in the U.S. for these participants. Although their husbands continued to gather in male groups, while they gathered in female groups, there were different expectations placed on the husbands because as both spouses were students their lives were profoundly different from those they led in the KSA.

**Physical Distance from Family**

Without the physical presence of her female relatives, Sara and Fawad were able to have a more intimate experience of bringing their son into the world, which they felt created a deeper bond, and was a source of independence and self-confidence for Sara. She felt that Fawad’s care and intense sense of responsibility for all of Malik’s needs was a result of being present at the birth, being the birth coach, and being the first to hold his son. While this event was bonding and nurturing for the couple, it was a social and cultural departure, and because the identities they adopted in this instance would not hold social currency or advantage in their social circles in the KSA, Sara was not sure if Fawaz would be willing to reprise this role if their next child was born in the KSA.
In reference to the changes she saw in Fawaz, Sara said he was more confident in their relationship, and he was trying to adopt a more connected role as husband than she saw in other couples’ relationships. The idea of growing confidence was a thread that ran through all of the discussions. Fawaz often made comparisons between themselves and other couples and young families. The three of us had more than one conversation about his comparisons and his worries that he and Sara were not “more better and more confidence to be parents” than other families they knew.

Rabab felt that she and Hussein moved smoothly back into the family. She bonded closely with Hajr, and the fact that Hajr is American-born had not made bonding with her any harder than Rabab would expect of a daughter born in the KSA for Rabab or her family. Rabab’s mother assumed the day-time care of Hajr, and Rabab was free to work long days if she needed to.

**Educational Distance from Family**

Hussein did not look for a job, they live with his family. They were both happy to be back in the bosom of their family, and they had a spacious and comfortable apartment in the family home. Hussein’s devotion to his diminutive wife was undiminished, and he hoped that they might have a son. Rabab was willing to have another baby, but that would not mean that she would give up her job and there was a sense of educational improvement in Rabab’s mind. “The things I have learn in the U.S. are not usuallys important in Dammam. Some of the culture things are not important but peoples I have at work are respect me because I have this experience there.” She did not feel that she needed the training (education) as much as she had thought she did. “This job not hard. It
easy for the women who work hard.” While she would not trade the opportunity that she had to visit and live in the U.S., she was very happy to be back in the KSA with her family and friends. She had no wish to continue her education at that time; she wanted to “get off with her life at the home.” Although she felt that any competent woman would be able to do her job, she was aware of the personal, educational, and emotional growth she underwent when she sat with her sisters-in-law in the family home, and said that she had a different outlook but did not flout it. Her input seemed to indicate that the change in her identity was not a conscious one because she was not aware of choosing to change.

Both Fatima and Yusuf like the independence that living these first years of their marriage in America had created for them, and they were both happy to have the opportunity to be independent from family and shoulder the responsibility for their own decisions. Fatima said, “We are still feeling the same thing, the love we have grow between us. I hope our marriage will be survive our return home.” They were also aware that facing opposition to their presence and their religious difference provided them with opportunities for growth as a couple. The intersectionality of this experience clearly demonstrated the development of their social and self-identities. In response to a question about how this would affect their relationships with their extended families, Fatima felt that her family would be unfazed, and her sister, Bayan, agreed. Bayan also agreed that her expectation of their family’s comfort may be in part influenced by her own experience here and the adjustments she has also made. However, Mohammed felt his family might not understand all of the paths and choices that they have embraced. These changes might cause an interruption of intersectionality in their relationships with
Mohammed’s family, “but” Fatima said, “they will be better to cope with it.”

**Love Stories and Marriage**

Many women, Fatima and Rabab observed, thought that they would find a love story in their marriages. The romanticized visions of marriage comprised a facet of what Fatima discussed above of women being prepared for a wedding but not a marriage. My observation as an ESL teacher was that some Saudi boys would ask for romantic stories rather than other genres of readers in the reading classes. There was a sense of romance that seemed to go unfulfilled. New husbands were often seen trailing their new wives, the public attitude one of devotion and compliance. However, solutions to disaffected and unhappy wives’ problems derived from innocent expectations of romance were one of the hardest situations Fatima had to give advice on.

**Family Senior**

Fatima was the go-to woman in her family and the ZSU Shi-a community, a duty which brought its own rewards and challenges. The main reward was the accompanying respect. Her sister and her sister’s friends sought her advice on school, raising children, daily responsibilities, and wanted to discuss their “marriage difficults with their husbands” with her. Some of her confidants expressed a desire for a closer and more attentive marriage such as hers. However, on the challenging side, she observed that unhappy wives sought refuge in having children, something she saw as a step backwards to more traditional attitudes. Participants consciously sought changes in situations and behavior to develop a new identity for which there was no social precedent. Fatima said
that in the role of mother, these women found a sense of purpose, of undivided love, and
the opportunity to be the center of someone’s world in a way they had not realized with
their husbands.

She expressed an indication of intersectionality in these marriages, where gender,
lack of education about marriage, and dashed expectations clashed and resulted in a
frustrated oppression from husbands who had no better training to be a husband than a
wife had to fulfill her role. Fatima said that this particular experience was all too common
in the KSA. She was aware of how these frustrations often spilled over into violence and
even a husband’s infidelity in one regrettable case.

**Family Sheikha**

Sara found that as she was now a senior Sunni Muslima in the local community
the role of “Sheikha” (advisor) devolved to her. Although she would rather not add these
responsibilities to those she already shouldered, she felt that the role had to be fulfilled
and it was her turn. Both Fatima and Sara recognized that these experiences were an
indication of a growing self-confidence and a social gain in their microcosmic world at
ZSU. Nawa saw her self-confidence and self-identity develop in her workplace and
amongst the girls in her tribe, although little advice was sought because the girls were
actively discouraged from studying beyond high school. Rabab said that both she and
Haya were often consulted about school choices and were confident in their knowledge
and themselves. They achieved a greater place of respect in their family. As they each
reflected on their achievements as graduates, or near graduates, growing self-confidence
in many areas in their communities was a thread running through each of their stories.
Changes

We all experienced identity changes as a result of locating to the US. However, the participants faced a greater challenge than I did as they were second or third language learners. At the time of writing, Rabab and Nawa, who were back in the KSA, articulated the identity changes they had undergone and roles they had adopted in the U.S. They faced with confidence the choices they had to make to return to their pre-U.S. roles to facilitate reintegration into their families, culture, and social milieu, and try to forge new paths without surrendering the new roles and their self-recognition as new women. They also had to face an inverse culture shock, similar to what they experienced when they began their studies in the U.S. In their new lives in the KSA, there was much to gain in the workplace, but much to lose in the family and society, so they were occasionally unsure of how to proceed for safety, family reputation, social acceptance, and in securing their futures in the workplace.

