CReaTE

Canterbury Research and Theses Environment

Canterbury Christ Church University's repository of research outputs

http://create.canterbury.ac.uk

Canterbury
Christ Church
University

CROSS-CULTURAL EDUCATION

ARAB WOMEN STUDYING A NON-TRADITIONAL SUBJECT

TRIONA CROKE

CANTERBURY CHRIST CHURCH UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE UNIVERSITY OF KENT

AT CANTERBURY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DECEMBER 2006

Dedicated to

William Croke 1935-2006

Abstract

The number of studies being carried out into the lives of Arab women in general and Arab women in education have increased in recent years. There has been little examination, however, of the phenomenon of modern Gulf Arab women and women of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) entering third-level education to study a subject that is considered non-traditional in their culture. This study aims to redress the balance by focusing on women of the UAE, where women have full access to third-level education and government policy stresses the importance of educated women participating in the workforce.

The methodologies used are grounded theory, phenomenology and ethnography. Data was collected through the use of informal interviews and a detailed diary, which was kept throughout the study.

Participants were selected using the theoretical sampling procedure, and collection of data was discontinued when the themes became saturated. Data was analysed using the constant comparative method. All of the women who participated in the study had made two specific choices with regard to their third-level education: to study Visual Communications and to study it through English. This distinction is important to the study because it places these women at the forefront of social change. Their choice to study through English and their choice of course reflects a definite career outlook. These students were aware that these choices meant a very real possibility of pursuing a career in this area, especially as this kind of work could be undertaken from the home.

In all aspects of their lives these students have participated in meaningful discussions that will impact on how they live their lives both now and in the future. This is a very important change and heralds the other changes now taking place in UAE society, on all levels.

This thesis concludes that the stereotype of Arab women as largely ignored, downtrodden, bullied and forced against their will to cover themselves is highly inaccurate. The Western notion of the Arab family as a controlling unit is far too simplistic. The Emirati family structure is complex: no single description can encompass its varieties and specificities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

How the thesis is structured

CHAPTER ONE introduces the thesis with a statement of the problem and outlines the purpose of the study, the research question and my perspective for the study. Also provided is an explanation of the transliteration of the Arabic words used, and a glossary of terms.

CHAPTER TWO presents a synopsis of the literature examined for this study and includes works from the areas of politics, women, history, Islam and popular media. This literature covers a wide area, so I have chosen to review that which I feel relates specifically to the subject-matter of the thesis. The literature is referred to extensively throughout the study.

CHAPTER THREE presents the research methodologies used in preparing this thesis, namely grounded theory, ethnography and phenomenology. The data collected through interviews, diary entries and personal observations is presented, along with the data analysis.

CHAPTER FOUR is the first data chapter and presents the data and themes which emerged from the research conducted. The themes are presented under the core category of Disconnection from the Self, within which are contained the themes of: centrality of family; a certain amount of discussion; family changes; taking action and becoming assertive; the veil; an overview; and transition and education. At the end of each theme is a summary of the points raised. It concludes with the presentation of the themes explored in this chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE is the second data chapter and begins with the second core category of Claiming Self, within which are contained the themes of: owning the decision to study; Communications Technology; desire for family approval regarding the choice of study; cultural issues surrounding the choice of programme; peer pressure; learning through English; and student frustrations with the programme; relevance of third-level education to the women's lives, past, present and future; summary of each theme. It concludes with the presentation of the themes explored in this chapter.

CHAPTER SIX provides further discussion on the findings from the data chapters. It is divided into two parts: Part One deals with the findings from the first data chapter; Part Two deals with the findings from the second data chapter. It examines what the findings mean for the young women students, now and in the future. In order to validate the study's findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of these issues, the findings are integrated with the existing literature.

CHAPTER SEVEN gives a theoretical perspective based on the findings of this study. They fall under the headings of: Family, a Changing Dynamic; Claiming a new identity; Socio-cultural change; Challenging accepted boundaries; Education — freedom power and achievement; Behavourial change and an entry to the workforce; Empowerment of women through education; The double bind of a transitional society.

EPILOGUE provides an autobiographical comparison of my life against the common experiences of the women of the United Arab Emirates

ENDMATTER contains the appendices, and an extensive bibliography. Finally, it outlines the kinds of issues which may arise in future research in this area, and the practical implications for a study such as this.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER *3*   **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION**

CHAPTER 4   FINDINGS: PART 1 DISCONNECTION FROM SELF

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Statement of the Problem

1.2 Purpose of the Study

1.3 The Research Question

1.4 My Perspective for the Study

1.5 Glossary of Terms

1.1 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The impetus for this study was a question: what is the experience for a young Emirati woman choosing to study a non-traditional subject through the English language with the aim of acquiring a third-level qualification? In response, the area of research for this study focuses on the experiences of Emirati women studying for a professional qualification in Visual Communications, an area that has received little research attention to date.

Third-level education has been available in the United Arab Emirates (hereafter "UAE") since 1977, when the University of the UAE in Al-Ain was established to teach third-level courses through the medium of Arabic. A decade later, in 1988, the Higher Colleges of Technology was formed, with English as the medium of instruction. Also in 1998, Zayed University established women-only campuses in Abu Dhabi and Dubai; there is still no male campus.

Education for women in the Arab world has been hard won and the difficulties encountered have been addressed in the relevant literature for many years[1] (Mernessi 1996:162) (Hijab 1988:116, 1996:41) (Ahmed 1999:271). For UAE women, however, the provision of education has never been an issue. From the outset, when the Federation[2] was formed in 1971, education for women has been promoted widely as official government policy (Suffon 1980:57). The problem

---

[1] See literature review in Chapter 2.

[2] The United Arab Emirates comprises the states of Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ras al Khaimah, Ajman, Umm al Qaiwain and Fujairah.

is not, therefore, the availability of education, but instead the complex issues stemming from a woman's choice to pursue an education and possibly a career thereafter. In order to address adequately the issues arising from women's participation in third-level education — in this instance in a course on Visual Communications — it is necessary first to address the larger social context that pertains in UAE.

Standard histories of the Middle East assigned women to the world of the household, which was considered a world away from the spheres that mattered in society, i.e. economic production and political and social power. However, since 1971 and the formation of the new Federation, UAE society has experienced significant changes. These changes, both social and economic, impacted heavily on the lives of both men and women — albeit in different ways — and members of both genders contributed to the emergence and development of the modern state. The experiences of UAE women during this period of change are diverse, multifaceted and at times difficult to define within the limits of a single study. Nonetheless it is possible to outline general trends and to identify events that, in retrospect, represented important turning-points in the collective experience of UAE women. There is considerable commonality of experience in many areas of the women's lives. Both the rhetoric and the reality reveal that attitudes to women's work and education did not differ radically on either side of the economic or social divide. For nearly all of the women, the family occupied the most important place in their lives. This of course broached the common perception of the male-dominated family unit, but this did not, in fact, prove to be the experience of the women themselves.

According to Tucker, the family is likely to be perceived as the instrument of women's oppression — the mediator of values and customs that circumscribe women's activities and sustain an unequal distribution of power between the genders (Tucker 1993:195). Although this perception contains a certain amount of truth, it side-steps the importance of the family to the region in general and to women in particular. While it is true that women did live, and still live, within certain family boundaries, there is little doubt that familial relations remain central to their lives. Many of these women find their domestic tasks enjoyable and fulfilling, and they also have opportunities to engage in certain activities and relations beyond the family. They feel neither oppressed nor constricted by family life, as some observers might have expected. Indeed, the role of the family and women's place within it may ultimately impact positively on their education.

In a study such as this there is a danger, as Clear once described, of assessing the past on the criteria of the present. Given that the majority of women in UAE society, both past and present, chose to stay in the home as mothers and workers, it is important to acknowledge their contribution over several generations. However, although these woman may have made this choice happily and had positive experiences as a result, one cannot ignore the disadvantages arising from women's marginalised status in the world of paid employment (Clear 2000:215). But that, too, is now changing as increasing numbers of young woman enter the workforce.

This is one of the most striking features of UAE society today — change is occurring at a rapid rate and in all sectors. By the year 2001, few of even the most isolated rural areas would have remained untouched by the trappings of

modernity, with television, radio and the internet infiltrating slowly but surely and transforming communication and daily life. In terms of education, the opening up of third-level education to young women has produced a vibrant youth culture, which is now beginning to challenge all aspects of conventional behaviour, questioning traditional aesthetic and moral values, while at the same time observing a reverence and love for the religion of Islam and its place in their lives. By choosing to study a non-traditional subject, the group of young women who took part in this study are in the unique position of instigating change, and managing to do so from within.

In tandem with this transformation, the extent of the revolution in communications has ensured that the voices of these young women are being more widely disseminated than could have been imagined before; their opinions are often expressed in the new Emirati magazines available on the news-stands. Naturally, communication works both ways, and young Emirati women are in turn being exposed to the latest trends in music and fashion from the West, along with western ideas of Arab society. The presentation of Arab women in the western media is a cause for concern, as modern UAE women regard it as highly inaccurate, biased and subscribing to a stereotype with which they do not and cannot identify.

Media education, and particularly Visual Communications, is still a relatively new profession, identified with the German Bauhaus of the 1920s and 1930s. Since that time media and design pedagogy has evolved measurably, but in the UAE it is still a very new programme, the course having been established just twelve years ago, in 1994. This study will examine the implications of applying an

education model designed for use in the West in a society like the UAE, where all third-level education is gender-segregated.

1.2   Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to gather and collate information that will add to our understanding of women in education in the Arab world in order to make a significant contribution to the existing literature in this area, which to date has not addressed women's perspectives adequately. The literature indicates that women in the Arab world face many difficulties in their daily lives, which may be divided roughly under four key headings: women's rights; education; health and welfare; and employment (Tucker 1993:197) (Sabbagh 1996:xi). Several studies, books and articles have documented the obstacles facing Arab women who wish to acquire an education (Hijab 2000:130) (Wikan 1991:109) (Warnock-Fernea 1997:332) (Brooks 1995:183–201). Contrary to what many observers may believe, the problem does not lie in gaining access to education but rather in overcoming the invisible obstacles and complexities which have never before been addressed (Suffon 1980:56).

Results from this study will illuminate some of the realities of everyday life in the colleges for the fastest-growing section of the student population: young women. Implications for the future of Emirati women in the communications industry and for the future of educational policies for women in the UAE are discussed by the students as they describe their experiences. More important, perhaps, is the possibility for new connections, insights and understandings for

women who are considering entering a profession in the media, for those already working in the media industry, for faculty and counselors whose work brings them into daily contact with the students, and for administrators who develop and administer Communications Programmes in ESL (English as a second language) settings.

The ultimate goal of this study is to provide an insight into and an understanding of the complexities facing women students entering a non-traditional field of study at the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) in the UAE. It is argued that, in effect, the HCT represent a microcosm of UAE society, lending greater weight to the research and results presented here. This study is important because (a) there has been a recent initiative by the UAE Government to encourage greater numbers of women to enter the workforce and, more particularly, to enter the media industry, (b) greater understanding is required of the challenges/successes faced/won by Emirati women as they combine media work and family life, and (c) there is a need to dispel the well-worn stereotype of UAE woman as oppressed individuals.

Studies exist with regard to the feasibility of setting up various programmes, but these were conducted from an industry point of view (Steinmetz 1991:09). To date, no studies have been predicated on the methodology of engaging with students over an extended period. Consequently, there is a definite need for qualitative studies that examine closely the perceptions of the students.

1.3   THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The research investigation was based around the following:

(a)   Classroom observation.

(b)   Extensive use of a diary that I kept from 1995 to 2001.

(c)   Interviews with students, in which the following questions were addressed:

1.   What is the meaning of the experience of studying Visual Communications for women who have chosen a field of study considered non-traditional in their culture?

2.   What are the experiences associated with studying a liberal arts programme in a society that imposes certain restrictions on women?

3.   What cultural adaptations, if any, must be made by students in order to succeed in the programme?

4.   What is it like to study Visual Communications when the subject is taught in a second language, i.e. English?

5.   What are the aspirations and expectations of the students studying Visual Communications?

6.   What relevance do female students feel the Visual Communications programme has to their lives?

7.   What advice do women working in Visual Communications have to give other Arab women who are struggling with decisions about entering a career in that field?

It was important to use qualitative methods which were sensitive to the women's response styles and attended to the social context surrounding the women's daily lives. This was of particular importance because the UAE is a controlled society that places certain restrictions on women. For this reason I wanted to ensure that the women had the opportunity to share their personal experiences in complete

anonymity. It was assumed that no two students would have experiences that were exactly alike, and that each student's story would include unique aspects that reflected her personal history and life experiences. It was also assumed that as the experience of attending college is a shared one, there would be certain commonalities in the experience of the students studying to third-level. Kaschak (1992:24) speaks of the dual perspective of acknowledging each woman's story as her own (i.e. in terms of history, cultural context and individual experience), while at the same time recognising that experiences are organised by gender, therefore each woman's story is also every woman's story.

The research conducted took account of local conceptualisations of the Muslim religion and the Arab culture, therefore in chapters 4 and 5 the following areas are examined in detail for their contribution to an understanding of the issues facing women studying Visual Communications in the UAE:

- demographics of gender and women's education in the UAE;

- women's 'role' in the UAE as it is determined by religion and culture;

- history of women's involvement in educational institutions and in society;

- media and communications in the Arab world and specifically in the UAE;

- communications as a field of study for women;

- development of the Visual Communications programme within the context of the development of the Higher Colleges of Technology.

1.4   MY PERSPECTIVE FOR THE STUDY

I feel it is necessary to first point out that I am neither Arab nor Muslim and that my study of Islam is limited to the specific confines of this work. The choices I have made regarding the question for this study and the manner in which it is explored reflect my personal beliefs and values about research and teaching, and my personal assumptions about an education in Visual Communications.

The idea for this thesis arose from a teaching role I undertook at Abu Dhabi Women's College from 1995 to −2001, which led me to question the decisions of and repercussions for the women students who opted for a programme of study rooted largely in a foreign (western) culture with completely different values and norms. Again and again I was confronted by my personal feelings about the programme I was teaching and its relevance to the lives of the women who chose to study it. These questions and experiences led me to examine my own accepted ideas about what education should be — ideas that were predominantly western-derived — and to query how I could make them relevant in a very different cultural context. In a bid to answer my many questions, I turned to the literature available on UAE women, but I quickly realised the paucity of information addressing their particular issues, either as women or as women in an educational environment.

My position as a female teacher at a women's college put me in a unique position because I could interact easily with and have a lot of access to these students. I feel immensely privileged to have had this opportunity to engage with women whose lives are marked by a degree of seclusion and self-containment that

is rare, perhaps non-existent, in western society today. In so many ways it was a world apart, a deeply foreign place, which made it an exciting challenge to enter into it and understand those who lived there.

In the current political climate the predominant questions posed in relation to Arab women refer only to the extent of their 'subjugation'. This stems from the common depiction of Arab women in popular western media magazines, such as *Marie Claire*[3] and *Vanity Fair*[4]. (I will explore this area further in Chapter 4, in 4.6 on The Veil, in Chapter 2, in 2.5.1 on Sensationalism and Stereotyping and in 2.2.1 on Islamic Dress.) I realised at an early stage that such questions hold little interest for me and for this study. Instead, this study is about the women's experience of themselves, not about my experience of them. It was very obvious from the way these women talked that they did not see their lives in terms of unmitigated subjugation. On the contrary, they questioned the merit of various college rules and regulations and the value of some of the courses they had to take as part of the programme. I do not hold with stereotypes and categories that purport to accommodate the lives of all women everywhere, and I do not think the Emiratis would support such sweeping statements either. Their tradition is strong and as a result strongly supports other cultures and traditions that follow their beliefs. The UAE is not an isolated country with solidly closed borders and minds. Its economic wealth means it accommodates many foreign nationals, so Emirati society is influenced by the ideas and cultures of many different nationalities, and is not threatened by this.

---

[3] *Marie Claire*, September 2004: 'I am a Suicide Bomber', by Joanna Chen.

This study has been a process of learning for the author and a dissection of inherited beliefs and presumptions. In undertaking and completing it, I have learned about and become acutely aware of: (a) the different effects of gender role socialisation on women; (b) the impact of the cultural, religious and social context on education and on individual interpretations of reality; (c) the traditional, hierarchical power structures that exist between men and women; and (d) the perception of the Arab world in the west. Each participant in this study is an individual, therefore each woman is 'the owner of the context and, as such, holds the power to define reality, to say what matters and what does not' (Kaschak1992:31). The research process was designed to respect the autonomy of the participants and to avoid creating a hierarchical relationship between interviewer and interviewee.

---

[4] *Vanity Fair*, April 2004: 'Daughters of France, Daughters of Allah', by Marie Brenner.

1.5   Glossary of terms

The term 'West' is used throughout to refer collectively to North America, Western Europe and Australia.

When referring to the traditional clothing of the women of the United Arab Emirates, I use the following local terminology:

Abaya: black outer garment.

Shayla: black headscarf.

Jelabaya: national dress.

Burqa: face covering.

Mahr: dowry.

Acronyms used in the text:

HCT: Higher Colleges of Technology

ADWC: Abu Dhabi Women's College.

ESCWA: Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia

Transliteration

The transliteration of Arabic words used in this work is taken from *Islam* by Caesar E. Farah (7th ed., 2003). The following standard spellings are used:

Qur'an: this spelling is used for the Muslim Holy book.

Fard: canonically imposed duty or obligation of the faith.

Inshallah: God willing!

Hadith: 'Sayings' of Muhammad.

Hadith: corpus of the sayings of Muhammad, the man.

Shariah: fundamental Law of Islam, its 'constitution'.

CHAPTER 2

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

2.1   Introduction

       2.1.1   Historical Arabia

2.2   Islam

       2.2.1   Islamic Dress

       2.2.2   Women and Gender in Islam

2.3   The Centrality of Family

       2.3.1   Changing Attitudes to Marriage

       2.3.2   Abandoning Custom

       2.3.3   Power

2.4   Establishment and Development of Formal Education

       2.4.1   Transition

       2.4.2   Western Models

2.5   Western Reporting Post September 11th

       2.5.1 Sensationalism, Stereotyping and the Veil Issue in France

2.6   Working Outside the Home

2.7   Conclusion

2.1   Introduction

Research on women studying to third-level in the UAE is scant, largely due to the fact that this area of study was not available until the development of the University of the United Arab Emirates, which was established in 1977. Until that time the Arab countries were relatively untouched by what we in the West regard as education. More recently, the development of the HCT and the establishment of The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research in 1994 has led to more literature being produced on this subject.

Numerous books have been written on Arab women, a section of which I will review below. Two factors must be taken into account when reading and reviewing this literature: 1. interpretation and 2. censorship. There are twenty-two Arab countries, therefore there are twenty-two different interpretations of what it is to be Arab. The centrality of Islam to the Arab people is also interpreted in many different ways, depending on geography and cultural influences. Most of the available literature on Arab women and their experiences has been written by Arabs from the Middle East, and sometimes second-generation Arabs living in the West. Their particular circumstances influence how they interpret and write these experiences.

Censorship, too, plays a role in the writing of any person living in this region and, indeed, of any person living there who attempts to write what could be described as criticism. The UAE is a liberal country in Islamic terms, but in the

eyes of a western expatriate living there, it is ruled carefully by a benign dictatorship.

Following the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington in 2001, a considerable number of books were published on Islam and the Arab World in general, written almost exclusively from a western point of view. The literature review presented here would not be complete without recourse to some of these titles and an examination as to how they affect this study.

The topics I have chosen to review here fall into five main categories: 1. History, 2. Islam, 3. The Family, 4. Education and 5. Western reporting. During the research phase of this work these were the topics most readily identified in the literature and most often discussed with the study participants.

These categories are important for different reasons. The history of the UAE and of the wider geographical area has determined the national identity of its people. While Islam is the dominant religion of the Arab people, it has many and varied interpretations depending on social and cultural mores. The family is without doubt the single most important factor in, and the defining feature of, the daily lives of the people of the UAE. Education is regarded as the foremost tool of change and development in UAE society. It is not without its controversies because it has placed women in the vanguard of societal change and has polarised opinion on the changes and challenges affecting the country as a whole. Traditionally, western reporting tends to present Arab women as one homogenous group, largely ignoring the complexities of their lives and thereby providing a stereotypical view of Arab women as downtrodden beings, forgotten voices. The parameters and structure of this study have been chosen carefully to

avoid the pitfall of the stereotype, and to elucidate the reality of life, culture and opinion for Arab women.

2.1.1   Historical Arabia: background to the present-day UAE

It was from the Trucial States Arabia (see below), with its rich history and culture, that UAE society developed a tradition based on tribal affiliations. In Arabia, Islam displaced a polytheist religion that comprised three paramount goddesses and a plethora of marriage customs, including, but not confined to, those enshrined in the patriarchal family. That is to say, Islam effected a transformation that brought the Arabian socio-religious vision and organisation of gender into line with the rest of the Middle East and Mediterranean regions. Islam explicitly and discreetly affiliated itself with the traditions already in place in the region (Ahmed 4–5) (Ali 2003: 24–34) (Suffon 1980:28).

The historical literature provides differing opinions as to the status accorded women in Arabia prior to the coming of the Prophet Mohammed, in 500AD, and the subsequent spread of the religion of Islam. Although there are well-known women, like the queen of Sheba, who ruled Yemen and Zenobia of Palmyra in the region of Syria, it is generally accepted that women occupied an inferior position in society. Evidence points to the practice of female infanticide, for example, until it was outlawed by the Qur'an. On the other hand, there were various kinds of marriage arrangement available, one of which involved a form of polyandry and was known as the Sadica marriage (Robertson Smith 1903, cited in Suffon 1980:13).

The Sadica marriage gave full rights to the woman. She remained with her tribe, could dismiss her husband as she wished and the *mahr* (dowry) was paid directly to her. Such freedom had a reliable precedent: the Prophet Mohammed is believed to be the third husband of Khadija (Ali 2003:27–28) (Montgomery-Watt 1969). One theory suggests that the pre-Islamic Arabian society was in transition from a matrilineal to a patrilineal system. It was not a powerful matrilineal system, however. The Sadica system was in place only for very short period of time and was restricted to isolated areas, mainly around Medina in Saudi Arabia.

According to Melikan (1988), until the mid-twentieth century the Arabian Gulf had little connection with the world beyond its Middle East region. The people of the Arabian Peninsula lived a traditional life, centred on the desert and the sea. Their identity and connectedness derived from their tribes, which had similar social and family organisations, legal systems, interpersonal relationships, values, housing arrangements and marital customs (Melikan 1988:153–188) Unlike the northern Arab countries, the Arabian Peninsula has traditionally had less contact with other cultures, resulting in less internal diversity (Christie 1996: 407–16).

In the nineteenth century Britain forged naval treaties with this area — then known as the Trucial States — but there was little input into its economic or social systems. Britain had some political influence with the local rulers and forbade any foreign relations with other countries, which further isolated the area from outside influence. Unlike other British colonies, however, the Trucial States had no well-defined position within the British imperial framework: they were not colonies, crown colonies, mandates nor protectorates, but simply states in treaty

relations with Britain. Likewise, today 'they cannot be described as absolute monarchies, dictatorships nor constitutional monarchies; they are a group of Arab states located in the Arabian Gulf with a unique political system' (Zahlan 1989:73). It was only later, as a result of international interest in the discovery of vast oil resources in the Arabian Gulf in the 1960s, that the western colonial powers cynically drew the national boundaries to ensure there were oil-rich states with small populations and oil-scarce states with large populations, which 'pre-empted any future pan-Arabism or pan-Islamism' (Hoogvelt 1997:118).

When the British left the region in 1971, Sheikh Zayed, ruler of Abu Dhabi, reorganised the region's political structures to form the United Arab Emirates, an independent federation of seven states: Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ras al-Khaimah, Ajman, Umm al Qaiwain and Fujairah. (Qatar was also to have joined, but eventually declined and remained independent.)

This brief outline serves to illustrates how the tribal system influenced social development in the UAE. This influence is apparent to this day, and it is by tribal, rather than religious, rules that the people determine their everyday lives. Herein lies the challenge for young women in UAE, who are attempting to change attitudes that have remained undisturbed for centuries.

2.2 Islam

There is a wide variety of works relating to women in Islam, but the literature that will be reviewed here relates specifically to *women* in Islam. It is not the aim of this study to review Islam as a religion. Regarding women in Islam, the areas we

shall explore are: historical context; woman's traditional place in Islam; Islam in the daily lives of the women; and Islamic dress.

As described by Ahmed, historically western ideas about Islam have derived from the tales of travellers and crusaders, augmented by the deductions of clerics from readings of (poorly understood) Arabic texts. Male travellers in Muslim societies had extremely limited access to women and the explanations and interpretations they brought back, insofar as they represented a native perspective at all, naturally gave a male point of view on whatever subject was under discussion. By the eighteenth century the western narrative of women in Islam, drawn from such sources, incorporated elements that did bear a resemblance to the bold external features of Islamic patterns of male dominance, but at the same time often garbled and misconstrued the specific content and meaning of the customs described, merely assuming and representing the Islam practised in Muslim societies in the periods in which it was encountered by the European visitors. Of course, by that time Islam dominated those societies, to some degree or other, and the eighteenth-century form of Islam therefore became the only possible interpretation of the religion (Ahmed 1992:25–9).

According to Stowesser, very little has been written specifically on women from the Persian Gulf or, in particular, from the UAE. Islamist writings on the woman's role in society can be roughly divided into three groups: modernists, conservatives and fundamentalists. The criteria for these divisions are the writer's stance on Islam and its role in social development, and his understanding of social reality (Stowesser 1993:8–10). Modernists rely on an individual interpretation of the scriptures (*Ijtihad*) and do not place emphasis on the Shari'a's interpretation

nor on the processes that led to its formation, particularly the process and principle of community consensus. Conservatives, on the other hand, view Islam as an inherited, balanced system of faith and action, which is based on the scriptures and interpreted by the verifying authority of community consensus. The spokesmen of this community consensus are the lawyer-theologians, who view the core of Islam to be the Shari'a. Fundamentalists insist on the 'static' and immutable nature of Islam, as legislated in the scriptures. Everyday reality is judged as being either right or wrong, either 'righteous' or 'sinful'. The objective and absolute criteria by which this distinction is made are the eternally valid norms and laws laid down by the Qur'an and interpreted in the Prophets' Sunna (Tucker 1993:195–6) (Stowesser 1993:10–11).

Authors Khalidi and Tucker state that Islam is not a single notion, but rather a range of beliefs and values that have evolved over time, in parallel with changing historical conditions and with the local customs and practices with which it has come into contact. Of fundamental importance to the issue of women's rights, as pointed out by some UAE women, is the Hadith, which is a collection of stories about the works and deeds of the Prophet Mohammed, collected and compiled by male Muslim scholars almost two hundred years after the prophet's death. It is the Hadith conservatives rely upon to make such proclamations as: 'Women make up the majority of inhabitants of Hell because of their ingratitude towards their husbands' (Khalidi and Tucker 1996: 9–11).

Suffon maintains that Shari'a law is based primarily on the Qur'an and the Hadith. The four main schools of Sunni Islam, which were developed in the early centuries of Islam, agree on many of the rules and principles governing gender

relations and the Qur'an, the Hadith and the Shari'a provide the textual basis for an understanding of the Islamic view of gender. However, the literature is divided on the topic of gender definitions as laid down by the Qur'an.

Suffon argues that, historically, Islamic law granted women rights with regard to education, marriage, inheritance and economic pursuits and that at the time of its founding, these rights were very progressive and aimed to improve the status of women (Suffon 1980:49). She goes on to say that Islam, as laid out in the Qur'an, gives women rights in terms of education, family and place in society. These rights were undermined within a matter of generations, however, because the laws concerning women were rewritten by men. Authors writing on this subject agree that the interpretations of the laws affecting women have been drafted by men and do not necessarily come directly from the Qur'an. The result is women's inferior position in Arab society. Stowesser points to the modernist writing of Egyptian scholar Muhammed Abduh, a self-proclaimed proponent of women's rights, which calls for the equality of women while at the same time placing them in a secondary role to men. Abduh advocated women's liberation from male oppression as an essential pre-condition for the building of a virtuous society, rather than as liberation for the benefit of women (Stowesser 1993:10).

Heard-Bey (1996:67), writing from a purely historical point of view, talks of Islam as being a religion in a way that transcends the western meaning of the word. Islam exists across secular and religious spheres, comprising both the purely spiritual and the speculative, both the form and content of devotion and the order of authority in all matters concerning the faith. Islam dominates the cultural, moral, social, economic, legal and political spheres and as such is the inescapable

common denominator for life in a Muslim society. The illiterate nomad, the learned Qadi, the successful pearl merchant and the widow claiming her inheritance — consciously or unconsciously, many times during a day they all turn to the same moral, legal and religious authority.

Qassim Amin's *Tahiral-Mar'a* (*The Liberation of Woman*), published in 1899, was one of the first works to bring the issue of women in Islam to the attention of the Arab press. It provoked an angry and passionate response from those who disagreed fundamentally with Amin's thesis. According to Stowesser, this reaction becomes intelligible only when one considers not the substantive reforms for women advocated by Amin, but rather the symbolic reform, such as the abolition of the veil, a point upon which he insisted (Stowesser 1993:10).

'Each country interprets women's rights under Islam somewhat differently, and within each country social class is a determining factor in the way in which women's personal rights are treated' (Sabbagh 1994:xv). Like Sabbagh, Khalidi and Tucker hold that the Qu'ran contains material that can be used to support the arguments of those who want equality for women under Islam and also of those who wish to restrict women's rights (Khalidi and Tucker 1994:9–12).

> 'The difficulties of coming to terms with the question of women and Islam are compounded by the tendency, both outside and within the Arab world, to label any pervasive social practice "Islamic".'
> (Khalidi and Tucker 1994:9)

The authors caution that the role of religion in the Arab world must be kept in perspective and that it must be understood how historical and political forces have shaped 'western' views not only of the situation of women in the Arab world but of the issue of Islam itself.

Supporting these warnings, an article in the *Gulf News* written by two women students points out that observers tend to confuse inherited customs with Islamic principles and to think that Muslim women are victims of their religion and, further, that any irrational treatment meted out to women has religious sanction. In the article, the student authors stressed that Islam does not preach discrimination, that it respects the rights of all humanity, women included, and that it acknowledges the constructive role women play in society. In her feminist article about post-revolutionary Iranian women, Mehran confirms that the Islamic framework of women's rights and responsibilities does not, in fact, limit Muslim women to the domestic realm (Mehran 1999:201–15). Khalidi and Tucker also concede that many of the traditions and social constraints families place on women in the region apply as much to Christian as to Muslim women, including, for example, the concept of 'honour' in the sense of controlling sexual activity before marriage (1994:12).

2.2.1 Islamic Dress

In relation to the dress of Muslim women, Anne Sophie Roald makes the following observation:

'In an Arab Islamist context, I have observed that female covering is of utmost importance. In the various Sunni law schools there is agreement that the headscarf is regarded as obligatory *(fard)* attire for women from the age of puberty (Sabig 1985, Az-Zuhaili 1989). Shi'a Muslims, on the other hand, require that girls should cover from the age of nine. As many Islamists have explained to me, one of the verses which deals with the covering of women is in the Qu'ranic Sura *light*, which starts with the words: "This is a Sura which we have bestowed on you and made it obligatory for Muslim women."' (Roald 2001:62).

Roald does not believe that the Islamic covering necessarily indicates 'religiosity' or 'non-religiosity' because she assumes there are uncovered, yet religiously devoted Muslim women and non-committed women who wear headscarves due to external pressures. Nevertheless, she still holds that the wearing of a headscarf indicates a commitment to Islam (Roald 2001:62). In *Daughter of Persia*, Sattareh Farman describes her mother's desolation when ordered not to wear her veil:

'When my mother had learned that she was to lose the age-old modesty of her veil, she was beside herself. She and all traditional people regarded Reza's order as the worst thing he had yet done – worse than his attacking the rights of the clergy; worse even than his confiscations and murders.' [Fearing the Shah's displeasure, her husband orders her to go out in public unveiled.] 'The next day,

weeping with rage and humiliation, she sequestered herself in her

bedroom.'

(cited in Brooks 1999:23).

Vern L. Bullough dismisses the notion that the practices of veiling and seclusion were introduced by Mohammad because he saw women as 'continually giving trouble to man', a notion some short-sighted western commentators prefer to explain Muslim women's apparel. Nor were veiling and segregation purely Muslim practices: in the Middle East, Christians and Jews also veiled and secluded their women right up until the twentieth century (Bullough 1973, cited in Suffon 1980:15). It is believed that veiling dates back to ancient Persia, where it was a common practice, and that it was imported and adopted by the upper classes in the settled areas of Arabia as a sign of prestige.

When discussing the issue of veiling with me, some students saw full-body covering as an infringement of their rights and refused to do it. In their defence, they quoted the fact that it is not dictated in the Qur'an, which demands that only hair be covered. In these young women's opinion, it was men who chose to interpret the stipulation to mean covering completely. In many cases it seems the interpretations of various religious scholars, alongside local traditions and social trends, has meant women have not been given the rights due to them (Hajji Shaykh Yusuf 1965:355–59).

The adoption of the veil by Muslim women occurred through a process of assimilation of the social mores of the peoples conquered by the ancient Arabs.

The veil was apparently in use in Sassanian[5] society, and segregation of the sexes and use of the veil were very much in evidence in the Christian Middle East and in Mediterranean regions at the time of the rise of Islam. During Mohammad's lifetime (and only towards the end of his life at that), his wives were the only Muslim women required to veil. After his death and following the Muslim conquest of the adjoining territories, where upper-class women veiled, the veil became a commonplace item of clothing among Muslim upper-class women by a process of assimilation that has not yet been ascertained in any detail (Ahmed 1992:4). Lady Mary Wortley Montague, travelling in Arabia in the early twentieth century, not only observed veiled women but also veiled herself. She asserted that veiling was not the oppressive custom her compatriots believed it to be, and in fact gave women a kind of liberty because it enabled them to pass unrecognised (Wortley Montague 1965:1–318, cited in Ahmed 1992:150).

Fatima Mernessi and Leila Ahmed, writing in a thesis on the new colonial discourse of Islam centred on women, argued that the non-Islamist view was that Islam was innately and immutably oppressive to women, that the veil and segregation epitomised that oppression and that these customs were the fundamental reasons for the general and comprehensive backwardness of Islamic societies. Only if such practices 'intrinsic' to Islam (and therefore to Islam itself) were cast off could Muslim societies begin to move forward on the path of civilisation. Thus to western eyes, veiling — that most visible marker of the differences and inferiority of Islamic societies — now became the symbol of both

---

[5] 'Sassanian — of or relating to the dynasty ruling the Persian empire from AD 224 until driven from Mesopotamia by the Arabs (637–51).' (*Oxford Dictionary* 1996).

the oppression of women (or, in the language of the day, Islam's degradation of women) and the backwardness of Islam. Islam thereby became an open target for colonial attack, with moral justification for western assaults on the greater Muslim societies (Roald 2001:255).

The ongoing debate in the modern Arab world between Islamists and secularists, i.e. advocates of veiling and its opponents, and the ways in which women and the veil figure in this debate seem encoded with political meanings and references that, on the face of it, appear to have little to do with women. This raises the question of how such discourse is conducted, its motives and aims; a question that applies equally to such discussions in the West, whether in the popular media or the academy. It appears that such discussions of women's rights often engage, even if only implicitly, other, separate matters, such as the merits or demerits of Islam or Arab culture. This tendency highlights the importance of taking the discourses themselves as a focus of investigation (Hijab 1988:51) (Mernessi 1991:85) (Ahmed 1992:163–68).

2.2.2 Women and gender in Islam

'The need for modesty on the part of women, and the containment of their self-assertion to a small domestic circle, are doubtless basic features of Islam. However the justified extent of this containment and segregation, and the reasons for it, are less clear. Scholars have never ceased to debate which aspects of the position of women have

their ideological foundation in the Qur'an, the actual word of God, and which represents an accretion of man-made social institutions.'

(Wikan 1991:109)

In response to this assertion by Wikan, Mernessi argues the latter view, holding that it is the interpretations of men that have led to the compromise of Muslim women's liberation. In Mernessi's reading, and contrary to the common assumption, Islam does not advance the thesis of women's inherent inferiority, but instead affirms the potential equality between the sexes. The inequality currently pertaining in Arab society is therefore the outcome of specific social institutions designed to restrain women's power, namely segregation and legal subordination of the woman to the man within the family structure. A whole system of suppression is based on the belief that woman is a powerful and dangerous being (Mernessi 1975:xv–xvi, cited in Wikan 1991:57).

Many authors have written about the problem of making distinctions within Islam. They point out that, on the one hand, the problem of the distinction, or 'non-distinction', between various kinds of Muslims is the result of a 'them and us' attitude, such that unacceptable characteristics are projected onto 'them'. On the other hand, Muslims can also contribute to the confusion by their own behaviour. As Islam is the feature that apparently distinguishes Muslims from non-Muslims, many who would not identify themselves in terms of Islam while in their home countries will regard themselves as Muslims first and foremost in any cultural encounter with 'The West' (Roald 2001:8–9) (Turner and Giles 1981:31, cited in Roald 2001:6).

The predominant characteristics of 'the other' cultural group become those which are highlighted in comparison to one's own ideological stance. Apart from judging one's own group according to an ideal standard and judging outsider groups according to their actual practice or behaviour, individuals belonging both to the majority and to the minority groups tend to 'stereotype *themselves* as well as others in terms of their common attributes as group members' (Turner and Giles 1981:39). Moreover, Roald observed that there is a tendency on both sides to perceive the other group in terms of that which is regarded as most 'extreme' in relation to one's own stance or practice (Roald 2001:6).

Roald — herself a Swedish convert to Islam — states that she experienced constant accusations from non-Muslims to the effect that Islam is a religion that is hostile towards women. However, Muslims expressed to her the belief that there was never a gender issue in Islam until 'The West' began to interfere in Muslim matters, suggesting that, in their view, an ideal gender pattern exists already in Islam and is present in Muslim society. It seems that cultural behaviour can be perceived from very different perspectives in the cultural encounter between Muslims and non-Muslims. Roald uses the term 'cultural behaviour' because she believes that that which many, from both sides, judge to be Islamic often turns out to be Islamic sources interpreted through the lens of cultural experiences.

Similar to other world religions, the traditional interpretation of the social issues in the Islamic sources is androcentric. As more and more Muslim women pursue higher education, they tend to look at the traditional Islamic gender pattern as an androcentric social construct, rather than as reflecting a divine order

in terms of gender (Roald 2001:x). The image of the suppressed Muslim woman is ubiquitous, but Muslim women find it difficult to identify with such an image.

The presentation and interpretation of gender within the Arab world is currently undergoing a considerable change, due in large part to the arrival of news broadcasting television stations, such as Al-Jazeera. In accordance with its civil liberties policy, Al-Jazeera has continued to present programmes dealing with Arab women's participation in sport. One of the civil liberties promoted by Al-Jazeera is the right of Arab women to seek and receive information and ideas. For example, one of its programmes, *Akhbar Riyadiyya (Sports News)*, has devoted several episodes to Arab women in sports, highlighting the championships won by Arab women in various sporting fields. Moreover, Al-Jazeera's programmes have made it possible for Arab women from all over the Arabic-speaking world to witness the developments within and impact of women's movements in other parts of the world, and also in the Arab world (El-Nawawy Iskandar 2003:59).

In another, more troubled, part of the Arab world women are gaining equality with men, but through a sinister and desperate cause: that of the suicide bombers of Palestine. Barbara Victor describes how the 'Army of Roses' — a phrase coined by Yasser Arafat to describe his female followers — has always known that when it comes to suffering and dying, they are the equals of their men (Dickey in Victor 2003:iii). Victor goes on to point out that the differences between men and women in a society steeped in fundamentalism and a culture of double standards do not disappear, even within that extraordinary concept of martyrdom. Women understand from the beginning that men do not accept them as equals nor regard them as warriors within their ranks until they have achieved Paradise and

are accepted at Allah's table. By then, of course, they are dead; there are no women who can testify to the fulfilment of those promises in another life (Dickey in Victor 2003:iv).

The vast array of literature produced on this subject amply illustrates the complexities of Islam and how those complexities affect its female followers. From the very beginning there was no single interpretation of Islam; each society interpreted Islamic texts according to its own wants and needs. However, a reading of the holy texts of Islam shows that they identified broad principles of behaviour and religious practice. That notion is central to this thesis: Islam did not lay down absolutes for female followers; it did not state that they should be covered entirely; neither did it say that they should not be educated nor work outside the home in non-traditional areas, such as the media. It is very important to highlight this as it will be evident throughout the data chapters that the participants of this study, all practising Muslims, saw no religious conflict in their choice of third-level course. This was because they did not perceive or believe that Islam had dictated to them a specific place in society.

2.3   The Centrality of Family

According to Suffon, women accepted readily the tacit understanding that the males in the family were of greater worth, and also accepted the lack of affection, and sometimes love, they experienced on the grounds that they were female. Traditionally, most fathers argued that, as a woman's purpose was to marry, formal education would be wasted on girls. Perhaps significantly, most men were

afraid of the power that educated women might wield (Suffon 1980:34). Now, things are changing. Suffon explains that new levels of education and literacy mean that Arab women know what their rights are, and some of them are beginning to assert those rights.

The Bedouin people — the desert tribe from which the people of the UAE are descended — are constantly preoccupied with maintaining and preserving family honour and tribal and family customs. The chastity of their women is the embodiment of the family's sense of honour. The woman is therefore the repository of moral deeds in her family, with the power to destroy the honour of the family. She carries her family honour with her even after marriage, when she continues to represent her family through her modesty (J.G. Peristiany 1974:45). Suha Sabbah makes reference to the fact that, in some cases, patriarchal controls have grown even stricter because women's new roles are threatening to erode traditional male prerogatives (Sabbah 1996:5). In the UAE, tribal traditions and customs play a huge part in determining women's roles in the family, and now in the emerging phenomenon of the working woman.

In the traditional, tribal society of this region it was not difficult to observe that Islam not only informed patterns of social behaviour and the many conventions of daily life but also permeated people's minds, behaviours thoughts and desires in such a way as to make it appear they were born natural believers. Compared to the western way of separating things religious from things secular and of making religion a subject of speculation, the spirit of Islam is intertwined completely with the traditions of this tribal society (Heard-Bey 1996:30). Hijab (1996:45) believes that most Arabs do not see their society as comprising

individual men and women, instead seeing the members of society as mutually complementary: both sexes and all age groups are expected to give up some rights and to take on some responsibilities in order to forge a coherent community. By and large, men are seen to be as much the victims of their surroundings — family, society or State — as are women, and are not viewed as 'the oppressor' or 'the enemy'.

In 1985 the United Nations conference in Nairobi adopted further strategies to achieve the aims of equality, development and peace, and extended the time limit to 2000. There are two striking things about the approach of the Arab region as compared to that of the other regions, i.e. Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean. First, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) report opened with a cultural definition of the region that none of the other regions had felt necessary to include.

> 'The strategy for Arab Women in Western Asia to the year 2000 is based on the heritage of Arab-Islamic civilization and the religious and spiritual values of this region, the cradle of the messages of God, which affirm the dignity and freedom of all human beings in this universe'
> (ESCWA, at p.40)

The second most striking thing about the ESCWA recommendations was the dedication of one whole section to the family. Other regions did mention the family, but not to this extent. The report underlined that:

'… constitutions, charters, and legislation in the region have asserted the role of the family as the nucleus of social organisation in Arab Societies. It is necessary, therefore, to make available to the family the economic, social, cultural and psychological conditions that would ensure its stability and satisfy its needs.' (Hijab 1996:45–7)

This approach puts the family unequivocally at the core of Arab society and makes evident a clear determination to preserve it, although not, in theory at least, at the expense of women's role in wider society. The recommendations instead supported 'the right of women to choose their roles in and out of the family' and considered 'family responsibilities as developmental activities'.

2.3.1 Changing Attitudes to Marriage

A survey conducted by the Women's Charitable Association for Social Services in Dammam (reported in the editions of 28 February and 7 March 1983 of the London-based Saudi weekly women's magazine, *Sayidaty*) showed a new trend in attitudes to marriage. From the responses of 260 single men and 292 single women, it was clear that marriage was no longer accorded the prominence it once enjoyed: in terms of importance, it came in third place, after work and education, for 58 per cent of men and for 44 per cent of women (Hijab 1988:127).

Expectations of married life had also shifted, with 28 per cent of men and 15 per cent of women deeming it a duty one had to undertake. Most men (59 per

cent) viewed marriage a source of love and affection, as did most women (66 per cent). However, most women (73 per cent) saw marriage as a partnership between man and woman, while only 45 per cent of the male respondents concurred with this viewpoint. When asked why they had not yet married, 68 per cent of the women replied that no suitable suitor had come forward, 39 per cent that they wanted to continue their education, while 18 per cent said they had not been able to select their own partner. Responding to the same question, 44 percent of men said they could not afford to marry, while 39 per cent mentioned the difficulty of making a personal choice. It is significant that so many single girls appear ready to postpone marriage until they have completed their education — even at the risk of remaining spinsters. In fact, some of the female respondents from the Gulf area stated frankly that any woman going on to do post-graduate work knew she was taking the first step to spinsterhood.

Sociologist Fatima Mernessi describes how, at a level deeper than laws and official policy, Muslim social order views women as potent aggressive individuals whose power could, if not tamed and curbed, corrode the social order. It is very likely that, in the long run, this view will facilitate women's integration into the networks of decision-making and power. Conversely, and quite ironically, one of the main obstacles western women must overcome is their society's view of women as passive inferior beings (Mernessi 1996:162–8).

Crocetti describes some Emirati customs surrounding family membership and the participant students support some of this information, thus increasing its credibility. Crocetti outlines the order as follows: the woman is always a member of her father's family, even after marriage into another family and even though she

usually lives with her husband's family; any offspring belong to the husband's family and, as a deterrent to divorce, the older children automatically remain with their father; patrilineal descent means a woman's brothers and father can still defend her if she is mistreated or dishonoured by her husband or his family. She continues:

> 'Patrilineal descent strongly discourages marriage to members of other families or tribes. Women take strength and wealth in the form of children and inheritance away from the paternal families and to their husband's family when they marry someone outside the paternal family.'
> (Crocetti 1996)

Thus the prevalent form of marriage is cousin marriage, which widens family control and narrows marriage choices, thereby maintaining economic integrity and the solidarity of the patrilineal clan (Tucker 1993:205–6).

Graham-Brown points out that this view of women's role is not unique to the region: 'Most Islamic groups stress the importance of male authority and emphasize the primacy of women's roles as wife and mother'(Graham-Brown 1996:7).

2.3.2 Abandoning Custom

Authors Roald and Ahmed agree that the idea that improving the status of Muslim women necessarily entails abandoning native customs was the product of

a particular historical moment, and was constructed by an androcentric, colonial establishment committed to male dominance in the service of particular political ends. Nonetheless, to this day that idea often informs discussions about women in Arab and Muslim cultures and in other non-western world cultures. Its absurdity and essential falseness become obvious when one recalls that those who first advocated this idea believed that Victorian mores, dress and Christianity represented the ideals to which Muslim women should aspire.

Adopting another culture as a general remedy for a heritage of misogyny within one's own culture is not only absurd, it is impossible. The complexity of enculturation and the depth of its encoding in the human psyche are such that even individuals deliberately fleeing to another culture, whether mentally or physically, carry forward and recreate in their 'new' lives a considerable part of their previous enculturation. In any case, how could the substitution of one culture for another be brought about for the peoples of an entire society, or indeed several societies? (Roald 2001:1–7) (Mernessi 1991:15–19) (Ahmed 1992:292–3)

2.3.3 Power

In the literature on the subject of women in the Middle East available up to the 1970s, Arab women were assumed to be powerless. According to Hijab (1988), three factors were used as the criteria to assess power: participation in the democratic process, i.e. the right to vote, to be elected, to be a member of government, etc.; the legislation on matters pertaining to personal status; and access to education and paid employment. Using these indicators, women were decreed to have low status and little power in society. Most authors would also

agree that another reason for the common assumption that Arab women were powerless was the fact that much of the literature up to the 1970s was produced by social scientists, who were usually western and male. They were forced to rely almost exclusively on the theoretical framework provided by the criteria cited above because they were very unlikely to meet Arab women from traditional sectors of the population, that is from the majority of the population (Ahmed 1992:153).

