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Silence, Declaration, and Circumstance: Rethinking Women's Roles in Saudi Arabia

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SILENCE, DECLARATION, AND CIRCUMSTANCE: RETHINKING WOMEN'S
ROLES IN SAUDI ARABIA

by

Ashleigh Elizabeth Dunham

A thesis submitted to the Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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Ashleigh Elizabeth Dunham, M.A.

Western Michigan University, 2013

The canon of academic research on Saudi Arabian women still fails to address the stereotypical images that represent them. While Anglo-American models of feminism may benefit American women, they cannot and should not be a lens through which Americans view Saudi women, as American and Saudi cultures are fundamentally different. Because of this issue, Anglo-American feminism along with the obvious problems of racism and Islamophobia contribute to the American assumption that Saudi Arabian women lack agency and control of their lives. The resulting ideologies continue to influence American ideas about Saudi Arabian women's access to the opportunities that non-Saudi women may take for granted. Through qualitative ethnographic research, this thesis examines the changing lives of Saudi Arabian women to illustrate that, despite Anglo-American assumptions about their disempowerment, Saudi Arabian women do have access to many opportunities that non-Saudi women take advantage of.

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Finally, I am extremely grateful to the Saudi women who agreed to participate in this research. I sincerely appreciate their willingness to let me into their lives. They welcomed me with open arms, despite our differences. I truly hope this thesis will illustrate the complexity of the lives of Saudi women and will help to dismantle the presuppositions about them. I hope this thesis demonstrates that there is a need for us to rethink our ideas and assumptions about Saudi Arabia, the women and men who live there, the different contexts that exist in Saudi Arabia, and the ideologies that arise from those contexts.

Ashleigh Elizabeth Dunham

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Despite the critical impact of Said's *Orientalism* (1978) on scholarship dealing with Muslim and Middle Eastern cultures, deeply seated assumptions surrounding Islamic practices and Islamic actors persist.

-Sherine Hafez, *An Islam of Her Own*

In America, ideas about Saudi Arabian women have become associated with Muslim women or women from the Middle East, and vice versa—this is a problem. The presuppositions made about Muslim or Middle Eastern women collectively, and Saudi women in particular, contribute to the stereotype that they are oppressed victims of a male-dominated society and religion. It is common hegemonic “knowledge” in our Anglo-American society that Saudi Arabian women face discrimination in many forms, but when it comes to the idea that Saudi women have access to power many disagree. Unlike women in Saudi Arabia, many women in other parts of the Middle East, and women in other Islamic countries, have already experienced empowerment in ways that Saudi Arabian women have not. Furthermore, the way American women experience and understand empowerment seems to be at odds with the way women in Saudi Arabia do. For example, it is common knowledge that Saudi Arabian women cannot drive and need a male’s permission for educational and work-related opportunities. This is not the case for many non-Saudi women, and many Saudi women see this as disempowering.

In America's post 9/11 context, rhetoric concerning the "war on terror," along with liberal feminist discourses, continue to affect and prolong misguided ideologies about

Muslim and Middle Eastern women and their access to different forms of liberation.

Hafez agrees and asserts that:

[A]lthough deeply committed to raising awareness of the plight of oppressed women in the Middle East and elsewhere, feminist literature still fails to articulate their condition in ways other than the obvious dichotomy of state versus Islam or modernity versus tradition. (2011: 75)

Presumptions about Middle Eastern and Muslim women that stem from these dichotomies fail to acknowledge the multiple ways these women, and more specifically Saudi women, can become empowered on their own terms. Anglo-American models of feminism, while beneficial to American women, cannot and should not be a lens through which we view Saudi women—our cultures are fundamentally different, and we need to adjust our ways of thinking in order to do the situation justice. Because of this issue, Anglo-American feminism, along with the obvious problems of racism and Islamophobia, contribute to the American perception of Saudi women as oppressed, which stands in opposition to the idea that Saudi women can be empowered in specific contexts that will be mentioned throughout this thesis.

In this thesis I argue that Saudi Arabian women do have access to power through many different avenues. These avenues wherein Saudi women can exercise control of their lives can be partially attributed to the shifting material conditions in Saudi Arabia—conditions that have influenced social relationships to the benefit of Saudi women. Additional avenues to power exist in areas where Saudi women are making headway in Saudi Arabia—via their active participation in Saudi society and through social networking sites, television programs, and Saudi publications.

I analyze the experiences and exchanges I had within the Kalamazoo, Michigan Saudi Arabian female community to learn about the ways women's roles in Saudi Arabia are changing. From these experiences and the research done for this thesis, I learned that although there are many instances where Saudi women are oppressed, there are also many instances where they are liberated. Saudi Arabian women are demanding the right to become more fully integrated into Saudi society and are actively challenging and raising Saudi consciousness with regard to things that Saudi women are concerned with. This nuanced perception of women in Saudi Arabia must be brought to the table to break down the misconceptions about Saudi women that portray them in only one light. The questions I attend to in this thesis are: How have the circumstances and developments in Saudi Arabia transformed the lives of Saudi women? What avenues of power do Saudi women have? What can we learn from women's movements and experiences in Egypt that can be applied to Saudi Arabia? What is being done to lay the foundation for a successful women's movement in Saudi Arabia?

Despite the reformations that have promoted changes in Saudi society, not much research has been done by American academics to consider the weight of what these changes mean for Saudi women. Given cultural constraints, it can be very difficult to gain access to the lives of Saudi women in order to undertake ethnographic research that is ethical and non-threatening to potential Saudi respondents. Thus, I hope my research contributes to the canon of scholarly literature devoted to the changes affecting women in Saudi Arabia.

In this thesis I will elaborate on the current circumstances in Saudi Arabia while

examining the assertions and silences of my respondents. My respondents themselves are a product of the shifting material conditions of Saudi Arabia that are fostering more educational and work-related opportunities for women. Although the majority of the women I spoke with did not speak up about women's issues that constantly surface as an Anglo-American concern—such as women driving and the guardianship system in Saudi Arabia—they directed my attention to areas where *they are* concerned, areas where they feel empowered: within and through their families, through their education, and through Islam. One of my respondents, however, freely shared her thoughts about the problems that disempower women in Saudi Arabia, but she also voiced that she anticipates that these problems will be resolved with time. Like her, many Saudi women have been more forward with their opinions. Many of these women use Islamic and literary discourses to promote change in a culture that is growing increasingly preoccupied with issues Saudi women are concerned with, issues such as having the right to drive and not constantly needing a male's permission (Arebi 1994). Concurrently, major Saudi political and religious institutions are encouraging women's reform, and with the waves of the Arab Spring many Saudi women have demonstrated a sense of urgency, protesting and lobbying for various opportunities—like the right to drive and make choices without needing a male's consent—that their female counterparts have access to in neighboring countries.¹ I will examine the advances made and gained by Saudi women, to have

¹ The Arab Spring is “one of the most significant events in the Arab Middle East since the end of World War Two” and “has launched a set of changes in motion that [has] fundamentally [altered] the region's course” (Jones 2012: 448-9). The Arab Spring that is currently underway began in the start of 2011, with

access to power in different forms. Many Saudi Arabian women are demanding the right to become more fully integrated into Saudi society—this must be acknowledged.

Review of Literature on Saudi Arabian Women and Empowerment

While there is a wealth of information about Arab and Muslim women in general, literature on Saudi Arabian women in American academia is lacking. In many publications about the general problems facing Arab and Muslim women, Saudi women are mentioned, but their achievements are sometimes glossed over because it is common knowledge that Saudi women simply are not guaranteed the same rights as Arab and Muslim women in neighboring countries. The conclusion most readers seem to draw from publications about the triumphs of Muslim women is that, while there are a select few Saudi women spearheading positive changes for women in Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabian women are still the most oppressed and down-trodden of all Arab and Muslim women, second of course to women in Afghanistan, who they are frequently conflated with. While many Americans and non-Saudis may agree with the previous statement, I disagree. While I concur that there are many opportunities other women have that Saudi women do not, I believe—based on my experiences in the Saudi community—that many Saudi women enjoy luxuries other women do not. For example, many Saudi women enjoy the luxury of studying abroad and having access to government scholarships that pay for their education. Many Saudi women enjoy the luxury of being citizens from a country rich with oil wealth. Many Saudi women are also proud of their cultural

pro-democracy uprisings in North Africa. It spread in the form of protests first in Tunisia, then in Egypt, Libya, and other places in the Middle East.

heritage, and are particularly proud that the king of Saudi Arabia is the custodian of the two holy mosques. These things have worked to finance educational and work-related opportunities for many Saudi women. That is not to say, however, that all Saudi women benefit from this oil wealth, or from their rich cultural heritage. However, I do feel that they themselves do not believe they are the most oppressed and down-trodden of all Arab and Muslim women. And even if the previous assumption is true, then all of the women with whom I had a chance to become well acquainted in Kalamazoo must have been the exception. As John Bradley (2005) points out in his book *Saudi Arabia Exposed*, while there is more than one Saudi Arabia, there is only one that Americans seem to be fixated upon. He says,

[C]ontrary to the temptation of ideologues of all kinds to see or portray the country as monochromatic or uniform in thought and belief [...] there is no single culture that defines what Saudi Arabia is and who its people are, just as there is no single culture that alone could be said to define what the United States is and what Americans are. (XV)

Despite the variation in thoughts and beliefs in Saudi Arabia, it is still known singularly by many Americans as the home of the fifteen hijackers who were involved in the September 11 attacks; a place where women and immigrants are treated like slaves; and a place where Westerners are not safe. There is another Saudi Arabia that many Americans have not been exposed to and thus have not considered. This Saudi Arabia, as Bradley describes, has open-minded, intelligent citizens pushing for reform; career women who are educated and can think for themselves; Saudis who are struggling to find decent jobs; secular Saudis who take part in lectures in opposition to the Wahhabi-Al Saudi hegemony they've grown up with; and Saudis who are concerned that recent events which have

tarnished Saudi Arabia's reputation will be difficult to redeem.² Despite generalizations made about Saudi Arabia and Saudi women, these other realities I have been exposed to ought to be considered.

To find information related to my thesis, I relied heavily on literature from many areas, predominantly the social sciences, feminist studies, Middle East women's studies, and Islamic studies. Given the limited amount of academic research specifically centered on Saudi Arabian women and empowerment, I gained information from various media outlets, popular Saudi female bloggers, and via the stories and narratives written by Saudi Arabian women themselves.

Because little research has been done that specifically centers on the strides Saudi women have made, and also because Western media outlets have not given enough attention to the positive changes women are experiencing in Saudi Arabia—but have given attention to the lack of opportunities they have, many Americans do not have a nuanced perception of Saudi Arabia. Quite a bit has changed compared to research that was being done on Saudi Arabian women almost thirty years ago. Soraya Altorki noted then that “Saudi Arabia represents a virtual *terra incognita* for social science research. Saudi Arabian society has not been studied by many social scientists” (1986: 2). But in the wake of September 11, Saudi Arabia has become a focal point for American discourses centered on terrorism, Islam, and women. Additionally, given the Arab spring

² Wahhabi-Al-Saud hegemony stems from the Wahhabi ideology in Saudi Arabia. When Saudi Arabia was unified, Wahhabism played a large role in its political centralization. For a more detailed discussion of Wahhabism, see Chapter 3.

and the happenings in the Middle East, especially those that revolve around women's roles in the public sphere, there have been new waves of rhetoric that focus on the lack of agency Saudi women have at their disposal. There is some literature on Saudi women, generally speaking, but few attempts have been made by scholars to demonstrate what forms of power Saudi women do have access to.

Altorki (1977 & 1986), a female Saudi anthropologist, for example, illustrates the ways in which Saudi women can gain power through their families, their material and financial contributions, and their social statuses. Altorki maintains that a woman's inclusion in the public or private sphere really depends upon her participation in the economy through work done outside the home. If a woman makes economic contributions to her family, she is more likely to have increased mobility and interactions in public (1986). Altorki notes a shift in the rise in new areas where women have control: "This is the domain of private property rights, which women are asserting with growing frequency. It is likely that this development indicates a shift that is still in process and by no means completed" (ibid: 25). She also contends that women have political power via their control of domestic life and through their roles in arranging marriages, which Altorki suggests have noteworthy economic and political significance for Saudi society. Although she acknowledges the many areas in which women do have access to power, she claims the male control of the public sphere surpasses women's and thus women and men do not have equal power.

Sadekka Arebi, a Libyan-American anthropologist, writes that "Since the late 1970s and despite the overwhelming power of discourse about them, [Saudi] women's words

[have been] unrelenting and daring in their challenge” and “[have insisted] on forming their own readings of culture and religion” (1994: 1, 2). Arebi argues that women’s writing has power—particularly in the public realm—and contributes to shaping Saudi society, religion, history, and other Saudi institutions and ideologies. Arebi, like many people, acknowledges that: “Saudi Arabia has developed a reputation for being more restrictive of women’s mobility and public activity than other Arab societies,” but despite their restrictions Arebi claims that Saudi women are able to produce culture and wield power through literature (1994: 4).

In a similar vein to Arebi, American anthropologist Debora Akers, Saudi sociologist Abubaker Bagader, and German writer Ava Heinrichsdorff illustrate that Saudi women are a force of change in Saudi Arabia in their edited volume *Voices of Change* (1998). They offer fresh perspectives about Saudi women, through presenting short stories written by Saudi women, to help complicate stereotypes of Saudi women as being oppressed, passive, or vacuous. As with Arebi’s work, not only do these scholars draw attention to the many obstacles facing Saudi women, but they also suggest that Saudi Arabia is changing substantially for the benefit of women. Akers, Bagader, and Heinrichsdorff maintain that many Saudi Arabian women are now able to better fortify their roles and statuses in Saudi Arabia:

The profile of the Saudi Arabian woman is changing considerably as more women pursue a higher education and join the work force. An educated wife is considered more desirable, as young working men show a preference for brides who can contribute to the household income. Young women, on the other hand, are not only asking for the right to work in their marriage contracts, but also for households separate from their husbands’ families. Both of these changes will strengthen the position of Saudi women, giving them higher status in their

households and more control over their lives. (1998: 15)

Saudi sociologist Mona Almunajjed says, “I always felt uneasy about the West’s image of us, which has always been severely critical.” She goes on to say that, “the persistence of misunderstandings and misconceptions about the status of Arab Muslim women in general and Saudi women in particular has distorted their true social image in most Western countries” (2006: 1). Almunajjed notes that Saudi women do face many obstacles, but that changes have been introduced as a result of reform (albeit at a slow pace) and she states that Saudi Arabia is undergoing a transition to increase women’s participation socially and politically. Women’s participation, in all sectors, is on the rise, “[women] have become a considerable social and economic asset to Saudi society, and as a result, the status of educated Saudi women as well as their participation in the labour market is increasing” (ibid: 18). Almunajjed illustrates through her interviews with other Saudi female professionals that the patriarchal foundations of Saudi Arabia are yielding to a more open society that encourages women’s involvement in all areas.

In reflecting on women’s power in general, but more particularly Saudi women’s power, it is important to note that women’s roles should not be limited to their roles as wives or mothers because it “overemphasizes the limitations on women’s powers and sphere of action, even for the most male-dominated cultures” (Mukhopadhyay as cited by Ogasawaru 1998: 8). Saudi women are constrained in many ways that other women are not, but they are not completely hindered. These avenues to power that Saudi Arabian women do have must be reconsidered to acknowledge, not only their current opportunities, but also the possibility that these opportunities will usher in a successful

women's movement that gives Saudi women the rights they've called for.

On Representations of Saudi Women

Perceptions of Saudi women dominate many of the circulating narratives reported in Western discourses, particularly after September 11, and especially now with the focus on what is occurring in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and other countries in the Middle East as a result of the Arab Spring. Perhaps as an outcome of the Arab Spring, some Saudi woman caught the world's attention. But despite the attention surrounding the efforts of Manal al-Sherif, the Saudi woman who became the face of the women's opposition to the driving ban, having openly defied it herself, and Wojdan Shaherkani, the first Saudi female athlete to officially participate in the 2012 Olympics, it is not uncommon for Westerners to think of or refer to Saudi Arabian women as walking black shadows, cloaked, dark, shapeless figures, or "little black clouds" (Deaver 1978: 14). These portrayals have come to dominate the ideas that shape Western perceptions of Arab women, and due to a flattening of the diversity laden in the term "Arab," Saudi Arabian women as well.

It is true that, for most Westerners, even today, the phrase 'Arab woman' conjures up heavily veiled, secluded women, whose lives consist of little more than their homes, their children and other females in the 'harem' or immediate kinship circle. (Al-Hassan Golley 2004: 522)

Juhayer Al-Musa'ed, a Saudi female writer, also notes possible Western views of Saudi Arabian women and her reactions to those views (as quoted by Arebi 1994: 205):

They [the foreigners] imagine the Saudi woman [...] as a bundle of backwardness, a disgrace to humanity in the twentieth century [...] who still thinks in the past centuries' mentality [...]. That is what they think of our women. But that is because they have not read our papers [...] they should have

because they think they are more advanced, and if they are they should have known more and better [about us]. When they read, they would certainly discover that among Saudi women, there are those who love thinking [...] [whose] situation did not kill thought but rather revived it, gave it life, depth, and meaning [...]. They have established themselves in the [literary] field and proved their distinction...

In her article about women in Afghanistan, journalist Sharon Smith reinforces a negative depiction similar to the one Al-Musa'ed laments. To her credit, Smith criticizes the particular usage of iconography that perpetuates images of “oppressed” Muslim women to justify the war in Afghanistan. However, she problematizes her own critique by bringing Saudi Arabian women into the picture, attempting to draw a comparison between women in Saudi Arabia and women in Afghanistan—a comparison that blends national, ethnic, class, and cultural boundaries. She states that:

Like their counterparts in Afghanistan under the Taliban, Saudi women are required to wear an abaya, a robe that covers a woman from head to foot, and cannot travel without a male escort. They are not permitted to drive cars, rent rooms, or eat in public places. Nor can they work in any occupation where they might have contact with men, except for medicine. A girl is allowed education only with her father's permission. Saudi women charged with a range of so-called sexual crimes can be lashed or even beheaded. (2002)

What is the purpose of this mismatched comparison? Saudi Arabia is an entirely different country than Afghanistan, having a very distinct cultural and historical heritage that Smith seems to ignore. Additionally, the socio-religious, economic, and political elements of Saudi Arabia are completely unlike those in Afghanistan. This long list of social limitations, although not unwarranted, is misleading and taken out of context. For example, she says that like women in Afghanistan, Saudi women are required to wear an

abaya.³ While this is true for Saudi women, many Americans—particularly upon seeing pictures of women in Afghanistan—probably do not make the distinction between the *burqa* that many Afghan women wear, and the *abaya* that Saudi women wear.⁴ A *burqa* is not an *abaya*. While the *abaya* is required by Saudi law for all women, though I have been told otherwise by Saudi men, there are colorful stylistic variations in how women wear the *abaya* regionally. Some cities, like Riyadh, are much more conservative, while others are not. Some women in Riyadh may be seen wearing an *abaya*, a *niqab*, and long gloves, so that every inch of their bodies is covered.⁵ In contrast, some women in cities such as Al-Khobar, or Jeddah, may not even cover their hair. Some Saudi women do work alongside Saudi men in hospitals, universities, at national dialogues, and in other areas. Many Saudi women frequent malls and enjoy eating in public places. Of course segregation is practiced, but in some areas it isn't strictly practiced. In many marketplaces, strict segregation is not enforced. However, the ways segregation is carried out depends largely on the region in Saudi Arabia. Often times families—composed of related individuals from both sexes—will be allowed in certain places on specific days, along with other women, while single men are only allowed to enter those places at different times. For example, there are certain times the mall is open for women

³ An *abaya* is a loose-fitting black robe/cloak worn by some Muslim women, covering the body from head to toe (Litcher 2009).

⁴ A *burqa* is an outer garment that envelopes the whole body, with a mesh screen over the eyes, and is commonly worn in Afghanistan (Litcher 2009).

⁵ A *niqab* is a full-face veil, often synonymous with the *burqa*, except that the eyes are exposed (Litcher 2009).

and families and single men are not allowed to enter the mall at these times. Similarly, there are specific times the mall is open for single men, and women and families are not allowed to enter at these times. These spatial restrictions also apply in other places such as museums, restaurants, and coffee shops. While many of Smith's claims are true, many are not. Saudi Arabia and Saudis need to be understood on their own terms, and not in comparison to other countries, cultures, and contexts.

Sabria Jawhar, a female Saudi journalist, and writer of the popular blog "Sabria's Out of the Box," satirizes a view some Westerners may have of Saudi women:

Apparently the harem sits around all day trapped in a patriarchal society where we feed our husbands chocolate-covered dates, belly dance for him and his friends, and then cool them off by fanning them with palm branches on the veranda. (Jawhar 2011)

These criticisms stem from the reproduction of hegemonic discourses that sustain the perception of Arab women—in this case, specifically Saudi women—as one-dimensional figures. Unfortunately, Western media outlets are so saturated by these caricatures of Muslim women that the depictions have become simultaneously naturalized and racialized. This normalized discourse needs to be reconfigured.

Perceptions of Saudi women, perceptions that arise from a context that is tangled with modern tensions given U.S. involvement with and presence in many Middle Eastern countries, the media, and "imperial feminism that espouses the liberation or rescue of non-Western women in accordance with Western values" (Mishra 2007: 262), should be approached with a critical eye. The oversimplified images of Saudi Arabian women being circulated in popular Western discourse are more than problematic: they are

embedded in flawed and misguided representations that leave those who possess them uninformed and those who are objectified by them dehumanized. Although a great deal of scholarship has attempted to dismantle the stereotypes associated with Muslim women, very little specifically addresses the characterization of Saudi Arabian Muslim women as being victimized, vulnerable, and subjugated walking black shadows.

Although the books were written with good intentions, namely to draw attention to the problems some Saudi women face, the popularity of Jean Sasson's *Princess* trilogy in America probably contributed to many of the stereotypes Americans have of Saudi women.⁶ Twenty years ago, when the *Princess* trilogy was in its final phase, Saudi Arabia was different from the place it is now. Despite the events and depictions Sasson describes, it is not my intention to undermine the tragedies, both real and sensationalized, that she outlines—as they are not baseless and some are truly tragic. However, many Americans perpetuate the stories they hear on the news, from their friends, or from the books they read. The aforementioned narratives in circulation about the “realities” that Saudi women are forced to endure, with hardly any control over their own lives (Sasson 2001)—as true or exaggerated as they may or may not be—are representing Saudis as either frenzied, oppressive, barbaric men, or victimized, enslaved, meek women. Although there have been increasingly more publications written by individuals who are attempting to promote more holistic understandings of Saudi Arabian culture, for example—as seen in John Bradley's *Saudi Arabia Exposed* and in Qanta Ahmed's *In the*

⁶ The trilogy consists of three books written By Jean Sasson about a Saudi princess, who describes the lives of women in Saudi Arabia—focusing specifically on the more miserable aspects of life for Saudi women.

Land of Invisible Women, there have not been enough. I hope that the information provided in this thesis offers up a new, more nuanced, perception of Saudi women who have more control over their lives than those in our Anglo-American society might imagine.

Methodology

Before I actually began doing research for this thesis, I drew upon experiences I had in two other courses to frame the research I proposed to undertake in the Saudi community. First, I took a course under the direction of Dr. Laura Spielvogel: Ethnographic Research Methods. Throughout the course I spent about five hours a week, over ten weeks, at the Kalamazoo Islamic Center getting to know Saudi women and other Muslim women. I also spent a lot of time in the houses of the women I met there—participating in their lives and inquiring about their worldviews. Soon after those friendships evolved, I began to question the “realities” I had *thought* I once understood through reading the endless reports of the abuses the women of Saudi Arabia were facing: oppression, male guardianship, and not being able to drive. After my involvement at the Islamic center, I took a class on racializing discourses taught By Dr. Kristina Wirtz—which supplied me with a way to better articulate my feelings about anti-Arab and anti-Muslim racism. While enrolled in that course I, along with three of my peers, conducted interviews with seven students attending Western Michigan University.⁷ The goal of each interview was to better understand how the racialization of Muslims is perpetuated subconsciously

⁷ The interviews conducted received HSIRB approval and were done as part of a course instructed by Dr. Kristina Wirtz in the Department of Anthropology.

through everyday language. After this coursework, I undertook my own ethnographic research to use in this thesis.

Drawing upon the fieldwork I conducted for Dr. Spielvogel's class as well as my almost daily involvement with my Saudi boyfriend (of over three and a half years), his friends, and his friends' wives who became my friends, I decided to conduct interviews to augment the participant-observation I had already accomplished by the time my formal thesis research began within the Saudi community for over three years. My identity as an American, non-Muslim woman, interested in both positive applications of Islam to promote change, as well as interested in Saudi Arabia's historical and cultural heritage, worked both to help and hinder my ability to establish rapport with the Saudi women who agreed to allow me to interview them for this thesis.

Some of the women I was introduced to through other women I met at the Kalamazoo Islamic Center, or through other Saudi friends. However, many women were hesitant about participating in this study for reasons I will mention throughout this thesis. As a result, I had to rely predominantly on my prior experiences in the Saudi community accomplished in the context of research for Dr. Laura Spielvogel's class. I also had to narrow my list of respondents to only five women. Fortunately, these few women were enthusiastic about being a part of my study. One, to whom I have given the pseudonym Alaa, told me that she understood what it was like because she had to do research for her dissertation. Needless to say, she was probably the most helpful of all my respondents. She shared with me, as an explanation for why so many women I have known for at least two years did not want to participate, that perhaps many of them were being cautious for

fear that what they said to me could somehow be traced back to them and affect not only their reputation but their families' reputations as well. Any discourse about government, religion, or culture could have social consequences for any Saudi—male or female—depending on where one's family stands within society. And because communities like this are often so connected, news and words travel quickly and sometimes bear the brunt of unforeseen social consequences. An additional illustration for Saudi women's hesitancy in general, that explains why some Saudi women were apprehensive about participating in this study, is offered by Sadekka Arebi.

