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Between Contentment and Curiosity

The Hybrid Femininities of Young Bedouin Women in South Sinai

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## Abstract

The drastic changes in infrastructure and arrival of luxury tourism to South Sinai has brought the global world at the doorstep of the region's nomadic bedouins. The ever-expanding global influence has given birth to a generation of young bedouin women who absorb the surrounding new ideals, behaviors and understandings, blending them with their tribal culture. This has created identity hybridities, resulting in redefinition of gendered identities, or as referred to in this study, *femininities*. Using qualitative methods of ethnography and semi-structured interviews, this study explores how these women absorb the influence of changes and continuities, and global and local when constructing their understanding of femininities within their socio-cultural realities. By using conceptual framework tailored to discuss these aspects of influence, the concepts of *performativity* by Judith Butler, *agency* by Sabah Mahmood and *cultural appropriations* by Janice Boddy are utilised in order to further analyse these changes, continuities, and globality/locality in the subjects' lives. This study suggest that each woman individually chooses to either adapt or reject these surrounding influences in their lives, resulting in myriad of different hybrid ideals of femininity. Performing these ideals in front of the community has resulted in a gradual change of commonly accepted appropriations of femininities among the bedouins of South Sinai.

**Keywords:** *bedouins, women, femininity, gender identity, social change, cultural erosion.*

*To Sabaha*

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# 1 Introduction

Before traveling to Sinai for ethnographic research, I was aware the lives of the women I was about to study had grown out from conditions inflicted by several different influences of force. While acknowledging the continuous regional imbalances and global pressures Sinai peninsula had been a subject to long before its returning under Egyptian rule in 1979, I was naïve about the depth and significance of the local socio-cultural conditions. Being a Muslim today; being a member of an indigenous, nomadic community under national integration pressures; being a woman of a minority group in the Middle East; or being a woman in a bedouin community - none of this was straightforward. Yet, the way in which these women constituted an understanding of their gendered self - their *femininity* - was rather a result of processes that were inherently local in nature. The issue had less to do with structures of masculine or hierarchical values, than with how ideals of gender and gender dynamics were internalised by these women through their active participation in seeking and self-sustaining of what was real to them. When constructing this understanding, the bedouin women actively implemented aspects of *change* and *continuity* in their social worlds. Whereas the site for these processes was the *local* community, the constant negotiation with *global* influences shaped the way in which they understood and idealised different femininities.

In this thesis, I will explore the following research question; “*How do young bedouin women construct their understanding of femininity among the Mzeina tribe in South Sinai?*” As such, the purpose of this study is to unravel the processes of how these women construct these understandings within the constraints and opportunities of their individual social realities. In order to answer the question at hand, this study explores the impact of changes and continuities, and global and local forces in the constitution of their current self. This was achieved through two months of ethnographic work conducted in South Sinai in the fall of 2017, further elaborated by semi-structured interviews in the spring of 2018. The gained material was then analysed through three theoretical concepts that help us to discuss the aspects closely linked to the constitution of femininities; change, continuity and the dialectics between global and local.

In this study, gender is seen as an identity constructed through time, institutionalised in communication with the surroundings through a repetition of acts. These different, mundane behaviors constitute an image, or an illusion, of the gendered self in that particular social

temporarity (Butler, 1990). In this understanding, gender is not something we *are*, but rather, something we *do*. The word 'gender' refers to separation of biological sex from ideas about social roles, however it has been increasingly used as a term to classify sexual differences (Hood-Williams, 1996; Kessler & McKenna, 1978). In the context of this study the term 'femininities' is seen as more appropriate to describe the process of creating and understanding one's gendered self. Thus, it is not synonymous for a gender, or a woman, but rather relates to its historic, social, cultural and spatial-temporal aspects. Femininity does not relate to female individuals only - women are also consumers, producers and performers of masculinity, and vice versa (Gilligan, 1982; Halberstam, 1998, Sedgwick, 2008). The concept of femininity, thus, shall be perceived as cultural product in a certain space and time, constrained by the surrounding conditions. The hierarchical and asymmetric relationships between men and women have been a focus of many studies; yet their gendered identities have been less problematised, leaving masculinities and femininities understudied (Ghannam, 2013). We can assume there are multiple different femininities adopted by different people, in different temporalities. Carrie Paechter suggests it is only when we find ourselves attempting a femininity that somehow fails to 'fit' that given social situation, that we reassess our performative acts and change our behavior to better fit in the situation in which we are (2003; 69).

In the following chapters, I will answer the research question by framing the question in its socio-historical context; I will then continue to discuss the available literature in the field and describe the conceptual framework used in the study. Subsequently, the main findings are presented and analysed, followed by a discussion of the main purpose of the study. Finally I will sum up the discussion by answering my research question and drawing conclusions.

This study provides an intimate account of the individual lives of young bedouin women in the town of Dahab. Through this I wish to contribute to a better understanding of how women today, in their cultural temporalities, constitute their understanding of femininity within the web of forces that keep shaping their individual worlds. I aim to illustrate how in the increasingly interconnected world, the local translates to global and can be seen as an example of gender identity struggles women all over the world are facing.



## 1.1 Framing

The contemporary indigenous rights discourse tends to treat the special category of nomads as “second class citizens” within the state. It is widely accepted that the issues derive from colonization and consequently, the development of the modern nation-state which often pursue the “capitalist” industrial expansion (Goodman, 2013; Sarnowski, 2010, Wilmer, 1999). According to Sarnowski, the difficulty arises from the uneven distribution of power of trying to consolidate the needs of indigenous peoples with the majority of the population (2010; 21); similarly, Wilmer argues the concept of indigeness refers to a quality of modern state-building, where the industrial expansion, in one way or another, seeks to destroy the existence of indigenous groups as self-determining peoples. Whatever the reason is, as a result these culturally distinct societies struggle to reclaim the right of self-determination (1999; 181).

Given the global context, a certain social transformation is assumable as the nomadic societies are facing pressure to settle down as the modern nation states emerge (DeJong, 2013). Some argue against the perception that urbanisation would put an end to pastoral social organisation and tribal lifestyles; as opposition to losing cultural heritage, some argue the stationed lifestyle reflects new junctures to their traditional heritages, formulating fusions of cultural practices and perceptions, some of which are changing, and some of which are continuing (Chatty, 2006; Goodman, 2013). Persisting cultural traditions is seen as articulation of identity and as a form of opposition against cultural erosion (Goodman, 2013). On the other hand, the fluctuating cultural exchange with tourists and foreigners brought by growth of tourism, is argued to formulate into the main source of cultural transformation, which is also partly fuelled by the bedouins’ interest towards foreign cultures and realisation of the benefits of the tourist development to the local bedouin communities (ibid, 22). Simultaneously, whereas the old way of life has radically changed, a variety of aspects from what is perceived as ‘old tribal life’ has continued in the new context (Chatty, 2006).

In the midst of the global and national pressures, discussing women of these societies becomes highly problematised. The women in the Middle East are often described as victims of global-, national-, male- and patriarchal structures, and whereas all of this echoes some truth, the lives of these women are primarily local in nature. Therefore, when looking into their understandings of themselves as social agents, we have to recognise how their understandings

have primarily grown out from, shaped and established by the local dynamics. Being set in between socio-cultural structures, rapidly changing environment, emergence of social media, social pressures and individual processes, negotiating feminine understandings in such conditions becomes problematic. Whereas such phenomena take place all over the world, each nomadic social organisation faces problems specific to the context of their respective nation state with which they negotiate their right for self-determination. Such negotiations initially begin from the local and individual level where the people negotiate among themselves of what they are, and who they want to become.

## 1.2 Outlining the General Problem

Lila Abu-Lughod uses veiling as an example to discuss how simple things might be confused with, or simplified to reflect the social reality of a given culture. She states that not only are there multiple forms of covering which all have meanings that differ from community to community, but veiling has recently been depicted as the flagship representation of class, piety and political affiliation. Referring to her ethnographic research among bedouins in the North-West of Egypt, covering herself in the presence of older men was considered a voluntary act through which the women could show honour to the ones they chose to. Veiling was thus a sign of respect towards the person; a respect that they themselves would choose to grant (2013; 39). By this she invites us to reflect on the limits we all experience in our given conditions, and the ways in which they shape our possibilities of being active agents of our own lives. Young bedouin women, much like women across the world, are to a certain extent a result of their surrounding conditions and social realities from which they grew out from. However, whereas these women are a subject to surrounding national and local structures, the presence of technology has brought with it social media and global pressures. It would be ignorant to assume the effect of this would not have reached the people of these cultures as well. This creates conditions that put these women in the nexus of variety of influencing forces; from continuity to change, as well as from global to local. In these given, turbulent conditions these women then negotiate and construct understanding of their femininities.

In the spaces between the established, analytical definitions and the individual perceptions of the subjects of this study, another shaping process takes place. This constant dialogue shows the complexity of the exchanges and negotiations over different understandings from the day-to-

day understandings to the abstract, analytical conceptualisations. In order to transform these individual perceptions into analytical language, this study looks into the dialectics between what the subjects say, and how this resonates with the analytical language. This requires socio-cultural sensitivity and contextual understanding towards the subject's social realities in order to provide a fair reflection of their individual meanings and realities. Therefore, through ethnographic field work combined with open-ended, semi-structured interviews this study aims to grasp the realities of these young women by considering their lives as a continuum of different life phases and self-understandings.

The bedouin girls start selling bracelets for tourists around the age of six and continue to do so until they reach puberty. They are then expected to stay home, to learn skills in housekeeping and to prepare for family life. When studying these young women, both of these life phases were included in their lives in one form or another. It revealed a lot of their individual journey in constructing their femininities over time, both collectively, as well as individually. Therefore it was important for the outcome of this study to include a subject group that cuts across both life phases. Hence, the topic at hand is not only a concern of the feminist discourse, but also deals to a great extent with the global phenomena of cultural transformations and constitution of self-understandings in such contexts. For the women of this study, the intensity of different transformations in the touristic hub of Dahab has been a gradual source of discovery and socio-cultural self-definition. These women are an example of how encountering global trajectories and exploring myriad of cultures, values and worldviews can lead to discoveries of the self, as well as larger-scale social change. The experiences of these women shall be understood in the context of globalization and the effect of international migration in this particular locality. The findings are to be regarded as their own self-definitions and individual experiences of understanding and constituting their gendered self - their femininities.

### 1.3 Aim and Objectives

The main purpose of this study is to understand how the subjects perceive and construct their understanding of femininity. In order to achieve this, I aim to explore how the women accommodate different aspects of changes and continuities that are present in their lives, and how the global and local forces affect this process. Three conceptual tools are applied to better discuss the issues at hand. These conceptual tools are performativity (Butler, 1988), agency

(Mahmood, 2005) and cultural appropriation (Boddy, 2016). The first two come in handy when discussing why one might choose to change, whereas others prefer continuity in their lives. The latter one is helpful in putting these discussions into context by looking into the interplay of global and local forces that both have a role in constituting the understandings of femininity. Essentially, this thesis examines the women's capacity in shaping or accommodating the surrounding conditions from where their lives and worldviews have ultimately emerged. Instead of producing generalisations of women globally, this study aims to understand the individuality of the gendered lives of women, and their self-understanding of these realities.