Identity Changes

Nawa felt that she was entering into yet another new role for herself, but this would also affect the men she would be working for and was anxiety-laden for both her and them. In this situation there was no foundation to work from, nor were there precedents for anyone to refer to. This voyage into the unknown was fraught with many possible unanticipated dangers that at times she felt overwhelmed. Her unexpected intersectionality was apparent in the fact that she was facing a new role in creating her own home immediately after leaving the U.S., she was also grappling with a new sexual
identity as a wife, and despite her best efforts was feeling unprepared for the panoramas unfolding in her life. She felt that her husband’s new roles and transitions to work, marriage, and society had been largely seamless and less challenging. She acknowledged that they were both living away from their families, so these roles were new to both of them; however, the expectations of their families and of marriage were difficult to negotiate and at times are oppressive.

Nawa had not been idle as she faced these new roles and scenarios. She was trying her best to develop positive attitudes. She said she had a “new identity mechanics” (mechanism) that was proving to be a source of confidence. She made lists and thought about each area of her life separately in order to set goals. “I can reach the goal I have think about it and made plan for it,” which in itself could be an exhausting and daunting task. She recognized, that she had successfully employed these strategies to develop her self- and social-identities in some smaller measure when she came to the U.S. and had unconsciously returned to them. She said that she knew that she was well-qualified, if not over-qualified, for her new job, and that she would be able to master the situations it presented in time. She now saw the same successes and some additional failures and was happy with the positive results. Her new-found confidence was a whole new role in itself. However, as she was now cognizant of her strategies, she felt that she would be able to overcome anything that her new situations threw at her.

**Changes in Spaces**

Sara was able to step outside of her culturally expected role of a Saudia in the company of strangers, and created a private space, a hybrid world between the worlds of
“us” and “them.” Here she was alone, confident of moving between her worlds as she had need. Far from being a limbo-like place, she was able to use any of the tools, cultural practices, languages, and contexts of either of the other two worlds to her own advantage and this created an individual resource, which she could call upon at any time. The boundaries of this space were permeable allowing her to cross back and forth at will. Tajfel and Turner’s, and Erikson’s identity theories, come close to this space, but rather than only being a place of refuge, the identity constructed here through comparisons, negative and positive, was a tool for purposeful action. The personal spaces Sara, Fatima and I created were places of reflection and protection.

In my own space I could negotiate intimidating unexpected cultural challenges, pursuing a transformation constructed to deal with perplexing and possibly dangerous challenges to my understanding of the worlds I inhabit. Fatima found her space easiest to access on her daily one-hour drive between home and school, where she was free from any responsibility to family or school and could spend time reflecting on situations she had encountered during her days at school. Sara, who most often accessed her private internal space at home, would do so when Fawaz was out on the balcony, or out of the house entirely. All three of us retreated to access a quiet time when times of stress threatened to destroy or overwhelm our steadfastness.

**Empowerment**

Empowerment was an important thread that wove itself throughout the study, all the other themes falling beneath its umbrella. Confidence in themselves, their abilities,
and their futures imbued the participants with a sense of their own potential that they had not recognized before located to the U.S.

**The Empowerment of English**

Their developing mastery of English helped the participants to recognize their new roles and abilities. Mentowski wrote that “language cannot be separated from culture, so a change in language can both signal and prompt a change in culture” (quoted in Al-Salem, 2005, 26). Recognition of the possibilities of the new roles the participants adopted were part of the empowering social identities that they created through learning vocabulary in English with which they not familiar in Arabic, and the structure of English, as opposed to the structure of Arabic.

As these participants began their studies outside of the ESL department, their self-confidence in their ability to use English in all their classes was the root of their realization that they could actually complete their studies, and understand and employ the resulting knowledge. In the KSA, where the apotheosis of the traditional pedagogical practice, to teach by rote, is illustrated by becoming *Hafiz*, حافظ, (a person who can recite the entire Qur’an), there was no requirement for, or expectation of, critical thinking. This process of critical thinking was important in the participants’ ESL training and was a major goal of the ESL department. The ability to speak English was also something that opened new doors for the participants as they began to be confident in negotiating educational, social and personal situations without help. This ability also required them to create new selves, new identities, as they entered new academic arenas each semester. Learning English was accompanied by a new set of socio-cultural expectations that often
appeared to be a well-kept secret to the newcomer. The details of this secret society also contained different power relations, boundaries, and opportunities that seemed to exclude the newcomer. Increasing mastery of English unlocked some of the secrets of the host society, but it also distanced them from parts of their own society.

As the participants’ English language skills developed to express their new relationships, and they learned concepts and vocabulary in English they had not yet learned in Arabic. There was a possibility that their Arabic could fossilize and translation into Arabic become an arduous, and, at times, impossible task. The disconnect from Arabic could become cemented and magnify the already great distance from the native culture as English presented possibilities to engage in a new social order, a new way to describe the new self, and an emerging consciousness of self. The “ideologies of language and gender, inherently ingrained in language, provide new gendered discursive practices and understandings of gender identities to speakers of a new language” (Skapoulli, 2004). The participants made specific decisions about whether to adopt the ideologies they were exposed to in the course of their linguistic development. Specific and conscious development of the social and self-identities were reflected in efforts to maintain and develop Arabic at the same pace as English. This was a decision that demanded conscious commitment and dedication. One of the things the participants learned early was to translate back to Arabic any new words that we discussed to help ameliorate any challenges to their mastery of English.

Empowered by English English

The notion that the immigrant or L2 speaker wanted to learn “unaccented”
English (English that fits in with the local dialect or accent) so that they could “pass” as native speakers (Skapoulli, 2004, p. 246, quoting Piller, 2002) was discussed as part of the development of hybrid identities. However, none of the participants were seeking to pass as Americans in the context of the community at ZSU, their local Muslim community, or the larger local neighborhood communities. Skapoulli wrote that “Passing is always implicitly associated with the notion of authenticity and the subsequent assumption that certain linguistic features are emblematic to particular social, ethnic or gender groups.”

Fatima and Sara both expressed concerns over the new roles and possibilities that learning English had presented. They were both uneasy with the ways they felt transformed by the new knowledge and world view they were presented with. Sara broached the subject herself with some dismay. When we focused on the advantages and disadvantages of learning English as an intrinsic and fundamental part of a change in world-view, both participants felt that there was more to gain than lose in using English as a resource, and expressed their desires to continue to master English as much as possible before they returned home. They specifically sought out every opportunity to refine their skills including asking for constant correction of word choices, sentence structure, and accent.

The participants had no goal of passing as Americans in their present situations, nor in the KSA. The advantage of learning English was always oriented towards better social and employment opportunities in the KSA. The two participants who remained in the U.S. at the time of writing, Fatima and Sara, did seek to refine their accents, but they
were not trying to mimic an American accent; they were trying to mimic mine because they were aware that displaying the emblematic sound of British English had greater benefits, a “prototype norm...language produced in authentic contexts by authentic speakers” (Bucholtz, 2003, p. 398, as cited in Skapoulli, 2004). Fatima and Sara did not want to surrender their Saudi identity here, or upon return to the KSA, but they did want to exhibit what Sara described as the more “valued and respected” accent.