Arebi mentions that many Saudi women writers themselves have used female pseudonyms instead of their real names as a form of anonymity and uses the writings of Juhayer Al-Musa'ed (1994) to demonstrate her claim. Arebi notes that many Saudis reading Al-Musa'ed's essays believe she is male because of her aggressive stance on many social issues. If Saudi readers are surprised that a woman is writing about these types of issues, it really says something about what is and is not acceptable for a woman to talk about. However, that is not to say this prevents women from speaking openly or aggressively about social issues that affect them. Some readers additionally believe that Al-Musa'ed is a member of the royal family using a pseudonym. Arebi says (1994: 193) many Saudi readers "reason that in order to protest what happens in society or to engage in discussions with religious leaders in the manner that [Al-Musa'ed] does, one has to be 'protected.'" I know my respondent Alaa has this sort of protection, or backing from her family. However, the other women in this study did not have this protection and thus,

were not “protected” from any perceived critiques of the sociocultural-religious institutions in Saudi Arabia.

Although the number of respondents I thought I would have was much less than I anticipated, I was able to collect enough material through my five consenting respondents as well as my past three years of experiences within the Saudi community. I would have liked to have formally interviewed other Saudi women to further illustrate my claims, but for ethical reasons, I could not. I would also like to mention that many of the women who were even slightly apprehensive about participating in the study were not here pursuing a degree, but were here with their husbands, who were on scholarship. The reasoning behind their apprehension about participating in this study is very complicated and, like I mentioned before, is possibly tied to an overarching unwillingness within Saudi society—whether male or female—to engage in a critical discourse when religion, culture, or politics are involved. In my experience, many Saudis are very private and are not necessarily open to disclosing personal information. Based on my experiences and conversations with my Saudi friends and respondents, I believe it has a lot less to do with gender; it has more to do with reputation, family ties, and other reasons earlier mentioned.

To further introduce my respondents, I have established a chart (see Appendix I) to represent all of the women who agreed to participate in my research. These five women, Alaa, Mona, Amool, Badra and Noona, all are from different regions in Saudi Arabia and I met each woman through friends I had within the Saudi community or through

acquaintances who knew Saudis within the community.⁸ Before conducting research, I had to obtain permission from Western Michigan University's HSIRB to ensure that the research I did was ethical and fell within the guidelines established by the board. My proposal was approved and I have attached the approval form (see Appendix II).

I did participant-observation frequently and in many settings—at the Kalamazoo Islamic Center, at the houses of my respondents, at shopping centers, at restaurants and coffee shops, and at rooms rented out for special occasions. In each setting, I shared with the women that I was doing research for my master's thesis and it was centered on American ideas about Saudi Arabian women. All of the women agreed that Americans are misinformed when it comes to Saudi women and outwardly encouraged my research, but when it came to doing interviews most of the women were unwilling to discuss the topics I wanted to at length. The types of questions I wanted to ask often came up in conversation, but I know my friends, and my respondents, would not want me to include the things said that were shared freely with me in confidence. Despite the fact that most of the women I interacted with speak English fluently, my current level of understanding and study of Arabic allowed for more flexibility in the interactions I had with my respondents, particularly with regard to the code-switching that occasionally took place in our interactions. Some words used in Arabic cannot be effectively conveyed in English, as there are numerous lexical gaps. This code-switching worked simultaneously to help establish rapport between myself and my respondents as well as effectively communicate

⁸ The names of the five women are all pseudonyms.

meaning. Although I did not conduct interviews in Arabic, having a more than intermediate comprehension of the language offered a large amount of adaptability with regards to how I obtained and interpreted the information I collected—not only from my Saudi respondents, but also from Arabic media.

While interviewing Saudi women, who are students enrolled in universities, I attempted to focus on their interpretations of Islamic literature and discourse as well as their reactions to educational and women's reform. Subjects selected for this study met the following three criteria: all participants were Saudi, female, and Muslim. When I began doing research, I first contacted these women and then used a snowball sampling technique. The snowball sampling technique offered an opportunity for me to identify future respondents. In contacting the women I already knew, I gave them a recruitment slip, or told them verbally about the research I intended to do, and asked them to pass it along to other women they were in contact with at the time. In the recruitment slip, I detailed the purpose and components of my research, how confidentiality would be maintained, and how to contact me. Any of the women who received the information about my research who were interested in participating, were able to contact me via email or telephone as it was indicated on the form. Whenever they contacted me, I invited them to meet with me at a time and place convenient for them to hear more about the research. At the first meeting, I showed each potential respondent the consent document and then engaged in an interview if they decided to participate.

In order to unravel and make sense of the experiences my respondents shared with me, it was imperative that I set some of my own cultural biases aside and listen to them. I had

to rework my reactions, assumptions, and sense of self to understand even a scrap of interchange. By conducting interviews, I gave the women who agreed to the interviews some room to decide how and if they wanted to answer my questions, knowing what I was focusing on. These interviews were coded and analyzed. The main themes that surfaced within the interviews were used to lay the foundation for the material in this thesis and are included in the following chapters.

In the third chapter, I examine changes in the lives of Saudi women resulting from the reforms that have been introduced in Saudi Arabia. To better frame the situation for Saudi women, I provide a backdrop that contextualizes the institutions and ideologies that have guided the reforms that are now transforming women's lives. In the fourth chapter I introduce my respondents and include excerpts from the interviews I conducted with them. Throughout the chapter, I analyze their opinions about and insights into the opportunities both afforded to and forbidden to Saudi women, as well as discussing the potentiality for more profound changes in the future. The fifth and final chapter concludes my thesis and also includes a discussion of the time I spent in Cairo, Egypt and the changes in my perception of the situation for Saudi women I had while living there. I consider women's movements in Egypt and discuss the possibility of a successful women's movement in Saudi Arabia. I reconsider and answer the questions I asked earlier to better understand the limitations of my research while also reaffirming the conclusions drawn from it. I wrap up the chapter by making suggestions for future research. In the following second chapter, I position myself in the field through showcasing an excerpt of a personal experience I had during one of my first interactions

in the Saudi female community. I provide a detailed explanation for the reasons I chose to undertake this research as well as the problems I confronted while conducting it.

CHAPTER 2

IN THE FIELD

Fieldnotes

Excerpt from fieldnotes
March, 2010
Birthday party for three Saudi children
Concord Place Apartments, 5:00 pm

I had been invited to my first Saudi party for women (and children). I had no idea what to expect. I was nervous. I envisioned abaya-clad women wearing niqab. Assuming nothing I owned would be modest enough to wear by my imagined Saudi standards, I settled on something that would be modest by American standards: blue jeans and a long sleeved, high necked, black shirt. I spent maybe thirty minutes trying to decide on an outfit that would be deemed appropriate enough to wear to the party while my then Saudi boyfriend spent that thirty minutes trying to assure me that I could wear what I would normally wear and it would be acceptable.

When I arrived to the building that was rented for the gathering, I realized I was locked out. I peered in through the window and didn't see anyone.⁹ I thought Umm Azooz told me to come at five o'clock, but there wasn't a woman in sight.¹⁰ I stood outside for a minute or two, wondering if I should come back later. Finally, the hostess came to do the door, and yes, she was wearing an abaya—which was reassuring in a way because it confirmed my own expectations. She scrutinized me with every muscle in her face and scanned me up and down. I awkwardly explained why I was there. I wasn't sure she was expecting me, but I was certain she had at

⁹ All names have been changed to protect and maintain privacy.

¹⁰ Umm means mother in Arabic and, once a woman has a son, she is then called “mother of [son's name].”

least heard about me.

Sensing her apprehension, I asked if I came too early. She must have realized how self-conscious I was and quickly uttered, “No, no. They will be here soon, but you can help me with the decorations.” She urged me to come inside and I followed as she removed her abaya and the black scarf that was draped loosely over her hair. She seemed to relax upon realizing I was already “in” with the community through my friendship with Umm Azooz. There were two other women there and I timidly introduced myself. Once they learned I was studying Arabic, they grew more interested and wanted me to try speaking with them. “Your accent is so cute!” Blushing, I thanked them and answered their probing questions, while we taped up balloons and streamers: “Do you have a boyfriend? Do you like Saudi men? Are you Muslim?” I side-stepped most of their inquiries while searching the room, hoping my friend and her son Azooz would appear. Before I went to the party, my boyfriend practically begged me not to tell anyone I was dating him and, although I struggled to understand why, I also wanted to respect that—so, I lied.¹¹

At that time—my first real Saudi party, outside of the usual comforts of the homes of my closer Saudi friends where I felt much more at ease—I couldn’t wait to scoop

¹¹ In my experience, reputation is extremely important to Saudis. Thus, whenever meeting others within the community, I had to be very careful about what information I divulged. Not only could it affect my reputation, it could also affect my boyfriend’s reputation. I wanted approval and also to establish rapport with women I’d never met, so I left a lot of more personal information out while I was getting to know them. I later confided to Umm Azooz that I had been dating a Saudi for a few years and that it was actually by his and her husband’s arrangement that we met. I desperately wanted her advice, and I confided a lot of things in her. She made many helpful suggestions for my relationship and helped me in more ways than I can articulate.

Azooz up in my arms—he was always eager to play with me. I wanted, more than anything, to be distracted by his smile. Initially Azooz helped me relate to his mother in ways that would have been difficult otherwise. He was always there entertaining and distracting us from our more obvious cultural differences. I was delighted that there were so many children at this party and found myself wandering off to play with my friends' children more than I found myself sitting and talking with the other women at the party. Umm Azooz often mentioned her son's fondness for me. I remember her laughing while admitting that I confused him because I was the only white woman he knew that spoke to him in Arabic—although it may have been more confusing because I initially used colloquial Egyptian.¹²

As more women and children arrived I helped the hostess cover the windows in aluminum foil. This way, the men who were dropping their wives off, bringing supplies, or picking up their children couldn't see inside. As soon as all the windows were covered, some of the women took off their abayas and scarves to reveal stunning, ostentatious outfits. Few were dressed as casually as I was. Wearing fancy low cut shirts, short skirts, showy jewelry, and high heels, the women frequented the bathroom to finish their hair and makeup. Umm Azooz, in contrast, wore a nice sweater and jeans. She had a hint of makeup on, but nowhere near as much makeup as the other women—it was like Michelangelo took a brush to their

¹² I later made frequent attempts to use the Saudi colloquialisms I was so often exposed to. I guess it didn't matter much because Azooz was very young when I first met him, and he—much like I—was also just learning Arabic.

faces.

I stuck out like a sore thumb. A lot of women I didn't know that well glanced over my way, as if to guess why I was there: Was I dating a Saudi? Was I Muslim? Was I thinking about converting to Islam? Did I come because someone invited me? Of course they probably knew I was there with Umm Azooz, but my cultural clumsiness gave me away. I am not Saudi. I am not Muslim. What was I doing there? Where did I belong?

Positioning Myself in the Field

In an attempt to better understand my boyfriend, who was the antithesis of all the stereotypes I've ever heard of Saudi men, I made every effort to understand his perspective of the world. This resulted in attending many Saudi "ladies nights," such as the one detailed in my fieldnote except above. I met so many women at each of these gatherings that each interaction contributed to the process of unlearning what I had previously "known" about Saudi Arabia, and more particularly Saudi women. The more I learned about these Saudis, the more confused I became. As my confusion and my exposure to the Saudi community increased, so did my desire to make sense of the incongruous opinions I had.

Working to understand the perceptions of Saudi women, through their own lenses on their own terms, is crucial. However, without being Saudi myself, acquiring this sort of understanding is nearly impossible. While writing this thesis I tried to remain aware of how I was choosing to represent not only myself, but my respondents. Nadia and Hind Wassef suggest (2001: 112) that:

Producers and consumers of representations should be more analytical in what they internalize and put out for mass consumption. Labels and explanations are freely lavished on subjects without enough attention to details and inconsistencies; and without enough dialogue having taken place. Dynamics between individuals, their communities, societies and factions within these groupings are [colored] by political realities that women must contend with. Inconsistencies offer more insights into people's lives and choices than information that tidily fits into pre-existing [molds]. Women's regulation of relationships with different power structures on micro- and macro- levels allows for a constant reinvention and reformation of floating identities. This is seldom captured.

Thus, I acknowledge that I may possibly be contributing to the problems I am trying to address.

Upon applying to Western Michigan University for the Master of Arts degree in anthropology, I remember my preoccupation with the described experiences of Saudi Arabian women in Jean Sasson's *Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia*. Although I was concerned with the stories reported in Sasson's book, I never envisioned myself undertaking ethnographic research that would challenge my own stereotypes about Saudi women.

As it stands, I have completed over three years of ethnographic fieldwork in the Saudi community. While doing ethnography, every ethnographer must first acknowledge their reasons for going into the field. Ethnographers are unique in that not only are they interpreting culture and lived experience, but they are also forced to interpret *their own experiences* without getting lost in them. I now realize that I *was* lost in my experiences within the Saudi community. Having dated a Saudi man for over three and a half years, and thus gaining access into the Saudi community, I was not prepared for the life-changing experiences I would have—the experiences I would not have had, had I not

loved a man who just happened to be Saudi.

The experiences I had with my boyfriend, his friends, and the women I met through them, really challenged all of the opinions I previously had about Saudis. This kind of knowledge and insight caught me off guard. I struggled to fit these new opinions into the ones I previously had, but they were almost incompatible. This lateral knowledge really stood in opposition to all of my previously held notions about Saudi Arabia. I never considered doing research within the Saudi community, but I abruptly became a part of it, even though I was still an outsider. It wasn't until I became romantically involved with a Saudi that I became aware of the differences between us as well as the similarities that brought us together. It was because of this relationship that I decided to write this thesis.

As a white, non-Muslim, middle class American woman, I hadn't been exposed to anti-Arab and anti-Muslim racism until I began dating this man. I never realized the extent to which Americans are uninformed about Saudi Arabia—nor how often the discussions I had with people within my community centered upon the “oppression” of Saudi Arabian women and their “oppressors,” Saudi men. But, at the same time, I was one of the uninformed people in my community. I had concerns when we first began our relationship, and they were based out of ignorance of a culture I wasn't familiar with. The concerns I had about this Saudi man were concerns I shared with other Americans—particularly my family members and friends. I quickly realized the understandings I had about Saudi Arabia were misguided. Upon having my eyes opened up to a world that became much more familiar and comfortable to me over time, I began seeing things quite differently. And all I saw was racism. All I experienced—on a daily basis—was anti-

Arab and anti-Muslim racism.

Where I was once oblivious to experiences of racism in this particular context, I became almost obsessed with defending my new Saudi friends, as well as my boyfriend, to others within my community—my family members, my friends, and strangers I met by chance. I learned that being Muslim was one thing, but being Saudi *and* Muslim, was an entirely different thing. My boyfriend's religion was bad enough, but his nationality seemed to compound the problem in their eyes. I was surprised that even during my annual exam my doctor, a white woman who had worked in Dearborn, Michigan for some time, had all sorts of horrible things to say to me about Muslims, and more particularly about Arab men.¹³ I did not completely understand where all of this latent anxiety and objection to my relationship came from. Usually racism is embedded within discourse in discrete ways, but because I am white, others within that white community probably felt safe stating their opinions to me—regardless of the fact that they were rooted in racialized discourse. I saw racism surface in ways I never anticipated. Perhaps I was not conscious of the racism that runs rampant in America—probably because I am white and thus unmarked.

I'm not quite sure of exactly what triggered my anger and fixation on repairing the racist ideologies I was so frequently exposed to, but I am sure that within the relationships I formed in the Saudi community, I lost myself. I began to romanticize Saudi Arabia and Saudi culture and tradition. I did not realize the bias created by this

¹³ Dearborn has a very large concentration of people who identify as being ethnically Arab—particularly Lebanese, Yemeni, Iraqi, and Palestinian.

romanticism because I was so determined to “educate” people within my community. Due to this bias, I disregarded some of the social realities that shape the Saudi experience as well as the reasons that Americans have certain understandings of Saudi Arabia. I became well acquainted with a community I may not have gotten the chance to be a part of, if not for my partner. Through him, I was introduced to the wives of his friends—initially because I was curious about Islam and also because I took my relationship very seriously and wanted to fit in with other Saudis. Through the wives of my boyfriend’s friends, I was introduced to other women and invited to many Saudi female gatherings, where I met and formed relationships with women who were probably just as curious about me as I was about them. I’m sure they wondered why I was there, but it was something I almost never mentioned out of respect for my partner. Despite the initial uneasiness and awkwardness we all experienced during our first interactions, I formed real friendships with many Saudi women while my relationship with my then boyfriend grew stronger.

At that point in my life, I realized that I had to make a choice. How much of myself was I willing to compromise? My concerns about the future of my relationship influenced me to consider what being a Muslim Saudi woman entailed because my relationship would demand it if it was going to last. The thoughts burning in the back of my mind were irreconcilable. I was trying so hard to fit into a community I wasn’t officially a part of that belonging became an obsession of mine. I tried uncommonly hard to appreciate and make sense of an identity that wasn’t my own, and in the process I felt compelled to negotiate my own identity—even to the extent of questioning my own beliefs in favor of

Islam. I wanted a lasting relationship with my then boyfriend, so I tried to open my mind to other possibilities. In exploring new ideas, specifically centered on Islam, I did some soul-searching.

Part of this soul-searching started when I began doing background research by attending Friday prayer at the Kalamazoo Islamic Center. I also volunteered at the Islamic school offered on Sundays. During the 2010 spring semester, I spent five hours a week over the course of ten weeks doing fieldwork for my project in Dr. Spielvogels' class. Through my activities at the mosque, not only did I establish relationships with many Muslim women, including some Saudis, but I formed a deep appreciation for an identity that was not my own. In reflecting on my experiences at the Kalamazoo Islamic Center as well as within the Saudi community, I realize the importance of demonstrating the complexities I was exposed to in order to help negate the stereotypes that simplify and dehumanize Saudi Arabian women.

Not surprisingly, once I was disengaged from the field, I began to realize how much I had actually changed as a result of my continuous engagements with my respondents. I dressed much more conservatively and my perceptions of Islam changed. I started viewing American culture more negatively and Saudi culture more positively. It was startling. To more fully understand Saudi Arabian culture, and Saudi women's experiences, I applied for and accepted a position in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. To my surprise the offer was retracted. I am still not completely sure why, but I was told I could not get my visa in time. Apparently, getting a visa to work in Saudi Arabia is a long process. Whatever the reason, I decided instead to take a position in Cairo, Egypt. While

living in Egypt, I confronted other realities that brought attention to the fact that Saudi women do not have the same opportunities as other Muslim women in the Arab Middle East, which should not be ignored. The Egyptian women I interacted with seemed more liberated than the Saudi women I interacted with. Egypt is completely different from Saudi Arabia with its diversity, competing ideologies, dissimilar political structure, distinct cultural and economic complexities, its colonial history, and linguistic differences. However, I thought the position would offer me an opportunity to improve my knowledge of Arabic, despite the differences in colloquialisms, as well as help me gain certain cultural insights that may apply to Saudi Arabia. While working in Egypt, I truly realized how much I had changed during the time I was with my ex—I was able to take a step back and view my experiences in a different light.

In Egypt, I broke up with my boyfriend.¹⁴ Upon our breakup, I opened myself up enough to reflect upon how I had changed in ways that I had not considered before—although my friends and family had definitely noticed aspects of that change that went completely unnoticed by me. For example, I realized I was extremely paranoid about what my neighbors in Egypt thought of my comings and goings. I also realized I dressed very conservatively by American standards—even by some Egyptian standards. I wore long shirts that fully covered my arms and my rear, loose baggy skirts, dark socks to

¹⁴ We broke up because I realized our religious differences would be a big strain on our relationship. We also knew a couple—an American woman and a Saudi man—who had lots of problems because of cultural differences, the documentation required in Saudi Arabia and America for them to stay together, the adjustments and problems resulting from their families' knowledge of their marriage, and the compromises that they both had to make in order for their relationship to succeed. Needless to say, we both agreed that it would be easier to end our relationship sooner rather than later.

cover my feet and ankles, and a scarf to cover my chest and neck every day.¹⁵ Initially, when I was living in Egypt, I never went out at night—not even with my American co-workers. I didn’t want my neighbors to think I was out drinking or out with men because I wanted to keep my reputation intact. After about two months of this type of behavior, and breaking up with my boyfriend, I realized how dramatically I had changed. So, I decided to spend more time with my American and Egyptian co-workers and less time obsessing over what the people around me thought. Most of my friends said that, because I was an American woman, my neighbors—despite my good behavior—probably had their own thoughts about me that I could do nothing to change; stereotypes about American women. As I came to terms with unlearning certain habits I had developed while I was with my ex-boyfriend, I realized the full extent of the mental and behavioral transformations I had made after spending so much time in the Saudi community. I had become very secretive and private, and was constantly paranoid someone would know something about me that would negatively impact their opinion of me. Finally, I came to terms with how much I had romanticized Saudi Arabia.

It took me moving to Egypt to put myself in perspective. Here I was, in Cairo, working at a school run by two strong-willed, outspoken, intelligent, well-respected Muslim women—one who had raised three sons by herself while establishing this school. I found myself spending time with Muslim women who were raising daughters and living

¹⁵ I had begun dressing this way in America, although I wasn’t as aware—like my friends and family were—of how much I had changed. Because of the ways I had changed, my old friends had trouble relating to me. I wasn’t *me*—at least not the way they remembered, anyway.

on their own while their husbands worked in gulf countries like Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates. I attended metal shows where I met female Muslim musicians who actively perform in bands that are very popular in the Egyptian metal scene.¹⁶ I also met female Muslim concert goers whom I watched head bang to death metal bands from Dubai, Jordan, and Egypt while wearing hijabs *and* Slayer shirts.¹⁷ Although instances like this are rare, maybe more attention needs to be drawn to them to further diversify American ideas about what constitutes being a Muslim woman.

With all of the rich experiences I had in Egypt, particularly concerning the women I interacted with, I began to wonder what it would take for women in Saudi Arabia to have the ability to do these things—perhaps they *already* do these things, but since I have not experienced it, I am unaware. While in Egypt, I went from defending Saudi Arabia’s restrictions on women, to sympathizing with them, to criticizing them. Then I really began to focus on the questions I touched upon earlier:

[H]ow do we fully immerse ourselves to share our subjects’ experiences, without fully losing ourselves to them; and how do we ensure that our subjects’ subjectivity comes across in our work? How do we engage in the politics of the particular in ethnography while at the same time trying to create larger pictures? (Wassef 2001: 112)

I now, more than ever, understand the difficulties of doing ethnography. I am still grappling with these questions—regardless of how hard I try, I will always “see” my respondents’ experiences through the filter of my own worldviews. I feel that my being

¹⁶ Metal is a genre of music that has been negatively stigmatized in Egypt for various reasons. In 2012, the political party backing then Egyptian President Morsi—the Muslim Brotherhood—targeted metal concert goers in Egypt through portraying them as Satanists.

¹⁷ Slayer is an American death metal band.

removed from the field has enabled me to withdraw just enough from the tight knit community I felt so much a part of, that the results of those prior interactions can now be more clearly reproduced in writing. While living in America, I was so caught up in defending my Saudi friends to my community, that I overlooked some of the realities that shape Americans' views of Saudi women. However, in sharing my initial reasons for going into the field as well as my emergence from the field, I hope that those reading this thesis are able to consider the nuanced issues that surface from my own intimate involvement within the Saudi community as well as my transformation while living in Egypt.

CHAPTER 3

CIRCUMSTANCE

This chapter examines the changes in the lives of Saudi women that have resulted from the past and present reforms introduced in Saudi Arabia. To analyze the effects of globalization and consumer culture in Saudi Arabia and how they have impacted the lives of women, I rely heavily on the work of Saudi Arabian female, Middle Eastern, and Islamic feminist scholars. To illustrate how Saudi women are reacting to the economic, political, and socio-religious transformations that characterize Saudi Arabia, it is important to first consider the influences of what is referred to in America as Wahhabism, or Wahhabi-Al Saud hegemony (Bradley 2005).¹⁸ The ideologies that stem from Wahhabi-Al Saud hegemony affect and govern the behaviors of all Saudis. Thus, it is crucial to understand how Wahhabi-Al Saud hegemony has affected and guided the reforms that have influenced women's opportunities in the past in order to better understand how it is currently affecting them.

Wahhabism and the Need for Islamic Rhetoric to Legitimize Reform

Since Saudi Arabia was unified in 1932, it has undergone rapid social transformation. Part of this transformation resulted in an alliance between what could now be considered the government and the *'ulama* (Commins, 2009).¹⁹ Eventually this alliance created an official doctrine known as Wahhabism. According to Elmusa (1997), the relationship

¹⁸ Wahhabism is a puritanical form of Islam based on the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd-al-Wahhab and practiced primarily in Saudi Arabia. Wahhabi ideology aims to remove deviances and idolatries from religious practice. Practitioners see their role as rescuing Islam from what they perceive to be polytheism and consider other branches of Islam as heretical (Litcher 2009).

¹⁹ The *'ulama* are a council of Islamic religious and legal scholars who have a central role in Saudi politics (Lichter 2009).

between modernization and tradition in Saudi Arabia is impossible to understand unless one is cognizant of the underlying influences of the Wahhabi ideology and the important role it plays in the government and the *'ulama*. Elmusa (1997: 349) states:

[The Saudi monarchy] saw technology as a means to integrate the kingdom, strengthen and extend state power, and raise the prestige and influence of the country internationally. To do that, it had to compromise with the *'ulama*, often by suppressing actions that technology makes possible or by employing technology in ways that preserved, if not fostered, what they believed to be the Islamic way of life.

Elmusa goes on to state that the Saudi monarchy and the *'ulama* have had to constantly reinterpret the relationship between modernity, reform, and traditional Saudi Arabian culture, politics, history, and religion.

