Spring 5-2017

"What Is My Environment, I Will Change": Exploring the Possibilities of Transnational Feminism through Kennesaw State University's Middle Eastern and North African Students

Lissa M. Small
Kennesaw State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/mast_etd

Part of the American Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/mast_etd/9

This Capstone is brought to you for free and open access by the Interdisciplinary Studies Department at DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master of Arts in American Studies Capstones by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu.
“WHAT IS MY ENVIRONMENT, I WILL CHANGE”: EXPLORING THE POSSIBILITIES OF TRANSNATIONAL FEMINISM THROUGH KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY’S MIDDLE EASTERN AND NORTH AFRICAN STUDENTS

A Thesis
Presented to
The Academic Faculty

By
Lissa Small

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Masters of Arts in American Studies

Kennesaw State University
May 2017
To the MENA women of Kennesaw State University
Your grace, perseverance, and wisdom is transforming the world one encounter at a time
## Contents

### Introduction

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................... 1

### Chapter I: Literature Review

*Major Themes in Transnational Feminist Thought* ................................................................. 2
*Trends in Middle Eastern and North African Women’s Experiences at Home* ...................... 8
*Trends in Middle Eastern and North African Women’s Experiences Abroad* ................... 19
*Ethnography* ............................................................................................................................... 26

### Chapter II: Methodology

*Anonymous Online Survey* ........................................................................................................ 31
*Personal Interviews* ................................................................................................................... 32
*Notable Works of Fiction* .......................................................................................................... 34

### Chapter III: The Student Experience of MENA Women at Kennesaw State University

*Factors Bringing MENA Women Students to KSU* ............................................................... 36
*MENA Women Students’ Perceptions of Their Roles at Home and Abroad* ..................... 39
*Challenges for MENA Women Students in the U.S.* ............................................................. 44
*MENA Women Students and Changing Perceptions* ............................................................ 48
*Friendships and Solidarity among International and Domestic Students* ......................... 52

### Chapter IV: MENA Women Students and Transnational Feminism

*MENA Women’s Perceptions of U.S. Women* ........................................................................... 58
*Feminism Perceived* .................................................................................................................. 62
*Causing Problems or Creating Solidarity?* ............................................................................ 65
*Changing the MENA Region from Within* ............................................................................ 68
*Possibilities for the Future* ....................................................................................................... 72

### Conclusion

Conclusion .......................................................................................................................................... 74

### Bibliography

Bibliography ................................................................................................................................. 77
Introduction

In the 2014/2015 academic year, 103,307 students from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) studied in the United States.\(^1\) Of those students, 123 studied at Kennesaw State University (KSU) in a degree program or Intensive English Program (IEP) in the spring of 2015, and at least 15% of these were women.\(^2\) These women face distinct challenges as they maneuver various social and political realities in their home countries and abroad. Nevertheless, with the challenges come new possibilities for these women and for women across the world. This paper first identifies scholarly research on feminism in the transnational context and the possible impact that studying in the United States may have on women from the MENA region. Drawing upon this research and truths found in select works of fiction, the paper then analyzes surveys and interviews conducted with Kennesaw State University students to understand the lived experiences and beliefs of the women students from the MENA region at KSU and to investigate these women’s roles in furthering solidarity between women across the world and creating avenues for transnational feminism.


\(^2\)Kennesaw State University, “International Student Profile, Spring Semester 2015,” last accessed October 24, 2016, http://eimirvic.kennesaw.edu/ProfilesStudent/InternationalStudentProfile/Spring2015.pdf, and Kennesaw State University Intensive English Program Center, IEP Internal Data Records, provided to the author on October 24, 2016. Enrollment of women students from MENA countries in the Intensive English Program was 19 out of 93 students. The number of women students out of the 30 MENA students enrolled in undergraduate programs is unknown.
Chapter I: Literature Review

Major Themes in Transnational Feminist Thought

The Arab women who enroll at Kennesaw State University in a degree program or Intensive English Program (IEP) travel across great distances to further their education. They choose to leave their own city, country and culture to learn in a new environment in a different country. Since this relocation is international and my focus is on women, it is important to identify recent scholarship on the relationship between geographic locations as it pertains to women in particular. Scholarly thought relevant to this issue may be summarized into three general categories: (1) globalization, (2) the meaning and importance of a transnational approach to feminism, and (3) an intersectional approach to identity.

In the last half-century, the world has undergone the process of globalization, which many define in economic terms as the spread of capitalism and international companies and trade deals.\(^3\) Globalization also entails the transmission of culture across borders.\(^4\) According to feminist scholarship, globalization has harmed women in multiple ways, including, for example, through the feminization of poverty and the devaluation of women’s work.\(^5\) Interesting in its seeming contradiction, globalization has both increased and at the same time restricted


\(^4\)Naples and Desai, 8, 15-16.

\(^5\)Ibid., 16-20.
international travel to the United States. Scholars argue that, on the one hand, globalization has displaced women from their homes and has encouraged international travel to the U.S. to pursue low-wage jobs.\textsuperscript{6} On the other hand, the U.S. borders are heavily policed and immigrants scrutinized.\textsuperscript{7} Nevertheless, globalization has also provided opportunities for feminist organizing across borders, as individual women and organizations are able to connect across national boundaries through partnerships, non-governmental organizations, international governmental agencies, and digital media.\textsuperscript{8}

In recent decades, scholars have critiqued the mainstream, western understanding of feminism to identify the diversity of women throughout the world and validity of non-western feminist work. They call for a new approach to feminism that displaces the hegemony of the West and that allows for effective alliances and activism across borders and across oceans. Key in this critique is the writing of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, especially her early, groundbreaking essay, “Under Western Eyes,” and later her follow-up book, Feminism without Borders. In her writing, Mohanty argues that the West has produced hegemonic discourses about women outside of the West, creating a conception of the “Third World Woman,” which both “others” all non-Western women and collapses the rich diversity that exists between the women. The universalized notion of the “Third World Woman,” Mohanty writes, prevents any distinction from being made between the histories, economic status, class status, and ethnicity of the


women. The “Third World Woman” is identified as sexually oppressed and confined in terms of class status, education, and gender roles, in stark contrast to the modern, liberated western woman. Mohanty sees this lack of attention to particularity as detrimental to feminism because it reveals the colonial, political discourses of the West and prevents effective activism between women of various geographic locations.

Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan similarly discuss the West’s ethnocentric approach, noting that although the West may recognize difference, it still considers itself the arbiter of difference and thinks solely in terms of “exotic” and “domestic.” While Mohanty focuses her study on the need to decolonize feminism, Grewal and Kaplan argue for a postmodern approach that would decenter the West and recognize what Grewal calls the “scattered hegemonies” that exist in various ways and forms. Rather than focusing on the political as Mohanty does, Grewal and Kaplan investigate the influence of economics and culture, most specifically, how cultural production affects women. Grewal and Kaplan believe that postmodernism would enable a critique of generalities such as the monolithic “Third World Woman” which Mohanty describes. Furthermore, as Mohanty calls for attention to the specificities of location, class, and race that intersect in a person’s life, Grewal and Kaplan call for feminists to be aware of the reality of various oppressions that occur simultaneously. Thus Mohanty, Grewal, and Kaplan argue for

---


10 Ibid., 18-20, 39, 226.


12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., 17.
acknowledgement of diversity: in the lived realities of women throughout the world and in the multiple and simultaneous ways in which women may be oppressed.

Scholars have identified several models of the relationship between women throughout the world that are useful to consider in a study of international women students in the United States. These include geographical terms such as West/East, Global North/Global South, and other relational terms such as Center/Periphery and One-Third World/Two-Thirds World. Each of these terms is contentious due to the connotations of power and privilege embedded within the terms. One term, however, appears in the study of transnational feminism that I would like to highlight here: Global/Local. Following up on her argument in “Under Western Eyes,” Mohanty writes in “Under Western Eyes Revisited” that she believes it is not only critical for feminists to understand the multiple and various differences that exist between women, but to connect them to global themes in order to understand the common oppressions women face. In doing so, Mohanty responds to those who label her argument as postmodernist and who accuse her of disregarding any common experiences between women throughout the world to focus solely on the differences.

Interestingly, Grewal and Kaplan, who do argue for a postmodern approach to feminism, hold a similar position to Mohanty in that they likewise see connections between the local and the global. Grewal and Kaplan take their understanding from Armand Mattelart, who envisions lines flowing through the local and the global; these lines flow both directions, intersecting and redirecting at various times and locations. Grewal and Kaplan, however, caution against

---

14 Mohanty, 226.
15 Ibid., 225.
16 Grewal and Kaplan, 13.
overuse of the global/local relationship, arguing that it is a theoretical relationship rather than a realistic one. They write that the distinction between global/local becomes blurred, for example, when one tries to identify what exactly qualifies as local, or when one faces multiple global realities. Furthermore, Grewal and Kaplan believe that the global/local distinction focuses too closely on ethnicity and leans toward the ethnocentrism that feminism is attempting to distance itself from.\textsuperscript{17} In considering the linkages between various women’s experiences, therefore, it is important to create a balanced understanding of this relationship, paying attention to the factors of time, place, and agency that exist in the creation this relationship.

While Mohanty, Grewal, and Kaplan speak of the local in terms of geographic space, other scholars consider location in terms of identity. This is especially pertinent when considering how international women students may conceive of themselves in different times and spaces. Susan Stanford Friedman, in her book, \textit{Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter}, argues for a geographical feminism, which she defines as a feminism that acknowledges the constant shifting of identity.\textsuperscript{18} She sees identity as ever in flux and bases her argument on a “geopolitical axis” in which space intersects with time in the formation of identity.\textsuperscript{19} Friedman believes this approach allows for differences between women without constructing an insuperable wall between them. In this way, Friedman’s argument is in agreement with Mohanty, Grewal, and Kaplan. However, while Grewal and Kaplan prefer to focus on the way that cultural and economic production affects women as a gender, Friedman

\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., 11-12.


\textsuperscript{19}Ibid., 110.
argues against the centrality of gender in feminist literature, attempting to demonstrate the multiple intersections of identity, only one of which is gender.20 When put into conversation with Mohanty, both Mohanty and Friedman argue for a world without borders.21 Friedman believes that feminism must be flexible, adapting itself to diverse situations in time and space, and ever-changing through interaction with others.22

Similar to Friedman’s notion of identity through location, Wendy Hulko discusses location in the context of intersectionality, developing the concept of “social location.” She writes that while intersectionality is theoretical, social location specifies a person’s identity in a particular time and place.23 Using stories of her own experiences and those of others, Hulko demonstrates how aspects of a person’s social location become more prominent based on a particular situation, and this is especially notable when one travels.24 Social location is important when considering how one may experience oppression at various times, depending upon the context.25 Hulko’s concept of social location is significant, then, when considering international women students’ experiences and the contexts in which they find themselves.

The five feminist scholars discussed above, Mohanty, Grewal, Kaplan, Friedman, and Hulko, demonstrate the complex relationship between women throughout the world and also the


21Mohanty, 1-2, Friedman, 5. Mohanty, however, makes the distinction between a world without borders and a borderless world. For Mohanty, the first implies that the borders can be crossed, in the similar sense to Doctors without Borders. The second implies no state boundaries.

22Friedman, 5, 108.


24Ibid., 50.

25Ibid., 52.
complexity of each woman’s own identity. The scholarship argues for acknowledgement of the ways in which politics, culture, and economics factor into the relationship between women divided by geographical borders, while also acknowledging the potential for unity based on discovered commonalities. Transnational feminist scholarship gives agency to women throughout the world, rather than privileging those in the West, while highlighting how various identities are formed and developed in time and space.

Trends in Middle Eastern and North African Women’s Experiences at Home

With the above in mind, it will be useful to identify some of the lived experiences of women from the Middle East and North Africa in order to contextualize possible experiences of Kennesaw State University’s international women students from the MENA countries. Given the critiques and warnings of the scholars above, this section will treat only of those aspects mentioned by scholars as pertaining to many different Arab women in various locations and situations as an attempt to avoid any universalizations of what are, in fact, particularities.

Perhaps one of the most discussed aspects of women’s lives in the MENA region is the concept and function of community. The lived experiences of community of the international women students at Kennesaw State University is particularly relevant as these women leave their established communities at home to become part of different communities at college. Discussions of community as enacted in the Middle East and North Africa come from various sources, such as books on culture, communication, feminism, and history.