Hijab provides a good working definition of power as the extent to which a person or group can exercise control over her or their situation. In the case of women, this means the extent to which they can influence factors related to their situation in order to serve clearly defined personal (or family, or community) interests. These revised definitions of power make it possible to understand how women who were supposedly so powerless appeared so strong and self-confident, even — or rather especially — in the more traditional communities, which were suppose to be more restrictive of women. Anyone who has met and spoken to the Arab women of the Gulf could not fail to be struck by the forcefulness of their personalities, a fact very much at odds with the image suggested by a superficial impression.

Nadia Haggag Yousif draws a distinction between the respect given to women and the rights afforded them, together comprising the two elements that define women's status. She argues that women receive greater respect in those societies that give them fewer rights on paper than in those societies that give them equal rights. Similarly, when writing of women in Moroccan villages, at the opposite end of the Arab world, Susan Schafer Davis commented: 'A closer look at

the women's world will also help solve the paradox of why these apparently weak and status-less females often seem, to the observer who knows them well, to be the strongest members of the society' (Schafer Davis 1980:87).

This brief study of the literature on the family in Arab society throws up one aspect that is both common and important, that is the role of the family in the lives of the people, both male and female. It is from the family's strength, stability and constant presence that the young women who participated in this study received the courage to pursue a third-level education in a subject area considered non-traditional in their culture. The western perception, or misperception, of the Arab family is that it is a control mechanism used to keep women in their place. What we have seen here is that the family is, in fact, the source from which women receive support and validation. Woman occupies a very dominant and important role in the family, not just as the bearer of the next generation but as the totemic bearer of the family's honour. As such, woman is regarded as a very powerful being within the family, one who commands and deserves respect.

2.4   Establishment and Development of Formal Education

During the last twenty-five years educational development in the Gulf States has been phenomenal (Garrett 1987:317–27) (Christina *et al* 1996:340–54) (Hoogvelt 1997). Education is now seen as a key to modernisation and economic growth, which represent the primary objectives of Middle Eastern development (Christina *et al* 1999).

In *Women's Ways of Knowing*, in reference to educational institutions in the USA, Belenky states that 'most of the institutions of higher education in this country [USA] were designed by men, and most continue to be run by men' (Belenky *et al* 1986:191). These writers argue that, as a result, women students are undervalued and their voices not heard because educational models are concerned solely with male traditions. They suggest that these organisations operate a form of exclusion by not listening to their students, preventing the students from participating in their own educational development. These problems are more pronounced for women students because they are most ignored and they also have to cope with long-held assumptions regarding gender roles:

> 'All women … grow up having to deal with historically and culturally defined notions of femininity and womanhood, one common theme being that women, like children, should be seen and not heard … in everyday and professional life, as well as in the classroom, women often feel unheard even when they believe that they have something important to say.'
> (Belenky *et al* 1986:194)

Belenky suggests that feminist teachers and scholars in the United States are questioning the structure, the curriculum and the pedagogical practices of educational institutions. This is a necessary process because 'in order to design an education appropriate for women we must learn about the academic experiences of ordinary women' (1986:190).

In the Higher Colleges of Technology in the UAE, the bodies that govern the colleges are the Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, Policy Council and Academic Council (Management Structure, Academic Services, HCT). From 1995 to 2000 the management structure was almost entirely male, with the exception of one female manager in the English-language division. Where, then, are the 'academic experiences of ordinary' Arab women?

This imbalance is rooted in the formation of the HCT. When the Federation of the UAE was established, in 1971, it raised the question of and the need for a system of formal education. In order to establish a new system, the UAE had to employ Arabs from the Middle East, mainly from Egypt, where a distinguished education system was already in place. Author Leila Ahmed describes the immigrant education workers as 'The invasion of other Arabs and their cultures smothering and overwhelming the local Bedouin culture — all in the name of modernity and education' (Ahmed 1999:272–3). She sensed at the time that she was witnessing loss: the loss of Bedouin culture by being banished to the edges of life, overwhelmed by a supposedly superior culture bestowing 'education'.

There was mixed feeling throughout UAE society at the prospect of formal education for both sexes. Shortly after the establishment of the UAE a committee was set up to oversee the development and reform of education in the Emirates. This committee was made up of Egyptians Palestinians. While it did not count any local people in its make-up, the committee did have to report to local men who held government posts. When it came to the question of equal education for women, the non-local Arab men on the committee were opposed to it while the local men, as a group, were in favour. The local men were not unanimous in their

support, however. They were divided between those who were ambivalent about, or even opposed to, equal education for women, which group mainly comprised men educated in the Arabic, and primarily in the Egyptian, educational system, and those who fully supported equal education. A small minority of the latter group had been educated in the English system, but the rest were non-literate or barely literate. In other words, these were men who belonged fully to the oral, living culture of the region. What Leila Ahmed was observing was the profound gulf between the oral culture of the region and the Arabic culture of literacy (Ahmed 1999: 273–4).

The UAE has seen a population explosion in the past number of years, resulting in increased enrolments of students in schools and colleges. For example, for students between the ages of six and twenty-three, enrolment increased from 44 per cent in 1980 to 82 per cent in 1994. Enrolment rates for UAE children up to Year Five level (1990–5) is almost 99 per cent and is considered to be the best among the GCC[6] countries. Developments are most noticeable in the areas of female literacy and enrolment rates. According to the statistics provided by the Center for Strategic Research, enrolment of young women in secondary education as a percentage of male enrolment (1993–5) is the highest of the GCC countries, plus UAE female illiteracy rates and maternal mortality rates are the lowest.

These and other indicators confirm that the UAE has made significant progress in human development, with all the relevant indicators showing improvement exceeding many other GCC countries, most of which had commenced

---

[6] Gulf Co-operation Council, made up of Saudi Arabia, Oman, UAE, Bahrain, Qatar and Kuwait.

development programmes long before the formation of the UAE Federation in 1971. These encouraging figures do not give the true picture, however, because they also cover expatriates in the UAE. Accordingly, a more detailed analysis of the UAE education system would be very useful (Mograby 1999:282–3).

In a paper prepared for The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, Abdulla Mograby writes about the rapid changes engulfing the UAE at this particular time. The widespread use of technology in an increasingly knowledge-based and service-based economy, together with new market demands for quality and flexibility in products and services, has put a premium on human skills because they are necessary to sustain economic growth and competitiveness. In the UAE this development of human resources and the concomitant massive expansion of the education system has taken on another important dimension because foreign labour constitutes the majority of the labour force. Given the small size of the national population and the huge pace of economic development, it is likely that the labour market will continue to increase its demand for foreign labour unless, that is, the national labour force acquires the skills and expertise needed to drive competitive (Mograby 1999:279).

The focus of the Emiratisation policy is therefore to reduce the need for expatriate workers by developing educational policy that allows educational planners to devise systems that meet the needs of the indigenous human resource base. All Gulf States are implementing nationalisation policies that directly affect educational development, especially in the tertiary sector. The educational policy implemented by the Ministry of Education (MoE) is based on two fundamental principles of the State's constitution: the provision of free education to all citizens,

and the improvement of the quality of education to meet the needs of individual students and society's economic and cultural development (Nazzal, 2000).

Although primary and secondary education are compulsory and considered a citizen's right, the quality of public education regionally causes concern to the business and academic communities. Dr Hanif Al Qassimi, Vice-President of Zayed University, a women's university that opened in 1998, claimed recently that 'a major difficulty universities face is the serious problem of a weak academic background. The public school education system here is so poor that there is a huge gap between what students can do and the expectations of the university.' In his opinion, students were struggling with their studies because of the reliance on rote-based learning in the public schools. He also stressed the importance of quality education to national development: 'If a country wants to produce a better quality of people, education is the key' (cited in Richardson 2001).

One reason for this situation is that the UAE's educational systems were copied from Egypt, and administered and implemented primarily by Egyptian and Palestinian teachers. It was these Arabs who played a dominant role as agents of change during development, not western teachers. They designed the education system to prepare students for admission to Egyptian-type universities, where rote learning of academic texts is the main teaching method, unlike the more active methods used by their western counterparts. The first UAE public university, Al Ain University, opened in 1977 and continued this tradition, producing academically oriented graduates with few work-related abilities. The local press often publishes complaints about the inability of these graduates to fit into the job market, and regional governments are now being encouraged to redesign their

secondary and tertiary systems to more effectively address the manpower needs of their regions (Christina *et al* 1999).

In 1994 Dr Sulaiman Al Jassim, a local academic, said there was a need to plan and outline a strategy to gradually replace expatriates and he emphasised the inclusion of women in this strategy:

> 'We need, firstly, to design an education system which will help us achieve the goal of nationalisation. We need graduates in engineering technology, information systems, computers and other specialities. The English language should be used to communicate as it is used all over the world. Women also need to be educated. Women's participation will raise the qualitative and quantitative input. They could be utilised in professions such as teaching, computers, health science, administrative work, business, etc.'
>
> (Al Jassim 2001)

In order to produce a national workforce, a 'western-style' institution was opened in 1988: the HCT. The Chancellor's vision for the HCT stressed the pursuit of excellence in the provision of educational (academic) programmes for the citizens of the UAE, but also placed strong emphasis on preparation for employment. Accordingly, the HCT's primary function is to provide high quality, vocationally oriented educational programmes (Al Jassim 1994, cited in Richardson 2001).

2.4.1 Transition

Why were Arab women's labour force participation rates so low in the 1970s? In an attempt to answer this question a good many commentators on the region, including economists, have automatically turned to Islam and Islam-inspired cultural attitudes, the conservative nature of which, they feel, is responsible for holding women back. But the approach of 'blaming Islam' for keeping women out of the modern sector ignores the fact that many of its attitudes to women are shared worldwide. As Beck and Keddie noted in their introduction to *Women in the Muslim World:* 'In the light of patterns that are found in many traditional societies around the world, although with numerous variations, one comes to question the view that attributes these patterns [specifically] to Islam or its laws and customs' (1978). Moreover, to blame Islam is to ignore the fact that cultural attitudes, including those inspired by Islam, change remarkably quickly when the need and opportunity arise (Hijab 1993:43) (Roald 2001:86).

Beck and Keddie answered this by posing a pertinent question: 'The real question is why Islamic society has been more conservative in its maintenance of old laws and traditions in this area than have other societies — although the others have not lacked conservatism.' In the Arab world, the reason for the slow pace of change is that so many conflicting issues must be solved concurrently, such as the role of women as members of the labour force or home-makers/mothers, the role of religion in society, the struggle for an independent political and economic identity *vis-à-vis* the rest of the world, and the establishment of a sound mode of development. All of these issues are tied together inextricably, but the attempt to

solve them all at once is delaying the resolution of any one of them (Hijab 1993:47) (Mernessi 1993:162–4).

The Arab world is a society in transition and it is during periods of transition that contradictions are at their most severe because while traditional definitions and methods of operating are no longer completely valid, new substitutes have yet to take shape. Therefore, on the one hand women are respected and encouraged to embark on new careers, while on the other there is an unwillingness to accept that that necessarily entails change in other spheres, particularly in the area of familial relations. In some States it is possible for an Arab woman to be CEO of a company and yet not have equal rights with her husband when it comes to guardianship of their children — a gross inequality that is enshrined in the law of the land.

It could fairly be said that, of all members of society, women suffer the most from the various tensions of the transitional phase. The question of their changing roles makes up the base of the fragile pyramid of problems that the Arab world is seeking to solve. They are the key to maintaining the traditional family unit, and of course in a transitional phase the family provides the only security against a nebulous future. In the Arab world there is most resistance to change involving the family structure, even though it is unrealistic to think there can be change in the political and economic spheres without change in social relations across the board (Hijab 1988:13).

Most authors writing about the transition in the Gulf States agree that underlying all the arguments is the very real threat that if women allow their key role within the family to be superceded by their other roles, then the whole social

system will fall apart. The proponents of these arguments find conclusive support for their stance in what they see as the breakdown of society in the West. They point to the erosion of family ties in the West as the factor causing a range of social ills, from the loneliness of elderly people to drug addiction among the young, from violence and rising crime rates to flagrant immorality.

What these writers have neither asked nor answered, however, is how Arab society can maintain what is good about the family — the sense of security it offers, the warmth, the way it ensures people have more time for one another and more of a share in material goods — while shedding the negative aspects — domination of its members, sacrifice of the individual for the general good, stifling of initiative and the tyranny exhibited towards its female members and its youth. That is the true challenge facing the Arab world into the future.

2.4.2 Western Models

A 1997 conference sponsored by the School of Visual Arts, New York City, and entitled 'How we learn what we learn' produced many interesting arguments and explanations, as well as raising many points about graphic design/visual communications education. In a book based on the conference's findings, *The Education of a Graphic Designer*, editor Steven Heller presents a number of the papers, many of which describe and explain the importance and influence of the Bauhaus movement as a fundamental starting point in design education.

In her essay, Katherine McCoy talks about the Bauhaus as a revolutionary school model that used the master–apprentice workshop method and in doing so contributed much to design education. The Bauhaus introduced students to what

became known as the Basic Course, starting with the statement that basic design principles underlie all design disciplines. In this approach, primary design education begins with abstract problems that introduce the basic design principles, before students proceed to tackle programatic design problems applied to specific scales, needs and media. The Bauhaus' emphasis on abstraction and experimentation, and its rejection of accepted traditional formulas, represented a radical new attitude in education. In twenty-first-century design schools, be they in the USA or the UAE, the persistent residue of this movement is still evident (Heller 1997:3–5).

In the UAE, the HCT teaches exclusively through English. Student feedback suggests this approach is regarded as being very positive, although the use of the English language can also create stresses and strains largely tied up with issues of culture and identity. Given the recent history of the UAE, the countries can be considered post-colonial. Citing Walcott, Canagarajah says:

> 'The conflict Walcott expresses is an everyday experience for millions of people in post-colonial communities. They find themselves torn between the claims of Western values and their indigenous cultures, between English and the vernacular. Ironically, however, with the passing of time, the possibility of choosing one or the other may no longer be open to them; the English language has become too deeply rooted in their soil, and in their consciousness, to be considered "alien".'
>
> (Canagarajah 2000:1)

In the context of the programme on Communications Technology, one criticism expressed repeatedly by the students was that Arabic as taught in the classical form was far too difficult to learn, which was why they preferred to study through English. This was also discussed by Leila Ahmed, one of the first people involved in the development of education in the UAE, who likened the teaching of Arabic to Emirati students to the teaching of Latin to western students (Ahmed 1999:280–1).

According to Canagarajah, the alternative response of engaging favourably with both languages would call for a different set of assumptions, in which subjects have the agency to think critically and to work out ideological alternatives that favour their own empowerment. He goes on to say that the intention is not to reject English but to reconstitute it in more inclusive ethical and democratic terms, and thereby to bring about creative resolutions to the linguistic conflicts identified by Walcott and others in the periphery (Canagarajah 2000:2).

It must be pointed out that this conflict did not occur in my teaching experience, although the marginalisation of non-native English teachers was a theme I came across while interviewing the students. The respondents felt they learned more from native English speakers because non-native English speakers, particularly Arabs, often resorted to Arabic to explain a word. This probably had much to do with the level of proficiency in English these teachers had acquired.

Canagarajah asks the following question: 'Does English offer third-world countries a resource that will help them in their development, as western

governments and development agencies would claim, or is it a Trojan horse whose effect is to perpetuate their dependence?'

In his major study of the politics of English Language Tuition (ELT), Phillipson (1992) conducts a scathing attack on the English language as a vehicle for imperialist relations and values. The 'ELT Centre' refers to those technologically advanced communities of the West which, at least in part, sustain their material dominance by keeping less-developed communities in peripheral status. Significant among the Centre nations are the traditionally 'native English' communities of North America, Britain, Australia and New Zealand. The periphery countries, where English constitutes a post-colonial currency, are Barbados, India, Malaysia and Nigeria. Ethnography provides us with the most useful methodology for assessing the use of the English language in non-native countries because it explores the values and assumptions that motivate the behaviour of people in everyday contexts. This approach provides a useful counterpoint to theories and pedagogues produced by the ivory towers of academia. While it must be understood that choosing a small community in an already small island state obviously limits the generalisations that can be made, the insightful interpretations deriving from careful observation of the everyday life of a community provide ethnographic validity (Canagarajah 2000:3–5).

The culture of the UAE is largely an oral tradition handed down through successive generations. Writing about the first peoples of Canada, LaRocque shows how Aboriginal voices were silenced in Canada due to the primacy of English, particularly in its written forms. Native languages, usually oral rather than written, have frequently been marginalised or dismissed in educational and

other institutions, along with the cultural values and traditions to which they bear testament. This is one of the most pressing issues for Arab families struggling with the threat they perceive from western culture, which seems capable of toppling their traditional culture and values. As LaRocque emphatically tells us: 'I have sought to master this language so that it would no longer master me' (LaRocque 1993).

In concluding the discussion on the literature regarding education in the Arab world, it must be noted that there are a number of areas in which the UAE does not conform to the widely held perceptions about its education system. Education was not hard won, rather it was seen as a natural right of all citizens and as such was written into the constitution at the formation of the Federation in 1971. Initially, non-local Arabs were drafted in to develop educational policy and, after a number years, it became apparent that the type of school graduate being produced was one who was ready for admission to a rote-based learning institute, similar to those in existence in Egypt.

As the pace of development accelerated, there was a recognised need for a system of education more focused on the vocational, which would produce graduates who could fit easily into the job market. The HCT facilitated this need. The resultant increase in the numbers of women attending third-level education saw the emergence of a new society, in which educated young women played an important role. This change has in turn led to a transition from traditional roles for women to something else, something not, as yet, defined. As with any transition or change, fear is a factor and it leads to resistance. Nonetheless, the

participants of this study, although navigating uncharted territory, continue to force societal change from the heart of their cultures.

2.5   Western Reporting post-September 11

In the foreword to a collection of essays entitled *Journalism after September 11th*, Navasky argues that journalism incited by the events of September 11 2001 presented an exception, and therefore any attempt at generalisations based upon it would be misleading; in effect, the reporting was the penumbra of trauma-journalism in an emergency. 'America under attack', 24-hours-a-day, wall-to-wall coverage revealed the values and assumptions underlying journalism as it is practiced in the United States. Navasky points to the fact that since the events of 2001, network and newspaper overseas budgets have been slashed and correspondent numbers greatly reduced. Therefore a very significant consequence of this reactive concentration and consolidation, i.e. the 'market logic', is a new ignorance on the part of the US citizenry of the realities of other peoples and countries, their politics, cultures and beliefs.

Zeizler and Allan (2003:xv) further note that of particular concern was the possibility that the enemy — including 'people who dress and look like the enemy' — would be subject to a process of 'demonization'. The direct impact of such casual assumptions was clear to me in conversation with students (after my departure from the UAE) who had aspirations to study abroad, most particularly the USA, where their husbands were already studying. They were no longer

considering this option because travel abroad had become much more uncomfortable.

Jack Shaheen writes that Western TV programmes tend to perpetuate four primary stereotypes about Arab people: 'they are all fabulously wealthy; they are barbaric and uncultured; they are sex maniacs with a penchant for white slavery; and they revel in acts of terrorism' (Shaheen 1984:4). According to Karim, citing Kassis (1992:261), 'such core images have been the basis for dominant Northern perceptions of Arabs/Muslims since the Middle Ages when they were viewed as being "war mongers," "luxury lovers" and sex maniacs.' Karim goes on to say that although these *topoi* may vary from time to time in emphasis and in relation to the particular Muslim groups to which they have been applied, they remain the most resilient images of Muslims in the West. Variations of the four primary stereotypes have not only been reproduced in newspapers and television but generally appear as the representations of the Muslim 'Other' in popular culture, art, music, literature, school textbooks, public discourse and computer-based media. It may be true that individual Muslims exhibit such characteristics, but it is grossly inaccurate to suggest they are shared commonly by a significant proportion of Islam's adherents. Thus future journalists face the disadvantage that, even as the presence of Muslims in current events grows, factual knowledge about their history and cultures is rarely imparted in Western educational systems (Karim 2003:110–11).

Thomas Friedman, a *New York Times* journalist, believes that September 11 started World War III and created a new World Order:

'In this World War III, the world is again divided in two, but the division is not between East and West, North and South, or even free and un-free. No, the new bipolar system is divided between the World of Order and the World of Disorder. The world of order is built on five pillars — the US, the EU, Russia, India, and China, along with all similar powers around them. The world of disorder is comprised of failed states (such as Liberia), rogue states (Iraq and North Korea), messy states that are too big to fail but too messy to work (Pakistan, Colombia, Indonesia, and many Arab and African states) and finally the terrorist and Mafia networks that feed off the World of Disorder.'

(Friedman 2003: ix)

This attitude implies that Arab and African states, by the simple fact of being Arab and African, are outside the 'World Order' as laid down by Washington, with the implicit suggestion that they are inferior to the Western World. Friedman neglects to identify exactly to which Arab or African states he is referring, thereby implying that such identification is based on skin colour or dress. He goes on to explain that the job of the 'five pillars of the World Order' is to work in harmony, both bilaterally and through institutions like NATO and the UN. The aim of this cohesive work is to stabilise the World of Disorder, elevating those disordered countries into the World Order, and also to co-ordinate police and military strategies in order to limit the ability of super-empowered angry people to disrupt the World of Order (Friedman 2003:x).

Friedman wrote this article before the USA totally disregarded the UN by invading Iraq. He talks of 'lifting the countries out of their disorder and into Order', an attitude that is typical of many western journalists, exhibiting an arrogant superiority towards cultures of which they in fact know little. The UAE has traditionally been a very progressive and peace-loving country whose ruler, President Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahayan, is the longest-serving statesman in the world (1966–2004) without any *coup* attempts or revolutions. However, the accomplishments of Arab women in countries such as the UAE would be of little interest to writers such as Friedman because they do not fit their inaccurate, racial stereotype.

Edward Said believes there is remorseless media coverage of Islam today:

'No one, of course, expects journalists or media personalities to spend a great deal of time being scholarly, reading books, looking for alternative views, or trying to inform themselves in ways that do not presume that Islam is both monolithic and hostile. But why the slavish and uncritical adoption of views that stress the unvaryingly reductive arguments about Islam, and why the extraordinary willingness to accept the official rhetoric emanating from the government in its irresponsible characterizations of Islam: by that I mean the loose application of the word "terrorism" to "Islam" and the attitude that elevates Israeli views of Islam's "dangers" to the level of United States policy?'

(Said 1997:xxix)

Said singles out Bernard Lewis for particular criticism, mainly because Lewis has held important positions, such as British Orientalist and Princeton professor, and his influential essays appear regularly in *The New York Times Review of Books.* Over many decades Lewis' views — which have remained unchanged and, indeed, have become more strident and reductionist— have seeped into the discourse of the 'think pieces' and books undertaken by ambitious journalists and a few political scientists. Said believes Lewis' methods are the snide general observation and the fraudulent use of etymology to make all-encompassing cultural points about an entire set of peoples and, no less reprehensible, a total refusal to grant that the Islamic peoples are entitled to their own cultural, political and historical practices. In Said's view, Lewis' *modus operandi* is a cynical attempt to show that because Muslim peoples are not western — a notion of which he has an extremely tenuous grasp — they cannot therefore be good people (Said 1997:xxx).

2.5.1 Sensationalism, Stereotyping and the Veil Issue in France

Sabbagh maintains that western popular literature on Arab countries and Islam usually falls under the category of 'sensational'. A recent article by two overnight American experts, Deborah Scroggins and Jean Shifrin, contains the following breathless headings: 'Women of the Veil: Islamic militants pushing women back to an age of official servitude'; 'Male Honour Costs Women's Lives: It's dangerous to be born female in the Islamic world'; 'A Mother's Glory is her Sons: Daughters barely count'; 'Women: Political Islam Brands Them as Inferior'; 'Using Rape to Settle Scores'; 'Women are pawns in men's game of revenge'; 'Rapes are Rarely

Investigated'; 'Honour and Shame, A life spent locked away' — all written by western authors with little or no knowledge of Arab or Islamic customs, traditions or practices.

Ahdaf Soueif describes how this kind of 'slanting' can occur in the most innocuous-seeming places, citing as an example the publishers' 'blurb' for a book called *Price of Honour*, written by Jan Goodwin. It refers to the 'sixteenth wife of a sheikh', who turns out to be fifty-year-old Dr Su'ad Sabbah (quoted above), author, publisher and philanthropist, who, by her own account, lived contentedly with her loving and encouraging husband for thirty-two years until his death (Soueif 2004:239).

The stereotypical image of Arab women crops up again in Jean Sasson's ghostwritten memoir, *Daughters of Arabia*, which contains the following passage:

> 'Think of a Saudi Arabian princess and what do you see? A woman glittering with jewels, living a life of unbelievable luxury. But in reality she lives in a gilded cage. She has no freedom, no vote, no control over her own life, no value but as a bearer of sons. Hidden behind the veil, she is a prisoner, her jailers her father, her husband, her sons.'

In *Princess* and in her most recent offering, *Daughters of Iraq* (published right on cue with the Iraqi war), Ms Sasson employs sensationalism of the most blatant kind. As a result, her books have been largely discredited by a number of leading Arab feminists and authors (Ahmed 1999; Mernessi 1993; Sabbah 1993).

This sort of lazy sensationalism affects many people's views of Muslims, filtering down through media, political and education systems. Its most potent illustration, perhaps, is in France, where the Government has taken a decision to ban the wearing of religious symbols in its public schools. Since the ban was proposed, countless articles have been written on this controversial issue, with the Catholic Church to the forefront of the debate. The Vatican is aligned with the pro-choice group, as reported in *The Irish Times* online edition under the headline, 'French official claims Pope is "misinformed"':

> 'The French official who first proposed a ban on religious symbols in state schools said yesterday that Pope John Paul II was misinformed about the controversy. Mr. Bernard Stasi, who led a commission proposing the ban on Muslim headscarves in school, said the head of the Roman Catholic Church should not give fundamentalists arguments to use against Paris.
>
> His statement, published in the daily *La Monde*, was a polite but firm rejection of the Pope's remark to Vatican diplomats last week that "religious freedom was endangered in Europe by people seeking to ban religion from the public sphere".'

This unusual public rebuff to the Pontiff illustrates how difficult it is for the French Government to explain to the rest of the world how its planned ban from

schools of Muslim veils, Jewish skullcaps and large Christian crosses is an act of religious tolerance. On the ground, most French people agree with and support the proposed ban, although Muslim, Christian and Jewish leaders in France have openly opposed it. The head of the Anglican Communion, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, said France apparently feared religion could challenge its secular values (*The Irish Times (Reuters)* 21.01.04).

The issue caused consternation among the French Sikh community, which feels it has a long and distinguished history in France. It was reported under the following headline: 'Exempt turbans from French ban, Sikhs tell Chirac':

'France's Sikhs urged President Jacques Chirac yesterday to exempt them from a planned law banning religious symbols from public schools. Chain Singh, spokesman for the community, wrote to Mr. Chirac stating that Sikhs in Britain and Canada and the United States had been granted exemptions to work in the police and the military with their trademark turbans *without any problems.* "We invite the French Government to grant the same freedom to Sikhs in this country so the Sikh religion can be properly respected," he claimed. Singh said that including Sikh turbans in the planned law, which bans all religious symbols in a move mostly aimed at stopping Muslim schoolgirls from wearing Islamic headscarves, would be a setback in the community's relations with the French.'

The idea of banning veils has since spread to Germany, where a row erupted after several German states said they planned to forbid teachers wearing Muslim headscarves. The following was reported: 'German president criticised for proposing Christian symbols ban.' The Roman Catholic Church in Germany, backed by the Vatican, strongly criticised President Johannes Rau for suggesting public schools should also ban Christian symbols if Muslim headscarves were outlawed. Cardinal Karl Lehmann, head of the German Bishops Conference, commented that President Rau was wrong to equate the headscarves with Christian symbols, which had long been identified with German culture. It would appear that this whole issue, and the stances taken on it, derives from a desire to protect what countries regard as their 'own', i.e. the crucifix, rather than as a defence of a Muslim woman's right to dress as she pleases.

The *New York Times* (26.03.04) reported on the issue as it arose in Italy under the following headline: 'Headscarf causes ripples in Italy':

> 'The debate over headscarves that divided France has reached Italy, with a kindergarten asking a Muslim trainee teacher to remove her headscarf. In an interview in the Rome daily, *La Republica*, Mouyache (the woman in question) said she couldn't understand how the veil, which covers her hair but not her face, could frighten anyone and that if it did make children afraid, she could be flexible. "In front of women and children, I can take it off," she said.

> After the story was published the town council in nearby Ivera offered Mouyache a position in another kindergarten and she

accepted. "We decided to offer her a position in the nursery in Ivera to complete her training, with or without the veil, just as she likes," Andrea Benedino, a municipal official in Ivera, said. While saying many Samone parents agreed with the school's position, Benedino said he too didn't understand how the veil could frighten children, noting it was similar to those worn by Catholic nuns.'

In Ireland this issue has caused a lot of controversy, with countless column inches devoted to it in both broadsheet and tabloid newspapers. The Irish Government has not banned religious symbols from its schools, mainly because the school system is still very tied up with the Catholic Church. Ireland is probably the only country in Europe that has still not fully separated Church from State.

At one of the many demonstrations held in Dublin against the French ban, Mr Boyd Barrett, a member of the anti-war movement, said in a statement:

'The proposal to ban the *Hijab* from schools and public offices is a racist attack on the entire Muslim community. The French Government claim that the ban is aimed at removing all religious symbols from the education system and public offices and is not a public offence. Christians will still be free to wear a crucifix around their necks. This ban is overwhelmingly aimed at Muslims and is part of an alarming rise of Islamaphobia worldwide.'
(Reuters)

Its long history of Church involvement in State institutions means that in Ireland there are strong arguments for and against the banning of the veil. Arguments in favour of the ban are based on the notion that religion should dictate a person's day-to-day life, but as a personal choice, not an enforced rule. This indicates that the stereotype of the Arab woman being forced to wear the veil is very much taken as the correct interpretation of the wearing of the veil in the first place. In the opposing corner, the issue of the female religious orders wearing veils informs the resistance to a ban. The argument goes that to force the Catholic orders to remove their veils would be tantamount to heresy, so how can Muslim women be asked to do so?

Recently in the West there has been a renewed, if somewhat polarised, focus on the 'domain of Islam and Arabia' and that to which this refers. Consequently, there has been renewed interest in the perception, and misperception, of the Islamic or Arabic woman. The 'domain of Islam', although containing a common ground, has many and varied identities rooted in diverse historical, cultural and social differences. It is highly unlikely, as stated above, that the majority of journalists possess an indepth knowledge of Arabia as this is not taught in schools in the West. Nonetheless, they continue to write reports, articles and books that can have far-reaching implications.

Recent reporting on Arab countries and Islam has had direct consequences for the women who participated in this study. A number of the students who would have cited further study abroad as a career goal have now changed their minds for fear of discrimination. As with any race or nationality, they do not wish to be misrepresented, but they understand that even their most innocent gestures,

such as choosing to wear the veil, could be misinterpreted. To wear the veil while travelling in the west has many connotations, although in the past chief among these would have been that the wearer was a downtrodden woman. Now, the veil has taken on new, sinister connotations among certain sections of the western media, and can be viewed as a symbol of Islamic fundamentalism. For a Muslim woman wearing a veil in a western country, the reactions of others are no longer predictable, which makes these women feel very exposed and vulnerable.

2.6   Working outside the Home

In the debate on women's education and work there are frequent references to the region's Arab-Islamic identity. Graham-Brown quotes Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernessi, who asserts that 'Arab identity' has been conceived in a way that regards change as threatening to the moral order, thus impeding the development both of democracy and the emancipation of women (Graham-Brown 1994:7). Hijab suggests that it reveals a fear that what constitutes 'Arabness' is not defined enough to resist erosion by the process of modernisation (Hijab 1993:43). She believes that Arab society's struggle to construct identities and heritage is tied to efforts to preserve the family and community, similar to existing southern European and Asian cultures which view the family as the nucleus of social organisation and women as the core of that nucleus (Hijab 1993:44). Much of the local literature confirms this struggle between the wave of views, beliefs, values and practices imported through the large expatriate community and the culture and tradition of the small indigenous population.

'Of all the world's regions, women in the Arab world perhaps suffer from the worst case of invisibility. Even as recently as 1990, figures of women's recorded participation were below 10 percent of the total labour force in seven Arab countries.'

(Hijab 1994:43–6)

One of the issues facing the Arab world is that of women's economic activities, 'not so much as a problem of the lack of economic participation or legal disability, but rather of social constraint and marginality' (Tucker 1993:195–7). While this is the position of some authors, it is not always borne out in reality, as in the case of the UAE Army and the Iranian Parliament. According to Brooks, UAE women are making their mark in the armed forces and the police. In the UAE, Muslim women soldiers, their hair tied back in Islamic veils, jump from helicopters and shoulder assault rifles as confidently as their male counterparts (Brooks 1995:108–9).

Similarly, a little farther across the Persian Gulf, in Iran, the strict Iranian Muslims vote women into Parliament and send them abroad as diplomats. Pakistan was the first Islamic country to elect a woman prime minister; Turkey has a female economist as its prime minister; and Bangladesh has a woman Prime Minister and a woman leading the opposition. Instead of adhering to the rules set down for the prophet's wives, these women cite other role models from the history of early Islam. The soldiers look to Nusaybah, who helped save Muhammed's life in battle when she stood her ground by his side as the male soldiers fled. The politicians cite Fatima, Muhammed's shy daughter, who spearheaded a political

power struggle after the prophet's death. As far as these women are concerned, Islam never decreed the oppression of women. So why, then, were so many Muslim women oppressed? (Brooks 1995:110)

2.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, how do young Emirati women intent on acquiring a third-level education balance the internal family structure and their place in society, both as a student and later as a member of the labour force and possibly a mother? Studies to date deal largely with women from the Middle East rather than from the Persian Gulf. However, from direct experience of the culture and from extensive reading, I have determined these peoples to be very different on many levels. Arab studies may not necessarily be Muslim, and this gives a whole other perspective when talking about the issues facing women from this part of the Arab world. Issues that concern Islamic women may not necessarily concern others. The answers to the questions posed here are slow in coming because studies regarding Gulf women are only beginning to emerge now, and most of them remain unpublished to date. There is much research to be done before the experiences and dilemmas of young Emirati women can be understood and facilitated.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND

METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

3.1 Introduction

3.2 Qualitative Research

3.2.1 Phenomenology and Ethnography

3.2.2 Grounded Theory

3.2.3 Selection Criteria and Sampling

3.2.4 Ethics of the Research Process: The Research Setting

3.2.5 Building Trust

3.2.6 Consent to Participate

3.2.7 Ethical Approal

3.2.8 The Research Setting

3.2.9 Gender in the Research Process

3.3 Methods of Data Collection

3.3.1 Introduction

3.3.2 Interviews

3.4 Diaries in Qualitative Research

3.4.1 Reason for using a diary in the data collection

3.4.2 Structure of the diaries

3.4.3 Compiling the diaries

3.5 Classroom Observation

3.6 Conversations with Colleagues

3.7 Non-verbal communication

3.8 Data Analysis

3.8.1 Transcribing the interviews

3.8.2 Diary analysis.

3.8.3 Arriving at the themes

3.8.4 Trustworthiness

3.8.5 Credibility

3.8.6 Transferability

3.8.7 Dependability

3.8.8 Confirmability

3.8.9 Criticisms of the methods

3.9 Conclusion

3.1 Introduction

Thus far I have outlined the social theory that underpins my research and considered some of the literature relevant to the topic under investigation. Chapters 1 and 2 have provided a general background to the study. The reader will recall that my research question was:

> What is the experience for a young Emirati woman choosing to study a non-traditional subject, through the English language, in order to acquire a third-level qualification?

In order to address this question I have chosen research methodologies within the qualitative paradigm, namely Ethnography, Phenomenology and Grounded Theory. It was necessary to employ a multi-method approach to allow me to investigate the same phenomena from different angles. It was also important to choose methods that were sensitive and appropriate to the cultural context in which the study took place. As the women's experience of attending college in this context was complex, it was necessary to examine it from different perspectives. To this end the following methods were used:

1. Interviews, based on open-ended questions and guided conversations, which were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

2. A detailed diary that contained notes, written records of conversations with students, classroom observations and records of information provided by the person responsible for the development of the Communications Technology programme at Abu Dhabi Women's College and other colleagues.

In this chapter I will set out and explain the methods of research and data collection, detailing how the data was collected, plus the ethical and gender considerations that informed its research, collection and presentation. We will examine how the data was analysed, how the themes of the core categories were arrived at and how subsequent categories emerged. An explanation will also be given regarding the specific cultural restrictions that existed and the need for total anonymity of the participants.

3.2   The Qualitative Paradigm

Holliday (2002:17), citing Denzin and Lincoln, states that there is an argument for using a broader perspective when employing the qualitative research approach. Looking at strategies first, Denzin and Lincoln make it very clear that there are no tight categories, for example, you do not have to choose between case study, ethnography and grounded theory (1994b). Case studies can be ethnographic or not, and do not have to be quantitative at all. They are 'defined by interest in individual cases, not by methods of enquiry' (Stake 1994:236). Although ethnography is often closely associated with participant observation, 'it has been argued that in a sense all social research is a form of participant observation'

(Atkinson and Hammersley 1994:249). While focusing on ethnography, Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) also build in the ideas of Glaser and Strauss, more usually associated with grounded theory, and talk about 'cases' as a specific phenomenon within or across social settings (Holliday 2002:17).

Holliday breaks qualitative research into two broad categories — Naturalist Qualitative and Progressive Qualitative — and explains the differences and the similarities as follows. Under these two headings fall the different strategies of enquiry. Naturalist qualitative is a more 'traditional' paradigm in qualitative research, being much closer to positivism, whereby reality is seen as relatively straightforward. The research setting is a physical, geographical 'place' that the researcher can describe simply by 'being there' long enough, while 'authenticity' can be ensured by focusing on what 'local characters' say in interview, personal accounts and conversation. The most accurate form of data, therefore, are verbatim transcripts of local people's actual words (Gubrium and Holstein 1997:19–33).

Progressive qualitative researchers, on the other hand, 'portray people as *constructing* the social world' and researchers as 'themselves constructing the social world through their interpretations of it' (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995:11). Holliday (citing Gubrium and Holstein 1997) states that 'whereas naturalists believe that meaningful social worlds can be discovered by 'being there', progressivists 'argue that there is no "there" until it has been constructed.' This is a far more fluid concept of knowledge, in which 'Every act of "seeing" or "saying" is unavoidably conditioned by cultural, institutional and interactional contingencies' (Holliday 2002:19–21).

Both of these broad approaches were employed in this study through the use of ethnography, phenomenology and grounded theory.

3.2.1 Phenomenology and Ethnography

The phenomenological approach gave the researcher access to the students' perceptions of their studies. According to the definition provided by Marton, phenomenology is:

> 'The empirical study of the limited number of qualitatively different ways in which various phenomena in, and aspects of, the world around us are experienced, conceptualised, understood, perceived and apprehended.'
>
> (Marton 1994, cited in Ashworth & Lucas 1999:4)

'Experience' refers to the mental processes mentioned above, but in phenomenology the emphasis is on experience that 'has been reflected on, so that it can be discussed and described by the experiencer' (Ashworth & Lucas 1999:4). This emphasis is described as a 'second-order' perspective (Marton 1981, cited in Ashworth & Lucas 1999:5). The aim of phenomenology is to construct categories of description for the different types of conception held by the subjects themselves, and for the researcher to produce interpretations that allow for a 'clearer and more articulate account of students' conceptions than students would themselves generate unaided' (Ashworth & Lucas 1999:5).

As these authors state, it is a primary requirement that phenomenology be 'sensitive to the individuality of conceptions of the world', and so it must at all times be grounded in the lived experiences of the research participants. I adopted the phenomenological research approach for this study because I wished to discover how visual communications studies were conceptualised, understood and perceived by the women students. By listening to the students' experiences, I attempted to enter their 'lifeworld', which for this purpose means 'the whole context of personal meaning of the experience under research' (Ashworth & Lucas 1999:6).

Phenomenology is related to ethnography and, states Moustakas (1994:9), shares with hermeneutics a focus on consciousness and experience. Traditional hermeneutics, however, was seen as a rigorous process of understanding the author's intended meaning in a text within its *original* cultural settings, while the modern 'philosophical hermeneutics' views the process as 'inevitably reflecting the 'prejudices', the pre-understandings, of the interpreter' (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995:143–5). Thus, when I analysed the conversations and documents, the underlying social, cultural and historical contexts that influenced the words of the informants, I also considered my own words because, *per* this philosophy, I too was a part of the social world under investigation (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995:145–6).

These qualitative methods allowed me to hear real-life experiences and ground them in the local contexts. The term 'lifestory' is used to describe the students' narratives, which, according to Miller (1997:17), refers to an account given by an individual that can be supported by additional, external sources, such

as newspaper reports, official records, or photographs (Denzin 1995, cited in Miller 1997:18). However, Miller also holds that there is now less need for such verification due to the emergence of the narrative viewpoint in qualitative research, whereby stories *per se* are seen as valid because they represent an individual's truth within the context of the whole experience at that particular time. I heard many stories from my informants that I believed to be valid truths, but I also researched local sources that supported their accounts. During analysis I had to guard against using 'snippets' of information given by individuals as being representative of the whole population, and against the temptation to look only at the dramatic stories at the expense of the more mundane accounts (Silverman 1993). In the UAE it was quite common to hear unsubstantiated, anecdotal stories, so I was alert to the potential for the study to be compromised by false trails.

3.2.2 Grounded Theory

Grounded theory was chosen for several reasons:

(a) It allowed the students being interviewed to share their experiences freely.

(b) It encouraged a detailed diary to be kept and analysed.

(c) It focussed on individual life experience and understanding meanings.

(d) It allowed for an interview process in which the participant was empowered to work together with the researcher to develop her experience, while simultaneously allowing the researcher to write a diary based not on interview data but on data collected in informal conversation and classroom observation.

(e) It allowed for the development of a theory grounded in the data provided by the participants, and the theory in turn was grounded in ethnography and phenomenology.

The grounded theory approach originated in the social sciences and is based on the principles of symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969:2–3). Symbolic interactionists view human behaviour as the result of an interpretative process by which individuals assign meaning to their experiences via social interaction with others (Blumer 1969:4–6) (Chenitz 1986:67). This approach emphasises exploring the meanings given to events in particular contexts, and interpreting these meanings as an essential part of reality, which reality can be understood only through naturalistic inquiry and inductive analysis (Patton 1990:115).

Grounded theory, as a research method, was originally developed from the symbolic interactionist perspective as a way to generate theory inductively from data collected in practical settings. It thus enables researchers to study the experiential aspects of human behaviour, which previously had been addressed inadequately by traditional research methods. The uniqueness of grounded theory is that it 'uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived theory about a phenomenon' (Strauss & Corbin 1990:57–61).

Using the grounded theory approach, the researcher gathers data based on the realities of the participants within their particular setting, develops a conceptual framework for analysis of that data and uses inductive and deductive analysis to move the information from a descriptive to a theoretical level (Glaser & Strauss 1967:237–50) (Strauss & Corbin 1990:75–96). The resulting theory

77

articulates the basic social psychological process (BSPP) through which the participants solve the unarticulated problem (Glaser 1978:438–9). This core variable, the BSPP, can explain most of the variation within the data (Glaser 1978:3). Grounded theory therefore focusses on generating theory rather than verifying existing theory (Taylor and Bogdan 1984:126). In this study the intention is to construct a theory that explains the process experienced by UAE women students while studying a non-traditional, and sometimes controversial, subject at third-level.

The grounded theory approach has been verified as a method by which 'to understand the participant's perspective in a way which is relatively uncontaminated by theory derived from the researcher's perspective' (Rennie, Phillips, Quartaro 1988:139–40). For this reason grounded theory is an ideal method of data collection and analysis to study problems about which little research has been done, allowing the researcher to discover what the participants themselves see as solutions, which can then be applied to the setting. This particular feature of grounded theory informed my choice to use it for this study, the goal of which is to explore the phenomena of experience in an area that has received little research attention to date.

According to Strauss and Corbin (1990:75–96), a grounded theory that is well constructed meets the following four criteria:

1. It fits the substantive area being studied.
2. It is comprehensible to participants and to those practicing in the area.

3. It has sufficient variation to make it applicable to a variety of contexts related to the phenomenon.

4. It provides control with regard to action toward the phenomenon.

3.2.3 Selection Criteria and Sampling

The main selection criteria for this study were accessibility and theoretical sampling, as well as voluntary participation. According to Hammersley and Atkinson (1995), a representative sample of informants is not always what is needed where the primary concern is to elicit information. In that case, what is required is people who are willing to talk and divulge.

Some authors promote 'sampling on the basis of concepts that have proven theoretical relevance to the evolving theory' (Strauss & Corbin 1990:177) (Chenitz & Swanson 1986:9). Theoretical sampling evolves an interactive and cyclical process of data collection and analysis. Initially, data is gathered across a broad range of relevant areas by interviewing participants with a broad, general knowledge of the topic of study. As the study progresses, data-gathering is focussed on particular areas and participants with more specific knowledge of the developing concept are selected, thus providing a comprehensive understanding of the topic under investigation. Finally, the breadth of the concept is investigated by conducting interviews with informants who can provide variation in the study topic.

The participants selected for inclusion in this study were all in the third year of a three-year degree in Visual Communications and studying full-time in the Department of Communications Technology at Abu Dhabi Women's College.

They possessed the linguistic ability necessary to communicate their experiences and a willingness to talk about those experiences. The sampling was purposive, based on their linguistic and communication abilities, and represented the best judgements I could make in the circumstances.

As an 'inside' researcher I was familiar with the college culture and the education system and therefore shared common knowledge with the participants. We did not share a common first language, however, and this could have had implications for making sense of the data given that it is through words and text that people create their worlds and relate their experiences (Maykut & Morehouse 1994). I simplified the English used for questions during the interviews, although this was difficult to do in every instance without simplifying or altering the content. I also frequently rephrased interview questions when students had difficulty understanding them. In their responses, the language used by the students could be described as 'Gulf English', and I did not alter this except in certain circumstances where, being familiar with the usage, I was able to extract the meaning I felt the students were trying to give. My familiarity with their communicative language gave me a better ability to understand and interpret the responses than a researcher without such knowledge.

When describing the participants of this study, certain issues must be taken into consideration. The students who took part did so on the basis that they would not be identified. As the number of students taking the Visual Communications course between 1999 and 2001 was very small, I cannot provide a detailed description of the individual students and their individual backgrounds because that would be to identify them. It is sufficient to note that they represent a

certain place and time, and are not representative of the entire female population of the UAE. The fact that these women had enrolled in the Visual Communications course as part of the Communications Technology programme meant they were already somewhat different from the 'mainstream' students who came through the college. A number of the students had literate and well-travelled parents. Although their parents struggled with certain issues relating to the education of their daughters, they all shared the same desire to see their child educated to the highest level. Some of the students spoke English in the home, and most had attended second-level schools following the British system and therefore were quite fluent in English, even if they did not express confidence in their linguistic abilities.

3.2.4 Ethics of the Research Process: The Research Setting

Following Bogdon & Knopp-Biklen, three broad factors were taken into consideration regarding the ethics of this study:

> 1. That subjects enter research projects voluntarily, fully understanding the nature of the study and the potential dangers and obligations that are involved. Their right to withdraw without prejudice at any time is ensured.
>
> 2. That participants are not exposed to risks greater than the gains they might make. In other words, while there may be costs, the benefits must outweigh those costs.

