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

Jillian Schedneck

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Gender Studies and Social Analysis (School of Social Sciences) The University of Adelaide

November 2013
# Table of Contents

**LIST OF IMAGES**

**ABSTRACT**

**DECLARATION**

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

**Introduction Gender, Globalisation and Minority Cultures**

**Chapter One Framing the UAE: Context and Cultural Change**

- Constructing the Other: Dubai context and criticism
- Media representations
- Modernising the UAE
- Nationhood
- Research focused on the UAE

**Chapter Two The Theoretical Context**

- Intersections: Modernity and tradition
- Cultural globalisation
- Tradition
- Gendered modernities and traditions
- Discourse and Orientalism
- Orientalism and women
- Gender and nationalism
- Gender and nation studies
- Theories of identity
- Emirati identity
- Poststructural agency
- Conclusion

**Chapter Three In the Field: Research Process and Methods**

- Poststructuralist feminist approach
- Poststructuralist feminism
- Data triangulation: Interviews, participant observation and discourse analysis
- Sampling procedures
- Interview participants
- Interview practices
- Participant observation
- Discourse analysis
- Steps in discourse analysis
- Research positionality and reflexivity
- Advantages, challenges and limitations
- Interview analysis
- Conclusion

**Chapter Four A Bridge Between: Representing the Modern and Traditional Emirati Women**

- State-sponsored women's empowerment and the promotion of Emirati women
- The discourse of state-sponsored women's empowerment
- Local newspapers
- The language of feminism
- To be empowered
Portraying modern and traditional
Time as progress, time as loss
Counter narratives
Conclusion

Chapter Five  Investing in State-Sponsored Women’s Empowerment
Agency and investment
Investing in state-sponsored women’s empowerment
A bridge between the modern and the traditional
Competing feminisms
Conclusion

Chapter Six 'We’re Normal. We’re Just like You': Gendered Practices of Cultural Understanding and Translation in Dubai
Contexts of cultural understanding
Choice, agency and empowerment in discourses about Muslim women
Muslim women representing the nation
Cultural translation
"Correct" answers
Representing Emirati women at the SMCCU
Demonstrating distinction
Conclusion

Chapter Seven  'It's a Choice We Make': Gender, Choice and Emirati National Dress
Female individualisation and choice
Modern nationalism and identity
Cultural difference
National identity as dress code
Individualised choice
Invested agency and the abaya and sheyla
Alienated in abaya
Conclusion

Chapter Eight  Global Performance of Cultural Distinctiveness: Young Emirati Artists
Globalisation and creative arts
Globalisation and creative expression outside the West
Global performances of nationalist art in the UAE
Context for national art and exhibitions
Global citizens, culturally distinct
Self-censorship and the limitations of UAE art
Misrepresentations
Conclusion

Conclusion  Gender and Invested Agency
Gendered subject position
Individualisation and choice
Global citizens and distinctive cultural belonging
Agents of globalisation
Limitations of this study
Recommendations for future research

APPENDIX ONE: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (GUIDE)

APPENDIX TWO

REFERENCES
List of Images

Image 5: Young women celebrating photo, UAE Yearbook 2010. The caption states: “Women in the UAE have long been recognised as equal partners in national development.” http://www.uaeinteract.com/uaeint_misc/pdf_2010/Yearbook2010_EN/ ........................................ 122
Image 7: Billboard in Dubai Mall, Arabian Court section, featuring a woman in a headscarf, advertising that “traditional” clothes can be purchased in this section of the mall. (researcher photo) ........................................ 134
Image 12: Souvenir shop in Bastakiya, Dubai (researcher photo) ........................................ 212
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.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

The author acknowledges that copyright of published works contained within this thesis resides with the copyright holder(s) of those works.

I also give permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the web, via the University’s digital research repository, the Library catalogue and also through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the University to restrict access for a period of time.

Parts of Chapters Five and Six will appear in:


_____________________________  _______________________
Jillian Schedneck 25/11/2013
Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the generous young Emirati artists and cultural program volunteers who participated in this research. These talented and dedicated young people met me for coffee or lunch, or invited me into their homes and offices. Thank you for sharing your thoughts and experiences with me, and trusting in my intentions.

Thank you to my thesis supervisors Associate Professor Megan Warin and Dr. Anna Szorenyi, for providing me with support, feedback, and confidence that my topic and arguments were worthwhile.

Thank you to the Gender Studies and Social Analysis department. Completing my PhD was assisted in various ways by staff and students. I would not have come to Australia if it were not for Professor Margaret Allen, who was interested in my project from my initial email, sent from Boston in the United States, over four years ago. Thank you for believing in my ability to carry out this project. Another thanks goes to Megan Warin for agreeing to supervise this project from its very initial stages. Thank you to Associate Professor Susan Oakley and Dr. Kathie Muir for their support, as well as Dr. Kate Cadman for her wonderfully helpful writing workshops. I also appreciate Sarah Hoggard and Ryan Cortazzo for all of their administrative and technical support, and Helen Attar for her library assistance. Thanks goes to fellow PhD students Dr. Clare Bartholomaeus, Tara Bates, Sharyn Goudie, Connie Musolino, Nadine Levy, Dr. Penelope Eate, Dr. Ruthie O’Reilly, Damien Creaser, Anne Burger, Dr. Gabbie Zizzo and Kanchana Bulumiulle for their camaraderie and support over the three and a half years of researching and writing this PhD. Thanks also to my international student friends here in Adelaide, particularly Rebecca Kittel and Shymaa Nasrullah.

During my field research period in Dubai, I was assisted by several friends. Thanks goes to Perri Giovannucci for her friendship, enlightening discussions, and allowing me to live in her beautiful apartment for my nearly five months of field research. I would also like to thank Sarina Wakefield, fellow researcher, for her friendship, research related discussions, and letting me tag along on her trips to Abu Dhabi.

I have also gained a great deal from discussing my research at conferences and via email exchanges. Thanks especially to Staci Strobl and Mehal Krayen.

I appreciate the people who have read various forms of my thesis, particularly Dr. Clare Bartholomaeus who proofread the full thesis and gave great support, advice and friendship throughout my PhD.

Thank you to all of my family for their support, especially my parents, Judy and Skip, and my sister Brooke and brother-in-law William Starner, who always had faith in my abilities even when my own is temporarily lost. Special thanks to Brooke for giving me the inspiration to apply for a PhD in Australia. Her thoughts on my early ideas for this project and subsequent chapter drafts were extremely helpful, and I always appreciate our discussions of academic pursuits.

I would also like to acknowledge the financial support I have received from the Adelaide Scholarship International, Australian Postgraduate Award (APA) scholarship, Gender Studies and Social Analysis Postgraduate Funds, University of Adelaide Travel Abroad Scholarship,
the Henry Luce Foundation, and the Karen Halley Fund.

Finally, to my partner and fiancé, Duncan Jardine, who I met while pursuing this PhD. Thank you for your confidence in me, your unwavering support, and the wonderful distraction of falling in love with you while researching and writing this thesis.