In her book on Arab culture, Understanding Arabs: A Contemporary Guide to Arab Society, Barbara Nydell is careful to note the broad geographic space, diverse histories, and ethnic and religious makeup of countries in the Arab world. However, she also identifies certain
overarching themes that are part of Arab culture, many of which deal with relationships between people. For example, Nydell observes that loyalty to and protecting the honor of the family is held as one of the most important values in Arab culture, and explains that one’s family is believed to be of the highest social priority. In her book, *On Saudi Arabia*, Karen House offers an example of this deep connection to family in her story of a Saudi woman who could not take a short get-away trip because in Saudi Arabia, traveling requires an extensive process of leave-taking with one’s relatives. Katherine Zoepf, in her essays on women in the Middle East, reflects on the Arab notion of communal responsibility, writing that in Arab culture there is a unique bond between people in that everyone is the guardian of each other. However, Zoepf believes, based on her observations during her time in the Middle East, that this responsibility falls more heavily on the shoulders of the women, whose virginal bodies represent their male relatives’ masculinity and their family’s honor. The women, then, are the bodily representation of the strong communal aspect of Arab society.

According to Nydell, loyalty to family and friends is always expected; personal preferences are secondary to others’ needs, and the need for personal space in family life or friendships is not understood. Thus, the group is more important than the individual. In her book on Saudi Arabia, Karen House believes that Saudis have a fear of being an individual, that

---


28 Zoepf, 51-52, 121. This responsibility can have negative consequences for some one in different locations in the MENA region. Zoepf notes that honor killings of women to protect family honor still occur in certain places. See Zoepf’s chapter, “Washing Away the Shame.”

29 Nydell, 8-9.
is, to be noticed for being different, because this will cause disruption in family and social life. However, R.S. Zaharna writes that while Arab society in general is collective (and therefore not individualist) it does not preclude individuality in its members. She points out, as an example, that within Islam there is much emphasis on an individual’s relationship with Allah. Nevertheless, Zaharna notes that individuality is situated within an associative context; that is, individuality is constantly in negotiation with social situations. This is particularly the case, Zaharna writes, in regard to one’s honor, an attribute which is determined by society. The importance of honor within the collective Arab society is a theme running through much of the scholarly literature on the Arab world. As discussed above, loyalty to family and friends and avoiding disruption in society because of your actions, thereby upholding the honor of your family and friends, is emphasized. This is further supported by Zoepf’s observations regarding the responsibility of women to protect men from unchastity through the women’s actions. This conception of society and the importance of relationships and of honor are critical when considering the lives of international women students from MENA countries while they are in the United States and after their return, because it informs the decisions they make, the relationships they form, and the actions they may or may not take.

---

30House, 31.


32Ibid., 185.

33Zoepf, 50. Bouthaina Shaaban similarly discusses women in the workforce who believe it is good to erase their feminine features while at work so that their male coworkers are not distracted or disrespectful. See Bouthaina Shaaban, Both Right and Left Handed: Arab Women Talk about Their Lives (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 2009), 59, 95.
Also important to understand are the connections and differences between the religion of Islam and Arab culture, as there is often debate about where the oppression comes from that Arab women face, and Muslim women in the United States may experience discrimination based on their outward expressions of their faith, such as wearing a veil. As Barbara Nydell reminds us, not all those who live in the Middle East and North Africa are Muslim. However, Islamic traditions have influenced Arab culture. In some countries the rule of the land is Shari’a law, that is, Islamic law based on the Quran and the Hadith, while other countries have both secular law and Shari’a law (usually with Shari’a law governing family life and secular law governing public life), and yet other countries have completely secular governments. Because in many societies the Islamic religion is so imbedded within local culture, it is often difficult to identify what is simply social construct and what is faith. This confusion often appears when discussing women’s rights in the Middle East and North Africa, as scholars have pointed out.

In her book, Women and Gender in Islam, Leila Ahmed traces the role of women in Islam, beginning with cultural traditions prior to the establishment of Islam and continuing to present day. Ahmed’s work portrays the relationship between women and Islam as changing during various periods in reaction to social and historical factors such as Muslim conquest or western colonization. Thus, for Ahmed, society, religion, and the way women are treated are connected. The author places the ultimate confusion over the place of women in Islam with a


35Nydell, 3.

36Ibid., 80.

distinction between ethical Islam (political, legal Islam understood by orthodox Muslims through the Hadith and the Quran) which affirms a sexual hierarchy, and popular Islam (Islam understood by the general population according to the Quran), which acknowledges the equality of men and women.\textsuperscript{38}

Others, however, prefer to place the divide between Islam and Islamic Fundamentalism. In \textit{Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature}, miriam cooke argues that women can be Muslim and feminists when one understands the distinction between Islam and fundamentalism. Nevertheless, cooke believes that Islamic feminism requires constant negotiation and is a “contingent, contextually determined strategic self-positioning,” rather than an identity because of the tensions between secular feminism and religious belief.\textsuperscript{39} Cooke sees Islamic feminists as being able to subvert power structures and deconstruct gender norms through claiming their religion and their right to interpret it.\textsuperscript{40} Similarly, Sirma Bilge argues against some feminist claims that religion oppresses women, and instead argues that in wearing the veil and claiming religion, women can express their agency through Judith Butler’s notion of “enabling constraints/subjugations.”\textsuperscript{41} Likewise, Zoepf’s \textit{Excellent Daughters} introduces the religious educational projects of certain women in Damascus who believe that the Quran supports women’s rights and that knowledge of the Quran will protect women from abuses of their rights.\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{38}Ibid., 65-66.

\textsuperscript{39}miriam cooke, \textit{Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature} (New York: Routledge, 2001), 58-60.

\textsuperscript{40}Cooke, xv-xviii, 60-61.


\textsuperscript{42}Zoepf, 74, 79.
Pertinent to the discussion of religion in a transnational feminist context is Miriam Cooke’s observation that religion creates opportunities for transnational connections through imagined communities of fellow believers across the world.\(^{43}\) In *Women Claim Islam*, Cooke describes the ability of Islam both to expand across geographic boundaries and to connect its followers, thereby creating a sense of belonging through its tradition and its past.\(^{44}\) Thus, scholars have argued that religion can be empowering and that it can also aid in transnational alliances.

Both Barbara Nydell, a western woman who spent much time in the MENA countries, and Bouthaina Shaaban, a Syrian woman who traveled internationally and who spoke to many women from other countries, argue that impediments to positive change for women are not due to religion but to politics and culture.\(^{45}\) This relationship between religion and culture plays out in various ways, as scholars have discussed. In *Women and Gender in Islam*, Ahmed writes that Muslim women were trapped once by the forces of colonization and then again by Islamist reactionism. She argues that western colonizers and Islamism both confused religion and culture and focused either on women’s degraded treatment in Arab society or on the depravity of women in western society, manipulating women to fit their agendas.\(^{46}\) Similarly, Karen House argues that the struggle for more freedom for women in Saudi Arabia is not over gender, but between conservatives and progressives; the position of women thus becomes a battleground over the identity of the nation.\(^{47}\) House further demonstrates that after Saudi Arabia became more

\(^{43}\) Cooke, 10-12.
\(^{44}\) Ibid., xxiii-xxiv.
\(^{45}\) Nydell, 37, and Shaaban, 67.
\(^{46}\) Ahmed, 236-237.
\(^{47}\) House, 72.
conservative in the 1980s following a jihadist attack on the Grand Mosque in Mecca in response to perceived immoral excesses, the Saudi people became confused about what was a religious belief and what was cultural. The closeness of religion and culture and the difficulty in sometimes distinguishing between the two is also remarked upon by Katherine Zoepf, who observes that in the Middle East, the Muslims she met would often criticize what might be associated with Islam by remarking that it was pre-Islamic tradition and not actually a tenet of Islam.

The scholarship discussed above demonstrates that religion and culture are intricately tied within the MENA countries, and for those who are both Arab and Muslim, the boundaries between the two can be confused and blurred. Nevertheless, the aforementioned scholarship only focuses on the perceived relationship between culture and religion from those within the Middle East and North Africa. The students who leave these areas for a study abroad may perhaps achieve a new perspective when viewing the relationship from without, or when reintegrating with their home societies.

Another relationship that may be viewed differently during and after a study abroad experience is the relationship between men and women and their roles in society. In order to understand the experiences of the Arab women who are or who have studied in the United States, it is important to understand the general perspectives of the women in their home countries in regard to gender norms and to women’s roles in the family and society. Perhaps not surprisingly, scholars present differing viewpoints. Barbara Nydell, for example, explains that many Arabs

---

48 Ibid., 20, 84.
49 Zoepf, 41.
view the traditional norms not as demeaning or restrictive, but as a way to care for and honor women. Karen House presents a case example of such a woman in the life of Lulu, a conservative Saudi woman who viewed her secluded life of caring for her husband and children within the walls of their home as an honorable and holy duty. Women like Lulu see clearly defined gender roles and believe it is for their good and the good of others to act in accordance with those roles. Interestingly, in a study done by Salwa Al-Khateeb on Saudi Arabian women, while Saudi women preferred for men and women’s roles within the home to be complementary rather than equal, the women did seek equality within the workplace. However, more women wished also to have equality at home if they were middle aged, if they possessed advanced degrees, or if they had traveled overseas. For a study on international women students at a place of higher education, this changing perception of equality is fascinating.

The scholars discussed above are careful to provide a balanced approach to women’s perceptions of gender norms in the Arab world, noting that there are some women who prefer the protection and division of labor that their way of life offers. Nevertheless, there can be a tendency to be uncritical, as in the case of Barbara Nydell, who, while not completely ignoring the struggles some women in the Arab world face, is certainly optimistic to the point of glossing over certain real struggles. There are also others who paint the circumstances of women in dire

---

50 Nydell, 45.

51 House, 34.

52 Salwa Al-Khateeb, “Muslim Women’s Perception of Equality: Case Study of Saudi Women,” Mediterranean Quarterly (Spring 1998), 110, 127. Al-Khateeb’s study shows that women with advanced degrees sought equality at home, with the exception of those women whose degrees were in nursing or education. The study did not discuss any connection between the caretaking elements within nursing and education and the more traditional, maternal gender roles espoused by the degree-holders, but the connection seems very likely.

53 In her attempt to present the Arab world in positive light and counteract western perceptions of Arabs are backward and Arab women as oppressed, Nydell omits any mention atrocities such as honor killings or female genital mutilation. When discussing the progress of activism in the Arab world, Nydell is so optimistic as to make one forget that Arab women still face difficulties.
terms. Bouthaina Shaaban, in her descriptions of women from Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, and Algeria, argues that women find themselves in miserable situations because of their gender. Shaaban discusses honor killings, spousal abuse, and abandonment as some of the unfair but seemingly unavoidable experiences of the women she encounters. Even apparently positive changes for women, such as being able to work outside the home, only resulted in the women working a double shift, first in the place of employment and then again at home, she argues.54 For Shaaban, to be a woman in the Arab world is to live a life of misery. Shaaban’s stories paint men, including her own, self-chosen husband, in an unattractive light. In fact, she seems to argue that the women’s unfair interactions with men have pushed women into hating all men and also into becoming lesbians.55

Despite Shaaban’s portrayal of women, Mohanty calls for western feminists to realize that women from other parts of the world are not universal victims.56 It is thus important for a study of transnational feminism to come to understand how Arab women view feminism and activism. First of all, the tendency of western feminists to set themselves up in distinction to other women has not gone unnoticed and has, according to scholars, caused some disassociation between women across the world. In “Convergences and Divergences: Egyptian Women’s Activism,” Leslie Lewis writes that the Egyptian women she interviewed held western feminists in contempt, viewing them as misled by a debauched western society. In distinction to the negative connotations of western “feminism,” the promotion of “women’s rights” was viewed

54Shaaban, 36.

55Ibid., 31, 65, 75. As Shaaban presents it, women turn to lesbianism after negative experiences with men, rather than having a previous sexual orientation toward other women.

56Mohanty, 24-25.
quite positively. It was not until Lewis explained what western feminists wanted that the Egyptian women recognized similarities between their struggles and those of their western counterparts.⁵⁷ These nuances are discussed in other literature as well. Karen House, for example, argues that while the women in Saudi Arabia do not want equality per se, they do seek equal rights.⁵⁸ In general, scholars have pointed out that Arab women wish to keep their own values and forge a new way for themselves, rather than copying western feminism. The women see both the positive and the negative in their society and in western society, and wish to create a new order from the good in both, rather than abandoning one for the other.⁵⁹ This would fit with Mohanty’s argument for a transnational feminism in which women can align politically and seek what is best for women, rather than uniting because of particular cultural or ethnic similarities.⁶⁰

If anything, the difficulties and restrictions that women from Arab countries face only serves to unite them. For example, in her study of teenage girls in Saudi Arabia, Zoepf writes that although most westerners view the separation of men and women as insupportable, the separation actually created strong bonds between the women.⁶¹ Similarly, the women Shaaban highlights in Both Right and Left Handed speak to each other as confidants, with a sense of community created in the sharing of experiences. Scholarship discusses many ways that Arab women form communities for mutual support and to promote women’s rights. In “Arab

---


⁵⁸House, 75.

⁵⁹Nydell, xxxv, and Shaaban, 39.

⁶⁰Mohanty, 46.

