“AM I FRACTURED OR WHOLE?": EXPLORING CENTRAL ASIAN FEMALE STUDENTS’ SELF-IDENTITY IN AMERICAN GRADUATE SCHOOLS

A dissertation submitted to the Kent State University College of Education, Health, and Human Services in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand whether and how Central Asian female students’ identities change because of their studies in American higher education and cross-cultural encounters. Using a basic interpretive approach, I interviewed six female students from five countries of Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. My dissertation puts Central Asian women’s identity formation in a historical perspective. This offers some insight into who the female students were before coming to the United States and some of the challenges women face while defining their identities and coming to grips with their identity changes.

Based on the Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007), the Affective, Behavioral, and Cognitive Model of Culture Shock (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001), and the transnational feminist perspective (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994), the findings are divided into three chapters. The first findings chapter demonstrates the ambivalent nature of participants’ views on their certain identity dimensions. The second findings chapter elaborates on the transformative effects of higher education in the United States on women’s self-identity. The third findings
chapter explores the in-betweenness of women’s sense of self-identity after living and studying in the United States. The dissertation concludes by suggesting that universities should not view students’ identity change as a pathology, but to understand the sense of in-betweenness and accept this complexity that is still in process.

*Keywords*: identity construction, Central Asian female students, education abroad
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to

my parents Enejan and Sapardurdy;

my siblings Ejeş, Merdan, Alma, and Mähri;

my husband Brandon and my baby boy Silas.
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“so, here you are
too foreign for home
too foreign for here.
never enough for both.”

Umebinyuo (2015)
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

In Search of an Explanation

For women, studying in a foreign country carries particular implications for their sense of identity—namely, the way they choose to practice their agency and view themselves, as well as their intimate attachments and identifications with family, traditions, landscapes, and society (Ellwood, 2011; Galucci, 2014; Haugh, 2008; Koehne, 2005; 2006; Qin, 2009). While identity is generally understood as a concept of continuity and sameness among sociologists (Winkle-Wagner, 2009), Hall (1990) emphasizes identity as a notion that is in a constant state of change and transformation. Hall (1990) portrays an individual’s identity as unstable, fluid, in process, and as one of becoming rather than just being, which allows for multiple and sometimes contradictory ways of being at the same time, which may seem unsettling for some individuals. Identity is not an “already accomplished fact… [but rather] it is a production” (Hall, 1990, p. 222). It is also not a free-floating entity; rather, it is tied to histories, times, narratives, and societies (Hall, 1990). The term identity is used to refer to the social categories in which an individual claims membership as well as their personal unique character traits (Deaux, 1993). The term self-identity signifies female students' reflexivity on their personhood as a whole (Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012), including their social identities and personal identity (Jones & Abes, 2013).

The tremendous changes that international students experience—the movement away from networks, from family and friends, from familiar cultural and educational
markers, from their language—may lead students to place themselves in a narrative of agency and of strength (Glass, Wongtrirat, & Buus, 2015). Cultural change also “implies the capacity to relinquish at least aspects of a given identity” (Robins, 1996, p. 61). These changes allow students to live “…in a parallel universe, one that belongs to them alone as they negotiate and renegotiate who they are…” (Koehne, 2006, p. 251). Students’ identity negotiation may depend on multiple factors, and Paige (1993) identifies ten specific contrasting cultural circumstances that have a significant psychological impact upon individuals in cross-cultural educational experiences. They include cultural difference, ethnocentrism, language, power and control, cultural immersion, cultural isolation, prior intercultural experience, expectations, physical difference, and social status.

Spending an extensive period in a foreign country to get an education may lead international students to transform their identity in various ways, as suggested by Paige’s (1993) intensity factors as well as students’ gender, their sociocultural, and historical contexts. These intensity factors can increase the psychological intensity of stress during the adaptation process. Some students may undergo massive identity change, but some may identify with only specific portions of U.S. society. Yet they must find their way among many attachments and various identifications, in addition to the attachments international female students had before leaving their home country¹ (Paige, 1993; Hall, 1990).

¹ International female students may have had attachments to their family, friends, professional affiliations, religion(s), custom(s), tribal network(s), language(s), landscapes, and other social structures. Paige’s (1993) intensity factors may play a major role here. For example, looking at a factor of power and control, one can see the difference between a woman who came to the U.S. right after her undergraduate degree and a woman who held a highly-respected position before she came to the U.S.
The issue of experiencing new identifications with a new culture and people lies not only in the process of such experience, but also in the fact that students who study abroad may not always be aware of the impacts of those experiences to their self-identity. Often when students decide to study abroad, their initial goals are to gain knowledge, learn a new language, and meet new people (Zhang, Satlykgylyjova, Almuhajiri, & Brown, 2013). It is rare that one chooses to study abroad with the specific goal of changing their sense of identity. With or without such awareness of identity negotiations, one may experience a sense of loss in addition to feelings of anxiety, fear, and disturbance (Hall, 1990; Robins, 1996; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001), or the experience may be positive and rewarding (Glass et al., 2015). In both cases, pursuing a higher education in a foreign context is a powerful force in shaking up women’s identities and their lives (Arar, Masry-Harzalla, & Haj-Yehia, 2013).