There was a sense of confidence and authority in the participants’ voices speaking in English on subjects discussed up to this point. They were aware that the command of English had provided them with social gains because they were here in the U.S. and how that had changed their future lives in the KSA. They able to code switch linguistically, and also between cultures and social class with ease, and they had become important resources in their families and social circles where linguistic and social interpretation were necessary. They were aware of how this skill had given them access to a world-wide circle of business, trade, and industry that was closed to women and men in the KSA. Finally, they were aware that there was a choice of identity and roles yet undiscovered available to them, and they could manipulate the language and culture of the U.S. and possibly marry those products to the language and cultures of the KSA to suit the needs of those new roles beyond the classroom.

The Participant’s Feminism

In our discussions of Islamic Feminism, a result of Nawa’s ideas, the participants saw how it described their experiences academically, but felt that they had little
investment in using it to describe themselves. The participants didn’t knowingly theorize these practices and boundaries, and discussions about Islamic feminism as a practice (Lather, 1991, p. 71, as cited in Creswell, 2012, p. 29) were difficult to express, as the vocabulary, and practice of this kind of self-examination were new to the participants.

There was a limit to what the participants would tolerate as representations of themselves, a set of borders that delineated their expected and accepted behavior. These borders were self-imposed and rooted in Islam, the religion they defended and found comforting. There were boundaries for different areas of their lives: Muslima social circles, inside and outside the classroom on campus, and in other public spaces. Some of the self-imposed boundaries I observed in the classroom; others were the subjects of the participants’ stories. In all of the examples there were attempts to redraw, recreate, or negotiate boundaries from their own cultural needs and to create safety, comfort, and ease in new cultural contexts, with Islam as a foundation and guide. Discussions of how to address the world always returned to the safety, comfort, and the unchanging nature of Islam. The participants agreed that Islam had all the answers and that there was no new situation the world could present that could not be answered from the moral and ethical guidelines they found in the Qur’an, Hadith, or Sharia.

**Empowerment as a Process**

In reviewing the theories of culture as a process for conscious self-development, Cooper and Denner (1998) argued that the process of viewing oneself in relation to how others view one can help the individual to address the milestones and major obstacles to a co-existence and understanding of self. Within the evolving cultural contexts, the
participants were constructing, the complex process of renegotiating and developing existing relationships was an important part of the development of their coping mechanisms and identities. The renegotiation is further complicated by the presence of, and sometimes critical observation by, other Saudias and Saudis in and around the community. Ultimately part of the process was othering, categorizing “them” and “us.” This process of categorizing, in my own experience, was a defensive measure and was based on the personally accepted and expected set of cultural norms or identity. Cultural identity being “a common heritage or set of beliefs, norms, and values....the shared, and largely learned, attributes of a group of people” (Humphrey & Townsend, 2005, p. 1), a set of standards of behavior (Cooper & Denner, 1998). To achieve a sense of security in the new locale, and thus enable success, one clarified self-identification and self-definition within the parameters of one’s own group as a base from which to create successful relationships with the new world. With these parameters established, boundaries could be tested, navigated, negotiated, and established. One of the misunderstandings that arose from this process was assuming that others, them and us, were also aware of why these boundaries existed, and what those boundaries were in the reality of those involved. However, boundaries could blur depending on the state of mind, health, or understanding of any situation that arose, or assumptions that the boundaries were understood and valued by the surrounding community.

**Empowerment in Difference**

Confusion could result from linguistic misunderstandings and ethical and moral standards that varied widely between cultures. Crossing back to previously visited
geographical locations, such as visits home, or to other states for short periods of time, undermined the boundaries set, as the edges blurred or the new boundaries were rendered ineffective or unnecessary in the process of relocation. I found that what I thought were moral and ethical behaviors accepted as norms in the UK were not in the U.S., and those expectations that I carried were occasionally mistaken for aggression, attempts to undermine, harm, or defame. Many of the misinterpretations were based on the perceptions new acquaintances had based on my accent. However, in my case, there was less offense taken because I was White, of Christian background, and had an accent that was mostly valued. For the participants this was not the case (Bresnahan et al., 2002), Fatima said, “My accent is my history, it is a recording of my achievement, my success, and my strong decisions.” Sara added, “My accent it is my inherit. If they are asking me to change my accent they are asking me to change my inherit, my family, my success, my story in America. So it’s your fault, you asked me tell them.” Nawa said that her accent “is part of the history of my community in America. It is a thing to be proud with, and thanks be to God for this.”

Physical differences, such as skin color, or hair texture were unimportant to the participants while they were in the KSA because as Arabs they were part of the ruling majority. People in the KSA with darker skin were the short-term guest workers, or descendants of slaves, who had been absorbed into the Saudi community. “When I came in here I found I have brown skin. People in here think I am a brown woman,” said Rabab. “People are bad attitude to me because they know I am brown.” Sara admitted that she had been aware of the brown skin idea when she first came and that she thought
that, combined with the veil, it was something that frightened people she met for the first
time. She would not attend my English 2010 class if her friend, also a former ESL student
of a similar age, was not going to be there. She felt she needed the safety of numbers that
Tatum (2003) referred to in *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*
Fatima had already discussed her shock at being identified as “other” because she wore a
veil. Nawa felt that because she was too focused on her studies and was shielded by
nontraditional White women (aged 40+) in her classes and rushed home to her father after
classes, she was unaware of the social rejection and micro-aggressions the other women
experienced. However, she was aware of the confusion and unwelcome interest that
wearing her veil under her graduation cap caused when she graduated.

Cooper and Denner (1998) discussed the values that new participants moving into
an existing culture can discover, bring, or adopt and adapt. These various inputs might be
from disparate sources within the culture and as a result the participants could attach
themselves, be introduced, or absorbed into many different groups simultaneously. Some
of these groups might have common values, which the participants employed in many
other groups and then absorbed into their own developing culture. Some of these features
were consciously evaluated and adopted or rejected based on those value judgments.
Sartorial choices were an obvious decision that was not always made consciously, but did
facilitate interaction with the very conservative local dominant religion around ZSU,
which proudly promoted its ‘dress standards’. Another common experience for both
populations was based on the historical othering the host population endured when they
settled the state that has transmogrified into a jealously held and celebrated difference
within the larger U.S. population. Some of the celebrated difference of being Muslim and Arab in the U.S. for the participants has proved to be a sustaining feature of life in the diaspora for the participants, something that unites an otherwise disparate sectarian Saudi population.

Something that all the participants had to deal with was the expectation of the U.S. student population that they could represent the entire Muslim community, or the entire Saudi population at home and abroad. The expectation appeared to be that Muslim identity could be described as a one-dimensional image, what seemed to be some Western interpretation of how being one of the faithful could describe the identity of a host as a singular body. The participants felt that generally being represented by Islamic or even Saudi feminism was irrelevant to their lives and an over-generalization, one that did not allow room for individuality or multiple identities, as Creswell (2012), Errazzouki (2012), and Samiah (2012) also argued.

**Empowerment in Action**

The contributions that the participants brought to the campus culture based on student research was their awareness of Americans in the U.S. and as actors on an international and national stage. Some of their contributions proved difficult for them to make, based on their sense of their linguistic development and ability, the value of their own interpretations of the academic canon, and the novel idea of presenting to their classes.