⁶¹Zoepf, 19.
Women’s Movements: Developments, Priorities, and Challenges,” Pernille Arenfeldt and Nawar Al-Hassan Golley discuss a plethora of traditional women’s organizations and clubs that were created to assist women in multiple arenas, including health care, political rights, and education. At the same time, digital media has opened new avenues for women’s empowerment, solidarity, and activism, as Elham Gheytanchi and Valentine Moghadam demonstrate in “Women, Social Protests, and the New Media Activism in the Middle East and North Africa.”

Social media, for example, has become a way to rally support for a cause within one’s community, but also has the potential to attract “accidental” feminists who stumble upon the story on the internet. Although not without its difficulties and limitations, the internet has become a powerful tool for transnational organizing, not just between women across the Arab world, but between women across the globe.

Recognizing that the MENA region is diverse politically and geographically, trends in scholarship nevertheless highlight certain general aspects that one should consider when studying Kennesaw State University’s international women students from the Middle East and North Africa, such as the importance of community, the relationship between the Islamic religion and culture, and gender norms. Likewise, it is important to realize that women from the MENA countries have a history of activism. These general concepts may inform an understanding of the students’ experiences while in the United States and their actions upon their return home.

---


64 Gheytanchi and Moghadam, 7-8, 13.
As will be shown, scholars have demonstrated that international travel, including an extended period of study in another country, impacts a person in a variety of ways, both negative and positive – from experiencing discrimination and culture shock to the development of a deeper understanding of personal identity and a desire to become a positive influence upon returning home. A look into the experiences of Arab women studying abroad may shed light on how feminism can create transnational linkages through international study.

As with feminist scholars like Friedman and Hulko, who discuss identity in relationship to location, scholarship on international education likewise comments on identity, this time in relation to travel to a new geographic location. Lorraine Brown, for example, describes the international student location as a place where students are free to develop an identity not bound by the restrictions of their home country’s norms. Brown calls a student’s time abroad a “therapeutic pause” in their daily life and writes that a sojourn gives a person a chance to develop herself. 65 Based on a series of interviews, Anh Le, Barbara LaCost, and Michael Wismer further argue that international students experience the phenomenon wherein they are neither restricted by their home culture nor their host culture and are capable of developing an identity that is based on their personal beliefs and experiences rather than social dictates.66 Thus, for Brown and Le et. al., international travel is a time of active formation of identity. It should be noted, however, that Brown and Le et. al.’s approach differs from that of Hulko, whose conception of social location is more about how others see a person; rather, Brown and Le,


66 Anh Le, Barbara LaCost, and Michael Wismer, “International Female Graduate Students’ Experience at a Midwestern University: Sense of Belonging and Identity Development.” *Journal of International Students* 6, no. 1 (2016), 137.
LaCost, and Wismer see travel to a location as a way for a person to develop how they see themselves.

Scholarship on international students agrees that, in addition developing identity, study abroad also develops women’s independence and self-confidence. Ruth McDermott-Levy, in her essay on Omani nursing students, writes that these women students developed independence because they traveled alone and had to manage a range of issues that were traditionally handled by the men in their society, such as finances or interactions with strangers. She argues that this opportunity to travel allows women to experience the world through their own actions.\textsuperscript{67} The women did not only have to learn to take care of themselves, however. McDermott-Levy and fellow educators Erin Lefdahl-Davis and Kristin Perrone-McGovern also discuss overcoming an initial lack of confidence due to language barriers, a challenge that the Arab women in their studies faced.\textsuperscript{68} Nevertheless, McDermott-Levy notes that once fluency was achieved, the women felt more confident in their interactions with others.\textsuperscript{69} As described by various scholars, education abroad can be difficult but ultimately promotes confidence and independence.

Like McDermott-Levy notes, Arab women studying in the United States may find themselves taking on roles and tasks that they would not have done at home. In fact, many international students experience a shift in gender norms when they travel to the United States. In their study of women from China, Ukraine, Iran, and Kyrgyzstan, Le, et. al. argues that most international women students appreciate their time in the United States as a time where they can


\textsuperscript{69}McDermott-Levy, “Going Alone,” 273-274.
explore their identity outside of their home culture’s prescribed gender roles and that they appreciate the wider range of options available to women.\textsuperscript{70} Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern, however, note a division between the Saudi women they interviewed. Although most come to prefer American women’s freedom to act without male permission to Saudi Arabia’s gender restrictions, other women prefer Saudi male oversight and the protection it affords.\textsuperscript{71} Nevertheless, Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern’s study does indicate that living in the United States enabled the women students to see alternative relationships and power structures between men and women. While some women prefer the lifestyle they were raised in, others begin to question those lifestyles and desire change.\textsuperscript{72}

Another difference that international women students experience, according to the studies, was between the generally collective society of Arab countries and the individualistic society of the United States. Experiencing both, the women were able to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of each society. On the one hand, McDermott-Levy notes that the Omani students appreciated the individualistic society because it gave them freedom to act without drawing attention, while Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern write that the students they interviewed appreciated that a difference in opinion was acceptable.\textsuperscript{73} On the other hand, Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern document the students’ negative impression that family was not as important to Americans, while McDermott-Levy writes that perceptions of family honor and what was acceptable as a topic of conversation created barriers between the Omani

\textsuperscript{70} Le, LaCost, and Wismer, 142-143.

\textsuperscript{71} Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern, 417-418.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 417.

\textsuperscript{73} McDermott-Levy, “Going Alone,” 271, and Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern, 418.
students and their friends.\textsuperscript{74} Nevertheless, the studies do indicate that the women appreciated their independence and freedom on the whole, and Brown argues that when students return to their country, they do so with a more individualistic outlook, for good or for ill.\textsuperscript{75}

Study abroad in the United States enables pathways of communication and breaks down barriers between societies. For example, McDermott-Levy and Lefdahl-Davis both document that their informants faced discrimination based on their perceived ethnicity or religion at some point while studying in the U.S. However, both scholars also demonstrate that most discrimination was based on ignorance and that most people the students encountered were eager to learn about the students’ culture.\textsuperscript{76} Similarly, Le et. al. documents that stereotypes of Americans by the international students were broken through interactions with each other.\textsuperscript{77} McDermott-Levy’s work particularly shows that interaction with cultural others creates empathy between groups and questions ingrained judgments based on a person’s ethnicity or nationality.\textsuperscript{78} Additionally, Lefdahl-Davis and Kristin Perrone-McGovern provide insight into another aspect of cultural understanding. They write that the Saudi women students saw themselves as representatives of Saudi Arabia, happy to share Saudi culture with those they met in the United States as a way to combat negative images of their culture.\textsuperscript{79} Thus, the scholarship demonstrates


\textsuperscript{75}Brown, 512-517.

\textsuperscript{76}McDermott-Levy, “Going Alone,” 271, and Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern, 417, 419.

\textsuperscript{77}Le, LaCost, and Wismer, 145.

\textsuperscript{78}McDermott-Levy, “Going Alone,” 273.

\textsuperscript{79}Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern, 424.
that international education acts as a means to break down the stereotypes that Mohanty, for example, warns against.

Cultural adjustment is a concern for all international students, and scholars identify the important role of a support system in assisting the student with adjustment. According to Le, LaCost and Wismer, professors, along with host families, international student services offices, friends, and spouses, can assist in the cultural adjustment of a student.\textsuperscript{80} Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern point out that in the case of Saudi students, most women traveled with a male companion, usually a father or brother, in accordance with Saudi law. This required travel companion was effective in reducing culture shock among Saudi women students because they had a compatriot with them.\textsuperscript{81} Similarly, Le explains that the spouses generally assisted their wives in dealing with culture shock, although she notes that spouses initially were a barrier to adjustment because of the gender expectations that they brought with them from their home countries.\textsuperscript{82} McDermott-Levy, who focused on Omani women students who traveled without companions, writes that the women initially experienced difficulty but through this difficulty learned self-reliance.\textsuperscript{83}

Important to understanding the international student experience and the possibilities of transnational feminism are the friendships that international students create. Both Lefdahl-Davis and Le, LaCost and Wismer’s research demonstrates that, in contradiction to previous studies, international students developed friendships with American students and with students from

\textsuperscript{80}Le, LaCost, and Wismer, 138-141.

\textsuperscript{81}Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern, 428.

\textsuperscript{82}Le, 139.

\textsuperscript{83}McDermott-Levy, “Going Alone,” 275.
other countries, in addition to friendships formed with others from the student’s home country. Le, LaCost, and Wismer stress the importance of co-national friends in initial adjustment, but note that as time passes, the students engage in friendships with people from the United States and other countries. Nevertheless, both studies mentioned above do recognize that the women did not perceive their friendships with American students as deep friendships. According to Le, LaCost, and Wismer, this is because the strongest friendships were formed when the students were in the most need—that is, when they were newly arrived—and that this was a time when co-nationals provided the most support. However, McDermott-Levy’s study imputes the lack of deep friendships to the average college student’s age and race. She notes that adult learners were more likely to be friends with the Omani students because of the adult learners’ ability to better empathize with the Omani women’s struggles as international students. She also indicts young Caucasian students as being the least likely to develop a friendship with the Omani students because the Caucasian students were more self-absorbed in their own lives. However, McDermott-Levy also recognizes that young American students may be intimidated by a group of women from a different culture who tend to sit together. Thus, the research demonstrates that while international education does provide an opportunity to women of many different countries to form bonds, it is difficult to create deep friendships with domestic students.

---

84. Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern, 421, and Le, LaCost, and Wismer, 139-141.
85. Le, LaCost, and Wismer, 140.
86. Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern, 421, and Le, LaCost, and Wismer, 140.
87. Le, LaCost, and Wismer, 140.
The scholarship reviewed indicates that the identities and characteristics developed while studying in the United States can have both positive and negative impacts upon the student once they return home. Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern document that for some students, reentry is more difficult than adjustment to the host culture.89 In her study entitled, “Female Arab-Muslim Nursing Students’ Reentry Transitions,” McDermott-Levy finds that students have a desire to return home and contribute to society through what they have learned.90 However, she also notes that while the student may have changed, the environment at home may not have likewise developed, leaving the women frustrated with the lack of employment opportunities and resources, less progressive societies, and stricter gender roles.91 Similarly, in Lorraine Brown’s “The Transformative Power of the International Sojourn: An Ethnographic Study of the International Student Experience,” the author explores the struggles newly independent and more individualistic students face when they return home to their collectivist cultures.92 The author reflects that study abroad is ultimately beneficial only if the changes the student experienced during their time abroad can be maintained once they return.93 This is difficult because the change is more personal and cultural and, while the student’s personal development during their time abroad can affect others by proxy, this is not guaranteed. Thus, when students return home,

89 Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern, 416.


91 McDermott-Levy, “Female Arab-Muslim Nursing Students,” 4-7.

92 Brown, 513-514.

93 Ibid., 516.
they can experience stress because of a disconnect between themselves and their society, and this is especially true for women, as both Brown and McDermott-Levy identify.  

*Ethnography*

As the scholarship has shown, study abroad offers both opportunities and challenges for international women students from the MENA countries for transnational feminist work. Similarly, those hoping to effect change by studying the experiences of international students and of women throughout the world face various challenges in pursuit of breakthroughs. In regard to the challenges, scholars from various disciplines comment on the danger of orientalism, a failure to understand the ways different people communicate, and possible harm to the people the researcher is trying to help.

Similar to Mohanty’s transnational feminist warnings, sociological scholarship warns not to create a monolithic, objectified “other” of the group being studied. In his 1978 book, *Orientalism*, Edward Said condemns the West for developing its false notion of the exotic “Orient,” which is always in counter-distinction to the West and of which the West presumes to know. Said details that underlying this creation of the monolithic Orient are the knowledge and power structures of the West. In *Being Ethnographic: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Ethnography*, Raymond Madden discusses the “ethnographic gaze,” which likewise involves knowledge and power. Madden acknowledges that previous ethnographic research involved...
orientalism, and he cautions ethnographers to reflect continually on how their observations are influenced by knowledge, power, and predispositions.\textsuperscript{98}

Not only is the means of observation important, but so is the method of communication. In her essay on intercultural competence, R.S. Zaharna discusses the use of the associative approach for effective interaction with people from the Arab world. Zaharna notes that Arab communication is built upon personal social relationships and unspoken cues, which a non-Arab must attune her- or himself to; furthermore, the non-Arab must adapt his or her behavior to the new context so as to be most successful in developing relationships with Arabs.\textsuperscript{99}

Zaharna’s essay describes Arab communication as multi-layered and contingent upon relationships and associations, with some meanings understood only if one is familiar with the culture.\textsuperscript{100} In her essay in \textit{Scattered Hegemonies} entitled, “Betrayal: An Analysis in Three Acts,” Kamala Visweswaran describes a similar need to “read between the lines.” Visweswaran’s essay discusses how her feminist activist informants strategically chose what to reveal about themselves and about others. Although initially shocked that the women would betray a feminist ethnographer by keeping secrets, and would betray their friends by exposing the friends’ secrets, Visweswaran sees in these actions the agency of the informant to determine what is known about herself.\textsuperscript{101} Visweswaran calls for ethnographers to “‘hear’ silence,” to understand the perceptions and boundaries of the women’s agency and identity.\textsuperscript{102} Thus, both Zaharna and Visweswaran

\textsuperscript{98}Ibid., 100.