This study focuses particularly on Central Asian female students’ identity transformations. For Central Asian women in the post-Soviet era, the process of identity transformation may come with added pressures. The study abroad programs funded by the Central Asian governments come with the expectation that students will return to their home countries more educated, and yet fundamentally, still the same individuals with the same self-understanding and loyalties to family, community and nation (e.g., Nessipbayeva, 2015). For instance, the Bolashak study abroad program funded by the government of Kazakhstan indicates that “upon completion of their graduate degree, Bolashak scholars are required to return to work in Kazakhstan for at least five years” (Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, n.d., para. 1), although this requirement may be
changed depending on the level of degree a student pursues abroad. Such emphasis on contribution to the home country showcases that this study abroad program is not about feeding into individuals’ personal gain or their identity transformation but to align national expertise with national goals.

While the transformative dimensions of education and cultivating critical consciousness are considered as a given in the U.S., the government officials and policy makers of Central Asian countries may not believe in similar educational philosophies. Further complicating matters, situations and expectations may vary from country to country. The circumstances may be different if students are studying in the U.S. on their own, without any financial assistance from their governments, or if their education is funded by the U.S. government. In fact, the exchange programs funded by the U.S. government promote and emphasize the belief in people-to-people contacts and soft power, that is the idea that a country can achieve what it wants in world politics by the power of attraction (Lutter, 2015). Soft power is the persuasive approach to international relations involving the use of cultural influence. Although the U.S. intentions behind funded exchange programs are subtle in nature, the programs fundamentally encourage change and transformation to better the students themselves and the societies they live in.

Here, female students’ experiences with transformative effects of studying in the U.S. are examined through the transnational feminist perspective. This is in accordance with Blum’s (2016) findings with return migrants from Kazakhstan. He asserts that men change less dramatically than women and that “compared to female return migrants, male returnees tend to be far less involved in negotiations on gender issues” (p. 143). As a
matter of fact, after observing and interacting with women in the U.S., both male and female return migrants in Blum’s work delineate significant ways in which women in Kazakhstan do not fully enjoy gender equality. For example, they note a professional decision-making inequality between men and women, and that men make the final call for most major issues. Even though women in Kazakhstan practice modern behavior by such things as going out and having a drink, they normally first get permission from their husbands or boyfriends (Blum, 2016).

Despite the fact that Blum (2016) reports crucial differences in identity change between male and female return migrants of Kazakhstan, this study focuses on female students' experiences in their own right, rather than emphasizing the differences of women's transformations in relation to men. Based on transnational feminist theories the varying contexts of Central Asian female students' lived experiences and their identity transformations are highlighted, as are the idea that global sisterhood (Morgan, 1990) may no longer represent all women of the world as one unilateral category. The tendency of such theoretical conceptualizations of women's concerns and issues toward Westernization (Mohanty, 2003; Spivak, 1994) may not represent the varying experiences of Central Asian female students. Based on Grewal and Kaplan's (1994) interdisciplinary and transnational approaches to women's studies, this study analyzes Central Asian female students' identity transformations and considers the ever-changing relationships they are involved with in terms of movements of people and ideas.

Despite the sprawling theoretical and empirical discourses on identity, knowledge of how identity changes in the context of Central Asian female students studying in U.S.
higher education is still limited. Blum’s (2016) compelling work on return migrants is the one most related to such a problem area. The author focuses on male and female Kazakhstani return migrants’ individual-level experiences, and structural explanations of cultural change by focusing on their cultural identity. The author looks at how return migrants’ individual-level changes make an impact on more macro-level cultural globalization. In this study, I build on Blum’s (2016) work and extend these individual-level changes to focus on female students’ transformations from five Central Asian countries. Further, emphasis is placed specifically on female graduate students’ experiences in the context of U.S. higher education. The complex processes of Central Asian female students’ identity construction are examined using a qualitative approach that invites participants to reflect on their experiences of crossing cultural borders and studying in a foreign context long term. These reflections build better understandings of the consequences of these experiences on women’s personal and social identities. With this information, future female students from Central Asia can be better prepared to go through such a complex cultural transition, and educators and administrators of the U.S. higher education system can be better prepared to accommodate them.

In any case, Central Asian female students choose to study in graduate schools with specific goals and expectations, which may not align with their said realities. Said realities are emphasized because the contributions women bring to the study are doubly mediated by participants’ own recollections of their experiences with change and by the researcher’s analysis of their recollections (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). This study offers detailed findings of those said realities of transformation, considering the participants’
recollections of their changed behaviors, stress and coping, and the way they now view their self-identity and its various dimensions.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand whether and how Central Asian female students’ identities change because of their studies in U.S. higher education and cross-cultural encounters. Identity construction is generally portrayed as a process that occurs whenever female students negotiate or translate the cultural differences they face while living and studying in the U.S. Specifically, I explore the transformative effects of studying in the U.S. on the identities of female students who were living and studying in the U.S. for a minimum two years at the time of initial data collection process.

