

# Qatar Narratives

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## F oreword

“When you write you’re saying in effect: I have a voice.”  
*Audrey Lorde (1934-1992)*

### **The Vision: An Overview**

Historically women have enjoyed limited opportunities to speak out about social, economic, political and personal issues. Yet, the printed word has provided a safe medium for women to enter into public discourse. Putting their thoughts in writing has empowered women in various contexts, whether during a civil war, celebrating independence, or reflecting on everyday life. The ability to explore and express in public one’s culture and personal views is a mark of a mature, civil society.

The Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), a small grants program funded by the U.S. State Department, provided such an opportunity to women in Doha, Qatar, who were interested in writing personal narratives, and made possible the project that produced this volume.

Early in 2008, we, the editors, offered a series of writing workshops for female students at Qatar University. We designed the workshops to encourage the participants to explore their views and their voices on the page. We also decided to compile this anthology, inviting women all over Qatar to hone their thoughts and share their writings on a variety of subjects.

The Arab world is known for its rich oral tradition. Stories and tales have been passed down for centuries. We encouraged students in our workshop to believe that, as writing teacher Pat Schneider says, “Talking is writing on the air.” If you can talk, you can write. If you can tell a story to a friend you can write. By the end of the six weeks, our students were “talking” in their own voices, on the page.

Our goal for this anthology has been to collect writings from women all over Qatar—on subjects ranging from social development, politics, and education to personal experience and memoir. With help from the American Embassy and the Qatar University library, we launched an essay contest, open to any woman living in Qatar. The response was overwhelming: we received many more entries than we were able to include here—both from our students and from residents living throughout the country. As you'll see, the essays range in subject from the very personal to the global.

### **The Editors: a Personal View**

The two of us first met back in 2005, in the United States, where we were both involved in an intensive writing residency—Mohana as participant, Carol as program director and co-leader. During the week we came to realize that both of us believed strongly in a teaching process that empowered writers to share their truths aloud, uncensored, and in print. Standing in the residence hall doorway late one night after a day of writing, Carol told Mohana, “If you ever need any writing teachers in Qatar, contact me.”

Later that year Mohana, an educational consultant at Qatar University, did just that, inviting Carol to teach a series of writing workshops in Qatar at Education City and Qatar University, in March 2007, as an experiment to gauge the interest of students in writing.

The workshops during this trial period were well attended and the students enthusiastic. “We want more of these!” students said again and again.

The American Embassy in Qatar, a partial sponsor for Carol's first trip, invited us to apply for a Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) grant; the purpose of these grants is to build understanding and support cultural awareness through ‘soft diplomacy.’ As Joey Hood, the Embassy's Public Affairs Officer said, “[the purpose of the MEPI program is]...to stimulate people's thinking and creativity and help build a civil society.”

Through the grant, and the support of Qatar University, we were able to offer six weeks of writing workshops to female students and staff, focusing on cultivating spontaneity and comfort with writing and thinking in English. Another goal was to encourage the participants to form opinions, without being reticent to communicate those opinions effectively and persuasively in print. We also offered individual coaching and editing sessions, as the budding writers began to refine and further develop their ideas into essays.

The workshop met for six weeks, from January 8 to February 13, 2008. From day one, the students wrote—as soon as they sat down at the large table around which we always met. We started every session with the same writing prompt: “What matters?” Or restated: “What are you carrying in your handbag, your heart, your memory, on your shoulders?” In effect, we were inviting everyone at each session to respond to: “What's on your mind, right now?” Exploring these thoughts on the page became a gathering point, a buffer for whatever had happened before, and a clearing space to reflect and write that afternoon.

This form of writing in response to a prompt is called “free writing,” an approach pioneered by writing authority, Peter Elbow (*Writing Without Teachers*). When free writing, the writer allows thoughts to spill across the paper, without knowing beforehand where each one will lead.

At first some students seemed skeptical, or confused. We heard: “We've never done anything like this before,” and “What should we write about?” “Nothing's in my mind,” was a common complaint. “Then write about that,” we said. “What does ‘nothing’ mean to you?”

As the weeks progressed, participants came to relish class time—the hours during which they could release the day to the blank space of the page. Students filled pages with thoughts about the future, childhood memories, triumphs, and losses—from a cell phone to a homeland.

After the initial writing exercise—in which everyone participated, including the two of us—we went around the table and read what we had written. This form of active engagement and sharing was new to all the students, creating a vulnerable but safe haven within which to share all material created during the workshop series.

We then took turns reading aloud pre-selected examples of strong writing across a range of genres and themes, including persuasive personal essays from a variety of sources: Arabic essay collections, articles from the New York Times, and various magazines, including Muslim Girl. We also read poetry by Rumi as well as other poets, and excerpts from memoirs. After the day's chosen selection, the group would discuss the subject matter as well as the style, voice, tone, and point of view in each piece of writing. Then as a large group, we brainstormed aloud ideas the writing sparked, prior to practicing specific writing techniques, such as writing in the present tense, or from different points of view.

One of the benefits of free writing is that there is no time for censorship, for the inner critic to chime in and say, “What is this?” or “Where is this going?” Generating freshly minted words was the goal of every session, and for the first week, our focus was on empowering students to keep the pen moving, to reach for the next word, and to write through those nagging thoughts that so often stop the flow, stifle creative energy, and squelch the desire to write.

By the end of the second week, concentration, momentum, and excitement were high. Once we had read the writing prompt, a luscious silence would embrace the room as pens flew across paper. Students wrote well past the allotted time, instead of fidgeting or glancing around. The exercises kept them engaged in their writing in an immediate way. As engineering student Ghina Al Katsi said, “. . . prompting my fingers to hold the pen again and to type on the keyboard--not only to chat with friends but to chat more with myself.”

The liberating effect of free writing is partly what helped these students write more confidently. Free writing allows writers to give rein to their imaginations, to sink deep within themselves and let images, scenes, thoughts bubble up without self-censorship. In *Writing With Power*, Peter Elbow, an emeritus professor of English at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, says: “When people first do free-writing they usually experience an immediate release from pressure. It doesn't matter what words come out. In the absence of danger, they find new words, thoughts, feelings

and voices they didn't know they had. Most of all they discover that the process of writing doesn't have to be an ordeal."

Good writing often contains interesting twists, fresh images. If the writer isn't surprised, poet Robert Frost said, the reader won't be surprised. Such writing becomes an organic process, an act of discovery, not drudgery. When we write about what we care about, writing begets writing. Meaning grows on the page; and often, our own writing can surprise us. The students discovered this. As we entered into our third and fourth weeks, students eagerly took their writing home and worked on the pieces that intrigued them.

By the end of the workshop series, there was a marked change in the participants. They were more deeply engaged in their writing and more comfortable expressing their opinions and ideas on the page. One student, Abrar Dalgamouni, said she now realizes that what's important when writing for school or for herself is to "get the ideas down. Don't worry about the form and the grammar. There's time to fix that. Let yourself get excited about the ideas you're working with. Let the words flow."

Abrar's words reflect the sense of self that enlivens all good writing, whether academic, personal, or artistic. The workshop participants began to "think on the page," to truly experience for themselves the words of National Book Award winner Joan Didion, who says: "I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see, and what it means. What I want and what I fear. I write to find out what is going on in these pictures in my mind."

Workshop participant Noura Abdulaziz had never before considered writing about her childhood but doing so opened her to new perspectives and insights on her emotions and her life—as she bravely told the crowd gathered at the launch of the essay contest.

"If you say what's on your mind in the language that comes to you from your parents and your street and friends," says writer Grace Paley, "you'll probably say something beautiful."

We trust you will enjoy the varied voices and opinions expressed here, in Qatar Narratives, the first, but hopefully not the last, collection of women's voices from within Qatar. You'll find narratives of childhood memory, essays about future aspirations, and differing perspectives on current issues, including the introduction of English and the challenges of obesity and rapid change. Above all we hope you will find a range of voices that hint at the complexity and richness of women's lives in this country.

*Carol Henderson*

*Mohanalakshmi Rajakumar*

## Glimpses Inward

## Belongingness • *Noof Al Khalifa*

As I grew up I realized that the first days are what make the difference in where you will belong. It has always been the first day: the first day of school, the first day of an internship, the first day at the gym, and the first day of vacation. First days seem to be the points that determine where you stand. But you can't always depend on them because life can sometimes take a 180-degree turn and change everything, including where you are—so you don't get your first day.

I'm sitting in the car with my mother and she is busy reading the Quran. The radio is off and I'm remembering our recent trip to Saudi Arabia, where we had a very good time. I'm thinking of cousins and aunts and uncles in order to delay the stress of going to a new school, enter a new class, and make new friends.

But here I am, on my first day in Hafsua secondary school, which is actually the third day of class! I'm starting two days late. Everyone in the class knows each other, knows their teachers and where they will sit, for the rest of the year. I feel lost. I'm thinking: where am I going to sit? And next to whom? My family's trip meant all of us, my brothers and sisters included, missed this critical time.

Now I'm standing in front of the class, in a small blue painted classroom with a wooden door. All eyes are staring at me. I'm carrying my Hello Kitty bag, and wearing the school's ugly uniform—a brown skirt it's the first time I've worn a skirt I hate and a big beige blouse. I couldn't find a blouse small enough for me. The math teacher introduces me to the class: "Hello seventh grade, this is the new student, Noof Al-Khalifa."

All of the girls are staring at me like I was some kind of alien.

"Choose your seat," the teacher says. This is a difficult decision. Choose my seat? The seat that will determine the rest of my days in this classroom? It feels like the weight of the world coming down on me. Where should I sit?

As I stand wondering, it seems like hours are passing. Suddenly a girl with a very friendly face stands up: "The desk next to me is empty. You can sit here."

"I'm Nadra," the friendly-faced girl says. She's not Qatari is the first thing that pops into my mind.

We became very close friends. At the end of one particular school day, Nadra and I were heading to the school's gate and chatting.

"Noof, can I ask you something?" she said.

"Sure," I replied

"Is Al-Khalifa a Bahraini Family?"

"Yes," I said

"So why are you living in Qatar?" she asked.

"Because I'm Qatari."

"So, you're not really from Al-Khalifa!"

"No silly, I am an Al-Khalifa," I replied, in shock.

"Then why are you in Qatar and not Bahrain?"

"Nadra, stop asking these meaningless questions! I'm from the Al-Khalifa family and I'm Qatari."

At the time, I didn't understand myself why my family was in Qatar or the history of how Al-Khalifas came here.

But now, today, everything is clear to me.

The Al-Khalifas were the ruling family of Bahrain and thus a family with a long history.

So how can I be Qatari?

It's a long story. A story that made up a family's history and a history that many people might not be aware of. But we, al-Khalifa, have always known about it and, as with my friend Nadra's question, are constantly reminded of it.

The Al-Khalifa family in Qatar is just like a tree that was pulled out of its original soil and planted in foreign soil, but this does not make this tree different from other trees. It grew up to be part of the earth it was planted in.

Because of political issues, Sheikh Abdullah bin Ahmad Al-Khalifa, who died in Oman at 1848, was not allowed to enter Bahrain. After his death, his family lived in different countries like Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. The beginning of my family's settlement in Qatar was when my great grandfather, Sheikh Nasser bin Mubarak bin Abdullah, married Sheikh Jassim bin Mohammad Al-Thani's daughter. After his marriage to a member of the ruling family here, we became part of Qatar.

Throughout my life in Qatar, I have always asked: "Where do I belong?"

But I know: I am a Muslim, an Arab, and Qatari. I come from a big family tree, the Al-Khalifas, with complicated roots. All of this reflects on me, of course, but what I belong to doesn't really matter. Nothing is more important than me just being me - Noof.

Yes. This is all I need to know.

I had confirmation I was right when I learned about a curious man who studied human motivation, Abraham Maslow. He observed and studied the behavior of the healthiest people. Based on his observations, he developed a theory that states that human needs are arranged in a hierarchal order. This idea was breaking news and many people argued against it, like Chilean economist and philosopher Manfred Max Neef; he said that essential human needs are non-hierarchical.

But Maslow developed a hierarchy of needs - a division of basic human needs into five main categories: physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and the highest—self-actualization. Maslow argued these levels must be fulfilled in sequence, one leading to the next, to reach the last level of self-actualization—the point that makes the human a human.

Well, although many highly educated and really smart people have argued against Maslow, I think his theory is cool. It convinced me from the beginning. But

when I apply it to my life, I get a bit confused.

The significance of all these categories seems to crowd onto one same level, not a hierarchy.

But maybe now I do understand what he meant because I no longer care what others think of me. I am Noof and that is enough, no matter what anyone else says. Was this Maslow's idea of self actualization?

## Arabian Superwoman • Rooda Al Neama

Imagining the garden of our house, the picture would never be complete in my mind without seeing my grandmother crouching down in the middle of a bush. She was always determined to try and figure out what latest type of weed was daring to inhibit her most proud accomplishment. For me to see her in the hospital bed following her knee replacement operation was very strange. She was out of her usual framework: rushing to the market, checking on her pets, preparing lunch, setting the table, working on the garden, spending time with her grandchildren and reading Quran before going to sleep.

Her once pleasantly plump figure was now deflated like a balloon losing its air, its essence. Her petite eyes surrounded tightly by thin wrinkles and her tiny button nose, and her vertical slim lips, all practically non-existent, yet still they create an overall calm balance reflecting the kindness within. Even as she lay in the hospital bed her tone showed the concern for her responsibilities, in a tired but serious and crushed voice. "I'm worried about the house, and I'm sure nobody is looking after it like I did. Nobody is looking after your grandfather or cooking his favorite food."

Before she was sick in the hospital she would often complain about how tired she was and how nobody ever helped her, but we all knew that in her eyes nobody could meet the standards that she set. As a result, she loved to be complimented on her food, garden, pets; it was the positive feedback that gave her extra motivation and the approval of her family was always a bonus.

She was so determined to get well and be up and running, on her two feet, before the house 'deteriorated.' The care she felt for everything and everyone around her showed through her actions. She would take her time in making food for the family, perfecting the taste and the whole meal. She had a little farm in one of the corners of the house, where you could see the love and care she gave her pets. She constructed a three-area space for her goats, one area including an air conditioner for when the weather got too hot. She would make sure they were fed each day and felt comfortable. As her grandchildren, we would usually joke to her about her loving her pets more than us. She would usually reply, "Animals feel the heat too; it is the only thing keeping me away from the garden!"

Then she would laugh about her recent tantrum about screaming at one of the help for not applying her instructions to the word. "You come from jungle," she would say, steaming with anger. This was one of the few times she would actually speak the words in English. That was her nature, infuriated easily but amused easily too. She was not only active in the household, she was also active in the real estate business—building, renting and selling. Although she was uneducated she always pushed beyond her 'grandmother stereotypical capabilities.'

As a young woman with five daughters, she juggled her responsibilities with her education. She was committed to learn how to read and write and finished

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*Noof Al Khalifa is in her third year at Qatar University and majoring in Finance. One of her hobbies is drawing, and she also enjoys reading. She hopes to encourage her fellow students to develop a love of writing by participating in a writing club.*



six grades of school in three years. As she reminisced about that time in her life she would often impersonate my grandfather as being a demanding husband who thought her time spent in night school was getting in the way of her domestic duties. She would continue, saying "...and those daughters! You try and bring them up in the best way possible and provide for them. They don't have the time to help around the house OR help me with my studies. In my day I used to wake up with the sunrise and help my mother; you know that saying is true: my heart is with my son, and my son's heart is made of stone." Then her thoughts would lead her to remembering her mother and tears would accumulate in her eye. Suddenly she didn't seem to be a grandmother but a child longing for her mother's arm.

At this present day, she is still the determined woman she has always been. She worked through her knee replacement operation, walking again but with slight difficulty. She no longer works in the garden but supervises; after all it is her passion for life and her hobbies that keep her going. Her 'pets fad' has modernized with technology; she now uses a complicated gadget to hatch chicken eggs and feed them! She still fantasizes about driving a car, saying, "if only they would allow women of my age with my poor eye sight!" She complains and secretly wishes she had been younger when all this technology was around. One of our German friends described her once as, "the most powerful Arabian woman I have seen."