\textsuperscript{99}Zaharna, 189-191.

\textsuperscript{100}Ibid., 190.


\textsuperscript{102}Ibid., 100, 105.
warn the ethnographer to be aware that not everything is verbally communicated; some information is refused, and other information transmitted within cultural contexts. In either case, the scholarship calls for the ethnographer to be sensitive to these situations and to allow them to inform their understanding.

Nevertheless, for Paul Rabinow, the work of communication is not one-sided. In his seminal work, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*, Rabinow describes the skill that the informant must also possess in order to successfully communicate the cultural information to the ethnographer. According to Rabinow, the informant must be able to see his culture objectively in order to explain it to the ethnographer. Rabinow sees the striving to communicate between cultures as the “dialectic process” within ethnographic fieldwork done between the informant and the ethnographer. Based on this mutual striving for effective communication, Rabinow explains that interpretation always influences the understanding of culture, whether it is the interpretation of the informant or that of the ethnographer. Rather than be deterred by a failure to achieve pure knowledge of the subject, however, Rabinow celebrates the continual learning process involved in seeking to understand another culture.

Ethnography is not limited to anthropology and sociology, however. Feminist scholars do contribute to ethnographic approaches. That feminism can add another layer to ethnographic research is argued by Judith Stacey and Laura Lengel. Lengel counters claims that feminists do not add to ethnographic research by arguing that unlike traditional ethnography, feminist

---


104 Ibid, 39.

105 Ibid., 150-152.

106 Ibid., 155.
ethnography acknowledges the varying and multiple experiences of the subject, thus creating a layered and constantly developing understanding rather than one, ultimate truth.\textsuperscript{107}

One of the main concerns of feminist ethnographers is to use their work for good. Lengel discusses the possibility of harming those whom feminist ethnographers are trying to help in their research. She raises the ethical question of feminist ethnography: is the research commodifying the informant for the academic benefit of the researcher?\textsuperscript{108} Lengel decides that ultimately, feminist ethnography is not done for the benefit of the women being observed. She writes that the women of the Third World are better able to help other women of the Third World, while feminist ethnographers from the First World are more able to change other women of the First World through their research.\textsuperscript{109} She believes that in presenting the situations of women of the Third World, the ethnographers will be able affect the First World, by changing their perception of the Third World woman as the Other.\textsuperscript{110} Lengel’s argument could therefore be seen as a reaction to and an extension of Mohanty’s call for feminists to avoid the universalized and othered “Third World Woman.” It also recognizes the agency that women in the Third World have in the fight for change.

The scholarship on Arab women is broad and covers several disciplines, from feminism and activism to psychology, from education to anthropology and ethnography. It is indeed as layered and multiple as the women’s experiences themselves are. Within the scholarship discussed here, there is a common thread of transnational possibilities. While calling for

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{107}Laura Lengel, “Reseaching the ‘Other,’ Transforming Ourselves: Methodological Considerations of Feminist Ethnography.” \textit{Journal of Communication Inquiry} 22, no. 3 (July 1998), 239.

\textsuperscript{108}Ibid., 236-237.

\textsuperscript{109}Ibid., 246-247.

\textsuperscript{110}Ibid.
\end{flushright}
attention to diversity and cultural differences along with an understanding of the multiple ways Arab women experience their lives at home and abroad, the scholarship points to the potential for transnational feminist networking through international women students’ education in the United States. This paper strives to identify if that possibility may be a reality.
Chapter II: Methodology

My study involves three main components: reflections on select works of fiction that give insight into the KSU students’ experiences, an anonymous survey, and personal interviews. Although it was planned initially to be only for F-1 (degree-seeking student) or J-1 (exchange student) visa holders, the low number of potential participants prompted the inclusion of women with other immigration statuses. While the women with other immigration statuses may not hold visas indicating an imminent return to their homeland, they nonetheless have ties to their home countries, experiences to share, and valuable insights to provide in regard to being an Arab woman at Kennesaw State University. The information they provided only enriched the understanding of the possibilities of transnational feminism and solidarity among women across the globe.

Anonymous Online Survey

The anonymous survey, to be completed online, was used to identify trends in the lived experiences of KSU’s Arab women. As a step to prevent the survey data from being distorted by ineligible participants, the survey included a qualifying question to ensure that the respondent was an Arab woman and KSU student. The link was shared on university Facebook groups and in messages, was emailed to potential participants from a list of currently enrolled students provided by the university, was announced at an international student event, and was posted in flyer format in various campus offices. The survey was fully completed by seven women, three from the Levant, two from the Arabian Peninsula, and two from North Africa. This number is
significant considering the fact that for the current semester of Spring 2017, only sixteen female students from the Middle East and North Africa enrolled at KSU, and any former students were only contacted through Facebook or by word of mouth. I believe this participation data shows the willingness of KSU’s Arab women students to discuss their lives and to further the cause for solidarity and support for women across the world.

*Personal Interviews*

In addition to or as an alternative to completion of the survey, informants could participate in an in-person or Skype interview. The interviews were used to allow for more detailed responses and the inclusion of additional questions, which would have made the survey too cumbersome. Like the survey, requests for interviews were advertised on Facebook, emailed to current students, announced at an event, and posted in campus offices. Six women offered to be interviewed. Although it is probable that some of the women interviewed also took the survey, there are differences in the data indicate that some women who took the survey were not interviewed and vice-versa. Since information provided in the interviews was potentially sensitive, the names of the women interviewed were kept confidential. All of the informants’ names in this paper are, therefore, pseudonyms.

The particular challenge of the interview process was to set up meeting times with the women. Each of the women who offered to be interviewed had busy schedules that needed to be worked around, and some were initially non-committal about their availability. Knowing this hesitance to commit to a time may have been cultural, I remained patient and took care not to importune the women.\(^{111}\) It was important both culturally and in respect to ethical research that

\(^{111}\)Nydell, 6-7, 49-50.
the women not feel pressured into meeting. Patience bore fruit, however, since once we met, the women were generous with their time and seemed happy to talk as long as needed.

In drafting the interview questions, and later as I analyzed the conversations and the surveys, I tried to be aware of my own positionality and of my relationship to the participants. I am a woman born and raised in the United States to a white middle-class family. As such, I have had to face very little racial, religious, or gender discrimination. Although I did study abroad and can in some way relate to the experience of international students as being in a foreign place, I studied in Europe and Mexico, two places where I still experienced privilege and was not discriminated against or questioned because of my race or religion. I was raised with an understanding of Catholic morality and society and needed to make certain this did not taint the interview questions or the presentation of the women’s statements. As I interviewed, I tried to remain neutral and listen to what the women were saying about their lives and experiences and hear their point of view, rather than my own preconceived notions.

In regard to my relationship to the participants, it was important to be aware that the women who took the survey or who were interviewed most likely knew that I was not an Arab. This could be assumed from my name, which was present on all documents, or by my profile picture on Facebook, if the participants accessed the request for participation through that platform. The fact that I was not an Arab most likely affected their answers; they may have felt the need to explain more to me, or to avoid sharing something which may have been confusing. Additionally, they may have chosen to withhold certain information that may have reflected negatively on some aspect of their culture. Furthermore, if the participant knew me in some capacity, either through my employment at the university or through a mutual acquaintance, they may have felt more or less willing to share certain information. In regard specifically to the
interviews, the personal nature of that format may have also affected the women’s answers, since, as Martin Hammersley and Paul Atkinson point out, “[i]n interviews, the very structure of the interaction forces participants to be aware of the ethnographer as audience.”\footnote{Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, \textit{Ethnography: Principles in Practice} (New York: Routledge, 1995), 220-221.} It was, thus, important to understand my role in what the participant chose to reveal, while at the same time recognizing the participant’s agency in both word and silence, as noted in Kamala Visweswaran’s essay, “Betrayal: An Analysis in Three Acts,” discussed above.

\textit{Notable Works of Fiction}

The third component to this study is not information-gathering, but a search for truth through fiction. It is a series of short reflections on certain novels touching on women’s lives in the international context: \textit{An American Brat} by Bapsi Sidhwa, \textit{The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf} by Mohja Kahf, \textit{Girls of Riyadh} by Rajaa Alsanea, and \textit{The Complete Persepolis}, by Marjane Satrapi. In \textit{Reading Lolita in Tehran}, a story about a secret women’s book club in revolutionary Iran, Azar Nafisi writes, “Do not, under any circumstances, belittle a work of fiction by trying to turn it into a carbon copy of real life: what we search for in fiction is not so much reality but the epiphany of truth” \cite{Nafisi2008}. The novels discussed here, therefore, are not meant to be used as irrefutable proof of the students’ experience, but as a complementary means to gain insight into their lives. Literature allows one to comprehend on a level that mere facts do not; it opens hearts and imaginations to possibilities. For this reason, these novels were selected. Not all of these novels are from the perspective of an international student from a MENA country; in

fact, only one meets that full criteria. Yet, all contribute in some way to Nafisi’s “epiphany of truth” in regard to KSU’s Arab women students from the Middle East and North Africa, and for this reason, they were selected.
Chapter III: The Student Experience of MENA Women at Kennesaw State University

“*I Could Have Been Anywhere Else:*” Factors Bringing MENA Women Students to KSU

In *An American Brat*, a young Pakistani woman named Feroza Ginwalla is dropped off at a library by her uncle, Manek, and tasked with finding a suitable university to attend as an international student. “At the end of an hour, her brain rebelled,” the author tells her reader. “At the end of two hours, bug-eyed from reading the small print, Feroza had an urge to throw the book through the window. She glared at the catalog and savagely pushed it away. Manek found her, her head and arms on the large oak library table, fast asleep.”

Feroza eventually finds herself at a junior college in Idaho because she “liked the name of the city and the distance between it and Boston [where her uncle lived] on the map.”

For Feroza, finding a school in the U.S. is overwhelming. Working without contextual knowledge, the search for a school must have felt like a needle in a haystack, without knowing what the needle looked like. Feroza’s tired eyes and display of anger towards the college catalog demonstrate her strong desire to study in the U.S., while the search’s result in her falling asleep represents her inability to discern an appropriate school. This situation is emphasized by Feroza’s flippant choice of a college based on a name and location, rather than any academic motivation. Despite its inauspicious beginnings, however, this choice greatly impacted Feroza’s future.

Somewhat like the junior college in Idaho, Kennesaw State University is located in a relatively small city. Outside of the Atlanta area, KSU is not well-known. Why, then, did the

---


115 Ibid., 138.
women choose to come to this university? According to the survey, the women came primarily for better educational opportunities and employment opportunities. Still, as unflattering as it may be, the choice of KSU was almost circumstantial, much like Feroza’s decision. As one informant from Libya told me, “There wasn’t any special thing. I could have been anywhere else.”

Two of the six women interviewed came to Kennesaw State University because of a scholarship opportunity. In these women’s situations, the choice of school was limited. This placement at an unknown school resulted in some real fears because of the inherent unknowns that exist when enrolling in a school so far from home. According to Mariane, an engineering student from Lebanon, she once dreamt about arriving at KSU only to discover that it was a farm. She was glad to find that this was not the case, saying that one of the best things about living in the United States is the range of activities available to her. Amal, a student from Saudi Arabia, explained that she wanted to go to another country but her scholarship sent her to the United States. Her only connection to Kennesaw State was a family friend who happened to live in Georgia. Amal was concerned about attending KSU: “I did not know anything about Kennesaw,” she said. “In the beginning I was so, like, nervous. It was a new country for me. And I did not [choose] it, by the way.” But, she told me, “We believe as the Quran says, like as God says, ‘You may hate something that is good for you, and you might love something that is not good for you.’” In the end, though, Amal was satisfied with her time at KSU, describing her satisfaction with her living accommodations and the diversity she saw around her. The women who came on scholarship were initially in the dark about what their experience would be like; their knowledge of KSU was much like Feroza Ginwalla’s knowledge of her college: just a name and a location. The role of the university on their lives was as yet unknown.
In order to help students coming from overseas identify an appropriate school to attend in the United States, the U.S. Department of State created its EducationUSA website, which also directs interested parties to academic advisors in a range of governmental and nongovernmental agencies and offices around the globe for assistance in the choice of school.116 Nevertheless, according to Mazzarol and Soutar, two of six factors determining international students’ choice of schools are related to the influence of family and friends.117 Of the six informants who were interviewed, half settled on Kennesaw State University because of family or friends who lived in the area. One student, a Syrian woman who for the purposes of this study will be called Rima, explained that “Because I am a girl from the Middle East, I have to find a school where my relatives live…. I had to choose something where I had relatives around, so I was just looking in Atlanta.” Likewise, a student from North Africa remarked that her choices were between Georgia and Colorado, the two states where there were family connections. At first glance, these statements, especially that of Rima, seem to indicate that the women were restricted in their choice of schools because of their gender, and in some ways this is true. According to Barbara Nydell, families headed by a man ensure protection for the members, while in public social interactions, a male relative or husband ensures the respectability of the woman and the family.118 In the case of Rima, this transferred to her life in the United States. However, it is important to keep Mazzarol and Soutar’s study in mind as it does not differentiate between international men and women students, but in fact focuses on East and South Asian students.