I understand the difficulty of balancing between the dialectics of ongoing analytical concepts and individual descriptions of the informants. In this study, I aim to emphasise the *dialogue* between both sides, rather than an understanding of one or another. This study invites us to see these personal narratives as windows to the subjects' understandings of the self; these narratives, then, are discussed in dialogue with the literature on women and gender in the Middle East, yet recognising restricted material on bedouins in South Sinai, as well as marginalised women in the Middle East.

Along these lines I show how these women use the surrounding hybrid conditions as a catalyst for re-defining their femininities, extending beyond the pre-supposed, gendered understandings. I show that they actively blend aspects from both change and continuity when coming about this self-understanding. Therefore, this study is guided by the following **research question**:

*How do young bedouin women construct their understanding of femininity among the Mzeina tribe in South Sinai?*

By addressing the intersections between change and continuity, and global and local, this study explores how these young women position themselves in this nexus as they are attached both to the heritage of the community, as well as the intriguing modern changes that come their way. Thus, it seeks to shed light into the way the globalising world can trigger reactions in local particularities, and how these changes connect back to the global world, reflecting the individuality of women all over the world. This will be achieved by focusing on individual narratives as well as personal accounts of the subjects' lives as gathered during the ethnographic field work over the course of three months in the fall of 2017 and spring of 2018.

## 1.4 Importance of the Study

The bedouins of South Sinai have been a subject to multiple studies, varying from cultural to linguistic and socio-political studies (Bailey, 1985; Chatty, 2006; Goodman, 2013; De Jong, 2013; Lavie, 1990). Similarly, there is an emerging body of literature on women in the Middle East that has provided us with a great starting point in better understanding the individual lives and particularities of women in the Middle East, helping to recognise the diversities among such groups (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Brown, 2012; Deniz, 1995; Mahmood, 2005). However, there is a limited number of studies conducted specifically on bedouin women, especially on how they construct their self-understandings and gendered identities. Furthermore, even in the larger context of the Middle East, these topics are rarely touched upon in terms of marginalised and minority women. By responding to this gap, this study aims to better understand these women and their self-understanding in the context of local socio-cultural conditions, and the interchange between these localities and global forces. Lastly, observing a community in its transformation phase between ‘continuities and changes’ provides an exceptional chance to document the aspects of the bedouin life that are gradually disappearing.

## 1.5 Limitations

Instead of suggesting definitions such as ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’, or putting words into the mouths of these women, this thesis aims to shift the paradigm to the subjects’ own individual experiences and explanations of the phenomenon around them. Thus, the discussion over these conceptualisations are left out from the scope of this study in order to avoid setting structures on social phenomenon and conditions surrounding the subjects’ lives, and to leave room for their individual experiences and understanding of their social worlds. Whereas this is a study of gender, its main scope is still women and their femininities. Men/masculinities are incorporated in some parts of the study to illustrate the social dynamics between genders, as contrasted with the opposite gender much like in the real social situations. However, men and masculinities are outside of the scope of this study. This research aims to emphasise the difference between what the subjects say, and how the researcher analyse and conceptualise it; acknowledging the need to conceptualise the subjects sayings in order to be able to discuss them, I did my best to avoid imposing generalisations or reducing my subjects to simplifying concepts. Lastly, by

acknowledging a presence of my personal world views and values in this study, I have tried to keep my personal bias at its minimum.

## 2 Literature Review

The increasing interest towards the role and development of modern nation state in the Middle East has been a popular field of study in the Middle East and North Africa after the First World War (Sarnowski, 2010; Goodman, 2013). As a side-product emerged the question of what happens to those who do not fit into this frame, bringing the issue of indigenous peoples and nomadic way of life more into light. The role of nomadic lifestyle within, and in relation to its respective nation state poses multiple questions, revolving around questions of national integration and nationalisation, acculturation, cultural preservation and paradoxical emotions of structural integration and self-determination (Bussow, 2010; Goodman, 2013; Glassner, 1974; Lavie and Young, 1984; Shaw, 2008). Yet, the literature on bedouins caught between this crossfire largely seems to ignore the micro-level social effects of supranational developments in the Middle East. In case of Sinai, the national and foreign penetration of the peninsula in terms of socio-economic changes, blooming tourism and economic development has pushed the nomadic lifestyle aside, forcing the bedouins to urbanise quickly in order to maintain a life in lands they claimed in the 10th century. While acknowledging their benefits in tourism business, the bedouins of the region oppose the way in which the state pursues their agenda in the peninsula (Goodman, 2013; 23). This has created a blend of equilibriums, ranging from traditional to urban, pastoral to modern, and static to fluid. This sets an interesting stage for shaping the collective culture and understanding of social roles such as femininity.

### 2.1 Nomads Globally and Locally

Whereas the study on indigenous peoples and nomadic cultures is rather wide-spread and material on nomadism is accessible from all over the world, there is lack of studies that go deeper into how these groups feel and perceive the world they live in. The exploitation of the rights of nomadic communities is discussed in varying contexts from Saami people in Finland and Sweden (Devere et al, 2017), to Quechua and Aymara in South America (Garcia and Lucero, 2002), focusing largely on self-determination, education and policy analysis of indigenous rights. Among this literature, finding material on women and gender is less common, and more emphasis is based on the physical rights of indigenous peoples. The traditionally nomadic bedouins have been studied mainly in Jordan and Israel where their status as indigenous

nationals has been challenged and negotiated (Yahel et al, 2012; Yiftachel and Abu-Saad, 2008; Tidwell and Zellen, 2016). Politically part of Egypt and bordering both Jordan and Israel, the conflict-ridden Sinai peninsula and its bedouins have also received academic attention in the recent decades. The structural and social development in Sinai has embarked changes not only in the geography of the region, but also in the bedouin culture and lifestyle. Since the early attempts of 1920s to bring the rights of indigenous peoples into daylight, the process further materialised around 70s when the United Nations carried out series of extensive studies on the issue of native populations which in turn triggered various efforts to create a framework on the issue of indigenous peoples' rights and issues of definition (Anaya, 2011; Tidwell and Zellen, 2016; Yahel et al, 2012). Along these paradigms the interest towards the field has been attracting more and more researchers. The research circles around legal and human rights perspectives, and even this body of literature focuses mostly on bedouins in the Israeli territory in Negev (Anaya, 2011; Nasasra et al, 2015; Yahel et al, 2012) or other bedouin communities in Jordan and the Negev, Iraq and Algeria (Chatelard, 2006; Chatty, 2006). There are few exceptions discussing bedouin law, customs and culture in South Sinai (Bailey, 1985; Lavie, 1990, 1993; Goodman, 2013). Otherwise, the sources discussing bedouins in South Sinai are limited in number, and no major work has been conducted in this area since 2013.

As one of the key authors, Dawn Chatty brings together a range of discussions on the social transformations of nomadic societies at the emergence of modern nation-states, challenging the stereotypical assumptions of vanishing pastoral social organisations at the face of modernisation (Chatty, 2006). This perception deviates from the mainstream perception of urbanisation as an end of the pastoral and tribal lifestyles. In this regard, Goodman builds on the discussion with remarks emphasising the bedouins stationed lifestyle, which reflects interesting junctures to their traditional heritages; this articulation of their identity is then presented as a form of opposition against cultural erosion (Goodman, 2013). Paradoxically, this fluctuating cultural exchange with foreigners deriving from the development of the region is argued to formulate into the main source of cultural transformation, which is also partly fuelled by the bedouin's interest towards foreign cultures and realisation of the benefits of the tourist development to the local bedouin communities (ibid. 22). Fundamentally, Chatty concludes that whereas the old way of life has radically changed, a variety of aspects from what is perceived as 'old tribal life' has continued in the new context (2006).



## 2.2 Bedouins of South Sinai

Despite being one of the biggest contributors to the South Sinai's tourism industry, the lack of studies conducted on bedouins in the region is surprising. In terms of anthropological studies the material on their culture, traditions and transforming lifestyles focuses on the cultural transformation under the Israeli administration (Glassner, 1974), the bedouin culture and allegories under both Israeli and Egyptian rule, (Lavie, 1990, 1993) and contemporary accounts of Sinai's developments and bedouin identity in the process (Goodman, 2013). These authors share the perception agreeing the bedouins of the region are facing socio-political marginalisation, and their identity fluctuates somewhere between pastoral nomadism and urbanised bedouin. These tribes have been the "*hinterland of every occupier of South Sinai*", where the occupation and reoccupation by different forces have changed the community's perception of themselves and the occupier's centers of power (Lavie and Young, 1984; Lavie, 1990). Remarkably, in 1977 Lavie composed a census on one of the largest tribes that also covers the town of Dahab, Mzeina bedouins, exploring their population size, organisation, history and social behavior (Lavie, 1990; 18). Whereas these issues help us to understand the social composition, culture and history of the tribe, there is lack of studies discussing where the tribe stands in terms of self-perception. Do they feel more national or tribal, nomad or urban, bedouin or Egyptian; what are the aspects of heritage they preserve in their current existence, or is cultural erosion taking place? These questions guided the initial interest in looking into this particular group.

Whereas the material on the bedouins of South Sinai discussed above constitute some of the core academic knowledge of this study, they should be viewed with certain carefulness. Firstly, all of the authors are from an Israeli background, allowing them to approach the tribe from religiously and historically different perspective, yet accounting to a certain level of bias. Secondly, the given studies are conducted in a timeline between 1980s and early 2010s, covering only some of the most recent changes within the peninsula and Egyptian state, which in turn indicates the current knowledge is outdated and calls for further exploration of bedouins of South Sinai. Both Chatty and Goodman provide their own accounts of the bedouin way of life in the region, offering perceptions from 80s onwards and showing the gradual development of nomadic life among the bedouins. The main difference between these two views is that whereas

Lavie's description of bedouin life is still rather nomadic and traditional, Goodman emphasizes the gradual lack of it. Interestingly, more depth is brought to the field by few individual pieces of work by Ira Glassner (1974) and Rudolf De Jong (2011). Glassner contributes to the field with early accounts of bedouin's cultural transformation and the rapid sedentarisation experiences of South Sinai tribes already from early 70s, whereas De Jong's linguistic exploration of Sinai's tribes also touches upon a great deal of socio-cultural processes, recognising the cultural erosion that is taking place. Whereas these pieces of work do not focus on the culture and social dynamics of the tribe, they contribute to the understanding of collective trauma of forced sedentarisation processes, occupation of the region and dismissal of the bedouin culture.