Madawi Al-Rasheed, in her piece *Contesting the Saudi State* (2007), and David Commins, through his work in *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia* (2009), also offer insight into the importance of the Wahhabi ideology. With the multiplicity of social transformations taking place in Saudi Arabia related to education and women's rights, Al-Rasheed demonstrates the importance of focusing on the dialogue that is shaping this reform that Elmusa alluded to—the “Wahhabi religio-political discourse” (ibid 2007: 22). According to Al-Rasheed, the ideology that guides this discourse stems from Wahhabism. Wahhabism is easily distinguished from other Sunni Muslim religious discussions because of its very explicit interpretations; however, she notes that Wahhabism is a religious perspective that promotes debate so long as it remains within

the Wahhabi context.²⁰ Thus, it would seem that if Saudis use Islamic rhetoric that is framed within Wahhabism, they are able to encourage reform as long as it promotes an Islamic lifestyle. Commins (2009: vii) summarizes Wahhabism best:

Wahhabism – the official religious creed of Saudi Arabia – has stirred controversy since its genesis more than two hundred years ago. Presently, it figures in arguments over Islamic belief, worship, and manners throughout the world. Saudi embassies and multilateral Muslim institutions, funded by Riyadh, disseminate Wahhabi teachings. Saudi universities and religious institutions train thousands of teachers and preachers to propagate Wahhabi doctrine, frequently in the name of reviving ‘Salafi’ Islam, the idea of a pristine form of Islam practiced by the early Muslim generations. From Indonesia to France to Nigeria, Wahhabi-inspired Muslims aspire to rid religious practice of so-called heretical innovations and to instill strict morality. While Wahhabism claims to represent Islam in its purest form, other Muslims consider it a misguided creed that fosters intolerance, promotes simplistic theology, and restricts Islam’s capacity for adaptation to diverse and shifting circumstances.

Because Wahhabism is the dominant ideology in Saudi Arabia, it guides and influences reforms that affect the lives of all Saudis, particularly women—thus, it is something that should be reflected upon and understood. Some Saudis do not agree with the label “Wahhabism” to explain their religious beliefs, and it is unfair to use the blanket term “Wahhabi” to label all Saudis. There are many different Islamic beliefs and practices in Saudi Arabia as well as many minorities with beliefs that are incompatible with those that the kingdom was built upon. For example, there is a large Shia minority, largely in the eastern part of Saudi Arabia. Additionally, in my experience, many Saudis do not like being labeled Wahhabi, probably because it has become increasingly

²⁰ Some practitioners of Wahhabism see other Muslims as heretics. Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab believed that a belief in one God alone did not make one Muslim—one needs to heavily deny the worship of any other object (idolatry) and this includes prophets, religious leaders, grave sites, places of worship, and anything else other than God (Commins 2009).

stigmatized since September 11. Saudi Arabia is not monolithic, and neither are the Islamic beliefs in Saudi Arabia.

In the West, Wahhabism commonly epitomizes fundamentalism, narrow-mindedness, and extremism. Despite this, for some Western and non-Western Muslims, Wahhabism can represent a separate and independent form of unmediated Islam. Yet still, for some Muslims, Wahhabism is based on an “intentional distortion of Islam” that has been used By the *‘ulama* and by the royal family to maintain power in Saudi Arabia (Commins 2009: 2). However, Al-Rasheed argues that the Wahhabi ideology is intertwined with modernity; without it, there would have been no political centralization in Saudi Arabia.

Although frowned upon in the Wahhabi doctrine, some Saudi women and men participate in interpreting the texts and teachings of Wahhabism and what it means for women’s roles in society. As John Bradely indicates, there are many Saudis who are highly critical of the Wahhabi ideology (2005). Even the Al-Sauds—the royal family that has maintained political control of Saudi Arabia for years—are somewhat critical, but in a very discrete way. Many Saudi women are critical as well, but must frame their critiques in a context of Islamic rhetoric that supports an Islamic lifestyle. Through using Islamic rhetoric women can manufacture culture and affect social consciousness in a way that benefits Saudi women (Arebi 1994).

To briefly outline the many shifts in Saudi society as they relate to women, Islamic rhetoric, and reform, I will largely rely on Mai Yamani’s (2000) work in *Changed Identities*. Yamani notes three significant turning points in Saudi Arabian history, the first being its unification in 1932. Although the unification of Saudi Arabia was very

important, I will focus on the two turning points that more directly relate to my research: the “oil era” and globalization. Yamani says that the best way to judge these transformations is through considering three generations of individuals: grandparents (born around the 1930s), parents (born around the 1950s), and the new generation (born around the 1970s and 1980s). My research deals predominantly with the new generation and the era of globalization, but I will first focus on the parents’ generation that grew up during the oil era because this is when the reforms that most benefitted women were introduced.

The Oil Era: Reform and Women’s First Noted Attempt to Mobilize

The oil era attracted many foreigners who began to establish themselves permanently in the kingdom. The effects of expats living in Saudi Arabia have been dramatic. With the growth in technology have come regular interactions between Saudis and non-Saudis. The introduction of many of these outside elements into Saudi Arabia dramatically changed the social and cultural landscape. The “parents’ generation,” or those born in the 1950s and 60s, grew up during this era of diplomacy and standardization:

They came to adulthood after the institutional structures of the state had been firmly established. National homogeneity became the norm with the unification of dress (all Saudi men adopted the national *thoub* and headdress and all the Saudi women the black ‘*abaya* in public), a national education curriculum and the beginnings of mass communication through the first national newspapers and radio.²¹ (Yamani 2000:6)

²¹ A *thoub* is a long gown that normally comes in white, or grey—depending on the season—and is worn by Saudi men from head to the ankle or foot. A headdress is usually a red and white checkered scarf, a *shmagh*, that is placed on top of the head with a thick black cord, an *igal*, that is placed on top of the headdress to keep it securely on the head. Saudi dress varies regionally and the headdress styles reflect this.

It was during these conditions that transformations in the lives of women really began to come about. The distribution of oil wealth enabled social mobility and stratified the society with dramatic changes in the socio-economic status of many people. Oil wealth also brought with it government grants that enabled many Saudis to go overseas to pursue higher education (Yamani, 2000). In the oil era, many Saudis loved the state. Oil wealth improved the lives of many Saudis and thus, made it easier to establish a sweeping and homogenizing Wahhabi-Al Saudi political power as Saudi citizens were content with those in power—“[a]uthority began to rest on the just distribution of Allah’s wealth” (Yamani 2000: 8). During this time, it was much easier to get jobs because the demand was high due to the expanding economy. These jobs were predominantly for men, as reform was just being introduced. Most women were not yet educated and focused primarily on their roles as mothers and wives.

However, educational reforms began to dramatically change the situation for women. The 1960s were characterized by the reforms made by King Faisal bin Abdul Aziz to create numerous educational opportunities for women (Lacey 2009).²² Throughout this time education was made free and available to youth from across the country. During this period some began to realize, via the combined influences of King Faisal and Queen Effat, that women needed to be included in educational institutions as well as in the workforce (Le Renard 2008). The establishment of schools for young women was a radical change that redefined the status of women in Saudi Arabia (Hanley 2005).

²² King Faisal bin Abdul Aziz was the king of Saudi Arabia from 1964-1975.

Women's roles in society began to change as many graduates of the first institutions opened for women became prestigious career women in the Kingdom. However, not surprisingly some women who took advantage of these new educational opportunities continued to uphold traditional Saudi women's roles. During this time there were many changes that made women's lives easier such as the introduction of modern medicine and the economic growth that made it possible to finance lavish houses (Yamani 2000). These modern comforts led to a baby boom in Saudi Arabia.

Many of the women born in the 1950s and 60s became key agitators for the events that characterized the 1990s during the Gulf War. The new generation grew up during these tumultuous times taking education, radio, television, and modern conveniences for granted (Yamani 2000). Throughout the Gulf War American women were stationed in military bases in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabian women also came into contact with Kuwaiti women who drove into Saudi as refugees, to protect their families from Iraqi forces (Ambah 2005). Possibly as a result of these interactions, many Saudi women began to speak out in an attempt to have similar opportunities. They used Islamic rhetoric to assert that women were allowed to lead camels during the time of the Prophet Mohammed. A retired Saudi history professor, Mr. Zulfa, noted that "there's nothing in our religion or society that bans women from driving. Women drove camels during the time of the Prophet [Mohammad] and if he were around today his wives would be driving." (Ambah 2005) During the first week of November in 1990, 50 Saudi women flouted gender norms, drove their cars through the streets of Riyadh, and were subsequently arrested (Lacey 2009). The purpose of this particular information is only to

demonstrate the usage of Islamic discourse in an attempt not only to mobilize, but also to gain social footing in the past. Many of the championed reformers such as King Faisal in the 1960s, and now King Abdullah since he took charge in 2005, have used Islamic discourse to guide and legitimize reform and modernization in the Kingdom. The women who benefitted from the oil era birthed a new generation of women who are coming of age in the era of globalization.

The Era of Globalization: Reform and Women's Attempts to Mobilize

Not unlike Saudi women in the “oil era,” women more recently have couched reform in Islamic rhetoric. For example, in 2005, Princess Loulwa said that rural women always have driven and that she had hopes that urban women would also drive when Saudi Arabia is prepared (Hanley 2005). In another article, the Princess said, “[w]omen can drive in the desert, and some women in the cities have licenses, too” (as cited by Jardine 2005). Even today, seven short years after King Abdullah (the current King in Saudi Arabia) began to promise reform, women are still echoing affirmations similar to the ones asserted during the “oil era”:

[I]n the early years of Islam, women were a vital presence in Muslim communities. They attended mosques, engaged in public debates and got involved in decision-making processes. Aisha, one of the wives of the Prophet Muhammad, commanded an army of men while riding on a camel. If Muslim women could ride camels 14 centuries ago, why shouldn't they drive cars today? Which Koranic injunction prohibits them from driving? (Milani 2011)

Much like the government has used rhetoric that promotes an “Islamic way of life” to legitimize reform, Saudi women and men are doing the same thing. This use of rhetoric can be seen, especially now with the effects of the Arab Spring influencing the minds of

people eager to promote change in Saudi Arabia. The transformations that resulted from the oil era have propelled the restructuring of Saudi Arabian society. Whereas before the country was undeveloped—in comparison to all the developments that erupted from the rapid oil-driven transformation—the material conditions that emerged from the oil era have allowed new social realities to surface in ways that many Americans, and many Saudis, may not have anticipated.

Many women, from the new generation (born around the 1970s and 80s) in Saudi Arabia, are intent on receiving an education, securing employment, and are demanding opportunities to be more fully integrated into society. Saudi writer Samar Fatany (2005: 50) describes the effects of modern tensions on Saudi Arabia in relation to women's rights, asserting:

Social and cultural attitudes and habits at times hamper the progress of women. However, with continued successful contributions to the development of the country and an unwavering determination Saudi women are confident they will be able to utilize their full potential and ultimately change the negative attitudes and cultural constraints that have in the past marginalized their role in society.

Fatany notes a trend in the attitudes surrounding the role of women in the Saudi sphere; currently, there are a wide range of Saudi media outlets, and social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, applauding women's reform in their own way. These outlets are influencing and manufacturing changes in the cultural attitudes surrounding women's roles in Saudi Arabia. As a result, Saudi Arabia has made many changes to integrate women more fully into society, giving them more opportunities and control of their lives.

In 2009, Saudi Arabia opened its first co-ed university, the King Abdullah University

for Science and Technology (Coulter 2009).²³ Additionally, the Princess Noura bint Abdulrahman University for Women recently opened on May 15, 2011 and is considered the largest women's university in the world (Ali Khan 2011). According to Ali Khan, Khalid Al-Anqari, the Minister of Higher Education, said that King Abdullah's support is evidence of his intentions to educate the women of Saudi Arabia, and is working towards goals that will open all avenues for them. Ali Khan states that this university, according to its *female* president, Huda Bint Mohammad Al-Ameel, is also a symbol of gender equality (2011).

In addition to educational reform, reformations are being made in socio-religious realms that, traditionally, have been areas that were once criticized for their "oppression" of woman due to strict Islamic interpretations. Sheikh Abdullatif Al-Asheikh, the freshly appointed head of the *Hai'a*, better known as the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, is very supportive of women's rights to work in a public space (Hawari 2012).²⁴ He says: "I have always supported women working in places such as supermarkets provided that their dignity is preserved in accordance with Islamic teachings that supported this." Al-Sheikh also stated that he intends to set up a women's department in the *Hai'a* so more women will have the option of working (ibid 2012). Because women will play a role in this religious policing organization, they will be in a

²³ Sexual segregation is practiced in Saudi Arabia, but sexes mix in some public spaces such as super markets, certain shopping centers that allow families (but no single men), the Grand Mosque (Masjid al-Haram), and in certain hospitals, universities, and cultural centers.

²⁴ The *Hai'a* can be thought of as a religious-policing organization in Saudi Arabia.

position of authority in a way that was not possible before.

In addition to women becoming more involved in the *Hai'a*, one of the most prominent religio-political establishments in Saudi Arabia—and the most infamous to Westerners, King Abdullah also made a statement that women will also play a role in the *Shura Council*, yet another influential religio-political institution.²⁵ They will be able to vote and run in the elections themselves (Fatany 2011). Saudi women are also being encouraged to practice law with an increasing need for Saudi women, as lawyers, to represent Saudi women in court (Al-Shibeeb 2011). This is important as Saudi Arabia has no real written constitution. The Qur'an *is* considered the constitution. Sharia law is practiced, but the way it is carried out varies regionally across Saudi Arabia. Therefore, there are no standardized policies—most of the policies in Saudi Arabia are based upon interpretation. If women are able to play a larger role in influencing how laws and violations of those laws are carried out, this will most likely be to the benefit of women who will no longer have men presiding over their lives and whatever they did that necessitated a lawyer in the first place.

In sum, there are many changes in judicial, political, and religious institutions that have allowed women's participation in public realms that influence public opinion and behavior. King Abdullah, along with Sheikh Abdullatif Al-Asheikh, and other Saudi leaders, are using Islamic rhetoric to legitimize the demand for women in these areas.

²⁵ The Shura Council is a consultative council made up of 150 members who are appointed by the king. These members advise the king on various issues that surface within Saudi Arabia (Information Office of the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia in Washington, DC 2013).

Al-Asheikh noted in an article in the Saudi Gazette (Al-Ghamdi and Al-Dhubyani 2011) that there was no problem with women working, “as long as the nature of work and the work place are not forbidden in Islam.” Meaning as long as the work coincides with an Islamic lifestyle—essentially, whatever is interpreted to be appropriate for women to do in Saudi Arabia, which will vary between regions. In simpler words this means that as long as women continue to perform their duties as mothers and wives, and continue to follow the tenets of Islam as prescribed in Saudi Arabia, it is alright for them to work. In the article, Al-Asheikh is noted as saying that God allows women to work and there is a financial need for it, in some cases. He also brushed off any problem associated with women dealing with male customers as there is a system in place—surveillance cameras, the *Hai’a*, and well established cultural traditions and sharia law that guide behavior and interactions between men and women—that will curtail the problem. Sheikh Abdullatif Al-Asheikh also mentioned instances of women working during the time of the prophet to further validate his opinion.

Furthermore, Al-Ghamdi and Al-DhuByani noted that “the most important role for a woman is motherhood. This was the special role for which Allah created her and honored her for, [Al-Asheikh] said. But it doesn’t mean she should only be restricted to the home.” The dismissal of other roles for women in favor of motherhood may sound restrictive, but these reformations must be legitimized in a way that is culturally relevant and acceptable.

As earlier mentioned, even monarchs have also had to use religious rhetoric to validate technology and other integrations into Saudi society. In an article written by

Samar Fatany, Islamic rhetoric is said to have been used by King Abdullah, who “rejected the marginali[z]ation of women in all sectors and encouraged their participation in political life.” Fatany goes on to say that King Abdullah, like Al-Asheikh, used examples of important female leaders in the Prophetic era to endorse Saudi women in a way that was Islamically acceptable.

Interestingly enough, there were rumors reported from many Western media outlets about a new, women-only city being built in the eastern part of Saudi Arabia in Hafuf. However, in reality, it’s a city that has segregated areas for women’s use only. The Saudi Industrial Property Authority (MODON) issued a statement saying that (Cavell 2012):

The city is distinguished from other industrial cities for its proximity to residential neighborhoods to facilitate the movement of women to and from the workplace. It is also characterized by allocating sections equipped for women workers in environment and working conditions consistent with the privacy of women according to Islamic guidelines and regulations.

The construction will begin in 2013. This city is supposedly being designed to enable women to work without going against the Islamic laws, interpreted and enforced by the state, that govern their everyday lives. These laws vary by region in Saudi Arabia and involve prescribed stipulations for the way women dress, how men and women are segregated, and how active the *Hai’a* is in enforcing these stipulations. For example, Riyadh is considered very strict and many women are fully covered and almost always have a male escort. In contrast, cities like Jeddah and Al-Khobar are not as strict and some women do not even cover their hair or have male escorts. In Riyadh, strict segregation is practiced in many areas, while in Jeddah it is not.

The material conditions that have shaped social relationships in Saudi Arabia have had

noteworthy effects on gender roles. The segregation of the sexes in Saudi society has led to considerable opportunities for women, as indicated above. However, some people may liken this segregation of the sexes to the old Jim Crow laws that were practiced in the United States. At least in Saudi Arabia it's no secret that there is not gender equality—definitely nowhere near “separate, but equal.” However, the wealth brought in from the oil era has resulted in a private female sphere, that is perpetuated and controlled by and for women, thus allowing for solely female public spaces at some universities, work places, shopping malls, museums, banks, gyms, cities, and other institutions. In her article, “Only for Women: Women, the State, and Reform in Saudi Arabia,” Amelie Le Renard puts a positive spin on how this spatial separation has worked to the advantage of many Saudi women. She says:

In contemporary Riyadh, women are rarely visible in “mixed” public places, which does not, however, mean that their activities are limited to the domestic sphere. In fact, the segmentation of Saudi society into different spaces, where access is restricted either to men or to women, should not be confused with a division between a male public sphere (for production) and a female private sphere (for reproduction). This paradigm does not correspond to contemporary Saudi society, given that exclusively female public spaces exist[.] (2008: 612)

The material conditions in Saudi Arabia have actually paved the way for a female space, thus allowing for Saudi women to have access into the public sphere. This public sphere of course is “public” in a different sense. It is made public *for women only* and therefore dissimilar to what has been experienced in America, as Americans may have different ideas about what constitutes private and public spheres. Despite differences in our perceptions of “public,” this women-only public sphere is creating many new work-related opportunities for Saudi women. Despite the current lack of female entrepreneurs

in Saudi Arabia, with changes like these being made, this is sure to change.

In an article entitled, “Women Entrepreneurs in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia,” Dorothy Minkus-Mckenna notes that Saudi women control an estimated 45 billion Saudi Riyals in currency (2009) and also that “[w]omen own some 40% of family run companies, very often as silent partners” (2009: 8). Of course there are plenty of obstacles for these female entrepreneurs such as needing a male’s consent and needing a separate bank. However, Saudi men are being increasingly more encouraging of Saudi women. With support from male and female family members, as well as the government, new avenues are being created for women that are presently eroding the resistance and hostility towards the changes that are slowly, but unquestionably, transforming Saudi Arabia.

For example, this support of Saudi women can be seen as, for the first time in history, Saudi women participated in the 2012 Olympics. This unprecedented participation may seem trivial because so many other women have participated in the Olympics, however, this represents a large step for Saudi women. Wojdan Ali Seraj Abdulrahim Shahrkhani and Sarah Attar became the first Saudi women to participate in judo and track and field (Taplin-Chinoy 2012). These reforms that have created and fostered new opportunities for Saudi women are sure to erode the state laws that disempower them.

In addition to the structural changes in Saudi Arabia, there are now popular comedy shows, based out of Jeddah, where thought provoking social commentary is acceptable. “Ala al Tayer” and “La Yekthar” represent two areas where wittingly critiquing Saudi society is OK. Many episodes of “Ala al Tayer,” or “On the Fly,” center on women’s issues in a way that makes it easier for society to laugh at and open up about, but also

critically engage with important topics that the kingdom is currently facing. In the fourth episode of “Ala al Tayer,” host Amr Hussein guides the audience through a satire on the guardianship of women in Saudi Arabia.²⁶ As the skit unfolds, the audience can sense the ridiculousness of an adult woman carrying around a pocket-sized doll representing her guardian in order for her to gain mobility. It goes without saying that this snippet, although safely embedded in light humor, is a critique of the guardianship system of Saudi Arabia. Just the fact that there *is* a show that exists in Saudi Arabia that is addressing contentious issues demonstrates the amount of social change currently taking place within the country. In the past the then *mufti*, Shaikh Abdul-Aziz Ben Baz, issued a *fatwa* stating that any attack on men’s guardianship of women was a criticism of God and an attack on the Qur’an and God’s law (Arebi 1994), so one can understand the depth of the power embedded in the discourse of this satire and all of the cultural meaning integrated into it.^{27,28}

In another episode of “On the Fly,” episode eight, Hussein lightly brings up the plan to defy the ban on women’s driving as there was a call for women to defy the ban on June 17, 2011. Hussein interviews three women in Jeddah about their intentions to drive and the four young women continuously say in tandem, “we will drive, we will drive, we will drive, we will drive!” More recently, a new TV show called “Hush Hush” aired during

²⁶ See Appendix III for Arabic and English translation, video, and audio.

²⁷ The mufti is the highest religious authority in the country.

²⁸ A fatwa is a legal opinion made by a religious authority. It should also be noted that some fatwas are not taken seriously.

Ramadan in 2012 that presented one of the obstacles to women driving—collective fears about men and women interacting in ways deemed culturally inappropriate—while simultaneously the show depicted Saudi women as powerful and dismissive of the laughable approach taken by the Saudi men in the skit (Stanley 2012):

[A] lilac sedan comes to a halt and a woman climbs out of the driver's seat. A group of goofy, lascivious men [...] try to pick her up by offering to repair the car. From beneath the black hijab and opaque abaya, glints of the woman's contempt show through. "Who says my car broke down?" she says coolly. "I'm waiting for my friend." A matching barbie-pink car pulls up and two women glide away, leaving the Saudi dolts deflated and agog.

Stanley claims that programming in Saudi Arabia is pushing the envelope between modernity and tradition, stating that television is "the arena in which small rebellions can be staged and festering tensions addressed." Besides television, there are other mediums available that accomplish similar objectives.

Given new technologies and media outlets, like the aforementioned Facebook and Twitter, but also YouTube, and blogging sites where individuals can freely upload videos and share opinions, social relationships are changing dramatically. According to an article on *Kabir News* (Anderson 2012) these sites are extremely popular in Saudi Arabia as it is one of the top countries in the Middle East using them. The article also mentions that 4.5 million Saudis use Facebook. Saudi women now have access to the public sphere—globally, for that matter. Women are now going abroad to study on scholarships given to them by the government. My respondents even described to me how quickly the visas for women were processed as compared to the visas for men. The government is making women's education a priority. Along with opportunities to study abroad, women

are free to share their thoughts with the world given the rise in popularity of the previously mentioned social networking sites. These sites also give Saudi youth a chance to interact with each other, and the world—promoting a constant exchange and flow of information and ideas. With constantly changing material conditions such as these, social relationships and ideologies are forced to change. Changing social relationships and ideologies directly impact economic, political, and socio-cultural realms of life. These described transformations have been greatly beneficial to Saudi women—who now have access to education, careers, and social outlets to freely, yet sometimes anonymously, promote social change. Saudi women are slowly, but surely, on their way to becoming more fully integrated into Saudi society.

CHAPTER 4

SILENCES AND DECLARATIONS

Engaging in ethnography is unique from engaging in other forms of research as the ethnographer plays a central role in interpreting experiences so that others can more easily understand these experiences as related to their own familiar context. While I was writing up my fieldnotes for this thesis—keeping my respondents, myself, and others who might read this in mind—the thoughts running through my head were similar to what Barbara Frankel (as cited by Fernandez 2006: 162) expresses:

What does a field worker actually do at the end of a day of talking with informants?....(It's been a long day and after all one can't record everything. Besides everyone knows that that 'x' is unreliable so why record his version of things when it contradicts that of 'y,' one's best informant. Inevitably the ethnographer's own personal and professional biases are at work as (s)he writes an 'account of the accounts' of the day, creating another selective version of what 'really happened,' always trying to make sense of the data by refining, filtering, and occasionally falsifying it, however, unwittingly).

Keeping these thoughts in mind, my experiences with the Saudi community—wrapped up in my own subjective biases and in the reproductions of those subjective experiences—are as much a part of this thesis as my respondents and the parts of themselves that they shared with me.

This chapter focuses on what my respondents expressed to me and my attempts to understand and derive meaning from those accounts. Based upon the information that I collected, I argue that despite living in a patriarchal society where Saudi women face discrimination in many forms, there are many opportunities available to women. These opportunities are beginning to extend beyond the realm of family and into a public realm that has been transformed by recent changes in Saudi Arabia and by discourse that is centered on creating more educational and work related opportunities for Saudi women.

While doing ethnography, I was surprised to find that I felt that I had much less access to many of my respondents' *real* opinions than I anticipated before actually doing the interviews. Many of my respondents did not want me to share certain information in this thesis. They were concerned that they would be identified by people reading the thesis. They also mentioned they did not want me to include the personal stories that they had shared with me, particularly if the stories centered around their families. They also did not want me to share information that could be perceived as being critical of the religious institutions or certain cultural attitudes that surface within Saudi Arabia—cultural attitudes that center upon whether or not women ought to have the opportunity to pursue an education or a career, or to have the ability to drive. My respondents are all well aware that they are stereotyped as Muslim, Saudi women, and they all resent the discrimination that results from the generalizations non-Saudis make about Saudi women and Saudi Arabia. Thus, many of them were happy when I told them I wanted to illustrate a more accurate portrayal of Saudi women's lives from a more nuanced perspective—a perspective that I hope reflects their multi-faceted opinions. However, I didn't anticipate how difficult it would be to illustrate their views. The conversations that surfaced during interviews were much more positive about women's lives in Saudi Arabia, and the interviewees seemed reluctant to criticize the attitudes and institutions that discriminate against them. Meanwhile, the informal conversations I had, both with respondents and with close friends, were more critical. Trying to find a way to balance

these experiences, without betraying my friends' and respondents' trust was something I really grappled with in this chapter.