---


118 Nydell, 33-34, 63-64.
Nevertheless, these students placed significant value on personal connections when considering a choice of school. Rima herself did not see her family connections in a negative light. Unlike An American Brat’s Feroza, who wished to be as far away as possible from her uncle, Rima viewed having her relatives nearby and already familiar with the school as a comfort. She said, “I had cousins who studied there, so they, when I came here, they first presented [KSU] to me…. I saw other universities, too, but you know, like when you know someone and they start describing it to you, you feel, like, more comfortable already.” This can be contrasted with Amal’s experience of moving to a place without connections, when she said, “I didn’t want to come. Especially I’m alone. I [was] used to a big family. It is very difficult for us to move, and like, being individual, and very independent.” Thus the choice of KSU for the women may have been influenced by their gender but also by the common desire of international students to choose a school where they have established connections.

“Your First Role and Journey Is to Figure Out Yourself:” MENA Women Students’ Perceptions of Their Roles at Home and Abroad

Before beginning to understand how the women experienced life in the U.S., some background about their lives in their home countries is required. When asked to describe their roles at home, the informants described a range of roles. The women from Lebanon and Syria described themselves as active participants in family life and society, while those who lived in Libya and Saudi Arabia had more restricted roles. Rima, from Syria, described her life as “strongly connected to the other people. I was described as the leader for my community. I used to do a lot of community work when it was like, not really well-known as it is now in Syria…. I used to be seen as a leader, especially through my family.” Mariane, from Lebanon, saw her role
in the family as the person who would be able to provide financial relief for her parents by eventually securing a well-paid job. According to the survey respondents, the role of women in the Levant was either the same, equally valid, or preferred when compared to women’s roles in the U.S. However, both survey respondents from North Africa preferred the role of women in the U.S. Nevertheless, Raghda from Libya did not seem too troubled by her role, which she described thus: “I was only ‘the student’,” she explained. “It works for me and for everyone else…. Until maybe you graduate from college, your role in your family and your society would just be the kid that your family’s taking care of, and the student they’re giving time to study.” In the survey, the women from the Arabian Peninsula answered similarly to those from the Levant, despite the differences in the societies. According to the women who were interviewed, limited interaction outside the home did not lead to a preference for U.S. women’s roles, but to viewing the roles in a similar light or as being equally valid. Nour, reflecting on her time in Saudi Arabia, and Amal, a Saudi citizen, focused on their domestic roles in the home, helping their mothers and taking care of the family. Nour explained that she was happy with her role, saying, “I tend to be very cultural, and that’s how I was raised.” Interestingly, Amal described her role outside of the home as “limited,” yet still expressed satisfaction with her life in Saudi Arabia. This range of roles not only serves to affirm the diversity that exists in the Arab world, but it also validates that there can be various ways that women can be satisfied with their connection to society. Whether they think they will be satisfied with these same roles when they return home will be addressed later in this study.

If this study is about how women students from the Middle East and North Africa create possibilities for transnational feminism, then it is important to understand how they view themselves and their place while in the United States. In *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, Khadra
Shamy is a Syrian girl raised in the United States by her conservative Muslim parents. Khadra’s experience of the U.S. is defined by two groups of people: a close-knit community of Muslims and all those not part of the community. Despite being raised in the U.S., Khadra never felt as if she belonged in America. At the beginning of the book, the author tells us that Khadra reflects as she drives through the Indiana countryside, “But this is not mine. . . this blue and gold Indiana morning. None of it is for me. Between the flat land and the broad sky,” the author says, “she feels ground down to the grain, erased. She feels as if, were she to scream in this place, some Indiana mute button would be on, and no one would hear.”

Khadra does not feel herself to be a part of her environment; in fact, the disconnection between herself and Indiana is almost hostile. The story of The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf is the story of Khadra finding herself and her role in the landscape. Khadra must learn to be comfortable with herself and her role in society before she can be at ease in the land. Although there will always be a disassociation between herself and other Americans, Khadra recognizes that she is significant in the American landscape: “She knows something valuable. She knows the faded globe in the window and, also a piece of history that no one in America has acknowledged yet: a history of Muslims in Indianapolis.” While it took Khadra years to find her role and value in the United States, Raghda already knew: “I really feel that your first role and journey is to figure out yourself and work for the best version of you, and then go out and help.”

In order for Khadra Shamy to feel at ease, she must be satisfied with her role in the United States. The interviews with the KSU women students from the Middle East and North Africa revealed various levels of satisfaction with their roles in the U.S. Nour and Amal

120 Ibid., 391-392.
represented the two extremes. On the one hand, Nour fully embraced her life in the U.S., remarking, “[o]n Snapchat, I see my friends who live there and I’m like, oh I wish you were here do you know it’s good to just express yourself without anyone telling you not to do it.” Nour’s comment indicates that while she identifies herself with her friends overseas, she is also happy with her place in the United States and what she is able to do in the U.S., wishing that her friends could also experience it. On the other hand, Amal saw her role as a representative of the Saudi way of life. “I wanna be to be a good picture for Muslim person who is from Saudi Arabia. I want to correct the stereotype that they have about us, and I already did that.” Nevertheless, Amal went on to say something very similar to Nour about identity: “This is my role: it’s how to represent my country and myself, too. Not only my country, but myself, as [Amal].”

The women’s current level of happiness seemed dependent on how they viewed themselves in connection to the society in which they lived. Raghda described her relationship to the U.S. as “normal,” and seemed comfortable with her life in the United States. However, while Amira said there was “no difference” between her roles in Syria and the U.S., she later displayed a desire to fit in more in the United States, revealing that she planned to change her name because of its connection to an English word. Amira’s situation in some ways reflects that of Khadra Shamy in feeling that she, as herself, did not fit into the American landscape because of her heritage. Similarly, Rima and Mariane both expressed dissatisfaction with their current roles due to difficulty interacting with the community around them. Rima told me, “I didn’t reach this point where I feel fully engaged like how I am in my country... but what has helped me was doing these volunteering things.” When I asked if she was happy with her role, she said, “Not really. Somehow it satisfies me to continue learning and trying other things, but I didn’t reach this point when I feel like, “Oh, I’m happy, I, like, did something great!’... I feel like, no, it’s not
enough.” Like Rima, Mariane identified contributing to society, in her case through tutoring, as a way to find some satisfaction with her role. However, she said that she was “not happy in general.” Mariane continued, “I am not adapting to this lifestyle too much. A lot of things frustrate me a lot and it’s stressful a lot. Like, the stress I had on studying at home is the stress I have in living here.” The statements of Amira, Rima, and Mariane indicate a desire for authenticity of self and the ability to connect to society in the United States, yet a difficulty in doing so.

This situation may be caused by the change in the women’s social location. As Nour pointed out during her interview, it would be easier in some ways if she returned to live in Saudi Arabia because everyone would understand why she acted in a particular way, whereas in the U.S. she often has to explain her actions or beliefs as cultural or religious. Nour’s actions and heritage place her in a different social location in the U.S. which creates new challenges, much like Hulko, for example, notes in her essay. Additionally, the students deal with further layers of intersectionality while in the U.S. Not only are they women, but they are also students, many of them on are on contingent statuses in the U.S., they are Arab in a society wary of Middle Eastern cultures, and most are Muslim in a majority Christian land. The ways that they are able to satisfactorily negotiate these identities and find their place within their current social location contributes to their happiness or unhappiness. In the case of Rima and Mariane, and also Raghda, their contribution to the society through volunteering or tutoring helps establish a more positive identity and comfortable connection to society, at least in their eyes.

---

121 Mariane and Raghda commented on the difficulties of being a student with an F-1 visa, explaining that the employment restrictions for that visa type prevented them from engaging with others as much as they would like to.
“You Will Test Your Wings:” Challenges for MENA Women Students in the U.S.

In Rajaa Alsanea’s novel, Girls of Riyadh, a young Saudi woman known by her Americanized name, Michelle, goes to study in San Francisco. Michelle unequivocally delights in her time in the United States, enjoying campus activities, traveling the country, and interacting with her American cousin, Matti. Michelle is opinionated and often compares life in the U.S. to life in Saudi Arabia. The most important comparison for Michelle is the ability to express her opinion. The author writes, “[w]hat Michelle liked best about Matti was that he always showed respect for her opinions, however different they were from his views. . . In her own country, Michelle was used to pulling back. . . She avoided expressing her opinions strongly except when she was with people she felt close to, such as her most intimate girlfriends.”122 Having lived in one culture for most of her life, Michelle was able to compare her experiences in Saudi Arabia with those in the U.S., developing her voice in the process. This is certainly true for KSU’s women students from the MENA region. The surveys and interviews indicated that the women were very aware of the differences and similarities and were able to appreciate aspects of both cultures.

The studies of the international experiences of women students from the MENA countries by Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern, McDermott-Levy, and Le, et. al, demonstrate the growth of individuality and confidence the students experience because of studying abroad. Additionally, the studies show that the majority of women prefer the freedom and responsibility they had in the United States and would find it difficult to return home. However, according to the survey and interviews of KSU students, the majority of the KSU women students viewed life in the U.S. as being more difficult. In regard to the survey, seventy-five percent of the

respondents said that life in the U.S. was more difficult, with the independence and responsibilities being contributive factors on both sides. While some saw the freedom as making their lives easier, others saw the responsibility of taking care of themselves as making life more difficult.

The interviews provided more varied reasons for why life was more difficult in the U.S. For Rima, it was the little feminine things that were the challenge: “Like for example, where do you do your eyebrows? . . . They’re never going to tell you at school where you go to do this stuff. The first time I went to the Kroger, I went to buy, you know, the feminine products. And there was like a whole wall of stuff! And I had to read them and my English wasn’t that good. I had to call my cousin, who’s a male, for help!” According to Mariane, the cost of living took a toll on her wallet, while the lack of sun compared to Lebanon affected her health. Raghda, although she expressed satisfaction in her independence and responsibilities, found that they also made life more difficult. As an example, she described how in Libya, her father would drive her wherever she wanted to go, but in the U.S., she had to drive herself: “When I got my car, I was really excited about it at the beginning. But then later on, I almost even hated my car. I was like, damn, I really hate driving myself all the time.” Likewise, Amal told me that life was more difficult because of the responsibilities she had in the United States. However, she added, “It’s not like you cannot live it, no, you can still handle it, but it’s more difficult than my country.”

These statements of Mariane, Raghda, and Amal, that is, their appreciation for some aspects of life at home, correspond to data from the survey, where four of the six respondents said that their experience in the U.S. made them more appreciative of their home countries.

Reflecting on the comments in the survey and interviews, one might think that these women were still in their initial adjustment period and were overwhelmed by new challenges.
However, this was not the case. All of the survey respondents had lived in the U.S. for between two to four years, and the women interviewed had not recently arrived in the United States, either. While not invalidating any of the challenges experienced by new students, the fact that these statements were made by women who lived in the United States for multiple years offers perhaps a more realistic comparison of difficulties in the U.S. and at home.

It should be noted that two of the women who interviewed, Nour and Amira, said that life in the U.S was easier. Nour told me, ‘It all goes back to… just, for example, driving. We [women] can get to wherever we want.” Amira, who is a permanent resident, cited better infrastructure as making life easier. Interestingly, Nour and Amira have permanent statuses in the U.S., while the other interviewees have other, more temporary statuses. One wonders whether the permanent commitment, either by choice or chance, affects their viewpoint as they are less likely to return home than the other students.

In An American Brat, Feroza Ginwalla meets Father Fibs, a sidewalk prophet with a talent for Shakespeare and a uniform of embellished denim. Father Fibs is invited to dinner, where he tells an attic room filled with South Asian college students, “You are like buds. . . . But like all young things, you will bloom. You are protected innocents, secure in your chrysalises. When you leave your universities, you will test your wings. You’ll fly and fall, fly and fall.” He then adds, “It will hurt. You’ll be frightened. Don’t be. Your wings will become stronger.”

Feroza reflects on Father Fibs’ words towards the end of the story as she goes through heartbreak and eventually gets back on her feet, resolving to pursue the life she wants. Although Father Fibs believed the students wouldn’t experience trouble until after graduation, he was wrong. Every day in Feroza’s college life was testing her, strengthening her, and changing her. During a visit

---

123Sidhwa, 116.
to Pakistan, the author tells us, “Feroza realized with a sense of shock that she had outgrown her family’s expectations of her.” Feroza’s experiences changed her, not in a negative way, but in a way that opened up new possibilities not even thought of previously.