### 2.3 Gender and the Middle East

Women - and gender- in the Middle East has been an increasing subject to studies since its initial impetus in early 1970's, partly inspired by the global women's movements happening around the same time (Deniz, 1995; 3). The focus has been largely on tackling the monolithic representation, resistance and power, the first one especially after 9/11 and latter ones after the Arab Spring (Al-Ali, 2000; El-Mahdi, 2010), as well as feminism in politics and Islam (Moghadam, 2002) and status and social change of Muslim women (Moghadam, 2003). Growing from Edward Said's original accounts on orientalism and representations of 'the other', the discussion has been increasingly linked to the discourses of gender and construction (and deconstruction) of the 'Muslim woman' (Mehdid, 1993, Mervat, 2003; Zayzafoon, 2005; Abu-Lughod, 2013). Whereas all of these pieces contribute to more detailed understanding of the individual, gendered lives of Arab and Muslim women in the Middle East, there is only few pieces of ethnographic studies that focus on the marginalised and neglected narratives of women. These pieces of work discuss gender mutilation of marginalised women in Sudan (Boddy, 1998), women's piety movement in Cairo (Mahmood, 2005) and rural women in Egypt (Abu-Lughod, 2013), and in a refreshing contribution by Farha Ghannam (2013), the deconstruction of masculinity in urban Cairo. Whereas men are her focus, she includes the interaction with women as a key component in judging the 'mastering of' existing norms in a given social context. These interventions to others' gender behavior are often instrumental in re-establishing the social structures that privilege one gender over the other (Ghannam 2013). These authors' accounts aided the building of this study not only by constituting the main body of literature in discussing

marginalised women in the context of Middle East, but also in terms of their methodological choice of ethnography that resonates also with this thesis. There is an emerging gap in studies on bedouins, especially in regards to socio-cultural conditions and change, and women in particular. This study aims to respond to this gap on bedouins in South Sinai, and link this particular nomadic group to the larger field of gender and the Middle East.

### 3 Conceptual Framework

This chapter will introduce three conceptual tools that are used to discuss the topic at hand. I will analyse the gathered material according to the different aspects of constituting femininities as observed among the subjects of this study; change, continuity and the effect of global/local. Whereas femininity constitutes the core theme of this research, the conditions these women live in project aspects of continuity of old, tribal heritages, blended with the changes the development of the region has brought with it. Subsequently, there is another dynamic that is not unique to these women only, but women all over the world; the globalisation and global forces affect local communities and their conditions to an increasing extent. Ignoring this presence when discussing any cultural community poses a danger of unrealistic reflection of their socio-cultural realities.

The first concept utilised in this study is *performativity* by Judith Butler, focusing on the processes of change in a self-understanding among these women. Furthermore, the concept of *agency* by Sabah Mahmood will be used to discuss the aspect of continuity. Lastly, *cultural appropriation* by Janice Boddy is used to contextualise the cultural practices taking place in order to see how different surrounding forces impact and shape the informants perception of femininity. These concepts will then help us to analyse and discuss the material gathered, and to explore the questions of how the women of this study come about their self-understandings.

#### 3.1 Performativity

Building on the work of theorists of social construct and reality, Judith Butler suggests a concept of *performativity*. She argues that whereas we are born as sexes, we are, from the beginning of this existence, *gendered* by a social construct. Our gender is not something we *are*, but rather something we *do* (Butler, 1988). Gendered identity, then, is something we construct socially and as such, individuals are automatically reenacting existing norms. In the repetition of the mundae bodily gestures, movements and enactments, we constitute the illusion of a gendered self (Butler, 1988; 519). This ‘self’ is to be perceived as a social temporarity, instituted through acts that are continuous in one’s appearance to what she calls ‘the mundane social audience including the actors themselves’, who then come to believe this behavior in an institutionalised manner, taken it as a face value. Butler assumes gender as a performance, yet it does not imply a radical free will. Instead, it is constrained by “norms that constitute, limit, and condition me; it’s

also delivering a performance within a context of reception and I cannot fully anticipate what will happen” (2004, 345). Gender is not a fact and thus the idea of gender is constituted through the various *acts* of gender. “Discrete genders are part of what “humanizes” individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished” (Butler, 1988; 522). In sum, gender is a constant performance of what is constituting the identity it is purported to be (Butler, 1988).

Butler’s body of work has been influential in the field of feminist and gender studies, as well as identity politics. Her framework is thus suitable and easily transformable to different contexts of women. Whereas Butler’s approach has been both praised and criticised, her framework is considered as one of the leading feminist theories - as well as most misunderstood one (Salih 2004, 90). The main misunderstanding derives from the assumption that performativity is equal to performance; meaning that the subjects can choose which gender to perform by simply changing visual attributes such as clothes (Probyn 1995, 79). Butler clarifies the distinction between the two, showing that gender identity has specific boundaries that separate one gender from another, as well as that the gender has an attribution of feminine or masculine qualities prior to the process of engendering. Because performativity is both linguistic and theatrical process, gender identity is impossible to internalise because it cannot be embodied.

Butler’s insight provides a starting point for understanding why things are *changing*. Performativity applies equally to the young bedouin women who constantly do identity creation, also in terms of gender and femininity. Performativity it thus used for discussing the study at hand. Gender transformation, as Butler sees it, is pervasive; this is also observable among the subjects of this study who continuously abandon, transform and adopt different aspects of their gender understanding in the midst of changing surroundings that pose new cultural, social and political context on the community. Foreigners and Egyptians have their specific ideas of womanhood and each of these comprises a specific realm of performativity. Bedouin women who interact with these different gender understandings are altered to enter a different field of understanding, and potentially illustrating these learned models to the community around.

### 3.2 Agency

In order to recognise the lack of subjectivity and representativeness of the bedouin women in the field of academia, this paper will frame the discussion by using authors that consider the

contextual differences when discussing women in the context of patriarchal societies. Sabah Mahmood (2005) rejects the mainstream perception in the contemporary feminist scholarship that aims to locate the political and moral autonomy of the subject in the face of power. In contrary, she views human agency in terms of the subject's ability to resist repression and structures of domination. She argues that when analysing the Arab/Muslim women and gender, we should extend beyond analysing how religion has repressed female agency in patriarchal structures, or the way how women create alternative forms of expressing agency in resisting the patriarchal constraints. She emphasises how the current feminist discourse is restricted in ability to understand the lives of women whose aspirations, practices and self-understanding have been shaped by non-liberal traditions (Mahmood, 2005). Instead, she invites us to think of agency not in line with resistance to structures of domination, but as a "capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create" (Mahmood, 2006; 33). As such, she acknowledges the 'uncomfortable spot' in feminist scholarship by recognising that feminist agency can also refer to practices and ideals deriving from tradition that has been historically associated with female subordination and feminine passivity; characters such as modesty, shyness and humility. In sum, she states that it is the very idioms that women use to defend and empower their presence in previously male-defined spheres, that simultaneously secure their subordination. Thus, we shall also understand the ways in which women resist the male-domination by "subverting the hegemonic meanings of cultural practices and redeploying them for their own interests and agendas." (Mahmood, 2006; 37).

In contrary to Butler, Mahmood's concept aids us to investigate the individual's capacity to choose not only to change, but also to adapt to *continuity* of the surrounding conditions, realities and norms. In line with Mahmood and the constructivist paradigm, this study invites us to view the process of understanding femininities and agency as fluid concepts that are shaped and defined by the social opportunities and constraints of the given conditions, as well as individual interests and agendas that have grown out from the cultural practices of their social worlds. It shall thus avoid to assume any normative values as universal definition and leave room for the women's self-definition in the particular social context. The strength of such conceptual tool is its ability to take the varying subjectivities and individualities into account, through which we aim to see whether some of the mainstream conceptualisations are forced rather than frown from the individual experiences of women across countries, cultures and time. This framework will

guide us in finding how the young bedouin women understand their femininities, and how much they play role as active agents in defining these understandings in their cultural context.

### 3.3 Cultural Appropriation

Apart from processes of continuity and transformation, this study exposes dynamics between local and global, and the interchange between them. In order to discuss these dynamics, a concept of *cultural appropriation* by Janice Boddy is utilised. In line with scholars of gender and power, Boddy introduces cultural appropriation in reference to the ways in which certain globally generated ideals and sensibilities are, in their own cultural contexts, certain parallels to behaviors of ‘Others’ - that is, the people whose practices differ from those of the globally dominant group that constitutes the evident norms (Boddy, 2016; 44). Building on her field work on Sudanese women and gender mutilation, she emphasises the anthropological realisation that power in all societies works “from below” - meaning, the production of the ‘self’ and ‘self-understanding’ as formed and shaped in mundane, everyday dynamics and interactions among individuals, institutions, cultural meanings and constraints that interact with their environment of objects, spaces and generally, any practical engagement with the surrounding world. Therefore, they should be viewed in their individual conditions, and contextualised according to the opportunities, limitations and effects that take place in that given context.

In reference to her field work on female genital cutting (FGC), she discusses how it is commonly suggested that when given more knowledge and freedom, women would challenge their conditioning and choose not to adapt to the given practice or behavior. However, such false consciousness would seem both patronising and uninformed for the women in Sudan, and lacking direct involvement in the situation and social worlds of the women who were cut (Boddy, 2016). She proceeds to exemplify this by paralleling the increasingly popular practice of female cosmetic genital surgery (FCGS) that has very similar aesthetic purpose to FGC, to the FGC as a cultural and religious custom. She points out that while respecting contextual differences, both practices do put the female body in the same line with elusive concepts of femininity and womanhood. She draws parallels between Sudanese women’s ideals of womanhood to the global ideas of femininity (Boddy, 2016; 61).

*“If Western women and men resist placing their cultural practices in the same light as those of Sudanese and other African groups, and insist on seeing in the latter a form of violence*

*absent from their own, this is because Africa remains for them a locus of the aberrant and exotic, in terms of which they are oppositionally defined". (Boddy, 2016; 61)*

By this, she aims not to draw trivial parallels between different realities, but to expose political, subordinating and worthy of critique practices of femininity in the global stage. Lastly, she exposes the lack of recognition of globality in locality, arguing that the conceptualisations of 'us' and 'them' are outdated. By this she means that as the circulation of sexy music videos and pornography is an unarguably boundless phenomenon on the internet, one can presume that communities globally are exposed to the same images of how women should be and look like. Subsequently, this shape the understandings of appropriate behavior and ideals of womanhood. As a result, much like women globally, also women in Sudan question their normality in relation to this, was it about female genitalia or other femininities (Boddy, 2016; 61).

My intention with such concept is not to take part to the orientalist and imperialist debates and discourses in the field of gender and Middle East. Instead, the reason why Boddy's concept is useful for the purpose of this study is due to its capacity to *contextualise* cultural practices in different conditions, and to move them to social particularities. This is useful in assessing how the women of this study perceive themselves in the light of global 'appropriations' and how these experiences shape their own cultural norms, behavior and ideals.



## 4 Methodology

In this section, the practical aspects of my fieldwork will be discussed in detail. In order to answer the research question I conducted an *ethnographic study* among the subjects, and further deepened the understanding of their subjective realities and meanings they give to their experiences through six *semi-structured interviews*.

I will first discuss the epistemological and ontological considerations of the study, then further proceeding to outline *how* I conducted my study and *why* these particular methodological choices were made. I will introduce and discuss the chosen approach, method and finally the considerations and choices made in regards to choice of participants, sampling and analysis of the material.