3. That confidentiality is ensured, if it is the participant's wish.

(Bogdon & Knopp-Biklen 1982:49)

Ethical concerns are a very important part of the research design and conduct (Mason 1996) (Silverman 1994) (Miles & Huberman 1994). Mason highlights the difficulty of maintaining anonymity and privacy when there is a small number of participants, a difficulty that applies especially in qualitative research due to the nature of the data used. For this particular study, confidentiality and anonymity were extremely important. In the UAE, a young woman's reputation must be actively protected. Social custom dictates that a young woman should not be known to national men outside her family group, so most students will not allow themselves to be photographed or their names to be published in order to prevent their becoming an object of interest and discussion in local society. Although this custom is slowly changing, it is imperative that neither participants' full names nor their identities be revealed.

The participants were all, as noted earlier, full-time students at Abu Dhabi Women's College. From my experience of the college and its culture, and my knowledge of the UAE and its education system, I was conscious of the fact that this was the first generation of women to acquire a third-level education and a professional qualification, which placed them at the forefront of radical social change. In addition, this particular group was studying an area that was controversial because it was perceived by some to be non-traditional; some even went so far as to say that the curriculum went against Islamic teaching regarding women. By facing up to these accusations in a considered and respectful manner,

these students displayed the characteristics necessary to be in the vanguard of developments in the UAE.

In this context the role of researcher was problematic, but by continuously explaining my research objectives and reassuring participants of total confidentiality I was able to create a relationship between researcher and subject based on mutual trust. I remained vigilant of the need to protect these young women, and myself, from adverse reactions stemming from research activities.

3.2.5 Building Trust

As stated earlier, the two data-collection methods used for this study were a detailed diary and in depth interviews. From the very beginning of the study it became apparent to me that one method would overshadow the other: I had initially thought that interviews would prove the most efficient tool, but I had not anticipated at that stage that other conditions would come into play in this environment.

Although the initial interviews alerted me to issues I had not previously considered, they suffer somewhat from the students' well-meaning tendency to tell me what they felt I wanted to hear, rather than telling me what they actually felt or believed. A similar experience is related by Holliday (2002), which occurred in an Egyptian university. The research being conducted was part of a nationwide survey carried out by a US curriculum agency and upon which policy decisions in educational aid would be based. Holliday explains the phenomena:

'I do not think that the lecturer felt she was "lying". I feel that she was sincere in her response to what she considered a social commitment to being polite, which outweighed the fact that she did not have all the information the researcher wanted. On the other hand, in this particular context educational resources were scarce and she probably did not wish to reveal this to an outsider that the official course timetable could never be maintained because lecturers spent all their time travelling by bus from the capital. This is only my interpretation of her behaviour. The point I wish to make is that people's reasons for responding in the ways they do to questionnaires and interviews can be both far from what the researcher expects and mysterious.'

(Holliday 2002:3–4)

Given the cultural circumstances, the diary provided a far more insightful account of what was happening, as did 'guided conversations'. Although generally following the rules of a normal conversation, in a guided conversation I would ask the students pointed and leading questions, always making it clear that I was using the information for research purposes because I felt it would be unethical to do otherwise. From the outset the students were far more comfortable with this approach as their responses were not being recorded, which meant they were much more open in their responses.

It became obvious very early on that the question of trust would be central to the success, or failure, of the study. To this end I gave an undertaking not to

use the participants' names, instead substituting them with fictitious names. Furthermore, I invited the students to choose the fictitious names they wished to be known by, and I purposely let them see me putting the fictitious name on a sticker attached to the tapes of their individual interviews. These actions were essential to encourage open discussion and productive contributions.

Another issue that had to considered was the students' understanding of my motivation for the research study. If they believed I was solely interested in their problems or regarded their society as backward, they would naturally be un-co-operative. Accordingly, concrete and precise explanations were necessary to develop mutual trust. The students were very aware of what they viewed as negative stereotyping of Arab women in the western media, and were understandably anxious not to feed into it by divulging information to an unsympathetic listener. It was essential from the outset to create a comfortable and safe environment for the participants so that they could get as much from the process as I did. As Robson states, 'Taking part in a study can often lead to respondents reflecting on their experience in a way they find helpful' (Robson 1993:297).

The need for this particular group of students to justify their lives as they lived them was a feature that recurred in the interviews and the diaries. There was also a sense of exposing a position with which they were beginning to struggle and which they feared might not be judged in the way they intended, which in turn might jar with their own beliefs of what it was to be an Islamic woman. In this context these students could be seen as a muted group in the sense that Ardner developed the term, to describe the disadvantageous position of women within a

patriarchal society (Ardner 1975, 1978). Muted groups describe their experiences within terms of reference of the dominant culture, although mutedness is not synonymous with inarticulacy. A muted group may talk eloquently in the dominant discourse and even oppose the *status quo* in ways that are socially endorsed. (Belenky also refers to this same condition, as a silent group.) In this particular context it was socially acceptable to attend college, but the students struggled to articulate aspects of their experience of demands for change that had not been accommodated into the dominant discourse, *i.e.* society in general.

3.2.6 Consent to Participate

The issue of consent to participate requires participants to be fully aware of what they are being asked to be a part of, including the dangers and obligations involved, and ensuring the risks and gains for participants are balanced. Even though I explained the aims of the research, it is unlikely that the students truly understood what involvement implied because of the lack of an institutional research culture in the UAE and because the students were not well-read academically. Thus the responsibility lay with me to follow Bogdan and Bilklen's (1992:56) advice carefully and to ensure they were protected from harm throughout all the research phases, presentations and future publishing. Each participant was free to withdraw and/or refuse to answer any questions at any time, but, as Mason suggests, it is necessary to constantly revisit the issue of consent during the study. I was very aware of my persuasive influences and of the students' need to please me as their teacher (Mason 1996).

In an attempt to overcome the difficulties of imparting a full understanding of participation, I showed the students their interview transcripts and they confirmed the accuracy of those transcripts and agreed that they were happy for the material to be used thus.

3.2.7 Ethical Approval

At an early stage in the research I realised that no formal studies had been carried out previously involving ADWC students. The reasons for this were probably related to the inherent ethical and linguistic difficulties, as well as the various cultural sensitivities. In order to ensure that I was not putting myself at risk, I asked the ADWC Director for his permission and received his approval to undertake research involving the women students. I was pleased to be able to tell the students of this high-level authorisation, but instead of getting the response I had anticipated — that the students would be delighted he had given his seal of approval — they made me 'double promise' that I would not discuss their responses with him and asked for assurances again that I would not identify them. The Director's knowledge of the study may have restricted the students' responses in the initial stages.

3.2.8 The Research Setting

The research setting for this study was the Department of Communications Technology at Abu Dhabi Women's College, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. This research was formally carried out between 1995 and early 2001. According to Holliday (2002), establishing a research setting and determining where, when and

with whom the research will take place is in itself a very important task. The aim of such choices is to fully understand a definable setting, where phenomena can be placed meaningfully within a specific social setting (Holliday 2002:38–9).

Hammersley & Atkinson state that 'settings are not naturally occurring phenomena' and that the notion of 'setting' is socially constructed (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995:41). Within the confines of the UAE, gender is also a factor in determining a research setting. Most public areas in the UAE are gender-segregated and this impacted on the data collection for this particular study.

When defining the research setting it must be borne in mind that perspectives change with time and education. In other words, conducting this study at a future time, or with another groups of students, might produce different results. My core setting was Abu Dhabi Women's College and within that the Department of Communications Technology. Although the formal interviews were conducted on campus, much of the data collected for my diaries was collected outside the campus, but within activities and circumstances connected with the Department of Communications Technology. These off-campus trips began in 1995 and continued until 2001.

The location used for taping the interviews for this study may have contributed to the type of response I received during my first interviews. The interviews were conducted in the Department of Communications Technology building, where the students felt very comfortable, yet they only answered the basic question being asked and did not elaborate. It was later in the development of my diaries that I realised the students felt more comfortable off-campus, when their voices were not being recorded.

3.2.9 Gender in the Research Process

Although this is not a gender study, within this particular context — that of a society where there is definite gender segregation — this issue was a factor. During the data collection, the fact that I was female gave me easier access to the students. Blackman (1998) notes that the researcher's gender is important to the research process in that it can result in the generation of different kinds of knowledge. This was certainly true in this case. Outside of the college campus, for example, in the coffee shops and restaurants where many of our discussions took place, there are family-designated spaces where males are not permitted to sit unless accompanied by a female relative. For a western male researcher, this would have meant no opportunity for social interaction with the female students. In relation to studies involving extended stays 'in the field', Silverman has stated that:

> 'People have also been shown to make assumptions based upon the gender of the researcher. For instance, particularly in rural communities, young women may be precluded from participating in many activities or asking many questions. Conversely, female gender may sometimes accord privileged access.'

Citing Oboler (1986), Silverman reports that her pregnancy increased her rapport with her Kenyan informants, while Warren (1988:18) suggests that women

fieldworkers can make use of the sexist assumption that only men engage in 'important business' by using their 'invisibility' as a resource (Silverman 1993:35).

Citing Oakley (1981), Parr argues that the richness of the material deriving from her research on motherhood was due to the non-hierarchical nature of the relationship between herself and the women with whom she spoke and the investment of her personal identity in the relationships. This means, of course, responding to personal questions and questions about the research, which can be both advantageous and problematic (Parr 1998) (Ribbens and Edwards *et al* 2000:91). Silverman points out that, equally, male fieldworkers may be excluded, or may exclude themselves, from contact with female respondents in certain kinds of situations.

In the UAE, cultural restrictions would have made it very difficult for a male researcher to gain access to the information necessary for a study such as this. Similar to Oboler's experience, I was able to increase my rapport with the students on a number of levels because of my own background. I often began a guided conversation with a topic we had in common, for example large extended families or segregated education. Oakley is of the opinion that one problem facing the ethnographer is how much, or how little, self-disclosure is appropriate. Atkinson and Hammersley add that it is difficult to expect honesty and frankness on the part of the participants and informants while never being frank and honest about oneself (Atkinson and Hammersley 2000:91).

According to Silverman, it is incumbent upon fieldworkers to reflect upon the basis and status of their observations. Clearly, how the researcher and the community being studied respond to gender can provide crucial insights into the

field realities. Silverman makes a strong case for being aware that even taken-for-granted assumptions can be culturally and historically specific. In this he cites Carol Warren (1988): 'The focal gender *myth* of field research is [that of] the greater communicative skills and less threatening nature of the female fieldworker.' As Warren notes, the important thing is to resist treating such assumptions as 'revealed truths', but rather to treat them as accounts that are historically situated (Silverman 2000:36).

'Bracketing' is a process that allows the researcher to suspend personal beliefs and permits the reader to take into account the researcher's perspective when reading the research report. From a qualitative perspective, the understanding one gains as a researcher can be difficult to separate from personal assumptions brought to the research context. In order to reduce the influence of personal biases about the phenomena being studied, the researcher uses self-reflection to identify preconceptions about the area of research and continues to record these biases throughout the research process. Accordingly, during this study I continued to clarify and bracket my biases through the use of a diary. I also met with colleagues and discussed my assumptions with them, and constantly checked my own views against the realities expressed by the participants.

3.3 Methods of Data Collection

3.3.1 Introduction

This section will present the methods of data collection, as described earlier. I shall begin with the interviews and progress on to a detailed explanation of the

diaries used. Also presented here are the underlying reasons for using these particular collection methods:

1. Interviews based on open-ended questions and guided conversations.

2. Detailed diaries containing notes, written records of conversations with students, classroom observations and conversations with colleagues at Abu Dhabi Women's College.

3.3.2 Interviews

Interviews with students took place within the Communications Technology Department and were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Fictitious names for the student participants were inserted when the study was being written up. The questions stemming from these initial interviews were used as the basis for the second round of interviews. I was acutely aware that some of the students were nervous during the initial interview, and that it was not until the second interview that they spoke freely to me.

The interviews are referenced throughout the data chapter as follows: interview abbreviated to IN, followed by the student's name, followed by interview number and whether it was interview 1 or 2, followed by the date: (IN: Name: No. Date).

A widely accepted definition of an interview is that it is a conversation with a purpose, but interviews have been variously described as unstructured, informal, in-depth, non-directive, focussed and open (Lincoln & Guba 1985) (Maykut & Moorehouse 1994). The researcher must decide the most appropriate approach to

enable the research question to be answered within his/her chosen framework. For this study, I used open-ended interviews and a detailed diary. These approaches were employed simultaneously as I re-interviewed the students to clarify themes that emerged from both sets of data.

For the interviews I booked the sound room in the Department of Communications Technology, which formed part of the suite of rooms used in radio production and was located at the very back of the Communications building. All the interviews were held at the end of the day, as this was when the students felt most comfortable. They were also very familiar with the sound room and the fact that it was completely sound-proof gave them more confidence to talk freely in the interview. Given that anonymity was important, the sound room was also suitable because the student population was used to seeing students recording programmes there for their lunchtime radio broadcast in the canteen, so our comings and goings did not excite interest or suspicion.

Initially I had decided to interview only eight students, but two more approached me when they heard about the study and asked to be included. The students agreed to their interviews being tape-recorded, although they later told me that they were very self-conscious, particularly about their proficiency in English, and asked me not to let anybody at Christ Church University College hear these interviews. While writing my research diaries and transcribing the interview tapes, I used the students' real names in order to keep the information fresh in my mind and remind me as to the context in which the information-gathering took place. In the interviews I used a prepared list of open-ended questions and adopted a flexible, informal approach to the questioning, 'allowing

the discussion to flow in a way that seems natural' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995:86).

During and after each interview I wrote brief notes about the social interactions that had been constructed, following Ashworth & Lucas' (1999) advice to build up participant profiles from both observation and interview data in order to provide evidence of internal validity and access to particular 'life-worlds'.

3.4   Diaries in Qualitative Research

Burgess states that there are no rules as to how research diaries or field notes should be compiled, the prime consideration being to find a format and style that fits with the needs of the research project, and which is found to be both workable and useful by the researcher. While researchers indicate that part of their research activities involves writing notes and keeping diaries, they do not tell us, in any detail, about how these diaries may be established and maintained (Burgess 1981:75).

Allport (1942:95–108) identifies three distinct models of diary familiar in everyday life: the intimate journal, in which private thoughts and opinions are recorded, uncensored; the memoir, an 'impersonal' diary often written with an eye to publication; and the log, which is a kind of listing of events with relatively little commentary. While the memoir may assume an audience, the log and the intimate journal are essentially private documents, written primarily for the diarist him/herself. They are therefore constructed within the diarist's own frame of

reference and can assume a forgiving, understanding reader (Allport 1942; Jackson 1994) for whom there is no need to present a 'best face'.

As they are written intermittently, either daily or over longer intervals of time (Allport 1942), diaries provide a record of an ever-changing present. Other autobiographical texts or life documents, such as letters, tend towards making retrospective sense of a whole life by retelling significant moments, but diaries are of a different breed. Their close proximity to the present, the closeness between the experience and the record of experience, means there is a perception that diaries are less subject to the vagaries of memory, to retrospective censorship or to re-framing than other autobiographical accounts (*ibid*).

According to Shatzman and Strauss, note-taking and research diary-keeping are much more than mechanical means of storing information for later retrieval. They argue that the 'researcher requires recording tactics that will provide him with an ongoing, developmental dialogue' (1973:94). They emphasise the importance of recording observations from the very beginning of the research: first encounters and the routes via which access was gained to research situations are all considered important research data. In terms of the organisation of notes, Schatzman and Strauss advocate an approach that 'packages' material into three categories: Observational Notes; Theoretical Notes; and Methodological Notes. By their definitions observational notes are:

> '… statements bearing upon events experienced principally through watching and listening. They contain as little interpretation as possible, and are as reliable as the observer can construct them. Each

observational note represents an event deemed important enough to include in the fund of recorded experience, as a piece of evidence for some proposition yet unborn or as a property of a context situation. An [observation note] is the Who, What, When, Where and How of human activity.'

(1973:100)

Theoretical notes:

'… represent self-conscious, controlled attempts to derive meaning from one or several observation notes. The observer as recorder thinks about what he has experienced, and makes whatever private declaration of meaning he feels will bear conceptual fruit.'

(*ibid*:101)

Methodological notes are:

'… statement[s] that reflect an operational act completed or planned: an instruction to oneself, a reminder, a critique of one's own tactics. It notes timing, sequencing, stationing, stage setting, or manoeuvering. Methodological notes might be thought of as observational notes on the researcher himself and upon the methodological process itself.'

(*ibid*:101)

96

The implication is that although written notes may fall more or less naturally into these three categories, an overly self-conscious or ordered approach to note-taking is unhelpfully slow. Over time the researcher will develop the ability to package his or her observations in the way suggested, to benefit later retrieval. The degree to which any researcher would want to adopt such an approach depends on the particular project and his or her preferences. It may be useful simply to identify observational, theoretical and methodological notes when reviewing continuous passages of a research diary. On the other hand, for a researcher dealing with large volumes of qualitative data, a packaged set of notes has some advantages, particularly when dealing with computer-aided research packages that handle large amounts of packaged data.

Burgess does not emphasise the packaging approach as Schatzman and Strauss do, but his three main elements, albeit labelled differently, are essentially the same. Burgess suggests the 'substantive account', the 'methodological account' and the 'analytical account'. These can be compared with Schatzman's and Strauss' observational, methodological and theoretical notes, and also with the approach adopted by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Richards (1994).

According to Burgess, the substantive account represents a chronological account 'of the events that have been observed and the informants who have been interviewed' (1981:76).

Burgess' 'methodological account' involves 'autobiographical details outlining the researcher's involvement in the social situation in addition to the methods of social investigation that were employed' (*ibid*).

The analytical account:

> '… raises questions that were posed in the course of conducting the research, hunches that the researcher may hold, ideas for organizing the data and concepts employed by the participants that can be used to analyze the materials.'
>
> (*ibid*)

Atkinson and Hammersley (1995) advise that it is possible to write a research diary in a more structured format. For instance, in ethnographic research it may make sense to distinguish data analysis from the data itself, using square brackets for analytic observations. In ethnographic research, it is suggested that the diary notes should also reflect how the participants of the study perceive the researcher.

Following Burgess and Schatzman and Strauss, I developed a more formal approach to the diaries when I began this study, although the filling in of categories was a method adopted later in the process. The various settings, and timings of the settings, for compiling data did not allow me time to categorise data in a formal manner while writing the diaries. Categories were developed along the lines suggested by the authors quoted, but I also added a further category: literature. I used this 'new' category to check and cross-reference he data I was receiving from the participants.

3.4.1 Reason for using a diary in the data collection

Prior to and during my time at Abu Dhabi Women's College my outlook was influenced by the existing body of information on Arab women. The literature I read on this topic had led me to believe that I would find evidence of difficulties and obstacles affecting the students' ability to pursue a third-level education. However, as outlined in Chapter Two, the vast majority of literature available on the 'Arab Woman' relates to the Middle East and some Gulf countries, but there is in fact little available specifically on UAE women (Harfoush-Strickland 1996:67) 9Alqudisi-Ghabra 1996:229) (Hijab 1996).

Before I began the study proper, I had kept an informal diary of my observations from shortly after my arrival in Abu Dhabi. These diaries were not kept formally until I decided to undertake the study. Prior to taking this decision I wrote them simply for my own interest as I was fascinated by what I was seeing and hearing in this very different environment. Also, the students in this particular group were very interesting people and the age gap was such that we shared a number of common interests. This particular group of women also had a great sense of humour, which appealed to me enormously and made social interactions all the more enjoyable. It was as a result of keeping these informal diaries that I decided to undertake a formal study, largely motivated by the fact that I was discovering many things that did not fit with my western stereotype of the downtrodden Arab woman. The more formal approach to the diaries was adopted for the study period, from 1999 to 2001.Plummer (2006) speaks of the diary as being a 'contemporaneous flow of public and private events'. 'The word contemporary is very crucial here, for each diary entry-unlike life histories –is

sedimented into a particular moment in time: they do not emerge 'all at once' as reflections on the past, but day by day strive to record an ever-changing present.' (Plummer 2004:48)

The literature on both qualitative and quantitative methods has highlighted the value of diaries in recording routine or everyday processes (Parvis *et al* 1996) (Verbrugge 1980), whereas in retrospective interview informants are more inclined to offer biographical narratives or general opinions. Follow-up contact with informants can involve more than triangulating and expanding written accounts, however. The process of returning to an informant and accessing different kinds of accounts provides the opportunity to develop a researcher's understanding of the meaning informants attribute to certain events.

3.4.2   Structure of the Diaries

I used a total of four diaries to record my observations of conversations and daily occurrences during the research period. (The number of diaries used is not significant; four notebooks simply provided the required number of pages to cater for my writings.) I have presented tables to illustrate the make-up of the diaries. (These tables are in the Appendices as Figs 1-4.) The dates detailed in the tables are to allow the reader to see at a glance the duration of the data collection. Some contain days, months and year; others contain only month and year because when I was recording the data in the earlier diaries, it was not done for any specific reason other than personal interest, therefore I was not meticulous in the recording.

The tables are laid out as follows:

Fig.1: contains the fictitious names of the interviewees, their age at the time, the year they were in on the Higher Diploma course and their marital status.

Fig.2: contains fictitious names, and to which diary certain quotations or entries were made. As stated, I used a total of four diaries and nearly all of the students appeared in all the diaries at different times and dates.

Fig.3: contains fictitious names, date of interview one and date of interview two.

Fig.4: contains the dates of the entries of informal conversations with the class group as a whole. (See Appendix I.)

3.4.3 Compiling the Diaries

When I joined the Department of Communications Technology in 1995, one of the first things the students said to me was how delighted they were that I would be able to take them on field trips, especially to Dubai. The procedure for these trips was to send a letter to the parents, or guardian, seeking permission for the student to leave the campus (see Appendix II). It was on these trips that much of the valuable information on family life and how it impacted on college life was shared. All the diaries are handwritten and describe encounters in great detail. (As a result, I could not include photocopies of these diaries as to do so would risk identifying the students, which would contravene the agreement I made with

them.) I decided to exclude information that revolved around their social lives and interests that did not impact directly on the study.

In order to elicit information from the students, I used what Rubin and Rubin describe as 'guided conversation' (Rubin & Rubin 1995:122). A similar method was used in the tape-recorded interviews. The conversations that were recorded in the diary took place at various locations and times throughout the college year. Students gathered daily in the canteen and the *majilis* to eat lunch, take a break and chat. During off-campus activity students sat and talked at length in designated areas of cafés and restaurants. When I sat with them, I asked questions they answered readily, sometimes singularly and other times as a group. The information I obtained while on campus usually referred to college issues, while off-campus discussions yielded more rounded answers.

A normal conversation can drift along with little objective, but in a guided conversation I gently nudge the discussion in particular directions, leading it through various stages by asking specific questions and encouraging the students to give in-depth answers. I sometimes queried the meaning of specific words, for example, a rare circumstance in normal conversation. In addition, during interviews the entire conversation was recorded, one way or another.

In a guided conversation the interviewer may ask one question and expect the conversational partner to give a long answer, sometimes hours in length. In such cases, as described by Atkinson and Hammersley (2000) and Burgess (1984), ethnographers do not stick specifically to formalised questions, but rather have a list of topics they wish to touch on before the interaction ends. These authors note that ethnographic interviews are closer to conversations than survey interviews.

This was certainly the case when I was on a field trip with the students that lasted for at least two hours. It was during this time that the students were at their most comfortable, and were easy to engage in conversation.

I used the approach described by Grimshaw, whose main objective in such encounters was to find out about things that could not be observed directly. I wanted to gain access to the informant's view of the world, to get their 'take' on the situation (Grimshaw 2004). The purpose of asking the students to keep diaries was to gain a clear understanding of that which I was not in a position to observe. Citing Burgess, Atkinson and Hammersley state that in more recent times ethnographers have shown rather different priorities, which have led them to place more reliance on their own observations. Nonetheless, considerable use is still made of informants, both to get information about activities that, for one reason or another, cannot be observed directly and to check inferences made from observations (Atkinson and Hammerlsey 1995:125).

Rubin and Rubin state that part of the job of a researcher is to unobtrusively teach the interviewee the level of detail desired and expected:

> 'For instance, you ask a limited number of questions, listen intently to the answers, and ask for detailed information about some responses, the interviewee will get the idea that you want him or her to respond in detail. By not interrupting a long rendition of events, you communicate that you want the interviewee to talk at length.'
>
> (Rubin and Rubin 1995:123)

They advise that if the interviewee responds to a question superficially, as he or she would in a normal conversation, his/her answer should be followed up with a series of other questions pressing for a more thoughtful response. This method worked very well in this context of this study.

In order to write notes in an informal environment, I had to develop an unobtrusive method. I often wrote notes while on the bus, sometimes on pieces of paper rather than in a specific diary. To be effective at note-taking, one must write quickly. To this end I sometimes wrote in Gaelic instead of English because it uses less words in description and therefore provided a form of practical shorthand.

After each encounter I made a mental effort to memorise the conversation and then write it down as soon as possible thereafter. I felt it was necessary to write up my notes as soon as possible after the conversation because, of course, things are lost with a lapse of time. To help me reconstruct details from memory, I first jotted down the main points in the order they had occurred. Then I went down each point and tried to remember as much as I could of the conversation, including my questions and the student's answers. I found that recalling one piece of the conversation triggered memories about other pieces until finally I had reconstructed a fairly accurate account of the conversation. I used them to fill out the information I had already gained from the interviews and to test hypotheses.

Informal conversation is referenced as follows: Informal conversation abbreviated as IC, followed by the Student's Name, followed by the Date: (IC: Name: Date).

3.5   Classroom Observation

Classroom observations were recorded when they related directly to the study, for example discussions regarding the students' final-year projects, or the problems and frustrations they experienced with a particular procedure within the college. The classroom observations are specifically education-linked and usually do not contain any information about the personal life or experiences of the student, although overlaps did happen occasionally.

Classroom observations are referenced as follows: Classroom Observation abbreviated to CO, Diary Number, followed by the Date:(CO: No. Date).

These observations were helpful because they allowed me to interact informally with the students while in the classroom. The nature of the subject they were studying meant there was very little formal lecturing: when teaching visual communication, or indeed any visual arts subject, one does not normally stand at the top of a classroom with the students lined up in rows. Instead, these classes took place in a studio setting, one that, to an outsider, might look chaotic. As a teacher in this context, one normally interacts with the students on an individual basis.

On several occasions the students were engaged in conversation or behaviour that allowed me to gather more information on what was happening, or what was being said. On one occasion, from the corridor I could hear much laughter and noise emanating from the studio. Upon entering the room, I saw one of the students sitting cross-legged on the floor wearing a *Burqa* made from orange day-glow paper. She was mimicking the older members of the community;

when sitting informally with their families Emirati women wore a *Burqa* and squatted on the floor. When I enquired as to what on the student was doing, she readily admitted her mimickry, enabling me to engage the group in a discussion on the *Burqa*, which discussion I in turn included in my diary. It was through this informal, unexpected interaction that I realised there was more than one interpretation of the *Burqa*, even within this small group. Up until this incident I would have assumed the *Burqa* was revered by every Emirati woman as a religious symbol. It seemed ironic to me that a piece of clothing that in the West has become synonymous with Islamic fundamentalism was being gently ridiculed by Islamic women in an Islamic country. I went back to the literature and decided to include this topic in the study.

Other incidents observed during class time and exam correction included changes in learning patterns. Once alerted to these, further investigation led me to new areas (as detailed in my data), such as the family structure and the family's involvement in the individual's life. Upon observing such incidents I took notes during the class time, then elaborated on them further outside of class time, while the memory was still fresh. These were subsequently recorded in my diary.

3.6   **Conversations with Colleagues**

Conversations with colleagues recorded in the research diary took place both within the college and off-campus. Data was obtained from staff meetings, and particularly from talking about specific issues with certain key members of staff, most importantly staff in students' services, who wished to remain anonymous.

(Their names are fictitious.) These conversations were not being analysed for this particular study, but I did use them to test hypotheses and to validate my findings. They also proved helpful in allowing me to place what I was hearing in the context of overall college structures. These conversations often took place in social settings, like restaurants or in people's homes. I then recorded them, where relevant, in my diary. Conversations with former colleagues were also recorded in the research diary. Most importantly, those discussions conducted with Fred Steinmetz, founder of the programme, took place in Canada and were tape-recorded.

These conversations are referenced as follows: Informal Conversation abbreviated to IC, followed by Diary Number, followed by the Date (IC: No. Date:).

3.7 Non-verbal communication

A challenge that presents itself to the researcher in any environment, be it foreign or local, is the issue of non-verbal communication, or body language. In the study group, some students were less confident than others, or did not possess the necessary English language skills to answer a specific question, even though they understood the question. Where such students allowed others in the group to answer, their non-verbal communication showed clearly whether the opinion being expressed was one with which they agreed or disagreed. Parr refers to this in her study of mature female students at Sheffield University, who were giving reasons for returning to education. She admits that her 'biggest problem was

keeping control over non-verbal communication — particularly facial expression — so that she was not appearing to be judgmental' (Parr 2000:95; Ribbens and Edwards *et al*). I also found this to be a significant factor and was careful to pay attention to the expressions of other students in the group when individuals were giving answers, or just making comments. Of course, at the same time my own expression needed to be sufficiently open and receptive to encourage the students to keep talking to me.

3.8 Data Analysis

In this section I shall present the procedures followed to arrive at the findings derived from the data.

3.8.1   Transcribing the interviews

Silverman notes that 'the use of recorded data is an essential corrective to the limitations of intuition and recollection. In enabling repeated and detailed examination of the events of interaction, the use of recordings extends the range and precision of the observations which can be made' (Silverman 1993:119).

After conducting the interviews I transcribed them myself, verbatim, using a foot-propelled, playback tape-recorder that I borrowed from the Office Administration Department. In transcribing, I adhered to the exact words used by the participants, even when I knew the context was in fact wrong. I did this in

order to keep the information fresh in my mind and to avoid losing any particular points. This was important because much of the participants' English was communicative as opposed to technically correct. However, my knowledge of this communicative language increased the likelihood of comprehension, thereby increasing the accuracy of transcription. I also listened to the interview tapes several times before I started an analysis from the transcript in order to 'sensitise' myself to the 'train of thought of the research participant' (Ashworth & Lucas 1999:12).

In the transcripts I included protocols to show pauses, emphases, remarks and emotional reactions, such as laughter, to take account of Ashworth & Lucas' (1999) assertion that verbal communications are transformed during the process of transcription. Finally, to test the accuracy of my transcriptions, a colleague repeated the transcription of one tape. A comparison of the two transcriptions showed a very high level of similarity, proving the reliability of the transcribed data.

A preliminary analysis of the transcripts from the first batch of interviews identified issues that needed to be followed up and allowed me to re-design the interview questions for the second round of interviews.

3.8.2 Diary Analysis

Following my decision to use a diary as a method of data collection, I formalised it using a similar system as that described by Burgess, Strauss and Richards. This in turn made it easier to analyse, clarify and cross-check the data gathered form the interviews.

In order to make sense of the large amount of data contained in the diaries, I read and re-read the entries and then organised all the information through a card system, made in the following way. First, I photocopied the diaries and the transcribed interviews. Then I cut up the copies and physically filed the data within a card system, under various headings. To begin with I used the headings derived from the interview data. Each piece of data was broken into individual sentences, or meaning units, and labelled descriptively, using as many codes as possible. Once initial or loose categories had been identified, I then checked and re-checked my notes and memos to ensure what was there was represented accurately, and did not constitute what I felt ought to be there. During this process, suspending bias was of paramount importance as I was beginning to gather findings I had not anticipated.

3.8.3 Arriving at the Themes

Once both sets of data had been combined using the constant comparative method (Strauss and Corbin 1990), the data were analysed systematically in order to find patterns and, ultimately, a core variable, or main theme, which explained the findings. When the interviews had been tape-recorded, the conversations were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. This data and that from the diaries were then analysed and interpreted by adapting the steps described by Strauss and Corbin (1990):

1.   (a) Individual meaning units were paraphrased throughout the interviews;

(b) individual meaning units were paraphrased throughout the written diary.

2. Open coding was used to label the meaning units descriptively, using as many codes as possible for each of the interviews. Codes were assigned to more than one meaning unit where this was appropriate.

3.   (a) Codes pertaining to the same phenomena were grouped together and the meaning units contained in each group of codes were summarised;

(b) codes were assigned more than one meaning where this was appropriate.

4. Sub-themes were developed in terms of the conditions giving rise to them, the contexts in which events occurred, the strategies by which issues were handled and the consequences of same (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

5. The major themes were developed by ordering and linking the sub-themes for each interview, and subsequently linking the sub-themes and themes across the interviews.

Through the use of the constant comparative method, sub-themes were compared with one another and with themes, and emerging themes were compared with one another. These emerging themes guided the focus for questions posed in relation to the existing data. Hypotheses were created and

checked in the data. Saturation of themes occurred after all the data had been analysed.

The central, or core, theme was defined by the themes categorised under it and was the last to saturate (Rennie *et al* 1988:139–50). The core theme evolved through memoing and diagrams drawn to elucidate the hierarchical structure of themes. Themes (memos) were cut out and re-arranged several times until the core theme emerged. Summarising the findings in the form of a narrative story (Strauss and Corbin 1990) also helped to conceptualise clearly the core theme (category). As the core theme emerged, the literature was used to validate the accuracy of the findings.

Once the analysis of the data had been completed, it was written up to reflect the common themes and the process deriving from the research and categorisation of findings. The common themes so identified are presented under two major categories. The first is Disconnection from the Self, which comprises the sub-themes of: The Centrality of Family; A Certain Amount of Discussion; Family Changes; Taking Action and Becoming Assertive; The veil: an overview; and Transition and Education. The second is Claiming Self, which comprises the sub-themes of: Owning the decision to study Communications Technology; Desire for family approval regarding the choice of study; Cultural issues surrounding the choice of program; Peer pressure; Learning through English; Student frustrations with the programme; Education and its relevance to the students' lives, past, present and future.

Below is a brief example of the techniques employed. It shows the kind of diversity and the number of codes developed in initial coding by pursuing as many

diverse avenues as could be created. The interview statements given below were made by a student choosing to study Visual Communications. My question centres on the experiences of choosing this particular program of study and concerns raised by the family.

1.   Was it a program that your family were happy for you to study?

FATIMA

'My family yes, they are happy because you know they didn't know what it was before, but now when I always go and talk to them and talk about my projects they really like it. When I decided to enter Comm. Tech. I went home and I told my mother and my father they were sitting having lunch, I told them, "Listen, there is a program, it's called Comm. Tech. and it's about, well …" I explained everything and I told them that I really want to enter this program, I feel that I am into that program, and my mother said okay, she didn't disagree, she didn't know what this means but now when I talk about it she really likes it. My father was fascinated by the Comm. Tech. program and he encouraged me to enter and now he always asks me, "What are you doing now?" Well now my husband, I got married and I have one baby, first he didn't like it he said, "No, I don't want my wife to go in the studio and be an announcer and blah blah blah," and I told him, "Hey, listen, it's my future, it's my own career and it's me who is going to work," and he did not agree, so I had to convince him to agree on that. I told him it's my future, I want to join the Comm. Tech. and this is it, you want me I will study Comm. Tech.

You don't want me, it's okay. He was having an idea about the Comm. Tech. — you will only be a television announcer — and he was planning to go to America to study for his Bachelors Degree. Then we got married and I went to America with him. He finished his Bachelors and I stayed there with him for nine months, then I came back and I enrolled again to Comm. Tech. and here I am. I told him, "If you want to get married with me, this is my study, and it will be my work in the future. I will be a graphic designer. You are studying business I didn't tell you, you are studying business, you should study engineering, now don't go to this place and that, it's your future its your career. So this decision is mine, mine alone."'

2. OPEN CODING

1. Importance of family and getting their approval.

2. Normalising the context of her education.

3. Assertiveness.

4. Future status within her marriage.

5. Positive self-esteem.

6. Acknowledging her interests.

7. Need for self-expression.

8. Negative identifying moment with her family about herself and the impossibility of her situation.

9. Self-perception.

10. Awareness of difference wanting to do study something other than business.

11. Identifying moment, the need to make the right decision.

12. Centrality of family the need to conform to their beliefs.

13. Participatory decision-making.

14. A certain amount of discussion.

3. Codes that pertained to the same phenomena were grouped together:

> Family
>
> 1. Importance of family and getting their approval.
>
> 2. Negative identifying moment with her family about herself and the impossibility of her situation.
>
> 3. Centrality of family the need to conform to their beliefs.
>
> 4. Participatory decision-making.
>
> 5. A certain amount of discussion.

4. Sub-themes were then developed in terms of conditions that gave rise to them, the context in which events occurred, strategies by which issues were handled and resulting consequences (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

For example, diary entry:

> 'Yes. I told them I was going to study journalism and media production and they didn't say anything, the decision was mine because I usually make my own decisions, so I told them I was going to study this. At the beginning they thought, why am I going to choose Comm. Tech and they asked me, "Are you going to work at the television station?"'

Family features strongly here and a sub-theme of **tentative agreement** was created. The student had made up her mind at this stage as to what she was going to study. A sub-theme of **self-awareness** was created.

Major theme	Family
Sub Theme	Importance of family and getting their approval; Negative identifying moment with her family about herself and the impossibility of her situation; Centrality of family the need to conform to their beliefs; Participatory decision-making; A certain amount of discussion.
Sub-theme	Tentative agreement; Self Awareness.

5. The central, or core, theme was defined by the themes subsumed under it, and was the last to saturate (Rennie *et al* 1988). The core theme evolved through memoing and drawing diagrams in order to become aware of the hierarchical structure of themes. Themes were cut out and re-arranged several times until the process emerged. Summarising the findings in the form of a narrative story (Strauss and Corbin 1990) also helped to conceptualise clearly the core theme.

The core theme into which the above eventually fitted was: Disconnection from the Self.

An example of memoing in the form of narrative story:

A significant thread that was woven throughout the fabric of these women's lives centered around their relationships with their families, but particularly with the male members, who were head of the house and controlled the family. It is of paramount importance that the

women students remain within the family fold and they were therefore reluctant to do anything that might cause conflict. All of the students sought first to get agreement from the family and, when that was not forthcoming, entered into negotiations and discussion until they had achieved the desired result.

6. As the core theme emerged, the literature was used to further validate the accuracy of the findings. Upon completion of analysis, the data was written up to reflect the common themes and process that had emerged from the data. The example of data from both the interview and the diary were further analysed to produce other themes, using the same procedure.

These codes, or loose categories, are referred to as open codes and often reflect the language used by the participants (Glaser 1978:441) (Strauss & Corbin 1990:61–75). Codes pertaining to the same phenomena are grouped into categories and concepts are assigned to as many categories as possible. This is to enable the thick description necessary for a theory that is well grounded in the data (Strauss & Corbin 1990:61–75) (Geertz 1973). These categories then become the basis for theoretical sampling.

Through the process of axial coding (Strauss & Corbin 1990:96–116), connections are made between categories and their sub-categories. The categories are compared for similarities and differences, and to determine how the emerging themes link together. At this stage the categories are developed in terms of the conditions that gave rise to them, the contexts in which they are embedded, the

strategies by which they were handled and the consequences of the strategies employed (Strauss & Corbin 1990:96–116).

Saturation of categories occurs when completeness is reached in terms of the conditions, context, strategies and consequences, and when no new information is available to indicate new codes or expansion of old codes (Strauss & Corbin 1990:117–43). According to Rennie, Phillips and Quartaro (1988:144–9), saturation of categories often occurs after the analysis of 5–10 protocols.

The central, or core, category is defined by the categories subsumed under it and is the last category to saturate. The core category evolves through an awareness of the hierarchical nature of the related categories, and of the categories repeated frequently in the data, which explain variation therein (Hutchinson 1986). Memoing is a strategy used throughout the research process to systematically record ideas and hypotheses about emerging theory (Glaser 1978; Strauss and Corbin 1990). Organising the memos helps to move the conceptual framework from a descriptive to a theoretical level. In a grounded theory study the researcher continues to ask questions of the data until fully satisfied that a 'conceptual framework is developed that is integrated, testable and explains the problem' (Stern 1985).

3.8.4 Trustworthiness

The criteria used for assessing rigour in qualitative studies is related to the objectives and purposes of qualitative research. It is assumed that qualitative research will be informed by multiple constructed realities, making truth relative to persons and contexts rather than a tangible reality discoverable through

rigorous activity (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Within the naturalistic paradigm, the researcher's objective is to present the richness and diversity of human experience, taking into consideration historical, contextual and relational factors. From this perspective, knowledge is relative to the stance, environment and experience; attempts to control cause and effect would therefore be antithetical to the function and purpose of qualitative research.

Another assumption of all qualitative research is the irreplaceability of the research process and product (Sandelowski 1986:27–37). As the study is designed around the particular question being posed, each study is unique. The objective of the research is to 'produce a coherent and illuminating description of and perspective on a situation that is based on and consistent with detailed study of that situation' (Schofield 1990). Instead of seeking to generalise the findings, the qualitative researcher limits the findings to those situations, time periods, persons, contexts and purposes to which the data are applicable (Patton 1990).

To establish the trustworthiness of this study, Lincoln and Guba's (1985:250–88) criteria for trustworthiness were used as the primary framework. According to these authors, the researcher must convince the reader that the findings are trustworthy, *i.e.* worth taking account of, by presenting their credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

3.8.5 Credibility

Lincoln and Guba (1985:250–88) state that the credibility, or truth-value, of a study can be demonstrated by describing adequately the multiple constructions of reality presented by the participants in the study. Sandelowski (1986) argues that

a study becomes credible when it presents descriptions or interpretations of human experience so accurately that a participant who had only read about the experience in the study would immediately recognise that experience if confronted by it.

The credibility of this study was sought and secured through the researcher's prolonged stay in the field, peer debriefings and presentation of the findings against a background of existing literature. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) a prolonged period of engagement in the field enables the researcher to understand the context, to recognise distortions and to build trust with his/her subjects. This was the case in this study, where interviews and conversations with individual students were conducted over a period of time, in order to obtain a detailed account of their experiences.

The first set of interviews was devised to obtain each woman's personal account of her experiences. These interviews were conducted simultaneously and the data recorded in the research diary. The second interviews and consultations were devised to determine if any changes had occurred since the initial interviews and diary recordings, and to expand on the core categories identified, *i.e.* Disconnection from Self and Claiming Self (not named as such at that time), which had emerged from analysis of the first set of interviews, diary entries and observational and oral data.

The member check procedure, *i.e.* inviting participants to check the data, is crucial to establishing credibility (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Hoffart 1991). In the instant study this procedure, as described by Hoffart (1991), was adapted to ensure the data and findings reflected accurately the realities of the participants. As

previously detailed, the measures employed to guarantee credibility were: briefing participants on the written content to verify the transcribed interviews and diary entries; allowing participants to clarify or expand upon the information provided. After they had reviewed the findings, the participants provided further information, which added hugely to the data already collected through the interviews and the diaries. This method was invaluable to the process because it allowed the participants to make comments and to present opinions they had felt unable to contribute in the context of a tape-recorded interview, where there were issues of anonymity and identification.

The constant comparative method was also used in this study and it, too, increased the credibility of the individual stories, as illustrated by the common themes that became apparent across the interviews (Rennie, Phillips and Quartaro 1988).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe peer debriefing as a process that keeps the researcher 'honest'. Throughout the research process I discussed my findings and assumptions with work colleagues and my supervisors. Another important facet was theoretical triangulation, which involved using the relevant existing literature for instructive comparisons and contrasts (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Lincoln and Guba (1985) underline the need to broaden or change hypotheses where there is disconfirming data. Accordingly, cases that did not fit the emerging pattern of data were used to revise hypotheses and to guide subsequent sampling, when this was feasible. Revised hypotheses were checked against past and future cases. As the study progressed, categories were continually compared to ensure that the theory evolving from the research fit with the data collected.

3.8.6 Transferability

Transferability refers to the practice of extrapolating the findings to contexts other that that in which the study was conducted (Lincoln and Guba 1985). In grounded theory research, however, the small number of participants dictates that the theory is really only relevant to the time and the context in which it was created. Nonetheless, as Hutchinson (1986) points out, a quality theory can identify a process that is relevant to a general population. Certain techniques were employed in this study to increase the likelihood of transferability.

The primary such technique was the purposive and careful selection of participants possessing the necessary characteristics to partake fully in the study, being students who could speak in-depth about their experience of attending college (Brink 1991). In keeping with the purpose of a grounded theory study, the initial participants were selected for their ability to speak in detail about attending Abu Dhabi Women's College as a young Emirati woman; subsequent participants were selected to complement and expand the ongoing data analysis to ensure the data was as fully representative of the population as possible. For this reason, a diverse range of participants was chosen, to permit research into a variety of social and economic backgrounds. This careful sampling procedure facilitated the 'thick description' required to enable others seeking to apply the theory to determine whether such application would be possible.

3.8.7 Dependability

The dependability of the research process is ascertained by an examination of the methodological and analytic 'decision trails' created by the researcher during the study (Hall And Stevens 1991). Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe the 'audit trail' as the grounds for dependability. This is a self-reflexive gesture as a credible study establishes that it is a dependable study. Here, dependability was ensured by keeping an audit trail and by journaling.

As suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), I documented the rationale and procedure governing the decisions made in relation to sampling, data collection, data analysis and the writing-up of results. Field notes were written after each interview, and memoing was practiced throughout the research process to keep an accurate account of questions, ideas and emerging concepts and themes. Following each interview, or informal conversation, a journal was also used to record questions and input provided by the members of my dissertation committee, by other professionals with whom I came in contact, and by the colleagues with whom I interacted throughout the process.

3.8.8 Confirmability

Confirmability refers to neutrality, meaning the extent to which the research reflects the true experiences of the participants and is free from the biases of the researcher. The audit trail and the journal records were an important method in achieving confirmability.

When conducting a qualitative research study, trustworthiness also depends on the researcher as the instrument of data collection and analysis. The

issues of researcher subjectivity and researcher competency must therefore be taken into account at every stage.

In order to ensure researcher subjectivity, I recorded and explored my feelings and biases throughout the research process and discussed any concerns arising from this examination during meetings with my supervisor and peers at ADWC. I also returned to participants several times during the study to clarify and verify my interpretation of the data. In this way, I avoided imposing my personal view on the participants' contributions.

Researcher competency is an obvious concern for the success and dependability of any study. In this case, I brought eight years' experience as a teacher and six years' experience in my teaching post in the UAE.

3.8.9 Criticism of the methods

Denzin and Lincoln argue that the grounded theory perspective is currently the most widely used qualitative interpretative framework in the social sciences. It has a broad appeal because it provides a set of clearly defined steps that may be followed by any researcher (see also Prus 1991). However, if the principles and practices of grounded theory perspective are not fully understood by the researcher, numerous problems can arise.

The researcher may face a flood of concepts that are unattached to the empirical world, which can muddle and ultimately deconstruct the coding and category schemes. The fundamental question that must be asked before data collection begins is: what is a theory? The answer is not always clear (see Woods 1992). Some writers suggest that, as the facts of a theory are always theory-laden,

a theory can therefore only discover itself, hence only the theory can ground the theory (Lincon and Guba 1985). This is an unsatisfactory tautology that has exercised the minds of many commentators. Others, however, criticise the overemphasis on theory, the use of previous theory as a guide to research, and the attempts to render previous theory more dense (see also Gerson 1991). They argue that the preoccupation with prior theory can stand in the way of the researcher's attempts to hear and listen to the interpretive theories operating in the situations under study.