The experiences of the survey respondents and interviewees likewise indicate change and empowerment, even against, or perhaps in spite of, adversity. Although more women indicated in the survey that life in the U.S. was more difficult, five of the six women said that they became more confident, and four of the six said they gained more independence or were more self-aware. Nour talked about how her personality developed as she asserted her identity: “I became more social, and not just, for example, to my group, to Arabs, [but to] just everyone.... Because no one knew where I came from, I made it noticeable. Everyone now knows, and that’s how I made my own personality, like, now we can learn something, and that’s how they became close to me. And I learned that I can be a leader in that.” Like Nour, Amal and Rima both indicated that they became more courageous. Amal told me, “I learned first that I run from my problems…. That’s not good because the problems follow me, actually.... Just face it and fix it!” while Rima explained, “It’s really easy to give up, to go back home, or to be easy in [your] comfort zone, and like [a] weak woman and you need help from [every]one, but it is really also doable, if you want to be the strong one, the responsible one, if you want to learn something, change stuff.” Rima added that she thought she was an independent person in Syria because she lived by herself and had a job, but living in the U.S. made her realize how dependent she was on her father.

Only Amira did not see a change in herself because of her time in the U.S., since she explained that Syria is a secular country and it is possible to live a similar lifestyle there. If anything, Amira’s behavior seems to indicate a lessening of self-confidence. When asked how she had changed, Amira responded only to the negative: “I have become a bit more self-
conscious about my accent. I am changing my name legally.... So these are things I am changing just to be able [to] blend in even better, but nothing more.”

“They Don’t Know What We Are:” MENA Women Students and Changing Perceptions

In *The Girl in a Tangerine Scarf*, Khadra Shamy’s dislike of Indiana is fueled by two instances of discrimination: (1) a murder of a black Muslim girl by the Ku Klux Klan, and (2) experiences of bullying by neighborhood boys when she was a child. One time, two white boys threaten to run a young Khadra down on their dirt bikes, departing with the ominous message, “We’re gonna get all you fuckers!” Another time, the boys drop a pile of broken beer bottles at the Shamy’s doorstep. When Khadra’s father tries to speak with the boys’ father, the scene unfolds thus: “Sound of [Khadra’s] father saying something. Stiff British textbook English, in an Arabic rhythm. Back of his head bobbing. He believed in the innate goodness of people, and in the power and sweetness of communicating with them. . . . Burly man at the door now. ‘-- ACCUSING MY CHILDREN--OFF MY PORCH--BACK WHERE YOU PEOPLE CAME FROM!’” [capitalization in original].124 These incidents cemented in Khadra’s mind that she and her family did not belong in Indiana and that she and her family were very different from the non-Muslim Americans they interacted with.

The incidents described above seem all too common, especially in today’s politically charged climate with debates over a ban on travel to the U.S. by citizens of several Muslim countries and then presidential candidate Donald Trump’s proposed ban on all Muslims entering the United States. However, on average, survey respondents listed discrimination as one of their least difficult experiences as an international student. When asked about any experiences of

---

124 Kahf, 6.
discrimination, most of the interviewees related that they either did not experience any
discrimination, or that if they did, it was indirect. Amira surmised that perhaps some people
avoided her because of their own preconceived notions of her based on her ethnicity. Amal, the
only hijab-wearing informant and therefore the most visible target, said that she experienced
mostly non-verbal discrimination. Amal was the only informant to describe a circumstance of
undeniable discrimination. The interaction was between herself, a Colombian classmate, and the
classmate’s friend. According to Amal, the friend would tell the Colombian classmate, “Don’t go
with [Amal] outside. You know, like, don’t be with her very close, she is going to make you like
her.” When relating this story, Amal commented, “I don’t know what’s the problem with me!”
[emphasis added]. She added, “What can I do? Because they don’t know what we are, you
know? Really, they don’t know. If they know, then they can interact more better with us.”

In fact, the women who were interviewed found themselves often explaining their culture
or religion to others on campus, in a variety of settings. Rima related how surprised her
classmates were when they first met her. They had assumed that she would dress differently than
she did. She found herself explaining diversity in Syria. Amal likewise found herself breaking
down preconceived notions of Saudi women. She told me: “When they see some [Saudi] women
walking in... Kennesaw, studying, and going [to] eat, they know she can join the community.
You know, that we are normal people…. I confirm that Saudi women, she can do everything,
like, nothing can prevent us from joining their life, even the American life.” Mariane also
contradicted stereotypes, in her case the grossly uninformed assumption that all Arabs are
Muslim. Mariane is a Christian from Lebanon. Her parents, who had heard of American
Islamophobia, told Mariane to wear a cross and a rosary bracelet in the United States so that no
one would think she was Muslim. And yet, Mariane told me, people still thought she was a
Muslim, writing off the choice of jewelry as a fashion choice. Experiences like those of Rima, Amal, and Mariane are proof of the western gaze that collapses all diversity in the MENA region and paints all women as being repressed, the position that Mohanty, for example, warns the West against in her discussion of transnational feminism.

Luckily for the West, or Kennesaw State University in particular, the university’s women students from the MENA region are willing to converse and to share. Raghda, who is Muslim, described being approached a few times by a group of Christian women inviting her to Sunday meetings: “I had to explain so much. They usually try to tell me, like whatever they talk about, and then they ask me if I’m interested in know more and all that, and then, like, we just kept on talking, like, do you know what I know?... It feels fine when people don’t try to pressurize [sic], when they’re like, ok, let’s just have this chat.” Now at a different college, Raghda compared the interactions she had with Christian groups on both campuses, and shared that she felt more comfortable with the conversations at Kennesaw State University: “It’s in how you ask the question, really,” she said.

When asked what effect their study at Kennesaw State had on the university and local area, all but one of the women interviewed identified the breaking of stereotypes as their greatest impact, and the surveys indicated a similar viewpoint. One survey respondent wrote, “I provide new stories that [lead] to presenting new ways of thinking.” Nour believed that her representation of her beliefs impacted her friends, not only in their thoughts, but also in their actions: “For example,” she explained, “some of the girls that I know like to wear short shorts, but when they go to my house they just wear long pants because they know, like, we don’t do that.” Nour believed, “The respect is mutual.”
In *An American Brat*, Feroza Ginwalla is roommates with an American girl who drinks, smokes, and dates a series of bad men. At first, her roommate, Jo, doesn’t understand Feroza’s polite manner of speaking, or her preference to always have her legs covered. Yet, despite their differences, Feroza and Jo bond, with Feroza supporting Jo in her troubles with various boyfriends, and Jo introducing Feroza to American slang and helping her become more comfortable talking to men. The result of their interactions is that each one positively changes the other. The novel demonstrates that the effect is mutual and gives Feroza, who would seem to be at a disadvantage by being a foreigner, equal power in their relationship, if not the greater influence. This is demonstrated in one scene where Feroza’s uncle, Manek, comes to visit Feroza and Jo:

Feroza, nervous about Manek’s meeting with Jo, explained to her, “You’ll have to be careful with my uncle. He won’t understand some of the things we do.”

Jo said, ‘Yeah, I know, he’s as square as dice. Don’t worry.”

And it was all right. If Jo had influenced Feroza, Feroza had, without either of them being conscious of it, influenced Jo.

Manek found Jo much more amiable at their second meeting and didn’t get the impression that he was being slighted as often. In fact, he told Feroza in confidence, “You’ve had a good influence on Jo. She’s almost become normal.”

These exchanges exemplify how two people with very different backgrounds can influence each other in subtle ways, through the daily sharing of lives. This connection inspires minds to the possibility of transnational feminism through the foundation of relationships built during study abroad.

---

125 Sidhwa, 155.
"I Was Surprised How Challenging It Was for Them to Imagine:” Friendships and Solidarity among International and Domestic Students

Despite possibilities of mutual respect and influence between domestic and international students, finding ways to interact with others is one of the greatest challenges facing Kennesaw State University’s women from the MENA region. On average, the respondents in the anonymous survey said that creating friendships with other students was one of the most difficult aspects of living in the U.S. after adjusting to the culture and finding resources for women. The high rankings of these three issues make sense in light of Yeh and Inose’s study showing that students from community-based cultures find adjustment difficult in an individual-based society because of the lack of social support and communal identity, which they are more used to.\textsuperscript{126}

Additionally, over half of the respondents indicated only interacting with American students on a monthly basis, rather than a daily or weekly basis. When asked about who provided their main emotional and personal support while they were in the U.S., none of the respondents indicated an American; rather, the main sources of support other than family were largely other international women students, either from the student’s country or from another foreign country.

Some of the informants indicated that the difficulty in making friendships stemmed from stereotypes and a lack of empathy. Raghda explained that making friendships with Americans takes more effort because of barriers created by perceived differences:

> It’s kind of hard to make friendships outside the class with actual Americans. It was actually easier with other international students around KSU just because we’re all international, so we’re all kind of outsiders, we’re so cool with how different we are... But it’s more harder to make friendships with Americans that have been living here their whole lives.... There’s all these stereotypes and there’s always like this pre-idea that’s always right there, and sometimes I don’t really feel interested in trying to break the stereotype. I’m like, eh, it’s easier to not do it.

Nour also found explaining difficult. She said, “[Middle Easterners are] a very, very small minority. You have to explain yourself, all the time…. When I say I’m Palestinian, from Palestine, they’re going be like, wait, is that Pakistan?... It’s hard for them to understand that I am a just person of my culture and I do some stuff because that is how I was raised.” Rima also found it difficult to connect with Americans because of a lack of empathy with the international experience. When explaining the advice she would give to another Syrian woman coming to study at KSU, Rima said, “Don’t really rely on the American classmates. They may disappoint you, especially if they didn’t try to travel and study abroad, or have this international experience.” She added, “I was surprised how sometimes it was so hard, too hard, for them to imagine the challenging stuff that you’re not able to adjust to…. You can see the American who studied abroad are more able and open to understand you because they’ve been through this.” It should be mentioned that Kennesaw State University offers its students over seventy education abroad opportunities and in the academic year 2015-2016 sent a record number 802 students abroad. However, this number is only 2.4 percent of the student body, indicating that most likely, the majority of the students the women interacted with had not studied abroad. In any event, empathy seems to be a large stumbling block in the road to creating friendships.

The lack of empathy that Rima felt is demonstrated in Marjane Satrapi’s graphic novel, *The Complete Persepolis*. In the novel, Marji, a young Iranian girl, is sent to boarding school in Austria to escape Iran during the revolution and war with Iraq. In Austria, Marji makes some

---


friends, but they do not always understand her and her experiences, as depicted in the strip below.

In this strip, Marji’s classmates are excitedly discussing their plans for the upcoming holidays, oblivious to the fact that Marji, as an international student without connections, has nowhere to go. In the last image, her classmates are drawn in front of her, partially obscuring her, making her seem irrelevant to the discussion. They seem to talk over her as she tries to share information about holidays in Iran. The classmates miss important information about Marji and her culture.

---

because of their self-centered excitement for their own plans. Luckily for Marji, her roommate, Lucia, eventually notices Marji’s unhappiness. Lucia offers Marji the opportunity to accompany her to Tyrol to spend Christmas with Lucia’s family. Although Lucia mistakenly thought Marji was sad because she could not be with her family for Christmas, her awareness of Marji’s feelings and willingness to include Marji touched Marji. Lucia’s family treated her very well and embraced her in her difference:
As seen here, by the end of the trip, Marji felt that she had a new family, as she reflects: “I had a new set of parents. . . Lucia was my sister. After this trip, I never complained about her hair dryer.”\textsuperscript{130} What this episode in \textit{The Complete Persepolis} demonstrates is the need first for awareness, and second for acceptance of the different experiences of the international student.

Kennesaw State University has several student services offices, including one called International Student Programs. This office, located in the Kennesaw campus’ Student Center, is known as the Global Village, and all students, regardless of country of citizenship are welcomed. International Student Programs also support the International Student Association, which runs several student events throughout the year. However, only Nour recommended joining a club, and while Amal mentioned participating in the Muslim student prayer group, she did not indicate creating close friendships with the American Muslim students, a circumstance contrary to Miriam Cooke’s argument that transnational solidarity could be furthered by shared religion.\textsuperscript{131} None of the other women mentioned joining any groups. Mariane explained that she was too busy and said that she made friends through her tutoring job. Similarly, Amira said that due to her job, she was not around campus enough to know of the various groups. Thus, although they are available, groups do not seem to be the way to increase solidarity between women from the MENA region and others on campus.

Nevertheless, many of the girls recommended interacting with people outside of their ethnic community. Although Amira could not participate in on-campus groups, she still commented, “I see a pattern here that our community kind of stick together, so I would advise

\textsuperscript{130}Ibid., 172.