Hala, Rabab’s sister-in-law, was part of a group of students who presented their own research on Elie Wiesel’s autobiography *Night* to a Utah Humanities Council
Venture class. One of the women attending the Venture class, an extreme introvert who had to be accompanied to class by a social worker, said that when she saw “That they could do this in front of a bunch of strangers, I knew that I could overcome my anxiety at speaking in class and in front of other people” (email to the author, 6 May 2012). At the graduation ceremony for the Venture class, this woman referred to the ESL students as her heroes for what she considered a “Gigantic step to help us understand the book better” (email to the author, 6 May 2012). Including Muslimas in presentations and as group-leaders in classwork will add not only an international flavor to any class, but will reassure them that they are valuable in the classroom, as academic resources, and as students with a wider world to share. They will also be valuable examples of religious diversity in a non-threatening manner.

In reflection of their time as students engaged in the ESL Conversation Partnership initiative, and because they created videos to illustrate their learning about diversity, intolerance, and stereotyping, Sara and Rabab created positive cross-cultural connections and greater international and intra-religious understanding. Sara said, “I learned that these people are not as harmful as I thought they would be, and my communication with her was like a new world of understanding” (email to the author, 20 Apr. 2013). Friendships and support groups that developed between the participants and American students in classes outside the ESL department instigated a change in the host population that was positive for both populations. A greater understanding and “awareness of world-wide citizenship” (email to the author, 25 Apr. 2014) were much lauded benefits to the White American Christian population in ZSU. Cooper and Denner
(1998) argued that when culture is recognized as a force in creating an individual, and in being developed as a determining force by that individual in another’s lived culture, there necessarily followed an exchange of information and trappings that affected the emotional and cognitive functions of all concerned as contributors to cultural development. Inclusion of international students who are disciples of a non-Chrsitian religion can offer greater understanding of the modern world for those American students who have no experience of the wider world. Including diversity from first-hand participants is inestimable.

Adopting the trappings and information of the culture that was being transformed and adapted to fit the needs and existence of the new individual, reinforced the contributions and influences of the individual into the new culture. Inside the classroom the participants adopted new and sometimes challenging information and ideas from the host population to their own classroom needs and created understanding for themselves. Oftentimes, they added questions that many of the native population had not imagined. However, while they adopted and adapted inside the classroom, they were unable to adopt or adapt as freely or deeply outside the classroom due to personal, cultural, or family norms and expectations. In my English 2010 class, Sara wanted to share her feelings about Ramadan with the rest of the class during a discussion of holy days; however, she held back her own beliefs because at the time she felt too much of an outsider and was not yet fully comfortable with her own expertise in presentations or English in this instance. Later in the semester during her assigned presentation, she gave herself permission to share her experience of that first instance and was well received by
the rest of the class, who realized for the first time that she was a Muslima. The response of the class in this instance was positive and she became a minor celebrity for the rest of the semester. She felt “I was like the hero for the first times.”

**Veiling**

Informed practice was something that was common to each of the participants regarding veiling and wearing hijab. This most obvious manifestation of adherence to Islam, veiling, is something that was observed at ZSU as the basis of distrust of Muslimas, engendering fear of the veiled Muslima, a reflection of national and worldwide attitudes (Alberts, 2010). This first of many intersections was a suitable place to begin the discussion of this widely-held perception of veiling. In and of itself intersectionality was not an explanatory theory and did not provide philosophies about why oppressions existed; it merely tried to describe nuanced experiences of subjects that resulted from the blending of diverse structures of oppression, and how they played out in our lives (Ritzer, 2006). It was here in the midst of the participants’ daily experience of prejudice in response to practicing hijab that the examination of situated oppressions and resistances underlined the intersection of complex systems of inequality.

Erikson (1968) wrote about identity formation being a process that was socially based through interactions with others in the host society causing growth or decay. The interaction and intersection of class, education, culture and tradition, the self, the outward evidence of being a hijabi (a woman who wears hijab, or a veil), linguistic ability, self-esteem, and their present and possible gender roles combined to create new identities. As
the participants negotiated new situations, they drew upon these many facets, re-evaluated themselves, and experimented with possible ways to be a successful self. In their pursuit of a socially acceptable self that straddled two worlds, a Muslim one and a U.S. one, specific decisions were made about which world was worth situating themselves into. The decision was guided in part by traditions, religion, and their native culture, but in the conflict that arose in non-Muslim contexts, there was little to no advantage to be gained. Based on my own experience as an immigrant, I believed that much of the decision-making could be subconscious. However, there were also times when the participants made specific choices in attempts to create self-confidence to address new roles and situations.

Cooper and Denner (1998) indicated that values of various groups in which we are invested will become part of our emotional, social, and cognitive operations as we seek to be accepted and function within those groups. As the environment developed and/or changed, identities also developed and/or changed to accommodate positive, successful identities, which led to the use of multiple identities (Sanchez et al., 2012). For the two participants still in the U.S., the intersection of U.S. social expectations combined with their own ethnicity and gender, as represented by their veils, created intersecting spaces of disadvantage, prejudice, and discrimination from many spaces in the campus and local communities.

**Veiling as an Intersection**

The greatest of intersections resulted from the participants locating to the U.S. where they learnt that their sense of self-respect derived from their decision to be modest
did not have any social currency, any value in the host community. The subsequent introspection of long-held and respected beliefs about their religion, their families, their society, and themselves was a fundamental part of this intersection. The purpose of the veil for all the participants was to remove themselves from the gaze of the curious, to be private (Almomen, personal communication, January 14, 2014; Tolaymat & Moradi, 2011). Various comments the participants shared indicated that they are fully aware of the effect that they had on the host population. “We have power, we can make people afraid because we wear the veil” (Almomen, personal communication, January 14, 2014). One of the participants related a classroom episode where an instructor had ridiculed Islamic beliefs, and another where a white instructor had spent time focused on the difference between another Saudi student’s skin color, versus her own. Yet another scenario had involved a tenured professor telling a Muslima to remove her veil, which he identified as a distraction. These actions in the classrooms of a university indicated to the participants and me that not only were Muslim women’s voices not solicited in discussions centering on them, but also media coverage focused on the “binaries of us and them...strengthening the distance between the Orientalist view of the veil as oppressive and the Islamist” (p. 472 ). Locating to the US had banished the participants to the outside edge of society, where they were in large measure, according to Deveraux (as cited in Sollors, 1995) recognised as “somehow nonhuman.” It was not just one facet of their differences that located them thus, rather it was due to the misunderstood differences they represent as Hijabis, Mulsimas, and ethnic and linguistic minorities to the host population.
The Intersection of Veiling and Western Masks