I would simply describe her as "superwoman."

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*Rooda has always been motivated by her family to strive to do her best educationally and thus grew up always questioning and analyzing what she was taught in the classroom. She hopes to open her own business one day and believes anyone can truly achieve any vision if he/she has the motivation and the will to strive towards his/her goals.*

## My Fear • Abrar Dalagomuni

"Let's watch Grudge," I said to my friend, Rina.

"No, you know how much I panic from horror movies," she replied.

"Okay, then let's watch a comedy movie," I said, annoyed. Each time we go to the cinema, we end up watching any kind of movie except terror movies.

"When will this fear of yours end?" I asked her.

"Hey, stop it. Do I ever complain about your fear?" she said. "I'm bothered when you can't be with me when we play with balloons, or when there is a party crammed with balloons, because you hate them."

I realized at that moment that I have trepidation about balloons and didn't realize how much my fear bothered me, and the people around me. Balloons are supposed to be a symbol of happiness, one of the most desired forms of decoration for many ceremonies. Yet, I find them a reason to be scared—a reason to be frustrated.

Balloons are my fear, to be more specific, anything that blows out regardless of how loud the sound. All I do when I'm around a balloon is this: I close my eyes and ears. Whenever I am at home, or walking through the street, I watch my way carefully, especially when kids are playing, just because I think that one of them may have a balloon or a loud Beebe gun.

Most of the time, I am a cheerful person who loves to party, talk, and fool around with friends. I even try to talk with people I don't know, make them join in. But, the moment I see a balloon I lose all joy and happiness. I am no longer a social person; I become a quiet person, and I sit in my place, keeping my eye on the balloons; I feel less confident.

Many girls invite me to come join in. They ask why I am not acting normally. Crossing my legs, clasping my hands over my knees, I whisper that it is because of balloons. They smile at me, trying to show that they understand, and walk away.

Since I was a kid, this fear has lived with me; it grew as I grew up. I may be the only person in all the ceremonies and at all the parties who hides when it is time for the fireworks. As a child, playing time, for me, was fear time. I was running and shouting not from happiness, but from the fear of the sound of balloons. This fear didn't give me the sense of joy that all the other kids felt.

I was ashamed when I was a kid to admit that I dreaded balloons. Kids would laugh at me. Though I don't feel ashamed when I say it now, I feel shamed when I shout when a balloon pops. I feel annoyed when I cannot be a part of all the games in a trip, play with my little sister, help decorate the house for a party, and see kids playing with balloons.

I've had enough of this impairment, in front of my family, my friends, and worst of all in front of strangers. I've had enough of making this fear one of my main concerns. I've had enough of running instead of facing.

In an attempt to face my fear, I tried to know why I have this fear in the

first place. I thought deeply, day after day, trying to remember: where did this fear start?

The first question that came to my mind: have I ever been in a war or witnessed gunshots. The answer was no. I was born in America, grew up in Jordan, then moved to live in Qatar, and all of my stays in each country have been quiet and peaceful; no wars, no enemies. One day I asked my friend who had been in a war if she fears the sound of the explosions; she told me that she is used to them. If I had been in a war, I would not fear explosions, I said to myself. I would be accustomed to them. There must be another reason.

I've asked my family, hoping for an answer. My mind desperately looked for an answer so that I could understand why I have this fear. Unfortunately, I end up mad and sad because I can't find the answer.

I stopped searching for an answer that would relieve me and tried to face my fear. I held a balloon trying to pop it; my hand shook as I held a pin to blow the air out. A tear fell from my eye. I gave up and let the balloon float away.

Maybe this fear has taken more of my time than it is worth. Maybe I am the one who made it a phobia rather than just a worry. I should work on adapting to be comfortable with balloons around me. Just pretend they are not there!

Over the years, I will be part of many ceremonies. I will be celebrating my kids' birthdays. I will not only be around balloons, but also blowing up balloons. I will be ashamed if I'm not over my fear. Hopefully, by that time, I will be glad to decorate my house.

The other day Rina called. "Do you want to watch a movie?"

"No, unless it is "Grudge 2," I said, with a sarcastic laugh.

"I will watch a horror movie, if you pop a balloon," Rina challenged me.

This challenge will be the first step I can make to get over my fear, I thought.

"OK, let's meet at 4 pm, "I said, "and I will bring an orange balloon."

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*Abrar sees herself as a hard-working person who doesn't hesitate to offer help or give advice. She enjoys spending time with friends and family and is the third child in her family between her brother and sisters. Her hobbies include swimming and running. She always looks forward to activities that will enable her to improve her capabilities and skills.*

## Photos From the Back • Ghina Elkatsi

She stood up to take a picture of us while we were writing in the workshop. As she held her camera, adjusting the zoom, we started looking at each other with an awkward look: what now? Should we smile at the camera? Or should we keep busy with our "what matters right now" writing?

I certainly thought about how I would look in the picture, especially if it's published in the university magazine where other students will see it. Too bad I wasn't wearing makeup that day!

"Your faces will not show. Don't worry," she said. "I'll take the picture from the back!"

This is how female students here usually get photographed: from the back, their heads covered with black veils or colored hijabs, same as I and some of the non-native citizens wear.

Girls don't like having their picture taken, especially in this culture. A girl's photo is not welcomed; she will be criticized, or at least this is how it's always been since I came here.

I came from another place. Photos are the only memories that I hold; I save them in old shoeboxes beneath my bed. I open it to refresh my memory whenever I miss the old friends and family. I remember the school picture; we were all on the playground wearing our navy pants and white shirts uniform. I was the only one in the picture wearing a pair of jeans. On the back of the picture I wrote the names of my classmates so that as years passed by I'd always remember their names. There are other photos of me and my girlfriends, just taken to laugh at our crazy behavior—and our weird outfits. We used to hang out in my room trying on everything in the closet and snapping pictures.

I come from a place where photos talk more about me and tell what I have achieved in the past years: school dances and plays, graduation days, newspaper pictures with me being the tenth best high school student in the country. I see pictures of me as a Doha Asian Games volunteer.

I try to understand the "picture from the back" idea, but soon I get stuck with questions and no answers.

Is it a religious belief that says that the true Islamic hijab is not complete unless the face is covered? If this is true, could my hijab be not complete? I tried once to cover my face; it was in Ramadan. I went to the shopping mall and it was really crowded, everyone went there to buy Eid (festivity) clothes. But I couldn't stand the shoppers staring in a direct concentrated look into my eyes, the only feature showing from my covered face. Soon I gasped for oxygen. I couldn't breathe well, not only from the cover but also from the hot weather and the crowded places.

However more than half of the Muslim girls wear their hijab same as I do, without covering the face and yet they don't like having their picture taken either.

Is it then a traditional reason that says a girl's face and name shouldn't be known by other strangers or by other non-family male members? How can this be? I see those girls driving with their faces uncovered, shopping, going to universities and sitting right in front of a male professor who can see their faces and knows their names by taking attendance in class. Definitely this can't be the reason.

In real life you can pass by anyone and that person sees your face but soon you will go on and your face is gone as well. But in pictures, you keep going in your life but the picture is still there with you. It's a "pause" button of you going "fast forward," a "past" that follows your "future" life. Maybe it's a trust issue, or a personal issue; you don't trust the one who will have your picture in the box of memory; you don't know what purpose he wants the picture for, or to whom this picture will be sent over and over. Your picture can travel the world and fall into your hands ages later:

"This is not me!" you say. "Someone has played with it! I never visited this place; I don't even know who is sitting next to me!" This is your picture that became a victim of the technology of stealing, your face replaced with another body, your picture with another picture and different people. Maybe our fear of technology is the reason, especially now that pictures are easily downloaded into pc's. But this doesn't happen often, unless you are a celebrity or have enemies.

Do female celebrities like being photographed? I see a lot of pictures of Britney Spears and gossip about her these days, and many other celebrities too. But do they really like being photographed when they are not ready for it? With no makeup? Without the perfect outfit? With someone they don't like to be seen with? Doing some stuff that shouldn't be seen by their fans? Probably NO. They often walk undercover with big black sunglasses, huge caps and hats, large sweater just to be unknown.

Even us: me, you, her. Many girls don't like to have their picture taken even if they don't have the cultural reasons, even if they trust the person holding the camera. Still, we don't like the picture taking unless we are fully prepared for it.

Does this mean that picture taking is an issue for females internationally, regardless of cultural and religious beliefs?

Perhaps.

P.S. Please don't put my picture at the end of this essay.

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*Ghina Alkatsi came to Doha when she was two years old; she grew up in this country, which she now calls home. Painting used to be her hobby but soon words showed her thoughts in a louder and clearer voice. She is also interested in movies and decoration, loves the outdoors, sightseeing, and trips. She is a chemical engineer major at QU. Her wish in this life is to leave it with a trace.*

## Nervous Teacher • Haneen Al Qassass

Have you ever taught before a large group of students? Have you ever tried tutoring without preparing? One of the hardest things I've ever done is teach. I did not expect what happened, but I believe that teaching was extremely beneficial, and I found that facing people was really important in order to improve my communication skills.

Trying to do something new is actually required in this life because life is a series of experiments that in the end make you stronger and more experienced. However to do something for the first time without being organized can seem impossible. A month ago my mathematics doctor asked for me to represent a topic in mathematics the next day because he would be busy with his own business. He asked me to do so because he knew I understood the previous lecture while some students did not, but I did not expect that I would be teaching the others.

That night when I tried to sleep, my eyes wouldn't close and my mind started thinking about how tomorrow would run. I slept approximately four hours only because I couldn't stop thinking. Then the sun rose and I did not want to get up, as the lecture time approached. I entered the classroom looking here and there. I stood over the podium in front of the students, who were surprised that I would present on that day. I waited for others to show up.

I was so nervous that I was shaking. I greeted everybody and started speaking in a small voice and with an inner struggle to be comfortable. I was shuffling the slides on the podium anxiously while presenting. After a while, everything began to go fluently like water, and the students were participating in the discussions. Finally, I felt comfortable with my job and the students helped me. As a result, the doctor thanked me a lot for what I did.

Taking part in sudden teaching is not an easy job, but when the others help you to conquer your fretful fears, you can relax, and it also gives you self-confidence.

I think now you can agree with me: life is about experiments!

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*Haneen Basher is 18 years old and has lived in Qatar since she was born in 1989. She is currently a student in the Foundation program at the University of Qatar. When she finishes the Foundation program, she hopes to study at the college of business and administration with a specialization will be Management and Marketing. She hopes to be a good and a successful manager in the real business world.*

## Dear Mum • *Hissa Faraj Al Marri*

Dear Mom,

This is the first time I am writing you a letter since you died. It's hard to remember that you're not with me. Before you went to the peaceful life, you were my best friend; you were the only person I could talk with about lovely stories that happened to me in school. I liked to get your opinion on my dresses. If I felt hesitant to do something, you gave me the right decision. When I didn't do what you told me, I would discover later that you were right.

I know that it is hard to talk with you after you've died, but still I feel you with me while I'm writing my diary. So I am writing you a letter now. I lost you before my graduation day and I felt that I was all alone at that special moment. For a long time, I kept hoping to see that you were proud of me and happy to see me graduate. As you wished, I finished my studies with high grades. I'm now working with QU. I really feel that I need to celebrate my success in life. But you are not here.

I do remember when you were happy to see me finish high school and go to the University. You were supportive of me when I chose my major, but it was a very hard time, because I chose the English Literature, and I built my dreams on it, but unfortunately I didn't get the TOEFL grade for that major. I felt that destiny chose my major.

The first year in the college was the worst because my cousin died and after that my two grandfathers. I knew that was hard for you. And now I know how you felt because it was so hard for me when you left. I still remember your tears when your mother had pain. You were very strong. You had to face a very hard and painful time, the worst time for you. I'm trying to be like you. I'm always trying to be strong because of you.

Now I need your smile to color my days. I need your breath to make my life beautiful.

Love,  
Hissa

Note: TOEFL is the acronym for "Test of English as a Foreign Language"

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*Hissa is currently a communications coordinator in the External Relations department at Qatar University. In the spring of 2006, she graduated from QU with a degree in Mass Communications. After her mother died, Hissa was writing in Arabic about her daily life. But during the writing workshops sponsored by this MEPI project, she started writing in English.*

## I Believe in the Spade • *Kholoud Saleh*

We believe in our past and we believe in the power that the past exerts on us. There are moments that are connected to our past that we wish had never happened. My parents had a life that was a combination of both good and bad moments. They lived in Palestine for a long time. They believed in the spade and the power of the spade. It taught them to be hard workers; it also taught them to be resilient. Their grandparents were farmers, and so my parents also worked in the fields.

Back in Palestine my parents spent most of their time with the spade; they used it at the time of planting and they used it at the time of harvest. It was the most important tool for planting. However, they were forced to leave their home country. They left behind them their beloved family, and they left behind them their lovely fields. But, they were able to keep the spade values. What do I mean by the spade values? Dear readers, you'll find your answers in this text.

The life of my parents changed totally in Qatar. It was like the land of opportunities for them. They got married here. My father had a job far away from anything related to farming. He worked in Al-Diwan Al-Amiri, which is the sovereignty symbol of Qatar, and my mother worked as a teacher. Their values, beliefs and hard work were transferred here to Qatar. The values of the spade were always with my parents. They tried to raise us, me and my brothers and sisters, to be of those who adopt the values of the spade. It is like an heirloom that passes from one generation to the other.

One time our doctor in the college asked us to bring the family heirloom to show it to our friends. Many of them brought books, gold, and other things. However, I brought the pictures of the spade. The spade lies in the garden most of the time. Although it is not new, it is the most important thing in the garden. My father kept it for almost thirty-five years. I was really proud to stand up and say that this tool is our heirloom and my father still uses it. My father didn't want to disconnect himself from the past, but he also wanted to plant things by this spade. The goods are planted by the past. I always see my father working in the garden. I get amazed when I see his hard work. He never gets tired from working with the spade, even though he works in a different field.

You will hold your breath when you enter our garden. The flowers lay down on the floor as if they were the queens of the garden. The leaves support their queens by making a more beautiful kingdom. The yellow flowers are jealous of the red queens so they lay over them; they are trying to hide them. The high jasmine that falls from the garage roof giggles at you with its perfume. The bees and the birds are always around, making a nice company to the beautiful garden kingdom. This entrance will lead you to the back of the house, where the real excitement begins. My father planted there, with the help of the spade and its

power, the most delicious fruits and vegetables. The red tomato could be found between the green parsley, and the high and strong lemon tree is found at the end of the garden. The yellow lemons on the tree and their green leaves make an amazing background for other fruits and vegetables. You must taste these fruits! I can remember one of my father's friends who used to say, "You and your spade Khedr, it brings you no benefit." My father said when he invited him to taste the fruit from the garden: "I know what I plant. Gardening doesn't bring for me this tasty fruit only, but it also brings me joy."

My father planted the fruits and vegetables. But he also planted the spade values in us. We do what we do for joy and love, we do what we do and bring out our best when doing it, and we work hard to have the good results. When you plant the fruits, you plant them in the right place and at the right time. My father also planted that in us: "Be in the right environment, pursue your dreams, so you can do your best in your field." The spade values didn't disappear; rather they were transferred here to Qatar and to us, the new generation. His words always inspired me, and that is why I want to be a very good doctor.

My siblings and I work hard to make my father proud. Most importantly we work hard and we pursue our dreams to make our country proud of us. By our hands it will be developed; by our hearts it will be seen. Each one of us has a different specialty and a different field, making the country diverse, just like the flowers, fruits and vegetables in our garden. I'm proud to be a member of this family, the family that has learned how to value the spade.