\textsuperscript{131}In fact, Amal reflected that the Muslim prayer group made her more aware of the differences in the cultures, saying that she “had a little difficulty” engaging with the American Muslim students because of the differences.
that [a new student from her country] must try to blend in with other backgrounds and experience other cultures.” Similarly, Nour advised, “See a lot of people. . . . don’t be afraid to ask.” Raghdha turned her social location to her advantage, pointing out the benefits in being an outsider: “Look outside the box and experience more. And since you really get the opportunity to be outside the box [as an international student], it wouldn’t be reasonable to put yourself inside it when you are actually in an environment that puts you outside it.” The question then becomes how and with whom can the women from the MENA region interact when friendships with American women are so difficult to create.

While it is a struggle for the women from the MENA countries to make connections with American women, this fact does not condemn the possibility of transnational feminism. It should first be pointed out that although friendships with Americans are difficult, the women from the MENA countries are creating bonds with students from other countries, which is equally important in creating transnational solidarity. Secondly, although the interactions the students have with Americans may not be fulfilling, they are affecting American perceptions of women from their countries. Their small conversations and relatively brief time in the U.S. might not spark a revolution, but it may plant a small seed for change. It could be the very beginnings of understanding and solidarity between women from the MENA region and women from the United States.
Chapter IV: MENA Women Students and Transnational Feminism

“*It’s Not Just White Girls in High School, There’s Always Everyone Else:*” MENA Women’s Perceptions of U.S. Women

In Laura Lengel’s reflection on feminist ethnography discussed above, she argues that ethnography’s effect is not on the women being studied, but on the perceptions of the ethnographers and others in the academy.132 The contact with the other culture, therefore, does not affect that culture so much, but rather one’s own understanding and that of others at home. During their time of study at KSU, the women I interviewed were not disengaged from the culture around them, but rather were active observers with thoughtful critiques of what they witnessed around them. When asked what shaped their opinion of American women before coming to the United States, many of the women interviewed mentioned television and other media as the main influence on their ideas of American women. Amal pointed out that her culture was just as guilty of stereotyping as Americans were, saying, “We used to have different stereotypes, too, because we guys only saw you in the movies.” Mariane likewise cited the movies, but said that the liberal, empowered kind of women projected in American film were not the kind she experienced while at KSU. Showing notable insight into American culture, she pointed out that this difference may be due to the fact that she is studying in the conservative South, while the movies could have been produced in the North or in more liberal areas of the U.S. Rima discussed the negative portrayal of American women in the media, which gave rise to the perception in Syria of American women being “so easy to take” and “sexually available.”

132 Lengel, 246-247.
Raghda laughed about the influence of movies on her perceptions: “I was there, thinking it’s all about white girls in high school. And then now I know,” she added, “it’s not just white girls in high school, there’s always everyone else.”

In regard to women’s lives in the U.S., the interviewees noted some positive and negative aspects of being a woman in the United States. Rima and Raghda in particular felt that there were more possibilities for women in the United States than in their countries. Raghda explained, “Once you really step over here, there isn’t an obvious limit or line that will put you in place. And you just start from there. There are no limits. You can work harder.” Rima believed that there were more jobs available to women in the U.S. She said, “You are not going to lose your feminine part if you want to be a leader or like a start [sic] in your industry. It can be done. There is nothing you cannot do, especially here. You can see women doing mechanical stuff, you can see women being a driver, or a police woman.” Nour also believed there were fewer restrictions, although she was thinking in terms of the social activities she could participate in. She explained, “Women here have more privileges, and again, that’s why, when I came here, I started having more privileges and I started going out and doing stuff, etc., as long as I know I am safe and not doing anything wrong.” Nour explained that religion had a lot to do with restrictions at home, arguing that the restrictions she faced outside the U.S. were due to her religion, not the culture, since in her experience, the Christians in her society were freer to do things prohibited to Muslims.

In An American Brat, the longer Feroza lives in the United States, the more she is able to identify flaws in the American Dream. This she did through interactions with her roommate, Jo, and with other Americans around her. During a semester break, Feroza accompanied Jo to her brother’s house for a visit.
They turned into the drive, and Feroza at once saw the large man with graying stubble, sprawled beneath an anemic fruit tree. The yard was overgrown with weeds. The house badly needed a coat of paint.

Tom was drinking beer out of a can, the gritty soil near his long legs was strewn with empty beer cans. His navel, and the pink hairy bulge above it, showed through a missing button on his red-and-brown plaid shirt. The shirt and shorts were stained with beer had dribbled.

The yard was littered with children who were either bawling or brawling... Jo explained that some of the kids were foster children. Feroza at once felt that she might have misjudged the couple and had come to hasty and judgmental conclusions. They must be kind-hearted beneath their gruff and rough exteriors to provide care for abandoned children.¹³³

Later, Jo explained to Feroza that in the United States, foster parents receive payment for the children, and Feroza was shocked. She compared her depressing experience of the foster system in the U.S. to how the children would have been in Pakistan, where relatives would have taken responsibility for the care and raising of the children. Likewise, she compared the miserable drunkenness of Tom to the rarity of alcohol addiction in largely Muslim Pakistan: “She wondered, was this the price one paid for the non-interference and the privacy she was beginning to find increasingly attractive?”¹³⁴ Thus, the story of Feroza’s visit with Jo’s family reveals how study abroad not only breaks down stereotypes but can also open eyes to realities that can exist behind what may at first seem so promising. As Raghda put it:

There’s always a stereotype, too, that America shines bright, it’s all pink, you know? It’s all rainbow colors.... And my friends call me and talk to me, they’re like “Oh god, you’re there. Just don’t talk about anything else. No, don’t complain, don’t say a single bad word....” No, really, it doesn’t work this way. There’s always white and black everywhere, good and bad everywhere.... I wasn’t really capable of seeing that there was more than whatever we know, or whatever we believe, and then, by time, when I’m here, and it went through really sharp. It broke everything single thing that I ever believed, and I’m like, ok, I’m just going to throw away everything I ever believed in and start building my own belief based on what I’m seeing right now in front of me.

¹³³Sidhwa, 211.

¹³⁴Ibid., 212.
The women from the MENA countries who were interviewed were keen observers of women in the U.S. and noted that the feminist ideal was not quite being realized, despite propaganda and American women’s own beliefs to the contrary. Both Amira and Mariane were surprised that America was not as feminist as they thought it would be. Amira thought that women changing their names upon marriage or waiting for the man to propose marriage was an indication that women were not equal to men. She pointed out that in Syria, marriage was a mutual arrangement. Additionally, both Amira and Mariane were surprised that a woman’s right to abortion, which is not contested in their countries, should be under debate in the United States. Amira said, “They do have rights and privilege provided to them by the law, but I don’t think the mentality or the understanding of their rights, or willingness to be independent... is there.” Similarly, when Mariane pointed out a much lower rate of enrollment of women in her engineering program compared to her university in Lebanon, she said that she thought that American “women are repressed, or maybe they are just not considering it.”

In a different vein, Rima and Amal argued that American women pushed too hard to be equal, and the equality they achieved became detrimental to their ultimate well-being. In Hester Eisenstein’s book, *Feminism Seduced: How Global Elites Use Women’s Labor and Ideas to Exploit the World*, the author follows the progression of women in the workforce from a maternalist stance that provided protection to women but also restricted their employment possibilities, to the mainstream feminist stance where gender is (supposedly) no longer considered. Eisenstein asks, “To achieve equality, did women have to become exactly like men? Or did they require measures ensuring special access—such as maternity leave and affirmative action—to make their equality in the workplace a reality?”135 Rima and Amal indicated their

---

135Eisenstein, 66.
preference for the latter. Rima told me, “Sometimes I feel yes, [American women] have more rights than us [Syrian women]... in the same point I feel also sometimes people here are a little harsh on women, because, like, they really think they’re equal, but they are not equal.” Rima explained that in the U.S., if a woman was carrying a heavy box, no one would help her because men and women ought to be treated equally, but in Syria, a man would offer to help with the box, recognizing the woman might not be as physically strong. Amal’s comments followed a similar vein: “American women, she works hard to confirm herself.... She is supposed to be masculine so she can be equal. She is suffering.... She is required to do many responsibilities, just to confirm that she can do [them].” Additionally, Amal recognizes the economic pressure for American women to work: “Women here [in the U.S.] she has to work. It is not a choice, let’s say sixty percent it is not a choice…. This is how the life here, the economic system require you to do that.... I feel that [a woman] has multiple jobs, more than the man.” Amal successfully identified the very argument of Eisenstein and that of Ehrenreich and Hochschild in regard to the situation in which American women have placed themselves in pursuit of equality. Thus, the interviewed women are aware that the status of women in the U.S. is not the golden ideal.

“A Bunch of Women with a Stick:” Feminism Perceived

When asked to define feminism, the survey respondents and interviewees’ responses indicated that it was the right of women to be active, empowered, and unrestricted; they see the right for respect and for the freedom to be themselves as intrinsic. In fact, one respondent to the survey wrote that she changed her opinion of feminism to believe that women should have more of a role in society. She wrote, “I think my perception about this side change a lot because when I was in my country I thought yes men should do all the things because they are men but that
might force some girls to get married to live but now women can do a lot. Actually, they said in my country, ‘women is the [half] of society’ but I can say women is all the society, not [half].’”

This respondent, thus, had her opinion changed during her time in the United States, learning that women can play more of an active and important role in society than previously thought.

Nevertheless, the women are also aware that not everyone shares their opinion. Mariane and Raghda, for example, discussed the negative connotation that the word “feminism” can have. Mariane believes that somewhere along the way, feminism became confused with “feminazism.” Similarly, Raghda explained that in Libya, many people, especially men and the older generation, viewed feminists as troublemakers who will upset the established order. She described their image of feminists as “women trying to get a stick and then [hitting] all the men with it…. Women just trying to ask for more than what they need.” She later commented, “I deeply believe that men feel like they are in so much danger. Like, it scares them, probably. That all their privileges, all their cultural superiority is going to be gone if women can be equal.” She then added, “It comes from the fact that we [Libyans] are less accepting, we are more self-concerned in some sense, when it comes to our own thoughts and beliefs.” In *Girls of Riyadh*, Michelle, the Saudi girl who studied in San Francisco, tells her friends why the men in their lives put tradition and social status above love, even when it hurts themselves and their lovers:

> It worries him to even think about following a path different from the path his father followed, and his uncle, and his grandfather before them. And anyway, he’ll think, *Those old men are still living with those shut-up women of theirs. So something must have gone right. What they did was successful. It’s got to work because everyone else has done it.* So he follows their steps and doesn’t go against their way of doing things. That way, no one can come along someday and rub it in that he failed because he strayed from the path of his ancestors. Our men are just too scared to pay for their own decisions in life. They want others to follow, others to blame [italics in original].

The author notes, “Not one of the three other women had any idea where Michelle obtained her theories of how guys think. . . They didn’t know how she had reached her conclusions, but they
knew, in their hearts, that she was right.” This passage in the novel is one of the most important because it is here that the book identifies the gulf separating the Saudi men and women in the story. Each of the women in the story is depicted as having hopes, dreams, and opinions. They know what they want in love, but they cannot always achieve it because of social restrictions. The men in the story are likewise prohibited, but unlike the women, their situation is self-inflicted out of fear. Rajaa Alsanea’s girls of Riyadh are not afraid to take risks, but the men are afraid to disrupt the status-quo. This is what Ragha feels she is dealing with in Libya.

Despite their positive identification of feminism, not all of the informants placed feminist activism as a priority. Surprisingly, the two informants who seemed most dissimilar in their beliefs, Mariane and Amal, both thought women’s rights were not a critical issue. Mariane, who is from Lebanon, believed that there were more important issues to address, such as war. She explained to me, “We are making the problem bigger because we are emphasizing the difference, like we need help, which we don’t.” In a similar argument, when asked what she thought was the best way to help women throughout the world, Amal responded, “Actually, I don’t know why people, they only talk about women, like how they will help women, how they will support women. I mean, if the country keeps talking about women, women, women, that means they have a problem with their women.” A survey respondent suggested, “Maybe you could examin[e] the conflict among women them[selves] before examining the clear conflict between women and men [sic].” Ragha also related that some of her friends prefer not to use the word feminism because they believe it makes something that should be a fact into a debatable issue. Her friends, she says, refuse to fight for equality as a kind of protest against the fact that the fight is necessary. They want it to come about organically. Ragha expressed frustration with

136 Isanea, 182.
these friends, arguing that “It needs to be enforced at the beginning, and it feels weird, and then later on it will feel normal.”

“‘Putting the Fire’:” Causing Problems or Creating Solidarity?