Both Sara and Fatima identified the Western obsession with them as women in veils as a contradiction, especially because their husbands were largely ignored because they were not so easily identified as Muslim. Fatima added that “this contradiction is this, and if we wear veil and hide our hair why is dangerous to other people in the mall or street.” Part of Fatima’s confusion stemmed from her desire wear a veil to be private and unobtrusive, yet which drew attention. She felt that the “American” obsession with wearing makeup as an obtrusive method of attracting attention was fundamentally different from her decision to protect her reputation by wearing hijab, and that this was the crux of her confusion. One facet of wearing hijab in Fatima’s mind was that men who speak to her were not attracted to her sexually, and then were able to hear what she is saying because they were not distracted by physical responses. Sara agreed wholeheartedly, “Women wearing makeup are not recognize because they do not show their true face. Makeup hides the real person and show us the doll. I don’t want to be a doll.” The mention of dolls gave rise to a further about the unrealistic manifestations of women in the shape of plastic surgery that the participants heard about. Sara said The intersection of women represented by an unrealistic, plastic, caricature such as the American Barbie doll, which went unquestioned and even impersonated at times, was mystifying to Fatima and Sara. The purposeful mimicking this doll-like appearance with surgery seemed degrading to them, removing all sense of intelligence and social acceptability, and reduced the women who adopt these “distorteds (distortions)” to objects not people.
Veiling, a Valuable Identity Marker

The self- and social identities that the participants developed also generated spaces that they needed to negotiate (Olesen, 2011, as cited in Creswell, 2012, p. 29), some of which negotiations were unconscious, while others were conscious. There was no advantage to abandoning the veil, and no social capital in the U.S. that could replace the self-identity of being a good Muslim woman with social standing within the Muslim community at ZSU, or at home in the KSA, therefore the participants found value and self-esteem by remaining in their own group. The social and self-identity of the participants in relation to dress had no positive comparisons for the Western idea of fashion, even in private. The jealously guarded idea of freedom of expression was a foreign concept to the participants, and so they saw no freedom of expression in Western fashion, merely slavish imitation. Therefore the cultural practice of veiling and wearing clothes that conceal their bodies was not worth surrendering. The participants see only, as Sara described, a “dangerous thing to be wearing, or not wearing, it is only dangerous to safety to do this.”

Hijab Providing Protection

Reflecting on their own culture, the participants felt that they were in a more favorable group by adhering to hijab (modest dress standards) and having the respect of their own community. The comparative group on campus and in the local community for these dress standards were, Fatima said, “professors and the Mormon Christians. The professors are not know what to do with us—we are not like the students, but not like the professors, but more like the professors.” As both of these groups, academics and
Mormons, were powerful groups, this was a safe and favorable choice.

Vygotsky (1962) wrote that consciousness, and by extension identity, had social roots, and that as all human actions were produced within the context of culture, the development of human identity was the result of history, social relationships, the internalization of cultural artifacts—cultural developments (see also Covarrubias & Revilla, as cited in Revilla, 2010; Weinreich & Saunderson, 2003). The powerful groups—professors and Mormons—around the participants provided opportunities to partake of cultural artifacts and developments and provided safe spaces for the negotiation of self at intersections of their lives. These places where commonalities of practice were evident were where the participants’ native culture was shored up and supported, even unwittingly by surrounding groups of power. And for once, they were not at a disadvantage; they were able to negotiate a way between the world of the student population and cross the border into the society of the older, more educated and influential clutch of women. Vygotsky’s claims summarized some of the tools the participants were able to use to create borders of safety while, and after, they negotiated and renegotiated their identities.

By contrast, Rabab and Nawa, who were back in the KSA, were no longer dealing with the same choices, pressures, or disadvantages. They had re-entered a space of normality and resumed their places of respect as hijabis, wives, and for Rabab, her new role as a mother in the bosom of her family. Because their presence often caused unfamiliar reactions in the people around them in the U.S., their safe self-perceptions as respectable women had been challenged on a visceral level. Observing hijab facilitated a
return to safety and the unwinding of a tightly coiled visceral well-spring of fear. Rabab, communicating by email, wrote that she was happy to be back in the KSA where her abaya and veil no longer caused “the people to stare with me.” She was able to leave her home in comfort, without pausing to see who was likely to bother her. She felt that “I am safety because men are not look at me with the sex in their mind.” Nawa, who was recently married wrote that she “was so relaxed now” that she could wear the veil without feeling like she had to “justify my wear it. I feel the respect because I am not physical object for watching.” all the participant’s comments confirm Abu-Lughod’s (2013) discussion that veiling has come to signify a Western desire to stereotype and reduce a complex issue to an emblem of ignorance.

**Westoxification**

Westoxification, or gharbazedegi (Economist, 2003) was a belief that I remembered was popular in post-revolutionary Iran (post-1979) and endorsed by the Ayatollah Khomeini as a resistance to the incursion of Western culture and perceived destruction of Iranian culture. In a religion as ancient as Islam, regardless of sectarian practices, there was a resistance to influences that would dilute a heritage based on what the disciple believed to be the “Word of God.” In the KSA, the advent of technology and access to an unrestricted internet has resulted in a proliferation of places to connect with Western cultures. Westoxification is creating intersections within Saudi society as various strata of the society interact with Western culture, causing disruption in the native culture and the practice of Islam. This process was affecting opportunities for modernization and Islamic Feminism in a religious backlash (Almuhemid, personal
communication, June 21, 2015). However, the participants, who were part of a temporary diaspora, did not feel that their experiences in the U.S. had been toxifying; rather they had been offered opportunities to cement their beliefs and take deliberate steps to safeguard their culture. However, this was a carefully evaluated, deliberate decision.

We discussed the notion of Westoxification, in relation to veiling because one of the areas that appeared to be exhibiting Western influence in the KSA was public dress. Sara saw that a movement towards accepting a return to Western dress might provoke a violent backlash. This divergence might create new intersections for Saudias to negotiate in the KSA, and that idea was troubling. Fatima referred to Yusuf’s story about their interaction with the police over her refusal to wear a niqaab when last in Dammam. Sara said that under King Abdullah (deceased, 23 January 2015), there was some relaxation of the social expectations of Saudi Islam, specifically veiling, and Fatima believed that was not a bad thing. She also said it would be a long time before they would see girls wearing “nearly nothing on the street, no self-respect for their brains, and too much makeup so we cannot see their faces” and that this idea was not worth pursuing. Mostly, Sara and Fatima believed that the right to dress in un-Islamic ways was only going to affect Saudi society negatively, “like a sliding hill” said Sara. Is Westoxification a rising threat to Saudi society? Rabab thought that the “change of the social is making us not be the Saudis anymore. We lose our identities and we don’t know who are we if we listen to the outside speaking.”

The internet is not only a tool of the West or the harbinger of Westoxification. Fatima felt that there were positive changes offered by access to the internet. “Because
we have the internet and we can talk to others and not be see, we can finally have
discussion that is all about what is inside the head and not have the influence of the shape
of the body.” Sara agreed that the internet offered a safer space for discussion and self-
expression. She agreed that “the thoughts are free to express on the internet and we can
say the things we are think.” Nawa pointed out quite rightly and practically that we were
able to conclude the study using Facebook Messenger and email when time differences
created difficulty in immediate communications.