James Fernandez writes (2006: 169): “[W]e anthropologists are a discipline that depends very much upon voice, our own and that of our informants, but we are also a discipline that must contemplate that inescapable presence in our practice which is an absence of voice.” Not only is this thesis affected by the absence of the voices of my respondents, but it is also affected by my own silencing of those voices—what I chose to include and what I chose not to include. While ethnography does give a voice to some respondents, “it is also an exercise in displacing into anonymity many other possible voices” (2006: 169-70). When should I muffle my own voice and emphasize the voices of my respondents? How can I go about understanding what the self-censoring, polite refusals dressed up in uncertainties, and euphemistic language I confronted with my respondents really meant? Of course, I had to keep reminding myself that the goals for these women are not my own goals; the problems of these women are not my own problems and my problems are not theirs; the rights of these women are guaranteed to them in different ways than my own rights are guaranteed to me; the lives of these five women I interviewed are markedly different from mine, but different does not mean oppressed, unhappy, or unsatisfying. However, this is not the case for some of my other Saudi friends, who are discontent and saddened by their life circumstances. My interpretations of their silences are only interpretations produced by, in, and through me and through the three years of experience I spent within the Saudi community, as well as through the time I shared with my respondents.

Without knowing what they didn't say or why they didn't say it, I can only make informed guesses into the intentions, purposes, and meanings of their silences. While many women spoke fondly of their families, some did not speak about their families much at all. Many of them did not speak about the men in their families. While my respondents all spoke about education, they did not all share their feelings on the educational institutions and educational reformation in Saudi Arabia. Although some of my respondents spoke about careers, they seemed to focus much more on family and education. While Islam guides the lives of all of my respondents, they didn't speak about it at all unless asked directly. When asked how Islamic practices and beliefs in Saudi Arabia affected women or reform, their answers were vague. And lastly, while the Saudi government affects the lives of many of these women, only one chose to mention her feelings about it. Perhaps the topics I was so concerned about were of no concern to my respondents. Maybe what I interpreted as silence or discomfort about certain topics simply indicated that these women I interviewed were indifferent to them. In this chapter, I will touch first on family and education because these are the topics my respondents spoke at length about. I will also examine the silence surrounding Islamic beliefs in Saudi Arabia, the government in Saudi Arabia, and Saudi society.

Despite what I interpreted as the unwillingness, or inability, of the majority of my respondents to openly voice their feelings about certain topics, I still agree with Arebi's claim that "[Saudi] women [continue] to insist on making the distinction between 'man' and 'God,' between the 'social' and the 'religious,' and ultimately on their right to text themselves, to explore their own history, in order to understand its relevance to their

personal lives.” (1994: 3) In Saudi Arabia, the lack of women’s presence in Saudi history, as well as the lack of certain opportunities for women in Saudi Arabia, is a result of a state policy that allows men, and religious scholars (also men) who interpret God’s “will,” to enact laws that affect what is socially acceptable for women to do (Litcher 2009). While I was disappointed that most of my respondents did not directly state all of their feelings about women’s lives in Saudi Arabia, I was able to experience firsthand assertive, intelligent Saudi women who put the cultural attitudes that disempower women into question. These women communicated to me that the problems they are confronting in Saudi Arabia are deeply rooted and will take some time to change. The issues that we talked about centered on the attitudes that many Saudis, and specifically Saudi husbands, have about whether or not women should drive, receive an education, or work. Fortunately, most of my respondents do have very supportive husbands who believe women should drive, receive an education, and work. However, this was not always the case with my ex-boyfriend, and this was not the case for some of my close friends—one of whom had to stop attending classes, and thus, discontinue her education, to fill her primary roles as wife and mother. She expressed her disappointment and resentment to me repeatedly as well as voiced the fears and concerns she had about her marriage. Unfortunately there are many cases like this, cases where Saudi women are unable to pursue their own interests because their dreams come second to what their husband thinks is best at the time. Fortunately, there are also many cases where Saudi women are able to work toward their dreams of having a successful career, getting a Ph. D., owning their own business, or getting their driver’s license.

As mentioned in the first chapter, Saudi Arabia is undergoing a dramatic social transformation that is affecting dominant socio-religious ideologies and cultural realities. There is a power struggle going on between the *'ulama*, the government, society, and the desire to maintain tradition. Struggles like this usually leave one group silent. In this case the group that has been silenced is often women. The role of the silence maintained by some Saudi women has become a noticeable form of discourse in the world, until recently. Johnstone says political processes often involve the creation of silences, and in Saudi Arabia, where the *'ulama* and the government have the most control “[s]truggles over power and control are often struggles over whose words get used and whose do not and over who gets to speak and who does not” (Johnstone 2008: 71). While not all of my respondents spoke up about the issues I attempted to draw attention to in our interviews, specifically the state laws that hamper potential opportunities for women, and the social attitudes that sometimes discourage or prevent women from taking on roles that compete with the more traditional roles for women in Saudi Arabia, some women did speak up. To demonstrate the complexity associated with why and how women have access to the opportunities that some non-Saudi women often take for granted, as well as why some Saudi women remain in silence about these topics, I will draw upon interviews with respondents as well as fieldnotes from the time I spent in the Saudi community.

I finished my research within the Saudi community during the year of 2012. In 1994—almost two decades before I completed my research—Saddeka Arebi played a large role in dismantling stereotypes about Saudi women through the publication of *Women and Words in Saudi Arabia* a book that was referred to me by many members

who were on the listserve of the *Journal for Middle East Women's Studies*, and by Dr. Caroline Seymour-Jorn, whom I met by chance in Egypt and who said it was one of the few academic books published that presents a different view of empowered Saudi women. As Arebi asserts, Saudi women “live in a time of critical social transformation and ideological rupture” (1994: 3). My respondents are playing a large role in this transformation—a transformation that has been underway for over four decades. Unlike the women Arebi interviewed, who were all noteworthy writers, journalists, or scholars, the women I interviewed are all products of the reforms in Saudi Arabia; they are a part of the new generation of Saudi women who have experienced these reforms first hand. Arebi insists that “anthropologists have traditionally focused on cultural institutions as they exist rather than the discursive formations by which they are produced.” The discursive formations Arebi mentions are what I attempt to focus on in the interactions I had with my respondents. As Arebi states:

[W]e know that in Saudi Arabia as in other complex societies, not only cultural institutions but also discoursing groups of men and women constantly reflect on their existence, questioning, modifying, and reshaping their thinking. This reflection usually has an ideological dimension that serves to legitimate or order social relations. (ibid: 9)

This is exactly what is happening in Saudi Arabia now, almost twenty years after Arebi's publication. Only now, as I am writing this in 2013, can we see the effects of the ideological transformations and how they have physically, spatially, and socially changed the lives of women in Saudi Arabia. I spoke with my respondents about these changes and the topics that consistently surfaced within our conversations revolved largely around family and education. There were some other topics that came up less frequently, but

came up none the less. We just skimmed the surface of these topics: future careers, Islam, the Saudi government, and reform. However, I'm sure—given the concerns of my respondents—that I would not have gotten the kind of information I sought. Some Saudis I formed close relationships with, who were not among the women I interviewed, expressed discontentment with the choices their husbands made regarding their education and their marital relations. While these women were comfortable with my presence in their houses to observe and take notes, they seemed apprehensive about answering direct questions about controversial topics in Saudi Arabia. They, unlike some of my respondents, had to adhere to strict cultural codes and thus, were unable to drive, do things without their husbands' permission, or attend classes because they had to stay at home with their children. In the context of personal friendships and casual conversations, some Saudi women felt very free criticizing their husbands, questioning religious traditions, or questioning the choices made on their behalf. However, when I interviewed my respondents about the same things these other Saudi women criticized in different contexts, they had very little to say. I was able to collect much more information while doing participant observation than I was during any interview.

In the next section, I will introduce the two women who were central figures in my research: Alaa and Mona. Each woman had very different things to say about family, education, and Saudi cultural attitudes towards women. To further illustrate their outward opinions, I will also include experiences I shared with my three other respondents as well as with other women—who I did not interview but became quite close to—in the Saudi community. I did not interview these other women, the women

who I grew close to, because they seemed uncomfortable with the idea that I would ask them potentially controversial questions about the experiences of women in Saudi Arabia. While I continued on with my participant-observation, I did not ask any of the women who did not want to be interviewed any formal questions. I instead focused on our informal conversations.

Alaa and Mona

In addition to having their gender, religion, and nationality in common, the women whose voices dominated my research also were born into the same generation. And while they are from different regions in Saudi Arabia, I believe the main difference in the opinions they shared with me is the result of their family backgrounds. Alaa and Mona, while similar in many ways, demonstrate the polarity of the perceptions Saudi women have regarding the changes seen in Saudi Arabia and how those changes affect women. I met Alaa through a mutual friend who was a fellow graduate student at the time of our meeting. She and I were both doing research in the Saudi community and she described Alaa to me as being very talkative, outgoing, and someone who would enjoy participating in my studies. She was absolutely right. Alaa is from the eastern part of Saudi Arabia. Her family is from a more elite class—they have *wasta*. Having *wasta* means that someone has social pull and benefits based on their social relationships and networks with other people, as *wasta* can often secure a job or entrance into a program, even if one is not necessarily qualified. Alaa has been to the United States many times before for shopping excursions, and that is a luxury that my other respondents simply did not have.

Alaa stands out from my other respondents because she is the most outspoken of the five. She is also not married and is very modest—she wears *hijab*, but does not wear an abaya like some Saudi women studying in America. She is pursuing her studies at Western Michigan University just as her fathers, uncles, and brothers did. When I told Alaa about my failed plan to get a visa to Saudi Arabia, she told me her father may be able to pull some strings to get me there. I'm not sure if this was done out of politeness, or if it was really possible. Either way, it did not happen. Unfortunately, I did not get the chance to really spend a lot of time with Alaa. Most of our time was spent talking on Skype, as I moved abroad to Egypt shortly after our meeting. Even then, while I was living in Cairo, our conversations were challenged by bad Internet connections, power outages, and a seven hour time difference. I would have liked to have gotten to know Alaa more, and it is unfortunate that our relationship didn't grow as much as my relationships with other, more reserved, Saudi women. I would like to think, if I would have stayed in the United States a bit longer, I would have learned so much more. Alaa was my most forward and outspoken respondent. She was not afraid to make criticisms where she saw fit, unlike other women whom I was very close to.

Mona and I, for example, became quite close, but she was absolutely not critical in any way and did not give any attention to the discrimination women in Saudi Arabia face. I met Mona through a mutual acquaintance at Western Michigan University. The first time we met was because she wanted someone to help her with English. I remember meeting her, with a friend of mine who also intended to help her with English and practice her Arabic, at the student center on campus. Mona doesn't wear *niqab*, but I

noticed every time I met up with her she always was wearing a nice, classy, fitted coat and a *hijab*. Many Saudi women I knew also dressed this way—probably to come to a compromise with their own Saudi values while not further stigmatizing themselves in an American culture that can be antagonistic towards the ways Saudi women choose to dress. Mona is naturally very beautiful. I remember admiring how she carried herself, as she was very confident and articulate, despite wanting to practice her English. It was interesting to me that her husband was not present when she met me and my friend on campus. The first time I met her by myself, at Starbucks, her husband was present. This could be because our meeting was off campus and she needed a ride from her husband. Perhaps her husband did not want to leave her there alone. Mona’s husband came to our first few meetings, but once he felt comfortable with me around his wife, I would usually pick her up at their apartment. One time, when I picked her up to get coffee, she showed me a picture of herself without *hijab* on. I believe she imagined that I would be stunned to see her without *hijab* and expected a lot of flattery on my end. Because I have seen many Saudi and Muslim women without their *niqabs* and *hijabs* on, I wasn’t shocked. However I will say that Mona is one of the most beautiful women I’ve met. She is what I envisioned after reading this description of a woman by an Arab poet:

Hair black as the feathers of the ostrich
Forehead wide and eyebrows thick and arched
Eyes black like a wild doe
Nose straight and finely modeled
Cheeks like bouquets of roses
Mouth small and round
Teeth like pearls set in coral
Lips small and coloured like vermillion
Neck white and long

Shoulders broad
Hands and feet small
Manners agreeable
Laughter delicate (Cuddihy 1996: 23)

Mona truly embodies the type of woman described in the poem. She is studying in the United States because her husband is. When they arrived, she joined him at the same university with the goal of completing her master's degree. She was very vocal about her work and educational experience prior to attending WMU. She told me that before she was married, she worked for about one and a half years as a teacher as the head of the department in her university in central Arabia. After that, she said she was a secretary. Mona also talked about her three sisters and emphasized how the women in her family dismantle stereotypes about Saudi women. She said that one of her sisters is a math teacher, one works in an office, and the other is a housewife, but enjoys being a housewife. Mona's mother and grandmother do not have a college education, but Mona said they have always encouraged her and her sisters to pursue their dreams.

When I met her to ask about participating in this research she smiled and said: "This is a great target." Mona thought my topic, or target as she termed it, was important because she expressed to me that she feels many Americans don't have a very good, or informed, understanding of Saudi women. She then went on to say I could give her the recruitment form and that she would give it to her friends so they could take part in the research too. Mona seemed to think my research would be a good way for Americans to be exposed to "the real picture of Saudi women." From Mona's perspective, this real picture seemed to entail women who are actively pursuing higher education, securing

jobs, and accomplishing the goals they set for themselves—all of this with support from their families and husbands.

In the following section, I will discuss Mona and Alaa's thoughts about families in Saudi Arabia. Both Alaa and Mona surprised me. During the interviews, I expected much more disclosure from Mona, since I formed a fairly close relationship with her. However, I got much more information from Alaa, who was a complete stranger to me. As I mentioned, if I had had the time to have gotten to know her better, I imagine I would have gained a wealth of insight from her. The experiences Mona shared with me were all very positive, but Alaa had a much different outlook on life in Saudi Arabia.

In the following section, I will focus on family as it relates to women's opportunities. Discussions with my respondents tended to center mainly on their families, but there were still silences that deserve attention. I will try to explain the reasons for these silences about the cultural norms, religious beliefs, and social attitudes that might encourage families to discourage women from taking on non-traditional roles or from pursuing new opportunities. I will be using theories developed by Arab and Saudi scholars, as well as using my own interviews with respondents. Family affects a woman's ability to pursue an education or a future career. The families that make up Saudi society influence public opinion, which in turn shapes reform. Mona and Alaa illustrate two different perceptions of Saudi Arabia, so I will be framing the following discussions by juxtaposing the interactions I had with Mona and Alaa. I will also include experiences I shared with my friends to make further comparisons. I will follow the

upcoming segment with a short section on education and another on Islam, discussing these things in relationship with each other.

On Family

In *Women in Saudi Arabia*, Altorki argues that there is “a general trend of movement away from the extended family to the nuclear family [...] this tendency is making a significant impact on a wide range of issues affecting [Saudi] women’s lives” (1986: 21). This might be surprising for some, particularly when traditionally family has been extremely important, so important that Cuddihy insists “[f]amily ties are ingrained from an early age and take precedence over any other obligations or relationships. An Arab proverb proclaims, “*My brothers and I against our cousin; my cousin and I against the stranger*” (1996: 49). However, it seems that, twenty years later, the idea of family is changing.

As I touched upon in chapter one, women’s family lives, particularly as they are related to marriage, have changed dramatically. Some women are demanding in their marriage contracts the right to an education, a career, and a separate household, apart from their in-laws, and specifically their mother-in-laws. Altorki says;

As an old woman (who lived with her son’s wife) said, “When young girls get married, they make it a condition to live alone. When a man goes to ask for a girl’s hand in marriage, they family asks, ‘Where will she live?’ A girl wants to move out because she wants to feel that she is the mistress of her new home. They want the liberty to go out and come without notifying their mothers-in-law, which they would have to do if they lived in the same house. [...] too close a contact between a man’s mother and his wife brings misunderstandings. In the past the husband’s mother was the mistress of the house. (ibid 1986: 33)

Altorki states that married couples have less contact with their parents due to separate entrances and exits in their home (of course, this only applies to those Saudis who can afford to have separate entrances and exits). As mentioned in chapter one, Saudi Arabia has been dramatically transformed since the oil era. The effects of modernization that accompanied this period of time can be understood in the context of considering the economic circumstances during the oil era. Oil brought jobs and government grants to Saudi Arabia. The money from these jobs and grants went into many things, such as the increased popularity of very lavish, spacious homes—many of which had separate entrances and exits to accommodate Saudi cultural values, specifically the tradition of segregating the sexes. Altorki supports this notion: “The traditional pattern of allocating space facilitated a strict segregation of men and women” (ibid 1986: 31). The separate entrances made it easier to maintain this segregation.

Nowadays, women are cutting down on traditionally obligatory familial relationships, such as the expectations a mother-in-law may have for a new daughter-in-law to cook, clean, and cater to her husband’s family. Due to these types of changing expectations, women are building relationships with friends outside of the family. Saudi husbands and wives are spending much more time together. Altorki’s research demonstrated that women are much more involved in decisions affecting their children, house-holds, and finances. To the extent that this is true for my respondents, I am not sure. We never spoke specifically about their financial situations. I do know, however, that their husbands gave them money to go shopping and spend that money freely. I also know that these women’s husbands gave them money to finance their fairly lavish women-only

parties. My female friends also chose the furnishings for their apartments and chose apartments close to other Saudi families, so they could be closer to them and have support from other Saudi women in the Kalamazoo community. Alaa mentioned she lived with her brother because it made things much easier for her, but she never mentioned being close to other Saudi families. Mona, on the other hand, lived in an apartment complex that many Saudi families did not live in. However, besides Alaa and Mona, all of the other Saudi women I knew lived within walking distance of other Saudi women they knew.

Almost thirty years after Altorki's publication, women have more support than ever before to pursue their own personal goals, on their own terms. However, this is not true for all women and it is dependent upon many things such as where the women's family lives and the families' feelings about women's roles. Alaa told me that most women, who live in bigger cities like Riyadh and Jeddah, normally have more opportunities than women who don't.

While most of my respondents talked very fondly of their families, Alaa addressed issues—related to whether or not women and men deserve the opportunity to attend school—that are confronted by many Saudi families and how hotly debated those issues can be among family members. She says:

For example, sometimes in the *same family* we have...educated people and open minded [people] and they... are refusing to even...have their—give their—freedom [to] their girls, or their sons, you know, to choose. For example, their majors or even to choose the *school* they want to go to. So, they are not ready yet. I feel [with] some people... there [are] a lot of issues to deal with. And... I think that sometimes they are not aware of...we have like...three parts: people who want to change, people who want to follow, and people they say “no”

without understanding the need for that change. That's how to summarize the Saudi society. (Alaa laughs) They say no without understanding the need for that change.

Although Alaa mentioned how supportive her own family is, she feels that within each family there is a lot of disagreement about whether or not women should go to school, have a job or study abroad. How each family feels about what a woman should or shouldn't be allowed to do is dependent on their family background (roots, kinship, family history, or maybe which tribe they identify with), level of education, class, the city they live in, their political and religious ideologies, and general cultural attitudes. In Saudi families there are family members, like in any family, who disagree with each other. Mona never mentioned anything like this within her own family. She only mentioned they were supportive of her and the choices she made. The case with Mona is the same as the case within my pool of respondents. All of the respondents I interviewed were in school and thus, had families who supported their education, or so they said. I feel that the fact that they are in the United States pursuing their education is a testament to the support they have from their families—after all, they need a male's approval to travel abroad, and without that kind of support, their presence here would not be possible. However, to what extent there may have been disagreements in the families of my respondents about their opportunities to study abroad, I do not know. When I spoke with them about other women they knew, they reported familial support and made no mention of any familial dissent.

Mona, for example, continuously commented on how encouraging her family was. This seemed to be true for Mona, at least based upon what she said. She has eight

brothers and sisters, four girls and four boys, who are all in school. All of the girls are married except for one. However, Mona told me when her unmarried sister finishes school, she will get married. It seems that her family has made education a priority over other matters, such as marriage and obligations to family, which have traditionally outweighed other roles for Saudi women. One of her sisters, although educated, is a housewife, which is often considered a traditional role for a woman in Saudi Arabia. That is not to say her family doesn't encourage her—she didn't seem to think it was problematic and noted how happy her sister was. When reflecting on her own life Mona said: "My husband is very supportive" and giggled as if saying to me, "obviously, why wouldn't he be?" The people Mona continuously spoke about in her family were her sisters, her mother, her grandmother, and her husband. I found it surprising that there was absolutely no mention of her father or grandfather, and very little mention of her four brothers. She told me her mother and grandmother don't have a university education—in fact, I am unsure what their level of education is—but that "they think you must follow your dreams, make your own future."

Similar to Mona, Badra also has positive things to say about her family. I was introduced to Badra through Mona. She and Mona are friends and both are from central Saudi Arabia. Mona really wanted to help me with my research, so she asked her friend if it was alright for me to do an interview. Badra agreed, but we never actually met in person because she was living in Saudi Arabia when we did the interview. With the help of Mona, I emailed Badra an interview form in Arabic, and she responded in Arabic as well. Badra is not married, and wants to finish school before she marries. At the time of

the interview she was pursuing her master's degree in central Arabia. Badra has three sisters and two brothers. Both her father and mother are retired and each had careers. Her family is very happy about her education. She is getting her master's in the social sciences. She noted that her family really values education and also that the women in Badra's family, her grandmothers, aunts, mother, and sisters, are always discussing education in Saudi Arabia because her family believes it is very important. Because I didn't officially speak with Badra, one might question the credibility of what she expressed on the questionnaire Mona gave to her. There is the possibility that she could have written answers that painted a very positive picture of her family and her opportunities in Saudi Arabia. I don't doubt the credibility of what she said, because I trust Mona's judgment and also because the majority of women I've met do seem to have very supportive families. My ex-boyfriend's sisters, for example, are educated. He constantly talked about one, who was going to school to be a nutritionist and working on her master's degree in Riyadh. He always talked about all of the opportunities his sisters had, however, he told me his mother didn't have an education beyond the eighth grade. He often expressed sympathy for his mother who had a husband, my ex-boyfriend's father, who was nowhere near as supportive of his wife as he was of his daughters. In my experience, the generation of the women I interviewed, all have men in their families who endorse their daughters' academic and work-related pursuits.

Amool, for example, also had a supportive family. I met her at a Saudi party for women only. Before actually talking with her at the party, I had seen her quite frequently

at the *Jumaa* prayer with her daughter.²⁹ At the mosque, Amool always wore an *abaya* and *hijab*—of course this is typical for women to wear when attending Friday prayer. Upon first glance, I never thought Amool was Saudi. While Amool was very beautiful, she did not have the physical features that other Saudi women had; she did not look Arab, but she identified as being Arab. I used to go to the Kalamazoo Islamic Center quite often and recognized her at a Saudi party that Noona had invited me to because she stood out, like I did, as a sore thumb. The only times I ever saw Amool were at Friday prayer and at Saudi parties. Although I did speak to her over the phone, we never met in person outside of these activities. The atmosphere at the first gathering I met her at, away from the mosque, was very different than the atmosphere at the Kalamazoo Islamic Center. I never approached any women there—they approached me. I discovered later that there was usually an incentive behind why I was approached. Many women at the mosque were curious about me, and some were attempting to forge a relationship with me so I could be introduced to a brother or son as a potential spouse. As I had never been approached by Amool, nor introduced myself to her, I was “reintroduced” to her at this Saudi party, and was surprised to see how much her daughter had grown since the time I had so frequently seen them at the mosque.

I remember I was sitting alone, awkwardly, at this party—hosted by Noona, who I will introduce shortly— and Amool approached me with her daughter. We began chatting

²⁹ Jumaa is considered a holy day for Muslims, akin to attending church on Sunday for Christians. On Jumaa—Friday—Muslims gather at mosques to hear a brief lecture by the Imam and then special Friday prayers are held.

and exchanged numbers. Although I knew Noona, most of the women I knew were either back in Saudi Arabia, as they or their husbands had finished school at this time, or had changed schools and ended up moving out of state. She probably assumed I didn't know many women at the party and I was thankful she took a liking to me. Amool is from the western part of Saudi Arabia and has two children. She was working on her master's degree at Western Michigan University with her husband, who was also a student at the time. I mentioned that Amool also had a supportive family, but I never heard her talk much about her family, or her husband. When I say "supportive" in this context, I mean that a woman is allowed to attend classes and get a degree. So in this sense, all of the women I interviewed had supportive families. As mentioned, every single woman I interviewed had no negative things to say about their own families—even Alaa who was very open about discussing the realities that affect many other Saudi women.

It is important to note that when it comes to families, reputation is extremely important. Cuddihy states that a "family's history of such intangibles as generosity, courage, and honor are far more meaningful than current success or failure or individual members, although this, too, will be woven into the tribe's reputation" (ibid 1996: 49). This means that what my respondents do and say could potentially negatively affect their family's reputations. So, of course, it is not surprising that my respondents had nothing negative to say about their families, or any topics—such as religion and politics—that may draw unwanted attention to their families. Altorki notes that "both men and women avoid provoking parental anger, by compliance if at all possible, and by deceit if

necessary.” I am sure that this extends to other family members. However, Altorki also addressed a change during her fieldwork done in the early 1970s through the mid-80s with how Saudi children interact with their parents. She writes:

As one old woman explained to me: “Things are different now—in the past, we could not contradict our parents. We couldn’t do anything without their permission. We feared and respected them. Today, young girls might even cross the room with shoes while their mothers are sitting down on the floor [a sign of disrespect]. They smoke in front of their mothers, some of them might even discuss love and sex with their mothers. Didn’t I tell you that those who have shame are dead?” (ibid 1986: 76)

Perhaps the silences involving certain family members come from a sense of respect, or maybe a feeling that compels them to protect their family reputations.