The affinities grounded theory perspective shares with positivism also have a point of criticism (Roman 1992). There is a textual style that frequently subordinates lived experience and its interpretations to the grounded theorist's own reading of the situation. At the same time, grounded theory attempts to attach the qualitative research project to the 'good science' model (Denzin & Lincoln 1994). The good science model is normally associated with researchers drawn from the first world. This is something I needed to do this at the outset of this study, before I suspended my own biases, because themes and categories were emerging that I had not anticipated and that did not fit with what I had assumed would emerge from the data collection.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter has delineated the reasons informing the use of grounded theory, ethnography and phenomenology in this study. All three methods enabled me to

access and use the many layers of data collected and to create 'thick description'. The combination of the three approaches allowed me to develop a connection between several different types of data: classroom observation, informal conversation and interviews in response to questions related to the phenomena being studied. In turn, this allowed for the creation of a workable system of interconnected data, enabling me to triangulate between different aspects of the same thing (Holliday 2002:75). Triangulation is useful because it increases the validity of qualitative research by gathering and comparing 'multiple perceptions' of the same phenomena (Stake 1994:241, cited in Holliday 2002:75–6).

The intention underlying this methodology was to gain an understanding of the women students' perceptions of their experiences of studying Communications Technology at Abu Dhabi Women's College. It must be remembered that perspectives change with time, and inevitably there have been further advancements in the education system since my departure. A number of the students went on to take a degree course, and their understanding of 'self' might well have changed since they related their experiences to me. This means that to conduct this study at a future time, or with other groups of women, would be likely to produce different results.

As I continued to work on this study, I recognised that my opinions and beliefs about Arab women and their participation in higher education had evolved over time and from a variety of sources. These sources included my own reading before I went to live in the UAE, the things I learned in my role as teacher, and from the range of theoretical perspectives illustrated to me during my time living

in the UAE, mainly from my colleagues at the HCT in other cities in the UAE region.

My own experiences as a teacher at Abu Dhabi Women's College sowed the seeds of my questioning of the issues involved in the whole educational process, such as gender roles, socialisation and the possibility of completing a third-level education in the UAE.

During the initial period of my tenure I was quite often surprised by things that happened regarding the students, as these things were different from what I had assumed would be the norm. At a time, I would not have questioned what their reality was actually like. Then I began to notice that in my classes I was imposing what I regarded as 'safe' teaching, particularly in the area of art history, as I was unsure as to what would be regarded as anti-Islamic. Also, dealing with a mixed group of students whom I did not know very well did, at times, prove frustrating.

This frustration was due to a number of factors, such as lack of experience and the restrictions imposed by western ideas of college management, which had been passed down from the inception of the college in 1988 and never updated. One thing that was apparent in the UAE was the speed of change, particularly with regard to media and communications. The restrictions imposed by the college stemmed largely from fear of a community about which little was known, but much was assumed.

Both during the collection process and the analysis process I was acutely aware of the necessity to suspend bias, and regularly checked my notes to ensure I was doing this.

While the students addressed similar issues and a core category of 'Claiming Self' evolved from the study, it should be noted that no two experiences were exactly alike. However, as the aim was to explore the similarities present in the process, it follows that some of the dynamics of the individual stories could not be captured. The following two chapters will explore and expand on the themes and sub-themes that formed the core categories of 'Disconnection from Self' and 'Claiming Self'.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS — DISCONNECTION FROM SELF

4.1 Introduction and Overview

4.2 The Centrality of Family

4.2.1 Relationships with male members of the family

4.2.2 Family traditions, expectations and changes

4.2.3 Relationships with mothers

4.2.4 Conclusion

4.3 A Certain Amount of Discussion

4.3.1 Family dynamics and its effect on the students' education

4.3.2 Conclusion

4.4 Family Changes

4.4.1 A change in marriage age

4.4.2 Conclusion

4.5   Taking Action and Becoming Assertive

    4.5.1   Assertiveness

    4.5.2   Conclusion

4.6   The Veil, an overview

    4.6.1   Historical

    4.6.2   Islamic Dress and its place in modernity

    4.6.3   Wearing the *Burqa*, *Shayla* and *Abaya*

    4.6.4   Local difference

    4.6.5   Modern usage

    4.6.6   Conclusion

4.7   Transition and Education

4.8   Conclusion

4.1 Introduction and Overview

What are the processes and difficulties UAE women must overcome when they decide to pursue a third-level qualification? This chapter will examine this question and present those themes that were of fundamental importance in the lives of the women who participated in this study and to their present and ongoing roles as female members of an extended Arab family.

All of the students who took part in this study spoke of life experiences that led to disconnection from their sense of self. These included experiences of having, or being expected, to follow a predetermined path laid down for them by their family or by social mores. Where their personal responsibilities were undermined or they were excluded from decisions regarding their own lives, this had a detrimental effect on their sense of self and self-worth. Being forced to adhere to the pattern of pleasing others led them to discount their own instincts, knowledge and values.

It became apparent during the course of the study that the students' journeys through college reflected and were informed by their upbringing and socialization as traditional Arab women. In relating their stories to me, the students did not separate their own lives from the historical contexts that shaped their experiences; nor did they separate their own lives from those of their extended family.

None of the students could clearly say that she had taken a decision regarding her education in one particular moment nor how the idea came about that she would continue with her education after secondary school, or what this

might mean in the context of her family life. Leila verbalised the sentiment expressed by others:

'I never think about the college in a long way, just that I will go there and study. I do not want to get married right away, and then I will not do anything except sit at home.Things are changing here and I want to work and have my own life and I make this decision myself, of course I tell my family, if they are happy I will go and if they say no then I cannot, when I started at the college they all agree for me to go.'

(IN Leila: No.1: 24:01:00)

The theme of claiming self that emerged as the core category from the study was revealed through the telling of stories of unique life events that led to common themes of absorption within the family, disconnection from self, unique turning points and journeying towards a life defined by new and different terms. As I reflected upon the importance for these women of connecting their past histories andlife in the extended family with a decision to pursue an education, and also the importance to each woman that this decision was taken by her, for herself, I came to recognise the significance this experience held for young women schooled all their lives in the ways and meanings of being an Arab woman. hI came to understand how these women learned to deny their core sense of self in order to fit standards of behaviour defined by others, rather than through an understanding of their personal needs and feelings. I also had the good fortune to travel with these

students on their everyday accounts of their journeys towards claiming themselves, and thereby coming to live their lives *per* their own standards and values. Moving through the process towards claiming self was a frightening journey for the students whom I interviewed, yet at the same time exciting and enjoyable. Each student occupied a difference place on the continuum of 'Arab family' at the time the study was conducted. Although there were many commonalities in their stories, each student's individual journey received its unique meaning from the events that had shaped her life.

Hajar experienced many setbacks on her journey towards initiating a discussion that would lead ultimately to the path to third-level education. She describes her personal journey as follows:

'I have many complications in my life, and because of this sometimes I think I will never get anywhere. My father is dead and my stepfather is nice, but he like it his way, it took me a long time to know this, and sometimes I do not like this as he is not my father, but here you have no choice, he is the head of the house. He is good to me, but I now want to make decisions for myself, of course I would not go against him, or against my religion, but now here things are changing and the woman should be going out to college and these things.'

(IN Hajar: No.1 24:01:00)

Leila describes her last year of school and the growing realisation that she wanted more from her life than just marriage and children:

'You know here, now, we can do other things. Before, they try to say Islam is the fault why women cannot go to college or go to the work, but this is not right, in those days the woman cannot read and she does not know this. Now we know this is not true and also Shaikh Zayed is saying for a very long time that the woman is to be educated and go to work, and although they love him, sometimes they do not listen, it is alright for other girls to go to work and college, but not for me how can this be? But now I have managed to change their minds for the college, and I know I can manage as well for the work … *Inshallah.*'

(IN Leila: No.1: 24:01:00.)

The experience of making a life-changing decision is presented as two major interconnected themes, as the making of this decision cannot be addressed adequately without a knowledge and an understanding of the life events that led up to it and continue to inform the process.

The first process, which is entitled 'Disconnection from Self', includes life events that led to the women being disconnected from their core sense of self. These life events are reported under the major themes of: The Centrality of Family; A certain amount of Discussion; Family Changes; Taking action and becoming Assertive; the Veil, an overview; and Transition and Education.

The second major process, entitled 'Claiming Self', includes life events that were integral to the women's lives as college students and as prospective members of the work force. This process is reported under the major themes of: Owning the decision to study Communications Technology; Desire for family Approval; Cultural Issues and Peer Pressure; Learning through English; Student frustrations with the programme; and Education and its relevance to their lives, both present and future. The struggle to attend college and to make these radical alterations in the pattern of their lives was not a linear process for any of the students, nor did the phases occur separately from one another. While the phases could be observed individually, they were also inseparable from one another. As will become evident from the quotes, processes often occurred simultaneously, sometimes with a great deal of overlap among the themes.

4.2 The Centrality of Family

The traditional Arab family structure dictates a very specific role to its female members — one that does not envisage a woman spending most of her time at college and studying. In order to enter third-level education, these students had to engage in a difficult process of discussion and negotiation with their families. So, what motivated them to embark on this solitary path? While I can isolate common themes in their motivations and experiences, each woman's process of claiming her individuality was in many respects unique to her own family history and family personalities. I will therefore examine the common themes alongside the individual stories of the students.

When one lives in a traditional Islamic society it quickly becomes apparent that Islam not only moulds the rituals and conventions of daily social life but also permeates people's minds, behaviour, thoughts and desires in such a way as to make it appear they are 'congenital believers'. Compared to the western way of separating things religious from things secular and of making religion a subject of speculation, the spirit of Islam is intertwined completely with the traditions of this tribal society. In terms of family life, this means that everything concerning the family's domestic structure, its functions within the community and its daily routines are an integral part of Man's existence as a Muslim.

The absolute necessity for any locally born individual to be and to remain part of a clan stems from the tribal basis of Islamic society, rather than from its religious aspect. However, the way in which family members arrange their lives together and incorporate other members of the society into the family unit by marriage is prescribed to a very large extent by the tenets of Islam. Therefore, to describe family life in the traditional society on the Trucial Coast[7] solely in terms of the influence of Islam would be inadequate because the origins of its traditions and the basis of its tribal social make-up — both of which govern family life — are entangled with the tribal roots of the Islamic religion itself (Sabbagh 1996).

---

[7] The British formed naval treaties in the nineteenth century with this area (then known as the Trucial States), but there was little input into economic or social systems. Britain had some political influence with the local rulers and forbade any foreign relations with other countries, further isolating the area from outside influence. However, unlike other colonies, the Trucial States had no well-defined position within the British imperial framework; they were not colonies, Crown colonies, mandates or protectorates. They were simply states in treaty relations with Britain.

A clan-based culture necessarily requires the family to be the central point of women's lives, to be the end and aim that governs all their daily activities. That the family is central to the life of the Arab woman is beyond dispute (Sabbagh 1996) (Stowesser 1996) (Heard-Bey 1988). Based on my research and personal experiences of living in Abu Dhabi for six years, I believe that the women students encountered a variety of reactions to their decision to study in this programme, ranging from the responses of their immediate family to responses from their society as a whole. The importance and centrality of family in the lives of Emirati women and the potential imbalance of power in family relationships means a certain amount of trauma and struggle, both internal and external, derives from the decision to pursue a third-level education. Fatima explains how she presented her unexpected proposal to her parents:

'My family, yes, they are happy because, you know, they didn't know what it was before, but now when I always go and talk to them and talk about my projects and they really like it. When I decided to enter Comm. Tech. I went home and I told my mother and my father, they were sitting having lunch, I told them, "Listen, there is a programme, it's called Comm. Tech. and it's about …" well, I explained everything and I told them that I really want to enter this programme, I feel that I am into that programme, and my mother said okay, she didn't disagree, she didn't know what this means, but now when I talk about it she really likes it.'

(IN Fatima: No.1: 12:02:00)

Fatima was also keen to point out how supportive her father was of her decision to attend college:

> 'My father was fascinated by the Comm. Tech. programme and he encouraged me to enter and now he always asks me, "What are you doing?"'
> (IN Fatima: No.1: 12:02:00)

Within this context Fatima's father's response was not, in fact, unusual. Fatima came from a section of the community that would be considered liberal and her parents were young forty-somethings. (The age of parents often played a role in their reactions to their daughter's decision.) The section of the community from which Fatima came was not the norm, however, and the majority of students had to overcome a number of obstacles before they could join the college, as in the case of Hajar. Her father was dead and she was being raised by a very strict stepfather; she usually had to make an appointment to see him and all decisions regarding her life were determined by him. This situation meant she had to think through issues very carefully before presenting any new possibility to him. In spite of his power over her, she felt that by treading very carefully she could manage to control her own destiny:

> 'I told him I wanted to study journalism and media production and he didn't say anything. He questioned where I was going to work on graduating from such a programme, as it would be impossible for me

to work in a mixed environment, such as the television station, and I

knew that there would never be a possibility of that. To be honest, I

do not want that either as there are too many complications with

such a situation.'

(IN Hajar: No 1.24:01:00)

When I asked her to describe these 'complications', she replied:

'The local men would be following me and wanting my phone

number and I am not interested in this as that would create a lot of

problems for me in trying to deal with it.'

(IN Hajar: No 1.24:01:00)

4.2.1 Relationships with male members of the family

A common and significant issue the women shared was the complexity of their

relationships with the male members of their families. The rules of social

engagement mean it is of paramount importance that they remain within the

family fold, and all exhibited reluctance to do anything that might cause conflict at

home. Once they had taken the decision to attend college, all of the students first

sought the approval and blessing of their families. When this was not immediately

forthcoming, they entered into discussion and negotiation until they achieved the

desired result. It was obvious that family agreement and support was essential to

their pursuit of a third-level qualification, and that this was for a number and a

variety of reasons. All of the students took this decision by themselves and it was

largely their own choice. How easy or difficult this choice was to make depended largely on the individual family structure. However, all the students did make it very clear that even though they might have encountered some resistance, family approval was given eventually — with persistence.

Shaikha belongs to a very traditional family and it was assumed that if she went to college, she would study business because this is an accepted norm for women. She describes her discussion with her family:

> 'They did not say anything, but one of my brothers said, "Why don't you go to banking and finance? It's better for you." But I don't like dealing with numbers and I don't want to stay here for eight years! I only want to spend four years from my life. My brother know that Communications Technology means that I have to work on a television station or *Etislat*, you know, mixed. I think he knows about freelance and these things, but I think he thinks that I can't do it, Yanni not able to do it from home.'
>
> (IN Shaikha No.1. 12:02:00)

When the students spoke about 'mixed' environments they were referring to Emirati men and women working together, a notion that was unacceptable to many parents. On the other hand, Emirati women working with non-national men did not seem to pose a problem. This seemingly contradictory state of affairs stems from the traditional view of marriage: the women in the family normally made the connections, and a woman seen mixing with men would not be considered a 'good

girl' — an aspersion to be avoided at all costs (Anecdotal Evidence from Students 1999).

4.2.2   Family traditions, expectations and changes

The impact of family life on the students' daily lives, but most particularly on their college life, was not always welcome. Shaikha explained why it was often difficult for her to complete assignments that had to be undertaken as homework:

> 'Well, when I go home in the evening I have a sleep because I have been up since five o'clock, which is the first call to prayer. Then I have my dinner and then all my female relatives gather at my home, it is necessary for me to sit with them and talk with them. None of them have been to college, and the older ones did not even go to school, so they would not understand if I say I have to go to my room to study. I would be offending them as this is what we do in our family.'
>
> (IN Shaikha No.1. 12:02:00)

This was a very common occurrence, and the students themselves acknowledged that it was unlikely to change until the next generation, the parents of which would likely have been college-goers and therefore more understanding of the demands of third-level study. The problem of time to study became particularly evident during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, during which the students fasted all day and then stayed up all night, taking part in family celebrations and

cooking and serving food for their extended families and for the poor, who traditionally call to the Arab households at this time. None of the students appeared to have any anger towards her family, however, rather each was resigned to this, did not see it as being the fault of the older family members and was prepared to work around it. As Sara put it: 'It is better than not coming to college at all' (IN: Sara No:14:02:00).

Suha Sabbah posed the question often asked by western women:

> '"Why can't Arab women be more like us?" They mean, why can't Arab women be individuals as opposed to being part of an extended family system which is patriarchal and where the family is the social unit? Figuratively, the question also implies the recommendation that Arab women should jump out of an airplane without the benefit of a parachute. Ill-equipped to deal with women's growing needs, the extended family nevertheless remains the best insurance system around.'
>
> (Sabbah 1996)

Maha describes how she feels her happiness is tied up in her relationship with her family:

> 'I will not be able to enjoy my life if I am fighting with my family. I prefer if they agree with me in my decisions. They, all the people in my family, can be in agreement and know what I am doing in my work and in my life when I will work after college. *Inshallah.*'

Major changes in the role of either sex within the family can threaten the stability of the entire society. Nonetheless, the family has not escaped the pressures of change. The middle and upper classes are now educating women, even if it is for no other reason than to make them better mothers. Regardless of the agenda, education is pushing women beyond their traditional boundaries. It is a quiet revolution, but it is happening all the same: time and time again my data proved contrary to the literature and to the expected norm. Ameena was one of the very few students from a Shi'a background, yet she defied all the stereotypes. She had had a very liberal upbringing and her parents were supportive of her ambitions:

> 'I didn't tell them that I was choosing Comm. Tech. because I don't think they care about this, you know, the only thing that they thought of, especially my father, he want me to complete my studies whatever it was — to finish my studies was their main concern.'
>
> (IN Ameena: No.115:02:00)

4.2.3 Relationships with mothers

The women students commonly enjoyed very good relationships with their mothers. Suha came from a very influential family and, as her father had passed away, her brother was head of the household. However, it was her mother who made all decisions pertaining to Suha's life and well-being. When discussing their relationship, Suha told me that her mother had been married at the age of twelve and in many ways was raised by her husband, who was much older than her. After

her husband died, Suha's mother did not wish to marry again. She fully supported Suha's decision to attend college, even though she did not know which subject she was studying. (Interestingly, Suha also described how her brother had fallen in love with an American woman, whom he had met while studying in Boston, but he could not marry her because the extended family would never accept it. The family could control both sexes.) It was noticeable that in cases where the father had died, the mother was generally more liberal with the daughter's freedom (IC Suha: No.1. 15:02:00).

A number of students mentioned that their mothers had died young from breast cancer, largely as a result of a lack of education on this subject. These young mothers had died between the ages of 35 and 40 years. Their daughters described how much they missed them and expressed the belief that their mothers would have been very proud to see them attend college.

Practically all of the female relatives of the graduating students came to the graduation ceremony (IC Suha, Shaikha, Noora, 20:03:00). On graduation day, Sara, who came from a Bedouin tribe, told me her mother had never before been in a hotel and that this was an enormous step for her. She did not like to go into the city, but she made a special effort because she was so proud of her daughter and did not want to miss this important event (IC Sara: No.1 18:03:00).

The women's mothers were also their first choice for child-minding, a service that allowed the women to study but also brought with it mixed blessings for the mother–daughter relationship, as Fatima explained: 'I really want my mother to look after my son while I am at college, however I am also afraid if I spend too long at college, he will think my mother is his mother. I do not want

this to happen' (IN Fatima No1. 21:01:00). This particular concern is also very common in the West among working mothers.

4.2.4   Summary

The research question asks: what is the meaning of the experience of studying visual communications for the women who have chosen a field of study that is considered non-traditional in their culture? That meaning, while it has various social repercussions, is primarily a deeply personal one. I believe these students developed a self-awareness they could not ignore. They realised a need, a desire to do something with their lives beyond what their mothers had been able to do, namely to study to third-level. While going against accepted tradition, it was also evident that the family, its traditions and beliefs were central to who these women were as people and that they had no wish to offend their families. For each student, the feeling that she had a voice that was being heard and considered in discussions of her future was of enormous importance. Family approval, and in turn support, was essential to each woman. Although aware of the power differentials, each student was willing to work within the family structure to achieve her desired outcome: permission to attend college. There were practical difficulties, particularly where the student was married and had children, but such phenomena are not peculiar to Muslim societies. The difference here was that this situation was new.

4.3   A Certain Amount of Discussion

The previous section acknowledged that, having initiated the discussion on the possibility of attending college and although realising there would be difficulties stemming from that discussion, the young women were prepared to persevere in their negotiations. All of the students I spoke to during my time at Abu Dhabi Women's College described family life experiences that led me to question the stereotype of Arab women as presented in the western media, which largely portrays them as downtrodden, ignored and disregarded. Instead, what I saw and heard were women who were very involved in the decision-making that ultimately affected their lives. The students were quick to point out that, although the discussion with the family regarding third-level education may not have always led to the desired outcome, they felt the family had considered their arguments and made the best choice for them — always keeping in mind their happiness and well-being. They spoke of persuasion as the method employed to achieve their ends: it was clear that in this society, a head-on confrontation with a man would never have a positive outcome for a woman; change had to be introduced carefully and slowly (IC: Class group. 14:09:01).

I must make a distinction here because I am talking about Arab women from the United Arab Emirates, and not from the whole of the Arab world. The women of the UAE are, in fact, very sociable and socially accepted and are extremely perceptive of other people, a trait that may be the result of being socialised as part of a very large and extended family from a very early age. The

students noted that, as children, they never remembered a time when it was just themselves and their mother in the house; there were always lots of people around (IC: 21:10:00). As a result, UAE women are very comfortable and adept in social settings, capable of speaking for themselves and commanding respect.

Sara describes her discussion with her family regarding her education and the various concerns they expressed regarding her attendance at college. Like the other women, her parents expressed considered reasons; they did not simply say 'no':

> 'As you know, my family didn't know what programme will I go to, I just told them that first I want to go to university and they said, "No, university is too far, it is in Al Ain," and they didn't like it, so I said, "Okay, I will apply for HCT," and then, when I finished foundations, I didn't even say I am going to business, I just went there and the first time they know was when I gave them my first report and [my mother] said, "What do you study?" and I said, "Photography, graphics, media," and she said, "Do you like go and shoot?" and I said, "Yes," she said, "That's nice". They didn't refuse what I entered and they didn't question if I was going to be an announcer, no, they said, "If you are happy with this, you go for it".'
>
> (IN: Sara No:14:02:00)

Hajar, who had to consult her older brother for permission, explains how her family assumed she would sign onto a banking course because this was the family business:

> 'He doesn't mind, but one of my other brothers works in Etislat and knows some local girls there. He think they are very free and that people will be talking about them because they work with the local guys and now they are very open and that will not be good for them and maybe nobody will want to marry them.'
>
> (IN: Hajar No:1. 00:02:00)

Meera, who lives in Baniyas, on the outskirts of Abu Dhabi, still lives within a very traditional environment and she described how her father reacted to her choice of study:

> 'He immediately think it is for the television station. The girls who do this become very open and he is afraid of this thing. He cannot see me with a job where I will still be a normal girl.'
>
> (IN: Meera No:1. 14:02:00)

The students used the word 'open' to mean free and without any parental control, or male supervision.

Maha's father is deceased so she was being raised by her mother. She was the youngest child, with three older sisters and a brother. She chose her own

education path and her mother and brother fully supported her decision to go to college, even though her mother, as she explained it, had no idea what she was studying. Maha's mother relied on and trusted her daughter to make the right decisions for herself and to take account of how these decisions might affect the family (IC: Maha No:1. 15:02:00).

While most of the students found their parents open to discussion and persuasion on the matter, the most frustrating aspect was when parents made a negative decision based on lack of correct facts. This issue came up time and time again when we discussed their bids for parental approval for joining the Communications Technology programme (IC: Student Group 01:03:00).

4.3.1 Family dynamics and its effect on the students' education

Arab families often constitute second and sometimes third marriages, so the family dynamic and make-up can differ markedly from the Western norm. This can lead to confusion for the children of such families. One student in particular was very confident and outgoing in the first year, but exhibited a noticeable decrease in performance and grades in the second year. When I talked to her about this, she explained that she was preoccupied with her home life. She described how her father had been having an affair with a Lebanese woman and had decided to marry her. He bought his new wife an apartment in the City and was visiting her there, not returning home at night. Her mother was devastated: she was a young, attractive woman and had been a good wife to him. The children were resentful and angry towards their father because they felt his actions contradicted all that was good about their way of life.

The student went to her father's office and confronted him with the facts of the situation and his behaviour. This course of action terrified her, but she could not allow her mother to be treated in this manner. She explained to him that the family's beliefs were based on Islam, that he had always told his children Islam was the path they must follow, yet here he was openly committing adultery (IC Ameena 23:04:00). His disregard for his first wife and his children had destabilised the entire family unit and threatened to destroy it.

Hajar, another student in a similar situation, requested permission to leave college early one day. She explained that she had to visit her mother in hospital, where she was being treated for a broken hand. Her mother's injury had been sustained in a fight with her father's new wife. The introduction of the second wife to the family had caused great upheaval because Hajar's father had not informed his first wife of the existence of his second wife until the night he brought home the second wife to live in the family home. The obvious stresses of the situation were compounded by the fact that Hajar's family came from a poor socio-economic background, which meant her father could not support a second family. This contradicted Islamic law, which ruled that, in relation to multiple marriages, the man must to be able to provide adequately for each subsequent family. Hajar explained this to me and the fact that her father could barely support his first family (IC:00:04:00). In spite of this, the first family still felt powerless in the face of the man's decision.

Women in the UAE readily accepted the unspoken fact that male family members were of greater worth than they, and accepted the lack of affection, and sometimes love, they experienced because they were female. However, Linda

Suffon describes how this is now changing because the effect of education and literacy is to enlighten the women regarding their rights, with the natural result that some women are beginning to assert those rights. The traditional argument against formal education for women was the fact that women's function was as wife and mother, therefore education would be wasted on them. Perhaps there was another, unspoken reason: men were afraid of the power educated women might wield at home and in society (Suffon 1980).

The two students whose stories are recounted above were very well read, especially in the area of Islam. They did exactly as told by their fathers, but that did not prevent new problems arising in response to their desire to achieve a third-level qualification. On one hand, men are anxious that their daughters be educated, on the other hand, men are wary of the consequences education brings in terms of personal freedom, which is of course placed behind family honour in importance

The women's role in relation to family honour is sacrosanct: her chastity embodies the honour of her family; her behaviour can secure or destroy that honour. The woman is therefore the repository of moral deeds, carrying the family honour with her, even after marriage. Throughout her life she continues to represent her family through her modesty (*Jg Peristiany*). Maintaining this tribal code of chastity is central to Arab family life, and Suha Sabbah points out that, in some cases, patriarchal controls have become stricter in the face of the threat posed to traditional structures by women's new roles (Sabbah 1996).

Some students spoke of how their fathers wished for them to get an education, regardless of the subject. This was not always the case, however. Sara's father was a government minister, and in her discussions with him regarding her

future she employed the fact that her father had been instrumental in drafting the Emiratisation policy, which states clearly that women must take part in the workforce if the country is to achieve its goal of an entirely Emirati workforce. Sara's father rejected this line of reasoning, however, because he refused to allow her to work in an environment that included local men (IC: Sara 00:09:99).

As in any society, such change is met with a diverse range of reactions. Arab men have responded differently to women's desire for education and a career, some fearing it, others welcoming it. Those who fear it are afraid that women's liberation will result in a flood of undesirable Western characteristics into their society. This fear is directed primarily at their wives, however; they want their daughters to be educated and are pleased that this opportunity is now available. Education is the key to all this: an educated the man is more aware of the ideals of sexual equality and is therefore more likely to want an equally well-educated wife (Suffon 1980).

4.3.2   Summary

A large part of the women's experience of choosing to attend college centered around the issue of the decision and the subsequent permission, or refusal, to attend. Owning the decision to go to college was very important to these women and they stressed that it was their personal choice. From observation and discussion, I believe UAE society is in a transitional period, initiated by oil revenues that have created a need for education and the ability to provide it. The male members of society genuinely want to embrace this new opportunity, but they also fear it as a sword of Damocles: an educated female population is

desirable, but what might it bring with it? They fear changes they are not equipped to deal with.

4.4   Family Changes

Social and political changes are inevitable in any human society, no matter how much it strives to guard against them. Such changes ultimately have an effect on the family, but there are also changes from within that the family must confront. Many of the women students had valid economic reasons for attending college. One student, for example, came from the outlying district of Banyais, approximately 20 miles outside Abu Dhabi. Everyday she got up at 5.00am to catch the 6.00am bus, returning home at 6.00pm. Her family was quite poor, so she stuck with this exhausting regime because she really wanted to get a good job and bring money home. Contrary to popular myth, not all Emiratis are rich (IC: Maha.02:05:00). The motive of earning a wage is often cited by students the world over, but in UAE other reasons are emerging for women to pursue a third-level education. Many of them mentioned, for example, the fact that college had given them a social life they could not otherwise have enjoyed, as Maha describes:

> 'I am not allowed out to meet friends in the evening as there is nowhere really for us to go. I cannot go to my friend's house because her brothers or her father might be there and they will see me; this is not allowed in our culture. I have to be careful what I ask for as some in my family do not like me going to college and I do not want to

give them any reason to stop me. I think I would go mad if I could not come to college. I would just have to sit in the house all day and watch the television.'

(IN: No.2.Maha 07:01:01)

These comments explained why the students constantly asked the college to provide field trips — it was the only time they could go out with their friends. As these trips were part of the study programme and were chaperoned, they were acceptable to their families. Ameena, who held a degree in statistics from the United Arab Emirates University at Al Ain, came from a very influential family but was not allowed to work, so her only means of meeting other people was through study. She attended college with her younger sister:

'I really came to college just to get out of the house. My family will sanction this as we are dropped off and collected each evening. I already know that I will not be allowed to go out and work, I am even dreading the confrontation I will have on trying to get permission to take my work placement.'

(IN: No.1. Ameena. 15:02:00)

The college required each student to undertake a three-month work placement to complete the Diploma. In the case of a student like Ameena, the family would usually agree eventually and would accommodate the student by placing her in

one of its own companies. In this way the family could control the student and the environment in which she worked.

A number of the students on the programme were married women. One student became pregnant and was due to deliver her baby during her work placement. She was very upset at the thought of not completing her Diploma (the twelve-week work placement was compulsory). She told me:

'For the past two months I have been very tired and when I go home in the evening I am being advised by my mother and my aunts to give up college. I really do not want to do this, and I am very grateful that the college are allowing me to complete the work placement during the summer break. But the best thing for me was when I was in hospital, having delivered my son, seeing the other girls there encouraging me and saying, "We are waiting for you to finish your work placement so we can all graduate together." This for me was the best thing that I could hear, as I felt so terrible.'

(IN: No.1. Fatima. 12:02:00)

4.4.1   A change in marriage age

Another issue pushing to the fore among the student population at the Higher Colleges is the traditional marriage age. Women are married at a very early age in UAE, but now many students are choosing to finish college before they get married. Sara spoke of the changes occurring in this area, describing how women often married in their teens; unmarried women of 24 years or older were

considered 'spinsters'. The women themselves wanted to change this because they wanted the choice to put other things before marriage while they were young. They wanted to get their Diploma first and then think about getting married. Sara was fortunate in that her family agreed: they wanted her to finish her education first (IC Sara. 14:02:00).

The issue is not clear-cut, however, and many students face obstacles and challenges to their desire to attend college. While some families do support their daughter's decision to put education first, many others do not approve of this approach. In this context, the students emphasised the support they received from each other. Fatima's description of the hospital visit from her college friends bears this out. The students often discussed their various difficulties at home and were able to validate one another's concerns regarding their families and the pressures they faced, especially with regard to marriage.

Another pressing issue for the students was recognition of their achievements. A number of them cited recognition as one of the factors that kept them motivated. They explained that marriage and giving birth were always the most important things in a young woman's life, but that now graduation was starting to acquire the same status. In fact, it has become a big social event that is attended by all the female members of the family, young and old, to mark this new rite of passage in women's lives.

4.4.2 Summary

The research question asks: what are the experiences for women associated with studying in a liberal arts programme in a society that imposes certain restrictions

on its female members? Young women are now challenging the restrictions imposed on them by the family, and the increase in the marriage age is a significant development in this regard. Society has changed in the UAE: the current generation is exposed to television and other significant external factors that were not present in their parents' generation. As a result, young Emirati men and women want more freedom. Whilst change has begun, it will take a long time to reach fruition. The things the young people want are considered 'western' by their families and therefore discouraged. This does not stem from an anti-West sentiment, rather it is a general fear that their own culture will disappear.

4.5   Taking Action and Becoming Confident

The notion of taking action and being assertive was very much intertwined with the choice to attend college. The decision-making process seemed to initiate a more reflective approach, encouraging the students to look inwards and acknowledge their own needs. This self-reflection led in turn to the students beginning to take action on their own behalf, often for the first time in their lives. As Fatima wryly acknowledged: 'This was the first time in my life that I think for myself. Till now, I did not even make my own breakfast' (IN: Fatima: No.1: 12:02:00).

One important element in strengthening the students' resolve was being able to talk to others about their common experiences. This was very important as most of the women were the only member of the family ever to have attended college, or indeed school, therefore it was difficult to share these feelings and

experiences at home. Instead, they sought validation from their classmates (IC Suha, Shaikha, Noor, 20:03:00).

This process of recognising constructive action and taking pride in it was much enhanced by the work placements in the final year of the programme, which gave the students external validation. For many, this was when they finally realised that they could 'do it', and they began to talk about their futures with confidence and a marked determination to succeed in a career outside the home. For all of the students, this will to succeed involved building a supportive network and re-organising numerous aspects of their daily lives. As the students proceeded in their college life, they began to embrace personal values and to form new attitudes and behaviours, which were recognised and approved through supportive relationships (CO: 00:10:01). Hajar, for example, had the most restrictive family, but the constant support of her friends enabled her to succeed. They made sure, for example, that the college helped Hajar to get a job at the Women's Union, which was a female-only environment under the patronage of Shaikha Fatima, the president's wife (CO:00:05:01). This allowed her to convince her stepfather to allow her to work outside the home.

In time, as the students came to know themselves through building friendships of their choice and claiming new lifestyles, they readily accepted their families' concerns regarding working outside the home. Part of this process included an acceptance of their own limitations and an understanding that decisions such as these might turn out to be an ongoing process. Here, too, was an enlightening experience for me as an outsider: we in the West are often unable to

accept the 'limitations' we perceive in other societies, overlooking the fact that sometimes it is those very 'limitations' which make that society work.

4.5.1   Assertiveness

Leila Ahmed, an Egyptian Arab feminist, participated in the formation of the education system of the UAE and her observations are insightful:

> 'I was placed, as soon as I arrived in the country, on a committee whose task it was to oversee the development and reform of education throughout the Emirates. In the preceding few years schools had opened fast and without much planning, and we were required now to revise and rationalize the curricula and plan the future of education. All the other members of the committee were men. In those days there were no more than three or four people in the entire country with PhDs, and I was one of them. It was this that had made it possible to appoint me, a woman, to this high-level committee.'
>
> (Ahmed 2000)

One of the women Leila Ahmed interviewed during her time on this committee was Mariam, who came from one of the ruling families of the Emirates. Ahmed took her through the questionnaire, and Mariam concluded by expressing the opinion that every woman was entitled to an education of the highest level, and to pursue whatever line of work she chose. Ahmed then asked her about women's role

in Islam and the requirements of Islam. 'Who founded Islam?' was Mariam's conservative retort. 'And whose side do you think he was on?' Ahmed fired back (Ahmed 2000).

Mariam was a very forthright person, but Ahmed points out that every woman she met was clear and passionate about the importance of education for women. They had a definite vision and were strong in articulating it:

> 'It soon became obvious to me that, for whatever reason, the local culture bred people who were intellectually strong and unafraid, including confident, clear-minded, utterly tenacious women who need no instruction from anyone in the qualities of strength, clarity, vision, understanding, imagination.'
>
> (Ahmed 2000)

This was an observation that I, too, made quite early on at the college: these women were incredibly strong in their own minds. They freely discussed their future plans and ideals; I was not sure at this point whether they had considered the obstacles, or if there were actual obstacles. The diaries and interviews illustrate again and again just how assertive the students were, how passionate they were about their futures and what the decision to pursue an education meant to them at that particular moment in their lives. Fatima described how she argued her case with her new husband; under Sharia law, he was in effect her guardian:

'Well now … I got married and I have one baby. First [my husband] didn't like it, he said, "No, I don't want my wife to go in the studio and be an announcer and, blah blah blah," and I told him, "Hey listen, it's my future, it's my own career and it's me who is going to work," and he did not agree, so I had to convince him to agree on that. I told him, "It's my future. I want to join the Comm.Tech. and this is it, you want me, I will study Comm. Tech. You don't want me, it's okay." He was having an idea about the Comm. Tech., you will only be a television announcer, and he was planning to go to America to study for his Bachelors Degree. Then we got married and I went to America with him. He finished his Bachelors and I stayed there with him for nine months, then I came back and I enrolled again to Comm. Tech., and here I am. I told him, "If you want to get married with me, this is my study and it will be my work in the future. I will be a graphic designer. You are studying business, I didn't tell you, "You are studying business, you should study engineering, now don't go to this place and that," it's your future, it's your career. So this decision is mine, mine alone."'

(IN: Fatima: No.1: 12:02:00)

4.5.2 Summary

The ability to take action and be assertive was a slow process that evolved over the course of the women's three years at the college. As they moved through their studies, they developed higher self-esteem, coupled with an awareness that their

struggle for education had had a positive outcome, thanks to their perseverance. This was an important realisation in their self-growth. Importantly, too, the women validated one another's choices and encouraged and supported each other in a way that was not always available to them in the home.

The students began to show how strong-willed they were, gradually acknowledging and asserting their rights. The decision to take up third-level education was daunting for many, convincing their families of their choice more daunting still, but they had stuck with it and achieved it. This experience shaped them as women and as individuals and would allow them to assert their status in a future marriage.

4.6 The Veil, an Overview

Few religious manifestations arouse such strong feelings as Islamic 'veiling'. Muslims and non-Muslims alike have produced many, many books, articles, television programmes, etc., discussing and dissecting various aspects of veiling (Roald 2000). In terms of western perception of Muslim women, the issue of veiling is the one invoked most frequently, and usually in a negative manner. This section will examine the place of the veil in the UAE, its history and tradition and how it affects the young Emirati woman who pursues a third-level education.

In the UAE, as in some other Gulf countries, modes of dress and perceptions of same are very varied. The clothing of UAE Muslim women can be divided into three different items: the *Burqa*, the *Shayla* and the *Abaya*. (These same items of clothing are worn in other Gulf countries, but may have different local names.)

4.6.1 The history of the veil

One student told me the history of the *Burqa* in the UAE, as told to her by her grandmother and which was in line with the literature on the subject. It is believed that veiling was a common practice in ancient Persia, and was imported into Arabia and adopted by the upper classes in the settled areas of the country as a sign of prestige (Ahmed 1994) (Mernessi 1987) (Suffon 1980). As Hajar's grandmother's story tells us:

> 'It came over here from Persia. It was seen as a high-class thing to do and Mohammed's wives copied this as a fashion, but it was never dictated by the prophet, even though the people sometimes say it is. He referred to the veiling as for her, the woman, to protect herself from unwanted men in the *souk* and such places.'
>
> (IC: Hajar 23:04:99)

Bullough rejects the oft-quoted view that Muhammed ordered women to veil because they were 'continually giving trouble to men'. He further points out that veiling and segregation are not confined to Muslim culture: Christians and Jews in the Middle East also veiled and secluded their women right up until the twentieth century (Vern L. Bullough, cited in Suffon 1980).

4.6.2 Islamic dress and its place in modernity

The face-mask worn by older Emirati women, and indeed by other Gulf Arab women, is the *Burqa* and it is worn all day. It is a mask made from a heavy canvas that is painted or dyed in gold. The *Burqa* covers only certain portions of a woman's face, which portions must include the upper lip, the central part of the cheeks above a line extending from the mouth, the front part of the nose and the lower one-third or one-quarter of the forehead, including the eyebrows. The parts of the face left uncovered are the eyes, the upper and lower parts of the cheeks, the sides of the nose, the upper part of the forehead and the chin. The *burqa* is held in place by four strings tied together at the back. It is a very strange piece of decorative clothing because although the intention is to obscure, the design means it is the most attention-grabbing part of the woman's attire (Wikan 1982:92).

A number of different stories are told as to the origin of the *Burqa*, the most prevalent being that women cover their face in keeping with the tenets of Islam, that is the sexually mature woman must be kept from the view of the sexually mature man, who is also a potential marriage partner. I spoke to the students about the *Burqa* and one told me it originated with the Bedouin women, who lived in the harsh climate of the Arabian desert and had to endure sand storms and scorching heat, therefore used the *Burqa* to protect their skin (IC: Hajar, Maha, Meera 22:01:98). Another student explained that, as women get older and consider themselves no longer attractive, they use the *Burqa* to hide their faces from the world (IC: 24:05:98).

The interpretation of the *Burqa* often varies from family to family, as can often be the case with tribal customs handed down from generation to generation. The Emiratis are a tolerant people by nature, and the answer to questions about such customs is often 'as you like', in other words, it is whatever you are comfortable with. The *Burqa* is not ubiquitous in Emirati society, rather it is associated with particular tribes. The Al Zaabi and the Al Mazrouei tribes are most associated with it, but even within these tribes it is a matter for the individual woman to decide. In my first year at the college I had a student from the Al Mazrouei family, but she left college once she married. I have since been told by her cousins that she now wears the *Burqa*; she is about 24 years old. This was one issue of Islamic tradition and culture upon which the students had no problem voicing opinions. In relation to Fatima, the student who left college after marrying, the other students were very annoyed by her decision to wear the *Burqa* because they viewed it as a step backwards. They felt the *Burqa* belonged in the past. The fact that women in the Emirates are not forced to wear the *Burqa* made Fatima's decision worse, in their eyes (IC: Hajar, Maha, Meera, Sara 22:05:98).

Another student caused consternation among her classmates when she got married in first year and dropped out of college to live with her husband's family in Al Ain. When I asked what the problem was, the girls expressed horror at the fact that this student had chosen this course of action of her own volition. Maha described a deadening life for this student: 'she could go mad sitting with all those old ladies all day, eating dates and drinking tea. There is nothing to do in Al Ain. She will also be wearing the *Burqa* because all the tribe there traditionally wear it.

Her husband is from a very good family and he has a lot of money, but she will go crazy' (IC: Maha 13:11:98.). Another friend of this student, Ameena, said:

'I know this sounds terrible, but it is a really backward thing to do. We feel we have moved away from this *Burqa*, it is ugly and unnecessary. But that family always wear it, even the young women.'
(IN Ameena: No.1. 13:11:98)

The students explained to me again and again that in the UAE the issue of the *Burqa* and its use in the traditional Trucial States stemmed from tribal origins, not Islamic ones (IC: Suha, Fatima, Maryam, Noor 00:12:97). Some referred to the *Burqa* as being 'something their grandmothers wore when they became old' (IC: Suha, Fatima, Meera, Noor 00:12:97).

4.6.3   Wearing the *Burqa, Shayla* and *Abaya*

One of the most interesting aspects of the *Burqa* is that it is worn not only where and when it ought to be worn but more frequently than it needs to be worn. It appears that women who choose to wear it do so not only to fulfil society's expectations but to fulfil their own personal needs and ends, for example by wearing it where only women are present. The *Burqa* does not hold any class distinctions: it is worn by the President's wife, Shaikha Fatima, and by the desert Bedouin women. Nor is it considered sacred: the women laugh openly about the *Burqa* and its effects on other people. One student told me of a visit her mother paid to Marks & Spencer in London. While there, she saw a little boy playing on

the floor and went over to talk to him. She bent down towards him, but when he looked up and saw her *Burqa*, he screamed and ran away. The students — and the woman's family — found this story extremely funny.

Unni Wikan views the *Burqa* as one of the oddest pieces of material culture ever fashioned by Man. It may also be one of the aspects of Arab tradition that will be discarded in the future (Wikan 1982:95). Opinion on the wearing of the *Burqa* and its function in society varies widely. Our classroom discussions about this issue provoked many different explanations and interpretations. None of the students discussed it as an Islamic tradition, rather they looked upon it as something that was simply done. Of course, the nature of the Communications Technology programme meant it attracted students who would not be considered to come 'from the mainstream', so their opinions and interpretations were many and varied (CO: 00:11:98).

Suha, who came from the outlying Banyais area and whose family was considered very traditional Bedouin, wore the *Abaya* and the *Shayla*. When I asked her why she wore both, she was quite astonished that there could even be a question about it:

> 'I never really think about this things. It makes no difference to me whether I wear it or not, I automatically put it on when I am going out, sometimes my *Shayla* fall off, but I will not die, you know (*laughs*). I really cannot answer this as I don't care if I wear it or not.' (IC Suha: No.1. 17.11:99)

Students of mixed marriages, whose mothers were from an area like Palestine or Jordan where the veil was not compulsory, often chose not to veil. On the other hand, a number of students from mixed marriages chose to wear the *Hijab* in its entirety. Leila, whose mother was Palestinian, was considerably more conservative than her mother and more devout in observing the Islamic call to prayer five times daily. I had met Leila's mother on a number of occasions and was interested as to why her daughter was so different in her outlook. Leila's response to my query was:

> '… in this country we can do as we please, it is not Saudi, and because of this people go with how they feel and feel comfortable with, although the Palestinian women normally do wear a head covering, [my] mother was not religious and did not care to wear it, also my father, although he is local and observes the local dress, he believe like us we can choose.'
>
> (IN: Leila No.2. 16:02:00)

Ameena's parents were both Emirati, but they had lived abroad as her father was an ambassador. She choose not to wear the veil and gave a practical reason for her decision:

> 'I don't wear it in the day as I am married now and am very involved with my children, and it's difficult to attend to small children when covered, it's very restrictive, my husband also agrees with this. My

mother covers, but then she is older than me and she prefers to do this.'

(IN: Abeer: No.1. 17:02:00)

This was accepted by the student body as Ameena's choice because they knew her personally and she was one of the class. If, however, an Emirati student chose not to wear the *Shayla* or *Abaya* questions would sometimes be asked and she would usually be regarded as not being a good Muslim (CO: 00:11.00).

4.6.4 Practical problems and different interpretations

The majority of students at Abu Dhabi Women's College wore the *Shayla*, but they differed from many of the local women in their general indifference to the whole issue of covering (CO: (Dubai) No.1. 00:11.00). When the issue did arise on campus, it was usually in relation to questions of practical safety in the studios. Lighting was part of the syllabus, which meant ascending a ladder to put lights in place on the grid — a task that was potentially hazardous when the woman was wearing extra layers of fabric. In response, the college attempted to introduce a policy that students did not wear the *Abaya* while climbing ladders. This move encountered resistance because the Lighting lecturer was male, therefore the students would not remove their *Abaya* in his presence. The issue had not been resolved prior to my departure and to date the situation remains the same, with students ascending the ladders wearing the *Abaya*. As far as the students are concerned, this poses no problem because they are very used to moving about in this clothing (IC: Suha, Shaikha, Noora 12:03:98).

On a more personal level, the students interpreted the issue of covering in varying degrees of acceptance. Some students viewed it as an infringement of their rights as women and refused to cover. These students pointed out that veiling was not dictated in the Qur'an, which states only that a woman's hair be covered. They felt it was men who had chosen to interpret it as referring to full veiling. On the other hand, the majority of local women wore the *Shayla* and *Abaya* and saw it as not only their choice but their right: 'People like to think that we are forced to do this, but this is not the case' (IC: Sara, Fatima, Ameena 08:11:99).

On a social level, some saw covering as a kind of freedom: they could walk freely in shopping centers and go into coffee shops as nobody knew who they were, therefore they could not get into trouble at home. This interpretation of veiling is not a new phenomenon. In the 1920s the redoubtable Lady Mary Monteague wore the veil while travelling in Arabia because it afforded her the freedom and safety of anonymity (Monteague, cited in Suffon 1980). Others spoke of using their face-cover to prevent their skin darkening in the sun because they saw lighter skin as being more attractive.

4.6.5   Modern usage

The question of when, where and why to veil is eliciting different answers as Emirati society moves into the modern era. Some reasons still invoke the past, however. For example, some students wore the veil because they knew of instances where an older, married man saw a young girl unveiled, was attracted by her looks and approached her father with a view to marrying her (IC: Students 10:04:00). Arranged marriages are no longer common practice in the urban areas

of the UAE and, generally speaking, girls have a say in who they will marry. It must be stressed that this is not always the case, however, and there were examples amongst the students I spoke to where girls had married a man chosen for them out of loyalty to their parents and a desire to please them (IC: Suha, Shaikha, Noor, Ameena 12:09:00).