**Conclusion**

This journey together was one of great love and dedication. The participants
shared their lives, precious time after finals, and between classes. They sent emails from
the KSA, we skyped, and I was included in recreational time with their families. Their
significant contributions and generosity have been invaluable. William Shakespeare was
a guide in this study; “It is not in the stars to hold our destiny but in ourselves,” said
Cassius to Brutus. His claim reflected the basis of the social identity theory used in this
study. These discoveries bring me to echo Khan’s (2002) invitation to reconsider our
fixed opinions of the Muslima, who cannot negotiate her identity because it is already set
in stone. I will also appropriate Said’s (1979) description of Islam to describe the
Western perception of Muslimas as “part fiction, part ideological label, part minimal
designation. . . [that] in no way bears a direct correspondence between the [Muslima and
her life] in Western usage and the enormously varied life that goes on within the world of
[Muslimas]” (p. 21). The participants have clearly illustrated through their testimonies
above that the stereotypical Muslima, the oppressed, uneducated, mindless zealot (Earp & Jhally 2001), is a grossly inaccurate claim that should be laid to rest.

The above discussions and interviews have added to the understanding of a sample of Saudia’s challenges and responses, their resilience and considered actions to address daily challenges in a profoundly different society. They have indicated that they were versed in Qur’anic teachings that related to them, and, together with the teachings of their childhood and their study of the Qur’an to answer my questions, they were also empowered by their part in this study, their adventures, successes, and struggles. They knew where to find the most troubling of passages of the Qur’an, the ‘Verses of the Curtain, the declaration of the Prophet Mohammed against female infanticide, and the practices of Sharia law. Their facility with, and dedication to, their religion required the use of Islamic feminism as a basis for interpretation, they grew to understand the idea that they were represented by Saudi Feminism, and contributed to my understanding of it. They have used their school, social, physical and medical experiences to substantiate their successes and are confident that they are acting within their faith.

They were fully cognizant of their culture and the difference between their culture, traditions, and Qur’anic teachings that may be used to establish segregation, and male superiority; such as driving restrictions, wearing niqaab, associationg with male students, and sectarian segregation. The participants were aware of their roles in their families and society, and how they might adapt and apply their U.S. experiences to their lives when they return to the KSA in the areas of education, medicine and seeking jobs. However, their desires to make changes in their own society are not ones they intend to
herald. The legacies they intend to leave are educated critical thoughts for self-improvement within the boundaries of the religion they love and protect. The greatest gift they think to leave is to improve the lives of their sisters, mothers, aunts, and the rising generation of daughters. Rabab, Sara, and Fatima have all decided to raise their children to be respectful of each gender, and to seek out an education for themselves when the time arrives.

These participants did not want to change their religion, to which they all adhered unfailingly. They were dedicated to practicing their own family sectarian version of Islam and were dedicated to passing it on to their present and future children, Fatima wants to replicate her father and mother’s childrearing practices, and Sara has already made her declaration of inter-faith tolerance to her family in the KSA. In the process of deciding what to shed, what to accept, and what to absorb in their negotiations of their identities in their new environments, they lived within the confines and traditions of the Saudi practice of their faith in the U.S., and they understood the protection that those confines provided; continuing the practice of veiling, avoiding too much contact with non-familial men, seeking help from female tutors and instructors. However, they no longer expected to accept those cultural limits on their abilities, physical and educational, as curtailments on their potential to fulfill their dreams. They left, and anticipated leaving the U.S. feeling that change within their society must be by women for women. They did not believe that they would achieve all the possibilities in their own lifetimes, but with the help of the KAAAS, the vision of their fathers, mothers, and teachers, and their own patient chipping away, they would create change.
Salma Yaqoob, a Muslim U.K. politician claimed, “we manage to simultaneously pose a threat to the whole of society and to show how oppressed we are, how much in need of rescue (Yaqoob, 2010, p. 40). Her statement reflects the participants’ awareness of the range of fear they provoked by their mere presence, and how it was expressed, for instance by their peers who did not understand or indicate any willingness to understand their differences. As the participants found themselves inserted into discourses and practices that might reshape their agency and affect their strategies of resistance, their efforts to maintain their normality were increasingly more difficult as Islam was recast in the West as a political ideology. Zine (2000) related how her participants were “not only able to negotiate their religious identities, but to use their identities as a means of resistance to counteract their marginality within secular Eurocentric schools” (p. 296). The participants in this study also unapologetically employed resistance, in their linguistic and social development, and their actions and achievements despite peers’ aggressions and micro-aggressions.

The participants and I all firmly believed that the “home” we had all left behind to come to the U.S. no longer existed and that return would be a difficult path of negotiation, experimentation, great patience and changing expectations on our part and our families’. The dissonance that we all experienced was explained by the social theories of Cooper and Denner (1998) and Tajfel and Turner (1979). The attempts the participants and I all made to find ways to fit in without surrendering culture, traditions, based on lived identities before arriving in the U.S. formed the foundation from which to categorize, cross-check, and build new ways to deal with the world about us. In attempts
to acclimatize, the participants and I stayed much the same in many ways, celebrating religious and national holidays, visiting other Saudias or Brits, visiting home and doggedly pursuing an education. My own feminism at the time the research began was, and continued to be, much closer to the ideals of mutual equality outlined in Islamic and Saudi feminism, as aspired to by the participants, but I lacked their faith in a Qur’anic foundation. The participants sought to employ the theories of Islamic and Saudi Feminism, without knowing of its existence.

The participants were aware of the advantages of returning to the Kingdom with their fluency in English, their degrees, and how those achievements would offer new paths and opportunities. They also anticipated that difficulties awaited them because of living in the U.S. Their lives and understandings of the world differed profoundly from families, peers, future work colleagues, and employers. The people left behind, who had not seen Saudi society from this new vantage point, had been unrelentingly immersed in generations of religious, sectarian, social, and traditional attitudes that had served them well, but might possibly change with the reintegration of the participants. Sara’s uncle embodied the fear that the families at home might feel, even if they had not realized it yet, or expressed it to the participants.

The above testimonies share an insight into a complicated and fascinating world rich in tradition, heritage, and culture, rewarding to the curious mind. However, it was undoubtedly the duty of the curious mind to divest itself of the traditions, expectations, and blind-sight that obstruct a fair evaluation of difference. My belief that difference was only difference, not something threatening, was affirmed by the participants’ testimonies.
It would not be fair to claim that the careful pace the participants employed to address change was something that was learnt in the U.S. It was something that was present throughout the study and was a marker of their personal cultural behaviors before the study began. I believed that the Kingdom would gain from their perseverance, aptitude, faithfulness, and hard work, laying bare the misconception that progressive politics do not appear possible within the category Muslima.