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*Kholoud Saleh was born in Qatar in 1988. She is Qatari, but originally from Palestine and a pre-medical student at WCMC-Q, Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar. One of Kholoud's hobbies is photography; she enjoys taking pictures of different things such as landscapes and flowers. Also, she has a great interest in reading.*

## Love me for who I am • Maha AbdulRahman Al Obaidan

June 28, 2005: It was my fourth year of spending my summer vacation in Australia. I entered the hotel lobby, looking for my friends. I saw them in the corner, my family and friends, occupying the largest sofa in the lobby. The "parents" as I refer to them (emphasizing their power and authority) were chatting and laughing while enjoying the beautiful lyrics of Mohammed Abdu floating from the laptop. As I walked through a path of children who were running around playing tag, I looked at my surroundings and thought, I love this atmosphere. I loved the family gathering, the sound of children playing, and the carefree environment.

The lobby did not only gather my family, but my friends and I who spent our nights gossiping in a small corner of the lobby. I was the first one there that night. I sat on the cozy colorful couch, as a friend decided to join me. She stared with investigating eyes, detecting my depression. I poured my heart out to her, telling her how my father had started comparing me to relatives my age who cover up, and emphasizing that he was expecting me to follow their steps. I knew and understood my father's point of view, his urge for me to be like them instead of different, causing my reputation to be questioned and attacked by the society.

My friend agreed with my father; however, her calm reaction and the way she decided to discuss the issue with me allowed me to see some logic in my father's argument, to accept it serenely.

When reflecting now on past events, it seems that people's perceptions and pre-judgments have had a serious impact on my life. I remember the preconception of others, for not covering up when I travel, but also for being in a co-ed school. I have always had the freedom of choice in how to live my life, unlike most girls my age, who envied me for the life I lived. However, I was under constant scrutiny and criticized a lot, because I had the opportunity to live life to the fullest by doing whatever I put my heart into, as long as it didn't go against my principles.

People stereotyped me as being "too free" in such a traditional society. To begin with, I was in the American school, a co-ed that stands out just because of the fact that, unlike public schools, girls and guys interacted. During a school visit to one of the public schools, I was introduced to new sets of misconception. Girls started surrounding me in class asking me whether I wore the traditional Qatari dress in school, and if I interacted with guys.

One of the girls asked me if the guys in school used to "throw their numbers on the girls," (referring to hitting on girls by passing on their phone numbers). This experience of interacting with the girls in the public school has impacted my life, allowing me to perceive a different angle on my society—one I never knew existed.

The identity crisis I consequently suffered from has accompanied me

until this day. I've always questioned my lifestyle and my way of thinking. Was I going against Qatar's traditions because I was placed in an American school and intermingled with guys? Back then- they misjudged me, accused me of being a "not well-mannered" Qatari girl because of the way I reacted towards their questions, and because of the choices I made in my life.

People's misinterpretations of me have affected my friendships. There were days when my friends were prohibited from spending time with me by their brothers because they thought I would pose a threat to their manners and mentality. One particular incident I cannot forget was when my friend's brother accused me of being too daring, according to Qatari conventions, because I spoke to his sister in front of him.

I've been misjudged because of the way I dress and the way I live my life. No one bothered to look deeply into this picture and see the true me. I don't go against our traditions; in fact I follow the basic morals and religious codes. Fortunately, people come to love my social traits and my optimistic personality.

Back in the lobby with my friend, I sat looking at my surroundings. I knew that I was with the people that I loved. As tears came storming down my cheeks, I looked at her and I thanked her. She smiled, without a slight move or word; I know that she loves me for who I am.

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*Maha AbdulRahman Al Obaidan is a Qatari citizen who has been in an international school throughout her educational life. She is currently a senior in Carnegie Mellon University, studying Business Administration. She was involved in several committees during her years at Carnegie Mellon, such as being the president of the Student Majlis, the News Editor of All Around Newspaper, and a member of the Active Women Club.*

## Werewolf Kiss • Noura Abdulaziz Al Suwaidi

When I'm sitting by myself wondering about my life, I sometimes ask: which part have I really enjoyed the most? I find that my childhood is the best part of my life so far. I have always loved to talk about it to everyone and I have never gotten bored, repeating the same story a million times. For me, childhood will always be the time of pleasure, love, and imagination. I would say it is the time of honesty, but that would be only partly true. I was honest to myself but maybe not always to others.

I have two uncles who are important in my childhood stories. One is very kind. He loves to take us to the swimming pool, restaurants, and to spend lots of time with us; the other is a mystery. He looks different. He has a lone bear look and darker skin, and never plays with us. Is he a werewolf, I wonder?

It's the beginning of the holy month of Ramadan. I'm an eight-year-old who loves to hang out and spend all my time in a big garden full of palms belonging to my grandfather. I spent the happiest and most beautiful childhood with my spoiled little cousin Lolo, my eldest beautiful cool sister Jojo, Hamad, my slim cousin Hansam, and my chatty cousin Noora.

Being a pudgy child makes fasting very hard for me, and also for Lolo and Jojo. One day, we grab a chicken from the refrigerator and hide it. Then we ask Grandma, "Mama, how do you cook chicken?"

"Ohhh you cute little children," Grandma replies. "You must be starving now. This is what I do. I clean the chicken with water, salt it, and directly put it in the oven."

And so that's what we do. We go to our tree house with our stolen chicken, build up a fire and start cooking for ourselves a big lunch in Ramadan. We take other things and cook them too. This would explain where all of the missing food goes during Ramadan. But no one asks us about it. We are innocent children, right?

And then there is praying. "Look," we shout, pointing. The mystery uncle is passing through the area where we're playing. He pauses for a while, opens the car window, staring on us, and says, "Have you heard the Azzan?"

"Yah," all of us scream together.

"Did you pray?" he asks. I start worrying and wondering!! What will happen if I say no? What will he do? Will he punish me?

"Yes Uncle," I blurt out finally. The words have come out unconsciously. I don't know that's what I'm going to say but I say it.

He smiles and leaves quietly, nodding in approval.

Another time we children are obsessed with buying the latest Game boy. We decide to sell our lunches at school to make money so we can get it. We also cross the main street alone—Hamad, Lolo, Jojo and I—to reach the

supermarket. This is forbidden, crossing by ourselves. We buy some stuff and sell it to the rest of the children back at Grandma's house. We are good at making money!

When the mystery uncle passes again, staring and wondering "Hey, what are you doing?" I say "I'm trying to collect some money to buy the latest game boy."

"That's very clever of you," he says. "How much more do you need?"

I smile innocently.

"You have been fasting the whole month of Ramadan," he says, "and praying. I think you really deserve this Game boy."

I feel happy. It is as though I have been kissed by a werewolf. At this point I recognize that my feelings toward my uncle's qualities and serious behavior—his weird look with a face full of hair like a long dark black bear, his fast direct way of walking—made me draw a picture of him exactly as the werewolf. But he wasn't one!

Family gatherings, world exploring, creative expression, and initiative made me a happy child. I felt no resentment, nothing but goodwill, and mutual cooperation. I had a good upbringing, full of wonderful memories that make childhood the best part of my life.

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*Noura has lived her whole life in Qatar, surrounded by her large, happy family. They have traveled together on many occasions and have seen many interesting places. She graduated from Qatar University in March 2007 and now works in Students Affairs as an accountant. She is very interested in improving her writing skills and really enjoyed participating in the workshops that were a part of this project.*

## The Magic of a Qatari Smile • Patricia C. Begonia

It was an out-of-schedule shopping trip to Lulu for portable heaters that gave me the gift of a heartwarming encounter in Qatar. As my husband and I waited for the elevator to come up, a lady clad in the traditional "abaya" approached the lift with a microwave in her cart. I smiled. She smiled. When the elevator door opened, we realized that two carts would hardly fit inside. So I said, "Please go ahead." She replied in English, "I think we will fit." Thus, we rolled our carts in and all three of us squeezed in.

She then asked us where we are from. "The Philippines", I answered. She smiled once again and added, "Oh, I thought you were from Japan." My husband's chink-eyes fooled her.

In the course of that very brief elevator ride, we told her how long we had been in Doha and we learned that she is Qatari. Before long we were at the ground floor. She pushed her cart out ahead of us, her lips still curled into a smile. As she walked away, she turned and said, "Have a good stay in Doha." leaving us with yet another sweet smile.

When she wished us well on our stay here, it was as if the enclosures of the tiny elevator were not so confining anymore. That's exactly what her smile did. It broke down walls and gave my evening a happy ending.

Whoever said, "a smile is a curve that sets everything straight" is very wise, indeed. It is like a magic eraser capable of removing less-than-flattering first impressions or the trauma of a better-forgotten experience. Take the case of my dear Filipina friend whose car was bumped from behind by another vehicle. I think she did something the rest of us may find difficult to do. She smiled at the other driver and said calmly, "I'm sorry we have to meet this way. I'm Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_." Was the other driver disarmed? You bet! All defenses were lowered down bringing the situation to an amicable close.

Many times, a tragic moment like that can turn into a "magic moment" by the power of a smile, especially from a child. Notice how hard it is to stay angry as soon as a tyke smiles at you. I think children hold the imprimatur on the universal quality of a smile. When a baby smiles, it is not because of the other person's color, culture or religion, except perhaps if he wears a clown's colors on his face. The baby just smiles! Perhaps out of joy, contentment, comfort or amusement.

I recall with fondness the memory of a gentleman friend who keeps in his wallet a picture of his wife as a little girl smiling in innocence with a front tooth missing. How very sweet of him!

You may have caught yourself thinking that someone is aloof and distant only to be proven wrong by his display of a smile or a kind gesture. Or perhaps you found a spring in your step because you remembered to wear a smile as part of your attire. It's not a bad idea to make a smile a part and parcel of impeccable

grooming. As a matter of fact, when one looks at himself in the mirror before he meets the world it might serve him well to check if his internal condition is primed for smiling. That may very well be his gauge for how his day will go.

Life is a boomerang. If you throw someone a smile but he does not catch it and reciprocate, you can, at least, be sure that you will get something pleasant back. Woe to you, if you smile not. It is also worth noting that most acts of courtesy are preceded by a smile.

A sage of a friend once told me that when I smile I should do so with every molecule in my body so that even during a telephone conversation, the other party could feel my smile, if not see it.

Really, why flex more facial muscles frowning when you can spread sunshine by flexing less and smiling at no cost to you? And as you warm people's hearts, there is a good chance you can melt the negatives lurking there as well.

The amiable Qatari lady in the elevator did not wear a "niqab". But even if she did, I am pretty sure I would have felt her graciousness just the same. Her smile became a fairy's wand that touched me and put me under the spell of memories gone by yet gratifying still.

To this day, the memory of her smile warms my heart better than the portable heater warms my body. Indeed, a smile flashed with sincerity cannot be barred from being a rainbow that connects, not the sky to the pot of gold, but people to people, making them diamonds to each other and, therefore, precious. As such, it colors the similarities among people and shades their differences, the better to make the world a pleasant habitat.

After all, the sun that paints the horizon at the Corniche a magnificent orange when it rises is the very same sun that sets at the Manila Bay and brushes a spectacular crimson hue across its sky.

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*As a student in high school and college, Patricia was active in journalism. As a young wife, she wrote a piece on the ladies' club's history of her husband's organization for its tenth anniversary. Before she came to Qatar, she served as the literary editor for her corporate newspaper. Her favorite roles in life are being true to herself, as well as the proud mother of four sons and even prouder grandmother of five grandchildren.*

## Standing Tall • Sameera Rashid

***The world has a habit of making room for the man whose words and actions show that he knows where he's going.***

Napoleon Hill

Do you love yourself?

Many of you (after many ah's and um's) would say, "Yes" . . . kind of."

So what is one thing you love about yourself? Isn't it that you are unique? Don't you go blushing and smiling the whole day when someone tells you that he or she has never met someone like you? Then why do we spend ninety percent of our time trying to be like others? To keep up with the Joneses? Buying what's in, throwing or giving away what's out?

Haven't we gotten addicted to the word "Latest?" Latest this, latest that: mascara, lip gloss. When everyone from Riyadh to Los Angeles is using the same thing, yet you want to be respected for the unique person you are?

Didn't you once have to buy the book with a title something like, *How to Impress Anyone in 60 Seconds?* And didn't you get over-excited while browsing through Web sites when you came across the ad for a book that guaranteed to help you find and keep (and seduce) the man of your dreams?

As a matter of fact we all do it. So did I. But only after reading all those books and visiting all those sites, well, trying to use them, did I realize: why should I try to impress someone who probably doesn't even like me?

No! I don't want to.

Being popular is a desirable idea, but if I pretend to show interest in someone I don't really like, isn't that hypocrisy? Shouldn't we try to improve ourselves so that people will want to like us? Even if we turn out not to be social magnets, can't we just be content with our humble friends?

Why not?

Movies create magic, magic to attract us. Nicole Kidman and Ashwarya Rai look like goddesses. So we stick glued to the television to see them and then are hooked by the commercials of the cosmetics they use. The amount of money people spend on make up could probably educate the entire world population.

So you buy those costly cosmetics, spend half your salary on your appearance, take out loans for cosmetic surgery, just to cry at the end of the day that nobody loves you. Millions of girls become anorexic and bulimic and some even die in pursuit of beauty, trying to copy divas like Britney and Lindsay, who themselves have ended up in the courts.

These are our role models? If you have straight hair you curl it, if you have curls, you straighten them—you burn them with an iron. But what is your own identity?



I remember being one of the few dark girls in my class. My skin color never mattered to me but it wasn't unusual to hear one of my classmates say, "You are so dark. Why don't you use Fair and Lovely?"

Or someone would say, "My mum says I'm so pretty."

"You know even yellow suits me so well." (Because I am white is what she doesn't say.) I will never forget the day when I was in seventh standard and one of my classmates (and my so-called friend) said to me, "You are so dark; no one will ever like you." She was laughing. "You better go to Africa."

And she kept on laughing.

I cried for hours that day. During the night I couldn't sleep; her remarks haunted my dreams. So this is what my friends think about me? I thought. This is what's on their minds when they look at me? What do they say behind my back? My "friend's" prejudiced behavior had already compelled me to buy whitening cream but I knew I couldn't change my skin color. And I never really wanted to, I realized. This is who I am.

When I woke up, I was a different person.

I looked myself in the mirror and said, "I love myself. I love my face.

Damn to whatever you think."

I kept on being friends with her and am now still, but instead of being angry I feel sorry for her. I don't actually think she herself is at all pretty but also because people like her are materialistic and because of that they are unable to appreciate the beauty around them.

This incident changed my life. I am so glad she said what she did because on that day I learned that if you don't love yourself no one will. From then on, I have taken life as it and tried to make the most of it. Even my friends noticed the change in me and started liking me for the person I am.

I wasn't shocked when I found out that the real name of a guy my brother frequently refers to as "Maddy" was Mohammad. That reminds me that five years back even I used to refer to myself as "Sam" or "Sammy." It's not that we just like the short forms but it's actually our craze for everything Western. We want to lose our background—wear jeans and headbands and blend into the crowd of the new global nation.

You won't find anyone these days who doesn't know of Che Guevara or Eminem or Shakira and they will proudly tell you about them. But if you ask them about Khaled Bin Waleed or Allama Iqbal they will look puzzled.

We are copying the so-called developed nations blindly. We are copying them to such an extent that we have forgotten our roots. But the point is, if we don't protect and project our nations, who will? Even if Muslims don't come out and preach peace, to clear the doubts about Muslims, who will?

The one thing I have learned in life is to be myself. Only then will I progress and succeed. If we cut ourselves down to suit others we will soon wither within ourselves. It's time we get back to the lessons we learned at school. If we want to be respected, we will have to be respectable.

It all depends on you. Will you bring out your own unique talent for the world to see? Do you have the guts to be what you want to be? Can you put in the effort?

Will you mix in with the crowd or stand tall?

The choice is all yours.