Islamist women, in particular, are defensive about veiling. While the imposition of the veil and the form it has taken is often contested, many Muslim women nonetheless choose the veil as a symbol of their devotion to Islam, embracing it as a public statement of their private religious choices. For them, the veil is liberating; it is not an oppressive force. They maintain that it enables them to become the observers instead of the observed, thus protecting them from the dictates of the fashion industry and the pressures of the beauty myth. In the context of the patriarchal structures that shape women's lives, the veil is seen as a means of preventing sexual harassment and 'gaining respect'. These views are echoed in Iran, where the veil is seen as a form of liberation, as a stand against being 'slaves of imperialism' and as a means that allows full participation in the public domain (Ashar in Yamani, cited in Roald 2000). Some of these aspects of veiling would apply equally to the student body in the UAE, but none of them discussed it in these terms because they had not considered this subject in any in depth way.

Emirati women generally wear the veil out of choice. They are not forced to do so; they choose to do so. This freedom to choose does not characterise the entire region. Many of the freedoms available to young Emariti women do not exist for their sisters a few miles away Saudi Arabia, although these regions are

very similar in many ways. For example, in the UAE women may join the army and carry weapons, as described by Geraldine Brooks in her book, *Nine Parts Desire:* 'In the United Arab Emirates, Muslim women soldiers, their hair tied back in Islamic veils, jump from helicopters and shoulder assault rifles.' Hajar understood this difference between compulsion and choice and how it defined women's approach to veiling:

> 'When we [UAE women] go to London or the United States we always wear our *Abaya* and *Shayla* because we want to, it's part of who we are. For example, we meet the Saudi girls and they will never wear the *Abaya* and *Shayla* and I think this is because Saudi is very strict and they feel the only time they can be free is when they are abroad.'
>
> (IN: Hajar: No 1.24:01:00)

One must be careful of the ideals of 'freedom' here: the women may choose to veil, but it remains true nonetheless that choosing not to veil raises questions. The wearing of the veil has a long and varied history throughout the Islamic world (Satterah Ferman Brooks) and to ignore that history can provoke controversy.

A telling incident occurred in the college during my tenure there, although not in my particular area. The Computer Architecture course taught the assembly, maintenance and repair of computers, which necessarily entailed taking apart the machines and reassembling them. This class was taught by a British, male teacher and he suggested to his fully veiled students that they unveil for this particular

task as it carried potential hazards. This request caused consternation among the students, who refused to unveil. The lecturer reported the situation to his supervisor and although the electrical currents in the disassembled parts were not active, the supervisor agreed with her lecturer, which caused further difficulties. Eventually the students approached the head of student services with the problem and an investigation was initiated. It transpired that the issue was not veiling *per se*, but that the lecturer was uncomfortable with being unable to see the students he was teaching. The student services manager saw this as a clear illustration of Western difficulties with the issue of veiling, which often failed to understand its importance to the woman who chooses to do so and views that choice as her right. Failure to acknowledge this choice can cause great offence (IC with Students 00:02:00) (IC Students Services Entry 00:02:00).

As with all aspects of Emirati life, there are rules, but the practice is more complex. The decision to veil is multifaceted, encompassing many different considerations. Among them is the simple matter of personal choice, styles and interpretations. Towards the end of my time in Abu Dhabi, I noticed the students had started to 'shape' their *Abaya* in order, as one student put it, 'to stop it looking like a big binliner' (IC Students 13:02:01).

4.6.6 Summary

The research question asks: what cultural adaptations, if any, must be made by students in order to succeed in the programme? This was, in fact, the most difficult question from which to elicit a satisfactory answer. Initially, I decided not to mention the veil at all because in my experience of UAE society it was not a

major issue. Later, when it did arise in the course of the research, all discussion on this matter had to be prompted — it was not an issue of immediate concern to the students. It did, however, have an impact on college life, and from the students' perspective veiling affected freedom, change and aspirations to modernity. I felt the presentation of the theme of Islamic covering was very important to an understanding of the students and, given its place in western perceptions of all things Arab, that it was necessary to show that these women did not feel they had been forced to veil. The students did not have any strong views either way on the issue, and the opinions expressed on the subject were largely moderate, which is in many ways indicative of the UAE itself.

4.7 Transition and Education

In traditional Arab society the period from puberty until the time of marriage was a most uneasy one for the family of a young girl. They continually feared for her honour and usually arranged her marriage as soon as possible. Upon reaching puberty the girl had to don the veil and stay within the female quarters of the household to protect her from unwanted attentions and to safeguard the family's honour (Suffon 1980). In modern Arab society the concept and practice of veiling is undergoing a transition, and education is in the vanguard of that change.

Where once there was a definite path ascribed to women by virtue of being female, education is opening new opportunities and granting women a new level of confidence and social status. As with the decision to cover, there is no fixed rule anymore for women and this uncertainty, this opportunity, has brought anxiety

for certain sections of Arab society. Recent government policy holds that women must have a role in the workforce if the country is to succeed in its Emiratisation plan, *i.e.* that the UAE will be self-sufficient and not require expatriate workers. While the people have welcomed this policy, in practice it poses problems, particularly for fathers whose daughters are eager to join the workforce. It is the necessary freedoms stemming from this involvement that present a difficulty for male members of society and the older generation. Some students, particularly those from strict families, told me that their fathers asked for their timetables so as to ensure that their drivers were there the moment they finished classes to prevent them spending time sitting around with friends. I thought this a little exaggerated, until one day Hajar pointed out to me her car and driver arriving at the car park five minutes before the end of her classes (IC Hajar: No 1. 00:01:96).

Parents' concerns for their daughters can affect the choices of college courses made available to the women. Most of the students spoke of their parents' lack of knowledge of Communications Technology, which affected their views of the off-campus trips that were necessary to teach and complete the programme. According to Sara:

> 'My parents don't understand that the UAE need people for the media, even though the President has said many times and they all listen to him, but it is okay when it is for somebody else, not for [my father's] own daughter.'
> (IN: Sara No:14:02:00)

The UAE is most certainly in need of trained personnel for its media industry. It is a very young industry, with great scope for expansion, but that will require the right people to make it happen. The fact that it has developed only recently — mass media and world media have been available only since the first Gulf war in 1991 — means it is unfamiliar territory for parents, which naturally makes them wary of allowing their daughters to enter into a career in this area. Hajar told me:

> 'It was pressure from women that got the media opened up during the Gulf war. The older women and those with children were very frightened during this time as they were been given little or no information from the government, and yet they were able to find out exactly what was happening from their relatives in Qatar, who had satellite television and could get regular information from CNN. The got a delegation together and presented their fears to Shaikh Zayed, who agreed with them and consequently allowed the setting up of satellite television.'
>
> (IC Hajar: No. 1. 00:01:96)

It falls to the colleges to try to assuage parents' fears. When the student arrives on campus, she becomes the responsibility of the college, which is *in locum parentis* from 9.00am until 4.00pm. Parents who visited the college constantly expressed anxiety about the changes in their home life as a result of their daughters being educated to third-level. There was a genuine desire to secure the best possible

education for their daughters, but also a gnawing worry about the temptations proffered by the city.

Their concerns were not solely about corruption. Several mothers, in particular, were very anxious that nothing happened to threaten their daughters' future at the college because they were determined that their daughters should receive the education they themselves did not have. These women wanted their daughters to have careers, or at least have the choice of working outside the home. One student's mother explained to me that not all Emiratis are rich, and that sometimes an educated woman can earn more money than her husband and may, in fact, be the sole breadwinner (IC: Mother 00:09:99). This held true for Suha, a student from the impoverished Baniyas district, who was the sole breadwinner for her entire family of two brothers, three sisters and parents (IC: No.3. 00:11:98.)

4.8   Conclusion

The process of disconnection from self occurred through a complex interplay of various factors, including: family of origin; cultural beliefs; religious beliefs; traditions regarding the role of women; power issues within the family; and feelings of powerlessness on the part of the students to bring about effective change in their lives.

Changes can be difficult in any society, but such difficulties are often more pronounced in the UAE because of the traditional social structure and the fact that major changes have occurred very quickly. The family unit is the fulcrum point of Emirati society, with a closely defined function and individual roles within that

function. In the early twenty-first century, families in the UAE are being forced to consider and make decisions regarding issues that would have been unheard of just a generation ago. Families are feeling their way into this unfamiliar new world, attempting to safeguard their children's well-being while at the same time responding to the new opportunities available to their sons — and daughters. Alongside this is the reverence for the Islamic religion, which informs families' understanding and interpretation of their world and affects young women's opinions and choices.

While there is trepidation about the future and what it will bring for UAE society, there is a concomitant sense of urgency about pressing ahead and establishing a new order in preparation for the days when the oil reserves are depleted. For this reason, any conflicts between Islam as interpreted by local traditions and the demands of modernisation must be addressed and reconciled.

The greatest of these conflicts is the question of freedom for women. Both Islam and modernisation support the notion of freedom for women, but local traditions are slower to embrace this particular change. Over the past seven years, however, ruling families, government agencies and independent organisations have made, and continue to make, much progress in their efforts to ensure that women receive the rights accorded them by Islam, which rights will prevent delays in the race towards modernisation.

It was from these unique places within their societies and their personal lives that the participant students began to move towards finding themselves for the first time. They harboured within themselves an incorruptible sense of spirit, of inner self, that remained strong in spite of the disempowering experiences to

which they were subjected in their daily lives. The students' discussions about how they came to embrace this inner sense of self will be presented in the next section, followed by the common themes that arose as the women moved towards claming their sense of self.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS: CLAIMING SELF

5.1 Introduction to Claiming Self

5.2 Owning the decision to study Communications Technology

5.2.1 Desire for Family Approval Regarding the Choice of Study

5.2.2 In summary

5.3 Cultural issues surrounding the choice of programme

5.3.1 Peer Pressure

5.3.2 In summary

5.4 Learning through English

5.4.1 Use Of The English Language In Their Intended Work Environment

5.4.2 Preference For Native English Speakers As Teachers

5.4.3 In summary

5.5 Student frustrations with the programme

5.5.1 Inequality in the Programme

5.5.2 Caught in a Double Bind

5.5.3 In summary

5.6 Education and its Relevance to their lives, both present and future

5.7   Conclusion

5.1   Introduction to Claiming Self

The young women who participated in this study related life events that pointed clearly to a disconnection from their core sense of self. This stemmed largely from their individual positions within the Islamic society of the UAE, positions that were often at odds with their personal ambitions and capabilities. In this chapter we shall move on to consider the themes that make up the larger process of claiming self. Here we will find evidence that, in spite of their backgrounds and social environments, each student managed to preserve her inner spirit, or the essential part of self necessary to persevere with her decision, against the odds.

What was it about these particular women, or their lives, that allowed them to embrace, or claim, the inner strengths and resources essential to their decision to acquire a higher education? Why did these particular students continue to persevere in their decision, in the face of setbacks and obstacles, when other students in similar situations surrender their hope for the future and in some cases lose heart altogether? For some reason, this group of students was in the vanguard of social change in the UAE, indeed without their perseverance such change would never have come about. They are living in the transitional phase that is slowly moulding their generation and those coming after them. Islamic society is, for the first time, seriously addressing issues of personal freedom, such as freedom to choose an education, to choose if and when to become a mother, to choose how to dress. And in this debate there is new voice: that of the young, educated woman.

The theme of 'claiming self' derived from the students' responses — they all of spoke of an 'inner self' that was determined to succeed, although each one described it differently. Maha, for instance, explained it as follows:

> 'I am, you know, aware that in this country we can do many things, but somebody must start and do the things now. Because many girls are going to the college it is becoming easier, but there are still some girls who, unfortunately, because their family does not know what to do, will never get this chance. But I know if I did not try so hard that I would not be here today, something inside make me keep trying.'
>
> (IN Maha: No. 2 07:01:01)

Ameena described how she embraced her 'inner self' out of the fear of being shut up behind four walls for the rest of her life:

> 'When I finish school, I think, oh my God, what will I do now? I cannot stay at home like my mother and my aunties, I will go crazy (*laughs*) … I might as well be in jail! So I find out from other girls about the HCT and I apply. Now, thank God, I am here. I don't know if they will let me work, but I will deal with that in four years' time. Not now, there is no need.'
>
> (IN Ameena: No.2. 16:04:01)

What, then, were the triggers that motivated these young women to aim for a third-level education and, in turn, a career in the media that would involve working outside of the home, especially when they were likely to be the first person in their family to do so? To understand this, it is necessary to explore the common areas of the students' experience, as well as their individual circumstances.

One of the common experiences shared by all the students was that they each reached a point in their lives that led them to acknowledge that a different kind of life was possible, and indeed probable, for them. This understanding of their own potential occurred at different times in their lives and was usually reinforced by a number of different incidents. Every one of them expressed disillusionment, and sometimes despair, at the prospect of living at home from the age of seventeen and allowing somebody else to take all the decisions that directly affected them (IC Suha, Shaikha, Noora 07:01:01). This was not the life these young women wanted, or expected, to lead: they were pulled towards the belief that for them, things could be different.

5.2   Owning the decision to study Communications Technology

The choice of study programme and the content of their chosen study programme was a big issue among the students. It became obvious very quickly that, in most cases, there was a direct conflict between the parents' or family's choice of programme for the student and her own preferred choice. Most students told me

that their families' preference was for Business Studies. Others said families had pressured them into taking Business, but were open to persuasion on the question of Communications Technology. Most eventually agreed in principle that the student could choose this programme, albeit under the proviso that under no circumstances would she be allowed to take up a work placement in the television station (IC Students: 15:02:00).

The fact that students made their decision regarding study programmes once they were in the college — not before, as is done in the West — gave them the option of being economical with the truth. For example, one student told her family that she was taking Business, her plan being to persuade them around to the idea of Communications over a period of time. She didn't tell them she was already studying Comms. Tech. as she feared it might result in an acrimonious argument and permission to attend college being revoked (IC Students: 15:02:00).

Once the students were enrolled and had started on the programme, they were excited to discover the possibility of working freelance once their degree was completed. This was particularly the case for those from the more restricted section of the community. Although some students felt that their brothers had a better understanding of the concept of freelance work than their parents, they felt they nonetheless doubted a woman's ability to actually do this kind of work. This was a particularly difficult situation for the students, as many of them felt very angry that their brothers held such power over them. This resentment was exacerbated where the brother in question was younger than the student. As Noor said:

'You know, this is one thing in our family structure that I really hate, how he [her brother] can have this control over me and he is three years younger than me!'

(IN Noor: No.2. 10:05:01)

A member of student services also told me that on several occasions a mother coming to the college to discuss a problem with her daughter would bring a male member of the family to accompany her; some Emirati women will only venture outside in the company of a male member of their household. These young men, often only about twelve years old, would 'lay down the law' regarding their college-going sisters, who might be eighteen years of age. When following this up with students, she usually found that they regarded this as one of the most unjust and humiliating experiences they had to deal with as young women. Obviously there were the age and gender issues involved, but also the added element of sibling rivalry (IC Student Services 09:10:97).

As a result of these claims on her decision-making, owning the choice to attend college and which college course to opt for was of enormous importance to each student. They spoke of it again and again, without prompting, like Sara when she commented: 'The decision was mine and because I liked this programme, it's mine.' She didn't ask her parents' permission, but they were very supportive of her and were comfortable to let her make her own decision once she didn't do anything that went against their beliefs (IC: Sara No:00:04:99).

Shaikha was also very keen to point this out: 'It was mine, the decision to do Comm. Tech. They did not object. My father is asking always, "Where you will work with this major?"' (IN Shaikha No.2. 07:01:01). And similarly for Hajar:

'They [her parents] never objected, they really supported my choice. Yes, they are very interested in what I am doing and I show them my work. Studying here means a lot to me. I remember the first year, when I was learning photography. I went like crazy, like, at the house I went to photograph every bit of it, even my nephew. My mother, you know, the whole family, so they told me, "We are going to open a photography store so that you can keep away from us." You know I had fun, great fun, doing this programme. No, I didn't tell them that I was choosing Comm. Tech. because I don't think they care about this, you know, the only thing that they thought of, especially my father, he want me to complete my studies whatever it was, to finish my studies was their main concern.'

(IN Hajar: No 2. 08:05:01)

Suha was also anxious to explain that her family had not put pressure on her to choose any particular programme and emphasised strongly that the decision was hers:

'Yes, they did not put pressure on me to choose, I chose by myself. So I made the decision and they supported this. In 1996 I did my O levels, I passed and decided to join the college. I was sixteen by then

and when I entered I had to do two exams, challenge exams, English and mathematics. I passed those exams so I did not have to do a foundation year. I had direct entry to first-year Comm. Tech.'

(IC Suha 25:02:00)

5.2.1 Desire for family approval regarding the choice of study

In the UAE women did live, and still live, within well-defined family boundaries. Although they do engage in certain activities and ties beyond the home, there is little doubt that family relations remain central to their lives and may have consequences that ultimately impact on their education. All of the students in this study identified their family as the most important thing in their lives. They saw the family structure largely in very positive terms and believed their family would always make decisions based on what was the best for them as individuals (IC Suha, Shaikha, Noora 00:05:99).

Sara, who was the adopted daughter of one of the ruling families, spoke of her desire to always do the right thing:

'I am adopted, as you know, and they are extremely good to me and have provided well for me. I really want to do well in my studies so I have a good report to show them. They support my decision in taking this programme as they were reluctant to allow me to go to Al Ain, to the university, as I would be a long way from home and would have to stay there during the week. I did not know about this

programme until I came to the college, and now I am again pleased

that they made this decision for me as it turned out to be for the best.'

(IN: Sara No:2 14:02:01)

This was not always the case, however. Fatima joined the Communications Technology programme, but continued to tell her parents that she was taking the Business module. When I asked her about how she thought she would deal with this at her graduation, she said:

'By that time I might have persuaded them, but you know they think I will get married anyway and so long as I have a diploma, it doesn't matter. They are not really interested in what the girls in the family are doing as they do not really take us seriously at the moment.'

(IN Fatima: No.2 21:01:01)

Despite the drawbacks, the extended family nevertheless remains the best 'insurance system' for a young Arab woman: 'Early on, Arab culture evolved a social system in which the extended family offered each individual all the amenities that the State currently offers its citizens in the West' (Sabbah 1996). Each Arab country interprets women's rights under Islam somewhat differently and each country's social hierarchy is a determining factor in the treatment of women's personal rights.

Most of the women described how it had been necessary to discuss their decision with their family and get approval to attend college because they would

not go against their family's wishes nor enter a programme of which their families disapproved. Fatima was the exception to this rule as she had entered Comm. Tech. without the knowledge or agreement of her family.

5.2.2   In summary

For each student it was very important to feel that she had made the decision regarding her education by and for herself. It was equally important that this decision received the consent of her family and their full support. The preferred choice of study programme from the families' point of view was Business Studies, a preference largely due to the fact that, in many cases, it was the only area of third-level study with which they were already familiar. The students' choice of Visual Communications was difficult for those families who did not want their daughter to work in a mixed environment, *i.e.* with local Emirati men. For the students, however, choosing Visual Communications meant a real possibility of being able to utilise their education and knowledge into the future because of the opportunity of working freelance, from the home.

In general, the students saw the family and its role in their lives in a positive light, but a particular difficulty for these newly assertive young women was the traditional male dominance within the family, regardless of age. It was noticeable that, as these young women become more educated, the power differential within the family began to shift.

5.3 Cultural issues surrounding
the choice of Study.

Once the student has chosen to study Communications Technology and has asserted her desire to do so, she faces another set of obstacles and challenges. In this section we will examine those challenges, as expressed by the students themselves.

Communications Technology was a new programme to the college and was regarded as a non-traditional subject. This categorisation led to anomalies in the curriculum. For example, the teaching of life-drawing was prohibited, but — as was the case with photography — no factual or academic reason was given, even though life-drawing would be the norm on visual arts courses in the West. As a researcher, it was necessary for me to discover if the students were aware of these anomalies and how they felt about them.

The students' answers to the question of religious or cultural conflict inherent in the programme were very short; the topic did not really seem to interest them. Hajar said she could think of no such difficulties and she felt the programme could be expanded to include other subjects, although she could not give me an example at that time (IC 28:04:01). Shaikha concurred, saying that she too could not see anything with which she personally disagreed (IC 28:04:01). In response, Sara chose to emphasise her father's support for her choice of study,

citing this as proof that there were no conflicts or difficulties with this study programme:

> 'Nothing in conflict. My dad is very supportive about my studies in the programme, he is very interested in photography and he used to do it a lot. He is, in fact, my biggest supporter, even my sisters, he supports each one of us in what ever we are doing. For example, my sister, the one who studies medicine, he gets her some equipment like stethoscope, the other one who is studying engineering, he gets her the boards for drawing and all that. Even if he is not interested, he shows us that he is.'
>
> (IN: No. 2. 14:02:01)

5.3.1 Peer pressure

The question of peer reactions provoked far more interest and reaction from the students. They were deeply annoyed by the reactions of their friends to their choice of study programme and the reasons informing their friends' disapproval, namely that Comm. Tech. was a not only a waste of time and money but was contrary to Muslim beliefs and could affect marriage prospects. Abeer described the general response:

> 'The girls in the CD [Certificate Diploma, awarded at a lower academic level] programme say it will be impossible for us to marry because we have been out mixing with boys and doing photographs

and these things. This is very annoying for us as we are trying to make the people realise what we are doing is very important for this country.'

(IC: NO: Date)

Hajar also felt her friends were unsupportive:

'Some were like, "Are you going to be an announcer?" I said, "No, come and see our work", and, "Ah yeah," they said, "it's fun" and when they saw us taking cameras we were different, we were the only one who use to take cameras and microphones, so what are you doing, what are you actually doing, yes, I am doing like this. And they come to see our designs — they only really knew Comm. Tech. when we did the exhibition. Even some teachers and students, when they saw the exhibition, they knew what we do. Up till now they have a negative impression of the programme, it's like, "You are not doing anything, it's all fun, you are always going out, you are not doing anything." We are working hard, we are doing projects.'

(IN. No.2. 14:02:01)

Shaikha explained why Comm. Tech. invited adverse reaction, mainly because it differed from the standard path of study:

'I said, "Okay, we don't have exams, we don't take exams, but our projects are more harder than exams because you are graded on your work, your project. If you didn't hand in your project on time, like this, or the quality of your project." A lot of my friends did not think Comm. Tech. was suitable for women because it's the area where all men like the TV, for example. They thought taking Comm. Tech. is just working at the TV station. Traditionally, this is not right for a local woman.'

(IN No. 2. 07:01:01)

The students who participated in this study comprised one of the first groups to study in the Comm. Tech. programme, so naturally that increased the amount of negative peer pressure they faced. Most of the other students did not understand the format of the programme, so it appeared abnormal to them. Noor described the views of her peer group to illustrate the level of uninformed opinion to which the students were subjected:

'My friends never knew anything about Comm. Tech. They thought it is something like a game and not serious, ah, I think they have a negative impression, they think what you are doing is just wasting time, they think it is not culturally acceptable and most families never allow their girls to enter this programme, although my family is a bit strict they never put pressure on me. The problem is, most families don't really know what the programme is. They hear Comm.

Tech. and they have this view of television and the media, they never know that graphic design exists. Lack of knowledge of the programme is the problem.

(IN Noor: No.2 10:05:01)

The other point of view expressed regularly to the students was that Comm. Tech. went against cultural norms and expectations and that it was therefore wrong for the girls to study it. Arab society has a traditional cultural belief that women should not be photographed, or that if women are photographed, the images should be seen only by female members of the family. This belief is related to the Islamic belief that it is forbidden to create a human likeness. The fact that these female students chose to study photography therefore appeared completely at odds with their beliefs. It was deemed anti-Islamic. The students described how they would hear comments such as, 'they would be going against the cultural norm and mixing with men' and 'you will be expected to go out and interview men and sit with them' (IC Suha, Shaikha, Noora 20:03:00).

This interpretation of the programme as an anti-Islamic statement of rebellion by the students was very difficult for them to handle. They were upset by the idea that they would become the subject of local gossip, and that this could lead to spinsterhood because local men would not wish to marry them as a result. Hajar describes this kind of pressure, which was brought to bear on most of the students taking Comm. Tech.:

'Oh my God, I had so many talk talk talk, you know, they thought that I was really free, you know what I mean by free? Like I have this kind of liberty, because they thought that the girl in our society doesn't like to go and meet other people, but if you are to specialise in media production, for example, you have to go out and talk to people whether they are women or men. You know, so they refuse completely this idea. They were persuading me to join the business [Business Studies], but I didn't like the business.'

(IN Hajar: No. 1. 24:01:00)

The fear of becoming an object of male interest was the underlying factor, as Fatima explained:

'Well, when I was in Business and the first week I studied there … some of the girls said, "No, Business is better the Comm. Tech., girls are just playing there, they are only doing songs on the tapes and they stand in front of the camera and pretend that they are announcers and producers and whatever, and this is not a future, this is not a career. In the future you will be working in the TV in front of the men and they will look at you, you know...'"

(IN Fatima: No. 2. 21:01:01)

From my own observations, I noticed that during my first three years at the college, the students taking Comm. Tech. did not mix with the larger body of students and sat apart from them in the canteen (Observation. Student canteen

11:99). When I asked my students about this, they said the other students did not want to sit near them because of the negative connotations associated with Communications Technology. Their fear of the programme was exacerbated by the fact that they did not understand or appreciate the course content: it was unfamiliar and therefore threatening (IC Students: 15:02:00).

One of the generally held assumptions was that a qualification in Comm. Tech. could lead only to work as a television presenter/announcer. Suha described her frustration with her peer group, who were convinced that the only possible outcome from Comm. Tech. was a job at the television station:

'Some were like, "Are you going to be an announcer" and "You will work in the Emirates media, this is very bad for a local girl, people will talk about you".'
(IC Suha 15:02:00)

Shaikha's friends were also concerned about the cultural implications:

'They think that I would like to waste my time, [that] I don't want to study, they think it's against my culture, they have the wrong impression and I think they know that in Comm. Tech. you have to go and shoot outside, do these things that's against our culture, all of them put the programme with the television station and Etislat and all these things, and they really don't know what it is.'
(IN Shaikha No. 2. 27:01:01)

Obviously this begs the question: why would a young local girl, facing the disapproval and criticism of her family and peers, opt for a course of study as controversial as Comm. Tech.? Given the age group of the students, one might be inclined to view it as an act of rebellion against authority, the kind of behaviour traditionally associated with teenagers and young adults. This did not seem to be the case at all, however. When the students spoke of their overall experience of attending college, they described it as a good experience and a theme that came up again and again was Shaikh Zaid, President of the UAE since 1966. The students spoke about him with reverence, using expressions like, 'he is our father' and 'he has made this country' and 'without him, there would be nothing' (CO:00:04:01).

There was absolutely no sense that these students wished to rebel against authority figures, rather they respected them and sought to please them. For example, during my first year at the college, one of the projects assigned to the students was the production of a magazine. This was the first time I became aware of the depth of feeling associated with Shaikh Zayed.[8] When choosing the front cover for their magazine, the students' unanimous decision was that it should feature Zayed. For a teacher from the West, this was a strange reaction; I could not imagine Irish teenagers choosing to put President Mary McAleese on the cover of a school magazine — unless as a satirical gesture. When questioned further, the students described how they had been aware of Zayed from a very early age and did not want to think of the future without him. They credited him with maintaining stability in a volatile region for the past thirty-eight years. They

---

[8] Shaikh Zayed died on 2 November 2004.

were certain that by studying Comm. Tech. and thinking in terms of a career, they were responding positively and correctly to Zayed's expressed wish that the UAE should be self-sufficient and not reliant on an immigrant workforce. Far from being rebellious, these students felt that by their actions they were furthering that cause and supporting their country's leader.

Alongside this desire to support the UAE, the students opted for Comm. Tech. because of their own curiosity and open-mindedness. Meera describes her conversion to Comm. Tech.:

> 'I think they [her peer group] think of the Comm. Tech. as going in the television station and presenting news, presenting programmes. I think they didn't know what the courses are that are offered on Comm. Tech. I completed foundations and then our supervisor took the ones who wanted to join the Comm. Tech. We came here, we had a tour, we were talking to the girls and then me and my friend went to the graphics room and we were talking with them. They told us what they actually do, so when I thought of playing with the pictures inside the computer and changing it, you know, I thought, it will be great.'
>
> (IN Meera: No. 2. 08:01:01)

Leila explained that most of her friends had tried to dissuade her from joining the course, telling her it was inappropriate for an Emirati woman to be associated with such work. However, she realised that neither she nor the other students actually

knew what the programme was about, so she decided to ignore her friends' warnings and come to find out for herself (IC Leila 25:02:00).

Shaikha also came to Comm. Tech. on her own because she felt she was not suited to Business Studies and was curious about what Comm. Tech. was. Her peers thought the course was a waste of time, for lazy students who wanted to have fun and enjoy themselves instead of doing real work. When her friends heard she had gone to the Comm. Tech. building alone to find out more and had subsequently signed up, they were divided in their reactions. Some were really impressed by her choice and considered her brave to go to the building on her own. Others were shocked because they still believed local girls should not be involved in this kind of programme. Again, she too faced the general assumption that the end result could only be a job at the television station (IC: Shaikha 14:04:98).

Given all these controversies and criticisms, it may seem surprising that the Comm. Tech. programme made it into existence at all. Unsubstantiated anecdotal evidence suggests that initially the programme was deliberately kept low-key. Shaikh Nahayan, the Minister for Education, was aware of parents' concerns about their daughters' education and he did not wish to cause alarm. He knew that if the Comm. Tech. programme were associated with working in the television station, parents of daughters would never allow them to join the course. For this reason it was felt that it was better to allow the programme to start small and to grow at a gradual pace, which is, in fact, what has happened.

5.3.2 Summary

The students did not regard the Comm. Tech. programme as a site of cultural conflict. In terms of examining any cultural concerns arising, the students put them down to ignorance of the course content and nothing more. Those students who eventually enrolled on the programme refused to bow to the negative pressure and took a personal decision to study in this particular field.

5.4   Learning through English

Once the obstacles of negative peer pressure and perceived cultural conflicts had been overcome, the students were ready to commit fully to the study of Comm. Tech. There was, however, a final hurdle, one that some found the most daunting of all: studying their chosen subject through the medium of English. In this section we will examine the positive and negative effects arising from studying through a second language.

When they first entered the college, a considerable number of the students had not studied through English before; most had taken it as a subject as part of their high school diploma. A small number of the students had studied at schools that followed the British curriculum, therefore had previously studied through English. A smaller number still had studied abroad because their parents were diplomats, or members of the government. Fatima was one such student — her family had taken steps to ensure she could speak and write in English:

'Actually, I learn English when I was visiting the UK several times. My father wanted me to learn English, and very good English, so in our vacation time, after school, I visited London. The last time I went there I went to Oxford where my brother found me a good college … ah … I was young at that time, about thirteen, when I took the courses in Oxford. It was really nice, a great opportunity for me. Before this I studied English, but not that much because before that I was studying in Egypt. They had English, but not as powerful as here in the UAE or England, of course. I lived in Egypt from the first grade until the ninth [grade], and the English was taught by Egyptians not English, and it was not that good. When I saw the books here, I found that their English was much better than the Egyptian.'

(IN Fatima No.2. 21:01:01)

The students' various experiences of learning English meant that, across the class, their command of the language differed markedly. When informed that the medium of instruction would be English, a number of the students were concerned about their ability to understand and converse in English. On the other hand, Sara, for example, was already fluent in English because she had lived abroad most of her life and as a result her siblings tended to speak in English at home. In direct contrast to her fellow students, who struggled to gain the necessary level of English, she required remedial help in Arabic (IC Sara 00:02:01). This highlights the very significant differences among the students in terms of language skills,

although no student was deterred from taking the course because of her own level of English, or because English was the medium of instruction.

Opinions on studying through English varied across the class. Generally, it was looked upon as a good and positive aspect of the course, one that would give them the edge over students from the UAE university, who studied through Arabic. They did not feel this way from the outset, however. The students said that it was not until they were in the third year of the programme that they appreciated the advantages of working through English and that this realisation came about largely as a result of their experiences in their work placements (IC Students 15:02:00).

5.4.1 Use of the English language in their intended work environment

When questioned about their opinion of the course, all of the students agreed that studying through English had been a positive step in their education. They were very encouraged by the positive feedback they received from their work placements, which opened up the possibility of paid employment upon graduation.

For those students wishing to work in the private sector, English was a necessary requirement. Of course, the decision to choose private-sector employment was not simply a matter of acquiring English. There was still the problem of cultural perceptions, as it was not considered appropriate for a local woman to work in the private sector because such employment would entail interaction with local men (IC Students 00:05:00). In the public sector, local men and women are segregated and greater concessions are made for cultural traditions. This was not the case in the private sector. This difficulty aside, those

students who did want to explore the opportunities offered by the private sector now had the tools to do so. Hajar enjoyed the challenge and benefits of studying through English:

> 'It was a great opportunity for me to learn Comm. Tech. in English because it make me learn … ah … so many things and besides my own language, for example, if I go to a different country to work, not just the Arab country, I can work there easily because I know that English is the easiest language ever, in all countries, not only in the Arab countries.'
>
> (IN Hajar No. 2. 08:05:01)

Maha shared this assessment:

> 'I did not find any barriers because of English. I find it really exciting completely, because we have different things to think about and the culture is completely different than the English and in the Arabic we use really complicated words, but in English it's so simple, you can say one word in English and in Arabic you can still not say the thing that you are doing as a graphic designer. Technically, no, it's the same thing, but only the written stuff.'
>
> (IN Maha: No. 2. 07:01:01)

Fatima saw the benefits of studying through English very much in terms of her future career:

> 'I think it's very good to study Comm. Tech. in English and because when you go to the other companies and you do your work there, you will be dealing with them and some of the companies speak only English and all the tools are in English, so you have to learn the names of them so that when you go to work, you will be able to deal with this.'
>
> (IN Fatima No. 2. 21:01:01)

5.4.2   Preference for native English speakers as teachers

There was a general consensus among the students that if they were to learn English, they ought to be taught by a native speaker of the language. While Hajar, for example, stated a preference for the programme to be taught in Arabic because it is the first language of the country, she also noted that it is appropriate for English to be taught by native speakers:

> 'Well, I think I would prefer the programme to be in Arabic because it's our first language, but for me, from my point of view, I like it in English. I like to speak in English. It's okay when we have some subjects in Arabic on the programme, but I like it more when it's in English. The teachers at school were Palestinian or Egyptian, they

were Arabic but they studied English in the university. I prefer the English people teaching English, not the Arabs.'

(IC Hajar 00:01:01)

Sara, too, felt English should always be taught by native speakers. In her own case, her English improved at college because she was learning from English and American teachers. It was not easy for her at first because of the pronunciation, which differed from the pronunciation used by her previous, Arabic teachers. For this reason she believed it was better to learn from native speakers from the start (IC Sara No. 00:02:01). Shaikha agreed with this:

'Also, we had Arabic teachers teaching English when I was at school and that was like, if I didn't know a meaning in English, she will describe it in Arabic, so I won't even learn English. This is very good here, even though we take Arabic in this programme. I did not find much difficulty ... no, maybe the first few months, but now, if I had to work in an English environment, I would be just as comfortable as if it was in Arabic.'

(IN Shaikha No.2. 07:01:01)

Suha found the language barrier a challenge, but was pleased to have the chance to improve her skills:

'As you know, before I study at college I study at high school and most of the subjects are in Arabic, except the English. When I came to college and I find all the subjects, well, most of the subjects are in English, it was really a different experience for me, and I think that it is an excellent idea to teach students in English, even if my first language is Arabic. I face some problems and with English okay at college.'

(IC Suha 15:02:01)

Fatima echoed this:

'I think it is a great opportunity for me to study communications in Abu Dhabi, through English, and because it is a rare major that the United Arab Emirates has to offer, and also it's different from, like, Business and Accounting, it is more showing your creativity and how you communicate with people, it strengthens your communication with people and I think it's a great major and I advise everyone to attend this. It is very important to learn this subject in English.'

(IN Fatima No.2. 21:01:01)

Noor was a dissenting voice. She was the only student who stated unequivocally that she would prefer the programme to be in Arabic. She felt her working experience was most likely to take place in an Arabic-speaking environment:

'I think it would be easier for me in Arabic. I think they have to set a programme in Arabic also because in the real world, from my experience in the work placement, most of the work we did there was in Arabic, even some programmes that we used, it was in Arabic, for example, they have Photoshop for them in Arabic, also so we have to learn the Photoshop and that was difficult for me because my first experience of this programme was in English. Almost the same words as the Arabic.'

(IN Noor: No.2. 10:05:01)

Noor was alone in taking this stance. Most of her classmates believed it was essential to speak and write English in order to pursue a career in Comm. Tech. Shaikha saw English as a pre-requisite in the modern working environment:

'Now you know the country is modernising and that is all in English, like computers in English, and it's very hard to use computers in Arabic, we are not used to using computers in Arabic, like people studying medicine, like medicine is all over the world studying in English, so it is more important to study in English, because if I go to England and I don't speak a word of English, I am a doctor, what will they get benefit from me, from just talking in Arabic? So even though in this programme we design, and how you apply design and designs, it also has an English sense to it, so I think it is better to study this programme in English.'

Leila also saw English as a necessity given that a lot of the technology used by graphic artists is produced in English-speaking countries:

'It is good to study in English because, as you know, all the machines are produced by English people, well, not English, but you know English, Japanese and Americans. But the names of it and the keys that we use are all in English, so it is good for us to practice this and we will know how to work with these machines. If we study in Arabic, it will be difficult for us to translate into English and then check it.'

(IN: No. 2. Leila 16:02:01)

Hajar had direct experience of English being a necessary skill for working in her chosen area:

'I think it is a positive thing because most of the companies now, they need English, or even French. They need people to speak English and French. English is the most common language in the world. By the way, yesterday I was asking for a career in one of the places and they ask me what level in English you are and … ah … they said, "Grade yourself from ten," and I tell them, "Seven-and-a-half or eight." What would you think? (*laughs*)'

(IN Hajar No.2. 08:05:01)

Marayam made a similar point, commenting on the fact that some of the work-placement situations required the students to use programmes such as Photoshop in Arabic, which caused confusion because they were used to using such programmes in English. She argued that the Arabic used for the translation in technology manuals is different from local Gulf dialect, therefore it made sense to use English (IC Marayam 00:02:01).

5.4.3 Summary

Every student who participated in this study, except one, was of the opinion that studying through English was a positive and beneficial experience. Although levels of competence differed from student to student, no one reported any particular difficulty arising from studying through English. In addition, they were very pleased that English was being taught in the college by native speakers, a factor they felt was important and helpful. All of the students viewed fluency in English as a necessity in the modern workplace, and for this reason felt they had a distinct advantage over the graduates from the University of UAE, where the medium of instruction was Arabic.

5.5   Student frustrations with the programme

Over the course of the three-year Comm. Tech. programme the students became more confident in their choices and needs, which led them to question what they

perceived as inequalities in this particular area of study. Some problems arose because local interpretations of Islam and its traditions had not and were not central to the development of this programme of study. This secular approach did broach some issues that had to be addressed.

These issues were particularly relevant in relation to the system of assessment used in awarding a final grade for graduation, namely the Common Assessments and Projects marking system (CAP). The majority of students chose Graphic Design Visual Communications as their primary area of study. When I researched the reasons behind this popular choice, I discovered there were cultural, religious and personal factors.

On a personal level, all of the students whose chose this programme were very artistic and creative individuals, therefore graphic design was attractive to them as a mode of expression (IC Students 00:02:98). Furthermore, for those students not permitted to work outside the home, graphic design was the logical choice as it allowed them to develop their own skills and creativity, while offering the possibility of a career as a freelance designer, working from home.

On a religious and cultural level, many of the students were drawn to choose the graphic design course because it was taught by a female teacher. Some of the students told me they preferred to work with a female teacher as they felt that they could be freer in discussions and overall felt more comfortable (IC Students 00:02:98). Maha was quite clear on this point:

'We feel more comfortable working with you because we can have fun and have a joke with you while we are working, this we cannot do

with the men. Because we feel more relaxed in your classes, we get more work done, because we enjoy it and we do not have to worry what you will think because you are a woman, you understand women.'

(IN Maha: No. 2. 07:01:01)

At first, I did not believe this could be a large factor in their choice, however it was reflected in the statistical breakdown of student numbers over the six-year period of my involvement. During the first three years of my tenure in the Communications Technology Department, the programme was divided into three areas: Journalism, Media Production and Graphic Design. Journalism and Media Production were taught by men; I taught Graphic Design-Visual Communications. The number of students signing up for Visual Communications was significantly larger than for the other two areas. This imbalance was somewhat redressed in my fourth year with the arrival of another female teacher, who took over the area of Media Production — what had been the least well attended class. Now, with a female teacher taking the class, the numbers evened out between Media Production and Graphic Design. Of course, it must be noted that by that time the programme was five years old, much had changed in terms of the students' attitudes (CO:00:11:98).

5.5.1 Inequality in the programme

Although the students asserted that they did not feel the programme suffered from any Islamic or cultural conflicts, problems did arise in relation to the final-year

assessments that preceded the awarding of the Higher Diploma in third year. From the female students' perspective, this was one of the most disheartening inequalities of all. A common assessment was set across the third-level system, for the Men's and Women's Colleges in Dubai and the Men's and Women's Colleges in Abu Dhabi. This system was set up to ensure that a student graduating from any one of the eleven colleges in the HCT system was graded in a manner that was equal and comparable to students graduating from any of the other colleges within the HCT. In theory, this was a very good idea; in practice, it was somewhat different.

By the simple fact of being male, the men had access to areas where women were prohibited to enter. This was the one time I saw the students become very angry about societal inequality. They spoke to me at length about how unjust and unfair this was. They described the diligence of the female body in their studies in contrast to the apparent lack of effort by the men (they could say this as many of them had brothers or husbands studying at the men's colleges.) Yet the men could produce better work, or what appeared on the surface to be better work, because they were able to use professional studios and equipment, which were not at the disposal of the women. This happened particularly with video projects because the male students would go to the television studio, where they were working part-time, and utilise the equipment there. This meant they were able to create distinctly superior projects to those produced by the female students, who had to rely solely on college equipment, which was not of broadcast level (IC Suha, Shaikha, Noor 00:03:01). Although the written and background work produced by

the female students was of a higher quality, the initial impact made by the male students' work was better.

We will explore the reasons for this inequality and the lack of change in relation to this problem in the section on the Visual Communications Programme (Assessment Observations – 00:06:99).

5.5.2 Being caught in a double-bind

One aspect of daily life at the college that proved extremely controversial was the question of campus security. From the college's point of view, this was a potentially explosive issue for students, their guardians and the college administration. The fact was that the college was responsible for the students while they were attending classes from 9.00am to 4.00pm. Should a female student choose to go off-campus, this could cause huge difficulties with the family involved. As a result, the college erred on the side of caution and took a strict approach, employing a heavy-duty security force to watch and 'protect' the students.

Some students were offended by the security presence, constantly complaining that their families did not place that level of security on their movements at home. They felt there should be some leeway in the matter, particularly with regard to final year when off-campus projects were assigned. The college did not see this as a negotiable issue, however. The only compromise offered was the granting of special permits to third-year Communications Technology students to allow them to complete assignments (IC Students 15:02:00).

I discussed this issue with the head of Students Services, who had responsibility for student security. She described herself as coming from a feminist background, which meant she had personal issues with some aspects of her work because she felt many of the college's policies, which she was obliged to implement, served to oppress the female student body (IC Student Services 09:10:97).

The problem was exacerbated when the Department of Communications Technology changed its focus in the second year and introduced a double major. Normally, Academic Services decided and implemented the curriculum, along with setting and assessing exams. It was responsible for the academic integrity of the programmes offered within the eleven-college structure and sought to standardise the system. When Comm. Tech. decided to introduce a double major, however, there was no consultation with the staff working at the women's college regarding the potential impact of this on the female students. The double major meant each student had to choose a second subject to study alongside Visual Communications. Most chose Media Production; the other option was Journalism, but it only ever attracted a small minority of due to the standard of Arabic it demanded.

While increased choices might sound good, this decision inevitably clashed with the procedures in place at the women's colleges. As part of the Media Production course, students were now being asked to go outside the college on shoots for their assignments. There was a strong divergence of opinion on this. Some of the students wanted to undertake off-campus assignments and voiced this opinion. Others did not wish to undertake such projects because of family concerns about women appearing in public.

On both sides of the divide, students found themselves in a double-bind. The students who did not want to leave campus were offended by the college's insistence that they should do so. They felt the college was forcing them into a situation that would invite a backlash from their families, which in turn might have an adverse effect on the possibility of being allowed to work outside the home in the future. Those who were willing to complete off-campus assignments were offended by the restrictions place on them by the college security. This no-win situation meant the assignments being set by the Communications Department were in direct opposition to both sets of students — those who agreed and those who did not. This highly unsatisfactory situation came about as a result of the common assessment, which set assignments for both men and women without taking into consideration the women's unique social position (IC Fatima, Shaikha, Hajar 00:03:01).

At the college, a stand-off ensued: the students who supported off-campus work stood their ground, while the dissenting students, being those from more traditional families, asserted that they would rather fail than go out in public with camera equipment (IC Suha, Shaikha, Noor 00:03:01). As for the college administration, there were concerns about the far-reaching consequences should anything go wrong during these disputed assignments.

Eventually, the students' refusal to leave campus resulted in a dilution of the course content. The focus of the HCT is hands-on, vocational training, but now the focus switched to theory to accommodate the opposing views. My particular area was affected in terms of the amount of time now dedicated to the teaching of theory, rather than practical work. This greatly annoyed the students,

who felt they were already stretched and now had even less time on the subject of their choice. They were angry because they felt that, yet again, decisions were being made for them by men. Maha expressed this point of view:

> 'Again it's a man making this decision for us, we are the ones who have to live with this, not him. He does not understand our position here. This subject is useless for us.'
>
> (IN Maha: No. 2. 13:01:01)

Fatima was also angered by this 'compromise' in the curriculum. She explained that she was frustrated because she felt it was more appropriate and beneficial for her to spend more time on the subject in which she was most interested, it being the area in which she was most likely to work after college. This new system made her feel that she was learning in 'bits and scraps' (IN Fatima No.2. 12:02:00).

5.5.3 Summary

Over time, the students gained the confidence to confront issues of inequality that affected their lives. The sense of being forced into choices not of their own deciding was particularly frustrating for these students, who had already surmounted many other obstacles in order to get this far. To be confronted with decisions that were not only contrary to their beliefs but counterproductive to what they wanted to achieve in life was a very bitter pill to swallow. They were undoubtedly caught in a double-bind. Nonetheless, these remarkable women found the drive and commitment to continue with their studies, despite this addition to the litany of setbacks they faced daily.

5.6   Education and its relevance to their lives, both present and future

During the final year of the programme the students' thoughts naturally turned to their futures, which they now talked about more openly and frequently. They had overcome the challenges within the programme — those posed by the medium of instruction and the double major — and now they were looking forwards, to graduation. At this exciting time I questioned them about the relevance of the programme in the context of their lives, both present and future. Their responses are presented below, under the headings 'Education and its relevance to their lives', 'What she expected from the programme of study', 'A right to work', 'Reasons for wanting to work outside the home' and 'Education and choice'.

All of the students were very positive about their college experience, seeing it as a first step on the road to a career, regardless of what obstacles might lie ahead. Most explained how they had come to Comm. Tech. through curiosity more than strategic planning, but now they could not imagine doing anything else. Suha highlighted two of the most important elements for all of the students: enjoying their work and receiving the support of their families:

> 'Studying here means a lot to me. I remember the first year when I was learning photography, I went, like, crazy, like at the house, I went to photograph every bit of it, even my nephew, my mother, you know, the whole family, so they told me, "We are going to open a

photography store so that you can keep away from us." You know, I had fun, great fun, doing this programme … no, I didn't tell them that I was choosing Comm. Tech. because I don't think they care about this, you know, the only thing that they thought of, especially my father, he want me to complete my studies, whatever it was, to finish my studies was their main concern, they never objected, they really supported my choice. Yes, they are very interested in what I am doing and I show them my work.'