### 4.1 Situating the Study

In line with the constructivist paradigm, this study agrees with the philosophical orientation that individuals create their subjective meanings of their own experiences, varying according to the observer. This study thus adopts a relativist ontology that assumes the existence of multiple realities, and a subjectivist epistemology that believes these realities are created through co-understanding between two actors, and all of these processes take place in the world in its natural form (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). It also assumes that human social life is constructed and guided by ideas, beliefs and perceptions that each individual perceives as reality (Neuman, 2011). Thus, the researcher's responsibility is to look for the multiple individualities and complexities of these views, rather than compartelising them into categories (Creswell, 2014; 37). Embracing such philosophy helps in examining a topic that generally lacks established knowledge and is, by its nature, elusive. The bedouin communities in South Sinai are rather little researched, thus departing from general patterns does not make sense as such patterns have not been established in the recent years, and even if some general ones could be identified, there is a risk they have already changed. Moreover, in order to reduce the lack of representativeness and understand the social realities from where the lives of women and the complexities of their everyday lives, moralities and ideals grow out from, we should first understand how their everyday realities are constructed. Therefore, an *inductive approach* was chosen. Within these frames, ethnography as a methodological choice responded to the needs of the research design and the questions

explored in this thesis, primarily helping to reduce the bias of the researcher's personal background, and secondly, to observe patterns of behaviour that would frame the research at hand. The main concepts used in this paper, change, continuity and global/local were generated from the ethnographic observations

Even the subjects themselves are often incapable of giving a full explanation of their behavior and intentions which contributes to increasing uncertainty of explaining human experiences (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013; 24). Acknowledging the almost impossible task of working completely in a value-free manner, this work aims to constitute of research elements and data that would rather reflect the subject's experiences of a particular reality in that given social context (Bernstein, 1990). Consequently, the subjects themselves are seen as agents for giving meanings to their individual experiences.

## 4.2 Method

### 4.2.1 Access

As researchers, we always intervene a social system of some sort (Flick, 2009; 109). Similarly, one of the challenges in this study was to access a social system that is very private in nature. Entering such closed community was only possible because I am a foreign visitor, and a woman (Bryman, 2012; 433). In order to comply with the study's objectives, I chose to locate myself closer to the area of 'familiarity' when negotiating proximity and distance with the subjects of this study (Flick, 2009; 112). However I had to maintain an emotional distance to the participant's lives and individualities, and try to remain as objective as possible (Bryman, 2012; 152). Being a *bedouin* counted as of high value to the subjects, yet I came to understand this had very different connotation within the bedouin community than among the surrounding society. Therefore I chose to adopt a point of view from within the bedouin community, subsequently motivating ethnography as a methodological choice. The gathered field notes were then further deepened through semi-structured interviews. Between September and October in 2017 I did most of the pre-field work preparations, namely familiarising myself with the academics of the topic and establishing contacts in South Sinai that eventually helped me to gain access to the community of bedouins. These contacts allowed me to contact some of the local bedouins upon my arrival.

In general, accessing women can be difficult for an outside researcher, which was the case in my study. I was aware the bedouin women are busy in their daily activities that take up most of their time, and it might not be appropriate - or even allowed - to break into their spaces (mostly homes) (Scheyvens and Leslie, 2000; 119). Indeed, men outside the community were not usually allowed into the bedouin houses unless they are close friends of the family; however, foreigner women were warmly welcomed to the houses, partly due to their hospitable culture, but also due to the interest towards outside world. Living with a bedouin family allowed me to familiarise myself with the socio-cultural context I was observing, and to meet more informants through them. I found myself in the middle of everyday exchanges of stories and got increasingly immersed in their daily practices and ideals of being a woman. This I would not have been able to access by meeting women on the streets, and not least because bedouin women are still very hard to find in public spaces. It was those moments where the lack of presence of men left space for the women to talk freely, comment and joke, reflecting the meanings of being a bedouin woman today; a scenery that appeared to be largely visible to women only.

#### 4.2.2 Participants

The participants of this study are young, unmarried bedouin women from different backgrounds, selected based on their capability of representing the current ideals of femininity among this group. By unmarried I refer to the women who are adult in age, yet have not yet married as married life notably changes their everyday dynamic due to moving to a new home, having children, etc. Thus the women were to be between 18-25, meaning they would have lived the phases of selling bracelets around town as well as experiencing the more domestic-oriented life. While recognising the importance of reflecting back to the socio-historical context from where a lot of today's behavior might have grown out from, this study focuses on the understandings of these young women, and how they come about these ideals. In order to explore this, also the interaction between men and women in different social contexts was considered as it tend to work towards ensuring that both genders perfect -and sometimes even re-establish- the existing norms that define what it means to be a man or a woman (Ghannam, 2013; 105). The influential role that men play within the bedouin family in terms of shaping family values, expectations and behaviours, affect the understandings of femininities and gender norms. Thus in order to understand the women, I chose to also consider their behavior in relation to -

and in contrast with - the men of the community. Therefore, two men were interviewed to provide insight in this regard. Yet as much as men are part of shaping the gender dynamics, their masculinities do not fall within the main scope of this study.

In the interviews I chose to narrow the target group down to young bedouin women and few men in order to get in-depth understanding of the women, and see how it resonates with the other gender perception. The age group for the young women was between the ages of 18 and 25 in order to be able to get an informed consent from the participants without having to involve their guardians as required when interviewing minors (Bryman, 2012; 147); secondly, the motivation of interviewing this age group is due to the current generation's capability of speaking fluent English; and lastly, selection of this age group limited the possibility of them being married, meaning the outlook of these women's social lives would have been considerably different. Participants from different social and economic background were chosen to map out possible differences in social realities within this small community as despite strong sense of collective spirit, not all the families had same level of income, social habits or family traditions. For the men I chose an old bedouin man in order to understand the community and their development across the past decades when the tourist developments began in South Sinai, as well as more contemporary accounts from younger, Egyptian tourist guide who had been intensely involved with the bedouin community for the past 16 years. Rather than engaging with the traditional feminist discourse of womanhood, I wanted to see how the different genders understand - or even shape - the concept of femininity. Whereas the interaction between women shapes their understanding and ways of practicing femininity, the presence, actions and interactions with men also affect their understanding.

### 4.3 Ethnography

I chose to conduct an ethnographic study in order to create a solid basis of contextual understanding, on which I could develop extensive interviews to generate data that was both rich and would reflect the social reality as realistically as possible. Whereas the main focus of data was on interviews, ethnography was used as a necessary tool to better understand the world-view of the subjects, and to bridge between what the subjects say and how they behave in real life. Thus ethnography was seen as a favourable data-collecting method, as well as a crucial first step in transition to the in-depth interviews. Lastly, ethnography was used to provide the basis in

inductive approach by creating basic understanding that would help in identifying the theoretical concepts on which I would build the study. As a result of the field observations, the three concepts of change, continuity and global/local were generated.

Based on anthropology and accommodating aspects of participant-observation, ethnography is defined as, by its minimum definition, an iterative-inductive research that grows directly from the sustained contact with the subjects in the context of their daily lives and cultures, that embraces the irreducibility of human experience. It produces rich, written accounts (field notes) that pay specific focus to the daily practices and customs that might seem insignificant but actually enlighten the observer about their socio-cultural processes (O'Reilly, 2004; 3-9). As bedouins and especially the women in South Sinai are rather little researched, departing from general observations of patterns seemed insufficient as such patterns have not been yet established, and even if some general ones could be identified, they might have already changed. As this study approaches the topic inductively (explore → describe → explain), ethnography was found as most fitting approach to answer the research question. This was motivated by the research question; construction of femininities as a concept and its transformations are very individual, elusive processes and approaching it deductively (general → more detailed patterns) would impose generalisations from the beginning that one cannot possibly know at this stage of the research. Therefore, it felt sensible to depart from micro-observations and move on to see whether these patterns occur on more general level, creating a social pattern or habit. Living the everyday life makes us blind to our own actions and the motives, which is why it is extremely difficult to explain to others in a subjective manner. Ethnography is merely a linear process, allowing a high degree of flexibility and reflectivity for the research process which in this study was highly desired (O'Reilly; 2004). Recognising the limited length of this study, ethnography was favourable as it can also be applied to small scale research carried out in everyday settings (Savage, 2000).

#### 4.3.1 On Field Notes

Human memory is elusive, and in order to record the observations during the study ethnographers have to lean on a range of methods to document their experiences. Most commonly used method is field notes, detailed summaries of the key aspects of what is being observed as well as researcher's initial reflections on them (Bryman, 2012; 447). I chose to keep

field notes on a small notebook that I always carried with me to jot down most immediate observations. It took a while for the community around me to get used to my presence and note-taking in intimate family contexts, however this was overcome already in few days (ibid. 448). Writing tends to reduce recorded events, making the note taking process inherently selective, and leads in imposing of a certain structure on events (O'Reilly, 2004; 99). To my best ability I tried to maintain awareness of the choices I made while documenting observations. Regardless of how rich the field notes would be, they will “never be able to explain fully the intellectual work that went into your determining what to do and write, when and how” (ibid. 99). As bedouin culture is very private in nature and difficult to access, I chose to avoid any actions that might appear intrusive, and relied on note-taking and few occasional pictures for which I always asked a consent (Bryman, 2012; 138). Publishing pictures of the women was strictly prohibited. My primary responsibility is to my participants which is why I tried to maintain a high level of transparency and honesty throughout the study (O'Reilly, 2004). There was a language barrier throughout the study due to my limited knowledge of bedouin Arabic. Therefore, I had to resort to the younger, ‘international’ generation who spoke sufficient english; other observations that I perceived important but could not translate I wrote down and translated later with a help of a friend with fluent bedouin Arabic.

#### 4.4 Interviews

An inductive approach does not necessarily explore *why* the given patterns occur in the given context (Babbie, 2013; 21). Therefore this study accommodated interviews as an additional tool to further explore the topic at hand. The limited time-frame in the execution of the study did not allow a production of such rich material as usual for ethnographic studies; therefore, semi-structured interviews were utilised to elaborate on motives behind the social patterns and identity components observed (ibid. 111).

##### 4.4.1 Semi-structured interviews

Complimenting the ethnographic field work, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used in order to expose unexpected answers and follow up on interesting topics (Bryman, 2012; 41). The interviews helped in determining formative events and behaviors in the women’s experiences and examine processes of shaping this consciousness based on firsthand experiences.

In line with the research objectives, interviews were utilised in order to understand people's behavior and chain of thoughts 'from inside', and generate in-depth, openly narrated data of the topic at hand (Flick, 2009; 150). In order to establish rich data, the interviews were stretched towards personal narratives (Bryman, 2012; 12); however, few guiding open-ended questions were presented which is why semi-structured interviews were more suitable [Appendix 9.2]. The presence of the researcher was minimised to my best ability in order to allow as much space for the informants as possible. Thus only few guiding questions were be presented (Bryman, 2012; Flick, 2009). This method was chosen due to its ability to generate knowledge on the individual realities and ideals of the subjects themselves. The participants narrated their experiences and understandings mainly on a free manner.