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*Sameera is a graduate of the Pakistan Education Centre in Qatar. She is a book-holic and loves exploring new fields of arts and science. She is spending this year doing things she always dreamed of doing, including reading lovely books, meeting new people, spending more time with her family, and finally writing a novel she hopes to complete in a couple of months.*

## No Expectations • Zanaib Obaid Watan

“No expectations, No disappointments.” This is a saying my sister used to tell me whenever I told her I wanted to go back to Iraq, my native country, to study medicine. This was my dream. She used to say that I was a dreamer. I would get mad at her and say, “I am up for it.”

However, not long ago, I discovered the cruel reality during my trip to Syria. There I witnessed the horrifying conditions of the Iraqi refuge and the condition of the country itself.

Looking back at those conversations, I never thought my sister would be right. Not a single person advised me to proceed with my dream; nevertheless, I refused to listen. In fact, their disapproval made me even more insistent about going back to Iraq.

We left Iraq in 1996 when I was nine years old. I remember my mother explaining that Dad couldn't endure the injustice under Saddam's regime. Also it was difficult for my father to receive his income because of the economic situation. My father decided we would leave and that we weren't going back any time soon. He recommended that we each take a pile of sand to always remember the smell and the touch of our homeland.

Now here I am, after taking this trip to Syria, back in Qatar to continue my studies. I decided to tell here my emotional experience, to talk about my shattered dreams, and to share a story about a country full of sorrow. This journey made me closer to a different world; it has changed me as a human being.

Four months ago my family and I traveled from Qatar to Syria because of my father's new job. As soon as we arrived in Syria, my father asked his company to arrange the living accommodations so that we could live in an area with an Iraqi majority. My father's intention was to reconnect his family, us, with our roots. For me this arrangement was the perfect opportunity to pursue my dream to go back to Iraq.

However, living in the Iraqi neighborhood made my dream and every memory I stored in my heart about the country where I was born evaporate in thin air. I have seen things that made me convinced that I did not want to spend six to seven years in an environment where the lives of human beings fade away faster than light, where the laughter of children has become something like a myth.

Near our house, there was a holy place. People would go there to ask, pray for all sorts of things, to pray to God about thoughts that were troubling them. The first time my sister and I stepped into the holy place I could feel it was charged with strong emotions. As I walked closer and closer to the front the feeling got stronger. When I reached the window – the place where people are supposed to ask for their needs - I could not remember why I was there nor did I feel entitled to ask God for anything, compared to the tragedies of the people next to me. I was overwhelmed

with emotions because I saw many women crying and so hard that I could feel their pain, agony and suffering, asking for the simplest things. I couldn't figure exactly what were they asking for, although I could hear them saying: “Oh, dear God just that thing and I will be happy and grateful for eternity,” or “Please God let our country be stable again.”

Suddenly my problems seemed shrunken. I was shy to ask God anything regarding my issues. All I could do was to ask God to help those people. Then I ran from that holy place without looking back, ignoring my sister's questions.

As for the condition of the refuge, it was very hard and very bad, with unspeakable suffering. One million people at least are living in Syria as refugees. These people left behind their houses, families -or what was left of their families- with no financial support. And the international community chose to look the other way. One night when I could not sleep (the walls of our flat were very thin), I heard two young men discussing dinner. The first one told his friend with an angry tone, “I'm sick of this situation. I'd rather go back and get killed than live with the daily struggle to find bread and water.”

The other man tried his best to calm the angry man, begging him to forget the idea of going back to that “hell.” As the conversation echoed in my mind, I thought about how Iraqis are not allowed to work in Syria. I realized that those people had lost hope and faith in humanity, forever.

Finally, the real victims of this meaningless war are the children. The thing that left me with the worst culture shock is the Iraqi children, with their ragged clothes, their bony faces full of pain and maybe shame, who beg for money or anything you can give them. I have seen this phenomenon in other parts of the world, but it touched me there the most because these children have seen a lot of blood and destruction. The last thing they need to be doing is begging for food.

I had nightmares where the faces of these children haunted me. Maybe I was attached to them because there were talking my language. I realized that they could be any one of my family, even me, if my life had taken a different path.

After living four months in Syria, I left with a condition; it was not desperation it was something close to frustration as a result of the unfixable tragedy of all these people. Here I am back in Qatar. I realize I am behind my friends in my studies, but I don't regret going to Syria.

The wounds of this experience have not healed yet. They say that time is the best cure. I am sure that after a while, I will feel better, but I don't think I will forget this journey, ever. I am happy that I was able to go back and see the situation. Some days I sit and think back on my lost lifelong dream, wondering should I put on a thicker skin!

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*An Iraqi citizen, Zainab S. Obied has been a resident of Qatar for over ten years. She is a second year student at Qatar University and is majoring in chemical engineering. Once she finishes her degree, she hopes to return to and assist with the rebuilding of Iraq.*

## Notes from Conversations I failed to Have • *Autumn Watts*

“Are you wearing that?”

Bodies have new meanings here. The signifiers are different. Living in a crowded American city, I once experienced other people’s bodies as peripheral surfaces within a field of other surfaces: walls and windows, glass and concrete, skin, coats, metal, asphalt.

Here, bodies are visible to me, especially my own. More than ever, I am conscious of my skin and what I leave covered or uncovered. In crowds I experience other people not as surfaces but as concealments; what’s hidden, what isn’t. Here, a bare shoulder blares across the room, trumpeting a message. The meaning changes according to listener.

“You are very fat. Why so fat?”

My body also has different boundaries. Men in thobes elude my body’s margins; I walk within an invisible bubble. Men in slacks see no bubble, or lean to press inside it. One male doctor declines to touch me, and a different male doctor asks if I’m married, then pokes my ankle and tells me I am obese...repeatedly. My new boundaries expand and shrink.

“I didn’t know it was you.”

In bathrooms, women who are covered sometimes uncover. Black scarves unwind. A niqab lifts, and eyes change context. I fail to recognize a woman whom I have always known veiled. All signifiers disrupted.

There are worlds I never see. I’ve never been inside a Qatari home. I’ve never seen a wedding. Curious, I glean knowledge on the outside of second-hand experience. I live in the same city, but never the same city.

“After a while, you’ll stop seeing the men in coveralls, too.”

Never the same city.

“Don’t they hate Americans?”

Coming here has exposed my ignorance. I know so little about Iraq, about Afghanistan, Lebanon, Palestine. I am trying to learn. Frustratingly, I have a bad memory for specifics so my learning is slow. My memory prefers images. Here is one: I am standing in a classroom, white board marker poised; a few students have their hands raised. On the board I have written “STEREOTYPES” above “American” and “Qatari.” Words are scribbled beneath their respective categories.

Ignorant. Independent. Pious. Respectful. Allah. Friendly. Cowboys. Tradition. Landcruiser. Blonde. Cheeseburgers. Oppressed. Gangs. Terrorist.

The list keeps growing. We haven’t reached bottom yet.

“We must seem weird to you.”

Men don’t hold hands in the West. Different signifiers. Different risk. Women might, sometimes. Friends are not the most important relationship, nor is family or community. Your lover fulfills all need, and offers the only physical

affection unfraught with boundaries.

I did not know I was impoverished. Then I came here and witnessed the effortless warmth between women, extended even to me—a cultural outsider. It is like finding something you never knew you lost.

“I can’t imagine Qatar.”

The rising sun strikes high-rise windows, tripling shadows tens of stories tall. Off-shift workers wait for buses, mouths wrapped, their bodies speaking exhaustion. At night families picnic by the Corniche. Armed guards doze outside my compound. Marble gleams within the college and abayas pass in swirls of perfume. In the bar, an Australian leans across the humid space between us and tries to tell me something over throbbing music; but I cannot hear him, and we remain only physically visible to each other. Cell phones ring non-stop throughout the movie. An SUV tears across my lane; I do not flip the bird. There are so many nations at Global Village that my feet wear out before I find the last booth. A bumper sticker translates: “We are all Qatar.” Twice a day a man who is not a child, although he is called a “tea boy,” delivers coffee to my office and calls me, who is not his elder, “Madame.” A student writes an essay about bombs and dead family in Iraq, and I must discuss comma placement and pronoun antecedents. A starving dog waits by a construction site’s margins. Another roadkill cat. Illiterate, I see only lines and dots. In the morning I wake up to a white sky and a blue sea with white sails sometimes on it. My fridge is empty: evidence of solitude. Nostalgia can wrack the body like physical pain. The call to prayer comes first as a hum from far away, like a plane approaching; often, fooled, I turn around. The entire city calls in a thousand different voices, none of which I understand; but a bright, dark yearning strikes me nerveless, and I stop where I am and I listen to it.

“When are you coming home?”

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*Autumn Watts earned her MFA at Cornell University, prior to her appointment as Writing Center Coordinator at Weill-Cornell Medical College in Qatar. Her fiction and poetry have appeared in Best New Poets, AGNI, Indiana Review, and Portland Review, among others; and she enjoys collaborations with visual artists. At the moment, she’s revising her first novel.*

## Qatar: The Land of Opportunities • Al Jazzy Abdullah Al Maraghi

Currently, I am studying at Weill Cornell Medical College-Qatar, one of the best medical colleges in the world. Ten years ago, my doing this would have been considered a mere dream. However, the dramatic changes in education in Qatar were pivotal to my life and will hopefully be to my future also.

One day when I was in the 7th grade, the principal came in to the middle of the classroom, interrupted the teacher, and called a few students' names. My name was on that list. I did not understand what was going on. The school distributed some papers among us and asked us to give them to our parents. In those papers, there was something mentioned about a new scientific school. My father was excited, since they chose only a few people to enroll in this school and they claimed it was one of the best schools in the country. The school was going to introduce a new approach to education in Qatar, and so they selected the best students to try this different style of learning. It wasn't until later that I felt really happy or appreciated this life-changing opportunity.

Everything happened fast. The days were flying by and the years were passing by, and I was walking along a new path in my life. Every day I learned new things that I never thought I would know until many years later. I was fortunate to have this kind of high education; not all people had it at that time. When I entered high school, it was also a very different experience for me. School was not just about education and academic performance; we also had a lot of activities inside and outside the classroom. Education was all about balancing and consolidating our knowledge and gaining more information from other people, like the visitors from different schools, cultures, and countries. This kind of multicultural education helped us to be open-minded and not to restrict our thinking by boundaries.

Choosing a specialty and applying to college was the biggest step I have ever taken in my life. Having the best colleges in Qatar was a motivation for me to work harder in order to meet those colleges' requirements. I have always strived for greatness and being an average student was not something that I had in mind. I chose to enter the field of medicine and to work hard with the help of God in order to reach my goal.

After I began studying at the college, I had another surprise waiting for me. One time, I was sitting and doing my work after all my colleagues had left for home. My friend called me. She said, "You are on the list!" I wondered what she was talking about. What special list had my name on it?

"What list?" I asked.

She told me that I was one of the students who was going to be awarded for Excellence in Education by His Highness Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani. At that moment, I felt like all the hard work I had done was eventually going to be

appreciated by others. The award gave me motivation to work even harder.

The ceremony happened a week later. We had to go early to rehearse. When I entered the hall, the place was dark, only sparsely lit with lights of different colors. People of all ages were there. One of the ceremony coordinators walked me to my seat, where I sat patiently waiting to rehearse before the ceremony began. The people in charge said that they would mention our names and we would have to walk fast to the stage. My name was the first on the list. At that moment I was shocked. I did not want to be the first person. I was very nervous. My parents arrived later that evening for the ceremony; they were happier than I was and very proud of my accomplishment.

When it was time for me to receive the award, I felt that my steps were heavy. I was nervous, and I could not move fast. However, when I reached the stage I felt more comfortable. I smiled, took my certificate, and had a picture taken with His Highness. When I got off the stage and sat in my chair, all of my friends started sending me messages, telling me how great I was. That moment was probably the best moment for me. To be successful and loved by other people was something that I always try to achieve. I have always liked to balance between my work and social life, and that evening I felt I had achieved a perfect balance. When I went home, my brothers were waiting to congratulate me. That was one of the best days of my life.

I used to think that there are limits for our ambitions and dreams. Now I totally disagree with this point of view. We hear all the time that America is the land of opportunities, but now I certainly believe that Qatar is one, even more so. The changes in the last few years in Qatar's education have influenced many young people's lives for the better. As a British playwright once said: "You see things and you say, 'Why?' But I dream things that never were, and I say, 'Why not?'"

This is how I feel now.

You never know where you might end up or if your wildest dreams might eventually come true. You just have to believe in yourself and have faith in your dreams. I have full faith in mine.

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*People have different ways of managing stress; for AlJazzy a pen and a paper have always made her feel better. She expresses herself comfortably by pouring out her emotions and thoughts into writings. As a college student, she writes a lot of different kinds of essays, but finds cause and effect essays the most interesting. She believes that if you have a certain interest in something, you have to work hard to improve it and nourish it, and that is why she participated in this essay contest.*

# Glances Outward

## **A**rt thou An English Speaker? • *Hana Saleh Al Obaidly*

English is the second language spoken in the State of Qatar and has gained remarkable popularity amongst nationals across all generations and between both sexes. Similar to any other theme of discussion, and with such unfathomed popularity, English has both positive and negative impact. Using English words within Arabic conversations has become a norm: words like “okay”, “bye”, “yes”, “no” have invaded the Mother Tongue of the citizens. During the recent years of modernization and with the successful blossoming of the education system in the country, English has replaced half of the Arabic conversations and, in most cases, dialogues between Qatari people.

Undoubtedly, English has a perceptible and acceptable impact on Arabic conversations in many areas. As a result of this public approval, it turns out to be a binding truth to include English words when conversing in Arabic. With the massive amount of awareness in technology, citizens have developed a complete understanding of jargon whenever and wherever applied. One of the most apparent examples of “jargoning” is in the World Wide Web. It has become common practice to use the English words “chat”, “email”, “blog”, etc in Arabic conversations; no one raises an eyebrow in bewilderment. Some people believe verbal translation of those words ousts the harmonic flow of the tone and complicates the meaning. Other examples include abbreviations: “CD”, “CV”; medical terminology: “MRI”, “CPR”; sports jargon: “goal”; police: “CID”, “ID”; computer: “update”, “DVD”, “mouse”; education: “English”, “Master Degree”; job-related terminology: “interview”; and so on.

There is a case for using English within the business and international markets. While we consider the loss of our mother tongue to be catastrophic, we should, perhaps, look upon the learning and use of a second language as being the way forward within the 21st century. Everything is being geared and knowledge of English and even the acceptance of English phrases within our mother tongue should be viewed as enhancement and modernization of the language, rather than its degradation. Have not all western and romantic languages been wrought from the amalgamation of several? English for example includes Latin, Hindi, the Scandinavian languages, and German!

While the industrial prosperity escalates in the country, the increasing foreign workforce has marked a new revolutionary stage of the spoken language. Having this cultural diversity within Qatar, Nationals have begun to eradicate the language barrier by adapting to this change and by using English more regularly than they once did. Consistently, the inclusion of English words in Arabic conversations has developed into a persistent habit and a pattern of speech amongst nationals.

When it comes to the debate over the detrimental effect of using English

words in daily conversations, the first thing that comes to mind is the use of obscene words. Swearing or cursing attracts the interest of the young generation more than others; the use of cussing words, sometimes without knowing their true meaning, has become the brand name of “speaking good English” between Qatari boys and girls. This negativity is mainly, but not solely, derived from attachment to and idolization of fictional and non-fictional characters such as celebrities and public figures, and in imitating their manner of speaking. This speech imitation provides a sense of psychological superiority and assimilation, identification with these famous people, for the imitators, in front of their peers.

A second debatable issue is about losing interest in using Arabic and losing the cultural attachment within. People refer to non-English speakers as traditional people or those who still live in the Stone Age. In job interviews, mastering Arabic as a mother tongue, at times, becomes a hurdle in successfully getting the job due to the applicant’s “lack of English language skills.” It is even more distressing that in some local advertisements, including the line ‘Arabic Language is an advantage’ is merely a way to keep the public quiet and content.