Recommendations

At the time of writing, the November 13, 2015 posts and outrages about the attacks on Paris, France by ISIS were flooding social media. Posts ranged from anger and hate messages towards Muslims of any hue, to encouragement, support and tolerance for non-militant Muslims. Local messages of hate and fear at the possible arrival of Middle Eastern refugees and rejection of their desperate need on a human level, were at best disappointing. While the mob identity of public anger seemed senseless, posts by supporters of the victims of ISIS violence against Syrians and other Mediterranean populations, made a much smaller and quieter impression, if they made any at all. One of my participant’s family was reeling from the death of a 22 year-old sister-in-law during a terrorist attack a Mosque in Qatif on عاشوراء Ashura, the day of the martyrdom of Husayn bin Ali, the Prophet Mohammed’s Grandson. Her death (A. Alabbad, personal communication, October 22, 2015), and the deaths of thousands of other Muslims in the Middle East this year went unremarked outside of the Arab world.

Against this backdrop I wrote that these outrages, and my experiences as an ESL teacher and ESL department chair have illustrated to me the need for further education of
university faculty and staff in an unbiased and accurate understanding of the Middle East, its population, and diverse religious make-up, which according to Dr. Jack Shaheen (Earp & Jhally, 2001) includes 20,000,000+ million Christians. All of this is essential information, as is ensuring that discussions in the classroom do not in any way hold Arab students responsible for world-wide events, or terrorist attacks.

The university should invest in the creation of a task force to hold high level discussions with administration, students and other stakeholders that does not start with the assumption that everything is o.k., but that any obstructions to providing equity can be overcome. Any at-risk populations need to feel valued and be provided with space to develop a sense of belonging, and can connect through the Diversity and inclusive programs on campus to overcome the sense of isolation that occurs for a wide variety of reasons. Annual series of taboo talks, diversity center presentations, round table discussions where Muslimas can talk about their own experiences, present their own interpretation of their religion, can help them to feel valued. Acknowledging that the Muslim, and other international, population are experts on their own experiences would be a step towards inclusivity, and would provide deep and meaningful resources to address the needs of the population.

In order to examine some of the larger problems posed by cross-cultural conflict, and to apply lessons in social justice across the campus, a distinct program of education about the university international student population should be required for all university employees. Faculty and staff professional development focusing on Middle Eastern cultures should be made available, possibly mandatory. Targeted behavioral guidelines
for the classroom should be adopted. Materials should include a thoroughly researched and peer reviewed bibliography, a self-check list, and a relevant details about the range of students’ cultural expectations of schooling, teaching and learning. To provide for the Middle Eastern population and to develop a campus that is attractive to international students and recruiters, services should include an ESL department with a culturally sensitive teaching faculty, a specific mentoring and tutoring program, ESL dedicated tutors in a writing support center, and the inclusion of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classes for ESL students. The White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) population on the American university student population deserves to have exposure to cultures beyond their own. The inclusion of international students, especially those from profoundly different religious and ethnic backgrounds are a benefit that is easy to provide. The ZSU ESL department is involved in a number of initiatives that have successfully exchanged perspectives on other cultures and ethnicities, such as conversation partnerships with English L1 speakers as a service learning opportunity, interaction with Frist Year Experience (FYE) classes to introduce ethnically diverse populations in the student body to American students, and presentations on common literature studied in the ZSU Venture program and the ESL department. These opportunities are simple, but effective, and are easy to undertake.

University curriculum assessment and approval processes can ensure the unbiased, complete, and accurate representation of Muslims in university and student senate reviews. University-wide diversity requirements can be expanded to include validation of multicultural courses and activities, including courses which refer to the
advent of Islam, Islamic empires, social movements, and literature by and about Muslimas, ensuring the wide representation of Muslima views, achievements and experiences in place of the negative stereotype of oppressed, ignorant and uneducated women in black bundling. An International Education Week can be adopted into the university calendar to apprise all students of the diversity of the student population where Muslims, can be given equal respect and opportunity to present themselves, their cultures and their religion in a favorable light.

Widespread ignorance of legally protected expectations of religious or national minorities, such as Eid-al-Fitr, Tet, Yom Kippur can cause friction between Minority students, and students and instructors. The Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Officer should be provided with the resources to update faculty and staff on an annual or biannual basis. She should also offer a mandatory session at new faculty retreats. During Ramadan, faculty should be aware that they may have unreal expectations of students who are fasting from sun-up to sun-down and attend school in a state of mental and physical exhaustion. Provision of study areas free of food, and the smell of food, should be made for students who are fasting (Muslims are not the only disciples to fast on a regular basis). The provision of a quiet space for uninterrupted prayers and reflection free of any religious symbols reflects a university’s commitment to religious tolerance and freedom.

ZSU has a short history of politically active Muslimas, and boasted the recent tenure of both a Saudia, and a Syrian male as international student senators over a period of 3 years. The Muslim Student Association (MSA) also boasted the tenure of a
Jordanian-American Muslima as president (she recently qualified as a medical doctor). Beyond students’ self-selecting and voluntary candidacy and service, universities can more actively invite Muslima’s comments and student body participation. The university may need to be more intentional and take deliberate measures to open a dialog with Muslimas, and listen to what they offer as realistic needs rather than perceived ones. Providing services staffed by women will provide more targeted support service for Muslimas, who may feel unable, after a lifetime of gender segregation, to seek the services of male tutors or advisors. Saudi clubs and Muslim Student Associations (MSA) could provide resources for an independent female section, encouraging more participation and developing a sense of belonging. However, given the population, merely presenting the resources may need to followed up with specific invitations and training from a university clubs and organizations program to organize the club.

Resources a university might offer could include rigorously gender segregated changing facilities, and religiously sympathetic uniforms and dress codes for athletic and gym classes. I took part in a few specially provided rock climbing sessions for Muslimas at ZSU in a carefully selected time when the gym was unused, with a thoughtfully prepared climbing expert who studiously respected and offered resources to respect and accommodate the women’s need for clothing that was modest and yet safe. Such allowances should be made for any Muslima who wishes to participate in physical education wearing hijab.

The university should conduct a survey of hiring practices with the intention of addressing any deficits that are revealed in minority representation amongst the
administration, teaching faculty, staff and student worker populations. Hiring Muslims and Muslimas in the above populations, and in mentoring services would help to overcome intentional misconceptions and provide space for questioning local societal norms, especially where one religious or ethnic group is a large majority.

As universities across the U.S. undertook efforts to internationalize their campuses, understanding the lives and expectations of these participants could have aided university administrations in providing adequate and effective strategies for accommodating and educating this population and their American peers. Funding could be sought from grants, corporations or from the governments of the Muslim populations present on campus to build an Islamic or Muslim cultures Institute, similar in nature to the British Council, Goethe Institut, Alliance Française, or the Confucius Institutes present around the globe. Providing resources and scholarships for study and promotion of Islamic or Muslim cultures in an effort to ameliorate the fears and clashes over Islam in the U.S. would be a place to start a journey of reconciliation and education.

Last, but by no means least, across the nation, the number of dual immersion or bi-lingual schools teaching in English and Spanish, or Vietnamese, or Chinese, plus First Nation schools teaching English and a native language such as Navajo, Hopi, Cherokee, Ojibwe, Lakota, and Sioux, among others could be expanded to include Arabic. These efforts at greater linguistic ability and accommodation of minority populations could be broadened to accommodate the anticipated influx of Middle Eastern refugees.