As the methodological build-up and focus on the subjects' individual perceptions suggests, semi-structured interviews helped me to capture the subjects' individual perceptions of their lives by allowing them to choose to narrate their lives as they prefer to compose it (Atkinson, 1998, Bryman, 2012). The participants were able to express themselves more freely than in structured interviews, putting greater emphasis on their own, individual narratives and therefore also decreasing the role of the interviewer as a guiding factor in the interview process. This method is found useful when focusing on a single aspect of individual's life in a specific context (Atkinson, 1998).

#### 4.4.2 Choice of material and sampling

The selection of the material was conducted in resonance with the research objectives, and tailored to best aid the process of finding answers to the research question at hand. As this study follows the tradition of qualitative research, the process of selecting suitable setting and cases to this study are based on their ability to generate data that enables new knowledge and theoretical insights, rather than to create generalizable results. I systematically observed and jotted down notes of my daily observations. When recording behavior in the field I had to be aware of the choices I made when documenting observations, while also recognising that the field notes will never be fully able to explain the intellectual work that went on in deciding what to write down, or neither will they ever be able to grasp the full experience that was experienced throughout this study (O'Reilly, 2004; 99).

For formal interviews, a sampling unit of 10 female informants were selected through snowball technique just simply asking women if they knew other women or that would be willing to be interviewed; similarly, an unit of five men were selected through a separate snowball sampling process in order to protect the anonymity of the bedouin women (Bryman, 2012; 202). This allowed me to reach out to different individuals from different areas, ages and backgrounds. From these two sets of samples, six key informants were chosen to be interviewed in-depth in relation to the research topic itself. These informants were selected on the following basis; firstly, the women were to be between 18-25, a group that would have life-experience from roaming around the streets selling bracelets, as well as more domestic-oriented life, yet would not be married. Secondly, I targeted women from different families and areas to have a more variety in the responses. Gender balance was considered, however the emphasis was put on female informants to keep the focus on women and their perceptions. For the male informants age did not matter as they were contributing aspects on understanding the ways in which their existence shape the understanding of the young bedouin woman. In this case, purposive sampling method was used as it embraces the culture of purposive selection of informants in accordance to the research question (ibid. 422).

Due to limited language skills in bedouin Arabic, all the informants chosen had to speak a sufficient level of English as a prerequisite. Bringing a translator to the interviews was not an option due to the closed nature of the community, and lack of translators that would speak sufficient bedouin Arabic. Luckily, most of the young bedouin women had learned English when working with the tourists, thus this did not limit the sampling remarkably. In few cases, the interviews had to be held hidden from the men of the house who disapproved the idea of women being the spokesperson of the community. This required extra-arrangements to ensure no distress or trouble would be caused to any of the informants (Bryman, 2012; 93). Lastly, being unable to attend the two last interviews in Dahab due to escalated conflict in the North of Sinai, I had to change my original sample to more accessible areas, namely Cairo and Ras Sudr.

#### 4.5 Limitations and Ethical Considerations

Cultural and emotional sensitivity was required throughout the study to ensure no harm was caused to the participants, as the topics at hand were deeply rooted to not just culture, but also deeply personal, individual experiences (Bryman, 2012; Neuman, 2011). A high level of



transparency and culture of honesty was embraced when making this study; the participants were aware of the purpose of the study from the beginning, and they were asked for an oral consent due to the fact that many of the informants were illiterate (Neuman, 2011; 55). Their anonymity was ensured by maintaining the confidentiality of the records by keeping the notes only in my personal use (Bryman, 2012; 136, Neuman, 2011; 57). The comfort of the participants was a priority, which is why the interviews were conducted in a setting of a home or other familiar place (also because leaving their houses was not an option for many). All of the interviews were conducted in English in order to avoid a possible bias in translation (Bryman, 2012; 486). Few challenges emerged; firstly, in two cases the interviews had to be conducted in secret from the 'men' who did not approve the young women talking about their lives to outsiders. In such cases, the occasion was carefully prepared and ensured that we would not be exposed, or interrupted at any point during the recording. Secondly, I was denied access to Dahab by the authorities as the conflict in North of Sinai intensified, forcing my immediate return to Cairo. I looked for informants in Cairo, which eventually led me to a great key informant. This, however, resulted in a loss of time, and missing out on two already scheduled interviews in Dahab. All throughout I remained careful not to include any information that might put my informants in danger, or cause discomfort of any kind (Bryman, 2009; 93).

#### 4.6 Reflexivity

This study understands the personal biography of the researcher as a defining component in the qualitative research process as it shapes the way in which the knowledge is observed, collected and understood, and how it is interpreted and communicated further. A researcher is thus responsible for understanding, documenting and communicating the lives and practices of the research subjects in as truthful manner as possible (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013). This comes with great responsibility: throughout the study I was aware my background and world view of a foreigner had an impact on my study. Whereas establishing a presence within the community did not have a big influence on the informants as they are used to the presence of foreigners, it had an effect on how I collected and interpreted data. I was aware my personal worldview might have shaped the way I understood behaviour that was out of my own cultural context; furthermore, my interaction with the informants, especially when lacking sufficient Bedouin Arabic, changed the dynamic and resulted in data that was not produced in their first language.

Thus, my prime responsibility as a researcher was to ensure my understanding of the context is sufficient enough to be able speak from within the observed group and to produce knowledge that reflects the social realities of the subjects, while being aware of a possible personal- and linguistic bias (ibid. 24). The way in which I asked about perceptions (interviews), as well as made assessments of meanings of events and behavior (field work), defined how fairly I reflected the understandings of these women. Discussing the interplay of my observations, the subjects' perceptions and the analytical space in between requires high level of reflectivity and carefulness not to overpower or to 'speak for' the subjects of the study (ibid. 24). Thus, I had to constantly reflect on what I chose to record - or to leave out- during the ethnographic field work; additionally, I had to reflect on how much my personal world views would affect my data and findings. Whereas I had to acknowledge I always impose a certain socio-cultural structure on the observed events, I tried to minimise my presence by reflectivity and maintaining emotional distance to the subjects (ibid. 393).

## 4.7 Data

The empirical material was collected during the field work in Dahab, South Sinai in the period of fall 2017 and spring of 2018. The data collection strategies consisted of 1,5 months of ethnographic observations, which were then further elaborated through six life story interviews.

### 4.7.1 Data collection

The ethnographic fieldwork allowed me to immerse myself to the daily practices of bedouin women, which I achieved by living and complying to the life of a local bedouin family. The fieldwork took place in the town of Dahab, one of the fastest changing touristic sites of South Sinai where the effect of global and national powers has collided with the local populations, thus creating a preferable environment for observing how the local communities interact with the emerging changes. This then creates a social space where the bedouins are to negotiate their social existence between new emerging changes, as well as cultural habits, norms and traditions. Few days after arriving to the site I moved in with a bedouin family; an opportunity that emerged through one of my initial contacts. The main objective with this approach was twofold; firstly, to maximise the potential of understanding the social realities of these women by living with them; and secondly, to reach out to more, and thus to gain more understanding of the culture of the

community from where these women's understanding of themselves have (at least partially) grown out from (Bryman, 2012; 432). In the course of the study I managed to establish a trustworthy atmosphere with the community that I believe allowed the women behave naturally around me, and speak freely of their feelings and experiences. In order to meet different women during the day, I spent time at the house where local women gathered every morning for a tea and gossips; on top of this I walked around in the town in order to meet women also from other neighbourhoods. This exposed me to a variety of individuals and discussions with different bedouin women, men as well as Egyptians and foreigners who had their own experiences with them. This helped me to understand the myriad of social realities that exist both in the universal and more context-specific lives of women, and their issues within, and across, different regions. Even in very mundane issues, I felt like the observations of the bedouin women in South Sinai have contributed to the field in a way that is two-fold. Firstly, it supports and builds on the study of marginalised women and their understanding and practices of being a woman in this particular context; secondly, it links to the less-known narratives of women in the Middle East on the field of feminist studies that lacks the contextual and particular nuances also from non-liberal contexts. Lastly, it expands on the knowledge on bedouin communities in Sinai and their social transformations over time which appears to be an understudied topic after 2013.

#### 4.7.2 Data Analysis

Humans tend to believe what they see or experience, rather than what carefully conducted research has discovered; the personal experience is a strong experience, however very delusive in nature and shall be critically reflected in order to avoid personal errors (Neuman, 2011; 6). These words are carefully taken into the consideration in the conduction of this study. All of the qualitative material (interviews and field notes) were transcribed into a written form. From there, through careful assessment of the material and a process of coding I conducted thematic analysis by extracting patterns which were formulated into larger categories and themes. These themes were used to group the gathered knowledge into more comprehensible categories that could then be discussed and further analysed through the conceptual framework (Bryman, 2012; 249).

*“One other thing that made me give respect for the bedouins, is the new generation; especially the girls. The girls... Imagine yourself being from a very closed culture. Like, coming from a very strict family that is not open to different cultures and stuff. And you see at home that your mom cannot meet her brother-in-law without covering her face, and she does not get to sit and spend time with some relatives, like men. And you sit all the time separately - the men and women. And this is since they are kids; that’s what they see for years. And when they get to go outside, they get to go to the town; they see girls sitting on the beach in bikinis. And couples holding hands. And kissing, maybe. Drinking. For us, even, coming from the city; it can be a culture shock, and be crazy, like, how can such thing be happening. There is a huge conflict, you know? But for the bedouin girls no, it’s not. You hear them, the kids, they ask you “is she your wife?” Maybe because they are not introduced to relationships, like you know, but they... they don’t ask anything beyond this. They don’t ask why she’s not covered up, or anything - they just ask “is she your wife”. “Yes”, because we don’t say ‘girlfriend’, because it’s not in the dictionary anymore. And when the bedouin girls grow up, and they get to meet tourists and to spend time with them - they build these relationships with them, and they see them all the time. Then they understand there is something called ‘relationship’ and couples that are actually together but they are not married. They don’t go home and make a revolution against their parents and say “we want to do the same”. They are just... happy. To spend their life the way that their culture is”*

[Informant 6, 23rd of February]

## 5 Findings and Analysis

In this chapter the findings of this study will be presented and analysed. The structure is based on the three main themes closely linked to the process of constituting the understanding of femininities: *changes, continuities and global/local*. In the category of *changes* I discuss the data by using the conceptual tool of *performativity* by Judith Butler, exploring how the women came about the changes in their understanding and ideals of femininities. In *continuities*, the concept of agency by Sabah Mahmood will be utilised to further discuss why some individuals choose to continue with the norms and values of the nomadic heritage even when it is against their freedoms or desires. Finally, the category of *global/local* will be discussed through the lense of Janice Boddy's *cultural appropriations* in order to better contextualise and discuss the interaction of global and local forces, and how they impact the constitution of understanding femininity among the subjects. For interview profiles, see Appendix 9.1. The Interview Script is elaborated in Appendix 9.2.