Using English words in Arabic conversations has its pros and cons. We may seek the respect from English native speakers when using their language and we attempt to leave a notable impression on our listeners. Nevertheless, when we disregard our own mother tongue, we lose our own identity and through it our own distinguished individuality. As the old story goes, we can either be the peacock or the crow, but trying to be both will create a pitiable creature with no distinctive identity.

As the global market increases, so will the use of foreign, everyday, phrases but this should not be of concern to us and we should all understand that regardless of any addition, our language is sacred and safe in our hands. It is our duty to speak it freely, yet uniquely.

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*When Hana was in junior high school, she developed a passion to write in English and succeeded in completing a few articles and short stories. Following this passion, she graduated from Qatar University in 1999 as a major in English Language and Literature. One of her stories was published in the Faculty Magazine. In the years since, she has continued to write and focus on writing short stories and novels in English. It is her personal craving to produce the very best of short stories and she is an aspiring novelist.*

## Female Obesity in Qatar • Khawla Ali

Over the last 30 years, the state of Qatar has witnessed major socio-economic developments leading to significant changes in standards of living and life style. The change into a more affluent society has led to many unhealthy dietary habits. These have contributed to the magnitude of diseases among women in Qatar. Among these are obesity, diabetes mellitus, and cardiovascular diseases.

Obesity, a condition in which excess fats accumulate in fat tissues in the body, has increased dramatically in Qatar, especially among females, over the past 25 years. A study conducted in 1989 showed that 63.7% of adult females (18 years and above) were obese (Based on BMI (Body Mass Index) equal or above 25). This is an increase of fifty percent in the last 25 years. This percentage is higher than that reported in other countries in the gulf region. This fact has led to the following thesis: The socio-economic development due to immense oil revenue has caused an increase in obesity rates among women in Qatar.

Obesity developed as food consumption patterns changed and personal income grew. Before the discovery of oil, fish, rice, and dates were the most commonly consumed food in the Gulf, especially among Bedouins. Meat tended to be consumed only when guests were invited or by the upper social classes. However, in the last three decades, the economic development has resulted in an increase in purchasing power. Consumption of meat and rice in Qatar has been very high, and women have been consuming high levels of fat, sugar and sweets but inadequate quantities of vegetables and fruits. Although fats make excellent fuel, by providing the body with huge amounts of energy, this also means that a person must work harder and expend more energy to use up the fat stored in her body. These energy-dense foods that are stockpiled with calories may increase the incidence of obesity among women in Qatar.

In some cases, obesity can be caused by genetic disorders such as Cushing’s syndrome and hypothyroidism. Cushing’s syndrome is a hormonal disorder caused by prolonged exposure of the body’s tissues to high levels of the hormone cortisol. Hypothyroidism, on the other hand, is a disease caused by insufficient production of the thyroid hormone. Although these genetically determined diseases are widely spread and are considered to be a major cause for obesity in many parts of the world, the increase in obesity rates among females in Qatar is not associated with the increase in genetic diseases. This is due to the low rates of such inherited diseases in this country and in the Gulf region in general. A recent research including 30,810 infants in Saudi Arabia, revealed that only 0.079% of infants had an abnormal thyroid function. These trends indicate that the low rate of genetically determined diseases is not the direct reason for the increase in the incidence of obesity among women in Qatar.

By the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Qatar and other countries of the Arabian Gulf aimed

to reinforce the region's position as the leading international financial centre of the Middle East and bring about more western investment in the country. Immigrant populations from Western countries came to the region, introducing new food habits. These food patterns, characterized by "junk" food, have spread widely throughout the region in a short period of time, and the number of fast food chains has increased dramatically. For instance, hundreds of McDonald's, Burger King, and Pizza Hut branches have been built since 1993. Epidemiological data from developing and developed countries concluded that with the westernization of the diet, many chronic diseases would emerge, first as obesity, followed by diabetes, CHD and cardiovascular diseases. As a result, many women replace healthy foods with fast foods that mainly consist of saturated and trans-fats, but low content of fiber. Thus dietary changes from traditional high fiber diets towards the affluent fast food diet may increase the incidence of diet related non-communicable diseases among women in Qatar.

Moreover, obesity has been attributed to the adoption of a sedentary life style. Several researchers investigated the levels of physical exercise among women in Qatar and its relevance to obesity. Some people may wonder: Is there a significant relationship between the lack of exercise and its direct affect on obesity with the socioeconomic development? In fact, this case is discussed below.

Primarily, women in the Gulf region including Qatar are now occupying office jobs that do not require much physical movement but ensure a high salary. Such jobs require sitting in front of a computer monitor for more than six hours a day. Besides this, internal networks within companies make it easier for employees to send reports, data and many other documents with a single click of the mouse. There is no need to leave one's chair to deliver a document.

Secondly, the low percentage of females who practice exercise could be attributed to cultural barriers. While many females in western regions find it convenient to walk and exercise in public places such as parks and streets, few women in Qatar would exercise in such places. Furthermore, Gulf society in general obliges females to serve their families and children first before considering their own health status or fitness. Another reason attributed to women's lack of exercise is the shortage of private places for women to practice. Finally, the traditional, long, comfortable and wide clothes worn by women have prevented them from noticing their gradual weight gain. Musaiger (1994) found that more than half of the women in Qatar (56.5%) did not practice any type of exercise; 27.5% practiced exercise infrequently while only 16.5% of women practiced exercise regularly. Most of these were non-Qatari. These facts are strongly associated with the high prevalence of obesity among women in Qatar (63.7%).

The rapid development in transportation due to the increase in petroleum exports has also contributed to the lack of physical exercise and movement. Before the discovery of oil, the majority of people used to travel to their destinations by walking or riding camels and horses. After several decades, specifically in the 1950s and the 1960s, bicycles and motor cycles were widely used among the Qatari

society. Nevertheless, by the 1970s, the country witnessed an immense increase in the number of cars and vehicles. The less a person moves the more fats he/she will accumulate in the liver and under layers of skin, and the faster the development of obesity.

After the tremendous increase in families' income and the fact that Qatari women need, or have the right to, go to work, many women workers consider the choice of alternative childcare inexpensive and easily accessible. Non-parental childcare has a destructive effect on children's development and health status. Although research showed that qualified alternative childcare during infancy can have positive effects, this paper outlines the use of housemaids instead of qualified caregivers in Qatar. Hala B. Roumani, a worker in Gulf Montessori Centre, outlines the destructive consequences of using unqualified maids as childcare providers and the way these caregivers interferes with the child's health condition. Since most babysitters are illiterate in Arabic and limited in health care knowledge, they may provide a child with any type of food, ignoring the fact that this food is typically inappropriate to medical health. As an example, most children under ten years of age are seen in malls and shopping centers with their house maids. When it comes to eating lunch or dinner, maids try to satisfy a child's needs by simply buying him/her an ice-cream from KFC or a happy meal from McDonald's. If this child suffers from obesity, eating fried food on a regular basis would eventually lead to serious chronic diseases including diabetes mellitus and cardiovascular diseases. The risk of female obesity in childhood and its continuation into adulthood is a major dilemma. A survey carried out by the National Center for Health Statistics Standards revealed that the behavioral and cultural attitudes involved in obesity operate early in life. By tracking body mass and obesity from childhood through adulthood, studies indicated that most obese adults were overweight during childhood.

An interesting story I have read recently outlines the destructive consequences of unqualified childcare, and the way it relates to a child's psychological and medical health. A girl from Doha, Sanah, suffered from obesity her entire childhood. Born in 1979, Sanah had an ultimate problem with obesity. The family's house maid, who was responsible for taking care of this child, found it easier to satisfy the girl's demands by simply buying her lots of chocolate, sweets, and fast food. Children in the neighborhood and at school teased her all the time, and gradually, she started avoiding sitting with people or interacting with children her own age. The only solution to getting rid of depression and loneliness was to eat. By the age of twenty, Sanah discovered that she developed type II diabetes. Complications developed rapidly, threatening her life. In 1994, after having suffered for twenty years, Sanah died from a heart attack.

Obesity may also be contributed to stress and negative emotions. Feelings of sadness, anxiety or stress often lead women to eat more than they normally do. The rapid economic and social development in Qatar has put people under pressure to adapt to industrialization and urbanization. And because of the

inflation in prices of goods like rice, meat, and sugar, life has become more and more expensive. Parents are working in full time jobs. More females are working to support the family's income. This new stressful life causes depression and therefore changes the daily food patterns and activity habits. Many women find it difficult sometimes to overcome stress or recover from sudden or emotionally draining events (e.g., losing a job, facing a serious medical problem, seeking disability to support the family financially). Gradually, they begin eating too much of the wrong foods or foregoing exercise. After a while, these turn into habits and changing them becomes a difficult challenge.

Some physicians proclaim that high levels of education in Qatar that have resulted from the economic development and improvement in standard life conditions have decreased obesity rates. Women nowadays are more health-educated and are more capable of making decisions related to food and daily consumed nutrients. However, this might be limited to Western countries. Concerning Qatar, the increasing levels of education did not have any significant association with decreasing obesity. A recent research by Musaiger revealed that there was no significant association between levels of education and obesity. In fact, the percentage of obesity in highly educated females was higher (60.5%) than in those with low education levels. Highly educated women usually occupy full time jobs and can barely find time to cook or choose to buy healthy food. Also, they tend to eat more sweets and fats to provide themselves with sufficient energy whenever they are overwhelmed with work. College students are good examples of how demanding pressures can lead to their neglecting their own health. Although most of them are well aware of the importance of having a healthy diet, they tend not to eat healthful foods, especially during final examinations. "No time to think about healthy food; studying is more important," they claim.

From the perspective of a pre-medical student in Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar, I find it extremely challenging to obtain a balanced healthy diet along with high academic standards. Personally, although I am fully aware of the significance of a healthy life style, whenever I feel overworked, fast food offers the quickest and most effortless of daily meals. In addition, accommodating time for exercise can be difficult when a person is under stress.

Women's obesity is significantly associated with the socio-economic development in the Arab countries of the gulf. Dense-fat foods, the lack of physical exercise, unqualified childcare, stress and the new sedentary lifestyle have all contributed to the high levels of obesity.

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*Khawla Ali is a first-year premedical student at Weill Cornell Medical and 18 years old. She has always been interested in research related to issues of women in the Arab countries of the Gulf. In 2007 she received the highest GPA in Bahrain, and in 2005-06, she won the "Hamdan bin Rashid Al Maktoum Award for Distinguished Academic Performance — Distinguished Student Category.*



## Qatar on the Rise • *Nayaab Shaikh*

It's hard to accept that a country, having acquired independence only three decades ago and containing barren land stretching across the country, today has the fifth highest per capita income in the world. Thirty years ago, it didn't have much to offer but here we are in 2008. Today Qatar not only boasts a per capita income equivalent to that of the European Union. In addition, Qatar is also the applicant city for the Summer Olympics 2016, owner of the world's best airline, home to an upcoming Science and Technology Park consisting of some of the biggest names in the industry—Microsoft, Google, Cisco Systems and more. And let's not forget the ever-expanding Education City. Now that's all appealing! Qatar in the last few years has stepped right up and made a very clear statement to the world: "WE ARE HERE TO STAY!"

The keystone of Qatar's economy is the utilization of its hydrocarbon assets. Limited resources, severe living conditions, harsh climate and famine had driven the citizens of the country to migrate to neighboring areas. Oil discovery changed this scenario and brought Qatar into a new era. Oil was first discovered in 1940 in the Dukhan field. Qatar started exporting oil in 1949.

Since the mid 1980's, there has been a major breakthrough in the economic situation, with the unearthing of the world's largest known non-associated offshore gas field in Qatar. In June 2002, Qatar emerged as having the second largest proven gas reserves in the world, after Russia. Qatar's exports have nearly tripled in the past five years from QR 14.0 billion (\$3.9 billion) in 1997 to QR 39.6 billion (\$10.9 billion) in 2001. This significant rise in exports is a product of income diversification, which has seen LNG export revenues increase ten-fold from QR 1.5 billion in 1997, to around QR 15.0 billion in 2001. This swift increase in LNG exports has uplifted Qatar to the position of the 4<sup>th</sup> largest LNG exporter in the world.

The income generated from the oil and gas industry has helped Qatar develop in a number of fields, including education. The country places great emphasis on education. Qatar University, since 1973 has been one of Qatar's major educational institutions for higher education. Education City, headquarters to the Qatar Foundation, is a hub for the generation of new education. This revolutionary project is home to an assemblage of branch campuses of some of the world's leading universities, as well as numerous other educational and research institutions.

The educational progress has not only been limited to men. The women of Qatar have transformed the image of women as being just homemakers. They have long since been connected with the corporate world and this association goes back to 1999, when Qatari women took part in the elections for Central Municipal Council. Her Highness Sheikha Mouza – wife of the Emir of Qatar—has given

eminence to the role of Qatari women and shaped an environment that encourages them to meet their social obligations and contribute to the civic life. This invigorating role is a change from the traditional role of women and is considered to be a vital sign of women's status in the society. Women have not only progressed in the field of politics but have also made a mark in various other fields: education, health, charitable work, law, arts, literature, journalism, aviation, banking, tourism, finance and investment. A woman is a member of the UN Committee on the rights of children. This increasing presence of Qatari women in economic fields led to the set up of the Qatari Investment Corporation for Ladies, with the support of Sheikha Mouza Bint Nasser Al Misnad. The women in the country are not only progressing for themselves but are also paving the way to success for young graduates. Mona Fadel Sulaiti – assistant to the Dean of Virginia Commonwealth University, Qatar (VCUQ) – launched 'Folio' in 2006, to give students graduating from VCUQ a chance to showcase their talents. The fall and winter fashion collection 2007 was launched under the brand name "YD09."

Qatar's vision encompasses sport as an integral part of the advancement of the country. The sports movement started during the 1940's with the foundation of the first sports club, 'Itihad Al Arab'. Today, Qatar has beneficially used sports to promote itself and has hosted a number of international championships on an annual basis – such as The Qatar Open Tennis Tournament, Golf Masters International Tournament, Qatar Motor Grand Prix, and the Qatar Desert Horseracing Marathon. The highlight of some of these international events was the 15<sup>th</sup> Asian Games held in 2006. Qatar was the first country in its region and only the second in West Asia, after Tehran, to host this prestigious event.

Sport has become a key marketing tool for Qatar, helping quench not only the thirst of the local population for sport but also in actively promoting itself as the Gulf's leading "sport capital." Some of the sports facilities Qatar boasts are The Khalifa Olympic City, Hamad International Complex for Water Sports, and Doha Golf club. The ASPIRE academy for sports excellence is one of the world's most advanced sporting institutions and the first of its kind in the Middle East. It was inaugurated in September 2004.

Qatar's health sector has come a long way to provide the residents of the country with the most advanced medical facilities and qualified people. The National Health Authority (NHA) provides preventive and treatment of public health services at home and a variety of other services. The Primary Health Services Department of Hamad Medical Corporation (HMC) supervises 23 primary health care centers, which are suitably distributed across the country, and provides various programs like health awareness, mother and childcare, immunization against child diseases etc. The Health Commission Department carries out medical checks on every person entering the country for work or visit, and issues certificates of health fitness for categories for those who are about to get married or applying for jobs, university acceptance, or public housing. Other medical amenities include the Hamad General Hospital (HGH), The Women's

Hospital, Rumailah Hospital, Al Khor Hospital, and Hamad Medical City Complex (HNCC).

A nation is successful when its inhabitants are truly happy. All great nations are formed by the vision of leaders and the determination of its citizens. All Qataris today want a nation that not only provides social security, good health coverage and pensions but also freedom for their women, education for their children and a safe environment for their elderly. The Qataris can be proud today that their leader's vision and their determination has paid off.