(IN Suha 15:02:01)

Fatima's route to Comm. Tech. was quite typical. She knew very little about the course or the work, but she was open-minded and eager to learn:

'When I was in foundation and I went to first year, they told us … we are in the class, and then one girl came to the class and she gave a little brief presentation about the Comm. Tech. and that was after a week still in the Business course … she came and she invited us to come and visit the Comm. Tech. department, so I said to my friends, "Come on, let's go and see the Comm. Tech.," so we went to just have a look before we decide and to see what they are doing there. So then I came here with my friends, we were five, but four of us really liked it, so the same day we went to register our names in the Comm. Tech.'

(IN Fatima 15:02:01)

Whatever brought the students to Comm. Tech. in the first place, they are anxious to encourage other young women to face and overcome the obstacles and join the programme. They felt the rewards were great, but that it was still difficult for young women to join the course because it was not familiar to their families. They offered many suggestions for how this could be addressed, including a college campaign to educate parents about the course content and aims. If this could be achieved, it would make it much easier for prospective students to explain the course and its benefits to their parents. They understood why parents did not favour the Comm. Tech. programme, disapproval stemming mainly from its association with the television station, which for most parents is a no-go area (IC Students 17:05:01). There were enough exceptions to give hope and inspiration to others, however: one student in particular came from a strong religious background and was herself quite fundamental in her religious beliefs, but she chose to and was permitted to work at the television station, in a mixed environment (IC Students 15:02:00). The women felt they could look to one another for ways forward into their chosen careers.

5.6.1 What she expected from the course

When asked what were her expectations of the course, Shaikha replied:

> 'My certificate (*laughs*). When I first came I expect to go shooting outside and I will pass by and have a juice, that's what I expect … but when I came, I knew I had the wrong point of view. There is hard work waiting for me, yes, more than what I expect. The marketing

and PR is the one I like most and I would like to continue this in the future. I will study the Bachelors [degree], *inshallah*, and when I finish it, I don't know. Well, there is no marketing or public relations here, only a small course, it's not a major. I will look for a place where they teach marketing and PR as a major, but, I don't know, I don't want Adjman University or these universities.'

(IN Shaikha No.2. 07:01:01)

The students gave many and varied opinions as to what they had expected and not expected to happen during their time on the course. As Noor says:

'When I first came here I thought that I am going to be a photographer, something like this, but I found out that there is no specialisation for this, you study photography for only the first year, so that you can use it in graphic design and media production. It is not just for one subject.'

(IN Noor No.1. 14:02:00)

In fact, the issue of photography was a bone of contention for the students because the course did not fulfil their expectations in that regard. A number of the students were particularly interested in this subject, possibly because it was something of a forbidden fruit: traditionally, an Arab woman may not be photographed for fear that a man outside the family circle might see the image. The students' disappointment with how the photography module was operated was compounded

by the college authorities' refusal to provide a reason for this. Unsubstantiated anecdotal evidence suggests the problem lay in the fact that female students would have to spend time in a dark room with a man (Anecdotal, unsubstantiated evidence from students 00:05:98). This seems an unlikely explanation, however, as during the single photography module, the female students did use the dark room.

A number of the students chose Comm. Tech. after visiting the department. Leila was one such student:

> 'Because when we came, we saw the studio and we saw the graphics and we saw the audio room and we were fascinated with that, and we run quickly to register our names. Before this I had no idea about the Comm. Tech. But now it forms a big part of my life and I can't imagine doing anything different. I don't wish to study anything else, except this subject.'
>
> (IN Leila No.2. 16:02:01)

A number of students had been influenced in their original choice of college course by what relatives had studied previously. Business Studies was the most popular choice among women, so naturally many of the students gravitated in that direction. Comm. Tech. was an unknown quantity, but the students felt drawn to it nonetheless, as Sara describes:

> 'I was in Business, it was the only thing that I know about, and I was going to enter office administration, but after, when I went to the

Comm. Tech. and I saw what they teach there, I really liked it and ran quickly to register because they only accept few numbers, I think only ten. Four of us joined. One [girl], her parents did not allow her to enter, they did not like Comm. Tech., so she could not do it. I intend to stay in this area because it now means a lot and I feel that I belong to it.'

(IN Sara No.2. 14:02:01)

Suha also felt this sense of ownership and relevance:

'Yes, it will because this is my chosen career, so it will help me in the future. I want to contribute to society here in the UAE. Plus the government is now trying to make things easier for women who are married and still want to work outside their home. For example, men have to go to work morning and evening; women have to only go one shift, that is the morning. [The normal working hours in the UAE are from 7.30am to 1.00pm and from 4.00pm to 7.00pm. These times can vary from region to region.]'

(IC Suha No.2. 15:02:00)

Ameena was very pleased that she had chosen a HCT college to follow her course of study because it was widely perceived to have a better reputation than the Emirates University at Al-Ain, where the medium of instruction is Arabic:

'Yes, this programme will be and is very relevant to my life because I learnt first communications through English, and when I was at work they said that the college students were better than the university [students] in communicating in English and they gave me a lot of praise for my major, like good report about my work. Really, the teachers were so helpful and I learnt from mistakes and I learnt from their knowledge.'

(IN Ameena: No.2.16:04:01)

Sara was very clear on why exactly she was studying this programme and what she intended to do with her education:

'The future is what I did here and is going to contribute to the UAE because everything I have studied, I will apply it in my career. This will benefit my country in, for example, I will show a good image to other people, what I am doing and what the college have taught me.'

(IN Sara No. 2. 14:02:01)

5.6.2   Possibility of further education

Some of the students mentioned the possibility of continuing their studies after the Diploma. Maha saw the Comm. Tech. programme as just the first step in her education and was determined to continue with her studies:

'When I finish I would like to apply for a job and just work as a graphic designer, for the experience, and if I have the chance I will do my Bachelors [degree] and then my Masters [degree], and take some other courses. I told my family that when I finish I have a job and they want me to work and this encourages them and also when I show them my projects, because they could not believe that I could do these things, especially my mother is very pleased, she like it very much.'

(IN Maha No. 2. 07:01:01)

Leila was of the same opinion. She explained her family's role in her life and the necessity for her to fit in with their expectations. Nonetheless, she was certain the Diploma was a starting point for her and was determined to undertake further study. Her planned route was to get a job after the Diploma, gain some hands-on work experience and then go on to further study (IC Leila No.2. 00:05:01).

Shaikha was also determined to go on to further education. Although she, too, had to take her family's opinions into account, she was far more concerned with securing a place. She planned to apply for a place by presenting her Diploma portfolio, of which she was justifiably proud (IC Shaikha 00:02:00).

5.6.3   Working outside the home

Historically, when Arab women attempted to exercise their economic rights, they were thwarted by the twin effects of veiling and seclusion. Even though the Qur'an supported their economic position, the fact that local tradition restricted

women to the home made it very difficult for them to participate in the economic sphere. In the modern Arab world, there has been some movement towards changing this state of affairs. Shaikh Zayed has spoken out in support of women's involvement in national development, urging educated women not to allow their skills to go to waste. Prophetic sayings and Qur'anic verses have been invoked as proof that wage-earning employment for women is not forbidden by Islam nor considered shameful.

The level of official support extended to UAE women to encourage them to work is rare in other Arab countries — not to mention western countries, of course, where women are still battling for employment opportunities equal to those available to men. UAE women have now gained access to various occupations at different levels of employment. Although the high-level positions are reserved largely for university graduates, several UAE ministries admit women with few or no qualifications. The official policy behind this is based on a long-term vision for the country. An official explained that every individual woman who is willing to work must be given the opportunity to do so. The hope is that, in time, as more and more women join the paid labour force, their participation will become the social norm and conservative families will be more inclined to permit their daughters to work. For now, what is deemed most important is that women get out and participate in various types of employment, then later, as their numbers and skills increase, strict job qualification requirements and standards can be implemented. Across a number of different offices on-the-job training of local women by foreign professionals has been

proceeding satisfactorily. Indeed, in several cases local women have taken charge of departments within certain government offices (Suffon 1980).

In this traditional, but now transitional society one of the most important questions concerning women's employment is the potential effect on the raising of children. It is only in recent years that the number of young, married women in the labour force has shown an upward trend, in both developed and developing countries, but studies conducted thus far have 'failed to confirm the widespread belief that employment of a mother of young children adversely effects the next generation' (Boserup). Things are changing, however:

> 'An important factor to keep in mind when studying the characteristics of employed women in the UAE is that none of the working women have to work out of economic necessity. If a woman has no male relatives to support her, she may rely on the government's generous welfare system, which allows no woman or man to go without the basic necessities of life. Rather UAE women work out of a sense of duty to their country and a need for self-fulfillment.'
>
> (Suffon 1980)

This statement is no longer completely true. During my time in the HCT, I knew several students who had to find a job upon graduation as a matter of necessity. They made no secret of this fact. In many cases their families were in debt to the banks; it seemed easy to acquire loans well beyond a family's means (IC Students

17:04:01). Shortly after graduation one student told me that she had found employment and was now the breadwinner for a family of eight (IC Students: No.1. 18:01:00).

The world economy never stands still, which means regional economies are also in constant flux. This is one of the greatest challenges facing Arab countries, both on a social and an individual level. It seems inevitable that Arab women will continue to take on more and more roles in their society and that their families will come to rely on them as wage-earners. This will not be a simple transition, however. Attempting to change centuries-old stereotypes is a difficult task in any society, but particularly so when a society places special emphasis on the 'wife, mother' roles of women, as is the case in Muslim societies.

When UAE women were asked about their willingness to work in a situation where money was not an issue, the most common response was that a woman works to gain status and a sense of self-worth. These women express great pride in their skills, and the fact that they are dedicating them to making their society stronger and more prosperous. While the weight of local tradition is still considerable and no woman would embark on a career without first consulting her family, in particular the head male, these cultural norms are being slowly revised. Each new generation of Arab women will experience more and more flexibility in their social, economic, political and personal lives (Suffon 1980).

5.6.4 Reasons for wanting to work outside the home

The students who took part in this study all expressed a desire to work, whether outside the home or freelance from the home. After three years of study and hard

work, they now see work and a career as their right, not simply a preference. Their college experiences and level of education mean they will not live the lives their mothers did, as housewives. A powerful illustration of this is the fact that one of the student participants had her right to work as a graphic designer written into her marriage contract. As this contract was sanctioned by the court, her husband could not legally prevent her from working (IC Students 21:04:01).

This is an important step for these women: to want to work because it appeals to them and also because they see it as the norm, as an obvious life choice. They do, of course, have to counter their families' concerns by ensuring the household is well maintained in their absence. The easiest way to do this is to hire a nanny. This is not always necessary, however, as another new phenomena in the UAE is the willingness of the older generation of women to support the younger women in their aims by babysitting for grandchildren. This makes the prospect of work outside the home a distinct possibility.

Although these young women are among the first to venture into the workforce, they display a high level of confidence with regard to their ability to find and secure suitable employment. They saw it as being a simple matter of time and patience. Their sense of self-confidence was boosted by local government policy, which dictates to both private and public sectors that a certain quota of annual employee intake must be filled by Emirati workers. This is in keeping with the government's Emiratisation policy. It is the female students who benefit from this most because, in general and throughout the country, they achieve higher grade results than their male counterparts. This is due largely to personal

motivation, which is high among female students but low for the male students because they do not have to work (IC Students 17:05:01).

For young Arab women, there are many reasons for wanting to work outside the home. One reason is peer recognition. For the majority of women in the UAE, the only time they are recognised and celebrated is on their wedding day and the days they give birth to their children. Now, however, graduation day is ranked as a day of celebration, too. The increasing role of education in women's lives is giving rise to a phenomenon with which we in the West are already familiar: the single, educated woman. Up until very recently this was unheard of in the UAE, but it is more and more apparent that education is becoming more important to young women than courtship or marriage. Arab women are being seduced by the opportunities and benefits of education, by the economic freedom it brings and by the possibility of much-reduced dependence on the males in the family (IC Students 17:05:01).

Another strong motivating factor for women is their sense of patriotism and a genuine love for the leader of their country, Shaikh Zayed. He became leader in 1966 and is credited with the country's success and prosperity since then. In a region of the world known for its instability, the UAE has managed to remain a secure and peaceful state. In many ways, in fact, it could be described as a socialist Islamic state. Zayed's authority has never been questioned over the past four decades, and the people see him in almost the same light as Allah and Mohammed. His successful reign is largely due to the economic fairness shown towards his own people. It was very clear that the students revered him and, as a result, felt

great pride in their ability to serve their country as working women (IC Students 17:05:01). Hajar encapsulated this viewpoint:

> 'I will start a new business, maybe I would like to do this, make a small shop for graphic design. My husband, he will support this and he knows that I am good in it so, *inshallah*, we will try. So I will become my own businesswoman, or work in another company. I changed my mind about working at the television station. *Inshallah* I hope so, yes, woman should work, there are so many things here in the UAE to be done.'
>
> (IN Hajar No. 2. 08:05:01)

5.6.5 Education and choice

Education is providing Arab women with new and wider choices, some of which bring them into conflict with the traditions, customs and beliefs of traditional society. Whereas their mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers worked in the home, the new generation of educated Emirati women want to work and contribute to society outside the home. Given that women outnumber men in Emirati society and given that graduation statistics show that women perform better than men, it is becoming obvious that if the government is to succeed in its policy of Emiratisation, it will have to rely on women in the workforce. It is likely that the conflicts generated by women working outside the home will grow before they are resolved.

The other major effect of education and careers for women is that it is delaying the marriage age. Many young women have secured their families' consent to postpone marriage until after they have graduated from third-level. Although still in the minority, some women are even being allowed to choose a husband depending on his attitude to a studying and working wife. While some men might feel it is not appropriate for their wives to work outside the home, there are strong economic reasons for supporting this. The continued modernisation of the country means newly married couples are facing a lot of the same difficulties as western couples in terms of cost of living. For many households, this means a second income is a necessity.

At the other end of the spectrum are the women from affluent families, who must fight for the right to work because they don't have economic reasons to do so. These women are no longer prepared to sit at home; they want to be part of society in a real way and make a tangible contribution. This group is particularly affected by male dominance as the more prominent and important the male family members are, *i.e.* members of government, the more difficult it is for the women to get permission to leave the family home to go to work. For example, two students attending the Communications programme were the daughters of powerful, prominent men. They already had degrees from university, but because they were not permitted to use their education in a work environment, coming to college was their only outlet.

The students who could work and planned to work were excited by the prospect. Sara decided she wanted to work outside the home because she believes she has a lot to offer, particularly having completed a very enjoyable work-

experience placement. Her family has no objection to her getting a job at the television station, and she is full of ideas and ambitions for her new career:

> 'For example, when I was in the television station, I did think of other things to do at the television station. I was doing a programme for the children where I got a story and I wanted to teach the children the numbers and ask what it's like. I wanted them to know more about their Islamic stories, so I was thinking of drawing stories of my own and, of course, things from the Qur'an and from the Emirates. It's a way of telling the children stories from here and not from other places, like the 'Tom and Jerry', the Walt Disney productions, you know. This is one example, so if I go in the real world, I can find so many things that need to be done.'
>
> (IN Sara No. 24:02:01)

Suha pointed to the fact that her husband had not finished his studies as an example of men's low level of motivation and put forward the argument that UAE society would soon realise that women were needed if the country is to modernise and develop in the way envisaged by the leader:

> 'For the public, for the children, for the old people, for everybody, so it depend on the programme and the educated women are very important here. Yes, these days there are thousands of women working compared with the men. You know, I noticed in the last few

months that the boys, they don't want to complete their studies, but the girls they are persuading their families, even if they are hard-tempered and they don't want their daughters to study and work, but by persuading them first, by persuading them, their family, to allow them to complete their studies, then they sit at home and tell their father, "I don't have anything to do, I need to go and work," so it will come gradually, you know. So in time they will change their mind.'

(IN Suha No.2. 24:02:00)

Fatima was also determined to work after graduation and had already secured approval from her husband to do so:

'Yes, I am going to work. He [her husband] did object in the first, but I convinced him. There will be a nanny. I will only be working only eight hours. I have to work. I am not going to be a potato couch.'

(IN Fatima No.2. 21:01:01)

Shaikha was happy with her choice to study Visual Communications and knew it was the area in which she wanted to work:

'It's very important in my life. I really like it because it's what I am doing and if I go to work, this is what I will be doing, and now I am

in graphic designer and I really like it and I think it will be my future, you know, this is what I will be.'

(IN Shaikha No.2. 07:01:01)

For these young women, education had opened up doors that had been locked for centuries. The choice to pursue third-level education brought with it a host of other choices, other possibilities and the students were excited by the challenges that lay ahead. It was the most striking indication that UAE was a state in flux.

5.6.5 Conclusion

The focus of this section was the notion of claiming self. The voices of the students make it clear that, over the course of the three-year Diploma, these young women had become more self-confident and more sure of their place in society. They had claimed a sense of their own ability and self-worth as a result of their college experiences.

In terms of the final part of the research question — summing up the choices and aspirations of the students on the programme — it was evident that although none of the students has a specific reason for choosing Comm. Tech., all of them were very positive about its relevance to their lives now. Each individual believed the programme would be of relevance to her future, whether in terms of further education or working and contributing to the good of society. It was also evident that their families supported the completion of their studies, regardless of the subject. From the evidence presented by the students themselves, I believe the programme met their expectations and, indeed, superceded them.

When asked what advice they would give to other Arab women struggling with decisions about entering a career in the field of visual communications, the students were very forthcoming. They strongly encouraged others to follow this path, but pointed to a lack of knowledge and understanding among parents as a major obstacle. The fact that the students were willing to speak enthusiastically about the course was important. Word-of-mouth within the community is one of the strongest recruitment methods for this particular programme, and during my second contract I noticed we were getting sisters and cousins — and in one case the mother — of former students enrolling on the programme.

Taken altogether, the students' testimonies are a clear sign of hope for a better, more fulfilling future for women in the UAE. The common threads through these women's lives were the restrictions placed on them by family and society. Yet they were connected, too, in their determination to circumvent these restrictions and live lives of their choosing. This is the fundamental basis of claiming one's self: to overcome obstacles and be the person of one's own making.

CHAPTER 6
FURTHER DISCUSSION

6.1   Part I, Disconnection from Self: Introduction

6.1.1   Centrality of family

6.1.2   A change in role

6.1.3   Relationships within the family

6.1.4   The larger implications of educated UAE women

6.1.5   Recent reporting on Islamic women from a western perspective

6.1.6   Conclusion

6.2   Part 2, Claiming of Self: Introduction

6.2.1   Transition

6.2.2   Education in the present-day UAE

6.2.3   Communications Technology at Abu Dhabi Women's College

6.3.   Beginning work at Abu Dhabi Women's College

6.3.1 Opinion as to what constitutes a good Communications Technology programme

6.4   The Future

6.4.1 Conclusion: Power and responsibility

6.1   Introduction

This chapter will discuss further the findings outlined in the data chapters, along with an examination of the content and objectives of the Comm. Tech. programme and questions about the future shape of Arab society. The first half of this chapter is divided into two parts: part one deals with the findings outlined in Chapter 4, Disconnection from Self, while part two deals with the findings outlined in Chapter 5, Claiming Self. In part one we will look at the role of the family in the UAE and the changing role of women up to the present day. This will include an exploration of the larger implications of the education of women for the Arab family and for Arab society in general. Part two will comment on the transition period currently ongoing in the UAE and the education system as it presently stands.

In our examination of the study's findings, we will ask what the findings actually mean, both now and in the future, for the young UAE women who took part in this study. In order to validate those findings and express them in a wider context, I have integrated the findings from this study with the existing literature, which will amplify and clarify the conclusions drawn here

The area of present-day literature is an important one, especially where it relates to the popular Western myth that all of Islam is wrong and all Muslim women are treated as second-class citizens. Presented as the 'true stories of Arab Women', these are in fact mostly ghostwritten accounts of acts of heroism in which the location does not matter. These texts will be addressed alongside more recent reports in print journalism on Muslim women and the issue of the veil.

One interesting outcome from this study is that the women who participated in it are now beginning to encourage others to write and publish, in English, in an attempt to correct the misleading material written about them that has led to the stereotyping of all Arab women. This would include books such as *Princess Sultana's Circle* (Sasson 2002), *Princess Sultana's Daughters* (Sasson 2001), *Mayada, Daughter of Iraq* (Sasson 2003), *Sold* and *A Promise to Nadia* (Mauhusen). Most of these books were ghostwritten by authors who have been largely discredited by Arab feminists, who regard their texts as both inaccurate and misleading (Ahmed; *see also* literature review). Nonetheless, these books sell in millions around the world and feed the stereotype that has dogged Arab women for so long.

This discussion will also query the common experiences shared by the women in the study in order to increase our overall understanding of the various stages observed in the decisions and actions of these women. As we have already noted, familial and cultural norms were two of the factors that initially prevented these women from questioning their given role in life. In the western media the Arab woman is portrayed as downtrodden and submissive: how, then, did she go against all the perceived cultural taboos and attend college? The stereotyping of the Arab male presents the image of a chauvinistic bully who sees no benefit whatsoever in the education of women and actively opposes it. The findings of this study, coupled with my own personal experiences in the UAE, all undermine this caricature and point to the fact that the stereotype of the Arab man, like that of Arab women, is highly inaccurate.

6.1.1   The centrality of family

The family has played a role in women's sense of disconnection from themselves in the UAE and other Arab countries. Traditionally, the nature of the Arab family relationship required a woman to place tremendous trust in her family to take care of her from the day she is born until the day she dies. This 'taking care of' necessarily involved an imbalance in power between the male and female members of the family, with the male members being charged with the decision-making on behalf of their female relatives. For their part, the women trusted their male relatives to make the best decisions in terms of their personal well-being and welfare.

From the point of view of western family traditions, this represented an unequal relationship, whereby the men in the family, regardless of age, retained all the power and authority over the women. Until now, there has been no pressure to change this dynamic because it was not an issue for women. They assumed the family would do right by them as women, that they would marry a suitable candidate and move in with their husbands' families. In the UAE women have traditionally continued the parent–child relationship into their marriage by substituting their husband for the father. In marriage, therefore, the power differential remained the same, as did the assumption that the man would take care of the woman.

Authors who have written on this subject have usually done so in conjunction with political problems arising from areas such as Palestine and Lebanon, largely associated with Arab women of the Middle East. It is important to note that there is a distinction politically between Gulf women and women of

the Middle East: in the Gulf, politics did not matter until very recently; in Palestine and Egypt, women have been actively involved in all areas of politics for decades (Mernessi1996:162–3) (Tucker1993:xv) (Stowesser 1993:10–11).

The life stories related by the women who participated in this study illustrate clearly the depth and strength of familial bonds and the cultural messages imparted to women through the family. These messages had been internalised by the women, creating a tremendous level of trust between woman and family. This process of 'internalisation' of social and cultural norms meant the women did not question the decisions of their families. At times, it could also lead them to ignore or mistrust their own feelings about their life path. Sometimes, even when they knew they very much wanted to go to college, they felt great anxiety at the prospect of proposing this to the family because of the possibility that it could be turned down — decisively. These young women were prepared to believe in and accept their families' decision as being the best choice for them and to abide by it. There was no other way for them to think about this: it was ingrained reaction.

6.1.2   A changing role

Despite the fact that Arab society has managed to maintain the *status quo* for a considerable length of time, it is now obvious that change within the family structure is inevitable, as evidenced by the stories related by the participants. Roald (2001) highlights the fact that in recent years female participation in Muslim society has increased across a broad social spectrum. There are a number of different reasons for this, including the market economy — which in most

countries tends to regulate supply and demand in such a way that one salary per household is not enough to sustain a decent standard of living — the increase in educational opportunities for women and the influence of the feminist movement, with its emphasis on economic independence for women (Roald 2001:86).

My own evidence and observations concur with those made by Roald. I, too, found that many women needed to work out of economic necessity, contrary to the popular myth of the 'wealthy Arab'. However, by far the most influential reason cited was the increased educational opportunities, which have broadened women's horizons and options. The influence of the feminist movement was also visible, albeit in a generally indirect way, through the role models provided by young, single, female teachers at the college. My observations of the effects of feminist thinking were primarily in the area of marriage, where there was a discernible shift towards postponing marriage until after graduation. As Roald pointed out:

> 'As women start to perform more visible roles in society, attitudes towards women's roles tend to change on an ideological level. There is still a notion among Muslims that women are in charge of domestic affairs, but the emphasis has shifted from regarding the home as the only responsibility to regarding it as the first responsibility. Thus, it is acceptable for a Muslim woman to work outside the home if she takes care to fulfil her primary task inside the home first. Interestingly, even among Muslim men, particularly those living in western counties, there is a tendency to draw

attention to those *Hadiths* (sayings of the prophet) which illustrate the father's role in the upbringing and education of children. So, as resources and conditions change, attitudes change in order to be relevant and compatible with contemporary life.'

(Roald 2001: 86–7)

Tucker maintains that the Arab family is generally described in diametric opposition to its Western European counterpart: it has remained basically unchanged, not touched by the historical transformations that paved the way for capitalism in Europe nor by the process of 'modernisation' that in Europe has promoted individualism at the expense of family control. Historical analyses of the European family delineate massive changes in terms of the very basic issues of the nature and timing of change in the family. Most discussions of the family in the Arab world, on the other hand, concur that it was and is an institution with a structure and function fundamentally different from that pertaining in Western Europe and one that is seemingly impervious to change until, that is, the very recent past. This 'otherness' of the Arab family, the notion that it can be defined in historical opposition to the European family, still permeates most discussions of family life (Tucker 1993:196).

The Arab family was and is a unit of economic, social and political relations situated within a particular historical context. Any attempt to deconstruct this family structure in order to understand its importance for women must take into account the ways in which the family fits within the prevailing economic system as an instrument of socialisation and control, and within the political system as a

means of recruiting support and forging alliances. Similarly, it would be too narrow to consider the woman's role within the family as simply that of victim. Women's perceptions and actions have also contributed to shaping relations within the family and have affected how power within the family was distributed and exercised (Tucker 1993:195–7). It is important to be wary of the siren calls of familiar stereotypes and instead to investigate these phenomena thoroughly.

Judging from the evidence gathered by this study, I would argue that the shift in the family structure in the UAE has occurred in a very practical way. Whereas the woman used to rely totally on family support to make the right decisions for her, she is now making decisions for herself, within the parameters of the family unit. In turn, the family is prepared to support her in her decision-making and is giving her the responsibility of upholding her honour on their behalf, her honour being central to the family's well-being. This represents a very big shift for the families of these young women and it is something with which they are, in some cases, struggling to come to terms. In general, there is widespread agreement that young women should be educated, but this agreement leads to the fact of women attending college and eventually seeking employment, probably outside the home. As with all societal change, one acceptance contains within itself further acceptances — the first acceptance leads, logically, to more change.

6.1.3   Relationships within the family

One aspect that came across very strongly from the students was the importance of 'owning' the decision to attend college, in other words that they were the

architects of their own lives. They were particularly proud to be able to articulate this and to prove that they did indeed have a voice within the family. They were anxious that the family would agree with their decision and couldn't bear the thought of their proposal being turned down. As a researcher, this notion of women as independent decision-makers was very interesting to me because it was at odds with the stereotype of the Arab woman. While the students were aware that their male relatives had the ultimate say in all matters, they nonetheless displayed an assertiveness and a strong determination to follow their own choices — a position that would have been unheard of in their mothers' generation. This attitude puts these particular women in the vanguard of social change, a change I believe will become more evident in the next generation.

Any suggestion that the sole place, or role, of women in Arab society is that of wife, mother or sister would oversimplify the lives of a half-a-billion Muslim women in countries around the world. For the Gulf region and Abu Dhabi, in particular, these areas remained largely cut off from the rest of the world until the discovery of oil in the late 1960s. Until then, tradition and Islam were the significant factors in the lives of the people of this region and a vast majority of women were comfortable with what Farah calls 'their traditional Islamic roles as home-makers and educators of the youth in Islamic ways' (Farah 2003:414–5).

Now, however, the increasing opportunities becoming available to these women have encouraged them to take up the challenges posed by modern society and to insist on change. Based on my time living in Abu Dhabi and the findings of this study, I would agree with Farah's description of the modern, educated Muslim woman in contradistinction to the traditional woman, but only because the women

in this study did not — with the exception of one student — come from very traditional backgrounds, the decision to study Communications Technology, a non-traditional subject, being an indicator of this classification.

> 'Others, who are highly modernized and "liberated" have opted for Western dress and modes of behaviour, as well as careers that do not hinge on marital status. Indeed, the latter would be indistinguishable from their Western counterparts were attention not called to their being Muslim.'
>
> (Farah 2003:415–6)

At the present time the largest grouping within the UAE would be women from stricter backgrounds, whom Farah describes as the women existing between tradition and modernity:

> 'A group in between is hesitant about seeking to find some medial position: to conform with the prerequisites of Islamic practices, but have the freedom of movement to assert themselves as best they might in order to serve their ambitions and needs in society at large.'
>
> (Farah 2003:417–9)

While the students were proud of their success in securing their own decision regarding their education, several spoke of the fact that they had very little knowledge about Comm. Tech. prior to registering. This added a burden in terms

of presenting their decision to their families and threatened to attract disapproval from the family. For the generations of students following after them, they felt it would be very helpful to promote and explain the course and for the college to get more involved with the community to this end. Parents struggling with the decision to allow their daughter to study this course would benefit greatly from guidance regarding the course content, structure and aims.

6.1.4   The larger implications of educated UAE women

In order to examine the larger implications of educating UAE women we must digress a little to include here a section that would normally be found in the methodology chapter. This is necessary in order to examine my own observations and experiences of the effects of education on Arab society and thinking.

This study was written up in a 'post-9/11' era, when world opinion on all things Islamic and Arabic has taken on meanings that do not signify accurate, or even fair, descriptions of one billion Muslim people worldwide. The Arab world, and Gulf Arab woman in particular, have been and continue to be the victims of culturism in the West and prescribed descriptions of these people and their world have become the norm. Popular television programmes reinforce this strongly. For example, NBC's 'The West Wing' (2001) constantly referred to a country called Qamar — being only one letter in difference from Qatar — as a country where abuse of women was the accepted norm.

Holliday argues that the tendency to 'otherise' is still fuelled by imperialism. 'Although labels like "Indian" or "woman" or "Muslim" or "American" are no more than starting points, we think of the foreign other as only, mainly,

exclusively White, Black or Western or Oriental.' He suggests that this is particularly so with the 'Islamic World' and 'all one billion people in it', where 'American or British academic intellectuals speak reductively and [...] irresponsibly of something called "Islam", which is then demonized to replace Communism as the west's great Satan' (2002: citing Said).

I used bracketing (see Chapter 3, Methodology) during the data collection and analysis segment of this study in order to stand back from what I thought I knew before I went to live and work in the UAE. This approach enabled me to see clearly what was there and to hear clearly what was being said and to stand back from that which seemed the 'obvious' explanation. A deliberate and conscious move away from 'otherness' was the key to my understanding of the women who participated in this study. I did not want this study to be just another 'objective' study of these women, devoid of real interaction. That meant that I constantly sought to remove the 'foreign' and to place these women in a context to which I believe they were entitled, that is to see them as modern, educated women and members of the global village, the same as any other woman in the twenty-first century, whether she is from Abu Dhabi or Dublin.

Throughout my time in the UAE, a period of six years from 1995 to 2001, its society underwent and continues to undergo transformations and changes that could not have been countenanced by the generation of people who are now the parents of the young women in this study. Western authors generally tend to talk about 'liberation' as a cure for all the perceived ills of Muslim women, assuming that they need to be liberated from overbearing familial and male dominance. I believe my evidence discounts this stereotype and leaves room for a different

interpretation of the woman's place in the family and in society in general. Smith writes that 'Muslim women are shouldering greater responsibilities in the re-ordering of their milieu, socially, economically, politically and even militarily [and that it] is a process that has been underway for some time and has nothing to do with "liberation".' Instead, Smith argues that this is to do with the exigencies of the transforming circumstances that initiated these changes.

'Given the expanded public role of women and the control they still maintain over domestic matters as mistresses of the household and conditioners of religious behaviour among the young, their powers necessarily expanded eventually into the male domain.'
(Smith)

These changes are visible throughout the Arab and Islamic world, where women are becoming more actively involved in all areas of society, most notably in the politics of countries like Palestine and Egypt. In the Islamic Republic of Iran women now participate in activities on every level, from performing in the Tehran Symphony Orchestra to providing logistics to sensitive government operations and the military. The most tangible sign of this creeping change was the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 to a female Iranian lawyer, Shirin Ibadi.

6.1.5   Reporting on Islamic women from a western perspective

Since 2001 Muslim women have been pushed to the fore of public consciousness in the western media due to the decision of the French government to ban religious

symbols from its State schools, which are defined as secular within the tenets of the French Constitution. My own research threw a different light on this subject: for the young women of the UAE, the question of the veil and whether or not they choose to cover was a non-issue, a topic in which they were not particularly interested. Nevertheless, in terms of perceptions of Arab women and Arab society in general, it is very much an issue and one that has aroused strong feeling on both sides of the argument. This was certainly the case in Ireland, a country that traditionally did not separate Church and State, and indeed still does not, to some extent. Irish newspapers devoted enormous amounts of column inches to the French debate, and I would feel that interest was largely due to the level of Catholic Church dominance in Ireland.

Personally, I believe that France pursued this difficult political issue as a sign of acquiescence to America to atone for its refusal to support the American-led invasion of Iraq. The intention of the Bill was to protect the secularism of French schools, but it cannot have come as a surprise that by far the most obvious religious display in those schools is the Islamic headscarf worn by Muslim students. In choosing to actively defend this particular clause of the French Constitution, the government was in fact singling out a section of the population that has very little political clout. The action led to an outcry from the fundamentalist supporters of Osama Bin Laden and has done nothing to encourage the tolerance of religion and beliefs it purports to serve. Instead, it has polarised opinions and differences in France. Reuters gave the following account on 26 March 2004: 'Osama bin Laden's right-hand man, Ayman al-Zawahri, condemned French moves to ban the Muslim veil in government schools in a new tape aired

by an Arabic television channel.' The Dubai-based Al Arabiya television station broadcast the tape on which a male voice denounced, 'This new sign of the Crusader hatred which westerners harbour against Muslims while they boast of freedom, democracy and human rights.' The voice sounded like that attributed to Zawahri on previous tapes.

Irish journalists on all sides took up the issue, arguing vehemently the pros and cons of the French government's position. Fintan O'Toole, who is regarded as one of the most liberal journalists in Ireland, drew attention to a demonstration in support of the Muslim women held by the Irish Anti-War Movement:

'People have different cultural and religious traditions and a liberal society must respect these diverse values. Islam is an established part of European culture and its followers have a right to express their faith without hindrance. Only a racist, a bigot or a xenophobe could object to a young Muslim woman going to school in the attire that her religion requires. And even if it is true that the French law is actually non-discriminatory in that it bans all overtly religious garb, including the wearing of Jewish skullcaps, this according to the protesters is simply a cover for anti-Islamic prejudice. It seems to me though that the protesters are wrong and that they expose the danger that, in the name of tolerance, we end up validating ersatz traditions that use religion as an excuse for oppression. By taking the teachings of a conservative elite as the essence of Islam, we practice a kind of tolerant bigotry, denying to Islam the complexity and

249

contradiction that we acknowledge in, for example, Christianity. Patricia McKenna told the protest meeting, for example, that unlike Christians, Muslims have a specific dress code.'

(O'Toole: Irish times)

From my own experiences I would argue against the suggestion of a specific dress code because I did not find any evidence of this. There is nothing specific about Islamic dress codes: there is no fixed standard as to the style of dress or type of clothing Muslims must wear. A number of issues arise from this article. O'Toole appears to be accusing women of Islamic faith who choose to wear the veil of following a bogus tradition, an accusation that would seem to derive from the belief that to wear the headscarf is to be victimised. Furthermore, his Qur'anic references are glossed over, inaccurate and tabloid in their presentation (see Literature Review). He then goes on to say:

'The irony of using the language of human rights to defend what are in fact patriarchal traditions with no real roots in religion is evident in Lara Marlow's report on the weekend's demonstrations in Paris, of which the Dublin protest was an offshoot: "The Paris march was led by men who several times stopped reporters from speaking to the veiled and unveiled women who walked behind them." While Patricia McKenna was talking at the Dublin protest of "free speech and democracy", many of those who were metaphorically marching alongside her in Paris would see her own outspokenness as a brazen

sign of a decadent society. We know enough in this country about the abuse of religious language to justify the naked exercise of power not to feel in any way superior to any other culture. But we should also know enough not to allow a spurious notion of "diversity" to undermine the far more basic need for equality.'

(O'Toole)

O'Toole is making a lot of assumptions here, most of which are endemic in Western media and which have been discredited by this study. For example, he is peddling the notion that the veil is in no way linked to Islam, but instead is a powerful means of subjugation. He appears to think that the veil is a power issue, a means of denying women a voice. However, from the evidence of this thesis I would argue to the contrary, that the UAE woman is in fact very much part of the decisions that impact on her life. A more fundamental criticism here is that O'Toole did not look to nor consider the perspective of the Muslim woman. In his 'liberalism' he has decided that women should not wear the veil as to do so is to accept victimisation.

6.1.6 Conclusion

The findings collected and presented here support the fact that young Muslim women intent on pursuing a third-level education must endeavour to balance the internal family structure with their desired place in society. Not only does this apply to the woman in her student years but also as a member of the labour force and, possibly, as a mother. Studies conducted to date on this issue deal primarily

with women from the Middle East rather than the Persian Gulf, so there is scope for a much wider examination of the changing social mores and the effect of this on women.

From immersion in the culture and extensive reading I have determined women from the Middle East and those from the Gulf to be very different on many levels. Arab studies may not necessarily be Muslim, which gives a whole other perspective when discussing women's issues in this part of the Arab world. Issues of concern to Islamic women may not necessarily be of concern to other Arab women. Studies focusing on UAE women are only now beginning to emerge, and many of them remain unpublished at this time. The intent of this particular study was to obtain information to provide an insight into women's experience of studying a relatively new college programme and by doing so to lay the foundations for future research. The theoretical and practical implications of this thesis are detailed at the end of Part 2.

6.2 Part 2, Introduction

The process by which the student participants came to claim their own sense of self was started in girlhood and culminated in their decision to attend college. The choice and experience of attending college allowed these young women to assume control of their lives and to redefine themselves and their own realities. They recognised and took the opportunity presented to them to embrace new

possibilities and live by their own values. For these young women, realising the 'spiritual' part of themselves was crucial to the discovery and claiming of self.

The process of claiming self did not occur in distinguishable stages. Instead, there was a great deal of overlap in experiences and events that contributed to the redefining of self. As each phase was mastered, it led in turn to an increase in self-esteem and in turn a clearer self-realisation. Thus began an upward spiral that continued apace, in spite of occasional setbacks.

For most of the participant students, the process of claiming self was triggered by the desire to attend third-level education. This desire was promulgated from a number of different sources. It is now compulsory for children in the UAE to attend second-level education, a requirement that has made students more keenly aware of the opportunities available to them and bringing those opportunities into the realm of the possible. These new generations are forming their opinions and choices through the influence of telecommunications, print and broadcast media and word-of-mouth as positive experiences are handed down from those who went before. All of the students spoke of the growing awareness during their teenage years of the need to confront their families with their decision and to present their case accordingly. In a small way this shifted the power balance, making them realise that they did have a voice and were capable of instigating change for themselves, and furthermore were capable of seeking and securing familial support for such change.

In the UAE the achievement of education for women has not been a difficult one. Officially, State policy has always favoured the education of women and has actively promoted it. There is little opposition to girls' education from

parents, and pro-education campaigns mounted by individual rulers, as well as by the education authorities, have proved very successful. Indeed, the ruling families are staunch supporters of the education of women and the example they have set by sending their own daughters to school has served as an incentive and a reassurance for other families to do likewise (Suffon 1980:52).

The issue of women's rights in general is by no means an insignificant one. The members of the ruling families and government officials have taken women into consideration at all stages in every development plan since the beginning of oil wealth in 1971. The hope and aim is that the UAE's educated women will apply their knowledge to strengthening the country's position, both socially and economically. The collective ambition to be part of a modern, twenty-first-century State has ensured that many restrictive tribal traditions have been firmly put aside in favour of progress. The President's wife, Sheikha Fatima, was reported in a local paper as saying:

'Sheikh Zayed's faith in women is limitless. His continuous support for women is based on his deep belief that society needs the energy of all its citizens and that the whole of society, men and women, should participate in the work for national development. It is one of his enduring dreams for the country to succeed in the elimination of women's illiteracy and for the UAE women to have a deep faith in their basic duty of family caretaker according to Arab and Islamic traditions, no matter how much education she gained or how far she went in her career.'

(*Gulf News*, 20:04:99)

Sheikha Jawaher, wife of the ruler of Sharjah, confirmed this view when addressing the first women graduates from Sharjah University. Whilst she urged the women to pursue successful careers, she also cautioned them:

> 'You must not forget your important role in life as mothers and generation-raisers and hold on to your religious values. This requires compromising between your duties and not letting one responsibility overshadow the other. But remember that your contributions to your homes are your first priority and that nothing compares to your role as wives and mothers.'
>
> (*Gulf News* 25:11:99)

Sheikha Fatima saw no conflict between women's desire to keep abreast of modern technology and their desire to preserve their Arab and Islamic heritage. In her view, Islam encourages learning of all kinds, for everyone. Such opinions are comparable to policy theories critiqued by Marshall in *Researching the Margins*:

> 'Liberal and critical theory allows women into the public sphere, but still leaves women with all the duties of the private sphere (it is fine if a women wants to be president as long as she can manage her family's needs for nurturance and support too).'
>
> (Marshall 1999)

6.2.1 Transition

At present, the UAE is in a transitional phase. There is much still to be discussed and resolved, which situation can have a negative impact on the population. At this time it is very difficult for families, and in particular fathers of daughters, as they try to move between what they want to hold onto and what they want to create. Many men are caught in a double-bind: they want their daughters to be educated and fulfilled, yet they are threatened by and fear the freedom and independence education brings.

According to Hijab, the oil boom of the 1970s brought about almost overnight change in the Gulf States. It was like drawing the winning lottery ticket: from being amongst the poorest countries in the world, the Gulf States suddenly found themselves among the wealthiest nations. The windfall brought mixed blessings, however. On one hand, the oil producers were able to build nearly everything from scratch, including houses, schools, hospitals and industry. On the other hand, nearly everything necessary to achieve this had to be imported from abroad, including the basic materials, the skilled labour, the administrative professionals, the technology and the technicians. Expatriate advisors drew up plans on how best to spend the oil producers' money, which often had more to do with creating jobs for the expatriates themselves than with the real needs of the oil States (Hijab 2000:125).

The inevitable influx of foreigners to man this revolution meant a concomitant influx of other cultures and religions. Soon, the UAE locals were outnumbered two to one by their foreign visitors. In some Arab countries this

would pose a substantial problem, but the UAE is very accommodating of other beliefs. It is, for example, the only Islamic State to have actively supported the building of Christian churches through financial donations. The delicate political situation also helped to promote integration. While it was official Gulf policy to prefer Arab labourers over non-Arab labourers, Gulf officials did have some reservations about a largely Arab workforce, which they felt could be a destabilising factor if too may politicised Arabs were involved. In any case, local labour had become more expensive than Asian labour, which further encouraged employers to look kindly on guest workers (Hijab 2000).

It soon became apparent that the UAE needed a trained workforce to meet its needs and built successfully on the new-found wealth and status. This meant education had to be a priority within the State. Leila Ahmed, an Egyptian author and feminist, was one of the first people to be consulted regarding the development of a formal education system in the UAE. She saw this as the moment when the country as a whole was catapulted, almost instantaneously, into modernity (Ahmed 2000:272–3). Ahmed experienced conflicting feelings about what was being done and what inevitably would be proposed. She saw the many gains to be embraced, but also the many traditional and worthwhile cultural factors that were threatened with extinction:

'After all, wasn't all this education, modernity, improvement a necessary and incontrovertible good? I don't know the answer even now. But I do believe that I was right in my feeling that I was witnessing the imposition of a profoundly different and in many ways

inferior culture. In coming to this understanding I would find myself suddenly also understanding one more piece in that central enigma in my own life of Arabness, identity, language, culture. My understanding of the meaning of mother tongue and mother culture in my own life would, as I reflected on Abu Dhabi, be forever changed.'

(Ahmed 2000)

She went on to validate the thinking of the Gulf governments at that time:

'Conflicting class and economic interests thus underlay the political and ideological divisions that began ever more insistently to characterize the intellectual and political scene – divisions between those eager to adopt European ways and institutions, seeing them as the means to personal and national advancement, and those anxious to preserve the Islamic and national heritage against the onslaughts of the infidel West. This states somewhat simply the extremes of the two broad oppositional tendencies within Egyptian political thought at this time.'

(Ahmed 2000:274)

The women in this study often expressed privately their wish to see the Emiratisation policy realised during their lifetime. However, they were always cautious of offending me as an expatriate. On several occasions I asked them to

'suspend that belief' and elaborate on what they felt regarding the expatriate influence on education, in particular as I felt very strongly that the HCT graduates of the programme would be very capable of taking over and running the programme in the not-too-distant future. With encouragement, they opened up on this subject. Some of the students felt their work placement has been compromised by non-local Arabs who would not help or train them for fear that they would one day take their jobs — which, again, I believe will happen in time. I did not gather evidence to back up the students' claims of being thwarted like this because I saw it as being outside the scope of this particular study, but nonetheless it is an issue that the college must look into. Work placement is one of the most important aspects of the educational programmes offered by the HCT because all of the programmes are intended to be 'work ready' in nature. According to the Mission Statement of the HCT:

> 'Graduates of the colleges will have the linguistic ability to function effectively in an international environment; the technical skills to operate in an increasingly complex technological world; with the intellectual capacity to adapt to constant change, and the leadership potential to make the fullest possible contribution to the development of the community for the good of all its people.'
> (Catalogue 1997–98)

Unsubstantiated anecdotal evidence suggests the Egyptian hold on the University of the UAE was a major factor in the establishment of the Higher Colleges of

Technology in 1988. It is said that the University of the UAE in Al-Ain, the second city of the Abu Dhabi emirate, was run almost entirely by Egyptians in the 1990s, who were causing problems for the Ministry of Education by demanding changes in educational practices. The University refused their demands and, rather than cause political problems, the HCT was established as a separate entity and where the medium of instruction was English. This policy was continued with the establishment of Zayed University in 1999, which was established in response to the growing numbers of students who wished to attend college. The University of the UAE is still female-only, which I see as a testament to how motivated these young women are and also a testament to the faith the government puts in the women of the UAE.

Although these universities are catering for the current college population in the region, this might prove difficult to maintain given the projected increase of enrolments in federally supported institutions of higher education based on the recent rapid growth of enrolments in tertiary institutions. For the past decade the number of students enrolling in the UAE University and in the HCT has been increasing at an annual rate of around 7 per cent. A count of children already born — taken from national census data — indicated that if the country maintains its policy of providing access to higher education for all qualified students who seek it, enrolments will continue to grow at an average annual rate of about 7 per cent for the next ten years. The scale of the problem is daunting: consider that in 1996 a total of 21,000 students enrolled in these institutions; at the predicted growth rate, enrolments will more than double by 2007 to about 44,000 students, placing huge pressure on the available resources.

On the basis of these statistics Zayed University has recommended that a new university be built in the UAE, initially with two non-residential campuses for female students living in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, the two major population centres in the country. When Zayed University was opened, in the 1998/1999 academic year, it admitted approximately 400 first-year female students to a campus prepared for it in Abu Dhabi and a further 1,100 female students to a second campus in Dubai.