Further Studies

In their turn the participants created a new invigorating outlook on my native
language; they showed how the infinite possibilities of linguistic development and mastery could create more vibrant and interesting forms of English akin to poetry, re-combinations of vocabulary that possess a beauty all their own. The development of language as it is shared and manipulated to express the needs of L2 students is an area I would like to research further.

Comparative studies of women from other Islamic countries outside of the Arabian Peninsula, the Persian Gulf, and South-East Europe may provide a more nuanced vision of Islam. We might then free those lands from the colonialist label “Middle East.” Studies comparing the lives of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian women in the same region might allay Western fears and create a better understanding of Western involvement in the problems that exist there.

Studies of American Muslimas born into bi-faith families (Christian and Muslim) who then make a commitment to Islam is something that is intriguing. This idea, born of attendance at Eids in the ZSU campus community, where I met four women who have made this choice, might discover the ease or difficulty of the paths that are open to the children of these women in a close-knit Christian community.

I wonder about the experiences of the young men who also live out their lives in such a profoundly different system of expectations from those I know. A series of documentaries based on the BBC’s “Seven-up” series of interviews of a group of British children at seven yearly intervals beginning in 1964 would provide an interesting insight into the effects of U.S. education, English as L2, and overseas experiences in the participants’ lives.
The community of readers who venture to review the work above would also, I hope, be more willing to look into the community of difference to which we all contribute, and recognize that the limits we impose can be expanded by extending a tolerant and inquiring view of the world. This research also indicated that the voices of Saudias are often missing from available literature. I hope these efforts have helped to address that in some small way, and will encourage a positive response to their perspectives and voices. The power of education and studying in a different culture are profound opportunities for positive change in domestic and international students’ daily experiences and also provide positive outcomes for their native cultures.

While the pace of change may seem to be slow at times, there have been deep changes in Saudi attitudes and society as a result of the KAAAS. This research has already had a positive effect in my own teaching, and the curriculum I create to teach ESL teachers. The participants were all graduates of ZSU and 3 of the 4 were graduates of the ESL program, so their experiences and the findings could be used by ESL programs in the U.S. and U.S. sponsored program overseas to aid in curriculum design, provisions and teaching applications. The above programs could also use this research for a basis for self-assessment and self-reflection in the construction and conducting of current curricula.

Finally, The Islam that I knew through the participants was a religion of love and peace. The media that painted the disciples of this religion as a group of dangerous jihadists and terrorists contradicted my experiences. However, I believed that with the combination of the empowering new roles, new language skills, and growing confidence
these participants had displayed, their faith and determination in direct contrast to many popular, detrimental stereotypes had proven the media’s claims to be false. I believed that my daily existence was richer for the friendship, exchange of human contact, and faithfulness that interaction with the participants and their sister Muslimas provided. An opportunity for creating greater understanding between student populations across the world was something that could be realized if we were to establish a workable solution for international crises respectful of differences and the strengths those differences offered. Humankind needed a generation of people who were more aware of solutions outside the cultural box in which we all existed.
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CURRICULUM VITAE

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Education

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Ph.D. Utah State University, Logan, UT.
Curriculum and Instruction. Dissertation: “It Is Not In the Stars to Hold Our
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Aug 1999-May 2003
M.Ed Weber State University. Dissertation: Assessing ESL Reading
Comprehension at WSU. Honor Awards for GPA

Aug 1998-May 1999
CERT TESOL (Certification required to teach ESL in all UK schools).

Sep 1996- Jun 1997
Northern College, Aberdeen, Scotland.
PGCE(S) History and English. (Certification required to teach any subject,
including substitute, in all UK schools).

Sep 1992 - May 1996
University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, Scotland.
MA (Hons) History. 2:1

Work Experience

Weber State University
LEAP Department Chair July 2014 - present
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Writing instructor for WSU Outdoor Programme (Summer 2012)
Instructor, LEAP Programme 1999 – present
English Instructor 1999 - present).
FYE program. Fall 2006
History adjunct instructor 2002 – 2010
Editorial board Student Publication; Student Solidarity 2001
ESL Writing Tutor (1999-2000)
Ogden High School

Spring Semester 2012
ESL volunteer teaching assistant in the AVID program

Salt Lake Community College

Aug 2001 - Jul 2002

Northfield Academy, Aberdeen, Scotland

Aug 1998- Jun 1999
Substitute Teacher of English and Drama. 1 year contract. Implementing the Scottish National Curriculum for 11-18 year-olds. Preparing students for national exams (equivalent to U.S. General Ed requirements).

St. Machar Academy, Aberdeen, Scotland

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Substitute teacher of English and Drama, plus Ad Hoc substitute for History, and Religious and Moral Education. Responsibilities as above.

Hazlehead Academy, Aberdeen, Scotland

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Substitute across the curriculum. Chaperone on 5th & 6th year (11th & 12th grade) trip to the Somme.

Portlethen Academy, Portlethen, Scotland

Summer and Fall 1985
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Management Committee member. Voluntary Ceramics Instructor

Publications

From Flanders Fields. Dialogue A Journal of Mormon Thought. 37.1 Spring 2004
Research contributor to *Societies, Networks and Transitions: A Global History* by Craig A Lockard. Sep 2007


**Book Review**

*Theory and educational research: Toward critical social explanation.*  Anyon, Jean

**Conference Presentations**

April 2004 *From Flanders Fields*. Sunstone Conference, Claremont, CA

April, 2005. *Shadows in My Bones*. Sunstone Conference, San Francisco

October 2005. *U2 can take the Sting out of English; Pop Culture and the Classroom* RMMLA

December 2006. *Aliens Among Us: My Life in Utah* Women’s Relief Society, LDS church, Ogden, UT

February 2007. *Using pop culture in the classroom to stimulate student centered learning*. Best Teaching Practices Adjunct Colloquium Weber State University


April 2007. *The British at Large* presentation in the Continuing Education Diversity Forum. WSU


June 2009 ISfTE. *Challenging Whiteness; Multicultural Literature Across the Curriculum* WSU
October 2010 iTESOL WSU, Utah. Monoculturalism Can be Cured: Conversing Our Way to Multicultural Understanding, I

October 2012 Faculty Forum Curing Monoculturalism. Building Bridges: Journaling the Summer Bridge to School. Challenging Perceptions of Night. (3 papers)

October 2012 Mentoring Conference UNM, Albuquerque. Paper revision and Poster session Monoculturalism Can be Cured: Conversing Our Way to Multicultural Understanding II

November 2012 Weber State University International Education Week. Overcoming Monoculturalism

January 2013 A&H Conference Hawai’i. Revisions of Monoculturalism can be cured III, Building Bridges: Journaling the Summer Bridge to School, Challenging Perceptions of Night. (3 papers)


Panel Presentations and Discussion

May 2014 ISfTE U2 can take the Sting out of English. Ankara, Turkey.

September 2014 WSU Teaching and Learning Forum. ESL students are not a handicap.

October 2014 WSU. ESL Issues and solutions Joint presenter with Morteza Emami.