### 5.1 Changes

Common to all the respondents was the presence of *change* in their understanding and the ideals of femininities. The informants referred to the myriad of ways in which the women gave up certain aspects of the understandings of gender norms and practices of the community, and absorbed new ones. These processes were both active and passive in nature. As informant 5 and 1 described;

*“Bedouin woman, she lived in the open air in the desert with tent. And then, this changed to concrete; changed to a locked door - locked door that she cannot open. You know, like confusing thing happened in the life of old woman”.*

*[Informant 5]*

*“Actually the woman, she do everything. She clean; she... cook. She... some of them now they start to work some company, some school, some **present-day** stuff. And, um... she feeling... The women, she... I favour the women because she has a nice heart, the bedouin woman. Actually, all the woman they have a nice heart”.*

*[Informant 1]*

Whereas informant 5 referred to the drastic change from tribal life at the desert to the stationed lifestyle, Informant 1 discussed the presence of ‘present day’ things, with which she referred to modern changes such as technology, emergence of schools and labour market which had an impact on their world views and ideals. Yet, in her view, the women are very capable in their own sphere of influence. After the emergence of stationed life and houses, women became constrained by the walls of their homes, which for some felt restricting. Some felt like they were dependent on others such as men or young kids, who can freely leave the house to run errands. When sitting with one of these women in the evening, waiting for her 6-year old niece to bring the missing dinner ingredients from a shop closeby, she voiced her frustration:

*“This - sitting in the house and doing nothing - it’s not good. It makes us bored and we just waste our time. It’s sad. I hope to marry someone special to be able to attend the exams and teach some day. Inshallah”.*

*[Field Notes; 17th of November]*

By this she referred to her desires and capabilities of doing more with her life, yet being currently unable to seize these opportunities. This illustrates how the changed conditions affect their individual desires for their life and future. Whereas some were able to move around rather freely, some were not allowed to leave their homes. The latter resulted in feelings of frustration or even, of being locked; consequently, this seems to have triggered a need to seek alternative ways of accessing the life outside of home as she wanted to. After working from young age and attending basic education, the women illustrated ambition towards the opportunities they knew they could have, even after turning 16 and being expected to stay home. For some informants, the way to escape their current limited conditions was to get married. Marriage was idealised over life at family homes; for example, for Informant 1 it represented a chance to fulfil her individual desires;

*“If I married... I have more freedom. Because my husband... I tell him what I want, and he understands me; he listens to me; he understands this is yes and this is no. And I would like to speak with him. It’s not the same with my brother; he says no, he says yes - I don’t get to speak again”.*

*[Informant 1]*

For her, marriage was a way to escape the controlling brothers at her family setting and getting her voice heard. This illustrates how for some of the women the surrounding structures feel limiting and they thus end up seeking for change to achieve their desires. Among the informants, the channels of reaching their desired lifestyles was not only through marriage, but also through working and studying, or even through utilising new global aspects such as technology and online presence. Whereas the women did this in order to seize their desired opportunities, these practices also had an impact on the way the women understood themselves in their social contexts. The gender ideal they performed in order to reach the wanted life often diverged from the expected norms and was thus restricted or criticised by the surrounding community. Regardless, all of the respondents commonly indicated their resilience in attempting this gender performance continuously; this, then, appeared to lead to gradual institutionalisation of such behavior among wider community. This did not only bring the women from private spaces to public ones, but also allowed them increasingly to attempt their gender ideal in contexts unusual for bedouin women. For example, Informant 3 started working in housekeeping business at young age, joining her older sister. In her family, the girls provided the main source of income whereas their brothers did not work. She felt that with the remaining money she could do whatever she wanted; to buy clothes, a better phone, or to get her teeth whitened.

*“Few years ago I didn’t think I could work. I thought I’m going to be 17 or 18 and stay home and get married - but no! When you make them used to seeing you work, they are fine with that. When you make the people, bedouin or the family used to see you always going and working and outside, they get used to that. So they are fine. But when it’s first time for them, it’s different”.*

*[Informant 3]*

Her behavior was seen as an unusual gender act among the community. However through continuous repetition, it began to institutionalise as normal behavior. She further continued;

*“We leave some for us for sure, and some for them [family]. You are responsible for them; they saw you working and with money, so she is doing something; she is not going and sitting and just enjoying the life; she is working. So then, it’s okay”.*

*[Informant 3]*

For her, the work mirrored her identity as a self-sufficient, capable woman which she was proud of. This reflects ideals of individuality that are still rather uncommon among the bedouin women, and goes in junctures of what can be seen as global ideals. This shows how the current generation increasingly build their own lives outside of their homes, at older age, and without the help of anyone. These femininities have started to catch on among the women, indicating change in the gender identity. Informant 2 and 3 exemplified such behavior in their lives by working despite being 'too old to be out and about', and moving around in a manner that women were not expected to. They still feel judged for not following the normative blueprint of the community.

*"It is the young people. Mostly young men. Because they are not really open-minded. [...] Because the other boys talk: "oh your sister, she's still going out?" and "I saw your sister at a supermarket at very late hour". [...] Some of them, they say it's okay. And most of them, they become very angry when they find out that other people talk about their sisters. This makes them feel very sad. So he tells her: "look, I don't want anybody to talk about you in a bad way, so don't go out late again".*

*[Informant 3]*

Informant 3 experienced social pressures, that often made her sad. This indicates how the women often realised they 'failed' to perform their expected gender. Surprisingly, this did not seem to bring them down but rather, the opposite;

*"Many people talk about me saying "Oh no, she is a big girl and she still sells bracelets - she should sit in the house". But because I bring the money for my family, they... For me, I don't care what they talk. Because if they talk about me today...[...] everyday they have a new story. They just talk at first, but they will not keep talking for the whole year. [...] I don't care, I don't listen to what they say".*

*[Informant 2]*

Informant 2 was motivated by the feeling of self-sufficiency in creating income and thus gaining more autonomy. My informants felt more confident of trying out new things that might be out of the expected norms and values when they saw other women attempting the same; there was a sense of collective boost of this women's agenda. Few women had become famous for traveling to Cairo alone, to visit their friends they made through their interaction with tourists. Informant 6 shared his perception of one of his friends who was known for doing this;



*“To see the lights and the shopping centres and the girls and clubs and pubs an all of this... She was very lucky to get to see all of this. But she does not go back and make this kind of a revolution. Like, “I want to leave home and go to Cairo”. Maybe she wishes this, but you don’t see her angry or sad for what she has, or what she has to be. She goes like... she does it in a very smart way. She does this balance”.*

*[Informant 6]*

He referred to the increasing initiative of exploring outside the boundaries of the community, Yet, as much as the women were intrigued by this, Informant 6 emphasised their need to maintain and value the strong connection to their own cultural world;

*“Majority, they don’t have the chance to do the same thing like our friend. They don’t get to travel and to see this. But the ones that get to do it, they do have this balance. Only few stories that you heard... I remember this one girl. She fell in love with a taxi driver who was not from the bedouin community. And then... she, her family did not accept this. Because you have to marry from the bedouins. But she loved him, and they got married and she escaped with him. It was such a huge thing, you know. [...] The parents and the bedouins were afraid this girl would be a role model for other girls if they let it go without it being a big thing. But the girl now, she’s married for that guy and everything, and not many girls thought about doing this thing as this girl. For them, they don’t - they don’t want this. Some of them - sometimes I think they are actually very happy and proud to be married with other bedouins. Because maybe they get treated the best, or they can see from the other side that there are so many divorces happening around in the rest of Egypt, that like so many couples break up and things like that. But between them, that does not happen a lot”.*

*[Informant 6]*

By referring to the process of balance, Informant 6 touched upon the process of blending aspects from the tribal culture as well as the culture of the international environment. This mirrors the construction of understanding of femininities through the multiple ways in which the young people choose to accommodate different ideals from both cultures. Also the concepts of family, collective life and dating, the ideals seemed to be a subject to change, indicating similar process of balancing.

*“To put it like this; we have two boyfriends. Like a boyfriend that nobody knows of - a secret. The next boyfriend, he brings the ring and the family will know”.*

*[Informant 4]*

Informant 4 referred to the way how concepts of relationships and even marriage have changed, and how this has become common among the women. As Informant 3 stated;

*Interviewee: “I wanted to ask have you had a boyfriend you did not tell your parents about?”*

*Informant 3: “Yes of course!” (laughs)*

In her view, such practice was common. She explained how these secret boyfriends are carefully hidden from the families, for whom it is important to make sure their daughters are married to a good family and kept away from other men until a suitable suitor would appear. The girls would stay in touch with their boyfriends via social media platforms, and meet secretly in a place (eg. relative’s house) where both could easily sneak into. This reflects the changing ideals of femininity; now, among the young women, it is fashionable to also have to have relationships. Only a while back women were not able to affect the choosing of their partners and suddenly, they could date anyone they wanted. Apart from providing them with a feeling of autonomy, this brought a certain level of security in their lives which they *themselves* could provide. This affected their ideals of family life, indicating a structural change; the women are increasingly choosing careers and studies over early marriage, which they would acquire after establishing the professional life. Thus, my informants found themselves between two worlds; the one of their parents, and the one of their own. The way they increasingly practice their gender subverts the old ideals and values and creates new ones, reflecting the way how the understanding of femininities has changed. Women no longer consider the same values and ideals as a measure of their femininity. What they now see as feminine is still based on the old, tribal values, yet increasingly linked to modern aspects of the life. This being said, the clash of these two worlds leave the young women with an identity crisis of some sort - a deeply gendered one.

In line with this clash of worlds, the informants voiced their dissatisfaction towards the young men of their generation who generally opposed the changes they wished to pursue, and did not accommodate the same ideals in life (eg. career or education) to the extent the young women did. This partly explains the emerged need to self-sustainability. Informant 3 stated;

*“This change is good. But now, the boys in our time, they just want to have fun, and when they see this life when they get married to another woman, they just want to keep her in the house. Don’t want her to go outside, because they think it is not good for the girl to be like them”.*

*[Informant 3]*

In the light of Butler’s concept of *performativity*, gender and femininity among the young women is constructed based on the old, tribal values and norms, yet blended with newly emerging ideals they absorb from their surrounding society. As much as the women perform their ‘new’, ideal gender, many of their understandings are still strongly rooted in the tribal values. This being said, there is a visible trend in subverting these values, and creating new ones through institutionalising the new gender performance. By actively illustrating the need for *change* in their social worlds, the young bedouin women come about their understanding of gender in a way that is twofold. Firstly, the process of gaining information from surrounding society or social media alters them for new norms and ideals, in addition to the old, tribal ones, contributing to their individual images of who they want to be. Secondly, they then display this ‘ideal self’ in their social context. In the repetition of these mundane bodily gestures, movements and enactments, they constitute the illusion of a gendered self (Butler, 1988; 519). This illusion, then, as a social temporality, becomes institutionalised through continuous acts of the women’s appearance to their ‘mundane social audiences’ who then came to perceive this behavior as normal, taken as a face value (Butler, 1988; 519). Still, the women do receive criticism for ‘failing’ to perform their expected gender which results in feelings of discomfort, or even restrictions in freedoms in order to pressure them to comply to existing norms.