The sports movement started during the 1940's with the foundation of the first sports club 'Itihad Al Arab'. Today, Qatar has beneficially used sports to promote itself and has hosted a number of international championships on an annual basis – such as 'The Qatar Open Tennis Tournament', 'Golf Masters International Tournament', 'Qatar Motor Grand Prix', and 'Qatar Desert Horseracing Marathon' and many more. The highlight of some of these international events was the 15<sup>th</sup> Asian Games held in 2006. Qatar was the 1<sup>st</sup> country in its region and only the 2<sup>nd</sup> in West Asia after Tehran to host this prestigious event. Sport has become a key marketing tool for Qatar, helping quench not only the thirst of the local population for sport but also in actively promoting itself as the Gulf's leading 'sport capital'. Some of the sports facilities Qatar boasts are The Khalifa Olympic City, Hamad International Complex for Water Sports, Doha Golf club etc. The ASPIRE academy for sports excellence is one of the world's most advanced sporting institutions and the first of its kind in the Middle East. It was inaugurated in September 2004.

Qatar's health sector has come a long way to provide the residents of the country with the most advanced medical facilities and qualified people. The National Health Authority (NHA) provides preventive and treatment of public health services at home and a variety of other services. The Primary Health Services Department of Hamad Medical Corporation (HMC) supervises 23 primary health care centers, which are suitably distributed across the country and provide various programs like health awareness, mother and child care, immunization against child diseases etc. The Health Commission Department carries out medical checks on every person entering the country for work or visit, and issues certificates of health fitness for categories as those who are about to get married and who are applying for jobs, universities or public housing. Other medical amenities include the Hamad General Hospital (HGH), The Women's Hospital, Rumailah Hospital, Al Khor Hospital, and Hamad Medical City Complex (HNCC) etc.

The true success of any nation is when its inhabitants are truly happy. All great nations are formed by the vision of leaders and the determination of its citizens. All Qataris today want a nation that not only provides social security, good health cover and pension to them but also freedom for their women, education to their children and a safe environment to their elderly. The Qataris can be proud today that their leader's vision and their determination has paid off.

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*Nayaab was born in Muscat, Oman and her interest in media began in seventh grade. She wrote poems and stories, some of which were published in the school magazine. Nayaab looks up to her mother and admired her ability to organize various events for the newspaper she worked for. Her mother's love for her work and zest for the journalism industry rubbed off on her. Nayaab plans to complete her education in the field of media and communication.*

## What Does it Mean to Be a Qatari Woman in 2008? *Nadya Al Awaintati*

Qatar is a country that was for a long time unknown. But 50 years ago, it started to become more popular and known in other countries around the world. This is because it became one of the richest countries, producing oil and petroleum. Qatar has passed through many changes that affect the population and the government.

There are many differences between Qatar 2008 and Qatar 1940. Earlier, people's life depended on fishing and pearl diving. Men used to sail the seas for many months. Women would take care of the children, cook, and clean. They didn't make any particular contribution towards the society, other than being good mothers.

My grandma, for example, was married at the age of fourteen. From then on she was behaving as an adult woman, taking responsibility and making her own life in her own home. Her mother had taught her how to cook different types of complicated dishes when she was eight. Most of the time growing up, she was the one who cooked lunch and prepared dinner. Sometimes when her mother worked to earn an income, selling different kinds of dates, she took care of her younger brothers and sisters.

My grandma left school after grade three, because my grandfather decided to marry her. He was twenty-six years old. When she married him she wasn't mature enough to make the right decision—her parents planned her life without considering her opinion. During this time she was very happy. She believed that she was one of the happiest ladies at her age. She was the first one among her friends to marry. At that time, people believed that the more beautiful the lady the earlier she was going to marry.

Nine years passed and my grandpa died. He left my grandma with six children. Only two of them were her own children, while all of the others were tethered to my granddad. During that time, my grandma told me much later, women used to give birth in the home with no one to support them because the men were away sailing. Women were treated as super nannies for their men and children. Adding to that, men were the ones who controlled the family and women had no rights to share her opinions with others.

My grandma suffered a lot in her life with the six children. She faced a lot of difficulties in many different areas. She didn't know how to raise children, how to feed them, or how to educate them. She started to work in areas that were acceptable by the society. She cooked foods in order to sell them. After that, she worked as a seamstress for more than five years. During these years many men offered to marry her, but she refused all of them. Eventually she started to think in a logical way and decided to marry her cousin in order to get support. He was a very kind man who loved all the children. In fact he wasn't able to have children.

Years passed and Qatar developed more and more, as a result of discovering gas and petrol. It became a very popular country. These developments affected the whole country in many different ways such as, lifestyle, culture, values and education. But the biggest change was related to people's lifestyle. Education became an important part in every child's life. The government helped every child in Qatar to become well educated. Hospitals were built in order to ensure people healthy life, and the governments were more aware of what was happening in the country. Men were no longer the only financial supporters for the family. Women were allowed to work in many different fields and to support the family. They were also given the right to vote and contribute to the society. Some women started to have their own businesses and to be qualified in their fields.

Education was very important for both of the genders. Gender discrimination disappeared and the level of education appears as the only judge between males and females. It became possible for women to earn high educational degrees from different countries around the world. At the beginning of the women's career, they used to work in a sheltered environment that didn't include men. Then people became more open-minded. As a result, women started to look for higher positions. They became engineers, doctors and politicians. They started to take their rights by fighting for themselves.

These changes created strong women who are confident enough to lead the next generation and to hold important responsibilities related to their own businesses. I think of the differences between my generation and my grandma's. I'm a seventeen-year-old lady, who is studying medicine at Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar. I feel that I'm able to take responsibilities for my life; I have been through many challenge and obstacles that, with the help of my parents, have taught me to make the right decisions.

One of my biggest goals is to help society by being a diabetes consultant; I will help everyone who suffers from diabetes. My life differs from my grandma's. Her goal was to marry and give birth to many children to make her husband happy. She didn't think of how to help the society and how to use her talents. She depended on the man, as she believed that women couldn't take all the responsibilities without a male, a man who is going to support her financially. Unlike my grandmother, my mother married when she finished high school. She married my dad and at the same time she was studying at university. A few months later she became pregnant. She faced a lot of troubles in her pregnancy, but she didn't delay any of her courses. My dad and mom helped themselves. After two years, my father decided to continue his studying abroad. So my mother held all the responsibilities on her shoulders. She was studying in the morning and raising us in the afternoon. She didn't give up; she tried to continue her studies, getting the highest degrees possible.

I think that Qatari women faced a lot of obstacles in developing themselves. One of the biggest obstacles is related to family and the Arabian culture. Most of the families were very strict and hard on their girls. Some of them

did not allow them to study abroad alone. Other women could travel, but only with one of her close relatives. The next obstacle is related to culture. Some families believe that if a woman starts to work and study with males she will lose all morals. Some husbands also believed this about their wives. They were very strict, not even allowing their wives to show their faces. Even though driving is allowed for women who are eighteen years old, many families refuse to allow their girls to drive a car. They think that Arab women in general are useless and can't contribute to the society.

All in all, Qatari women are the best symbol of what Arabic women face. They have had a lot of difficulties throughout their lives. But whatever the difficulty, they challenge themselves to do the best. If my grandma had started a family today, her life would have been so different.

## Social Impact of Globalization on Qatar • Nofe Khalid Al Suwaidi

During the last few years, Qatar has taken globalization and modernization initiatives in the search of greater economic benefits. As a result, the country has been rapidly changing in terms of dress codes, standards of living and life styles. At times the change could be beneficial to the economy and the political state of the country. In other instances, it could also strip a country of its sense of individuality and cultural heritage. Globalization and modernization in Qatar may have various negative social consequences such as the deterioration of the Arabic language, the loss of cultural identity, and the undermining of Islamic religious values. In order to combat these problems Qatar needs to make sure it preserves its cultural identity, language and religious values.

Globalization and modernization have undeniably benefited Qatar in various aspects of society. They have given Qatar access to world-class education, higher standards of living, and a greater sense of cultural awareness and social equality. Qatar has adopted the Education City project, in which it has invited a collection of prestigious American universities to open up branches here in Doha. Some of these universities include Carnegie Mellon University, the Georgetown School of Foreign Service, Texas A&M University, Virginia Commonwealth University School for the Arts and Weill Cornell Medical Center. Qatar has invested in the Education reform project with the aim of creating an academically stronger Qatari youth.

In addition, globalization has developed the economic and social state in Qatar. It is stated that today Qatar is one of the fastest growing economies in the world with one of the highest per capita income (CIA World Fact Book, 2007). Moreover, Qatar has created greater cultural awareness and global citizenship as a result of globalization. Cultural awareness is exercised as it is exposed to more foreign interferences through education, media, and free trade. At the same time, global citizenship is exercised through the creation of various human relief efforts organizations such as Reach Out to Asia, Qatar Red Crescent, and Qatar Charity. Furthermore, increasingly groups within society are being granted greater rights. For example, women have been granted the right to vote.

Despite the various benefits, globalization and modernization may strip Qatar of its cultural identity and sense of individuality. Ramzy Baroud, author of 'Weathering the globalization storm' (2006) addresses this by claiming that globalization strips Third World countries of their sense of cultural identity. The author argues that Qatar has abandoned the traditional villages in favor of Western-style projects. In addition, Baroud points out that Qatar has neglected its cultural initiative for the sake of globalization and economic welfare. As a Qatari citizen, I believe that it is in fact true that Qatar has somewhat ignored the old architectural sites and allowed them to perish away.

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*Nadya Al Awaintati is 17 years old and a student in the foundation program of Weill Cornell Medical College in Qatar. She is a Qatari student, and currently lives in the capital city of Doha.*

For the purposes of this research, I interviewed Lulwah Hamad Al Thani, daughter of the Emir of the state of Qatar, about the effects of globalization on Qatar. She comments, “It disturbs me to see some individuals adopting a complete western style of life and abandoning our social heritage.” She believes that as a result of globalization some Qatari nationals abandon their cultural identity in search of a ‘western’ way of being. In effect, adopting a western way of life dilutes the Qatari identity and cultural heritage to a degree that it may be neglected and lost.

Moreover, globalization in Qatar creates the dilemma of undermining the prominent local language within the region, Arabic. The importance of the Arabic language and the practice of the language itself is decreasing, as a result of globalization and the extensive use of English as the international language of business and higher education. A survey of 20 CMU-Q students was conducted to find out what people thought of the influence of globalization and modernization on Qatar. The survey showed that 75% believe that the number of Arabic speakers will reduce in Qatar as a result of globalization. In comparison, Lulwah Al-Thani asserts that, “I think our language will always be preserved simply because it is the language of the Quran.” She states that the deterioration of the Arabic language is not a problem. She believes that there are measures that should be taken to make sure that the Arabic language does not lose its importance and dominance within the region. However, it is undeniable that Arabic has been abandoned as the primary language of education. Furthermore, we find that today’s Qatari youth value English more than they value the Arabic language, as a result of the increasing number of English medium schools and American style universities in Qatar.

Consequently, globalization and modernization could have negative influences on the Islamic core values in Qatar. Through media, free trade, and education, Islamic values may be undermined as a result of cultural integration. Through the media, teenagers are allowed access to content that is profane and vulgar. This content threatens the strict Islamic values that the state of Qatar has managed to hold on to since its founding. In addition, through free trade, products such as alcohol, which is considered a sin, are being introduced into the Qatari market. Moreover, higher education in the form of English medium schools and American universities are constantly pushing the envelope when it comes to teachings. Qatar has employed the “hands off” approach in terms of the teachings given in the American universities. This has developed today’s youth into intellectual individuals with high levels of expertise in multiple fields. However, this has also introduced religious-threatening courses such as “The problem of God,” which is currently given to students studying at the Georgetown School of Foreign Service. The course consists of teachings about a variety of religions and belief systems. The course challenges the faiths and religious values of the Qatari and Arab nationals in the country ([http://www.diverseeducation.com/artman/publish/article\\_5931.shtml](http://www.diverseeducation.com/artman/publish/article_5931.shtml)).

In spite of this, introducing challenging courses provides students with the necessary intellectual and individual thinking skills—skills that are needed to create higher thinking abilities.

In order to combat these potential threats to the Qatari culture and society, the state of Qatar and the nationals of Qatar need to identify that there is a problem that needs to be tackled. First of all, Qatar has to develop methods to preserve the cultural identity of Qatar, its Islamic values and its local language. All of this can be achieved through educating the public.

To begin with, parents and educators need to be identified with the Qatari identity. The Qatari identity in the past was a combination of Gulf-based traditions and Islamic values. Today, the identity has reshaped itself in a form where Qatari nationals have the same basic ideals and values at the core but with a greater sense of acceptance and awareness of other cultures. In order to preserve the primary ideals and values of the Qatari identity, schools must make sure to imbed in the students the ideals and history of the state of Qatar at the primary and secondary level. Educators must also make sure to create a sense of pride in the Qatari identity and sense of distinctness to such a degree that whether globalization or any other global force takes place in Qatar it would not be able to strip the country of its cultural identity. Lulwah Al-Thani believes that, “We should be careful and preserve our basic ideals and religion because those two things must never be compromised. We should accept globalization only to the extent that our basic identity is not at stake.” (Al-Thani, Lulwah, Personal communication, 2007) For example, Qatar could host National celebrations as an opportunity to maintain the cultural identity of the country. In addition, Qatar could also form cultural societies or organizations that operate with the sole purpose of educating the public of what the Qatar identity is and its importance. With the fast growth rate of Qatar’s economy, it is inevitable that Qatar’s identity would be altered and reshaped to be more accepting and inclusive of other cultures. However, Qatar must make sure that the identity does not lose its primary ideals; it should only become more accepting of other cultural identities.

To maintain the high importance of the Arabic language Qatar has to keep an attentive eye to the education the students are receiving. Qatar has to make sure that the schools and parents are teaching Arabic as a core subject with the same importance, if not more, than any secondary languages. Lulwah Al Thani believes that parents should have a “proactive role” in the lives of their children to make sure that Arabic is exercised and learnt. In addition, the Qatari education system must also maintain the Islamic teachings at all levels of study especially during the growth stages between primary and secondary school. In addition, the education system in Qatar should be reformed to include Arabic in all subjects. English should not be the only prominent language in all but Islamic studies. Arabic should be included in the core subjects as well.

In conclusion, through this research I have identified that globalization has various social negative effects on Qatar that we as Qataris have to tackle. We first

have to highlight what these negative social impacts are; loss of cultural identity, undermining of the Arabic language and Islamic values and ideals. To overcome the consequences of globalization the state of Qatar needs to educate tomorrow's youth and the parents and teachers of tomorrow's youth of the importance of the Qatari identity, the Arabic language and the Islamic values. Most importantly, Qatar has to embed a sense of pride and joy into all of its citizens towards everything to do with Qatar. With such feelings and passion towards one's country, it would be hard for any force such as globalization to change or alter Qatar's identity, religious values and local language.

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*Currently, Nofe is a first year student at Carnegie Mellon University at the Qatar Campus and a Business Administration major. She acknowledges that globalization is a positive force that benefits the state on various levels; however, she understands there are challenges as well as benefits to this phenomenon. Qatar is growing at such a fast pace. Nofe would like to help the citizens of Qatar examine the social impact of such growth in today's increasingly global world.*

## Qatar: Through the Eyes of Essa Abdullrahman Al Mannai Noora Al Mannai

“The grains of my country's sand may scar the palm of my hands but I will never let them go.” These were the words of the patriotic Qatari national, Essa Abdullrahman Al-Mannai, describing his love for Qatar. Essa Al-Mannai is a prominent businessman in the country and he has lived here the full fifty years of his life. He has witnessed first-hand the dramatic change that has occurred in this country, economically, culturally, educationally, socially, and politically. For this essay, I interviewed Essa Al-Mannai, my father.

The change in Qatar's economy has been great and this has had a huge impact on the way people live today—their morals, beliefs, relationships with one another, and, most importantly, their way of life. Before “ladies would do all the cleaning,” Essa Al-Mannai says, and therefore the role of women was limited to cleaning the house. This was the result of extended-family housing, where the family all lived together and would provide financial support for members of the same household; women did not need to work then. They were taken care of. With the boom to the economy, small families began separating away from living with the entire family, as they could now stand on their own two feet. This independence caused the family relationships to weaken, as each member was no longer in dire need of the other. The men then needed to allow their wives to work, Mr. Al-Mannai explained during our interview.

