

# **Gender and Invested Agency: Cultural Expressions in the United Arab Emirates**

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## **Abstract**

Based upon qualitative research with forty young Emirati women and men, this thesis explores the relationship between gender and nation within the United Arab Emirates. The study examines how this relationship affects young Emirati women in particular, and investigates the ways Emirati culture is being represented by young Emiratis to real and imagined audiences, and the implication of gender within those representations.

This thesis argues that cultural expressions—such as artistic work, volunteering for a cultural program and wearing national dress—are best described in terms of a feminist poststructural model of agency I term “invested agency.” This research theorises the relationship between gender and nation as an investment by Emirati women within the discourse of the UAE’s state-sponsored women’s empowerment agenda. The term invested agency applies to the ways in which female participants’ subjectivities are shaped by the discourses around them, and speak both from within and to those discourses. The term also explains that agency is not always resistance against an oppressor, as in the liberal framework, but instead a strategic negotiation of contextualised choice from within available discourses. Participants’ subjectivities are embedded within the discourses of Orientalism, individualisation and cultural globalisation. These discourses fuel and create each other, resulting in female participants who demonstrate that “invested agency” means being attuned to and operating from within a multiplicity of discourses through embodied sites of cultural expression and representation.

Understanding invested agency requires critical analysis of conceptual binaries such as modern / traditional, agency / oppression, representation / expression, local / global, and

individualisation / collectivity. Considering these concepts as opposed and mutually exclusive is only a one-dimensional way to understand gendered subjectivity, the effects of globalisation, and cultural change. Instead, this research provides evidence that these apparent oppositions are entangled and mutually implicating, creating one another in new ways.

The UAE is not a well-studied area within Gender Studies scholarship, nor is the Emirati population, an elite, privileged and indigenous minority within their own country. By triangulating discourse analysis, qualitative interviews and participant observation, this research fills a gap in Gender Studies, Arabian Gulf Studies, and Middle Eastern studies scholarship. No other scholar has investigated the interplay of global processes that have shaped the way national identity is performed, considered and represented among young Emiratis who are undergoing radical cultural change. This research thus generates new meanings for the ways we consider the relationship between gender and nation.

# Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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Parts of Chapters Five and Six will appear in:

1. "'Empowering' or 'Empowered' Emirati Women? State-Sponsored Feminism and Self-Perceptions of Women's Achievements in the Public Sphere," in B. Clark, J. Moritz & A. Ghafar (eds), *The Contemporary Middle East: Revolution or Reform?* Islamic Studies Series, Melbourne University Press, Australia. (forthcoming, July 2014)
2. "'We're Normal. We're Just Like You': Gendered Practices of Cultural Exchange and Translation in Dubai," in M. Al Dabbagh & D. Abdelhady (eds), *Women and Globalization in the GCC*, Gerlach Press, Berlin. (forthcoming)

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*Jillian Schedneck*

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*Date*

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