The findings would suggest it is indeed these processes that take place, which formulate the women’s understandings of femininities. In Butler’s view, “whereas we are born as sexes, we are, from the beginning of this existence, *gendered* by a social construct”. Much in the same way, also the bedouin women have been put into certain social models since they are born; taking care of the house, cooking for the family, getting married. This does not mean they have forgotten these aspects of their lives; however, the social exchange and the opportunities provided by the encounters with foreigners have aided them with something the rest of the community is not. This makes them stand out from the community; they live a different social reality than rest of the members of the tribe. As informant 3 says;

*“We learn a lot. For me, it’s nice to meet different people. You know their religions, their cultures, you understand their ways - you know, how they think. So you see from this way, and that way. It’s not all the same”.*

*[Informant 3]*

She referred to the richness of diversity in her life. The women’s curiosity towards exchanging and absorbing new ideals illustrate their willingness to explore more. This led to absorbing of new ideals about the world, and their individual selves.

*“They (women) have now more freedom and more thinking - they have more thinking about the social media and about the car. All they think about is phone and laptop and social media. Before they did not know anything about this. [...] Before they don’t hold any phone - women they don’t hold anything. And today, any woman can hold a phone, it’s normal. And before, women, they did not study in school. And now they start to study. And before, like the university - if the university is in Cairo, nobody sent their daughter because they were scared. Now more freedom; they send them without problems. Because they **want** them to study. It’s very different”.*

*[Informant 1]*

The women of this study generated new understandings of femininities by blending aspects from their surrounding environment. In line with Butler, the informants performed this gender through the most mundane actions, within their contemporary culture, in different temporalities such as home, public spaces, as well as privately or with other women. Moving from private sphere to public caused friction between the ‘face value gender’ and the one the women were experimenting, causing them to fail to perform their expected gender in that temporality. These were also the spaces where most of the institutionalisation of new femininities were formulated. Much like Butler suggests, also here femininity is affected by the constant interactions between masculinity and femininity (1988). This also resonates with the perception that neither femininity or masculinity can be fully understood, unless contrasted with the opposing gender (Ghannam, 2013).

## 5.2 Continuities

Sabah Mahmood is interested in the way how individuals portray agency through their “capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create” rather than as a resistance towards structures of domination (2006; 33). The informants of this study found themselves in the situation where their ideal gender differed largely from the surrounding community - especially from the image pertained by men and the older generation. Open-mindedness and general deviance from the expected norms put them under strong social pressures and local structures. Sometimes, they did not have other choice but to reproduce the gender they were expected to by the larger community. For the women of this study, being a bedouin was not just something they were born into; it was something they would actively choose in their lives. Regardless of whether this was something they wanted in all aspects of life, they were, to varying degrees, bound by the surrounding relations of subordination. Yet, they were vocal about their pride and contentment of being a bedouin woman. When asked what it means to be a bedouin woman, the informants responded;

*“It means to have a nice life. We take care of each other, we have nice life, actually. I favour that I am a bedouin, not Egyptian. I favour the bedouin woman’s life”.*

*[Informant 1]*

*“When I see Egyptian people and how they live, how they speak with each other, I think “Thank you God for making me a bedouin woman”.*

*[Informant 4]*

For Informant 1 and 4, being a bedouin woman was of high value. The women distinguished between the bedouins and other groups, like Egyptians, articulating strong sense of group identity. They also embraced the attribute of being a bedouin woman and showed pride towards tribal heritages. The informants defined themselves strongly through the community and tribal life which made them feel proud. Like informant 5 stated;

*“Few things changed. Like, technology changed the people; or city changed the bedouin. But still, there are the bedouin girls. Every girl every day - one has to make the breakfast, one has to make lunch; the work in the house is between the girls of the house. The mother, she’s the leader. Because she worked hard in the beginning, she had to raise the girls and*

*teach them the right way. And when the old lady sees her daughters in the right way; she's healthy, she is happy - no change happened. You know, mother is mother".*

*[Informant 5]*

He referred to a continuum of bedouin life in the current context. The presence of the tribal norms appeared to be subverted among the women in some social contexts; in others, especially when surrounded by the family and rest of the community, they felt strong respect towards these values. Whereas all of the informants valued self-sufficiency in their own lives, they also highly respected their families and tribe which brought the old values in play. Whereas this was often a question of social context, the women chose to accommodate aspects from the old tribal heritage in their lives even though it contradicted with the ideals of gender and femininity they idealised. The informant 3 discussed the importance of knowing different herbs and how she regrets the younger generation does not possess this knowledge anymore;

*"It's very important to know these things. In case you go to the mountain and there is no doctor, there's no anything to do medicines - you know what is painkiller from the herbs, and what is good for you. If it doesn't do something good for you, it does not hurt you! [...] But the girls who are in our age now, they are not like from my mother's time. Like, they go and sit in their houses and close their houses and just forget about everything".*

*[Informant 3]*

She valued highly the knowledge of her cultural heritage, and disapproved the women who did not seek to learn and continue these heritages in their lives. This shows how also the women applied social pressures towards other women in practicing these cultural aspects; it appeared to partly define the 'value' of femininity among the bedouin women, and created expectations for performing one's gender in a way that embraces also these aspects. Through these interactions, the women of young generation persistently ensured the presence of their cultural heritage in their lives.

*"You know, the old generation woman tries to keep on life between what was before and what is happening new. She is in the middle. And she carries on the old day".*

*[Informant 5]*

In line with the former, Informant 5 discussed how also the older generation shaped the ideals of femininity among the young women. This put the women's process of constructing femininities on an equilibrium between the tribal heritages and modern changes, causing them to balance between these two ends.

In line with Mahmood, the informants show agency by not only resisting the existing norms and structures, but in idealising and *choosing to adapt* to traditions and structures that are often associated with female subordination (2006; 37). Being exposed to different cultures and social worlds of Egyptian and foreign women, the subjects were aware that some of their cultural aspects limited their opportunities. They also agreed that not long ago, the women did not have as many freedoms as they have now.

*“Before women cannot say no. Like, if the family says so, you just go get married. And of course this guy, if he’s a good guy, the family would say yes. But if he’s not a good guy, then no. And the women before could not say yes or no. They don’t have choices. But now it’s different. A very big difference. Before they live in the mountains with tents; no technology, no nothing. They know only their families. They don’t even see men, you know? But now, it’s, like, little bit open minded. Little bit! And somehow, if there is men who want to get married with a girl, he ask the girl first.”*

*[Informant 3]*

She was proud to highlight such positive change in the women's life, and described how choosing to do something new was easier in her generation. Even so, the women actively chose to continue their cultural heritage in their lives. Some characteristics they got to choose to accommodate, such as learning about food culture, herbs, or handcrafts; other characteristics they did not necessarily desire but chose to include in their lives anyway. Following on from Mahmood's statement “subverting the hegemonic meanings of cultural practices and redeploying them for their own interests and agendas” (2006; 37), also these women found themselves devoid of comprehensively resisting the surrounding structures in multiple occasions - and even more so, *unwilling* to do so. Instead, they deployed these cultural practices for their own interests, or operated secretly as the ‘secret boyfriend’ -issue exemplifies. Typical for the bedouin culture, also all of my informants travelled regularly to the desert, much in the same way as women in Europe go to malls or have ‘girls nights’ to hang out and gossip. These trips among girls are seen

as a cultural behavior and is thus encouraged by the older generation. While complying to this, the girls used the opportunity to include their own interests and agendas to the occasion. When alone in the middle of the desert, they experimented the various ways in which they idealise femininity, for instance by listening to commercial music, dancing provocatively, dressing up and taking pictures of themselves. Even today, I receive pictures from these women posing in front of the camera in a way media celebrities do on Instagram, without their veil and with make-up on. In line with Mahmood, such behavior is their way of practicing their agency of combining tribal values and modern ideals, yet masking it as if they would just subvert the cultural practices as wished by the rest of the community. Whereas a lot of such experimenting is done also individually, the desert trip gives such performances of femininity a feeling of group-acceptance, granted by the other women. This then seemed to boost their courage to try out their new femininity 'performance' in front of wider audience.

In contrast, the dynamics of gender and femininity seemed to remain the same in family context. Mostly, men are still responsible for the house and therefore, can impose restrictions that shape the women's life. The informants, however, continuously voiced the central role family and marriage in their lives. This reflects the women's capacity to *adopt* the surrounding conditions, realities and norms, no matter how subverting they might seem. The women seemed to pay particular respect and pride towards this part of their lives, even if it was seen as restricting by many. While they acknowledged this, this sphere of social life seemed to remain closer to the norms and values of tribal life. However, this should not be blamed only on cultural restrictions; such behaviors are a result of histories of internal debates and struggles over justice that has occurred in the given social world, as well as the social, political and historical forces that hold responsibility for the ways people live (Abu-Lughod, 2013; 20). In the family sphere, there surely have been internal debates over the behavior, yet the informants did not touch upon this topic more.

### 5.3 Global/local

As Boddy states, resisting to place our cultural practices in the same light as those of other groups and cultures and refusing to seeing the latter as injustice or 'wrong' absent from our own lives, is due to the persisting image of these communities as abherrand and exotic "in terms of which they are oppositionally defined" (2016; 61). The extent to which these young women



adopt and reproduce global ideals of femininity in their local, social context is significant. The presence of social media and online material unarguably impacts the way these women come about their understanding of femininity. Following on from Boddy, this study agrees that perceiving nomadic communities - and minority groups in general - as backwarded or 'the others' of global peripheries, is outdated. Internet knows very few limits; the social media and endless flow of commercial material reaches anyone who wants to find it. Much like most of the people in this world, also these women are exposed to online content on daily basis. It would be ignorant to assume this would not have an impact on them as well (Boddy, 2016; 61). This has generated ideals of what it means to be a woman - ideals the women are tempted by, and prone to. Sometimes my subjects were confused of the digital realities and could not tell how realistic and reachable they would be. In some occasions the social media painted unrealistic pictures of how women's lives should be, which in turn had an impact on the subject's self-confidence, especially of those who have international friends to compare it with. For example when watching a Saudi music video from her phone Informant 1 sighed admirably when a beautiful woman stepped out of a fancy car in a shining dress. Many of the women often showed me pictures of commercial products and make-up, asking me to bring some from Cairo. For them, these were the issues that are pressing in the world today, exemplifying how social media has already shaped the ways in which they see the world and themselves in it.

Whereas these influencing factors kept them actively alert of the global ideals of femininity, Internet seems to also have a positive impact. It provided the women with new educational tools such as Google Translate, teaching them new skills such as writing English<sup>1</sup>, or opportunities to establish a professional network or reach new customers. Informant 2 used internet to promote her bracelet business online; this has brought her larger scope of customers and online prestige.