In a report prepared for The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, Abdulla Mograby writes about the rapid changes facing the country at this time. The ongoing, fast-paced growth of technology in an increasingly knowledge- and service-based modern economy, together with new market demands for quality and flexibility in products and services, has put a premium on human skills to sustain economic growth and competitiveness. In the UAE the development of human resources and the massive expansion of the education system has taken on yet another important dimension: foreign labour constitutes the majority of the labour force. Given the small size of the indigenous population and the pace of economic development, it is likely that the labour market will further increase its demand for foreign labour unless the national labour force quickly acquires the skills and expertise needed to become more competitive (Mograby 1999:279).

6.2.2 Education in the present-day UAE

Education is free in the UAE at every level, from primary school to third-level. The government is happy to do this because it views education as an investment in

human capabilities, with an expected return for individuals and for society. Since the Federation of the UAE was established in 1971 special efforts have been directed towards education precisely because it is considered essential to the achievement of national targets for economic and social development. This belief is reflected in Article 17 of the UAE Constitution, which states that 'education is an essential element in achieving the progress of society. It is mandatory in the elementary stage and free for all stages' (Federal Law no.1 on Ministerial mandates, *Government Gazette* no.1, vol. 1, 1972).

Stemming from this basic stipulation, many UAE laws and ministerial decrees have been designed as a boost to education. These measures have ensured that higher education, like general education, has experienced significant growth over the last twenty years. The first UAE university was established in Al-Ain in 1977 and has since grown significantly in terms of number of faculties and student population (approximately 14,459 students by 1997/1998). It has produced about 17,100 graduates since its establishment, the majority of them women. Furthermore, the university has established relationships with overseas universities for the training of medical and agriculture science students, as well as for UAE students seeking further higher education qualifications in foreign institutions.

The twelve-college network of the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) provides training for UAE nationals through a programme of two- to four-year courses in Business, Information Technology, Communications Technology, Engineering and Social Sciences. In 1995 HCT established Centres of Excellence for Applied Research and Training (CERT) in the Emirate States of Abu Dhabi

and Dubai, with the aim of promoting excellence in vocational research and development. The HCT has also developed affiliations with recognised international tertiary institutions, with the express purpose of maintaining its educational programmes to international standards and facilitating the transfer of its students to study programmes abroad. Together, the University of UAE and the HCT account for over 75 per cent of higher-education students, with Zayed University and other private institutions accounting for the rest.

In the past number of years the UAE has witnessed a population explosion, which has of course increased the numbers of students seeking to enter third-level courses. Such developments are most noticeable in the areas of female literacy and enrolment rates. According to the statistics provided by the Center for Strategic Research, female enrolment in second-level education as a percentage of males (1993–5) is among the highest rates in GCC countries, while UAE female illiteracy rates and maternal mortality are among the lowest.

When taking into account these and other indicators, there is little doubt that the UAE has made significant progress in human development over the past two decades, with all the relevant statistics showing an improvement that exceeds many other GCC countries, most of which commenced development programmes long before the formation of the UAE Federation in 1971. These figures do not give the true picture, however, as they also cover expatriates in the UAE. Accordingly, a more detailed analysis of the UAE education system would prove very useful.

Under the heading 'Colonisation in reverse and the question of Identity', Hijab notes that there is no denying that social attitudes were more conservative

in the Gulf States than in other Arab countries, even though the same religious traditions and customs were to be found in all. The differential was in the degree of adherence, which deviation Hajib believed was attributable to the fact that change took place in the Gulf at a much quicker pace than in the rest of the Arab world (Hijab 2000:123).

Today the UAE is still in the throes of change, with one of the biggest shifts being the education of young women for careers outside the home. This can be difficult for parents as customs and tradition still provide the only fixed framework for assessing and managing this new reality, both for themselves and for their daughters. The students explained that, although they want their society to change, they want this change to occur slowly and in a manner that respects and complements their beliefs and traditions. In defending this assertion, the students cited the example of Iran. It is widely acknowledged that, prior to the Shah's radical modernisation, Gulf Arab women mixed with men in public and had many more social freedoms. The students felt that the Shah had tried to change things too quickly, which led to an Islamic backlash and the violence of the 1979 revolution.

In the midst of change and transition, education is seen as the solid foundation on which to establish modernisation and economic growth: the primary goals of Middle Eastern development (Christina *et al* 1999). The onus is on the educational planners to devise systems that meet the needs and potential of the indigenous population and thereby reduce reliance on expatriate labour. At present all Gulf States are implementing nationalisation policies that will directly affect educational development, especially in the tertiary sector.

6.2.3 Communications Technology at Abu Dhabi Women's College

The development of the Communications Technology programme at Abu Dhabi Women's College happened rather quickly. When planning the course structure, the college retained a consultant to assist with information and to develop a programme plan that could be put in place. The consultant's study was undertaken in 1991 and took place over a one-week period. The consultant, Fred Steinmetz, acknowledges the fact that it is both challenging and risky to summarise the findings gathered in a complex country over such a short period of time (Steinmetz 1991), but as it was the primary study conducted, we must examine it nonetheless.

The consultant's findings concluded that there were major challenges to be overcome if the programme were to be launched successfully. Arab culture was not accustomed to the harsh realities that confronted people operating in this field in other countries. However, he noted that he had encountered many exceptions that had proven to him that one must never generalise about such matters, and this was no different. When questioned, potential female candidates expressed a desire to become involved in many of the activities proposed. The other potential obstacle was the attitude of employers to female applicants. Again, when questioned, employers made it clear that they would welcome women into the various media industries, were willing to assist in training them and would hire them upon graduation. Although that was welcome news, the consultant did note that the pay scale in the private sector was comparatively low at this time.

The consultant recommended that the Colleges consider and assess the programme with the utmost care and sensitivity. More than any other, this programme would touch on people's personal sensibilities and cultural assumptions. For an Arab person to become involved in advertising, broadcasting and journalism would require them to question their own beliefs and actions, a questioning they would be called upon to perform at a very early stage in their training. (While this may be a concern at this time, it may well prove to be less so in the future as the programme develops and attitudes change.)

The consultant's observations led him to recommend to the HCT that they embark on the development of a Communications Technology programme, and that this programme be seen as the first step of future expansion into the fields of photography, music and other forms of Communications, thus creating a new division. At this point he avoided an expansion into the field of Graphic Design because he did not feel the discipline belonged in a Comm. Tech. programme as he understood it. He went on to recommend that the HCT conduct a similar investigation in the future to determine the feasibility of establishing a Design division that would accommodate the subject of Visual Communications (Steinmetz 1991:3–7).

The Comm. Tech. programme was subsequently set up, with a staff of one supervisor (who was also head of the programmes at four other colleges), one Media Production lecturer, one Journalism lecturer and a technician. All of the staff members were male. The attitude of the HCT tends to be 'just get it done', therefore proper planning and long-term implications are often sacrificed to instant results. I spoke with Fred Steinmetz many times during my first year at

the college and after he left in 1996. On one occasion he gave me an insight into how the programme came about and what was expected of him:

> 'On arrival at the college in June, I was shown a derelict building at the far end of the campus and was told that was where I was to house the programme. The programme was to be offered in September [of that same year]. I had two months to get the building ready, get staff and write the curriculum. July and August in Abu Dhabi is bereft of people and facilities as weather conditions force the majority, including the locals, to leave. So I hired staff from Canada as this was the easiest option and started doing everything we could to get things prepared.
>
> The next big hurdle was attracting students [as] no procedures were in place for this. I had to go across to the main campus building and pitch for students against Business and Office Administration. These programmes were already well established and had a good student base, drawn largely from the foundation course. Eventually we got enough students to make up the class, however this was not a requirement. We would have had to offer the programme regardless of the numbers.'
>
> (IN: Canada, July 2001)

6.3 Beginning Work at Abu Dhabi Women's College

I arrived at Abu Dhabi Women's College in 1995, at the commencement of the second year of the Comm. Tech. course. There was no induction training for staff, regardless of the fact that the majority of new staff members had never before been in an Arab country and had no idea what to expect, nor what was expected of them. As a result, we were left to pick up second- and third-hand anecdotes in an attempt to understand local customs, religion and ways. It was a daunting task. At that early stage I examined the curriculum matrix, which seemed to have a clear divide between the three areas of specialisation, with the first year being designed largely as a foundation course. Within my own area of Visual Communications, I decided to write the course using the Bauhaus principles as this was the recognised standard for teaching design and was the way I had been taught the subject.

When I first arrived at the college the students seemed excited and enthusiastic about their studies. They told me they were delighted to have a female teacher for a number of reasons: first, I was a graphic designer; secondly, I was young; and thirdly, they could now go on more field trips because I would be allowed to chaperone instead of an unfamiliar person from student services (IC: Abeer 00:09:95).

For my own part I was very enthusiastic about the post and working with the students, although it soon became apparent that neither curriculum nor materials had been prepared prior to my commencing lectures at the college. I stuck with my own best practice and experience of design education, which was, as

I said above, grounded largely in the Bauhaus tradition — the norm in western Visual Communications education.

The students were very interested in designing and producing a magazine, a project that had been promised to them in first year on the condition that a graphic design teacher could be appointed (IC: students 00:09:95). Thus did the programme progress, but as we entered the following year, which would be the programme's first graduating year, I became aware of gaps in the curriculum. There were two fundamental areas missing in my subject alone: art history and life-drawing. Neither subject could be taught for cultural reasons, although at this stage I was not entirely sure of just what those reasons were. Art history presented a difficulty because it was rooted in western art and therefore very influenced by Christianity. Life-drawing broke one of Islam's taboos because it involved representing the face and the naked human body. I very much wanted to explore these areas with the students, but it was simply not possible to do so within the college curriculum at that time.

The start of my third year at the college saw a change in leadership that in turn led to changes in the curriculum matrix, which were effected without any consultation with those of us teaching at the college. I now had two years' experience teaching there and was already beginning to see that the perceptions and opinions I had arrived with at the beginning were being challenged almost on a daily basis. During this year I talked to the students at length about the programme, the subjects they were studying, where they felt the programme was going and how they viewed themselves and their future lives as young women about to graduate.

6.3.1 Opinions as to what constitutes a good Communications Technology programme

In an interview with Steven Heller for his book, *The Education of a Graphic Designer*, Krysztof Lenk, graphic designer, information architect, typography lecturer at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) and one of the foremost proponents of Visual Communications was asked: 'What makes a good design programme?' He replied:

> 'Design education is a collective activity. We are never alone with a student in a programme. We work in a team of instructors, and only as a team are we strong or weak. This is why it takes years to create a well-synchronized programme and only a few stupid decisions to ruin it.'

I agree with him.

The worst decision made by the course supervisors at Abu Dhabi was not to give the students a voice, not to hear their opinions. April Greiman, a graphic, video and multimedia designer who taught at the prestigious CalArts School in Los Angeles, outlined the importance of this in response to the question: 'How would you describe an ideal design education?'

> 'I think a good school should provide an environment where the individual is encouraged to pursue whatever he or she feels

strong[ly] about. Multimedia is hot now, but it is still just one avenue to pursue creatively. Teachers of design should help a student to find their voice. In other words, not to be a template version of the teacher but rather to help [the students] unfold what they already know and can bring to the table.'

(Heller 1998:195, 203–7)

At this stage the focus of the Comm. Tech. Programme had shifted to Media Production, with the 'help' of Emirates Media. (Emirates Media is the new name for the national television, radio and newspapers services, which was in fact very much in the news during the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, and is now named simply Abu Dhabi TV.) The Media Production department of Emirates Media has recently been taken over by a twenty-two-year-old Minister of Information and Culture, Shaikh Abdulla. He wanted the media modernised, a point with which everyone concurred. While Shaikh Abdulla was correct in his outlook, he overlooked the cultural difficulties posed by female students mixing with male members of the community to whom they were not related. He was not, of course, solely responsible for decisions in the college, but I regarded his influence as unhelpful. The students held different opinions. While they agreed with Abdulla's ambitions for the programme, they did not feel those plans related to them. They felt that only the male students would be able to function in the environment envisaged by Abdulla (IC students 00/05/00).

The students were really impressed by what was happening at the television station and by the improvements made since Abdulla took over his

portfolio. What was becoming evident to me and to the others working on the programme, however, was that we could very likely end up running an apprenticeship for Emirates Media, something I did not regard as the mission of the HCT nor in the best interests of the female students.

I include this as I feel it highlights the lack of clear direction that affected the programme and the weakness of the curriculum in many areas. Constant changes were implemented without discussion or planning. Measures, such as the addition of subjects to the curriculum, were effected without any staff input or any consideration for the overall effect on the programme. It was plain to me that the various constraints surrounding the programme meant the subjects were not suited to the kind of programme being offered by Abdulla. For example, the addition of Silicon Graphics, which in most cases is taught over a four-year period, was added as a second-year subject, with no follow-up provided for the third year and no introduction in the first year.

The educational policy implemented by the Ministry of Education (MoE) was based on two fundamental principles of the State's Constitution: the provision of free education to all citizens and the improvement of the quality of education to meet the needs of individual students and of society's economic and cultural development (Nazzal 2000). Although primary and secondary education is compulsory and considered each citizen's right, the quality of public education regionally is a cause of concern to the business and academic communities. Dr Hanif Al Qassimi, Vice-President of Zayed University, claimed that 'a major difficulty universities face is the serious problem of a weak academic background. The public school education system here is so poor that there is a huge gap

between what students can do and the expectations of the university.' He felt that students struggled with their studies at third-level as a result of an over-reliance on rote-based learning in the public schools. He asserted that quality education was the cornerstone of national development: 'If a country wants to produce a better quality of people, education is the key' (Daniel 2001: *Gulf News* 18/05/01).

In the west, students entering a third-level programme of study in the area of Communications Technology would generally have the equivalent of A-levels in Art and Art History. Things were very different in the UAE, where the majority of students had no background at all in the visual or theoretical arts. From a teaching point of view, this situation was very different from what it should have been for third-level education in order to follow the syllabus we were required to deliver and to ensure the stated outcomes.

As already noted, the bias towards rote learning at public school hampered the students' comprehension of visual communications, primarily because the latter involves a high level of critical and independent thinking. Students were continually asking, 'What do we do next?' and it was obvious they had not been encouraged to use their initiative in previous learning environments. This proved to be one of the most difficult aspects of the programme for the students because their educational background simply did not prepare them in any way for this kind of learning.

The facilities at the HCT were state-of-the-art because money was no object. This might sound ideal, but it was in fact a mixed blessing. One of the effects of not having a good grounding in the fundamentals of design was that the students relied heavily on technology. It was a common assumption that the more

powerful the technology, the better their work would be. Of courser, their chosen area of study meant technology was an extremely important tool for them, but it was difficult to get them to understand that a computer is only as good as what is put into it. Several times during discussions with students about the quality of their work they would ask me, 'Should I get a better computer?' The college had spent vast amounts of money on technology, so it was expected that it would be used all the time. From my own point of view this hampered the teaching of my particular subject as a student in year one would have been much better served by a sketch pad, a pencil and an English dictionary. Those instruments paled into insignificance, however, in the face of a multi-million-dollar lab filled with the latest Apple Macintosh computers. The issue of reliance on technology is not peculiar to the UAE and is a debate that is heard regularly in the West, too. The effects of this imbalance are many, from a decrease in legibility to 'the creation of new type' to design for designers and, the ultimate criticism, art for art's sake.

Robert Greenburg is Chairman of R/GA Digital Studios, a design and production company known for pioneering new media and the creative integration of film, video, and computer-imaging techniques. When asked, 'Do you still work in any of the … well … old-fashioned, pre-electronic ways?' he replied:

> 'People are getting fed-up with the feeling of insecurity, that they have no control. What is ironic is that all this technology stuff is supposed to give you more control. Nevertheless, I always try to find the time to do something to remind me that technology is not all that is important — what one does with one's hands is also important.'

When discussing recent graduates who have joined his company, he said:

> 'A lot of kids [who] apply to R/GA are smart about new media because all of their attention is focused in that area, and they do some wonderful things, but sometimes they lack exposure to other forms of communication. They are going to have to focus on traditional graphic design, film, lighting, photography, art direction, and so much more.'
>
> (Heller 1998:203)

6.4   The Future

As previously stated, the UAE is undergoing transition and there are many tensions between tradition and modernisation, especially given the rapid developments in the communications and technology sector. In a 1996 newspaper article, an Arab teacher pointed to the struggles apparent within mainstream education: 'Our efforts will continue to guarantee the country well-educated youths who keep pace with international developments along with a commitment to traditions and values of the Arab and Islamic cultures' (Abdullah, Eman, *Gulf News*, 13:5:96). Education and work are frequently referred to in the course of the whole debate on the Arab Islamic identity.

Quoting Fatima Mernessi, a well-known and respected Moroccan sociologist, Graham-Brown asserts that 'Arab identity' has been conceived in a

way that regards change as threatening to the moral order, thus impeding the development of democracy and the emancipation of women (Graham-Brown 1994: 3–9). Other authors suggest that what constitutes 'Arabness' reveals a fear that that which is not well defined will be unable resist erosion by the process of modernisation (Hijab 1996:41–54). Hijab goes on to say that 'Arab society's struggles to construct identities and heritage are tied to efforts to preserve the family and community, similar to existing southern European and Asian cultures that view the family as the nucleus of social organisation and women as the core of the family' (Hijab 1996:41–54). Much of the recent local journalism confirms this struggle between the new views, beliefs, values and practices being imported through the large expatriate community and the indigenous culture and tradition of the small native population.

According to Richardson, United Nations reports and studies show that some of the obstacles blocking women's advancement worldwide are the deeply rooted traditions underlying cultural beliefs, coupled with a poor understanding of women's issues and their significance. The Arab women's struggle to overcome such issues is not dissimilar from that which faced women in Europe and North America in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, at a time of rapid industrialisation. In other words, the issues of heritage, identity, religion, patriarchy, the family and community and women's central role within the family are not unique to the Gulf region, but are familiar to people the world over (Richardson, 1999 citing Hijab).

Although there are socio-cultural factors affecting Arab women's entry into the workforce, research shows that when a society or a family needs women to

work, socio-cultural obstacles to female participation in the workforce are dissolved. This has already proved to be the case in some areas of the Arab world. For example, following migration of male workers to the Gulf after the discovery of oil there, women in countries such as Jordan and Palestine (necessarily) took over many of the jobs left vacant by the men (Hijab 2000).

This need to work is now becoming evident in the UAE, where not all young families have direct links to the production of oil and therefore must find other employment. The UAE government wants to have more control over its workers, so it has implemented new labour laws to encourage women's participation in the workforce. The government recognises that the women are in many ways far more qualified than the men, and that these skills cannot be allowed to go to waste if the Emiratisation policy is to be realised in full. A more practical consideration that is shoring up the work policy is the fact that many young Emirati families find themselves in debt due, in part, to the large dowries demanded by a bride's family and the cost of weddings, which can often run to $50,000. The students who participated in this study highlighted these factors as an influence on young families and their view of women working, also pointing to the new materialistic values that have seeped in gradually. (Dubai, for example, is becoming widely known for its 5-star hotels and expensive designer boutiques. The city hosts an annual shopping festival that is said to generate billions of dollars in revenue.)

Amidst all this talk of modernisation and female emancipation, it is easy to lose sight of the framework within which UAE society views these developments. We heard earlier from Sheikha Fatima, wife of Shaikh Zayed, who saw no conflict

between the rise of the modern working woman and the preservation of Arab and Islamic heritage. Women are simply expected to do both: to be modern and forward-thinking outside the home, and to respect tradition and traditional roles within the home. Graham-Brown argues that this Janus view of women's role is not unique to this region: 'Most Islamic groups stress the importance of male authority and emphasize the primacy of women's roles as wife and mother (Graham-Brown 1994:3–9).

Shortly before I left Abu Dhabi in 2001, an article appeared in the *Khaleej Times* quoting the Dubai police chief as saying that women should be paid to stay at home and raise children, that priority should be placed on increasing the population rather than increasing the workforce. His blunt comments caused an outcry among women, many of whom wrote to the paper stating that the Emiratisation policy clearly supports women's right to work and their achievements cannot be dismissed simply to give birth to more national babies (*Khaleej Times*, June 2001).

Although the police chief is only one man and his comments represented his personal opinion, it is likely his views are shared by many men who feel threatened or undermined by this new breed of confident, independent Arab woman. However, as with many aspects of women's liberation, this issue is in no way specific to Arab countries or the UAE. There is still debate in the West as to the pros and cons of working mothers, with staunch defenders on both sides of the divide.

In describing the post-revolutionary position of Iranian women, Mehran compares them with Emirati women and finds their positions to be very similar, with the exception of the political aspect:

> 'Contrary to widespread belief among scholars and laymen alike, the ideal female citizen of the Islamic Republic of Iran is not to return to the past when women were secluded from public life and banned from presence in non sex-segregated settings. She is not to be what her mother and grandmother before her used to be: domesticated and isolated. The new Muslim woman is not to become Westernized either. She has to be covered according to religious practice, and abide by the cultural norms of modesty prevalent in Muslim communities. The seeming contradiction is that the ideal woman of the post-revolutionary period is to be traditional and modern at the same time. She is expected to be a good wife and devoted mother as well as an active and educated member in the social, political and cultural affairs of her society, all at the same time.'
>
> (Mehran 1999, cited in Richardson 2000)

6.4.1 Power and responsibility

The ability to play a part in shaping their own futures was very important for the students in this study. Radical change, or the power to impose radical change, was not what the students wanted. So, if education and the chance to work outside the

home have given these young Arab women more power than the previous generations, it begs the questions: what power do they actually have, how do they secure this power and how do they use it?

In defining 'power' the available literature on the subject of women in the Middle East assumes that Arab women were fairly powerless up to the 1970s (Hijab). Three factors are usually employed to assess how much power women have: first, the right to suffrage; secondly, formulation of legislation on matters of personal status; and thirdly, access to education and employment. Measured against these indicators, Arab women were deemed to have low status and little power until the 1970s (Hijab 2000:138). However, the author goes on to point out that another reason for the conclusion that Arab women were powerless was the fact that much of the literature until the 1970s was produced by social scientists, who were usually Western and male. This meant very limited access to the study subjects and perhaps an over-reliance on the three factors cited above, without the support of field research (Hijab 2000:138–41) (see also Chapter 2, Literature Review).

Hijab argues that a good working definition of 'power' is the extent to which a person, or group, can exercise control over their situation; in the case of women, the extent to which they can influence factors related to their situation in order to serve clearly defined personal (or family, or community) interests (Hijab 2000:158). In terms of this study, being female gave me a huge advantage as I had a lot of access to the students' lives and thoughts. In order to assess the question of power clearly, it is important that more women become involved in the social sciences and in this kind of research. As a woman, I did not perceive a lack of

power in the lives of these young women. In their daily lives and experiences what was important in terms of personal empowerment was the informal structures and how they functioned in relation to their position and interests within the family and within society in general.

As Hajib argues, revising the definition of 'power' is necessary and helpful when studying the lives of Arab women. A wider definition of 'power', as provided by Hajib, illuminates how these women, who were presumed powerless, were so determined and self-confident, particularly those coming from traditional Islamic and tribal backgrounds. I believe it is not possible to know, speak with and work with the women of the UAE without being struck by and recognising the strength of their personalities, their self-possession and their self-confidence — all very much at odds with Western stereotypes and assumptions. This highlights the absolute necessity for any such studies to include indepth fieldwork and extensive interviews, as this is the only way to gauge accurately the position of Arab women within Arab society.

Responsibility is power, and accepting and having responsibility was something the students were keen to do. As they progressed through college, their increasing self-trust and awareness allowed them to take on more and more responsibility. This was not an isolated responsibility, however. In keeping with their social traditions, for all of the women support and validation from others, particularly their immediate family and their peers, was crucial to their attendance at college and their graduation from college. They were willing to take responsibility for their decisions, but also sought validation of those decisions through familial consent and support. This support and validation have given the

students confidence with regard to participating in the workforce. They now feel it is up to themselves to make sure this happens, that it is in their hands. Following Fatima's example, some of the students were insisting on the right to work being written into their marriage contracts; it was interesting to note that the husbands-to-be were not objecting to this.

Receiving validation from the family also allowed the women to question the role they had up until now played within the family unit. They spoke of being able to address the subject appropriately with their families regarding their education and future working role. For this group of young women, acknowledging their own needs and wants was integral to their growing sense of self-trust, something they would need in order to work in a mixed environment. During their college years the students came to embrace their own values and honour their own strengths. They became aware of the lifestyles they wished to establish and the choices they could now make to realise those lifestyles. Their stories showed that part of claiming self was the ability to explore and become comfortable with the new roles of student and, in time, worker. However, it is also essential to remember that the study participants were young women aged between seventeen and twenty-one, whose life experiences were limited by their age. It is beyond the parameters study to know whether they will take the paths they described and their intended ones. My own belief is that they will.

CHAPTER 7

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

7.1 Introduction

The transition from passive member of the family to one who is active, educated and intent on joining the labour force was an essential part of these young women's development, creating a new relationship between them and their respective families and the greater society of the UAE. This thesis, based on data generated by ethnographic grounded theory, has presented the words of a group of young Arab female students, a wide-ranging literature review and six years of on-site research. Thus far it has concluded that the only thing separating these students from other women of similar ages in other, similarly economically developed parts of the world is their location within the UAE.

Clearly this is not intended to dismiss the importance of religious and cultural differences, but rather to emphasise that the literature to date has largely 'otherised' Islamic women and cast them as disempowered entities within their culture. This study contends that this has meant that, for the most part, such literature has ignored the ways in which young Arab women have incorporated their religion and culture to achieve similar aspirations in their everyday lives. Culture is a dynamic entity, a fact evident in the lives of the young Arab women I worked with. Many of the interviewees suggested that they regularly produce meanings from their religion and their culture that empower them in daily life.

Given the evidence presented here, I believe that what has happened in the lives of these young women, and what is continuing to happen, is that in 'claiming themselves' as individuals they are embracing feminism. I would place them in the 'third-wave feminism', which is more sensitive to local, diverse voices and rejects

the universal perspective of a single feminist standpoint (Gilligan 1982) (hooks 1984).

This chapter will present the theory generated from this study. 'Embracing Feminism', looks how the young women are dealing with a certain amount of equality in their lives, and embracing feminism from the perspective of an Islamic woman. 'Changing Dynamic' considers how these young women are dealing with marriage, from what was considered the norm, to a new dynamic within the family where she is now older and educated. 'Claiming a new Identity' identifies what it means to become a modern, educated young woman while at the same time remaining and adhering to the religious and cultural traditions of the UAE. 'Socio-cultural change' sees change as the common thread running through all aspects of the lives of these young women, this section looks at change from the socio-cultural perspective. 'Challenging accepted boundaries', takes into account the accepted boundary of Patriarchal Control, and how this is now being challenged. 'Education, Freedom, Power and Achievement', are now considered as some of the most important aspects of these young women's lives, aspects of their lives that have been embraced and are now regarded as the norm. 'Behavioral Change' looks at how gaining the independence of attending college and of making choices, based on the trust that has been placed on them by their families has had a very positive impact. 'Empowerment of Women through Education', is gradually happening as more and more young women are overcoming obstacles, gaining an education, and using it to their own benefit. 'Transitional Society' takes account of the progress and yet the fear of progress that traps women when a society such as the present

day United Arab Emirates is coming to terms with young educated, capable women.

7.2 Embracing Feminism

Gundi makes the following observations on how we in the West have monopolised feminism by interpreting it as western-centric:

> 'It is difficult to demonstrate the existence of a discourse, a movement, a consciousness such as feminism in a climate that assumes the universal supremacy of Western feminism. It is even more difficult to argue for the combination of Islam and feminism in such a climate, which assumes a natural incompatibility between the two.' (Gundi 1996:159)

I use this example to illustrate the fact that, as Gundi has asserted, in the UAE a different reality exists and therefore a different set of circumstances apply in the lives of these young women. Gundi goes on to state that:

> 'Western feminism is, of course, grounded in Western thought, ideology and values, which are in some fundamental ways different from those of Islam or Arab tradition. Thus resistance to feminism in the Islamic or Arab world might in essence be a resistance, conscious or otherwise, to cultural conversion. If we are to understand and appreciate alternative feminist forms, we will have to release Western

women's claim on feminism or, to put it another way, to free

feminism from a Western hold on it.'

(Gundi 1996:160)

The young Emirati women encountered in this study have made the choice to

break with tradition in the narrowest sense and to embrace and uphold it in its

broadest sense, while simultaneously following a different, less travelled path. By

presenting themselves in public in a modest way, they are asserting their place

within society's traditional structures. They are living models of Islamic morality

while at the same time being full, progressive participants in education,

employment and the professions. Gundi concludes that 'to participate in such a

way further validates the point that [it] is a legitimate participation in the

traditional sphere that is most vital for Muslim women's concerns' (Gundi

1996:161). Viewed this way, this is a feminism that is true to its society's

traditions. These have the power to define their identity within Islamic terms and

develop a consciousness that is Islamic in character.

During her research for a study on Islamic feminism, Warnock-Fernea

found that her attempts to talk about a female viewpoint in Saudi Arabia

commonly drew a blank until one woman answered, 'What's so new about that? In

our society, we've always had a female perspective. In the world of women, of

course.' At that, Warnock-Fernea began to wonder whether this particular

element in Western feminist thinking has been ignored in Middle Eastern

societies because it was already present there — and taken for granted. (Warnock-

Fernea 1998:420)

In her writings, Moroccan sociologist/feminist Fatima Mernessi pointed out long ago that Muslim women had a strength and an independence in their own, female society that made them appear dangerous to men. Dr Mernessi never states that the female gaze had any *recognition* within the society of men, which was ruled by the patriarchs who wielded the ultimate power, but rather that strength existed and was utilised in the power-plays of family life, which life included men. According to Mernessi, that strength and independence remains in abeyance as strength stored to be used when the time is right. And now is the time, she believes, to take the talents honed in private life into the public sphere.

We must ask: why do western feminists overlook, or undervalue, this hidden aspect of Muslim women's lives? There is clearly a great deal of ignorance on this issue. Over the years I have pointed out to Muslim women friends that we Western women are brainwashed from childhood into believing that the only important acts are those performed by men and that if women are to gain power or agency in society, they must replicate those acts. This conditioning leads us, I believe, to downgrade any activities or evidence of agency that take place outside the public, *i.e.* male, sphere. In doing so we are buying into the age-old public–private split. This is the paradigm set up and developed by those male anthropologists, who, when faced with the need to study a sexually segregated society where one half of that society was closed to their (male) eyes, judged the hidden half to be the less important one (Warnock-Fernea 1998:333) (Ahmed 1992:153).

The women I met in the UAE are balancing their Muslim identities with their responsibilities as citizens. The reality I encountered was different from our

own in the West. It was a reality of the society in transition, with some changes proving more difficult than others. The primary motive for change is the education of the young female population. The society-wide changes that are occurring are not just economic and political but also socio-cultural, with the claiming of new identities, the claiming of education, shifting dynamics within families and general behavioural change stemming from a culmination of these factors. These issues will be discussed here from a theoretical perspective.

7.3 A Changing Dynamic

Theoretically, the students' decision to acquire an education outside the boundaries laid down for them by society is an acknowledgment of their desire to claim themselves and also a desire to challenge the traditional, centuries-old patriarchal structure. In coming to this personal decision these young women developed a greater sense of self-awareness. They understood that their decision would lead them to realise something in their lives that was new to them, to their families and to society as a whole. For these girls and their families, undertaking third-level education was a big stepping-stone into unknown territory, one that was likely to bring both positive and negative experiences.

The challenges faced by the individual in her endeavours to secure permission to attend college reflect her upbringing and her understanding of what it is to be a young, Emirati, female student. Although aware of the power differentials, the student still persevered with her decision and confronted the difficulties and challenges head-on. It is evident, however, that in the UAE the family is of utmost importance for the individual and that she largely derives all

her support and validation from it. Although these students did not passively accept the norm of finishing second-level education and staying home to get married, they chose to challenge the patriarchal system from within, without rupturing it. An open challenge to a male member of the family would have a negative outcome, so these women had to persuade and convince family members of the benefits of a third-level education.

Nonetheless, changes are occurring in families and new situations are arising both for the individual and for the family as a whole. In a study of a group of English schoolgirls who were part of a distinctive cultural group within the school, Blackman noted that beyond that group 'patriarchal culture forces them into a position where they are made to respond to and challenge masculinity' (Blackman 1998:224). Similarly, for young Arab women power struggles are beginning to emerge as the women begin to make decisions for themselves. The fact that the family gave the student a hearing and the student in turn believed she had a voice provided validation for the students. Given that the students would rarely seek to cause problems within the family, choosing to confront the issue openly was of enormous significance (Data Chp. 4. IN Hajar: No.1. 24:01:00).

This phenomenon is in no way new or unique, however. In 1960s America — at a time when Western society was undergoing enormous changes in terms of the role of women and was embracing the second wave of feminism, which was associated with the civil rights movement in America (Millet 1969, Firestone 1970, Greer 1970) — the preferred practice within women's colleges, such as Wellesley, Smith and Vassar, was to encourage change from within as opposed to change by open confrontation (Horn 1999). American women were facing

challenges in the late 1960s similar to those now facing the women of the UAE, thirty years later. Hillary Rodham Clinton's description of these challenges rings true for the women who participated in this study:

'We are, all of us, exploring a world that none of us understands and attempting to create, within that uncertainty, the only tool we have ultimately is our lives.'

(Horn 1999:xii)

By embracing feminism and asserting their rights, these young Emirati women are, for the first time, coming to terms with the experience of doing something beyond the confines and 'comfort zone' of the family. For the first time they are experiencing a sense of divided loyalties as they choose between the mores of the world they grew up in and the new possibilities emerging in their modern world. The effects of modern society are far-reaching. These women are exposed to television and, most significantly, to overseas travel, all external factors that were not present for their parents' generation and that are shaping their perceptions of life and work. Inevitably, this has in turn led to a desire for more personal freedom. The generation gap is very pronounced in this transition period. Much of what the young people want to do the older members of the families regard as stemming from the influence of the West. The UAE is not anti-West *per se*, but there is a fear that their Arab culture will be eradicated by this creeping internationalism that homogenises as it modernises. The core dynamics of the Arab family are being challenged on a daily basis, with the rise in marriage age

being one of the chief signals of the extent and speed of this 'revolution' (see Chapter 3, Research Methodology and methods of Data Collection; IC Sara 14:02:00).

To date, studies of the Arab family have raised questions about its structure historically and have tended to focus on four chief aspects of the 'otherness' of the family that hold special significance for women's roles and power: the relationship between husband and wife; family honour; patrilineal clan; powerlessness of the woman within the family.

Many of the studies completed to date suggest that the relationship between husband and wife is defined initially by the absence of consensual sexual union. In this 'other' family of the literature, marriage is not a union entered into freely by consenting adults who have developed affection for one other. Instead, it is described as a deal arranged to suit the interests or needs of the couple's respective families, which can mean that young people, particularly young women, are forced to marry their family's choice of partner, regardless of their own feelings on the matter (Tucker 1993:195–6, Goode 1963:89–90, sGoody 1983:24–6).

Based on my experiences in the UAE, and particularly on the several weddings I attended, I would refute this claim. I did not see 'forced marriage' occurring in the lives of the students who participated in this study. As noted earlier, the marriage age is climbing ever higher as young people choose to focus on education first — and they were free to make that choice of focus. Furthermore, the students clearly saw marriage as a positive life experience that they would enter into of their own free will and at the right time. In terms of the marriage

partner, the UAE still follows certain conventions. The female members of the young woman's family seek out suitable candidates before deciding on the best partner for her. The bride-to-be then has a choice as to whether she will or will not marry the man they propose for her. She will normally spend a considerable amount of time reaching this decision.

The notion that Islamic marriages are not based on free choice and are therefore 'forced' is still put forward on a regular basis, in the Western Media. While Goody points out that consensual union was not always the practiced norm, even in Europe, because families with significant property at stake were concerned primarily to arrange proper, beneficial marriages, it is nonetheless the case that the Catholic Church viewed consensual union as a requirement of marriage. As a result, it was widely practiced outside upper-class circles. Goody's discussion of the history of marriage thus sets up consensual union as the 'norm', or indeed the ideal, and implies that 'Islamic' marriages are not based on free choice and therefore are less than ideal. In this interpretation, the Arab marriage was from earliest times a family affair in which the opinions and emotions of the bride and groom had little influence. The bonds of affection that tend to equalise conjugal relations were thus absent, so that a young Islamic woman entered marriage without any claim to her husband's affections (Goody 1983:24–6).

One could argue that the high rate of divorce in Islamic society suggests that consent is absent, leading people to terminate their first marriage as soon as is practicable and select a new partner of their own choosing. However, this description does not accord with my observations of the partner choices and courtships of the student participants. It was usually the young women who

choose a man they liked, whereupon they would instruct their female relatives to make the necessary enquiries.

Goode (1963) goes on to describe Arab women as carrying the burden of family honour (*ird*). By this reckoning, any female behaviour that is either explicitly or implicitly connected with sexual relations beyond the confines of legal marriage reflects immediately and negatively on the reputation of the woman's family. While Goode admits that a woman's sexual conduct is subject to close social scrutiny throughout her life, he claims it is pre-marital virginity that carries the greatest weight and therefore any suggestion of loss of virginity before marriage is the greatest shame a woman can bring on her family. In this interpretation fathers and brothers are tasked with policing their women, and meteing out punishment, if necessary, and they are therefore likely to favour severe restriction of unmarried female relatives, including seclusion and early marriage.

Although what Goode is saying holds a lot of truth, the situation is not as black-and-white as he presents it. Yes, the woman is largely the repository of family honour, but the severe restrictions he describes simply did not occur in this particular group of UAE women who participated in this study. The majority of the women who attended the college did so with the consent of their guardians, many of whom gave permission for these women to leave the college campus on a regular basis, thus trusting them to police themselves (Data Chp 4. IN Noor: No.114. 02:00).

Tucker takes up Goode's theme, stating that one of the easiest ways to safeguard a girl's virginity is to marry her off at a young age — sometimes even

before attaining legal majority at puberty. Again, the implications for female power are clear: a girlhood of seclusion followed by a very early marriage would thrust an inexperienced, hardly grown girl into a proscribed environment where the possibilities for self-assertion would appear quite remote (Tucker 1993:197).

While Tucker's assertion might hold true in some Arab societies, it did not occur in the UAE because fathers, in general, preferred to educate their daughters to third-level. Recent newspaper reports reinforce this, quoting young, educated men who said they wanted to marry an educated woman. By citing these as their preferred choices, both men and women are implicitly acknowledging and accepting that the marriage age will be higher than in the past. In fact, in the modern UAE the most common marriage age is mid- to late twenties, something that would have been unheard of as recently as a decade ago. To put this huge shift in perspective, one of the students told me her mother was married at the age of twelve (Data chp. 4 IC Suha: No.1. 15:02:00). (Soueif:2006:239-40)

Goode and Goody both refer to a critical feature of the 'other' Arab family as being the importance of the patrilineal clan. This is a lineage structure that defines family relations in terms of several generations of descendants of a given male line. Arab history shows that economic and political relations were influenced, if not actually structured, by the patrilineal clan. As a result, the integrity and solidarity of the clan lay at the heart of both the economic prosperity and the political power of its members. Whether this clan is described as a three-generation extended family, or as a group of families who can trace their origins back ten generations to a common ancestor, the common denominator is that endogamous marriage was one of the most important ways of maintaining

economic integrity and achieving solidarity (Goode 1963:89–90, Goody 1993:24–6).

In Arab society the prevalent form of endogamous marriage was cousin marriage, specifically that of the children of two brothers in order to bind and cohere the patrilineal unit (Tucker:1993:195). In this instance the implications for female power are somewhat mixed. On one hand, marriage within a family, insofar as it allowed a young woman to remain within a familiar setting and close to her own parents, undoubtedly lent her greater leverage in her relations with her husband and his parents, who were, after all, her own cousin, aunt and uncle. However, widespread cousin marriage might have heightened family control but narrowed marriage choices: certainly most cousin marriages were arranged with the interests of the wider family in mind, and not the interests of the young couple.

This description is true for certain circumstances, but it was not always the norm. There were endogamous marriages amongst the students, but there were also marriages across different families and indeed across the Emirates, into the neighbouring states of Qatar and Saudi Arabia (an unheard-of possibility in the past). According to the students, a law had been passed in the UAE that forbade women to marry non-national men, but this law did not apply to men and was not enforced if a woman chose to marry within the above-mentioned Gulf States.

(Meera, writing in the student magazine 'The Arabian'. November 2000)

Goode's description of the 'other' family model places the woman in a powerless position. Although Islamic law reserves full property rights to women, in the past married women could exercise those rights only with difficulty because they lacked access to the public sphere. Often disinherited by their natal families in

the interest of not dividing family property, women could find themselves at the mercy of their husband's management of whatever property they had acquired through inheritance of their *mahr* (Goode 1963:93–5). Perhaps the ultimate measure of this powerlessness was the practice of polygyny. With the legal right to be married to up to four women concurrently, a husband could add wives to the household — who would compete for material resources as well as affection — without the prior agreement or even knowledge of his present wife . The practice, or even the threat, of polygyny could be used as a form of social control, employed to ensure submission and 'good behaviour' (Goode 1963:123).

'Polygyny is often used as a standard criticism for Middle Eastern or Muslim marriage. However, this state is increasingly on the decline, with young women stating that they would not tolerate it under any circumstances other than her own inability to have children, which she sees as a man's right on marriage. For these students the reality is that, with modern-day living, the cost of supporting a second wife would be out of reach for most of the men they would likely marry. Equally so with education. It is taken for granted amongst the younger generation and, in particular, this group of women that this is an old-fashioned practice and has no place in today's United Arab Emirates. It is unlikely, based on my own research with this group of young women, that this practice will ever again become the norm. This experience would be seen as really problematic for them as young, modern, educated women.'

(Data Chp. 4 IN Fatima: No.1: 12:02:00).

7.4 Claiming a new identity

The modern, educated women in the UAE are determined to claim their own identity. Although new, this identity is rooted in tradition, religion and culture. They have embraced their heritage and all it stands for and are now using it as a building-block towards the future.

One of the distinguishing aspects of the Gulf Arab woman is, of course, her dress, and with this comes all the meanings that have been attached to it — by East and West. The *Hijab*, so mystifying and misunderstood in the West, was not a very important issue, certainly not one the students felt merited much discussion. From the data presented, it was clear that there were many and varied interpretations as to the importance of the *Hijab* and the reasons why it is worn. I found no circumstances in which it inhibited a woman from active participation, either in college or in the workplace. I have come to the conclusion that for UAE women, the veil is worn as a mark of reverence for Islam and the *Abaya* is worn by choice. However, each piece of clothing is associated with a number of different interpretations (Data Chp. 4 IC Suha: No.1. 17.11:99). (Stratton:2006:166-167)

The students readily accepted that Islamic clothing does engender various meanings and that the choice to so attire belongs to each individual. Female covering is not mandatory by law in the UAE, as it is in Saudi Arabia, which was one of the first things the students pointed out to me. They are very aware that it is their personal right to wear it or not to wear it, although at the college the vast majority did wear traditional garb. Given that the UAE has never experienced political upheaval or an Islamic backlash — as was experienced in Iran in the late

1970s — the women there see no particular Islamic significance in wearing the *Abaya* to cover the body, while the *Shayla* to cover the head and hair was considered good Muslim behaviour (Data chp. 4 IN Abeer: No.1. 17:02:00).

The veil has been used and continues to be used for many and varied reasons, of which there are thousands of examples. The veiling of women in Algeria during the struggle for independence was a 'language of refusal', but the veil can also constitute an active, seemingly progressive weapon in the contest for political and cultural autonomy. For example, women donned the veil in order to cloak themselves in anonymity to carry out covert military assaults on the French in Algeria. Conversely, it can also represent an attempt to revert to an idealised past. In Iran in the late 1970s, veiled women were symbols of opposition to the Shah's regime and active participants in the political events leading to its dissolution (Ahmed 1992:164–5). (Soueif 2006:264)

Peteet argues that the same veil that symbolised a militant female activism is now being used to circumscribe women's presence in the workplace and to confine them to the home, as well as to regulate and control male–female interaction. Tradition does not therefore comprise a set of static cultural meanings, but instead displays a remarkable flexibility in activation, content and meaning according to the contexts of time and place. This means that an authenticity based on tradition is not necessarily a passive, mutely adopted obedience to that tradition. The 'language of refusal' can be both calculated and creative. It can represent an active language of refusal and a militancy to overcome cultural denigration, a means of reclaiming autonomy (Peteet 1993:53, in Tucker 1993).

I have already discussed the way in which the French government flexed its political muscles over the issue of veiling in schools — an example of the veil being denounced as a negative signifier, as a threat to social stability. Speaking from a western perspective, in Dwyer states that much of the early writing on youth cultures emphasised the significance of fashion and style in the creation of subcultures and affiliations and, in particular, the role of dress as a contested boundary marker between different group. Similarly, in the construction of dominant representations of 'Muslim women', different styles of dress have been used as highly significant markers of difference, rendering their bodies a contested site of cultural representation. Dwyer argues that for young Muslim women in Britain, dress style is a highly significant marker of cultural identity and one that is constantly renegotiated. (Dwyer 1998:54, in Skelton and Valentine)

As this analysis suggests, young women are actively engaged in the contestation of different meanings attached to their style of dress. By adopting new styles and challenging meanings attaching to particular dress styles — such as 'Western', 'Asian' or 'Muslim' — young women also construct and contest their own identities. This process of contestation occurs both in relation to different discourses and through particular spaces.

It can be argued, therefore, that the whole area of Islamic dress, whether it is in an Islamic country or in the United Kingdom, is a highly charged area and that this may be so primarily because it is an obvious statement of being 'the other'. In the claiming of their identity and what it is to be a modern woman in this society, the students pointed to the Western media as having undue and

inaccurate influence over the meaning of Islamic dress, assigning one flat meaning to it, that being 'a method of control over women' (Data chp: 4.6).

Jarmakani sees the veil as a cultural weapon in the arsenal of an evangelical West:

> 'Recent and ongoing military action in the Middle East has been accompanied by US media representations of Arab and Islamic culture which not only focus on oppressive Arab regimes, but also consistently highlight the "plight" of the Middle Eastern woman. While the issue facing these women, according to the US media, are things like access to education and the right to political representation, the corresponding images typically depict women hidden "behind the veil".'
>
> (Jarmakani 2004:2)

In this way, complicated political and cultural elements of Middle Eastern women's lives are translated into simplistic pictorial representations that concentrate largely on flattened symbols of Arab womanhood, such as the veil. This tightly narrowed focus not only slights the complexity of the circumstances that determine women's lives in different regions of the Middle East but also homogenises their lives experiences under the exoticised façade of the veil.

Warnock-Fernea (1998) believes the veil has long been a focus of western interest because in the West it is equated with religious and social oppression. Is this what the veil means to Middle Eastern women? Do western commentators

ever ask them? On the basis of her interviews and travels, Warnock-Fernea believes Middle Eastern women do not view the veil in this way. *Hijab* is an important *new* development in Muslim countries, where it is associated with piety and belief. She quotes Karima Alivi saying so forcefully in *Abiquiu*, 'the veil doesn't suck my brains out'. It is true that women are sometimes forced to cover, as we've seen in Iran and Afghanistan, but in other parts of the Arab world the veil is a matter of the woman's own choice, a personal decision based on her reading of the religious texts. It can also be the case that traditional dress lends women extra authority in their struggle with male Muslims to achieve gender equality. Thus the veil bespeaks a diversity in attitude, strategy and dress that might be said to characterise the entire region (Data Chp. 4 IC.Sara, Fatima, Ameena 08:11:99).