The first jobs women would exercise were simple. They did not have the opportunity to work where they wished even if they were just as capable as or even more capable than men; they were restricted to teaching and nursing. Only recently has the women's role in Qatar flourished and shown prominent progress. Now Qatari women can begin to compete with the role of women in other societies. According to Mr. Al-Mannai, Qatar has decided to develop with more “world wide opening” about the issue of gender equality. Therefore in order for Qatar to develop it needed to be more open and to allow an “opportunity for women to prove themselves.”

Shaikah Moza has of course played a leading role in Qatar's social change as she fights for the rights of education. By creating the Qatar Foundation, she has made sure that Qatari men and women can study together in a new positive environment. The foundation is of the highest caliber and is devoted to promoting education and offering the highest standards in all of Qatar.

Another significant change is the promotion of education itself. Today there are many students willing to learn; families today encourage that. Before the rise of the economy, recalls Mr. Al-Mannai, the students, “. . . would go camping in the desert in Qatar. So all of a sudden in December- January we would see half of the students in the classroom absent; even some of the administrators and teachers would be absent!” Parents used to take their children on these trips,

expressing their negligence towards education.

With the rise of oil revenues, the government tried to promote education by “giving allowances to students even in elementary school,” recalls Mr. Al-Mannai. He also says that in Qatar back in the 1950s there were “few schools and also few students.” However the earlier negligence and underestimation of the importance of education has been remedied within the Qatari culture by the availability of competitive scholarships and the launch of excellent universities.

On the other hand, the change in Qatar environmentally, according to Mr. Al-Mannai, is also great. It is one of the negative changes that have come along with the many positive changes he has witnessed. Mr. Al-Mannai remembers that the sea was, “not polluted. It was clear and the beaches off the coast were very beautiful. The water was clean and the fish were abundant, so we never thought that there could ever be an environmental problem.” The discovery of gas has caused companies to process these natural resources and this affects the environment negatively. As a result the sea in Qatar today is much more polluted than it was only twenty or thirty years ago.

Change in Qatar has arrived. It started slowly. But as Qatari families became more educated and learned about the benefits of change, they accepted it, causing the last five or six years in Qatar to be of most significance, economically, educationally, socially, and even politically. Qatar’s relationship with America is probably the most mutually beneficial compared with other Arab countries. The alliance, according to Mr. Al-Mannai, who refers to himself as “patriotic,” is “a sovereign decision for Qatar to take and I think there is a mutual agreement where the Americans and Qatari have a mutual understanding of how to conduct their operations and consider each other’s interests.” Qatar is a small country and he believes in order for it to prove itself it needs a strong relationship with the world’s super power.

The greatest political change in Qatar was in 1997, when Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa overthrew his father. “I don’t consider it a coup,” says Mr. Al-Mannai. He thinks that Sheikh Hamad, “was the heir apparent and he was second in line for rule in Qatar, feeling the country required younger blood and younger thinking. He decided to rule and take over because he had more vision of how to introduce positive change to the country”.

Therefore the change of rulers has caused a substantial change in the country, change that was welcomed by most of the people. One of the most significant changes, which came with Shiekh Hamad’s ruling, was the development of roads, the urban environment, and, most importantly, the development of “civil laws,” like the establishment of a constitution.

To conclude, Qatar has changed tremendously over the past fifty years—first with the discovery of oil, and then with the change of ruling in 1997. The government focused on promoting positive changes like the development of the role of women in society, developing the country’s infrastructure, and building the country’s education systems.

However with this immense positive change came minute negative changes, which were not accounted for, like the public’s views becoming more materialistic and environmental problems with pollution. But as Essa Al-Mannai notes, “With every change is a drawback.”

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*Noora is an eleventh grade student in the International Baccalaureate program at Qatar Academy and an aspiring writer. She is very interested in literature and history, particularly the history of the Middle East. She feels blessed to be part of Qatar’s new educated generation and comes from a large family where she is the youngest girl with four older brothers. Her status in her family means she constantly fights to be recognized; thus she is constantly trying to prove herself. She hopes one day to be able to display her full potential positively through her writing in her country.*

## **A**mma Asaad: A Planned Future • *Noor Al Athirah*

Growing up in a country that has embraced ongoing cultural reformation inevitably altered my cultural perspective; my views diverged from those of my elders. I was raised knowing that I have control of my life, a cultural freedom that would have been nonexistent having not been born and raised in Qatar. Today, a woman's education, career, experience, and freedom of choice are the highlights of this nation. Young women like me feel empowered to accomplish our dreams. However, this certainly was not the case in Palestine 64 years ago, as narrated by my grandmother.

1944 Nablus, Palestine: As the sun sets, Grandpa Ibrahim begins tidying up, moving in all the goods placed outside so he can close the store. There is no electricity in Nablus, so everyone heads to his or her house as night descends. As he enters the house, Grandma Amna rushes to the door. She greets him sincerely and takes the Tarboush off his head and removes his jacket. Like always, he directly goes to sit under the grape tree in the center of the house, next to his mother. He starts telling the highlights of his day as soon as his mother finishes telling hers. Meanwhile, Grandma prepares dinner then takes it to them on a big spherical tray, which she places on the floor. She sits down to join them. Continuing with the gossip, Grandpa pauses and says, "Oh, and you know what happened today too!" Grandma remains silent while Grandpa's mother replies, "What happened?"

"Abu Fareed came to the store today. His wife and daughters want to come over to talk to you and Amna. They want to ask for Na'elah hand for Nazeeh." Grandpa continues, "What do you think mother?" With a revolted look, Grandpa's mother replies, "I don't really like Nazeeh. He doesn't have a fixed job or a fixed income; I don't think he is a good husband for Na'elah, but you know better dear."

Grandpa then stares at Grandma in silence while chewing his last tomato slice. "I was not asked for my opinion when I got married; why should I interfere in my daughter's marriage!" Grandma disclosed with a sharp look and a sarcastic smile.

Born in 1912 (Nablus), Grandma was the eldest in her family, which consisted of her mother, her sister, and herself. Great Grand Pa died when Grandma Amna was four. He died of an unknown disease, not in war or of old age. After her father's death, they moved to live with her uncle, her mother's brother. "This was the case back then. Brothers and their families, no matter how big, lived together in one house. A widow lived with her brothers as well."

Grandma finished second grade in 1918 and was then taken out of school by her mother to stay at home. Education was not very important, especially for girls who were only viewed as future house wives.

"For fun, I used to spend hours playing with the neighbors' kids," she

said. On one of these days, Grandma was playing a game they called 'hat', where a ball of socks is thrown into a socket. As always she was very excited—playing, screaming, and fighting for turns. Unexpectedly, in the middle of the game, her mother showed up. Grandma continued playing; not noticing her mom's presence. Grandma's mother approached Grandma slowly, lifted her off the ground, and carried her home. Grandma cried loud all the way home, wanting to finish the game. After having a shower, Grandma's mother dressed her up in a white dress.

"I was nine; I hardly understood what was going on!" The next thing Grandma knew was that she was seated on a lounge, placed in the hall in the middle of their house, surrounded by flowers and women facing her. Two women were sitting on the right side of the rounded open hall, one playing *Tabla* (Arabic drum) and the other on *Daf* (Another drum-like instrument), and they were singing wedding songs. All the women were beautifully dressed in short dresses, tight from top to waist and puffed from waist to knees. Some were dancing and some chatting. A few minutes after grandma was seated, her mother announced the arrival of the groom.

Upon the announcement, the women hurried to dress in their long, loose, dark colored costumes that they had to wear to cover their bodies. They wrapped triangular, long cloth around their heads. When all the women were covered, four men entered the hall, one wearing a suit, and the three wearing *ombaz*—white pants topped by a long white shirt, topped by a vest and a wide striped (black and golden) belt.

One of the men wearing the *ombaz* was grandpa's uncle, and he was carrying him. Grandpa was 12; he was the only child, and was living alone with his mother. His father had died at war, fighting for the Turks in Europe; Grandpa was very young then. He had a younger brother, who died the second week he was born due to evil eye for how beautiful he was. It was during the celebration Grandpa's father and his brothers arranged for the baby that a man living in the neighborhood, who attended the celebration, envied Grandpa for having a gorgeous 'French baby' as the man expressed while staring shrilly at the boy. The day after, Grandpa's brother passed away!

Grandpa sat next to Grandma, on the lounge, for a few minutes. They were then taken to Grandpa's home by his mother and uncles. "The first three years were awkward for both of us," Grandma said. "We didn't accept each other. I hardly talked to him, and if he was in a room I would not enter unless his mother was there."

They were actually married, practicing the physical acts of marriage, a few months after Grandma turned twelve. During a family gathering in Grandpa's house one afternoon, Grandma was taken to a room on her own by Grandpa's mother. Grandpa, on the other hand, was lectured in the visitors' room by his uncles about marriage and everything that revolves around it. He was then told to enter the room where Grandma was and spend the night with her, alone for the first time as a married couple, to commence the marriage.



“I got pregnant at nineteen. The seven years before that were dreadful.” Grandpa’s mother was very anxious to have grandchildren. She thought that Grandma was physically weak to get pregnant so she used to feed her a lot, and take her to doctors and massagers all the time. “One of the massagers was about to kill me, she pushed my stomach so hard that I stopped feeling it!” At seventeen, grandma was taken by grandpa’s mother and her friends to a lake in the neighboring city at five o’clock in the morning on a winter day to swim in the freezing water. Grandpa’s mother believed that Grandma’s body had to be shocked for her to get pregnant.

On January 24, 1931, Grandma gave birth to her first baby, a daughter they called Marwa. In the same year, at the end of December, she gave birth to the second baby, another girl they called Na’elah. A year later, in November 1932, she gave birth to the third child, the first boy in Ibrahim AlAthirah’s family, whom they called Marwan. Having a boy meant the world to any father back then. It was every father’s dream! It connoted continuity of the father’s and the family’s name throughout future generations.

“Ibrahim loved the girls a great deal, but he certainly felt something greater towards the boys!” The celebration for the birth of uncle Marwan was ‘fascinating’ as grandma likes to describe it. Grandpa held a feast in his house for all of his friends and relatives, while his uncles distributed sweets and drinks to every family in the town. Grandma gave birth to eight more, five boys and three girls, in the fourteen years that followed.

“I lived for generations, been through a lot of hard times. But I enjoyed my life to the fullest. I remember every tiny detail of all incidents I’ve experienced. I’m 93 now, and I’m tired physically and mentally, but still anxious to discover what life has hidden for me tomorrow and the days to come.”

Grandma Amna’s life represents the lives of millions of women of her generation. Women’s lives at the time were planned for them by their families. We, the new generation, often look back at them, wondering at their lack of control over their own lives. We tend to forget that this past is what shaped our current lives. Even though Grandma hardly had any influence on her life, she raised generations, eleven sons and daughters, who fashioned their lives independently.

My life is far from identical to my grandma’s. My life is also different from my cousins’ who still live in Palestine and have to abide by many cultural and traditional constraints that my immediate family in Qatar can disregard. We are less exposed to cultural pressure and are continually introduced to opportunities that replace traditional concerns. Living in Qatar allowed my family and me to refocus my core ambition as an Arab woman, from marriage at a very early age to education and career development. Despite our differences, grandma’s story serves as a valuable lesson in patience and optimism, which I look back at in admiration and strive to continually learn from.

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## The Modern Woman • *Shalinee Bhardwaj*

Since the time I grew up in India's capital and metropolitan city of New Delhi, I have been watching women undergoing their eternal chase towards modernity. When I moved to the Gulf about five years back, things were no different; only faces were! And now this contest has given me an opportunity to delve into this subject and give it some 'thoughtful' thinking.

Qatar is a growing nation, taking giant strides towards modernization in every sphere of its developmental course. Such a growing modern society is a huge global stage—encouraging population mobility from different regions round the globe and creating a nomadic society of 'the Expatriates' (lovingly referred to as the Ex-pats). I belong to that class of ex-pat women who are secretly envied for their "leisured, stress-free lives" but who are also often brushed aside as being non-working—housewives.

How can a housewife be modern?

A frantic surfing through the Internet gurgled out a number of sites out of which eighty percent dealt with 'feminism and divorce in modern women,' ten percent promoted modern women as sex symbols while only ten percent were meaningful sociological studies on the changing roles of women in different societies! Gathering courage I read through some of the sites and one point clearly emerged: in order to be "modern" one has to be economically independent—a working woman! All my hopes of reaching the summit were dashed.

Prior to my migration to Qatar; I was employed with the University of Delhi in the capacity of a lecturer. I voluntarily left my job because I prioritised being with my family more than anything else. To me emotional ties are stronger than monetary. (Thanks go to my husband who landed a good job and can sustain both of the kids and us.) Housewife is always taken as a synonym for non-working wife. For me work starts at five o'clock in the morning and ends only late in the night. My work involves: meeting the deadlines of getting the older child admitted to a school of choice; keeping track of their vaccinations and health needs; paying Q-Tel and Kahrama bills; planning for the vacation and getting all the reservations made; preparing healthy and nutritious meals (quality control); maintaining the household (grocery) inventory; budgeting in these times of inflation; managing manpower (housemaid, cable operator, newspaper man, electrician, plumber); operating, maintaining and trouble shooting for the computer and other techie gadgets; keeping up with the ever-increasing demands of a four-year-old and another less than one-year-old; and, in between, finding time for exercise and personal grooming. At this point in my life, my home is my office and the kitchen my lab; but I am not employed - so does it mean that now I have ceased to be modern?

More than eighty percent of the wives in Qatar were employed in their

own countries and are educated enough to be self-dependent. So, it figures out that the second pillar of modernity is education. Education is an inevitable reality that every human being should undergo in order to be called a human. The importance of formal education in anybody's life—man or woman—is well known. Its link to a modern woman, well...

While travelling through the sand dunes in Oman, I met a Bedouin lady, fully clad in the traditional attire and belonging to a remote village and clearly "uneducated." She drives a Mitsubishi pick up. Every three or four days she brings water for her family and cattle in huge containers, from the nearest township. What it must have taken her to break the traditional image of women as meek, suppressed creatures holed up in their homes. Wouldn't you call her modern? To be confident and a go-getter doesn't always require a formal education. The difference lies in how you perceive education.

How does a modern woman look? When I go to the magnificent, posh shopping malls, I see beautifully decorated faces, body attired in the most fashionable labels, and hair set to perfection. I will call these women definitely modern since I absolutely believe that personal grooming is an inevitable factor in being modern. However, they fall short of modernity when they forget to wear a polite smile and mistake a smirk for a snug.

A modern woman is often misrepresented as a feminist. Surely being conscious of one's rights is very important, but demanding them even when you are not the suppressed being (nor is your family a monster) doesn't make any sense. I share family responsibilities, carry out chores for my husband, even polish his shoes when he is very tired and stressed out! Does it mean that I am demeaning my "self?" I call myself modern since I possess the capability of judicious analytical processing—discarding irrelevant thoughts and saving the better ones.

Yes, I call myself modern because I think I have found the basis of modernity—growth, a continuous perennial unstoppable growth in mind and actions and adaptability, implying an ability to develop new ways of dealing with unforeseen problems. Modern also means having an accommodating, open attitude towards change.

Mental challenges excite me, experimentation is infused in me, emotions flow within me, and the agonies of fellow beings pain me. The moment I let my mind get lazy and my feelings rusted, I will stop claiming to be The Modern Woman.

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## Social Change • *Suman Sara Peter*

Social Change is happening all around us. It can occur slowly and steadily, maintaining the stability of a social system. Or it can occur spontaneously and violently, damaging the original social system in the process.