*"I use it (smartphone) for internet, to text our friends in Europe. We meet here and they buy from us some bracelets. We'll be friends and they say "we want to keep talking, to be friends", and then we talk on WhatsApp or Facebook or Instagram and I can... I know when they come back, they talk with us when they are here and we keep talking until they come*

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<sup>1</sup> Bedouins are largely illiterate. After the arrival of urban developments, the children started to attend education. However, this applies only to the younger generation. English education is still poor; the girls learn spoken English when working with tourists, but struggle to write it.

*back*".

[Informant 2]

She was seemingly proud of her social and linguistic capabilities in establishing such network, and flattered by the attention she got for her achievements. The material and ideals channeled through online platforms often contradicted the bedouin culture and religion, as some of these social media -produced feminine standards are considered forbidden (eg. dressing up in a way that shows woman's shape, moving or dancing provocatively, wearing makeup). The idealising of these imaginaries and global world led to reformulation of their understanding of femininities. For instance, investing in fashion, commercial products or teeth whitening illustrated a presence of the same global pressures women around the world are subjected to. This transforms the immediate global to the local level. The women's online presence is still largely private and hidden from the rest of the community; however, it does illustrate a trend towards crossing boundaries of culturally appropriate sensibilities, both currently and perhaps even more so in the future. Some of this behavior is already seen acceptable in certain social contexts which indicates the ongoing change. Therefore, there is a chance new understandings of femininity would become a culturally appropriate sensibility among rest of the community as well. In resonance with Chatty (2006) and De Jong (2013), the bedouin communities today have found an innovative way to apply and re-create their traditional life in the modern setting. This obviously results in cultural erosion in some aspects, yet simultaneously it shows their resistance and persistence in living and continuing their own culture as much as the context allows them to.

In line with Boddy, there appears to be a strong presence of globality in this given locality which blurs the lines between 'us' and 'them'. To an increasing extent, these women are affected by the global ideals and pressures and understandings of femininities. They, too, question their normality in relation to what they see in their social environment. Their social practices are thus to be contextualised in their local realities but also, in the inevitable presence of global forces. This leads us to the main difference the findings of this study show in contrast to Boddy's cultural appropriations. Whereas there is no solid 'us' or 'them' setting in this equation anymore as the women are mixing with global cultures, the subjects show a strong trend in accommodating old cultural norms and practices from the tribal lifestyle in their contemporary culture (Chatty, 2006; Goodman, 2013). These behaviors show differently in the light of global 'appropriations'; they are unique to this particular socio-cultural reality, and thus, shows these

women's agency to also differ from - or resist - the global ideals of womanhood. This is illustrated in the quotes where the informants describe what being a bedouin woman means to them; they are notably proud. Resonating with Mahmood, this could also be seen as a form of agency to accommodate surrounding norms even when they challenge or even limit their lives (2006). For the women of this study, respecting cultural customs means more; these customs still continue to resonate with their individual ideals. In such cases, they choose local appropriations over global ones, even when the online content tells them otherwise.

## 6 Discussion

The analysis above provides us with intimate accounts of the individual narratives and analytical perceptions of the young bedouin women of Mzeinah tribe. This chapter discusses the purpose of the study; how the subjects perceive and construct their understanding of femininity, and how they accommodate different aspects of *changes, continuities* and *global/local* forces.

The findings suggest the women perceive themselves vis-a-vis the changing conditions around them. Their different levels of engagement with the surrounding changes influence their self-perception. This engagement process is restricted - or enabled - by one's individual opportunities depending on the family, individual characteristics and social empowerment they gain from the women around them. These negotiations over ideals with the surrounding society, and among the women themselves, contribute to the understanding of femininities. However, the mere fact that there are so many social pressures and pulling forces of changes and continuities around them indicates that the women are still in the middle of redefining their femininities.

What exactly are the main changes and continuities in these women's lives? Whereas the answer depends mainly on one's individual characteristics, few common trends emerged among the informants. There is an ongoing identity limbo where the women adopt and blend understandings of femininities from traditional (continuities) and modern life (changes), and from behavioral models they absorb from their surroundings. There is constant pressure from the older generation and young men to enhance the tribal values and behavior among the young women. Naturally, this contributes to the *construction* of their self-understanding of femininities within the constraints and opportunities of their social realities, values, desires and choices. In my reading, such balancing process acts as a catalyst and a space for the women to reconstruct their understandings of femininities. The women are determined to display their reconstructed femininities through repetition of this behavior, thus gradually institutionalising it by subjecting the surrounding community for the new form of femininity. This is not always accommodated by the rest, however the findings indicate a presence of socio-cultural change and active reconstruction process that is taking place among the bedouins in Dahab. In line with the literature, this could be a form of 'modern' or 'urban' social change which reflects junctures to the traditional bedouin life (Chatty, 2006; Goodman, 2013). However, whereas this can be seen as a form of opposition by the women against the surrounding, local forces, their behavior does

not reflect an attitude of standing against the urban and modern changes but rather, blending it through an internal negotiation process. It seems the women are actively mixing and re-inventing their femininities, resulting in new forms of lifestyles, norms and values.

In the light of this, it seems that the aspects that have most continuity in their lives are the family norms. The context of home embodies multiple different continuities in the conditions of the women's understanding of themselves. Within these conditions, the women are both proud of and frustrated over the continuing aspects of bedouin life in their individual worlds; yet, they choose to adopt them due to respect towards their culture, and agency of accommodating and subverting norms they might not agree with (Mahmood, 2005). In contrary, what appears to be changing the most in their lives, are the issues related to public life such as education, work and relationships. The women act as 'trend-setters' of some sort, in performing new gender norms and practices (Butler, 1988). Having their own businesses, traveling alone, or just experimenting in very mundane issues such as make-up or fashion illustrates the way in which these women seek to explore beyond of the usual. The women find spaces where they can freely experiment these gender images among the girls themselves, as exemplified by their makeover sessions at the desert. They then implement these new forms of femininities in their lives among the community. It is indeed in these mundane, everyday dynamics, interactions and constraints, where the engagement with the surrounding world produces their femininities.

All this begs us to consider femininity in both Middle East as well as globally. It invites us to consider why some cultural practices and sensibilities are vilified in global, dominant perceptions, while other are embraced as options and opportunities that improve and glorify the lifestyle of women. Bearing in mind we are all conditioned by the social and cultural constraints of our own worlds, why is something that is seen 'cultural' or 'ritual' in one cultural context perceived as unacceptable even within the cultural conditions of these particular women? Women all over the world have ideals in regards to their bodies, behavior and femininities, which they accommodate and aim to achieve in their lives. In one cultural context this might be trained body, strong social presence and active dating life. Yet these ideals have also grown out from the surrounding, cultural conditions. As the informants of this study choose to adopt continuities from their *local* conditions (eg. veiling, domestic-oriented life, cultural traditions), as well as changes from *global* forces (eg. current fashion in make-up and clothes, sexuality), they are just as much constrained and free in choosing to adopt or reject these ideals in their own

cultural context (Boddy, 2016; Mahmood, 2005). Each young woman individually positions herself differently on an equilibrium between *continuing and changing* their ideals. The *local* conditions paradoxically triggers feelings of both frustration and respect, forcing the women to evaluate what aspects they choose to accommodate, and what to give up; similarly, the *global* forces result in increased curiosity and even anxiousness of balancing between what they desire, and what is culturally appropriate within their social conditions (Boddy, 2016). Apart from social pressures from the tribe and families, the women among themselves create forces of social pressures by performing new, idealised femininity in front of other women. Inherently, the women are expected by their community and *by themselves* to be ‘bedouin enough’ in terms of their cultural and domestic life; simultaneously, they are expected to know the newest fashion, hit releases and make-up trends. In this hybridity all the various forces of influence come into play, shaping the way in which the women construct their femininities. It is fair to assume they are facing an identity crisis of some sort, indicating the women have not exactly come about what their femininity is; they are still actively, yet gradually discovering it.

## 7 Conclusion

In sum, among the women of this study the process of constructing understanding of femininities comes in three phases; first, the individual evaluation of one's ideals, deriving from both local and global factors around them. Local forces include family, tribal values and the ideals of other young women, whereas the global ones are a result of the interaction with the foreign tourists in the town of Dahab, as well as social media which acts as a strong source of global, social pressures. Then, when the ideals are defined, the women attempt their new gender performance first in front of other women, and later, the wider community. This leads to the last phase of the construction process; the negotiation. Through the criticism or approval they receive, both from bedouins and the foreign population in Dahab, they individually evaluate whether it is worthy and desirable enough for them to continue attempting this femininity. By choosing to continue, the acts of repetition gradually lead to institutionalisation of the behavior among the bedouins. As mentioned, some behavior has already been a subject to change, such as concepts of marriage and relationships, ideals in outlooks as well as career. In contrast, the women value certain tribal cultural aspects in their lives, which is why they choose to incorporate and continue adopting them in their lives. Such values are strongly in link with their domestic life and cultural knowledge.

The *changes and continuities*, and *global and local* indeed embody the identity of these women today. Bound to their families, homes and tribe, their femininities are, to a great extent, a continuum of paradoxes of contentment and curiosity; characters that well describe their nomadic culture. It seems that we are witnessing a change in the way femininities are imagined in local particularities, which coincides with a globalising outreach of social media and gender ideals of what is normal and acceptable. The local attitudes of women in marginalised and minority communities are expanding from local, cultural conditions to global ones. In this nexus, these women are in the process of shaping their understanding of femininities among themselves, in contrast to their respective communities, and the global pressures. Whereas these identity constructions are characteristic for this particular community only, the findings would suggest the local and global sources of power trigger similar reconsiderations and constructions of femininity among not only minority women, but the women around the world.

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## 9 Appendix

### 9.1 Informant Profiles

In order to protect the informants' anonymity, only the following facts can be provided.

**Informant 1:** woman, age 24. Stayed home after completing basic education. Wishes to study more, yet the family does not allow her to.

**Informant 2:** woman, age 19. Owns her own business of selling bracelets. Source of main income in her family.

**Informant 3:** woman, age 23. Works in housekeeping. Source of main income in her family.

**Informant 4:** woman, age 24. Studies at an university in El Tur.

**Informant 5:** man, age estimation around 70 years. Owns a tourist camp.

**Informant 6:** man, age 36. Egyptian from Cairo who has worked as a tourist guide and lived among bedouins in South Sinai for the past 16 years.

## 9.2 Interview Script

The following questions were used as a basis for the interviews. Depending on the answers, the questions were modified according to the topics that emerged. The script was changed as found suitable in the situation in order to best answer the research question at hand.

“This is an interview about your life. I am interested in hearing your story, including parts of the past as you remember them and the future as you imagine it. The story is selective; it does not include everything that has ever happened to you. Instead, I will ask you to focus on a few key things in your life.

Firstly, for you individually, what does it mean to be a bedouin woman? [For men; how would you describe the bedouin woman?]

Describe me your experiences in your life in regards to:

- High points in life
- Low points in life
- Turning points, if any
- Major changes, if any
- What do you dream of?

This concludes the interview. Thank you for your participation”.