Badra and Alaa are the only respondents who actually mentioned their fathers to some extent. Alaa had told me her father could potentially get me a visitor’s visa to Saudi Arabia. Of course, as I said earlier, this never panned out. However, I feel that Alaa comes from a family that supports her in ways that my other respondents were not supported. The fact that she said she could ask her father to help me, communicates that she has a fairly comfortable relationship with her father, and thus, her family. Badra only mentioned her father to say that he supported her and that he had a wife, her mother, who had a career. This indicates that he also is very supportive of the women in his family as he chose to marry a woman with a career. I was surprised that, while Badra and Alaa mentioned their fathers, none of my other respondents did. This could be because fathers are highly respected and because generally there is distance between a father and his children (ibid 1986). Another reason could be because *rida*, contentment or satisfaction, is something that children must observe when interacting with their parents (ibid 1986).

They should not do anything to upset their parents or make them angry, which could include giving me information that may damage a family's reputation.

Noona, for example, did not speak much about her family. She did tell me very basic information, basically that she has three sons and is here with her husband. Noona, the one who I earlier mentioned hosted the party, is a woman I ran into completely by chance. I was waiting for an Arabic class at Western Michigan University and she walked by because she had a class in the same building. As I saw her walking by, wearing a beige *abaya* and *hijab*, she paused briefly. She heard me and another classmate listening to and translating a song by Amr Diab.³⁰ I guess this must have spiked her curiosity because she began talking to me in Arabic. Noona, like Mona, is very beautiful. She has very delicate facial features, and a very round baby-like face. I remember when she invited me to a party she hosted how done up she was. While she was naturally beautiful, she knew how to put herself together. Her hair, when exposed in the company of other women and children, was long and black, but she had an ombre hair style—meaning the top was one color (black) and the lengths of her hair were another (reddish orange). Her hair, in my mind, really showcased her personality; she was very animated and enthusiastic. She made a charming hostess and was very attentive to her guests. When I first met her, I was surprised that she knew the Egyptian dialect—which is what I learned at WMU—and, after speaking for a bit with her in Arabic, she asked for my number. Noona wanted to introduce me to an Egyptian woman who didn't speak

³⁰ Amr Diab is an Egyptian pop singer.

English, but wanted someone, ideally American and female with knowledge of Arabic as a plus, who could teach her. Noona ended up introducing me to her friend, who later became a very close friend of mine, and invited me to the mall to shop with her, as well as inviting me to Saudi parties she hosted. When I met Noona, she was studying at Western Michigan University because her husband was. She is from a smaller city in Southern Arabia. Her dialect is very different from other dialects in Saudi Arabia. Apparently, none of her friends can understand her so she has to use a more familiar dialect. Noona's marriage was essentially the catalyst for her opportunity to come to America to study. In America, she had her husband's support and, even though she was expected to fulfill her duties as wife and a mother to three children, she managed to balance being a graduate student as well.

My boyfriend at the time, unbeknownst to her, was friends with her husband. He often went to their house for men-only Saudi parties that her husband hosted and that Noona cooked for. He and I always talked about her cooking—she made the best *kabsa* and *laban*—and upon returning from their house he always brought a big tin of whatever she prepared back for me to eat.³¹ I never told her how fond of her cooking I was because she did not know I was dating a Saudi man who frequented her husband's parties. I didn't want to break my ex-boyfriend's trust and was concerned about both his reputation and mine, so I normally didn't tell Saudi women I was dating him unless I sought their advice, or they were close friends of mine. In casual conversations I had

³¹ Kabsa is a traditional Saudi dish usually made with rice, spices, and various kinds of meat. Laban is like a tangy liquid yogurt usually made from goat's or sheep's milk (or both).

with her, Noona expressed that she really struggled to balance the multiple roles she was expected to fulfill. She had to balance the roles of wife, mother, and as a graduate student studying biomedical science. While she didn't speak much about her family, she did joke about how having children isn't that great often enough for me to notice. She seemed very tired with them, but she obviously loves them a lot. Noona's roles as wife and mother seem to be more important in her family than her studies. She had to work extremely hard to ensure her husband and children were happy, while studying at the same time. Despite the potential frustration of having to balance all of these expectations, Noona appeared very happy. Given that she hosted one of the Saudi women only parties I went to, I believe that her husband is encouraging and that they have a good relationship. Her husband was also friends with my good friends' husband; they both taught in the same department at Western Michigan University. I spent a lot of time with this family. I was at their house multiple times every week until they went back overseas, where I actually met up with them again, in Cairo. Through my friendships with other Saudi women and some non-Saudi Muslim women, I learned a lot about Islamic marriage and the marital role "requirements" for Saudi women.

I use the term requirements loosely because the roles both partners play in a marriage are subject to change depending on familial values, beliefs, and attitudes. While my respondents and friends may have expressed annoyances or dissatisfaction with certain choices that were made after some discussion, they ultimately accepted the advice and suggestions from their husbands and seemed content with them. Four of my friends constantly had to ask her husband if it was alright if I came over. They always had to

make sure their husbands were out of the house when they had friends over. They also always had to ask permission to do things with me outside of the home. Once they were given permission, they told their husbands where they would be and sometimes even texted them the address of the place we'd be at.

One time, while I was at my good friend Um Azooz's house—a woman I grew very close to, and one that I did not interview as I sensed she would be uncomfortable with my formal and controversial questions—I think I overstayed my welcome. Her husband got home earlier than we anticipated and I was helping her prepare dinner. I had assumed I would stay to eat with them since she was teaching me how to cook some more traditional Saudi dishes. Her husband called, and she seemed irritated. After she got off the phone, we spread out their floor mat, and began to set the food on it. Her husband arrived shortly after and their son, Azooz, rushed to the door and greeted him with a big smile. Um Azooz's spouse, also my ex-boyfriend's good friend, did not look pleased. I whispered to Um Azooz to inquire about whether or not it was alright for me to be there. She told me it was no problem, but I sensed a lot of tension. I did my best to ignore her husband's attitude, but it was a struggle. I finished eating, and then thanked them repeatedly for allowing me to be their guest. Of course, they said it was no problem, and then their son cried as I was leaving. This made me feel even more awkward. I'm assuming my friend and her son wanted me to stay, while her husband did not want me there. Situations like this, with this particular couple, happened quite frequently, as will be detailed a bit later in this chapter.

As illustrated by my experience with Um Azooz's family, in addition to the silences surrounding any discussion of my respondents' fathers, there was also a considerable amount of silence surrounding my respondents' husbands. Mona, however, spoke a lot about her husband. Although when she spoke about him, it was always to showcase his compassion, generosity, and kindness. She told me he was teaching her how to drive, and that she hated cooking, so they went out to eat a lot. Mona told me how he took her horseback riding on her birthday and how he was so supportive of her studies and career goals. I should bring up again that the first time I met Mona, her husband was present. As mentioned, he was present at many of our initial meetings. This makes sense because a husband's role is to support and protect his wife, just as a wife's role is to obey her husband. As a stranger, it did not offend me when I knew he was there to ensure that my intentions with his wife were well-meaning. Knowing these things, it is not surprising to me that my respondents did not talk at length about their husbands or their fathers in formal interviews.

When women are not married, their choices and opportunities are largely determined by their father, and when women are married, they need to obey their husbands (ibid 1986). Although the word "obey" is highly stigmatized in the West, the way Saudi women think about it is different from the way Western women think about it. Saudi women feel that obeying their husbands is a duty, much like Saudi men feel that taking care of their wives—protecting them, ensuring they have what they want and need—is a duty they must obey. They take these roles seriously, and these roles are like moral obligations. For example, during WMU's International Festival in 2011, some of my

female friends were involved in the Saudi booth. One of my friends, I will call Adeeba, also a woman I did not interview for the same reasons I did not interview Umm Azooz, did henna designs and mentioned how excited all of the women were to be a part of the International Festival. She said their husbands said it was alright. However, despite her excitement over being involved, she expressed disappointment to me. While the men were able to do their sword dance in front of those who attended the International Festival, the men forbid the women from participating in a dance of their own. I remember that my ex-boyfriend and some other Saudi men were upset because one of the women who helped out in the Saudi booth refused to wear *hijab* and cover her hair. I never discovered if she disobeyed her husband, or if her husband supported her. I'm guessing the latter statement is true.

As I mentioned earlier, the majority of women I got to know needed to ask their husbands for permission to do things that involved being outside of their apartment complexes. To be more specific, at least five of my friends—who I did not include as my interview respondents—needed their husbands' permission to spend time with me. However, not all of my friends obeyed their husbands or regularly asked for their permission. Um Azooz, for example, would often wander with her son to a duck pond near their apartment. They walked around without her husband quite frequently. She was often bored, and was not allowed to drive. Therefore, I usually picked her up and took her and her son to doctor's appointments or to parties. One time, nearing the month of Ramadan, her mother in law and her aunt came to visit and I ended up giving all of them a ride because, embarrassingly, her husband was unable to. Um Azooz did not take

kindly to his neglect of his duties as a husband. Another time, as I was driving and happened to be lost, she called her husband and was screaming at him to come pick them up because they would be late for their son's appointment. After that phone call, we met him at a gas station nearby—he was there in under ten minutes. His immediate response to his wife's stern request further illustrates the sense of duty regarding the roles a husband and wife are supposed to fulfill. He neglected his duties as a husband and a father, and he probably realized this. When Um Azooz grew understandably upset, he didn't argue, he just showed up and acquiesced to his wife because he knew it was his duty in this particular situation.

Despite the more traditional views of some of my friend's husbands, many Saudi men have really changed their views as they relate to opportunities and roles for women. I knew three Saudi women who drove cars and had licenses. Two of these women drove other Saudi women around when their husbands were not able to or selfishly refused to take them places. Since these women were here with their husbands, and two of them had children as well as graduate school on their plates, they needed their husbands' support to get their licenses. Two of these women were from Jeddah, which is considered a more liberal region in Saudi Arabia, and one was from Riyadh, which is considered much more conservative. When it comes to things like what a woman is expected to do at the home, some roles are changing. For example, Mona, unlike my other married respondents Amool and Noona, never had to cook for her husband. In fact, she hated cooking and told me her husband knew this and did not mind. They went out to eat instead.

Other areas where roles are changing involve women driving and getting around without being chaperoned. This is what I experienced with a few Saudi women I knew. Alaa, Mona, Noona, and Amool all went out and about by themselves. However, Noona and Amool required their husbands to drive them certain places because they were unable to drive themselves. In these things, I believe that the majority of Saudi women living in major cities are encouraged and expected to attend a university, graduate, and pursue a career.

But despite these changes, women, as illustrated through my respondents, don't normally discuss their private lives, or their family dynamics, in public. One of my friends, whom I did not interview, did share with me a lot of personal information about her family that contradicts what I previously said. She expressed her unhappiness to me. She told me she was not allowed to continue her classes at Western Michigan University because she needed to stay home and take care of her son. Her son used to go to daycare, but her husband decided it was best if she stop taking classes and take care of their son instead. She was absolutely devastated. She told me she asked God why her situation was as it is. She dreamed about going to college to study psychology. She expressed her fears of her husband taking a second wife. Her husband, she said, might take a second wife if she did not have a second child. She did not want a second child, but her husband continued to pressure her to have one. She seemed frustrated as if saying to me, "It's hard enough taking care of one child and one husband alone, without my family here to support me, and he wants *another child!*?" Months after confiding this to me, she

became pregnant. Months later, they lost the child. We never discussed the miscarriage, but I am sure she was relieved in some ways and anxious in others.

I am sure, to some extent, that the women I interviewed shared certain anxieties regarding their family's decisions—decisions they may have had no involvement in—with my friend mentioned above. This friend, who was not allowed to attend school, introduced me to two other women who also did not attend classes. These two other women, I will call Umm Abdool and Umm Seif, did have husbands who wanted them to learn English—probably to make their lives easier. So, I began teaching Umm Abdool and Umm Seif English in the comfort and privacy of their apartments. I didn't know them very well, but they seemed very content with their lives, unlike the friend who introduced me to them. There was always a sadness about her. She never seemed very happy to me, but while she seemed to be at odds with the decisions her husband made for her, she still obeyed her husband and continued to perform her duties considerately and courteously. While Saudi family's either curb or encourage women to pursue opportunities, education and what a woman does with that education is another. In the next section, I will touch upon the things my respondents, and other women in the Saudi community, expressed or didn't express about education, and to a lesser extent, cultural attitudes and institutions, and Islam.

On Education, Saudi Cultural Attitudes and Institutions, and Islam

The relationship between Saudi families and education for women in Saudi Arabia is a vital part of shaping Saudi reform. Alaa spoke very candidly about her opinions on educational reform. She was very open and asserted that many women still do not have

the right to go to school. Major cities like Riyadh and Jeddah present women with many opportunities to study. In addition, large city centers often have private areas for women only and this spatial arrangement allows women more freedom to attend universities and secure employment without having to mix with men if they so choose. Alaa pointed out that, despite the positive changes reform has introduced in Saudi Arabia, women living outside of major cities do not always have much of an opportunity to attend school.

Alaa: "I feel...it's a good...act to empower women because...in Saudi Arabia...we have ...women [who]...are educated...[but] not all of us have the right to, to go to school. I think it's uh, it's a very positive action, but at the same time, I feel it was late...in certain big cities...Certain big cities [afford women] the privilege to...[become]....educated, or...have a private area in cities. So, so it was a good thing..."

Ashleigh: "So, in um, in like cities like Riyadh, Dammam, Jeddah, Medina..."

Alaa: "Yeah, Medina, Jeddah...I think Riyadh and Jeddah...they really care, but the other places...they are under [the] weather. I don't know what they call it. But... for example, there is another city north of Jubail. It's called Nairiyah... just maybe five or six years ago they just established a college for girls. So if they wanted to study they had to travel, like...four hours a day going back and going in...to Dammam or Al-Khobar. And it's very difficult for them..."

Alaa described the problem of women not having access to educational institutions because they are from small towns. Alaa used to teach in Nairiyah, and she described it as "going to nowhere." As mentioned, she said up until five or six years ago, women had to travel up to four hours a day just to attend a university. She feels that this commute is part of the problem. In addition to the commute, take into consideration that women have to rely on a male family member, or private driver, to drive them, which poses an additional obstacle. The fact is that there simply aren't enough schools for women. Alaa

mentioned that the other part of the problem is that things in Saudi Arabia are very complicated because of a lack of programs for women as well:

Alaa: “Actually, it’s not fair, and uh, even though...our grades [are] much better than [men’s]...this is something I really don’t understand and uh (long sigh)...I feel it’s corruption there. And you wonder if it’s gonna be fixed.”

Ashleigh: “Is it like with *wasta*?”

Alaa: “Yeah, a lot of *wasta*. Although ...my family has a huge power in [eastern Arabia]... I don’t [want] something that’s not right for me. If I didn’t get it from my...education...I don’t want it... [Ashleigh: “Mhm”] They told me that you can [enter into the program because of] your family, but I said no, I really don’t want it that way *yaani*.”³²

She felt that the process of actually selecting who enters into which programs is very corrupt because, although her family’s *wasta* guarantees her more opportunities, the other women who consistently outperform men do not have *wasta*, and are not always selected for the types of programs they seek to gain entrance into. Not to say that this isn’t an obstacle for men, they also have to deal with similar hurdles. However, women have to deal with it to a larger extent than men do. Alaa noted that the time she spent applying for those programs was really a waste of her time, because she wasn’t chosen for the programs based upon her performance per se, but upon her family’s power and *wasta*. Alaa then decided to apply to the King Abdullah scholarship program to come study in America, where opportunities and assessments would be based largely on her merit, and not her familial connections.

³² *Yaani* is an Arabic verb that literally here means “means” or “intends” in the simple present tense, but in the interview it was being used as a filler—similar to “like” or “um”, but here it’s used as if to say, “meaning,” or “I mean.”

While it wasn't presented as a problem, another issue I noticed is that some women do not seem to have a choice in where they attend school. This is not the case with all women, for example, Alaa, who is unmarried. She expressed a desire to attend Western Michigan University, because her father, uncles, and brothers also did—unlike her Saudi counterparts who attended WMU solely to remain united with their husbands, who were students there. Women like Mona, Noona, and Amool all attended WMU because their husbands enrolled first. For example, Mona moved to three different universities because her husband wanted to change programs. She seemed to be doing fine at WMU and she seemed to be satisfied with what the university offered. She showed me a presentation that she did while she was enrolled in her ESL class. It was very good, and she was deservedly proud of her accomplishments at WMU. Her husband, on the other hand, was unsatisfied. Mona called me several times to tell me they were now in a different state. They moved from Michigan, to Virginia, and finally to Texas. So Mona had to postpone her studies and involvement at Western Michigan University to join her husband, who was searching for a program that was a better fit for him. She did not communicate to me that it was an inconvenience for her; instead, she seemed more excited to be moving around and seeing different parts of the United States. However, I can imagine reapplying to different programs would have been a hassle she might have avoided if not for her husband. At this point in her life Mona wasn't enrolled in an MA program, she was enrolled in English classes. She applied to WMU to enroll in a master's program involved in some way with fashion, media, or business. Before being able to enroll in

any program, she was required to pass her English classes. Thus, her husband's choice to move them three times didn't really have a negative impact on her studies.

While family plays a large role in education and a woman's opportunity to pursue a career, Islam underpins every aspect of family life in Saudi Arabia and thus affects opportunities for women as a whole. However, as mentioned before, it should be noted that Islam, as it is practiced in Saudi Arabia, is much different than Islam as it is practiced in other Islamic countries. Most of my respondents, not surprisingly, did not have much to say about Islam. Many of them would side-step the questions I asked, or say they didn't understand. Maybe I asked the wrong questions. I was framing the questions as positively as I could to see whether or not Islam, like the Islamic rhetoric I've heard women use, can be used in a liberating way for Saudi women. Alaa did speak briefly about the Saudi government, as she did earlier in other words while talking about corruption in educational institutions, which, as I touched upon in chapter one, is tied into the form of Islam that is practiced in Saudi Arabia. She says:

I think...Saudi Arabia [is], controlled, completely controlled. [We] have... many parties, and [in] each party, for example, some people don't want to have freedom. They...are religious...Some people are liberal and...they want to have...their rights for everything ... just like that. And you know, I think the Saudi society needs a lot of time [so] the people... need to be ready to adopt this change and...because there are a lot of different mentalit[ies] and...there [are] a lot of educational levels...I think they are not ready yet for this huge change. I think it's going to be gradually arriving.

While Alaa spoke up about most things, there is still a lot she didn't say. For example, she said Saudi Arabia is completely controlled and there are parties who are religious that don't want people to have freedom. Who are these religious people? Why do they want to restrict people's freedom? Whose freedom would be restricted? What does she really

mean? What is she not saying? She talks about people and Saudi Arabia, but does not specifically refer to the *'ulama* or the al-Sauds. In fact, none of my respondents ever did. They tip-toed around certain issues, but never directly spelled out what they meant. Another example of this is when I first met Amool. Once the formalities of introducing each other to ourselves ended, I opened up and told her that I had accepted a position in Saudi Arabia and she described the difficulties of living there and apprised me of the differences I would encounter and the changes in my lifestyle that I could expect. Unlike the other women at the party, who glorified Saudi Arabia and told me I would love living there, Amool told me it would be very challenging for me, being American and being used to having almost unlimited mobility and personal freedom. She said, “Maybe when you go to *Saudia* things will be different.” Then she mentioned the push for women to drive. She was not particularly positive about Saudi Arabia and said women do not have enough rights there, but she seemed slightly hopeful that it would change. I liked Amool’s unapologetic frankness. However, because she was so frank, she was very forward in telling me not to include her name in this thesis. I reassured her telling her I would use pseudonyms and not provide personal, identifying details.

There are many possible reasons for indirect statements like the ones given to me by Alaa and Amool. While Alaa mentioned many problems with religion and people being controlled and the government being corrupt, she didn’t say any names or directly blame any specific institution. Amool also said women don’t have enough rights, but never spelled out what rights she thinks women ought to have or what institutions, cultural attitudes, or people are preventing women from obtaining those rights. Alaa and Amool

may be protective, as many Saudis are, of their culture, of their reputations as Saudis, of their religion, of their traditions, and of their families, or even of themselves.

My respondents, with the exception of Alaa, also remained silent about educational institutions within Saudi Arabia, educational reform, and future careers. Mona, Amool, Noona, and Badra all seemed very happy and content with their educational opportunities, while Alaa expressed dissatisfaction with the amount of programs and institutions for women in addition to the unfairness in granting women scholarships to study and accepting them into programs that men also compete with them for. Other women I grew to form close friendships with also expressed similar sentiments. As I mentioned previously, one of them told me she asked God why she could not attend the university. She was very upset about her husband's decision that she quit school and told me of her plans to study in the future. But for many of the women I interviewed, who perhaps feel fortunate to have the opportunity to attend a university, they went out of their way to mention that their mothers and grandmothers did not have the chance. My then boyfriend's mother, as I mentioned earlier, didn't continue her education beyond middle-school, but his sisters are both educated and pursuing their master's degrees. Maybe the lack of criticism is not a lack of criticism at all, but an abundance of contentment and excitement about their futures and opportunities.

When it comes to opportunities in the context of Islamic practices and the Saudi government, it is important to understand that "[t]he abuse of women's rights in Saudi Arabia is not simply the unfortunate consequence of overzealous security forces and religious police. It is the inevitable result of a state policy which gives women fewer

rights than men [...]” (Litcher 2009: 277). While some Saudi women are exceptional examples and do speak out against the system that perpetuates a neglect of their rights, many Saudi women I’ve met do not. All, but two, of my respondents did not speak up about these things. Perhaps I didn’t ask the right questions.

I think the bigger issue here is that there is a culture of silence among Saudi women who may have to deal with the consequences of speaking out. For example, some women who have spoken out have been criticized by some Saudi women. I had a friend who was very critical of Rania Al-Baz, the Saudi television presenter who was beaten unconscious by her husband. Al-Baz made international headlines and the pictures of her, after the beating, were made public. Some Saudi women were critical because she painted a picture that they feel didn’t accurately portray life for women in Saudi Arabia (Litcher 2009). However, while Saudi law offers women protection from spousal abuse, the law really does not make a difference, as Saudi culture really does not seem to support the women who do speak out. Al-Baz was actually the first woman in Saudi Arabia to press charges against her husband due to domestic violence (Litcher 2009). Litcher says that many Saudi women “lean towards self-hatred” (2009: 297) and prominent Saudi women activist, Wajeha Al-Huwaider, believes fear is a part of this lack of confidence. Al-Huwaider believes that fear is the main tool used to silence Saudi women (Litcher, 2009). She says:

The fear gnaws away at [women’s] sense of being independent entities, and harms their self-confidence every day. Thus they always fail at removing the oppression. The real reason for this fear among Saudi women is that there is no law to protect them from violence and discrimination. (as cited by Litcher 2009: 297)

However, perhaps some Saudi women may disagree. Only one of my respondents actually discussed the silences surrounding things like family and social norms. Alaa said it all has to do with reputation and an unwillingness to deal with the potential consequences of anything one may say that could negatively impact one's family or society. As I also said, Alaa's family has *wasta*. Furthermore, it is important to know that the men in her family actually provide this *wasta*, and so she has status and privilege that protect her, in a way, from the same type of backlash that my other respondents are not protected from. Additionally, Altorki says,

In all these changes, the ultimate authority rests with men. While it is the women who often initiated change, their behavior becomes acceptable only if backed by the authority of husband, father, or brother, who enforce the social norms. The projection of this authority into the larger society is reflected in the law, often enforced by the Saudi government, which forbids women, irrespective of age or status, to travel outside the kingdom without the written authorization of a male "guardian". (1986: 71)

So when one considers the types of changes happening in Saudi Arabia, and the woman who are simultaneously a product of these new changes while they are pushing for them, women like those earlier mentioned throughout this thesis: Manal Al-Shariff, Rania Al-Baz, Samar Fatany, Wajeha Al-Huwaider, and Sabria Jawar, one will notice one thing about these women: they all have loving, supporting men who encourage their commitment and strides to promote positive change in Saudi Arabia.

As for my respondents, I can only make assumptions about what their silences mean.

As Kennan Ferguson reminds us:

Silence can operate in multiplicitous, fragmentary, even paradoxical ways. The politics of silence, in other words, are not reducible to any particular political functionality; even more than its putative opposite language, silence resists

absolution. Insofar as silence cannot be literalized or universalized, it is not reducible to one singular function. If silence was strictly resistant, or oppressive, it could be neatly categorized as salutary, or sinister; instead, it both embodies and transcends these neat categories. (in *Silence and Listening as Rhetorical Arts* 2011: 121)

In the next chapter, I will continue considering what role Saudi Arabian women play in shaping Saudi Arabia. I will consider women's movements in Egypt to theorize about what a successful women's movement might look like in Saudi Arabia, and if the effects of the Arab Spring will expedite the attempts Saudi women have already made towards a Saudi Arabia that accommodates their ambitions, hopes, and desires.

CHAPTER 5

A MODEL FOR SAUDI WOMEN?

When considering the lives of Saudi women in contrast to the lives of other Arab women, it is important to understand the contexts through which those women's situations evolved. While I gained many insights into how my respondents felt about their lives, I gained further insights into how their situations could be, but weren't, while I lived in Egypt. The ideologies that I witnessed firsthand, the ideologies informing the women's rights movement in Egypt, have also influenced the changes seen by Saudi women. Altorki (1986) sees changes in Saudi Arabia as the result of the strategic ideological systems in place that are working to transform the country. She describes an ideology as "a system of belief which serves the individual for the mental reconstruction of the real world" (1986: 149).

In this chapter, I use Altorki's argument about ideology as a strategic way for women in Saudi Arabia to effectively alter Saudi social and cultural norms. To support her argument, I will heavily rely on the experiences I had in Egypt while simultaneously reflecting upon the information presented in previous chapters. I will then draw conclusions and make predictions about the future of women's rights in Saudi Arabia based upon the information I collected for my own research within the Saudi community, as well my experiences in Egypt. To do this, I will first consider women's movements in Egypt and how they may or may not relate to or influence the social fabric of Saudi Arabia. Then, I will include a brief narrative that incorporates the correspondences I had with my family and friends about my own experiences while living in Cairo. To introduce each narrative I will also provide a backdrop to contextualize the social and political situation as it relates to women. I will also discuss the insights I gained through

the interactions I had with some very outspoken Egyptian women I had the chance to get to know and simultaneously make thematic connections to the interactions I had with my Saudi respondents. These connections undoubtedly point to the potential for a successful women's movement in Saudi Arabia.