With all of this being said, the question remains, what are the possibilities of transnational feminism? What do the women see as feasible? This question was posed to the women who were interviewed, and their answers followed two general themes. On a practical level, the women pointed out the diversity of the Arab world and the difficulty in properly understanding and supporting a cause across the world. Amira described a situation where an activist in the United States is trying to end female circumcision but does not understand the origins of the practice. Because of this, Amira told me, “It is very difficult for her to fight the fight…” Referring to situations like this, Amira said, “I don’t think the understanding is there, or the capability to make the change is there. Sometimes the actions could... provoke those countries rather than help them.” Similarly, Amal said that she believed in the possibility of transnational feminism, but that any assistance must be informed: “It depends on what kind of support the women, they’re going to give me,” she said. Referring to Saudi Arabia’s ban on women driving in the country, Amal explained, “I know what I am talking about. I know, I’ve lived there. They have to go and see, actually... Are you going to give me support that’s going to develop my country and help the women, or are you just going to do a problem? Open this topic, and change the public opinion, make everyone talking about it, and then, what’s the solution?” Translating a phrase in Arabic that means “to stir up trouble,” she remarked, “You just ‘put the fire’.” Statements like Amira and Amal’s indicate a hesitancy that stems from the first-hand knowledge of American’s misinformation about women from the Middle East and North Africa.
After all, the women have already experienced stereotyping during their time in the United States; they know the assumptions that some Americans have about women from the MENA region. The women’s caution echoes that of Mohanty, in that western women must be careful not to create a monolithic oppressed Arab woman that needs saving. Like Mohanty, they see the need to recognize the differences in various regions.

Nevertheless, on a personal level, the women also see the possibilities for international connections. Similar to Mohanty, Kaplan, and Grewal, the women students from the MENA region understand that there can be solidarity through shared commonalities which extend across the globe. This understanding comes from their experiences in the United States. This is reflected in Rima’s remark, “I feel like, again, like most of my friends who I feel like I can tell my problems are international. Like, they were American, but they had some international experience. They really can empathize with you. They really can understand what you’re saying and try to find [a] solution with you... When you have shared problems or challeng[es], you’re going to support each other.” In a similar but slightly more rose-colored vein, a survey respondent wrote, “My time in my American community overall has helped me to realize that no matter the development of the country or where that woman has come from… still the shared needs and challenges for all of us as women are bigger than our backgrounds.” Likewise, Nour posited that “American women can support the idea of feminism of women in the Middle East because they all have the same purpose in the end. . . They all have the same idea of just achieving their own dreams, so. And one can learn from the other as long as respect is there.” Nour’s comment echoes the realization of the women in Egypt working with Leslie Lewis that despite differences in approach, women in Egypt and the United States had very similar basic goals.
Like the women above, Raghda placed much confidence in transnational feminism and solidarity, but placed it in the global context. She said, “I don’t think it would really work if they just, if we just do it by ourselves, it’s not going to work…. We’re [the world in general] too globalized to be concerned in one culture and then trying to fix it without any outside interaction, because we’re actually already interacting in every sense.” Raghda referred to videos of recent women’s rights demonstration in the United States, saying, “When all these videos went, like, were all over the place about the rallies that went down that was about feminism, they were also back home [in Libya], too, and people started talking about it back home, too.” Raghda believed that the successes of women across the world could promote positive feminist action in her country as well.

Raghda’s mention of technology and the way it can create solidarity fits with Gheytanchi and Moghadam’s argument for feminism through social media, just one perhaps unmeasurable way that women across the world are connecting. Rima also mentioned the use of social media for creating solidarity, but only when used properly. Rima warned about the false information presented in the media and believed that women first needed to meet each other on the personal level to create true connections, and then they could post on social media. She described an international camp she attended and how the women from many different backgrounds bonded. Later, she was happy to see that not only did the women connect on social media, but the friends of the attendees also began interacting online. She believed this was the way to spread the positive truths about the world and the people in it, rather than using the media for fear- and hate-mongering. Of the women who completed the survey or an interview, all said they would be keeping in contact with their friends in the United States and other countries, largely through

137Gheytanchi and Moghadam, 6-7.
social media, and so this may be an avenue for transnational feminism. However, as Amal pointed out, keeping up connections is a two-way street. When asked if she planned to communicate with her U.S. acquaintances once she returned home, Amal replied, “The question has to be, are they going to communicate with me?” As is evidenced in this research, the women from the MENA region are taking on much of the burden of furthering transnational feminism through their actions in the U.S. and at home. If American women want to help their new classmates and friends, they must be actively engage with the women from the MENA region.

“What Is My Environment, I Will Change:” Changing the MENA Region from Within

While some of the women seem skeptical about the possibilities of transnational feminism, they are discounting their own influence on positive change for women in their countries. As previously mentioned, the women from the MENA countries who studied at KSU affected those they came into contact with by changing stereotypes, and when possible, creating friendships with Americans and students of other nationalities. In this way, they foster connections and understandings between themselves and others in the United States. However, the women also encourage transnational feminism through their example of international study and through the things they say and do when they are at home.

One of the main ways the women encourage transnational feminism is through sharing their experiences with others, something which they already do. Nour told me, “When I go visit my family or friends, I say, ‘Well, this is what we do there.’ And they say, ‘Why are you saying that?’ And then I explain myself and they start thinking. And I am not changing everything, but they are getting a new perspective.” Rima is also building bridges. Referring to the stereotype of sexually available women, Rima said, “I told my friends, it is not how it is [in the United States].
It is absolutely different. There are a lot of women who don’t care about values, but exactly that’s how we have them in our communities [in Syria]. But also there are lots of women who have values, who respect their parents… they are conservative.” By providing personal testimony, women like Rima are able to break down the stereotypes and lay the foundation for solidarity. Amal plans to influence opinions in Saudi Arabia in whatever situation she finds herself: “What is my environment, I will change. For example, if I am an anchor [on TV], I will talk about it. If I am a teacher, I will talk about it. I would like to change how men sometimes look at us, like you are not capable…. But I will change it in a reasonable way. I want to change men’s minds, how they think.” Raghda thought that it would be difficult for her to return home because of her difference in opinion, but that she would be able to find an audience:

Your character be there whether you like it or not, so I think it will be really even hard for me to just like, you know, switch back…. I will try to be with people who will be cool with me, and family, because family’s always family. And I know that there are people. It’s not impossible at all…. I believe that there are always people who are willing to listen and to hear whatever you’re saying. You can change whatever they believe in if we just sound really reasonable, rational.

Even though her audience may be limited, Raghda still has an opportunity to share her knowledge.

Raghda is not the only woman who anticipates challenges when she returns to her home country. Although each of the women interviewed--except Amira--do desire to return at some point, they are also aware that life will not be the same, much like the women in McDermott-Levy and Le, et. al.’s studies discussed above. In The Complete Persepolis, Marji returns to Iran after several years in Europe and is immediately struck by not only the difference between Austria and Iran, but also between the Iran she remembered and the Iran she was returning to. In one comic strip, a veiled Marji is looking up at a large mural painted on the side of a building, reflecting on the differences she needed to adjust to:
But Marji didn’t just feel disconnected from the city, she felt disconnected from her friends. Although at first expecting to reconnect with her friends easily, Marji realized that she and her friends had different experiences that had shaped them during the four years she had been gone, and admitted, “I had a hard time remembering what had brought us together before.” As noted above Raghda indicated her concern over the disconnect between the general mentality at home and the character she developed in the United States. Rima also expressed concern over a difficulty readjusting to the culture, much like Marji. She said, “The hardest thing is, it was too hard to adjust to the culture [in the U.S.] and fit in, and then because it is the absolute opposite, you have to go back. So, it’s like, you’re not going to be stable.” Other women had more practical concerns. Although Amal did not think women needed to drive in Saudi Arabia, she

---

138Satrapi, 253.

139Ibid., 259.
said that one of the hardest things about returning home will be transportation and needing to receive permission to go out. Mariane said the lack of the internet and resources will be difficult.

In regard to promoting feminism, most of the women who were interviewed related the difficulties to their culture, specifically the role of women and the family. Nour explained that in her experience, it is difficult for unmarried women to express their opinions, while Rima noted that families have much more input on an individual’s actions in Syria than they do in the U.S. She said, “The community, your family, your husband, your brother, [whoever] is responsible for you, because you have to have someone responsible for you as a woman, they more control you than here. You owe lots of explanations to the other people.” In this, the benefits of community such as a support network which the women sometimes lack while in the U.S. also stymie a woman’s freedom to choose for herself. Raghda was perhaps the most critical of the culture, saying that in Libya, people do not try to understand another perspective, and that they try to argue for their cultural beliefs by citing religious passages from the Quran. While Amal saw religion and culture as intimately connected and mutually supporting, Raghda believed that too often religion was used blindly to support cultural ideas. She likened it to a student who pulls a quote from a book to support his argument without reading the book first for context.

Meanwhile, Nour and Mariane saw religion as more restrictive that the culture, with Nour noting that non-Muslims living in the same area have more freedom that their Muslim compatriots, while Mariane believed religion divided people, especially in terms of intimate relationships. This difference in opinion on the role of religion and culture affirms the ongoing debate in Arab societies over what is cultural and what is religious.
Possibilities for the Future

As previously discussed, the women students from the MENA region play an active role in promoting transnational feminism through their study abroad experience and their actions once they return home, while the American women they come into contact with are more passive. When asked what would be the best way to help women throughout the world, the women from the MENA region were not without ideas: Mariane suggested educational support groups to empower women, Rima preferred economic assistance, and Raghda asked for organized, carefully planned activism that would inspire confidence in the movement. Generally speaking, though, the majority of the women saw a need for emotional and psychological support. Women, they believe, want to know that there are others who will encourage and help them in their need. Study abroad is an opportunity for building this kind of solidarity.

Recognizing the impact that study abroad can have, the women KSU students from the MENA region who participated in the interviews and survey largely support American women coming to their countries, although perhaps not immediately, due to current situations in their countries. The women see the value in international study for, as one survey respondent put it, “It’s [sic] a good and eye opening experience.” The women were more than happy to share the positive attributes of their countries, such as the way that religion can be tied to culture (Amal and Nour), diversity in an Arab country (Rima), the nightlife and beaches (Mariane), respect for the elderly (Amal), and community over individualism (Rima and Raghda). Unfortunately, Kennesaw State University does not currently offer study abroad opportunities to most of these women’s countries. However, there are opportunities to study in Morocco, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates. While they are practical about its limited possibilities in the current political

---

climate, they hope to be able to share their cultures and open minds by welcoming American women to their countries in the future.
Conclusion

As can be seen in the previous research and in the MENA women students’ own experiences at KSU, studying at the university can be a time of personal development. The women must navigate their role in society in the U.S. and often face the challenges that come from living in a new environment. Some of Kennesaw State University’s MENA women students reported times of stress in adjusting to life in the U.S. and discomfort with their place in U.S. society. Social location and the ability to engage with society in a meaningful way seems to be a contributing factor to their comfort level. The students also indicated a general need for the Kennesaw community to understand their cultures, and they occasionally, because of the lack of understanding, experienced both subtle and overt discrimination. For these reasons and more, the majority of women believed that life in the United States was more difficult than their life at home.

For the international women students at Kennesaw State, their period of study is also a time of sharing their culture and beliefs with others and for forming friendships. The women stressed the importance of making connections while in the United States, but also reported difficulty in making friendships with Americans. Failure to understand the experience of the international student on the part of Americans was a main factor, while the available on-campus groups did not seem to be of interest or particular use to most of the MENA women as a source of support. Nevertheless, while these connections they make are tentative and the burden is largely placed on the international students to share their knowledge, the friendships and acquaintances are the seeds that can promote transnational feminism. Opening the minds both of
their schoolmates at KSU and of their friends and family back home, the women from the MENA region create bridges between locations and between peoples. In addition to explaining the Arab culture to those in the United States, the MENA women report that they are also sharing their experiences and knowledge of the U.S. with the people back home, quietly changing misconceptions on both sides of the world.

As demonstrated by the women who participated in the survey or interviews for this research, women from the MENA region are aware not only of the particular challenges that their gender faces at home, such as a negative conception of feminism, but also of the situation of many women in the United States. The MENA women identified the struggle of American women to achieve a healthy version of equality, while also recognizing that women in the United States have more freedom of choice. Furthermore, the women were conservative about the possibilities of transnational feminism, with some cautioning against well-meaning but uninformed and destructive help from overseas, while informants believing other causes to be more pressing. Yet, others recognized the need for solidarity, suggesting assistance from non-governmental organizations or other organized groups.

Nevertheless, the knowledge they have gained about themselves, their countrymen and women, and others from across the world has empowered them to fight for change, while at the same time furthering solidarity by opening the minds of the Americans and other international students they came into contact with. Indeed, most of the women who completed the survey or interview believed their greatest impact on society was their role in changing perceptions. While this may not be viewed as a necessarily feminist action by the women, it does quietly promote transnational feminism by creating understanding between women throughout the world. One can only hope that Kennesaw State University will be able to further promote this progress by
encouraging more international students to come to KSU, by fostering study abroad experiences for its domestic students, and by creating more opportunities for dialogue and understanding.
Bibliography