Warnock-Fernea (1998) believes that feminism has many faces in the Middle East. The 'woman question' is a central question in all areas of the Middle East and she found that women were active on these issues in every Arab country she visited. Women are regrouping and employing a variety of methods to achieve their goals of gender parity, dignity and public power — goals that have been challenged by the ruling patriarchal traditions. Many of these women are rejecting the western 'feminist' label, but at the same time utilising those ideas and strategies of western feminism that they deem helpful to their cause. (Warnock-Fernea 1998:414)

For some women in the Middle East, religion is a given in the feminist/womanist movement and this minority refers to themselves as 'Islamic feminists'. Among these feminists is a belief that women ought to cover their heads and dress modestly because this is directed in the Qur'an. Thus the focus of

their efforts is not the veil *per se*, but an evaluation of the sacred texts with a view to reforming the law and 'creating the just society propounded by Islam'.

A few women, like Hala Shakrallah, (one of Warnock-Fernea's informants) object to the use of the term 'Islamic feminist'. Why does she not wish to be so labelled? 'Because I'm a Christian,' she says. 'Is there something special that applies to Islam only?' (Warnock-Fernea 1997:422). Shakrallah believes that a wider movement is in progress, a movement that includes secularists and Marxists who were born Christians and Jews and Muslims, all of whom adhere to the monotheistic religious tradition. Poverty, domestic violence, political participation, female circumcision, literacy, social class, discussion of the veil, appropriation of the written word, legal equality — these are all aspects of this wider movement in which Islamic feminists are also involved. The strategies these women are using to address their problems, though often different from ours in the West, merit our respect and offer us a new source of inspiration. They are forging something new and powerful from bits and pieces of western ideas and Middle Eastern traditions. In their struggle for legal and economic equality they lay stress on the viability of the family group, on a sense of responsibility to the wider social group and on the importance of religious values. In this way Muslim, Christian and Jewish women are combining elements of East and West to develop several feminist ideologies of their own (Warnock-Fernea 1998:422) (Data Chp. 4 IN Leila No.2. 16:02:00).

The students who took part in this study believe it is their right to claim an identity within the traditions, the religion and the cultural meanings that they themselves attach to this piece of clothing: the veil. It is not for others to do this for them. Their desire to wear what they wish should in no way interfere with who

they are in the sense of their education and their place in the labour force of the future. Their attitude demonstrated clearly that the issue of Islamic covering, in the context of the UAE, does not interfere with their changing roles in society. Their identity as women, though modern, is still firmly based within their own interpretation of what it is to be a young, educated, Islamic woman.

7.5 Socio-cultural change

Theoretically, the basis of the student's disconnection from self occurred as a result of the dynamics of her upbringing within the family, her society's interpretation of Islam and the traditional culture, and the overarching patriarchal social structure. Learning what it was to be a woman in this society necessitated accepting, not questioning, the structures that were outlined clearly for them as women. As the woman is the repository of the moral fabric of society, a collective fear restrained her movements and prescribed her duties as a traditional Arab woman. This was the story of the past. Now a new chapter is being written and these concepts of 'woman' are being challenged on a daily basis, largely as a result of government-sponsored education for women (Data chp 4 IN Leila: No.1. 24:01:00).

While this challenge is new for women in the Middle East, in the West women have been challenging it for a long time. It is a slow process, however. As Parr notes, the major institutions in western societies remain male-dominated (Parr 1996:88). The fast pace of change, coupled with the independent thinking of an educated daughter, mean the Emirati family is now facing a new threat to the home, which is being opened to the dangers produced by uncontrolled access to

external influences. In Emirati society, family honour dictates that men protect females in order to maintain the family reputation. While commentators might denounce this tradition as a hindrance to women's liberation, it is a fact that it is not a unique notion:

> 'Family honor is shared with Mediterranean societies and implies that one's sense of dignity, identity, status and self, as well as public esteem, are linked to the regard with which one's family is held by the community at large. The cultural assumption is that a person's actions reflect on his or her family as a whole and the reputation of the family is borne by each family member.'
>
> (Joseph 1994:199)

Tucker reports that, historically, women bore the burden of family honor in the Arab family: 'Any female behaviour explicitly or implicitly connected with sexual relations outside legal marriage reflected immediately and negatively on the good name of the woman's family' (Tucker 1993:197). As a result, the male family members took their responsibilities very seriously and were in favour of severe restriction of unmarried female relatives. Although Tucker is accurate in terms of the larger picture of the Arab world, the reality in the UAE is that these restrictions are dissolving gradually, which is having both a positive and a negative impact on families.

Khan protests that women everywhere are bound by societal constraints, whether it is the acceptability or otherwise of their mode of dress. Whatever the

yardstick by which women are measured as 'good women', it always relates to cultural norms or family honour:

> 'Notions of family honour are invoked to gain psychological control over women until ultimately they internalise "respectable" modes of behaviour.'
> (1999:131)

This assertion is backed up by the findings of this study. I have argued, *per* my observations and interviews (IN Hajar: No.1. 24:01:00), that the young women of the UAE are regularly caught in a double-bind, pulled between the desire to claim their own identities and acquire an education and, on the other hand, the desire to retain family support and approval and not cause distress or discord within the family.

Across the Arab world work on these complex issues is ongoing. It must be kept in mind, however, that the UAE is a very young country that, to a large extent, did not take part in what we regard as western education until the 1970s. This means the country was excluded from the debates taking place at the United Nations during its decade on the family — at that time the UAE was still a desert and a nomadic country and was not facing any of the challenges it is now facing. Instead, discussions of this nature regarding the Arab family were centered around the more developed Middle East, where feminism was already established and where women were active in the political arena. Within the conservative social climate of the 1970s, these UN agencies and the Decade for Women were

successful in introducing some changes into the lives of working-class women. More importantly, they provided middle-class Arab feminists with new national, regional and international forums in which to discuss issues of importance to them and to push for changes in attitudes toward women. Again, the UAE was not included in this because this sort of class system did not, and still does not, exist in the region. It can be said that during this time the Arab families of the Middle East, particularly Egypt and Palestine, were developing along western norms.

Mervat Hatem notes that the rising tide of Islamism in the region served to push middle-class women to organise themselves in opposition to its restrictive social goals. It is important to note here that the rapidly changing social and economic systems of the 1970s contributed to the rise of Islamist groups, whose values and demands struck a chord among middle-class men and women. In Egypt, where the State was beginning to withdraw its commitment to provide employment to college graduates, the Islamist demand for a return to the old Islamic definitions of the sexual division of labour legitimised the return of women to the home at a time of large-scale unemployment. Furthermore, the veil was adopted by college and working women to protect them from sexual harassment in the streets and in the workplace (Hatem 1993:29).

Among the Gulf States it is acknowledged that Kuwait has moved the farthest to integrate women into the public arena, especially in the areas of education and employment. Kuwaiti women's participation in the resistance during the Gulf War reinforced their desire to become involved in the public arena. The promises made by the government in that regard remain unimplemented, however (Hatem 1993:35). Now, the UAE has been catching up with Kuwait in the area of

education. The students with whom I spoke did not express any desire to get involved in politics and never actually questioned the authority of the ruling family. I believe this is because the women of the UAE do not feel disenfranchised or disadvantaged in any way by the systems imposed by their rulers. Education in the UAE now actually favours girls, as was evident from the establishment of the women-only Zayed University in Abu Dhabi and Dubai.

Hatem (1993) highlights the new development represented by the emergence of independent, non-governmental feminist groups in many Middle Eastern states. Such groups presently exist in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, the Sudan, the West Bank, Gaza, Kuwait and Lebanon. The proliferation of these organisations in the last two decades indicates that they are not a transient trend, but a permanent voice that seems to address a real need. Hatem comments that non-governmental women's groups have been missing in both the conservative Gulf States of Qatar, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Jordan and the former North Yemen, as well as in the radical mobilising states of Iraq, Libya, Syria and the former South Yemen. She argues that the conservative and the mobilising states share a hostility to independent women's groups (Hatem 1993:37).

Whether Hatem's statement holds true for the UAE is debatable. I did not perceive a need for NGOs promoting women's rights because the young women had respect for and an involvement with the Women's Union, a government-sponsored organisation. I believe strongly that this reiterates the fact that this group of women does not feel marginalised or victimised as a result of living in this Islamic country. In the UAE, women seem able to receive positive affirmation of themselves within their own accepted boundaries (Data Chp 4. CO:00:05:01).

7.6 Challenging accepted boundaries

One of the accepted boundaries in the UAE was the patriarchal structure of social and family lives. The primacy of man is a long-held tradition in the Arab world and constitutes a logical framework for most of the population. While the very word 'patriarchy' can cause hackles to rise, there was ample evidence from the data collected that patriarchy had both a positive and a negative influence on the lives of the students interviewed (Data Chp. 4 IN Fatima: No.1. 12:02:00) (Data Chp. 4 IN Shaikha No.1. 12:02:00).

In her study of mature women returning to education in Britain, Parr (2000) notes that, regardless of patriarchal barriers, the fact that the women had made a conscious decision to return to education appeared to be indicative of agency. Giddens' theory of structuration (1984) takes account of both structural influences and agency and the different levels and contexts within which power operates. Davis (1991) uses Giddens' theory of power in her study of the relationship between female patients and male GPs and concludes that, however great the power imbalance may be, the women did exhibit some control over their lives (Parr, 2000:88 in Ribbens and Edwards).

One might assume that patriarchy would erect barriers to impede the UAE female student from taking the decision to attend college. During the initial formation of structured education in the UAE, Leila Ahmed, a sociologist and professor of Arab Women's studies, noted that it was not only the women but also the men who staunchly supported women's education:

'They [the men] believed that women should be able to qualify for any profession. Whatever either sex felt about segregation and about women pursuing professional lives within a segregated context, they clearly did not want to see women held back intellectually or prevented from pursuing the professions they wished. However the education system was then developed along Egyptian lines, which stated a preference for classical Arabic education and not the oral culture of this part of the Arabian peninsula.'

(Ahmed 1999:276)

I believe that when the present-day students who participated in this study decided to acquire an education, the barriers society appeared to dictate on the larger scale were not strongly adhered to on an individual family level. As shown by the data, most of the students entered meaningful discussions with their parents and, in particular, with their father or other significant males in the family in order to achieve the desired result (Data Chp. 4 IN Noor: No.114. 02:00). To my mind, this represents a very significant finding. I was looking for the obstacles that would fit with the pervasive theory that these women were living lives of unmitigated subjugation. Learning to acknowledge and recognise that they simply weren't there in the way I expected was very much part of the learning process for me, of the process of discovering an ethnographic, grounded theory approach and of hearing what the women were actually saying rather than what I thought they were saying, or ought to say.

7.7   Education: freedom, power and achievement

Education had been and will continue to be one of the most important aspects of the lives of the women of the UAE and of the country as a whole. The development of the Higher Colleges of Technology, of which my participants were students, has been built on and improved upon and the bar is being raised all the time. The HCT were, of course, established as a result of the Emiratisation policy, and it seems there is no turning back the clock on that important step forward. A young Shaikha from the ruling family in Sharjah made the following comments in a local newspaper:

> 'Education was very important to me. It gave me a sense of freedom and power and achievement. Women here live very sheltered lives. For Muslim women, an education is the only chance at personal identity they get, to find something of their own. I told myself, go to the college and work for a few years and then get married. I believe women should work before marrying; it matures you to mix with other people. Your exposure is different from the limited one our women have at home. It makes a woman a better wife and mother. But life doesn't let you set up neat little formulas about how you will structure your future.'
>
> (Shaikha Lubna 2001)

In my opinion, Lubna's account speaks for the majority of the students in this study. The desire for freedom, power and achievement was common to all of these young women. These were the motivating factors that led them to take the path of

311

higher education. Freedom was gained in leaving the home to attend college, without familial supervision. Power was achieved in many areas, most notably in the decision to choose a non-traditional subject. The achievement was graduating successfully with a qualification that could never be taken from them, regardless of what happened in the home. There were many things to be negotiated in the course of their studies, from studying through English to embracing a subject based in western philosophy and practice, to dealing with a variety of personal challenges ranging from family pressure to remain in the home to pursuing employment outside the home. The fact that these young women took all this in their stride and succeeded is evidence of a strength of character they possess — a quality that is rarely considered, either in the UAE or the outside world (Data Chp. 5 IN Hajar No. 2. 08:05:01).

Many of the studies of women's education in the Middle East are conducted from a very broad perspective, with little attention paid to regional or national differences. Previous studies conducted within the UAE used a broad brush to paint the entire country — urban and rural — in the same colour, relying on statistical data derived from the census. The temptation to generalise is strong. When speaking of education, training and employment opportunities for women in the Arab world, Strickland states that it is not easy to generalise, but then goes on to do just that. It is obvious that these countries have a number of factors in common, such as religion, language and socio-economic similarities, yet they are very different in many ways: in the way they interpret religion, speak the Arabic language, their socio-economic and political structures and their level of tolerance for female education and employment (Strickland 1993:67).

According to Strickland, in the Arab world, in terms of employment, females are heavily concentrated in the arts, the social sciences and education. The majority specialise in the areas considered appropriate for women in their societies, *i.e.* education, social sciences, liberal arts and medicine (especially nursing). Female employment and opportunities to work are limited to those who have acquired high school or university degrees in areas related to their training. This was not the case in the UAE, however, and was in fact one of the more interesting outcomes of the newly established HCT, where female students were offered education in areas normally considered the male domain, *i.e.* medicine, engineering, computer science, information technology and communications technology.

A multitude of factors affect the educational and technical training opportunities available to Arab women, including access to education, continued participation, programme objectives and social, cultural and religious beliefs and traditions. In almost all Arab countries access to education depends heavily on social class and academic achievement. In general, only a small percentage of first-year primary-school students (both males and females) ultimately reach the final year of secondary school. (Strickland 1993:69)

Strickland's study is indicative of prevalent western thinking regarding the education of women in the Arab world, and as such is very misleading. In the UAE all national women and men have equal access to education and all education is government-funded, except for the private and expatriate schools. The UAE system does not, therefore, fit into the general category of Arab countries that discriminate against women's education, but nor does it follow the norm as

described by the Strickland study, which was sponsored by the Institute for Arab Women's Studies and the Middle East Institute in Washington DC. That study claimed that most rural and lower-class students, especially females, were eliminated by the rigorous selection process in Arab educational systems. It describes how, in rural areas, girls are often withdrawn from school at an early age by their families because the family sees no direct benefit in further education for girls. The gender imbalance in enrolments increases progressively at each successive level of education because Arab countries have always given priority to the education and training of males. It concludes that the result of all this is that the main beneficiaries of modern education continue to be mostly urban males from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and middle- to upper-class women.

Again, I would contest such arguments. A large percentage of the local population are not super-rich Arabs; many live on the outskirts of Abu Dhabi and still follow the traditional Bedouin way of life. These people are not, as Strickland asserts, either excluded or withdrawn. In fact, Abu Dhabi Women's College provides buses twice a day for its rural-based students (Data Chp 5. IC Suha, Shaikha, Noora 07:01:01).

Strickland adds that another deterrent to the education of women is the early marriage age for females in rural areas. Most technical, non-traditional training requires a minimum of nine years' schooling, but females are usually withdrawn from the school system between the seventh and ninth grades. These claims are misleading and paint a dire picture of conditions for women in this area. Furthermore, Strickland does not say where her research was conducted, but continues to use a broad sweep to include all Arab countries. There are twenty-

two Arab countries, which means twenty-two different educational systems. This 'broad sweep' approach has fed into the western stereotype, which assumes a systematic disregard for women in all Arab educational systems (Hatem1993:171-193, Tucker 1996:206).

7.8   Behavioural change

By virtue of their choice of study programme the students in the Communications Technology department became a highly visible group within Abu Dhabi Women's College. These were women who were embracing independent thinking and exhibiting a desire to break away from the norm. The two major distinguishing features were their location in a different building and their use of very different technology. The rest of the student body viewed their subject choice as non-traditional and not quite appropriate for an Islamic girl. These students did not set out to stand out from the crowd, rather it came about as a result of the college culture and facilities at this time.

There is also the fact that these young women fell into the category of teenager and, as Fiske acknowledges, 'Since its origin in the 1950s, the category of "the teenager" has been a site of trouble and anxiety for Adult America (Fiske 1994). For these students independence meant attendance at college rather than lack of attendance, which has been a traditional site of defiance and rebellion among western teenagers (Blackman 1998:211, in Skelton and Valentine). This reversal applied in this context because college was the only social outlet for these women outside their families.

There were significant opportunities for independence in the final year of the programme when college passes were granted for assignments outside the college grounds. This came about as a result of negotiations between the student and her parents, and between the students and the college authorities. The students felt validated by these decisions because they were being trusted by their parents and by the college. This enabled them to take control as individuals and as a group, which enhanced their sense of independence.

Change in women's behaviour is happening in the UAE and the family appears to be accepting this and dealing with it accordingly. There remain obstacles in the wider society, however. The whole area of local women interacting with local men in situations where there is no family control or relationship is still a problem. The students themselves did not want to pursue this because they clearly disapproved of the behaviour of many men in such situations, behaviour that included requesting the girls' phone numbers — something the girls interpreted as harassment and which could cause trouble for them at home. In the end, the students' desire for independence was far greater than any desire to socialise with 'boys' at this level; they were not going to allow any male to jeopardise their future.

7.9   Empowerment of women through education

In her study on Iranian women, Golnar Mehran draws a comparison to the UAE, which is also actively seeking new opportunities for women:

'What is empowerment? To understand the role of education in empowering Iranian women, one must first understand the importance of empowerment as an element of development. Empowerment has been defined as "the process by which people take control and action in order to overcome obstacles" (UNICEF 1997). It refers to "collective action by the oppressed and deprived to overcome the obstacles of structural inequality which have previously put them in a disadvantaged position" (UNICEF 1997). Furthermore, the Women's Empowerment Framework, propounded by UNICEF, views empowerment as the goal and the essential process for women's advancement. It is the process by which women mobilize to understand, identify, and overcome gender discrimination and achieve equal access to resources.'

(Mehran, 1999:203).

Mehran explains that by ascending through the five hierarchical levels of UNICEF's 'Framework for the Equality and Empowerment', women should reach increasingly higher levels of equality and empowerment. She outlines these five levels as:

'(1) welfare (meeting basic needs); (2) access (to resources and means); (3) consciousness-raising (gaining awareness of the problem); (4) participation (in decision-making); and (5) control (high-level participation and planning)'

(Mehran 1999:203)

The UAE is a rich nation and it has poured resources into education as part of the plan for Emiratisation, which is viewed as a positive investment in the future of the country. This meant the students had ample access to facilities required to complete their projects, thus eliminating the kind of demotivating factors often cited in relation to education facilities for those studying in the area of technology (Durndell *et al* 1995; Facer *et al* 1999; Harris 1999; Clegg & Trayhurn 2000). The government's ongoing commitment to providing equal access to educational facilities is greatly enhancing the education and the educational experiences of these women.

The ability to be able to interact successfully in the workplace is of special significance for these students because many have little experience of public places and are less used to dealing with people outside their households, particularly men. This ability was increased by the English language skills they gained in college, which is particularly helpful for the private-sector workplace. Students exhibited a high level of autonomy when deciding which programme to study, with two-thirds of the population relying on their own judgement with few outside influences. Although in some areas of decision-making it became obvious that these young women were strongly influenced by other people, especially from within the family, their status as some of the first young women to take tertiary studies locally possibly precluded them from referring to the family for advice. An insignificant number of students reported being influenced by female relatives. In reality, there is still such a limited number of HCT women graduates that the

students were largely forced into relying on their own instincts and information gathered at the college. From the evidence presented, it would appear to be the case that family members who had not had educational opportunities themselves encouraged younger women to get the best education they could.

7.10 The double-bind of a transitional society

In *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Gerda Lerner asks why it is so often women, whether visible or not, who are assigned the task of representing a culture. Do their roles as child-bearers and mothers make them the primary transmitters of culture and the repositories of tradition? Do women communicate messages? Women represent the status and power of their group, displaying its wealth and upholding its honour. Traditionally, as Middle Eastern men gained in wealth their kinswomen were often secluded or veiled as a sign of prestige. This suggestion is in keeping with what I learned from the students about the history of veiling (Lerner 1986:123–40) (Data Chp. 4 IC: Hajar 23:04:99).

It can also be said, however, that in a transitional society such as the UAE symbols and statements, such as veiling, are held onto tenaciously as examples of upholding tradition. In the UAE today many of its traditions are disappearing, with the young people only too ready to accept modern, western ways. A common subject amongst the students who had young children was how to deal with complaints from their own mothers regarding their grandchildren's preference for McDonalds' fast-food over traditional Arab food.

The community's need to be seen to uphold tradition often centres on the woman, again invoking that double-bind. On the one hand, the piety of a man can

be displayed in his wife's modest demeanour and clothing. On the other hand, women are expected to display modernity at the same time. Western clothing, higher education, white-collar employment —these are all signs of modernity that women display visibly and which are desired by her and her family, but these same factors can cause problems when put into practice in society at large. Although in general the populace wants certain changes, at the same time the people fear the uncharted territories into which change thrusts them.

This progress/fear of progress dichotomy betrays the same double-mindedness that so often traps women in a transitional society. Gustav Thaiss contends that in the discourse used by the Islamic opposition to the Shah's regime in the 1970s, women were metaphors for the integrity of the Islamic community. They expressed its purity in an idiom common to Muslim culture: unsullied honour and chastity. Of course, it was not this simple. While women were metaphors for attacks on the community of believers — the Iranian-Muslim community portrayed as a once pure, but now violated woman — they were also the polluting and dangerous force of nature that would distract men from the path of Islam (Thaiss 1978:1–13) (Data Chp.4 IN: Sara No:14:02:00). It is a familiar representation to feminists the world over: woman as angel and devil; as that which is desirable and as that which must be repulsed. In this, the women of the UAE face the same struggles to establish a woman-centric identity that does not capitulate to the myopia of the male gaze.

7.11   Conclusion

The qualitative methods of enquiry employed for this study allowed the student interviewees to share their experiences freely with me and allowed me to hear real-life experiences grounded in the local contexts. Throughout the data collected it is evident that the students who took part in this study were evaluating their strengths and weaknesses and calculating their resources.

During this study and my time spent living in the UAE, I discovered that the students I interviewed and documented were continually overcoming obstacles and claiming an identity for themselves — although not in the ways I expected. The students were constantly re-ordering their lives to meet the new challenges being fostered upon them by a changing society, a re-ordering that often put them in conflict with the old order. Islam, a monotheistic religion that is rooted in the patriarchal tradition, is being contested on a daily basis as female students move into third-level education and subsequently the workforce, taking a place alongside men and beginning to expect and demand the same privileges.

I found I had to revise my opinion constantly on the theme of 'what it means to be an Arab woman'. Although 'Claiming themselves' was one of the core themes that emerged from the data, it does not tally with what we in the West regard as equality. Instead, these young women were re-shaping this idea to meet their own individual and collective needs within their particular environment. The students stated unequivocally that Islam is part of their lives and could not be divorced from their lives. They were quick to point out that the UAE could never become fully westernised because that would mean adopting a society based on Christian values. Islam was too central, too important, for this to occur.

While these students shared religious devotion with their parents, their lives were quite different from the lives lived by their parents' generation. As stated in the data, these students in no way saw themselves, either within or outside the family, as being downtrodden or ignored. In all aspects of their lives they take part in decisions that will have an impact on how they live their lives, both now and in the future. This new voice is an important change and heralds the other changes now taking place.

In the area of marriage and family, which is so central to the Arab woman, there are discernible shifts in priority and expectation. Although arranged marriages do take place and are considered the norm, they are conducted with the consent of the young people involved. It is very important to make a distinction between arranged marriages and forced marriages. In my experience the latter did not take place in the UAE and the students I interviewed considered such a practice to be totally unacceptable and a breach of human rights.

There is no one, single description of the Arab family that fits all contexts and circumstances; as in all societies, there can be many different definitions of what 'family' means. Among this particular group, the family was seen as a support mechanism and was highly valued and regarded by the students. With regards to *qiwama*, which refers to the belief that men are in charge of women or that men are responsible for women, the latter is how the students understood this concept. By this interpretation, *qiwama* is a positive part of family life because the male members of the family always have the daughter's best interests at heart. As a result, these women were very reluctant to go against the family's decisions, or cause any kind of conflict.

The question of the veil, which has for so long been a focus of western interest, was not deemed an important discussion topic by the students. When pressed to give their opinions, it was clear to me that they in no way viewed Islamic garb as a form of oppression. The majority opinion was that covering one's head was a mark of respect towards Islam and therefore acceptable, while covering completely was a matter of personal choice based on one's reading of the sacred texts.

The education model being followed by this group of students is western, being a mixture of American and British systems. The stress placed on memorising and rote-learning in many Muslim countries contrasts markedly with western educational methods, which are based largely on problem-solving and open enquiry. Although some of the students would have had a western education at second-level, the majority had come via the traditional route. This difference in educational approach meant this particular group of students asked different questions, which necessarily demand different answers than those supplied by the previous generations.

The use of English as a medium of instruction at the HCT gave these students a helpful advantage because they are able seek employment in the private sector, where the multinational companies trade and do business through English. This is the major distinction between the HCT and the UAE University and has proven a big success with the students. The consensus was that the students felt comfortable with working through and learning English, in spite of any initial difficulties. As they chose to study a non-traditional subject, these students are pushing the boundaries of change further. Combined with the positive moves made

at government level, this will to change will ensure future generations a place in education and in the modern, global workforce.

The 'woman question' is a central question in all countries and the UAE is no exception. The student participants were utilising a variety of methods to achieve their desired goals, both within the family and within the larger community. These goals of access to education and to the workforce will in themselves, in time, engender further changes and challenge social norms into the future. Many young UAE women are rejecting western ways, and some are embracing religion as the path to equality, but at the same time they are taking up those western ideas and strategies that can benefit them in their struggle. When assessing these methods, it is important to remember that just because they differ from those employed in the West does not mean they are in any way inferior. In fact, the women of the UAE are creating something new and powerful from a careful mixture of western ideas and UAE traditions. In the quest for equality, they continue to stress the importance of the family, of their responsibility to the country as a whole and of the importance of religious values. Their unique combination of East and West is providing them with the building-blocks on which to found a new identity, one that sees them as valued members of the society as a whole.

CHAPTER 8

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

8.1   Possibilities for further research

8.2   Practical implications of the study

8.1 Possibilities for further research

The findings of this study raised some interesting questions that could form the basis for further research in this area. It is clear that the women who participated in this study are at different stages in their lives. What is not clear, however, is what triggers some women to set out on a journey towards a new life, while others from similar backgrounds and circumstances do not so choose. In an effort to understand this, it would be interesting to examine more closely the specific support systems that helped these students to get to college and to complete their studies successfully. In order to add breadth to such a study, it would be helpful to research other, comparative groups of individuals who share the experience of attending college in the UAE, and to this end I would suggest that male students be included in any future study.

Further research work could also benefit from a study assessing the teachers working in this area, to ascertain the difficulties encountered in dealing with problems with which they are unfamiliar and for which they have received no training. The coping mechanisms of those 'outsiders' working within the UAE college system could add an important layer of information to a study.

In a study conducted in the United States that examined educational institutions, Belenky noted that 'most of the institutions of higher education in this country were designed by men, and most continue to be run by men' (Belenky *et al* 1986:191). These writers argued that women were undervalued within the education system, their opinions were not invited or considered and that the available educational models were concerned only with male traditions and

requirements. They went so far as to suggest that these organisations practiced a form of exclusion by not consulting all of their students, which oversight prevented the students participating in their own educational development. For female students these problems were particularly difficult because they were the sector of the student body least likely to be consulted or considered. Furthermore, they had to cope with socially defined assumptions about gender roles and abilities (Belenky *et al* 1986:5).

Belenky pointed to the fact that feminist teachers and scholars in the United States were questioning the structure, the curriculum and the pedagogical practices of educational institutions. In comparison, in the small Islamic state of the UAE, where cultural, political and public institutions are founded on Arab-Islamic values (Richardson 2000; Minnis 1999), women's voices are still rarely heard in public debate. This is a serious setback for women's education as 'in order to design an education appropriate for women, we must learn about the academic experiences of ordinary women' (Belenky *et al* 1986:191).

Within the HCT system, women make up more than half of the student population, so it is vital that they are encouraged to voice their opinions, to describe their learning experiences and to become part of the structures in which they are involved, be these economic, political or social in nature. A study that canvassed the opinions of a wide range of women in education in Arab countries would be an important step forward in the modernising of those countries. The results of such a study could add immensely to the tradition–modernity debate currently being argued in the Islamic world in relation to women's status.

8.2   Practical implications of the study

While limited in scope, this study does have practical implications for female students in Arab countries who may be struggling with a decision to pursue third-level education, for their parents or guardians and for professionals, both Arab and non-Arab, working in this field. By sharing their opinions, perceptions, experiences and difficulties, these courageous female students have added an important dimension to the existing literature, enhancing our understanding of the meaning of education for Arab women.

Several of the students who participated in the study spoke of a feeling of validation stemming from sharing their experiences and hearing others express similar experiences and difficulties. One of the positive effects of the study is that it could help and inspire other female students who are struggling to pursue a third-level education. They too will benefit from reading about the collective experiences of those who have gone before them. Furthermore, the ambitions expressed by the study participants and their post-graduation achievements in their field prove that it is possible for a young UAE woman to have a career in a non-traditional field outside the home, thus paving the way for the next generation.

In the same manner, the study will be of interest to many professionals working in third-level institutions in Arab countries. It highlights the students' determination and ability to follow a study and career path — an important reassurance for those who daily face the restrictions placed on female students. It makes clear the fact that educating women is not a waste of time and resources

because they are capable of completing their studies and enjoying a successful career in their chosen area, in spite of the odds stacked against them.

All of the participants spoke of their fears of slipping back on the gains they had made. For this group of women, overcoming restrictions was a major life theme. This highlights the importance of teachers, or other professionals, ensuring they are aware of their own assumptions and biases regarding teaching this particular group. Teachers must be educated about gender-role stereotypes presented about Arab women, to avoid unwittingly perpetuating such biases.

Another crucial theme that arose from the study was control: the ability to take control of one's life choices. It was very evident from the students' accounts that the staff at the college did not address their concerns with regard to the delivery or content of the programme. Accordingly, it teaches us that when working with female students in such circumstances, non-Arab professionals must be mindful of granting them as much control as possible over their own educational development. The study also has implications for staff training in teaching in a second-language institution within a culture with which they are not familiar. For my own part, I was unable to find any literature on the training of staff for second-language learning in my particular subject, which would suggest there is little education regarding this issue in teacher-training institutions. There is a danger of focusing too exclusively on the students who have managed to attend college, forgetting the educational needs of teachers and their ethical responsibilities to their students. It is important that teacher-training institutions conduct the research necessary to address this deficit.

There are dangers inherent in failing to address this issue. For example, during my time at the Abu Dhabi Women's College I witnessed a phenomenon that occurred frequently: new teachers arriving at the college would espouse the belief that 'I am going to change the world'. Initially, they felt they knew best and, with a certain degree of arrogance, sought to impose their very western, and sometimes very personal, views on the college environment, without any knowledge or understanding of the local culture. Conversations with new colleagues often featured assertions such as, 'They need to change' or 'They will eventually change', the underlying belief being, 'We are right and they should do things our way'. Without, I believe, intending to do so, these idealistic teachers would often refer to the culture and traditions of the UAE in a racist and patronising way. Their position was based on lack of knowledge, a situation the training colleges could remedy with a little effort.

Finally, this study highlights gender issues that must be addressed within the college structure. This has implications for the delivery of the curriculum and the usefulness of the programme to society as a whole. What works for men will not necessarily work for women, so it is imperative that those who develop study programmes be aware that they may be contributing to an imbalance of power in the education sphere. Currently in the UAE, those developing study programmes tend to be male, therefore there needs to be a campaign of some kind to raise general awareness about gender stereotypes and learning in order to debunk those attitudes that continue to be perpetuated within, and to harm, Arab society.

EPILOGUE

I have decided to conclude this thesis from an autobiographical perspective, as a big part of my learning was in arriving at the conclusion that the students in this study were not radically different from students in the West, the main difference being their circumstances.

There were several reasons that informed my decision to undertake this study. First, my immense interest in the lives of my students at the Abu Dhabi Women's College and in Islam in general, and secondly my position as a female teacher at a women's college, which gave me unique access to the female students, something I felt could be put to good use within the parameters of a study. I feel immensely privileged to have had this opportunity to work with these young women.

Reflecting on women's experiences studying in the UAE and on my own life experiences there over the course of six years, it is not difficult to look back over that six-year period and enumerate the personal and academic challenges it posed. Casting the net further, however, it is more problematic to examine the wider timescale from 1979, when I first started second-level education, to the present day and the conclusion of this thesis. In *Women in Ireland: a Century of Change* (2003), Myrtle Hill notes that her professional training as a historian leaves her in no doubt that an objective history is neither possible nor desirable. For Hill, this meant researching and writing a historical narrative so close to home was a challenging task (Hill 2003). Similarly, in assessing the overall method and impact of this study, I too have invoked the subjective to reach a more inclusive understanding of the project and its findings. My own educational background and interests have inevitably contributed to this work, and my

personal experiences and memories of the UAE are commingled with those of my students, my relations, friends and work colleagues.

During my six-year tenure in the UAE, I witnessed much change: although the family structure remained largely the same, there were significant changes in employment patterns and in attitudes to religion and to women's participation in the workforce and the cultural sphere. For the students, this meant a shift from fighting to attend college to having their voices heard in the colleges and other institutes of education, right up to the national forum for education and in the press. While some aspects of both individual and collective female experience have been recorded within this important transition phase, many stories remain untold and there is no overview of women's responses to the challenges and changes taking place. If change is to continue and continue in a meaningful, positive way, it is vitally important that these issues are addressed.

Since the inception of the colleges in 1988, UAE society has witnessed an unprecedented rate of change. The effect of this on the generation of women now being educated to third-level is immense, but we must ask: how much of this change is fundamental, and how much is superficial or illusory? What actual difference does it make to women living in the UAE that during the course of the last decade they won the right to attend college, with the possibility of following a life path very different from that of their mothers and grandmothers? The answers can only be found if the questions are put to these women.

It is virtually impossible to understand Arab society unless one has actually lived there, and even at that it is necessary to work very hard to gain an understanding of it. This is clear to me now, particularly as I look back over my

journals and diaries. I would like to examine the changes taking place in the UAE from a personal point of view in order to make comparisons with cultural changes taking place in my own country.

I come from a European country that just recently held the Presidency of the progressive European Union, but which has seen social change happen at an incredibly slow pace, particularly where it involved women's lives and rights. Encountering a country on the other side of the world that is religiously and culturally different yet which exhibited many similarities to my own was endlessly fascinating. When it came to assessing the female experience in each country, I was surprised to find that the major difference was that, whereas in the national and international media Irishwomen are portrayed as prosperous, equal participants in society, stereotyping has conspired to portray Arab and Islamic women as miserable and subjugated 'second-class citizens'.

At present the Irish government is involved in four major tribunals of enquiry involving the systematic abuse and mistreatment of Irishwomen over the last fifty years. The first tribunal is examining the case of the Magdalen homes, recently the subject of a harrowing Hollywood film.[9] As journalist Gene Kerrigan puts it, 'it wasn't all that long ago that the choice facing most single women who became pregnant was emigration, prostitution, or incarceration.'

Throughout the country buildings were constructed specifically to cater for these women. Commonly called 'Magdalen homes', after the penitent prostitute in the Bible, they were run by various religious orders and took in young,

[9] *Magdalen Sisters* 2002. Irish Film Board *et al.*

pregnant women who had been rejected by their families. Described as 'charitable institutions', they differed from prisons only in that prison inmates are first required to appear before a court of law (Kerrigan and Brennan 1994:110).

Women were sent to Magdalen homes because they were pregnant, because they were worryingly headstrong, because they were mildly retarded, because they were orphaned, or because they were thought to be in moral danger. Thousands of Irishwomen effectively disappeared when they entered these homes and for some there was no way out, even though they were legally allowed to leave at any time. Vulnerable and institutionalised, many stayed locked away as 'Magdalen women' until they died. What some may find hard to believe is that these Victorian-style 'care homes' were operating as recently as 1975; the last remaining home, attached to the Convent of the Sisters of our Lady of Charity in Sean MacDermott Street, Dublin, closed down in 1996 (Kerrigan). It is a dreadful indictment of Irish society and its religious orders, and its repercussions continue to be felt to this day.

The second tribunal is that investigating the practice of symphysiotomy. This is a particularly disturbing medical procedure that came to light only very recently, following an article in *The Irish Times* of Thursday, 2 October 2003. The procedure involves sawing through the pelvic bone of a woman in labour, either immediately before or, in some cases, after the birth of her child. It was commonly performed during obstructed labour and its intended effect was to prematurely widen the pelvis. Symphysiotomy has bequeathed to the women subjected to it a range of disabling conditions, including incontinence, acute back pain and mobility problems. Many of the women thus afflicted say their consent was neither sought

nor given for the operation. Figures show that 348 of these operations were carried out in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda between 1950 and 1983, while hundreds more were carried out in maternity hospitals in Dublin and Cork. The investigation into this practice has led to the release of hospital records, from which many women have discovered, for the first time, that a symphysiotomy was performed on them.

Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital is also involved in the third and biggest of the four tribunals, that enquiring into the carrying out of unnecessary hysterectomies on young women who gave birth at the hospital in the 1970s and 1980s. The procedures were performed without the women's knowledge or consent, and in some cases the women were not informed even after the event. The women thus maltreated are understandably traumatised by the experience and are seeking redress from the State.

The fourth ongoing tribunal of inquiry is that investigating the Hepatitis C crisis. From the late 1970s on the Blood Transfusion Supply Board (BTSB) supplied blood products that were not safe for use. There were many warning signs, but they were not heeded and professional standards and best practice were ignored. Brigid McCole died of Hepatitis C after receiving an infected blood product. A further 1,600 people, mostly mothers, were infected with the same virus. In the aftermath, the BTSB added insult to injury by the manner in which it tested and counselled the affected women. For example, the women were made to stand in queues signed: Anti D/hep screening please queue here; they were asked if they had ever used needles or had tattoos; they were questioned as to the number of sexual partners they had. It seemed as if the first instinct of the BTSB

was to establish if there was any other way in the wide world that the women might have contracted the virus. The tribunal has already found that the women contracted Hepatitis C from infected blood products supplied negligently by the BTSB.

It has been a proven fact in many countries that institutionalised religion and women's rights do not go hand in hand. Many people in the West descry the Church of Islam and fear the spread of the Muslim religion, citing it as a negative and dangerous branch of extremism. In support of this view, it is common to see Arab women wheeled out for consideration, veiled and apparently downtrodden. We do not need to look too far to see the adverse effects of organised religion on women's lives; it is disingenuous to suggest Islam is set apart in this regard.

In Ireland, the Church has long played a dominant role in the everyday lives of the people. I began second-level education at the Convent of Mercy in New Ross, County Wexford, in 1979. In 1981 a young teacher at a neighbouring convent school became the subject of public scrutiny and censure. Twenty-six-year-old Eileen Flynn was in a relationship with a married man, and in 1981 she became pregnant by him. She realised her options were limited: she could have an abortion, give the child up for adoption, struggle on her own as a single mother, or live as a family with the baby's father. She decided the last option was the best for all concerned. The nuns who employed her as a teacher in the Holy Faith Convent School in New Ross saw it differently. In August 1982, Flynn was sacked from her post, just two months after her baby boy was born.

The official record does not state that Eileen Flynn was fired because she became pregnant. If it did, it would be in direct contravention of Section 6(2)(f) of

the Unfair Dismissals Act 1977–2001. The Employment Appeals Tribunal, the Circuit Court and the High Court all held that the nuns were entitled to dismiss her because her relationship with a married man openly rejected the standards of behaviour the schools existed to promote. The fact that Eileen Flynn was a good teacher who was paid by the State didn't seem to count. In giving judgement in the Circuit Court, Judge Noel Ryan said:

> 'Times are changing and we must change with them, but they have not changed that much in this or the adjoining jurisdiction with regard to some things. In other places women are being condemned to death for this sort of offence.'
> (Kerrigan & Brennan 1999:110–11)

I find this summning-up by the judge particularly poignant: the year was 1981, the place was a first-world country.

Just a few years later, in 1984, the lonely desperation of young, unmarried women who became pregnant was tragically illustrated in Granard, County Longford. The fact that teenager Ann Lovett was pregnant was known and openly discussed in her neighbourhood, but it appeared that no one offered her any help or advice. The young girl gave birth alone and unaided in a graveyard on a freezing cold night. She and her newborn child died (Coogan).

One final example is a case that made international headlines and led one German newspaper to write: 'This is no event from the previous century, nor from the Romania of Nicolae Ceaucescu, or the Iran of the Ayatollah. No, it is much

worse. This unbelievable story comes from the EC member Ireland in the year 1992.' The case in question, which became known as 'the X case', involved a fourteen-year-old girl who became pregnant by a forty-year-old man as a result of statutory rape. After reporting the matter to the Gardaí,[10] the girl's parents made arrangements to take her to England to have the pregnancy terminated, which procedure was illegal in Ireland. Upon learning of the case, the Attorney-General stepped in and prevented the family from travelling to England for this purpose.

This girl's personal tragedy quickly became a controversial political issue as feminists, conservatives, Church, State and media made known their opinions. After weeks of incensed debate and pleas for understanding from the girl's parents, psychiatrists judged her to be suicidal and the Court of Appeal ruled that the abortion would be lawful in her case, under Article 40.3.3 of the Constitution, which permitted the procedure where it was clear that there was 'a real and substantial risk to the life, as distinct from the health, of the mother'. Sociologist Ailbhe Smyth argued that the emotive public debates that attended this high-profile case were positively healthy in forcing Irish society to talk to itself across differences and divisions about meanings and values it deemed important.

Shortly after my arrival in the UAE, I became aware that I found it very easy to 'fit in'. I did not find the lives the students led to be all that peculiar, contrary to what I had read and heard beforehand. These young women came from large families and were educated in female-only environments, both of which I could identify with. They were restricted by their religion, again a familiar

---

[10] An Garda Síochána, from which is derived the plural form, na Gardaí, is the official, Gaelic name of the Irish police force.

experience to me. I quickly learned that Arab women are like women the world over who have been exploited and abused by institutionalised religion. They call their God by a different name, but the wrongs executed in his name are no different from those experienced by Irish women, British women, or American women.

I presented these Irish cases to show a number of things: (a) abuse of women's rights is not the sole domain of the Arabs; (b) the power of religion to control people's lives is universal; (c) the slow rate of progression of fundamental social changes. Ireland is seen as a prosperous, modern, first-world country, but the truth is it is only now going through its own transition from being a Church-dominated state to embracing new thinking, particularly with regard to the place of religion in the lives of the people.

Change comes dropping slow in the Arab world, too, where women are feeling their way into unknown, previously forbidden territories. The range of opportunities open to women in the UAE now is radically different from what was available to their mothers' generation, and would have been unimaginable as little as ten years ago. Though illiteracy does still exist in remote areas and amongst the Bedouin, in the twenty-first century the young women of the UAE are generally achieving much higher results than their male counterparts at all levels of education. This obvious potential was the motivation behind the opening of the Zayed University, by Sheikh Nahayan in 1997, with women-only campuses at Dubai and Abu Dhabi.

One significant difference between the West and the UAE is the study choices for women. In the UAE women are choosing traditionally male-dominated

areas, such as engineering and medicine. I believe this may due to the fact that they do not share with the West a history of women entering the 'acceptable' fields of teaching and nursing. Ironically, their homebound past has made them freer to choose when it comes to further education and careers. And while the issue of working mothers remains contentious in the UAE, more and more women are choosing careers that will inevitably take them out of the home and into paid employment.

In Ireland, despite three decades of preventative legislation, women still suffer discrimination in the workplace and are most likely to be over-represented in part-time, low-paid jobs. The 'significant minority' of women who make it to the top of their chosen field often do so at considerable cost to their personal lives. Of course, the Celtic Tiger now prevails and everyone is a busy consumer, and sometimes it seems the gaps between men and women are closing for all the wrong reasons and in all the wrong ways. We in the West can feel very superior towards our Middle Eastern neighbours, seeing ourselves as progressive, equal-opportunities democracies that value all citizens alike. Veiling and seclusion are 'backward' and someday the Arab world will see sense and catch up with us. What is forgotten in this self-congratulatory moment is the true cost of our history and the slowness of the changes we have come to take for granted. Bridie Quinn Conroy remembers growing up in the west of Ireland in the 1950s:

'To say we were "led and said" by religion is an understatement. Everything done or said was overshadowed by religion. We were afraid of what the priests would say. We were afraid of what our

parents would say. We were afraid God would punish us. So we let

time for change pass us by and we let the time for discussion elapse.'

(Hill 2003:5)

The young women who took part in this study are now dealing with old limitations and new possibilities. The old limitations are not imaginary nor are the new possibilities strictly about embracing the West. The limitations that faced these students in the past are gradually disappearing, and the new possibilities are becoming more and more common as real choices in the lives of the students. Slowly, these changes are providing the impetus that will lead to gender being of secondary importance to ability and aptitude. These gains did not happen automatically, as was proven in the data. They were hard fought and hard won, but will, I believe, continue on into the future.

FIG.1 TABLE OF PARTICIPANTS

NAME	AGE AT TIME OF STUDY	HIGHER DIPLOMA	MARITAL STATUS
1. Maha	Ninteen	Year three	Single
2. Leila	Twenty one	Year three	Single
3. Fatima	Twenty two	Year three	Married
4. Hajar	Twenty one	Year three	Single
5. Noora	Twenty	Year three	Single
6. Meeera	Twenty one	Year three	Single
7. Suha	Twenty two	Year three	Single
8. Shaikha	Ninteen	Year three	Single
9. Ameena	Twenty one	Year three	Single
10. Sara	Twenty two	Year three	Single

FIG.2 DIARY ENTRY DATES

NAME	INFORMAL DIARY	DIARY 1.	DIARY 2.	DIARY 3.
1. Maha	22:01:98 27:05:98 21:10:98 13:11:98		02:05:00	
2. Leila	22:01:98		25:02:00	00:04:01 00:09:01
3. Fatima	00:12:98 08:11:99		12:02:00	00:03:01
4. Hajar	27:05:98	00:01:99	00:04:00	28:04:01 00:01:01 00:03:01
5. Noor	00:12:98 12:03:98	00:05:99	20:03:00 12:09:00	07:01:01 00:03:01
6. Meera	22:01:98 27:05:98 00:12:98			00:02:01
7. Suha	00:12:98 12:03:98 00:11:98	15:02:99 00:05:99 17:11:99	15:02:00 25:02:00 20:03:00 12:09:00	07:01:01 00:03:01 24:02:01
8. Shaikha	12:03:98	00:05:99	20:03:00	07:01:01

	14:04:98		12:09:00	28:04:01 00:03:01 00:03:01 00:09:00
9. Ameena	13:11:98 08:11:99		23:04:00 12:09:00	15:02:01
10. Sara	27:05:98 08:11:99		14:02:00 00:09:00 00:02:00	00:02:01 24:02:01

FIG.*3* INTERVIEW DATES

NAME	INTERVIEW 1.	INTERVIEW 2.
1. Maha	15:02:00	07:01:01
2. Leila	24:01:00	16:02:01
3. Fatima	12:02:00	21:01:01
4. Hajar	24:01:00	08:05:01
5. Noor	14:02:00	10:05:01
6. Meera	14:02:00	08:01:01
7. Suha	15:02:00	15:02:01
8. Shaikha	12:02:00	07:01:01
9. Ameena	15:02:00	16:04:01
10. Sara	14:02:00	14:02:01

FIG 4. INFORMAL CONVERSTAION WITH CLASS GROUP AS A WHOLE.

YEAR	DIARY 1.	DIARY 2.	DIARY 3.
1996	00:11:96		
1997	00:05:97		
1998	00:02:98 00:11:98 00:04:98 00:11:98		
1999			
2000	01:03:00 21:10:00 00:11:00 00:02:00	00:05:00 15:02:00 18:09:00	

	15:02:00		
2001	14:09:01		00:10:01
			00:04:00
			00:05:00
			13:02:01
			17:04:01
			16:03:01
			21:04:01
			11:05:01
			17:05:01