In recent years, the Women Leaders Program of the World Economic Forum has been focused on supporting the advancement of women to positions of leadership in society, and on promoting consideration of other issues affecting women's lives thus leading to a social change. For the past four years, the Forum's Global Competitiveness Reports have provided data on the qualitative aspects of women's participation in the work force. The Forum has begun to explicitly incorporate in its measures of competitiveness aspects of gender equality, recognizing that, far from being a matter of mere political correctness, the advancement of women is an important strategic issue.

Countries that do not capitalize on the full potential of one half of their societies are misallocating their human resources and compromising their competitive potential.

Despite worldwide evidence of the low levels of female participation in social, educational, economic and political spheres, there is still a tendency to see this discrimination as a real problem only in a limited number of countries. Yet, as noted above, the reality is that no country in the world, no matter how advanced, has achieved true gender equality, as measured by comparable decision-making power, equal opportunity for education and advancement, and equal participation and status in all walks of human endeavor. Gender disparities exist, even in countries without glaring male-domination, and measuring these disparities is a necessary step towards implementing corrective policies. Yet measurement is challenging and country performance difficult to assess using disaggregated and diverse data for each nation.

Gender equality is not merely a desirable by-product of human development; it is a core goal in its own right. Any form of gender discrimination is a denial of human rights, an obstacle to human development. Gender mainstreaming means being deliberate in giving visibility and support to women's contributions and addressing the differential impact of strategies, policies, programmes and projects on women as compared with men. Gender inequality is an obstacle to progress, a roadblock on the path of human development. When development is not 'en-gendered' it is 'en-dangered.' The international community made strong commitments for women's equality and empowerment at the world summits and global conferences of the 1990s.

Women's empowerment is central to human development. Human development, as a process of enlarging people's choices, cannot occur when the

choices of half of humanity are restricted. Targeted actions aimed at empowering women and righting gender inequities in the social and economic sphere, as well as in terms of civil and political rights, must be taken alongside efforts to en-gender the development process.

Gender discrimination, unequal access to resources and opportunities, violence, lack of basic services, women's paltry representation in politics and business, and the power imbalances that characterize personal relationships between men and women hamper the progress of not just women but of society at large. It is clear that holding hostage the talents, energies and aspirations of half the society impedes human development.

The full participation of women is a prerequisite for governance that is truly democratic. Women continue to be under-represented in formal decision-making structures. Although women are increasingly active in community support systems, gender disparities persist in public positions at all levels: local, national, regional and global. Women's representation in national parliaments is above twenty five percent in only sixteen countries.

Women bear the brunt of physical and psychological suffering during and after crisis situations. An estimated eighty per cent of the world's thirty five million refugees and displaced persons are women and children. Moreover, even as women seek respite following the acute phases of conflict and crisis, they often remain targets of violence, both as they flee and while they live in refugee camps. However, they have emerged as sole managers of broken families and effective leaders in peace processes. Crises can break down social barriers and loosen traditional holds on power, thus providing windows of opportunity for the reconstruction of a more just society and the formation of new structures and laws that promote women's political, economic, social and cultural rights.

As Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) transform the world in which we live, it creates new opportunities and challenges for gender equity and women's empowerment. The potential of ICT to enhance access to knowledge resources and networks, facilitate participation in decision-making and leverage economic opportunities by women is tremendous.

In Qatar ICT Literacy for Women Empowerment is a partially government-funded program that contributes to raising awareness of the role of ICT in the personal, social and economic development of women. It provides access to ICTs as well as training to develop skills and knowledge for lifelong learning. A significant number of Qatari women (especially those residing outside of Doha) are staying at home, either by choice or by lack of work opportunities. There is a need to reach out to this important section of the population in order to empower them socially (becoming resourceful and knowledgeable citizens) as well as to provide them with the means to improve their socio-economic status.

The program aims at equipping women with essential ICT skills, knowledge and certificates. It strives to empower women in Qatar by providing them with tools for socio-economic development, while at the same time disseminating ICT literacy within the Qatari population. Women receive e-Citizen training that will allow them to access social and health consultation services, communicate with relevant communities and take part in societal development. The curriculum is developed in partnership with the ICDL-GCC Foundation, an international certifying agency. ICDL certification is an internationally recognized standard that will increase the eligibility of the women as they are seeking suitable jobs.

Shaikha Mouza has looked into the various social problems in Qatar. One out of three marriages among Qataris end in divorce. The Human Development Report for 2006 issued on April 26, 2007, by Qatar's Planning Council, said divorce cases had risen from 376 in 1995 to 581 in 2003, a rate of almost thirty three percent of total marriages. The report states: "The high divorce rate constitutes a problem for men, women and children. However, women suffer most as a result of economic burdens, child custody and the negative social view towards divorcees".

Besides the high divorce rate, the late marriage age is another factor "affecting women's empowerment". Report data shows that Qatari females in the twenty five to thirty nine age group constitute twenty four percent of the singles' pool, while men in the same age group represent twenty nine percent the male singles: "Late marrying age is a common phenomenon in the Qatari society and has consequences for women, who do not benefit from their primary reproductive years," in line with the traditional perception that women's primary role was in the domestic sphere. It said that Qatar's economic growth and social development had led to an unprecedented independence of Qatari women which affected the traditional social patterns.

Gulf News recently quoted 'Aisha Mudakhi, a Qatari single woman and university graduate, as saying: "We are supported by the government in becoming more educated and playing an active role in our country's economic life... In addition, being financially independent makes us [women] feel more motivated. I personally feel more independent, more confident and more motivated. My priority now is being part of Qatar's industry."

Financial independence is a key factor contributing to the rise of divorce rates, if compared to previous years. Qatar is committed to realizing further achievements in population and sustainable development, especially in terms of gender, women's empowerment, promotion of participation by youth, and integrating the aged into society.

Five important dimensions of female empowerment and opportunity have been chosen for examination, based mainly on the findings of UNIFEM, concerning global patterns of inequality between men and women:

1. Economic participation
2. Economic opportunity
3. Political empowerment
4. Educational attainment
5. Health and well-being

A social transition has become evident in Qatar as a total of thirty percent of Qatari women are now working in private and public institutions and women were given the right to vote in the country's first municipal elections in 1997. Unwritten codes of conduct still forbid women to have social contact with unrelated men, although Qatari women are now allowed to refuse a marriage proposal. And education is strictly segregated. Despite the painfully slow pace of social change, Qatari women are reluctant to press for faster change. Qatar, in the fast development pace, is undergoing a social change in all the spheres especially in the empowerment of women in all sectors.

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## Qatar: Conservative Modernity • Sarah Al Khawaga

Qatar is an Islamic country, which guides not only the religious beliefs of Qatari people but also plays a large part in daily living. Qatari people are descendants of Bedouin and have maintained a tradition of generous hospitality. Qatari society traditions, however, tend to be heavily influenced by Islamic customs. Likewise, dress is generally traditional and conservative. Primarily a Bedouin culture, Qatar maintains traditions based on poetry and song. Many things have changed, for both man and women, but some of the old values still remain.

Modernization didn't affect Qatari customs and traditions a lot. Qatari people didn't change their customs. In their daily lives, Qatari men still wear a white shirt (thowb) and a head scarf (kaffiyah) held in place by a cord (eqal). The dress of Qatari women, although still conservative, is far less formal than in Saudi Arabia. Many Qatari women still wear the long black dress (abayah), generally over Western clothing, with covering the hair with hijab (a black head covering). The contrast created between the men's white shirts and women's black dresses symbolizes the difference between men and women, while the long shirt and dress indicate the similarities—in Islamic values, men and women are equal. For marriages, men or grooms wear their thowb with a long dress over it called bisht that is decorated with elaborate embroidery in both gold and silver. A Qatari bride used to wear a green dress for her wedding, but now this custom has changed and has been influenced by the European fashion. Women now wear white dresses on their wedding day.

An important feature of Qatari life is hospitality, and most Qatari people are friendly. Most Qatari men receive male guests at home in a reception area called majlis. Traditionally, Bedouin's guests were seated on the floor on large cushions called sadou. Nowadays, however, the majlis has modernized and usually has sofas, chairs, and plasma TVs. According to religion, men and women rarely socialize together, so Qatari women still receive their friends in a different part of the house, as was the case in the past.

One of Qatari men's activities is falconry. In modern Qatar, the tradition of falconry remains a major activity during the hunting season, which spans from October to March. Hunting was practiced originally by Bedouins, when birds of prey, men's allies at this task, helped provide an important addition to their diets. A close bond is created between falcons and their owners, and the birds are treated with great care and respect.

Dancing is a form of expression that comes out of the closet on special celebratory occasions like Eid and weddings. Eid and Independence Day of Qatar are examples of the times when you are likely to see groups of men - folk dancers - performing around the country. They sway rhythmically, shifting their weight from one foot to another. You will never see Qatari women participate in such events

because they don't dance in public. They can only dance at weddings and parties, in the company of other women.

Unlike men, Qatari women were in the past not involved in activities other than cooking and raising children. This is not the case anymore. Women have benefited from the recent reforms in Qatar. Qatari women are now playing an important role in the Qatari society. We can see them participating in healthcare, education, and presidency. Now the Qatari woman exercises her full right to take her role in the society and act as a vital element to help in Qatar's development. She has proven her ability to participate in different fields and provide leadership. Tribes in Qatar are large extended families. People in a tribe were distinguished by differences of speech, dress, and customs. However, in modern Qatar these differences have disappeared. Nevertheless, ties among members of a tribe remain strong and people of the same tribe try to maintain strong relations by marrying into the same tribe. In modern Qatar, such marriages are not favored as they were before; people are becoming educated and aware of the genetic disorders that can occur because of inbreeding. However, Bedouins still marry their first cousins. Such marriages are deemed to strengthen the family and its business.

In the past, girls could be married at the age of twelve. However, nowadays a girl gets married after she has finished her education. Qatari weddings still last several days as before and there are still separate ceremonies and celebrations for men and women. However, marriages thirty or forty years ago weren't the same as they are now. Now weddings are costly and since the groom's family traditionally pays a bride-price to the Qatari bride's family before the wedding, Qatari men tend to marry women of different nationalities since the requirements by the bride's family are less costly.

Before, weddings were simple affairs. They used to take place in either the groom's or the bride's family house. Nowadays, wedding receptions for women take place in large fancy hotels which cost the groom around thirty to forty thousand Qatari riyals, and that is for the hotel only. Wedding receptions for men used to and still take place in large tents; however, these tents are now luxurious.

In the past, some tribes used to live in removable tents because they used to move from one place to another, based on the availability of water and food. Today, a few people still live these unstable lives in the desert. Most Qatari people have settled down in the cities and have jobs that grant them a stable life. Unlike before, most families now live in individual houses. Before, large Qatari families used to live together in the same house; the grandparents, aunts and uncles lived as one happy family. Now Qatar's government provides housing for all citizens, especially those who don't own homes. In addition, Qatar's government also provides each Qatari citizen with a piece of land and a loan to build his own house. The family life hasn't changed much. In Qatar, family life is still central. In the home, women used and still retain important roles. They organize the daily routine and holiday family gatherings, and they play a central role in arranging marriages. However, men used to be the head of the family and make all the decisions without

asking the women's opinion. This has changed now: the roles of men and women are becoming more equitable.

As I mentioned, girls used to marry at the age of twelve. However, now the percentage of Qatari women who are not married has risen dramatically because Qatari men are marrying into different nationalities. This has become a serious problem in the Qatari society since around forty percent of Qatari women are either divorced or not married. This rate has risen in recent years because of the poor communication between the family members. Women are facing problems and challenges because they are working outside their homes. Even with modernization, Qatari people are still not used to this quick and enormous shift in their lifestyle, which might explain the increased rate in divorce and family problems.

In conclusion, oil wealth has provided the Qatari government with the resources to build high-quality educational and healthcare facilities and so provide an extensive welfare system for its citizens. This modernization has affected the lives of Qatari people in many ways. Now women are well represented in education.

The female literacy rate has increased over the past few generations. In addition, oil wealth has provided Qatari women with a growth in professional employment opportunities. Qatari women's participation has been especially enhanced by the encouragement of H.H. the Emir and the patronage of H.H. the wife of the Emir, Sheikha Mouza. Her Highness encourages women to meet their social obligations and take a leadership role in their society. H.H. Sheikha Mouza has directed most of her attention to education programs, maintaining a very high educational standard for Qatari people.

Finally, it is normal to see everything changing with time. The Qatari culture is greatly affected and shaped by the Islamic tradition, however, and to our present day, we still see this rich culture that was carried through several decades. This is what makes the marriage of the ancient Bedouin tradition and post-modern civilization possible in Qatar.

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## Tomorrow Brings Change • Zahra Makki

My family and I were in the car going to my uncle's house. We were passing by the Corniche when suddenly we had to stop. TRAFIC JAM. TRAFFIC JAM. TRAFIC JAM. I lay my head down on the seat beside me, closed my eye lids, and listened to the most inconsistent boring harmony; the beeps of the car horns. I lay there fighting the killing tick tock of time. It felt like the usual dark, empty tunnel. Yet, the bright end came much sooner than I expected. It was not the traffic clearing, but a flashback, an old memory that came to me right then, as vivid as the day it happened. I remembered the image of the silky soft Corniche, with no sharp-edged, fancy glass buildings, and of course no traffic jams. I realized the fast dramatic changes that my beloved Qatar has endured.

I am a young Qatari lady who is not counted as history, but with this rapid pace of change, I feel like an old lady from the fifteenth century. Qatar is family oriented; I have never bothered about anything but family, studying, and education. That is why I know details about education in Qatar; it is fast-growing and flourishing. Luckily, I witnessed most of the changes in the basic education.

The first step toward a more efficient English education happened when I was in grade four. The Ministry of Education introduced the English language course one year earlier for us than for the students in former years. I remember how proud we were to study the syllabus of English. I always wondered what the syllabus would be that we were going to study when we became twelfth graders. I never found out.

When first I entered the preparatory school and in the first semester a big rumor surfaced, not only around our school but also in all the schools in Qatar. There was going to be a scientific school where the best people were going to be selected to study according to international standards. Every girl in the school wished to be a student in this scientific school that was still just a fantasy. When my friends asked me about it and whether I wanted to enter this school, I replied that the scientific school was a theory not a definite fact.

In that same year the winds of the spring revealed the truth along with some opportunities: "Fill in this form and discuss it with your parents; we will have a field trip to the school the day after tomorrow." Those were the exact words of the principal to a group of horrified girls, including me, due to the fact that we had been called to the principal's office!

When I stepped out of the office, I scanned the papers given to me and walked to my class. On my way to the class it took me a fraction of a second to realize what had happened. I stopped, with all the amazement and surprise. It's not a dream any more. I was going to the scientific school.

The preparation for this school was so costly to a student—a couple of weeks from the summer vacation. It was the first year that I had a non-Arabic

speaking teacher. All the classes were in English. It was difficult at the beginning but, it is not mission impossible. It is worth it because to have a good life or a good education you have to pay, give up some good, easy, effortless life.

As time passed, new changes blossomed. We were the first cohort of the school to have an English literature course. We explored not only different countries and cultures but also different thinking and writing styles. Then bigger projects were the target, the International Baccalaureate program. It was a very high standard educational program that had been restricted to the families of ambassadors in elite private schools. It is student-centered and a multicultural-based education. We worked extremely hard and so did the teachers and the administration applying the system. The school went through an extremely accurate international assessment. Our work was observed and analyzed by committees and schools around the world. This process was as hard as climbing a dark, rocky mountain, but nothing is better than the gorgeous peaceful panorama from the top. I remember when, for the first time in my life, a math teacher ended the lesson early because we had become the first governmental school in the world to be accredited with the IB program. Proud was a small word to describe what I felt.

Now I am a student in the first American medical college that opened a branch in Qatar and outside the U.S. Now I'm crossing the bridge to a new field, to explore the changes in the healthcare system. No matter how long the journey, the following will always be engraved in my mind: It's the threads of light that are the treasure, since they bring tomorrow and tomorrow brings change.

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*Zahra Makki is a Qatari student at Weill Cornell Medical College in Education City. She is proud to be featured in this anthology and hopes there will be others.*