The Women's Movement in Egypt

It was incredibly difficult for me to explain the contradictions that dominated my day-to-day experiences in Egypt and my attempts to make sense of them. The women's movement in Egypt is characterized by similar contradictions. The rise of the women's movement, much like the question of to whom credit is due for pioneering the women's movement, is still debated by scholars today. Nadjé Al-Ali gives a very comprehensive overview of the women's movement in Egypt (2000). She mentions the importance of understanding the historical context from which it came, while considering the effects of the gendered ideologies that have resulted from colonialism, present day imperialism, orientalism, globalism, and the role of the Egyptian state. As the contexts that fostered the women's movement in Egypt are as varied and complex as the individuals who took part in it, I will not include exhaustive explanations describing the history of orientalism, colonialism, or imperialism in Egypt. I will, however, provide a brief description of the beginnings of the women's movement in Egypt, including the men and women who are credited with those beginnings. I will then reflect upon the most important changes brought by the women's movement during three periods in more recent Egyptian history: the periods of Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak.

As mentioned, what actually began the women's movement in Egypt is arguable. The foundations of the movement are often associated with men who were considered modern reformers. The most recognized of them is Qasim Amin (Al-Ali 2000). Many scholars and activists think of Amin as the first Egyptian feminist. He published two books that were completely dedicated to women's liberation in Egypt. The books *Tahrir al-Mar'a* (*The Emancipation of Women*, 1899) and *Al-Mar'a Al-Jedida* (*The New Woman*, 1900) received a lot of attention. A women's group in Egypt actually named themselves after his second Book, *The New Woman*, calling themselves *Al-Mar'a Al-Jedida* (Al-Ali 2000). Al-Ali mentions that, while considering how the movement began, it's important to understand that the perceptions of the movement's history vary from one activist to another. Al-Ali even noted that some activists use their own perceptions of the history of the women's movement to "legitimize their own agendas or discredit those of others" (2000: 56).

Al-Ali claims that some scholars argue against the idea that male modernist reformers are wholly responsible for fathering the Egyptian women's movement. Some even claim that Qasim Amin was only reproducing colonial thinking, and "merely called for the substitution of Islamic-style male dominance by Western-style male dominance" (2000: 57). However, many female activists tend to agree that male reformers played a role in pushing for women's education, which many women believe is the first step to liberation. It is also important to note that many activists are not overly concerned with *how* the movement began—whether or not the ideological beginnings of the movement are credited to male reformers or female activists—but whether or not they are in any way

tied to the West (Al-Ali 2000). Despite the debates that perpetuate the dichotomies of “us” vs. “them”, the interactions between Egypt and other countries at that time definitely challenged popular perceptions and bred fresh ideologies. Al-Ali quotes Amal K., an activist and scholar in her sixties as saying:

There is a long history of feminism, but the word ‘feminism’ does not exist in Arabic. It was always called *tahrir al-mar’a*, that is, the liberation of women. This has been a very different kind of feminism than the western one. The bit that comes from the West is that at the time of the Arab renaissance, in the nineteenth century, a movement of translation started with the shaykhs who went to France. These shaykhs learned the language and they read a lot. The idea of women being free started from there. During the movement of independence, the idea of a free country and a free society was linked to western ideas. The shaykhs saw educated women in France and they started to realize that we lost something on the way. An educated woman can educate the children, so the future men will be more educated. An educated woman makes a better mother and wife. This is what the reformers like Muhammad Abduh and Qasim Amin realized. The other thing that influenced them was the relation between the sexes. People were talking to each other in France. All this pushed the issue of education for girls. Once a woman starts to read, she starts to question. Women began to object to the fact that they could not go outside to breathe fresh air. The first roots of emancipation of the Egyptian woman [were] education. (2000: 57, 58)

In the period of post colonialism, pre-Nasser, when the Egyptian state was beginning to emerge, the women’s movement had often been associated with Huda Sha’rawi and the Egyptian Feminist Union. The EFU was concerned with gaining political rights for women, through changing the Personal Status Law—which essentially gave no rights to women in the household. Therefore, women could not divorce, could be forced to marry at a young age, could not obtain custody of their children, and could not travel without a husband’s permission. The EFU sought to gain rights for women through changing the Personal Status Law and also called for more professional opportunities for women (ibid 2000: 62). However, Sha’rawi was educated in France, and the members of the union

were from wealthy families. Thus, the EFU and Sha'rawi are often considered Egyptian elites and sometimes associated with western sources. Therefore, sometimes Sha'rawi and the EFU are discredited because of a perceived connection to the West.

Another group that emerged in the post-colonial period, just before the 1952 revolution and the Nasser regime that emerged after the revolution, is repeatedly identified with Doria Shafik. It was the Bint El-Nil Union. The Bint El-Nil Union set itself apart from the EFU as it was primarily concerned with gaining political rights for women through promoting literacy programs, programs to improve social services for women, and other social reforms. Most activists do not debate the credibility of Doria Shafik's involvement in the women's movement, but Shafik was subject to heavy criticism partially due to her frequent confrontations with the Nasser regime.

Doria Shafik was engaged in a cultural critique that was simultaneously directed toward the Other (the west) and inward towards the Self (Egypt and Islam) in a project that was aimed to dismantle the distorted and stereotyped images of the oriental women as well as the patriarchal frameworks in which these were embedded. (ibid 2000:65)

Other female activists, like Latifa Zayyad, Inji Aflatoun, and Soraya Adham promoted social equality and justice and had adopted socialist or communist ideologies (ibid 2000). One of the earlier and most powerful female activists was Nawal El-Sa'dawi. She wrote very controversial books that attacked patriarchy and the control of female sexuality. She brought up very controversial topics in Egypt that centered on clitoridectomy and sexual abuse. El-Sa'dawi brought in a very different, more radical, type of activism. Some other activists distance themselves from El-Sa'dawi because of this, but many credit her with courage and do acknowledge the importance of her role in the women's movement.

The women's movement accomplished many things, first starting with the Nasser regime. Under Nasser, there were many improvements in education, employment, and upward mobility. Some people associated this period with "state feminism" because new state policies and programs were introduced that changes women's roles. However, no changes were made to the Personal Status Law. The problem during the Nasser period was that, while women gained more rights in the public domain, their lives in the private domain remained the same. Activists still are divided with regard with the changes seen under Nasser.

After the Nasser period, Sadat emerged and the *infitah*, or open door policy, created large gaps between classes as "the rest of the population suffered from the *infitah*'s broader implications—high inflation, chronic shortages of basic goods and housing, reduced employment opportunities, and poor working conditions" (ibid 2000: 72). The role of the state changed and the policies that once promoted social equality and opportunity were abandoned (ibid 2000). The Sadat era was also accompanied by the rise of Islamism. "Sadat's policy of manipulating Islamic groups as a means to weaken popular leftist forces led to an increasing Islamic revival which also galvanized women" (ibid 200: 73).

Despite the problems that emerged during the Sadat era, women gained autonomy as their husbands migrated to other countries for work. Another, more positive, change under Sadat was that the Personal Status Law was reformed to the benefit of women:

These reforms spearheaded a two-pronged strategy of undermining the strength and legitimacy of Islamists and demarcating the state's social agenda from that of the Islamists as a form of internal and international mobilization against them.

Internally, the state anticipated that the reforms would encourage the growth of a secular coalition of men and women; internationally, it hoped to use the law as a form of public relations to improve its image as a step towards gaining increased political and economic support, especially from the United States. (ibid 2000: 73)

The reforms in the Personal Status Law of 1979 gave women legal rights in marriage, polygamy, divorce, and child custody. Another law that was passed, that further affirmed a woman's right to divorce, and to travel without her husband's permission, was the 1979 Family Status Law (ibid 2000: 74).

After Sadat, during the post-*infatih* period under Mubarak, women's activism re-emerged due to the continuing struggles with state laws like the Personal Status Law and the Family Status Law. Under Mubarak, Islamists pushed the regime to reform laws in favor of more conservative policies toward women. In 1985, a revised Personal Status Law abandoned many of the rights that women had gained in the 1979 version. However, a few months later some of the rights were restored (ibid 2000). Although Mubarak's regime had a "pro-democratic" policy, both Islamic groups and women were repressed due to the Law of Associations, which regulated "the establishment of voluntary groups, associations, and organizations under the supervision of the Ministry of Social Affairs" (ibid 2000: 80).

I lived in Egypt from September of 2011 to February of 2012. During that period, Mubarak was no longer president, and anti-Mubarak protests continued while various political groups were campaigning for what would be the first democratic elections in Egyptian history. I observed that, in contrast to claims older women made about life

under Nasser and Sadat, a new generation of Islamist women had emerged. In contrast to what I experienced, Manal A., an activist from an older generation, reminisces:

Egypt was more modern than it is now; women were wearing mini skirts, striped dresses. I myself was wearing those; at that time, there were just three girls at Cairo University who were *muhaggabat* [veiled]; everyone was talking about them; they always stuck together; they called them *mutazamita* [rigid/conservative] and *mutakhalifa* [backward]. (ibid 2000: 72)

While there were traces of this Egypt left while I was living there, most of the Egyptian women I interacted with were *muhaggabat*. Some of my *Coptic* friends described a different Egypt very similar to the one reminisced about in the quote above.³³ Following the overthrow of Mubarak and Egypt's first democratic elections, Mohamed Morsi, the man who assumed office, was more recently unseated following a military coup. Given the political instability in Egypt, who knows what will happen for women or how that will influence life for women in Saudi Arabia. While the women's movement in Egypt is continuing to evolve, there has not truly been a recognized history of any women's movement in Saudi Arabia.

So, what does this mean for women Saudi Arabia? As of now, there are a few women's organizations for women in Saudi Arabia, and while they are not recognized by the Saudi government, I consider this to represent a start. As mentioned, some women's organizations in Egypt were not initially governmentally recognized either. In Egypt, women first gained rights through education, then through organizing, and then through pushing to have laws changed. This is exactly what is happening in Saudi Arabia, and

³³ Coptics are a Christian minority in Egypt.

much like many Egyptian men supported Egyptian women, many Saudi men are backing and speaking out for Saudi women.

Wajeha al-Huwaider, who I've mentioned before is a well-known Saudi activist, along with Fouzia al-Ayouni, founded the Association for the Protection and Defense of Women's Rights in Saudi Arabia. The goals of this organization are to provide an area for Saudi women to be heard—all of this, of course, in the hopes that their voices will advance women's rights. "The founders decided that the organization would establish various leagues to tackle specific issues, like women's health, education, marriage laws, and transportation and driving rights" (Global Nonviolent Action Database 2007-2008).

Another group, Al-Nahda Philanthropic Society for Women, was founded by Queen Effat in 1962. The group is now headed by her daughter, Princess Sara Al-Faisal. Al-Nahda Philanthropic Society for Women is a leading non-profit organization in Saudi Arabia and it *is* recognized by the Saudi government. The goal of this organization is to reduce poverty and increase employment among women (Fatany 2013). In addition to the two groups mentioned, there are other outside groups that were founded to help empower women in Saudi Arabia. This is a good starting point, but despite the presence of these groups in Saudi Arabia, not much has changed with regard to women's civil rights:

On January 11, 2013, for the first time in the history of Saudi Arabia—where women have no right to drive and are still required by law to obtain the escort and approval of a male guardian for almost every step that they take—King 'Abdallah bin 'Abd Al-'Aziz appointed 30 women to the Shura Council. (Admon, 2013)

King Abdulla's decision means that now women can be candidates in the *Shura Council* and participate as members. Women are now able to play an active role in this council, which means that they can greatly impact Saudi society. However, the candidates selected for the *Shura Council* are not democratically elected; they must be elected by the king (Admon, 2013). So while women still are unable to drive, still need a male's permission, and are—by law—second class citizens, progress is sluggishly, but steadily, being made.

In the upcoming sections, I will share the insights that I gained and the experiences I had while living in Cairo through emails I sent out while living there. I believe these emails help paint a more detailed, although incomplete, picture of what my life was like in Egypt and how those experiences relate to and build upon the insights I formed through my research in the Saudi community.

My Life in Cairo

In the second chapter I mentioned that while I was living in Egypt I confronted many realities that turned my attention to the fact that Saudi women do not have the same opportunities as other Muslim women in the Arab Middle East. While I was working in Cairo, my perceptions of what it might take to empower Saudi women began to change. In Cairo, I was able to put myself and my research in the Saudi community in perspective. In Egypt, I worked at a school run by two strong-willed, outspoken, intelligent, well-respected Muslim women—one who had raised three sons by herself while establishing this school. I spent a lot of time with Muslim women who raised daughters while living on their own because their husbands migrated outside of Egypt for

work. I attended metal shows where I met female Muslim musicians who actively perform in bands that are very popular in the Egyptian metal scene. I became a part of a local music event organization, Metal Blast. I met female Muslim metal heads whom I watched head bang to death metal bands from Dubai, Jordan, and Egypt while wearing *hijabs*. These interactions inspired me to reconsider some of the perceptions I had about Saudi women.

In contrast to the experiences that broke down my preconceptions about Muslim women, I also met women in Egypt who did not have much control over their lives, which reinforced some of those same preconceptions. I had one friend with whom I worked who could not do anything without her brother's permission. Similarly, my friend Nour could not go anywhere by herself unless she was escorted by her son or her husband, or unless her husband gave her permission. Despite my experiences with these two friends, the majority of the women I met in Egypt were independent and did have control over their lives. The women I saw on the street were mostly wearing *hijab*, but this really differed depending on what area I was in. The women I worked with almost always wore *hijab*—except, of course, for the *Coptic* women—and all of these women, backgrounds aside, seemed happy and confident.³⁴ Literally *all* of them were very outspoken.

No woman I met in Egypt was ever suspicious of me, which was a stark contrast to my experiences in the Saudi community where it seemed that most Saudi women *were*

³⁴ Coptic women, unlike some Muslim women, do not wear the hijab.

suspicious of me. I confronted and observed many differences in my interactions between Saudi and Egyptian women. On the surface, Egypt seemed very socially conservative and rigid, which is what I observed within the Saudi female community. However, my interactions with Egyptian women revealed that they seemed to have much more control over their lives than Saudi women do. For example, in the edited volume, *Women on the Verge of Home*, various scholars attempt to illustrate what home might mean to women from various racial, social, ethnic, class, and religious contexts. In this volume, Katherine Zirbel describes one Egyptian woman she worked with who frequently ignored her families' expectations and requests of her. Zirbel's work focuses predominantly on how rural *Bedouin* women in Egypt conceptualize "home." Zirbel mentions Cairene stories of rural women who set off by themselves, leaving their families and unhappy marriages behind, to achieve success and live for themselves (Zirbel, 2005). While I didn't know many Egyptian women who actually did these things, unlike Zirbel, the majority of women I did meet seemed very independent and usually did what they wanted to do anyway. For example, my roommate in Egypt had a friend who taught us how to cook some traditional Egyptian meals. She came over a few times, always wearing *niqab*. However, our interpretations of what her wearing *niqab* meant were thrown into question when we discovered she frequently went out with her boyfriend—the *niqab* was a way for her to anonymously enjoy a private relationship and avoid gossip. I also ran into women wearing *hijab* and an *abaya*, who, upon entering a bar, would remove these items in the bathroom, have a beer or two, and then put them back on before they left. What will it take for women in Saudi Arabia to have the ability to do

the types of things many Egyptian women are legally able to do? As I mentioned earlier, while I lived in Cairo, I went from defending Saudi Arabia's restrictions on women, to sympathizing with them, and then to criticizing them. This transformation took quite some time.

When I first got to Cairo, I was surprised at how much it had changed since I was last there back in 2010 while Mubarak was still president. Where there were once pro-Mubarak posters and slogans easily seen in Egypt, there were now murals and street art that illustrated Egyptian unity and glorified and commemorated January 25th—the day that most people agree began the Egyptian revolution. There was one painting with the words “Take Care”—the “T” being a Coptic cross and the “C” being the Islamic crescent. There was another painting that depicted a soldier with his arm up claiming, “The people and the army are one hand!” However, these sentiments constantly fluctuated throughout the time I spent living in Cairo. They are still fluctuating as I am writing this thesis. While I was in Cairo, the people and the army seemed in opposition to each other—and the way religion was politicized, religious groups seemed that way too. As I am writing this, many Egyptians have mixed feelings about the military coup that ousted Morsi, just like they do about everything else that characterizes life in present day Egypt.

Upon arriving at the Cairo airport, I was surprised that three men were there to pick me up. While I was apprehensive about getting in a beat-up blue van with three men who were complete strangers to me, I got in. I didn't talk to any of them, smile, or make eye contact because my ex, and some of my other close friends, coached me on what *not* to do. I wore a long, loose skirt, a long sleeved shirt, and a scarf around my neck. I wanted

to be sure I wasn't inviting any unwanted attention. After a quiet half hour van ride, we pulled up to an apartment building in what seemed like a decent area. A woman named Linda, who I found out was my supervisor, came out and greeted me and spoke with the three men for some time. She got in the van too and I was driven to my apartment in *Maadi*, a nice suburb in Cairo. The apartment was immaculate—marble floors, high decorative ceilings, and huge wardrobes in each bedroom. I was thrilled. Linda gave me some sheets with contact information, some Arabic phrases, a map, and she also gave me some food to hold me over until the next day.

That night I met my roommate, a British woman I'll call Beth. I was surprised to find out she identified not only as a vegan, but also as an anarchist, an atheist, and a polyamorist. I immediately wondered what she was doing in Egypt. I assumed it would be difficult for her to fit in. Upon arriving in Egypt, I was still very affected by my Saudi ex-boyfriend's worldviews. I dressed very conservatively, did not drink, and was even thinking about converting to Islam. I had no idea how much living in Egypt would force me to reevaluate my life and the conclusions I gathered based on my research in the Saudi community. To better illustrate my transformation and how it changed my perception of the possibilities for a movement that would change the lives of Saudi women, I will include emails I sent to my friends and family while living in Cairo.

I spent the first two weeks in Cairo watching the news. Egypt changed quite noticeably since I had last been there in the summer of 2010. When I arrived in September of 2011, I didn't expect there to be so many protests and unresolved sociopolitical problems. Many people were upset about the trials for Mubarak and

Mubarak-era officials. There was still a lot of anti-Israeli sentiment, particularly with the attempts at this time to discuss the establishment of a Palestinian state. Shortly after I arrived, there was an attack on the Israeli embassy in Cairo. Protesters attacked the Interior Ministry. People clashed in protests with the Supreme Council of Armed Forces. There were attacks on NGOs, particularly those that were suspected of having foreign involvement. Many student and faculty members of various educational institutions protested in response to university politics and corruption. Unrest continued and it seemed as if the revolution wasn't over. While I attempted to be conscious of the fact that Egypt was still very much a powder-keg, I tried to focus on getting to know my co-workers and preparing for the school year. In the back of my mind, however, I wondered what the revolution meant for Egyptian women. Initially there was a lot of hope regarding women's involvement in the revolution. However, when I encountered post-revolution Egypt, it seemed that no one was really sure what the outcome of the revolution would be, or what it would mean for women. I knew how the laws changed with each presidency for women. What new laws might be established that could curtail the rights that the women's rights activists worked hard to obtain? Given Egypt's central role in the Middle East, what would changes to women's lives in Egypt mean for women in Saudi Arabia?

No Place for Gender Rights During or After the Revolution

"We did not speak of our gender rights during these protests because it was not the right time. We spoke for the political and social rights of all Egyptians. If

we were to campaign for our rights as women in parallel with the revolution's national goal, that would have been called political opportunism." –Hala Kamal (as cited by Atassi 2011)

In returning from Egypt, many things came to my attention, one thing being that I did not pay much attention to women's involvement in the revolution. I realize now, in going through my old emails, that I did not mention *anything* about women's rights—not even once. In contrast to Saudi women, Egyptian women have more rights. For example, many Egyptian women drive, work and walk freely alongside men, and can travel alone. In contrast, Saudi women cannot drive, cannot travel alone (unless they are over 45), and in most cases are segregated from unrelated men. I think because I was overly concerned about the rights that Saudi women *don't* have, I failed to notice the problems many Egyptian women *do* have. I myself do not have many of those problems. There were other problems I dealt with while living in Egypt, but not anywhere near the extent of problems my female Egyptian co-workers faced.

The entire time I was in Cairo, there were protests, and soldiers, tanks, and ambulances lining many streets. I guess I wasn't too concerned because this wasn't my permanent home—I always knew I could go back to America if things got bad. Things weren't bad for me in Egypt. On the contrary, I loved living there. While I did what I could to stay informed, I still remember that in only the first couple weeks I was in Cairo, that there were tanks lining the streets near Tahrir Square. Any time I went downtown, I took a taxi and the taxi almost always drove by the *corniche*, the road along the Nile, and it was frequently lined with tanks, military personnel, and ambulances. By “lined” I mean maybe 30 or more vehicles were parked along the *corniche*. I'm not sure if the vehicles were there in case the protests turned violent, or if they were there to protect

people, but they were hard to miss. Unlike my experiences with law enforcement and government in America, the Egyptian government, military, and police forces were not for the people, by the people. Many of my friends distrusted the government, military, and the police.

I remember being ignored by soldiers when I spoke Arabic much better than my male American counterparts who could barely get a word out. I remember being harassed and followed by men because I was walking alone. I remember stories my friends told me of being harassed or groped in public. I tended not to tell my family and friends about this, but I did what I could to keep them informed without adding to their concerns about my safety. In all this I forgot about my Egyptian female counterparts. I forgot to think about what their experiences might be like. I was overly concerned about soaking up my experiences as they related only to the changing political atmosphere of Egypt. I ignorantly assumed Egyptian women had come a long way. I ignorantly assumed sexual harassment in Egypt was not as bad as it was reported to be. I ignorantly assumed Egyptian women had much more control of their lives than they do in reality—they have laws to protect them, right? What I realized, while living in Egypt was that I wrongly thought the women's movement in Egypt had done what it set out to do: gain equal rights for Egyptian women. I was wrong. Unfortunately I learned the hard way that my concerns were not theirs, and it's even more evident in the following email excerpts I sent that chronologically detail the post-revolution politics of Egypt, while completely ignoring anything about what the political situation meant for women:

September 15, 2011...

The UN and the Arab League are really pushing for the formation of a Palestinian State, but the US is strongly against it (surprise, surprise). There are plans to protest against the Israeli embassies, consulates, etc. I guess the Israeli ambassador fled Egypt.

September 16, 2011...

Two girls I work with went on a cruise last night and drove by Tahrir Square and said they were so scared—they saw tons of military people with guns and tons of people protesting...we're not supposed to go down there. I keep watching the news and every time I just see millions of people packed in downtown Cairo. I want to go down there to see, but I'm being cautious now.

September 25, 2011...

Things here are good. I went out Thursday to some rooftop bar in downtown Cairo—it was called Happy City. Went past Tahrir—the protests weren't bad. One of my students told me today we might not have class tomorrow because there's supposed to be some big protest because of the Palestinian State trying to be established.

September 27, 2011...

I did end up having class. My students told me today we might get a month off (in November) for the elections...who knows. I guess there are still attacks going on near the

Israeli border. A pipe line got blown up. Still protests every week. but, I went down there and they aren't too bad. Just a lot of people. Teachers here are protesting (in public schools and universities)...but I haven't really witnessed this yet. We will see. It's a good time to be here while all this stuff is happening.

January 15, 2011...

With regards to January 25th—yes, shit may hit the fan. No one really knows what is going to happen. I went through a protest a couple days ago. The protesters were chanting "we want to end the regime." Tahrir square is also closed off. I think shit will hit the fan. My roommate and I are going to stock up on groceries in case it gets like it was last year. Just to be on the safe side we're just going to stay inside and watch the news all day. If nothing happens, great, at least we were prepared. I think something will happen, but actually a lot of Egyptians are getting really tired of the protesting. Who knows...but we have to be prepared for something to happen. We will be fine, so please don't worry. We have good heads on our shoulders (for the most part...).

I just wanted to let you know in case they shut off the internet again or something like that—that's what happened last year. Now things are more complex here because last year the army and the citizens came together to over throw Mubarak, but now the army and the people are more divided...and it seems as if the same people are essentially still running things here.

January 25, 2012...

Just wanted to send out an email letting you know I'm alright. There are lots of protests going on in Tahrir, but so far it's been peaceful. We'll see what happens tonight and in the next couple of days. As always, Maadi (where I live) is very quiet and nothing is happening here. I've just been tuned into the news. There's tons of people downtown, but I won't be going down there anytime soon. I'll email again maybe Thursday or Friday to keep you updated.

February 8, 2012...

It's been a while since I've written, but things are alright. There is so much going on here—Egypt is like a powder keg. Most of the events going on in Cairo are localized in and around Tahrir. There have been increasing instances of crime: theft, carjackings, kidnappings, etc. Where I live in Maadi the atmosphere is calm—it seems to be relatively stable. However, there have been some kidnappings around Maadi. So despite Maadi's outward appearance of stability, I never go out alone at night and I've been staying mainly inside my apartment. Nour and Ahmed keep me updated on all of the events in various parts of Egypt. I also have many Egyptian friends in Cairo whom I trust a lot—they are constantly in contact with me to fill me in on the most recent events. Three foreigners (American, Australian, and Iraqi) that I work with were here last year during the revolution as well. They explained to me what went on and shared their experiences with me. I am stocked up on food and water in case of looting. I am taking every precaution to ensure that I stay as safe as possible given the escalating

problems that will most likely result in a continuation of last year's unfinished events.

The situation here is so complex. I feel like I am just now beginning to have a better understanding of it. If the situation in Egypt worsens, which is highly likely, I will consider leaving. It is probably very naive of me to want to stay. In spite of the difficulties and frustrations, I really love it here. My intentions were to come back to Egypt next year as well, but now it all depends on the political situation.

I don't want to alarm any of you, but I do think it's important I keep you updated on what's going on. I am going to pack an emergency bag just in case I do have to leave. I'm keeping an eye on the events—a big protest will surely happen on February 11th—the anniversary of the "overthrow" of Mubarak—his trial is a joke.

I'm not sure if any of you have been following the news, but there was a big soccer massacre. There is a group of outspoken soccer fans who are highly political called the Ultras. Apparently Mubarak paid some thugs to provoke the Ultras who were a big part of Mubarak's "overthrow" and it resulted in a massacre. One child was pushed from five stories...the police were completely inactive, despite knowing about the plans for the event hours before it happened. Over 70 people died and over 1,000 were injured.

People are pissed. Words can't even articulate how people are feeling. I left for a place called Hurghada—like paradise in Egypt—and the night I left there was protesting in

Tahrir which, again, resulted in tear gas and rubber bullets being fired on protesters. I have been tuning into the news daily and keeping myself informed.

I am supposed to start work again on Sunday—the day after the anniversary for the "overthrow" of Mubarak. That's three days away. I am going to stay inside my apartment, so don't worry.

Although the emails I sent jumped around the political situation at the time, it is apparent that I stopped writing about Egyptian politics for some time—I only wrote about the political situation when I first arrived to Cairo and when I was about to leave. I think I got used to the situation, or maybe I pushed it in the back of my mind. Though I may have temporarily distracted myself from the reality of the weekly protests and the other events and tragedies that the political context in Egypt entailed, I witnessed, and accidentally ended up in the middle of, a few protests. One was a big teacher protest near the Nile. My friend Mohammed and I went out to get coffee and talk about what was going on in Egypt Because I wanted his insight and understanding. While Mohammed and I were at the coffee shop, we noticed a plethora of people marching on the bridge. We tried to listen to what they were saying, but it was inaudible. He thought it was best for me if we left, so we tried to avoid the crowds. We actually ended up in the middle of this protest, but everyone was kind to me and seemed more concerned with protesting than anything else. He told me teachers were protesting, and didn't say much else about it.

I ended up in a couple other protests in Tahrir Square with another friend of mine named Meeto, and his brother Mohammed and Mohammed's girlfriend named Almudena. Meeto and Mohammed never seemed too alarmed about my and Almudena's safety around large crowds in Egypt—I'm not sure if it was because they assumed we were safe with them, or because I was American and she was Spanish. Almudena lived in *Zamalek*, a nice suburb of Cairo where quite a few foreigners live and many more liberal Egyptians. On our way back from meeting Almudena to go downtown—near Tahrir Square—we happened upon protests at least twice. While Meeto and Mohammed didn't seem concerned that anything would happen to Almudena and I, I remembered that—unlike in the popular Egyptian comedy *Aasal Eswed*, or *Black Honey*, where having an American passport guaranteed the male lead certain allowances, special treatment, and safety in Egypt—having an American, or non-Egyptian passport didn't mean our safety was guaranteed. Having a non-Egyptian passport certainly didn't prevent the beating and sexual assault of South African CNN reporter Laura Logan just 6 months earlier. There were many examples of how women were sexually assaulted during and after the revolution, but there were also many examples of how Egyptian men protected women from sexual assault before, during, and after the revolution.

For example, a month before the official birthday of the January 25 revolution in Egypt, an *abaya* clad Egyptian woman was beaten and dragged by military personnel along the street. While being dragged, her *abaya* ripped open and exposed her stomach and blue bra. There were a plethora of videos uploaded on YouTube and Facebook capturing the abuse of this female protester at the hands of military forces. Thousands of

men and women marched in Tahrir Square, reacting to the abuse of this woman. Some people say this was the largest demonstration of women in Egypt since 1919 (Coleman, 2011). My roommate Beth also accompanied three of her male Egyptian friends to the protests and nothing happened to her—she did not get harassed or groped, and said she felt very safe. Although I saw many women protesting, they were not truly protesting for their own rights—I think they assumed they would receive more rights if the situation changed, perhaps if they had politicians that would support women’s rights and create laws that guaranteed them those rights.

One woman, Bothaina Kamel, announced her candidacy for the Egyptian presidency, but never received enough support to be included on the ballot (Shenker 2011). While she said she wanted to give minorities, like *Coptics*, *Bedouins*, and *Nubians*, a political voice, she never mentioned giving women a voice—maybe it was assumed.³⁵ There were many candidates at the time I was in Egypt—all attempting to garner support. Out of all twelve candidates named on the website run by the American University in Cairo aptly called “The Cairo Review of Global Affairs,” only two candidates mentioned women’s rights in their platform (Plofchan 2012). Most of these candidates called for social justice, developing the economy, reducing poverty and unemployment, a review of the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, and calling into question the crimes committed by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. To my surprise, I noticed that in my emails I also

³⁵ As mentioned, Coptics are a Christian minority in Egypt. Bedouins are normally found in the Sinai Peninsula of Egypt and are characterized as people who live in the desert. Nubians are an ethnic group who live in southern Egypt.

tended to focus on these same topics. I think the assumption many people, including myself, make is that if these types of things are first taken care of, then other, less immediate, needs can be met.

Every single day, when I walked outside of my apartment in Egypt, I encountered orphans begging for food or selling incense on the streets, men and women who had no education, men and women who had no way to make a living, men, women, and children living in absolute filth. I also encountered just the opposite when I went to nice areas where educated people with good jobs and nice apartments lived and worked. There are over 91 million people living in Egypt, and the population is condensed into just 7.7% of Egypt's total area (Ahram Online 2012). With such a large population sharing such a small portion of the land, it's quite evident that Egypt has some serious issues in wealth and resource distribution that need immediate attention. Given this information and my experiences in Cairo that further attest to problems of inequality, poverty, and classism in Egypt, it's no wonder that women's issues have taken a backseat in politics.

As for Saudi Arabia, the political situation is completely different. There is no democracy, but there is wealth flowing from an oil-based economy. There is also an overabundance of government grants and scholarships for women. There is also stability, at least while King Abdullah is alive and remains in power. But perhaps, as with Egypt, once a new ruler comes into power, things could change for women. Perhaps all of the reforms made to benefit women will be undone. However, one thing is certain: the ideologies that have taken root in Egypt and Saudi Arabia—ideologies that have nourished the spirit of the women's movement and kept it alive—will stay rooted. The

advances made by both Egyptian and Saudi women, although weakened at times and neglected in favor of other concerns, have at least drawn our attention to areas where women are still struggling to make headway.

Victims, Villains, and Vigilantes

"To every girl, woman, mother harassed, I apologize sincerely with all my heart. To my mother nation Egypt, I apologize sincerely with all my heart. And I promise you all that I will try the very best that I can to bring an end to this, in the quest to have our sisters 'Walk Free.'"—Engy Gozlan (as cited by Lindsey 2011)

Despite the quote given above, my experiences with Egyptian women in Cairo were definitely at odds with the ones I had with Saudi women. For example, while there are problems involving ideas about gender roles and what behavior is acceptable within those given roles in Egypt, women do not seem too hindered by them. Instead, women seem to rise above them. Most of the women I became friends with in Egypt did not seem concerned about or discouraged by intimidation or coercion from family members, or by social limitations or expectations. While I have never been to Saudi Arabia, I *have* interacted with Saudi women *in* America—where I imagine they have much more freedom and feel more empowered to make their own choices. However, I have been to Suez, Alexandria, Siwa, Cairo, Luxor, and Aswan in Egypt, and the majority of the experiences I have had with Egyptian women regarding their own experiences with their families, educational opportunities, and careers, in their *own country*, stand in contrast to my interactions with the Saudi women I was so involved with *in America*.

The first time I visited Egypt was in 2010. I studied abroad and spent most of my time in Alexandria. Before setting foot in Egypt I remember that during our orientation we

were told to remain cognizant of how we dress and choose to present ourselves. I was told sexual harassment was a problem in Egypt and that the way we—women—look and behave may give Egyptian nationals the wrong impression of us, and therefore, affect their idea of how to appropriately interact with us. Although I dressed very conservatively by American standards, I was still met with some cat calls during that trip. Even while I wore *hijab*, I still heard flirtatious, or risqué, comments and was constantly ogled by men I did not know. There could be many reasons behind this. For example, I oftentimes did not cover my ankles, wore flip-flops—which I learned I should not have done, and I occasionally made small-talk with men working at shops to improve my Arabic. I may have unwittingly invited unwanted attention through my appearance and demeanor. Fortunately, I had a lot of guidance from my Egyptian professors and friends. I learned from these experiences and believed I was well prepared for my second visit to Egypt in 2011. The majority of the foreign women I worked with—non-Egyptian Western women like myself—arrived to Egypt unaware of just how much harassment they would receive. They were also ignorant of the “rules” that guided and legitimated relationships in Egypt, and thus, had no idea what was considered socially acceptable.

When I first met my roommate, I immediately assumed we would butt heads. Beth had a German boyfriend whom she invited to Egypt to stay with us. I was furious. As my reputation was extremely important to me, I did not want her boyfriend to stay with us. I wanted to be on good terms with our Egyptian neighbors and I did not want anyone gossiping about my roommate and me. It is normally not socially acceptable for a man and a woman to be alone in a room together if they are unrelated, unless they are married.

However, I had many Egyptian friends who ignored these “rules” and had families who also did not seem too concerned about them either. I was also aware that our *boab*, or doorman, monitored our comings and goings. I later found out that many of the people living in our apartment building did too. Our neighbors knew when we were home, when we left for work, who we had over, and if we were gone for the weekend. I tried explaining all of this to my roommate, but she insisted I was just paranoid. Not surprisingly, we got into an argument over men coming into our apartment. I explained to her I did not want our neighbors to think badly of us—no boys, no alcohol, nothing that would negatively affect our reputation. I went on and on, and now I realize that it didn’t matter anyway. To placate me, she did end up speaking with her boyfriend about finding his own place to stay for a while. However, my friend Ahmed put it best; he told me it will never matter what I do, or how I act; he said some people would always think I’m a loose woman, no matter how kind, charitable, religious, conservative, or pious I was. So, I gradually came out of my shell and I was surprised on many fronts by the experiences I had in Egypt. The following quote, for example, I feel does not align with my own experiences with women in Egypt because it ignores so many other factors that affect a woman’s experience in Egypt:

In Egypt, the Arab world's powerhouse, women may work outside the home, go to school and university, and are free to vote and run in all elections. But in education and the labour market, women still lag behind. On paper, women are four times more likely to be unemployed than men. But the reality is far more difficult to measure. Most women work in the home, taking care of children and elderly family members, often alongside some kind of informal work. (The Economist Online 2011)

While there is truth to those statements, the majority of women I spent time with in Egypt were educated. Some had a career, or were in a temporary position until they found a better career or finished their degrees. Some women I worked with were just waiting to find an educated man with a good job to marry. Other women had husbands who worked in gulf countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, or the UAE—and thus, had their autonomy and independence because their husbands were rarely home. Some women I knew had better careers than their husbands. Some women had no family support, and still were able to reach their goals. Some of the women I met could not afford to attend nice schools or go to college, but were still educated and spent their free time teaching themselves English, or another subject.

What the quote above ignores is the social context in Egypt and how much it has fluctuated throughout history. As mentioned, I will not get into an exhaustive history of Egypt, but I do feel that it is important to address my experiences, as it is crucial to note how they differ from some of the materials I have read online. Some of the women I met in Egypt reminisced about how their mothers *used* to be. Some women fantasized about finishing their degrees. In Egypt, I was told by many of my male and female friends pursuing higher degrees, that it is notoriously difficult to finish a masters or doctorate degree because professors do not want to compete with fresh graduates who have innovative ideas. Thus, and not dissimilar from the way things work in other countries where men and women often compete for the same jobs, Egyptian women are required to work extremely hard to finish their degrees so they have a better chance at securing a better job and a better life. Most importantly, I feel that I must draw attention to the fact

that the majority of my interactions with women in Egypt stood in opposition to the stereotypes I had about them.

The school I taught at, for example, was a language school run by two women. One of these women, Dr. N, set up the school after her husband died and she raised three sons *and* established the school as a single mother. These women were well respected, and feared by many of the students attending the school. I was even intimidated by them—they both had a very strong presence that demanded everyone’s attention and respect.

At the school, the women seemed to run everything, and by “women” I don’t mean the two women who founded the school. There were a few male teachers—three that I remember—but the majority of faculty and staff were female. No male foreigners were hired to teach English to the students; all of the foreign teachers were female. I quickly befriended women at this school. There were some jobs given to these women that seemed to fill no function in my mind. For example, there were four women who worked in a room and ran one unusually dysfunctional copy machine. Every time I went in to ask them to make copies for me, they were just chatting and drinking tea. The other women I frequently spoke with—and still do—were the hall monitors. They basically just stood outside the classrooms and took weekly homework slips from each class while simultaneously disciplining students with bad behavior. The women who ran the *cantina*, the place where students and teachers purchased food or beverages, also were extremely friendly to me. Women outnumbered men in this school, and the women were much friendlier and more outspoken than the men.

Despite my pleasant surprise in being involved in a school that seems to provide so

many jobs for women, I was discouraged to discover what Egyptian faculty was paid in comparison to foreign faculty. Although I realize foreign teachers have different financial expectations and obligations, I remember all of us foreigners were absolutely appalled at the huge differences between Egyptian and foreign pay scales. While I was paid 5,000 Egyptian pounds every month—what is now around 725 dollars—Egyptian teachers were only paid 500—about 72 dollars. I honestly don't know how people are able to survive on that salary. Perhaps that is one reason families were so valued and such an integral aspect of my friend's lives.

Out of all the women I got to know in Egypt, I knew the families of only two of my friends: Somaya and Nour. A few women I met talked about their families, and I spent some time with a few family members, but not quite to the extent that I did with Somaya and Nour's families. My friend Somaya had a family that seemed very supportive of her. Her father, who often gave me rides home from their apartment, was a religion teacher who was educated in Kuwait. Somaya's sisters all had careers and families. Somaya's mother, on the other hand, did not have a career at the time—however, I'm not sure that she *never* had one. I spent a lot of time with Somaya's family, and in my experience, everyone in her family seemed very happy and supportive of her and her sister's ambitions.

My friends Nour and Ahmed (her husband) were introduced to me by one of my Saudi respondents, Noona. Not surprisingly, Nour and Ahmed shared similar values with many Saudis I met—this is probably why they got along with so many Saudis. Most Egyptians I knew were not too fond of Saudis and were highly critical of Saudi cultural attitudes. In

Egypt, Saudis and Arabs from the gulf were criticized via jokes and satires. I think Nour and Ahmed were different from other Egyptians I interacted with for many reasons: most of the Egyptians I became friends with spoke English very well, had a good understanding of American cultural values because they had either lived in America or had an American family member by marriage, occasionally drank and didn't see any problem with it, were not overtly religious in a fanatical way, and were not as critical of me as I imagined Nour and Ahmed were.

For example, when I first got to Egypt, I was shocked that tattoos were much more acceptable—at least by women I worked with—than I thought. I remember Nour reacting badly to my tattooed eye-liner when I made *wudu* with her before we went to the mosque for *tarawi* prayers.³⁶ I washed my face, but my “makeup” was still on and she was very shocked, exclaiming, “*haram!*” while I tried to explain myself simultaneously.³⁷ I was relieved when her husband Ahmed explained to her that it was acceptable in American culture. Trying to relate to me, he said that many *Bedouin* women have facial tattoos. Fortunately Nour calmed down after he spoke with her.

Having had these negative experiences, I was quite shocked that a few of the Egyptian and foreign women I worked with had visible tattoos on their forearms. I was very surprised to discover that many *Coptic* Egyptians have crosses tattooed on their wrists. I was told by my Egyptian friends that this is to prevent *Coptics* from converting to Islam.

³⁶³⁶ Wudu is the ritual washing many Muslims do before praying. Tarawi prayers are extra prayers performed during the holy month of Ramadan.

³⁷ When something is haram it is forbidden, unclean, or sinful.

For the foreign women, the tattoos had other meanings. Still, most people we interacted with were very outwardly accepting of our differences. Based on my past experiences, I always dressed very conservatively at school. I usually had a long, loose skirt on, with a long sleeved shirt and a scarf around my neck. I later discovered that I gained a lot of respect from my students' parents for dressing this way. Still, I was in awe of just how accepting my female Egyptian co-workers were of our differences. There was a woman who I worked with who openly identified as being atheist, and our Egyptian coworkers were always very kind to her and always seemed very accepting of her non-belief. I remember trying to explain my beliefs to a hall monitor who asked me. I explained the best I could in Arabic, hopefully telling her that I thought there were some truths to all religions, but I myself did not have any religion. In the past, I made the mistake of saying the *shahada*, thinking I was effectively communicating my ideas about the universal truths in all religions; the woman I said this to thought I was Muslim, or converting.³⁸ So, based on my past error, I did my best to describe my ideas behind organized religion and tried to relate it to her beliefs in some way. I have no idea what my words meant to her, but if I said that to an American, they may assume I was an atheist. So, her reaction really surprised me. In trying to relate to my Egyptian coworkers who could not speak English, I always tried to stick with things we had in common. My coworkers who became my friends were much more tolerant of my

³⁸ The shahada is something Muslims say to testify that there is no God but God and that Mohammed is his prophet. Those who convert to Islam must say the shahada as a requirement for becoming Muslim.

different ideas than I first assumed they would be. Of course, not all people are this way, but I was happy that my work place was so full of women who were so accepting.

My roommate, as I mentioned, identified as being polyamorist, vegan, atheist, and anarchist. Again, our female coworkers fully accepted her. I really saw a new side to Islam that I never had experienced before. In Michigan, I had surrounded myself with Saudi women who were very religious, conservative, and took many of their religious interpretations quite literally. In Egypt, however, I met many liberal Muslims who were extremely open-minded. I ignorantly did not consider other alternatives to the perceptions I so frequently encountered in the Saudi community. Ignorantly and foolishly, I never before considered that one could be Muslim, liberal, accepting of contradictory ideas, and religious at the same time. I realized I was wrong about a lot of things. One context where I really was shocked can be detailed in the following email excerpts:

September 25, 2011...

Today I am going to a metal show in Zamalek. I probably spelled that wrong. I'm excited. There's a band with a female vocalist—it'll definitely be cool to see another side of Egypt. It's been surprising me. There is so much diversity here. Much more than I was able to really appreciate last time I was here. A month really doesn't teach you anything—a year, teaches you a lot. It'll be interesting to see what else surprises me by the time I'm ready to come back.

September 27, 2011...

The metal show was awesome! There were muhijabas in metal shirts—one was wearing a Slayer shirt and one a Metallica shirt. I love the complexity and how it shakes things up...I just wish other people were able to see this so they could rethink their perceptions. Also, something I didn't really realize (because most of my friends are Saudi, and then there's Nour who shares many beliefs with my Saudi friends) is that many Egyptians love dogs. It was shocking! I had no idea. I'm glad though.

September 29, 2011...

I guess, before the regime was toppled, metal shows were illegal because they were associated with devil worship...interesting. I saw muhijabas in Slayer and Metallica shirts. It was definitely worthwhile. I am hoping to write an article about it somehow, I just need to get more involved in the scene. An article about the Egyptian metal scene would, I think, complicate the traditionally held notions most Americans have about Muslims, and, more particularly, about Muslim women. Two of the bands had female singers. The first band had a fierce female metal vocalist. The last band, was my favorite--they did a great job incorporating more traditional Arabian (or should I say Egyptian?) melodies, vocal styles, instrumentation, and lyrics into their music. The other bands seemed to be catering to more of an international audience. Their lyrics were English and their music was predictable and formulaic—very Americanized, in my opinion.

There is another I will be going to on October 14th with death metal bands from Jordan, U.A.E., and Egypt.

In Egypt, I never had any idea there was a metal subculture. I also never expected Egyptian women to be such a big part of it. Through my roommate Beth, who had many connections in Egypt, I met many Egyptian musicians and event planners. When I realized there was a concert hall that featured rock and metal bands in Cairo, I was elated. I went to local music shops and spoke with strangers who became friends about when and where concerts would be and how I could get involved. I went to Sakia Sawi, a popular venue that hosted cultural events in *Zamalek*, for all of the Metal Blast concerts. I was surprised to find out that this place is right next to a large mosque. Just imagine: metal heads wearing black shirts with symbols that are heavily stigmatized and frowned upon and pious men with beards and prayer beads.

I observed scruffy—or “metal”—looking Egyptian men wearing Metallica shirts hanging around outside the mosque, smoking with Egyptian women who wore *hijab* complemented by band shirts. Some girls wore fishnet nylons and miniskirts, some boys had tattoos. Some of these people were smoking hashish. All of this while there were bearded men dressed in *galabeyas* gathering for *Maghrib* prayers.^{39,40} This would be

³⁹ A galabeya is like a traditional garment worn in Egypt. A galabeya is a long, loose outer garment that covers the body from the neck down. It is worn in many countries, but there are variations to the style and name. For example, in Saudi Arabia men wear a thoub, which is more fitted than the galabeya.

⁴⁰ Maghrib prayers take place just after sunset. Maghrib prayer is the fourth of the five daily prayers some Muslims perform throughout the day.

almost the equivalent of a band like Slayer performing right beside a Catholic church. This would absolutely not happen in Saudi Arabia. I became a part of the organization I earlier mentioned, Metal Blast, and worked with Egyptian men, and one woman, to put on and promote rock and metal shows around Egypt. All of the women and men at these shows treated each other with respect. Women were outnumbered by men, but seemed to be their equals. There was no groping, and no sexual harassment. I was thrilled.

However, despite this counter culture in Egypt and being wrong on many fronts, I was right about one thing: sexual harassment in Egypt is a problem that oftentimes creates obstacles for women. I didn't fully realize just how big of a problem sexual harassment, or fear of sexual harassment, actually is in Egypt. I gained a lot of insights when I stayed with my friends Nour and Ahmed in Suez for part of our *Eid-al-Adha* vacation.⁴¹ As mentioned, I first met Nour and Ahmed in the United States, then again in Egypt. They came back to Egypt in October, and I saw them a few times while I was also living there. The following emails detail my initial excitement surrounding our visit, and then the discomfort and awkwardness I felt after our visit:

September 20, 2011...

Nour and Ahmed (my good Egyptian friend and her husband) will be coming back to

Egypt October 21st. I will meet them at the airport and say hi and catch up with them

⁴¹ Eid-al-Adha is a Muslim holiday that celebrates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his firstborn son Ishmael to obey God. During Eid-al-Adha a sacrifice—usually a sheep, goat, or cow—is made and then families divide and eat the meat from the sacrificed animal. Some of the meat is given to the needy as an act of charity.

before I head back to my apartment. They invited me to spend all of Eid al-Adha with them (a Muslim holiday—we get a week off of school) in Suez by the Red Sea. I will get to meet Nour's family for the first time, so I am really excited. I am especially excited to meet her daughter, Noura. Nour and Ahmed told me if I spend one day with Noura, I will be fluent in Arabic . Haha. I guess that means she will talk a lot. I think I will only spend a couple days with them though—maybe only two. I don't want to impose because I know they will ask me to stay more than two days, even if I stubbornly refuse. They are overly accommodating. I will tell them I have so much planning to do for school and I think they will understand, but it will take some arguing first.

November 10, 2011...

Before I went to Dahab, I actually got a chance to visit my friends Nour and Ahmed in Suez. It actually wasn't too bad. I learned a ton though. Nour wears niqab (the full body covering where only the eyes are showing) here. When we were out, Ahmed was very protective of us. Their 11 year old daughter wears hijab (the head covering where the hair is covered but the face is visible) too. I wanted to wear niqab the way people were looking at me. I was the only foreigner I saw in Suez...and definitely the only one with blonde hair. There were tanks and armed guards with shields everywhere there. We had to go through a checkpoint. Ahmed was telling me that it's gotten really dangerous in certain parts of Egypt and it is his responsibility to make sure I'm ok while I am with them. I appreciated that. We went out for koshari (an Egyptian meal with macaroni, fried onions, chick peas, vinegar, and other spices) and I was walking with Noura

(Nour's daughter, who is adorable by the way) and Ahmed was holding Nour's hand (something that surprised me) and everyone was staring at me. Noura kept saying in Arabic, "Everyone is looking at you!" repeatedly. When we finished, Ahmed told us very sternly to go out to the car. He said when we left, 2 men sat at the table and were asking who I was and where I was from.

After that we got Ice cream and went out on the corniche. It was really empty and this crazy guy came up to us and I was kind of freaked out, but he was alright. After that, we all left because Ahmed was saying it was weird there were so few people. There are some problems with Israel right now. They released 25 Egyptian prisoners a little while ago and all the borders are closed and there are soldiers everywhere. Ahmed was saying he didn't want someone to try to run off with me. He said it's so easy here because of the desert—it's hard to find people if they are missing. I also found out Nour's first husband was killed on the road in front of their house with a knife. 4 years ago.

So after we all came back, Ahmed took a nap and Nour took me out (with her son Mahmood). She drove a stick shift and we went to get falafel and eggplant and some medicine for me (cause I've been sick since I've been here pretty much, but not super sick—just a cold/cough). We went to some back area and I got out with her to look at the food and the men were all like, "does she speak English?" constantly....then they gave us a ton of extra food—more than we ordered. Nour couldn't stop talking about it. I wish I could have taken pictures, but I didn't know the reactions I would get. I didn't want to

attract even more attention. I can definitely see the appeal of the hijab and niqab here. Ahmed told me Nour still gets harassed even when she wears it. If I wore it, as long as I didn't talk, people would probably have no idea I was American. There is so much harassment here. I can understand the function of the niqab and the hijab, but I don't understand how it will ever change unless men are forced to change their ideas about women—and by men, I don't mean all men, that is unfair and an overgeneralization. However, sexual harassment here is a real problem and it needs to change. Ahmed and Nour both miss America a lot. Nour was telling me she's been dizzy since she's been back and has been sleeping a lot—like 11 hours straight a night. I wish I could speak with her more, but my Arabic limits me because it's still not as good as I want it to be....maybe in a few years we can really sit down and talk. I think there's a lot she wants to tell me. She will mention things to me at times, about being bored, wanting to work, being tired of doing what she does every day, etc....but I don't get into it because I don't want to cause any problems by sticking my nose where it doesn't belong.

Of all the Egyptian women I met, the one I was closest to was also the most conservative. Nour did not speak any English, so we only spoke in Arabic. Before I moved to Egypt, I saw Nour three to four times each week in America and each time, I spent three to five hours with her. As my understanding of Arabic is limited, as is my ability to articulate myself, I sometimes relied on her husband to interpret our interactions. However, there were some interactions I did not ask her husband about. As I earlier stated, I met Nour through one of my Saudi friends, and respondent, Noona.

Noona and Nour met through their husbands who worked in the same department at WMU. In America, Nour seemed happy, but bored. I often took her shopping. During Ramadan I took her fishing. We had an amazing time and managed to catch fourteen fish and cooked them for *Iftar*.⁴² Even in America, she complained to me about being bored, not working, missing her children, etc. While in Egypt, she complained to me about feeling sick, and sad, and wanting to work, but being unable to. Months later, I spoke to Nour and was happy to learn she secured a job working for a petrol company. However, only weeks later, she called to inform me that some men had burned it down. She was, very understandably, extremely let down. The hope represented in Nour's career at the petrol company can be applied to Egypt as a whole—hope comes and it goes.

The idea of hope resurfaced in the conversations I had with many people in Egypt. This can be further illustrated in the email I sent to my friends and family regarding the visit I had with my friend Mina:

January 10, 2012...

Last weekend my friend Mina, from Michigan, was in Cairo. He's Egyptian, but he comes back every once in a while to visit family. I went to a Christmas church service with him because I wanted to see the differences between his Coptic community and other groups I've been exposed to here. I met many people from his family.

⁴² Iftar is the meal Muslims eat during Ramadan to break their fast.

Mina drove me around where he grew up—in Masr Gadida. It's a really nice part of Cairo. We saw all of the old buildings—just amazingly huge, really grandiose buildings. Classic, almost Victorian looking architecture (although I am by no means an architectural expert, but stereotypically speaking that's what the buildings reminded me of). I think he said the architect was from Belgium. Mina was explaining to me how much things have changed here since he grew up. It's sad how things have changed. Who knows how they will turn out. He was telling me many people from the Coptic community have left Egypt because Egypt isn't the country that they know and love—the Egypt they grew up with. He has a very different political stance than many of my other friends. It's interesting to be exposed to so many divergent ideas within such tight knit communities. He thinks Egypt needs a Turkish model to improve—have some sort of a dictator to jail and criminalize all acts of religious extremism so it is stomped out. Have laws in place to prevent religious extremism, etc. Some other friends think that the Muslim Brotherhood might not be so bad, but no one really knows what the outcome of that will be. There's a lot of fear that the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi group (Al Nour) will take over Egypt and turn it into some kind of theocracy like Iran. Some people think that Egypt needs to be rebuilt, but from the top down, starting with a new president, then a new cabinet, educational reform—people really need education...they need to be informed to have well informed opinions. It's hard because many people are very passionate about their views of the situation. Everyone thinks something different. I'm not really sure where I stand on what's going on. The protests, for now, have stopped. All of them are localized in Tahrir, so everywhere else in Egypt is safe. Cairo is such a big city and the

news only ever shows Tahrir, so it paints a very different picture than the everyday social and political realities of life in Egypt.

The visit with Mina was refreshing. His perspective forced me to consider another outlook into Egyptian politics and the beliefs that dominate Egypt. I talked to him about my trip to Suez and how uncomfortable I was. I spoke to him about my past plans to convert to Islam, and then my apprehension about the same thing. I also talked about the difficulties I was having in Egypt, with sexual harassment, for example, and he introduced me to yet another side of Egypt that left me even more confounded. His family was classy, kind, and compassionate. They made sure to include me in their conversations and wanted to include me in future get-togethers. His friends did the same.

I was able to see, in the experiences I had prior to writing that email, Egypt through three very different relationships I shared: one with Mina, who was an open-minded, upper-middle class Egyptian *Copt*, another with Meeto, who was an open-minded, quite liberal, upper-middle class Egyptian Muslim, and yet another with Nour and Ahmed, who were conservative, religious, and, although Ahmed has a Ph. D., on the lower rung of the class ladder. I firmly believe that class has more to do with anything in Egypt than religious background, or biological sex. The Muslims I met—both men and women—who were educated, and from a higher class, for example, occasionally drank alcohol, dated, and went out dancing with their friends. This was a very different perspective of Islam than I had while I was with my ex, as well as with my Saudi female friends. Many Saudi men I met *did* drink, date, and go out to nightclubs. However, I've only met two

Saudi women who ever did. In Egypt, I met many Muslim women who did these types of things and did not seem at all concerned.

However, some of these women had to fight hard to overcome their reputations. I recall them telling me stories of their families sticking up for them to gossiping neighbors, and also stories about overbearing possessive boyfriends. Towards the end of my stay in Egypt, I also had my own experience with an overbearing, possessive, verbally abusive boyfriend. I think this is the point when I really had a self-realization. While I confronted my new feelings about the experiences I had in Egypt in contrast to the experiences I had in Kalamazoo with the Saudi community, I came to some unsettling conclusions. When I decided to leave Egypt earlier than I anticipated—in February instead of June—the man I ended up dating was extremely upset with me:

February 14, 2012...

I think it was a good idea I left. The hardest part was telling everyone and having the courage to quit, tell all of my students, their parents, the school, my friends, Meeto, etc. After that—and dealing with Meeto crying a lot—it was alright. Seriously, he was hugging me and like...you know when you cry and your chest starts kind of hyperventilating—that's what he was doing, but acting like he wasn't. I will miss him a lot, but just when I thought he was really awesome, he had a bit of a freak out. I went out with some friends when he was in Mansoura and was with Bandar and Nidal (My ex's friend and the other Egyptian guy who has a huge crush on me) and my phone died and Meeto freaked out. I got all these texts...really rude and insanely jealous. I was really

shocked. I showed Almudena, Meeto's brother's girlfriend, and she said he's said similar things to her. I don't know if it is a guy thing here, but....so sweet/charming/loving, etc. but then crazy and dramatic all of a sudden. So that was good that happened before I left. I think it helped with the transition a bit because I saw a side of him I never saw before—a side that makes me a little nervous...not to mention how he initially acted when I told him I was leaving.

Anyway—Almudena also really helped me with a lot. She's a psychologist, but she was telling me she doesn't know why she's still with Meeto's brother for the same reasons I didn't know why I was still with my ex...and also why I got involved with Meeto. Same problems all around. It helped both of us though. She told me what I said to her really is helping her be strong to make a choice on whether or not to move back to Spain or to another country. She feels similarly to Spain as I do to America...it's hard to go back sometimes because you're torn between friends/countries/cultures/feelings, etc. There's always a part of you that isn't completely there. I don't know how to explain it.

Once I announced to everyone I was leaving, I was surprised to see how many people cared. As a goodbye to my friends, many of us went out to a coffee shop to hangout before I left. My ex's friend, Bandar, happened to be in Cairo for job training and so we spent a lot of time together. He was extremely helpful in being a listening ear with regards to the problems I was having with Meeto. He lived in America for his bachelor's degree and then returned to his home in Dammam, Saudi Arabia. Because he lived so

long in America, and dated some American girls, he had an excellent understanding of American culture and expectations for relationships. I confided in him a lot, and on the night we were out with my friends, my phone died. I never imagined the hurtful things I would hear from Meeto. I told Meeto I would be with Bandar, Nidal, and my work friends. I also sent him a text letting him know where I would be and that my phone was going to die. Once my friends and I left the coffee shop, we went to my co-workers house to relax a little more. I wanted nothing more than to enjoy spending time with my friends, as it was one of my last nights in Cairo. While I was at my friend's house, I charged my phone, which had died at the coffee shop, only to receive numerous texts from Meeto. He sent texts saying, "Why don't you answer your phone!? What are you doing!? Who are you fucking, you bitch whore!?" I could not believe it. Regardless of how conservative my ex was, he treated me with so much respect—he was truly a wonderful person, despite how different his ideas about women's and men's roles were from mine. And while Meeto was quite liberal and open-minded, I was completely taken aback by his crude words. He knew me better than that. Once he saw me in person, he apologized profusely for his remarks, but his words were empty.

Some of my co-workers had similar interactions with men they ended up dating—verbally abusive men who were always severely apologetic after they were finished insulting, or abandoning, them. While none of my friends were physically abused, they reported being pushed around and having their hair pulled in arguments—as a way to chastise them for their "inappropriate" behavior. Usually typical behavior for Western women in romantic relationships, when we stood up for ourselves, or raised our voices to

refute unwarranted accusations about our whereabouts or our behavior—putting our boyfriends in their place when they truly did something inappropriate in our minds, we were met with men who suddenly went from being loving and compassionate to being paranoid, aggressive, and insulting. However, not all men were like this. Many of my coworkers had wonderful boyfriends who treated them with respect and compassion, never making assumptions about their integrity or faithfulness. Besides the relationships we found ourselves in that sometimes caused us pain, many of my coworkers were met with verbal abuse, or unwanted physical advances made, from strangers. A Canadian coworker I had came to work one day upset because a taxi driver grabbed her breast. An American coworker of mine showed up to work one day crying because a taxi driver she apparently had a nice conversation with fondled her bottom and thighs as she was getting out of the taxi. My roommate had told me one day that while she was riding the subway a man said, “Do you like to suck cock?” and was uncomfortable with the many men who continued to invade her personal space. Of course, she was not riding in the part of the subway that is supposed to be a space for women. She was riding in the part of the subway many men ride in as well. However, she said that fortunately a religious man saw what was going on and told the other men off. She said he protected her from their insults and advances until she got off of the subway. Two other friends of mine, an Egyptian girl and a girl from New Zealand, were followed by a group of five Egyptian men in an SUV who were following them and repeatedly shouted insults at them. They walked into random shops to try and avoid them, but when they came back out, these men always seemed to find them. They were worried because there had been a few

women kidnapped in *Maadi*, where we lived. Eventually, they lost the men who were harassing them. These experiences frightened a lot of us, but fortunately we had enough positive experiences with Egyptian men, including our friends, coworkers, and strangers, who really respected women, so that we did not assume that all men had sexist ideas about women.

However, some interactions I had with men confused me. One of my students, for example, told her family I would be leaving. My student apparently cared about me so much that her father met me at the airport to make sure I made it safely out of Egypt. My interaction with her father was awkward and I am still not sure how to interpret it:

February 14, 2012...

One of my students' parents (her dad) met me at the airport at 1:00am and made sure I made it to my gate and everything (so there wouldn't be problems for me) until 3:00am! My baggage weight would have cost me \$220 USD, but their family knows the security at the airport, so I went back into the security area and her dad stayed with me the whole time to make sure I didn't have to pay extra and that I didn't have any problems boarding. It was so sweet. Her dad was telling me some crazy stories though—again, about Russians....I don't know why. I'll tell you more later. It kind of weirded me out, but he was really nice. He said, "So what's your favorite drink?" and I was like, "I don't really drink a lot..." ... "I did when I was younger, But not really anymore." and he said, "I'm Muslim, but I am open-minded." I never know if people are trying to test me or what...then he continue to tell me crazy stories....again, not sure why. He said he could

help me find husbands here...that he would make a list of good guys for me to marry for when I come back...awkward.

The stories her father told me about Russian women were interesting, because I'm not sure why he told me. He said that he was a good Muslim, but he was open-minded. I'm not sure exactly what he meant by that. He had said he went on business trips frequently, and had a lot of foreign friends who drank. My student's father then went on to say he had a Russian friend that he met at a business conference. Apparently, this friend had a daughter and my student's father took out his Russian friend's daughter and her friend. He then went on to tell me that these girls were crazy, wanted to party, and ended up taking off their clothes and skinny-dipping in the Red Sea. He said they invited him to come in and join them. While I appreciated his help, I was completely taken aback by the stories he told me. I had no idea what his intentions were; I wasn't sure if he was trying to relate to me, or if he was coming on to me.

This happened frequently with men I came into contact with. For example, our bus driver, Mohammed, was always very pleasant. He did not speak with me very often, but I was the only teacher who could communicate effectively with him in Arabic. I often gave Mohammed directions for picking up other teachers, or told him certain teachers on our bus route were sick, and I sometimes made small talk with him so he would know he was appreciated. We had found out that his fiancé had recently broke off their engagement and he was very sad, so I tried to be more friendly towards him to cheer him up. One day, he gave me a gift. It was a stuffed teddy bear with a heart balloon that said,

“I love you.” I awkwardly accepted his gift because I had no idea what to do; I didn’t want to be rude, but I also didn’t want to give him the wrong idea. I went to my male friends for advice and they told me to just stop talking to him and to quit being friendly.

Unfortunately in Egypt, sexual harassment, and ideas about women in general, are problematic. However, this is changing. For example, a group of vigilantes have taken to fighting harassment against women in the streets of Cairo. Some of these vigilantes have harassers arrested, while others physically punish them or spray paint their faces to mark them as harassers of women (El Sirgany 2012). To bring further attention to the issues of sexual harassment in Egypt, an Egyptian man, Waleed Hammad, dressed up as a woman and filmed instances of sexual harassment that he encountered on the streets. There are also now social networking sites where women can name their harassers, describe the kind of harassment they encountered, and detail the area in which it took place so other women can avoid being harassed too (El Deeb 2013).

While there are numerous problems in Egypt that surface and disappear, only to resurface later, Egypt is filled with diversity and also with educated, open-minded people. Many Egyptian men and women are working to change many of these deep-seated ideas about women and how to treat and interact with them. Like many others, I believe that education and spreading awareness will help lessen these kinds of problems in the future. I believe education is the first step to empowerment. Even my friend Nour, while wearing *niqab* and having very conservative values, questioned the circumstances that led to her inability to have some control of her life; she was very vocal about it. Her husband also was vocal about the discrimination his wife faced as a woman in Egypt and did his

best to shield her from it. Like my friend's husband, Ahmed, and many other Egyptian men who feel that women deserve the same rights as men, many Saudi husbands are being more vocal about the discrimination their Saudi wives face in Saudi Arabia.

Beyond Saudi Women's Failed Attempts to Mobilize

My experiences within Egypt, when juxtaposed with my experiences in the Saudi community, were certainly very different. While women have continually gained and lost rights in Egypt, due to the ever-changing socio-political agendas of its leaders, the ideology behind the women's movement continues to inspire Egyptian men and women to keep pushing for women's rights. Unlike the current situation in Egypt, Saudi Arabia is relatively stable, and thus women in Saudi Arabia are continually gaining rights. These rights Saudi women have gained are only picking up momentum and have not been abandoned as some of the rights Egyptian women gained had.

In order to better understand how a women's movement could take root in Saudi Arabia, it's important to revisit the four questions that introduced this thesis: How have the circumstances and developments in Saudi Arabia transformed the lives of Saudi women? What avenues of power do Saudi women have? What can we learn from women's movements and experiences in Egypt that can be applied to Saudi Arabia? What is being done to lay the foundation for a successful women's movement in Saudi Arabia?

As discussed in the third chapter, many changes in Saudi Arabia have really improved the lives of Saudi women. Its past and current monarchs have legitimized educational and work-related reforms that have made it possible for women to simultaneously create

their own for-women-only public sphere while still participating, to some extent, in the male dominated public sphere where sexes are, for the most part, segregated. Saudi men and women have continued to use pro-Islamic rhetoric to further bolster support for women, so that eventually they may be able to drive and make their own choices without needing a male's consent; these Saudis just want equal rights, as established by the state, for women.

Nowadays Saudi women have many more avenues to power than they did recently. While they are empowered via the support they receive from their families that present them with the opportunity to attend a university, or take on a career, they still are not autonomously empowered. Despite the fact that Saudi women still need a male's consent to pursue the aforementioned opportunities that are now available to them, they are well aware of the gendered inequalities and discrimination they face in Saudi Arabia. Through going overseas to study abroad, they are made even more aware of the cultural ideologies that some women feel are holding them back.

In reflecting on the women's movement in Egypt, we can observe the fact that movements take time. However, once an ideology is spread in the form of a movement, it's much harder to extinguish. Just like Egyptian women and men recognized the inequalities in their own society, Saudi men and women are now cognizant of the discrimination Saudi women face.

In lieu of the social attitudes and state laws that oppress women in Saudi Arabia, Saudi men and women are speaking out, and organizing, to criticize the institutions and ideologies in place that are keeping women entangled in a web of trepidation and

uncertainty about their future roles in society. In Egypt the women's movement began with men and women who believed women deserved more. Educated men and women began to educate others and their ideas spread. Their ideas lead to new legislation that gave women rights. To foreground this chapter, I noted that Altorki (1986) asserted that changes are the result of strategic ideological systems. An ideology, as Altorki sees it, is "a system of belief which serves the individual for the mental reconstruction of the real world" (1986: 149). The women's movement in Egypt is a part of the ideology that is slowly sweeping through the minds of men and women in Saudi Arabia. I think the women's movement in Saudi Arabia has already begun and it is already reshaping Saudi social and cultural norms to the benefit of women. However, much research still needs to be done. There is very little ethnographic research done on Saudi women *in* Saudi Arabia as it is difficult for non-Saudi women to get a visa to enter Saudi Arabia, unless they are Muslim women going there to make their pilgrimage or they have a sponsor for work or research. It is important that more be learned and understood about Saudi women because they are truly an untapped resource in Saudi Arabia. However, I am hopeful that as more women are leaving Saudi Arabia to receive an education from abroad, and more women in general are pursuing an education and future careers in Saudi Arabia, that Saudi women themselves will push for and undertake research that dismantles the stereotyped assumptions made about them. While I, and many other women are hopeful, these changes may take some time. As my respondent Mena echoes:

They are not ready yet [...]I think the Saudi society needs a lot of time [so] the people... need to be ready to adopt this change and...because there are a lot of

different mentalit[ies] and...there [are] a lot of educational levels...I think they are not ready yet for this huge change. I think it's going to be gradually arriving.

Bothaina Kalem would agree with Mena as she said that in Egypt, "No one expected a revolution would topple Mubarak, but it happened. We can win, but even if we don't we are winning every day just by being out here, changing people's perspectives" (as cited by Shenker 2011). While changes in Saudi Arabia may come slowly, often slow quantitative changes result in dramatic and swift qualitative changes. Saudi perspectives relating to women's rights are changing daily, and I'm certain that eventually the change will be actualized in the form of new laws and attitudes that guarantee women the rights they've been fighting to have for so long.

APPENDIX A

LIST OF SAUDI RESPONDENTS

Pseudonym	Region in Saudi Arabia	Degree Sought	Generation
Amool	Western Arabia	M.A.	1980s-90s
Badra	Central Arabia	M.A.	1980s-90s
Alaa	Eastern Arabia	Ph. D.	1980s-90s
Mona	Central Arabia	M.A.	1980s-90s
Noona	Southern Arabia	M.A.	1980s-90s

APPENDIX B
HSIRB APPROVAL FORMS

Date: December 5, 2011

To: Laura Spielvogel, Principal Investigator
Ashleigh Dunham, Student Investigator for thesis

From: Victoria Janson, Interim Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number 11-04-06

This letter will serve as confirmation that the change to your research project titled “Articulating Agency in the Global Sphere: The Parallels between Saudi Arabian Women, Islamic Discourse, and Reform” requested in your memo dated December 2, 2011 (to include data collected as registered class projects) has been approved by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board.

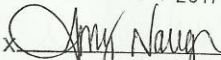
The conditions and the duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University.

Please note that you may **only** conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: April 14, 2012

APR 14 2011


HSIRB Chair

Western Michigan University
Department of Anthropology

Principal Investigator: Dr. Laura Spielvogel
Student Investigator: Ashleigh Dunham
Title of Study: Articulating Agency in the Global Sphere: The Parallels between Saudi Arabian Women, Islamic Discourse, and Reform

You have been invited to participate in a research project titled "*Articulating Agency in the Global Sphere: The Parallels Between Saudi Arabian Women, Islamic Discourse, and Reform*." This project will serve as Ashleigh Dunham's thesis for the requirements of the Master of Arts degree in Anthropology. This consent document will explain the purpose of this research project and will go over all of the time commitments, the procedures used in the study, and the risks and benefits of participating in this research project. Please read this consent form carefully and completely and please ask any questions if you need more clarification.

What are we trying to find out in this study?

We want to find out how Saudi Arabian women are encouraging reform through positive Islamic discourse (written or spoken communication about Islam).

Who can participate in this study?

You can participate in this study if you are female, from Saudi Arabia, and Muslim.

Where will this study take place?

The study will take place anywhere you feel comfortable.

What is the time commitment for participating in this study?

If you want to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in one or more open-ended interviews for at least 30 minutes per session over the course of four months, as well as involving the researcher in some activities (like social gatherings, daily chores, etc.) you are comfortable with.

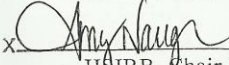
What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?

Ashleigh Dunham would like to interview you or spend time with you doing the types of activities you would normally do. The interview will be a chance for you to share your opinions about reform in Saudi Arabia, and there is no correct answer for any questions being asked.

What information is being measured during the study?

As this study is purely qualitative, nothing will be measured quantitatively. When we are done with the study, Ashleigh Dunham will write a report about what we found out in the form of a thesis. Your name will not be used in the thesis.

APR 14 2011

x 
HSIRB Chair

What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?

If you participate in this study you might be embarrassed or uncomfortable about some of the questions being asked. If you feel uncomfortable or embarrassed, you don't have to be in this study. You can choose to stop participating in the study at anytime for any reason.

To protect your confidentiality, even if you give your name or other private information, we will not include the information in any transcripts, reports, presentations, or any papers that will be submitted in the form of Ashleigh Dunham's thesis. We will give you a pseudonym and will not discuss your identity to anyone.

What are the benefits of participating in this study?

You have a chance to share your opinions about a topic that many Americans do not understand as well as a chance to possibly change common misconceptions about Saudi Arabia. However, we don't know for sure that these things will happen.

Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?

Yes. Time is a cost associated with participating in this study. You will be asked to give up at least 30 minutes of your time for at least one interview. If you would like to participate in more interviews, at 30 minutes per session, over the course of four months, that would cost more of your time. Any time you can afford to give up to allow the researcher to gather information to include in this study is a cost.

Is there any compensation for participating in this study?

There is no compensation for participating in this study.

Who will have access to the information collected during this study?

Ashleigh Dunham will have access to the information collected during this study and it will be put together in the form of a thesis. We will not include the information in any transcripts, reports, presentations, or any papers that will be submitted for Ashleigh Dunham's thesis.

What if you want to stop participating in this study?

You do not have to be in this study. You can choose to stop participating in the study at anytime for any reason. You will not suffer any prejudice or penalty by your decision to stop your participation. You will experience NO consequences either academically or personally if you choose to withdraw from this study.

Should you have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact the primary investigator, Dr. Laura Spielvogel at (269) 387-4140 or laura.spielvogel@wmich.edu. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at 269-387-8293 or the Vice President for Research at 269-387-8298 if questions arise during the course of the study.

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Do not participate in this study if the stamped date is older than one year.

APPENDIX C

ARABIC TRANSCRIPT AND ENGLISH TRANSLATION FOR ALA AL TAYER TV SHOW

6:13 – 6:43

Audio:	Video:
<p>1) Announcer [to Saudi woman]:</p> <p>Is your movement restricted?</p> <p>حركاتك مقيدة؟</p>	<p>Saudi woman dressed in black abaya and hijab stands in living room, nodding in agreement.</p>
<p>2) Do you need your guardian with you everywhere you want to go?</p> <p>محتاجة ولي أمرك لي كل مكان تبغي تروحية؟</p>	<p>Saudi woman nods again with an added eye roll and shoulder shrug.</p>
<p>3) And your guardian can't go with you to all the places you want to go?</p> <p>ولي أمرك مايقدر يجي معاكي كل مكان تبغي تروحية؟</p>	<p>Woman shakes her head back and forth with eyes closed and head turned downward to the floor, looking discouraged.</p>
<p>4) Hafa' Alsaakhaa provides you with a guaranteed solution!</p> <p>شركة هفاء الصاقع تقدم لكي الحل الاكيد!</p>	<p>Woman slowly looks up in shock, eyes widening.</p>
<p>5) W.A.M. → the portable guardian!</p> <p>و . ا . م ← "ولي أمر متنقل!"</p>	<p>Shot cuts away to the same woman superimposed against a blue sky, smiling and gazing lovingly at her portable, ken-doll like guardian she's holding in her hand.</p>
<p>6) The portable guardian is pocket size!</p> <p>ولي أمر متنقل بمقاس الجيب!</p>	<p>Woman, still smiling, takes and puts the portable guardian in her purse, looking to the camera and patting her bag.</p>
<p>7) Get approval for travel and your comings and goings!</p> <p>موافقة سفر وابتعاث!</p>	<p>Shot cuts away to the same woman superimposed against an airport, with her holding her portable guardian to sign travel</p>

	documents.
<p>8) Go to the sea or even court!</p> <p>رحلات بحريه! وفيه محاكم كمان!</p>	<p>Cutaway to the sea, with the Saudi woman in a brightly colored shirt and hijab, wearing goggles and holding her portable guardian. The second cutaway is to the woman, who is now wearing a black abaya and niqab, is superimposed against a government building with her portable guardian, also wearing traditional clothing (a thoub and a shmagh with igal) clothing.</p>
<p>9) He'll never say no!</p> <p>مايقول لا!</p>	<p>The woman smiles warmly with her eyes (the only part of her face visible), raises her eyebrows up and down, and gives a thumbs up.</p>
<p>10) You'll be smiling all the time!</p> <p>ومبتسم علي طول!</p>	
<p>11) Song [in the background] with words appearing on the screen:</p> <p>"I swear, my dreams have materialized, look my lover's with me"</p> <p>" والله وتحقق منايا شوفو حبيبي معايا "</p>	<p>The camera zooms in on the smiling portable ken-doll-like guardian.</p>
<p>12) Writing on the screen:</p> <p>"Look my guardian's with me"</p> <p>شوفو وليي معايا</p>	

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