In psychodynamic terms, Erikson (1956) portrays the process of identity formation throughout an individual’s life cycle. However, I am not interested in exploring Central Asian women’s identity development from birth to death because I consider the crossing of cultural boundaries as a *rupture* or a breach of continuous development in one setting, which was not embedded in Eriksonian formation of identity. I am interested in exploring only the impacts of crossing cultural boundaries, studying in higher education, and how psychological adjustment and sociocultural adaptation in a new setting affects Central Asian graduate students’ self-understanding or their self-identity.

I explore multiple dimensions of Central Asian women’s identity, including their personal identity or core and their various social identities (e.g. religious, gender, ethnicity, and linguistic identity). Social identity designates the person's memberships in
social groups, and personal identity denotes the person's specific character traits (Deaux, 1993; Jones & Abes, 2013). Drawing from the Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (RMMDI) (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007), I investigate how the Central Asian historical context influenced the way female students view their various social identities, and how those social identities changed the women’s core or personal identity that is the center of their being (Jones, 1997). Specifically, I investigate the reflections of women on how social memberships and other contextual influences in the U.S. may have affected their views on their self-identity.

**Significance of the Study: Research Questions**

Three observations clarify the contemporary significance of the overall research framework. First, scholars in various disciplines have argued that identities must be situated within a broader and ongoing process of cultural change within a society (Bhabha, 1994; Deaux, 1993; Hall & Du Gay, 1996; Kraidy, 2005; Spivak, 1994). More specifically, they have examined the complicated conceptual overlap of globalization scholarship and postcolonial discourse to describe how identities are situated in a complex web of interlocking histories (Kraidy, 2005). Placing post-Soviet Central Asian women in such broader processes of cultural mutation and change within a society enables a better understanding of the complexities and dynamics of such societal histories and their consequences that have impacted contemporary Central Asian identity.

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2 The term ‘postcolonial’ is written without a hyphen because the connotation of cultural legacies of colonialism and imperialism is emphasized rather than the literal meaning of “after” for the prefix “post.” Although, many critics insisted on the hyphen to distinguish post-colonial studies “as a field” from colonial discourse theory (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2007).
Specifically, contextualizing Central Asian female students’ identity in historical perspective is beneficial for this study not only to understand who the female students were before coming to the U.S., but also to make the Central Asian countries and people more known in American higher education institutions.

Second, individuals from Central Asia or other Asian countries do not negotiate the cultural and educational differences the same way as those who are from Europe or other Western countries because the level of difference between cultures is more drastic for Asian countries than the European ones (Blum, 2016; Liberman, 1994; McCargar, 1993). Moreover, women and men of Central Asia or other Asian countries may experience various U.S. cultural aspects differently from one another, depending on the societal power dynamics or socially constructed gender roles (Blum, 2016; Yoder & Kahn, 1992). This study, which focuses on female students’ experiences in the U.S., is significant because the findings show certain gender-specific identity transformations that are not relevant to multiple genders. Understanding female students' cross-cultural experiences in their own right is significant because it generates heterogeneous narratives based on women’s specific circumstances that are unique to them alone.

Finally, understanding everyday negotiations of being Central Asian (or Turkmen, Kazakh, Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Tajik, Pamiri, Muslim, etc.) in the U.S. higher education context and understanding their customs and traditions is essential not only to participants themselves but also future participants of various study abroad programs. Understanding identity construction may assist future study abroad participants in better coping with the cultural struggles they might face. The findings may also help educators and institutions
of the U.S. to be better prepared to accommodate and advise students from Central Asia on the changes they might go through during their studies in graduate programs and help with their cultural transitions.

The following research questions guided data collection and analysis in this dissertation study.

1. How do Central Asian female students understand their self-identities after studying in higher education institutions and living in the United States for more than two years?

2. In what ways do studying in the United States higher education system and crossing cultural boundaries change Central Asian female students' perceptions of their self-identities?

3. How do Central Asian female students negotiate their self-identities when studying and living in a new context and/or after they return to their country of origin?

**Why Identity Matters**

Studying identity and its changes is important because through identity, individuals make sense of the world, their experiences with the world, and their relationships with other people and places (McCarthey & Moje, 2002). Identity matters because individuals can be understood by others in particular ways, and people act depending on such understanding and positioning. According to Josselson (1996), "[i]dentity is what we make of ourselves within a society that is making something of us" (p. 28). The ways individuals view themselves and the way society influences individuals
are very interrelated, tightly connected, and “identity formation is truly multifaceted: it is at once social and personal…” (Blum, 2016, p. 186).

Jones and Abes (2013) highlight the importance of the contextual influences when discussing general college students' identities. They discuss the contexts, such as power and privilege, as an essential part of the influences on students' understandings of themselves. Certain influences may not always be possible to control, such as growing up in an underprivileged environment (Jones & Abes, 2013). The context becomes even more important for identity construction when discussing international students, because they may go through additional challenges, such as language learning, culture learning, and experiencing feelings of powerlessness (Furnham, 2010). These challenges of adaption and adjustment may have affective, behavioral, and cognitive consequences of cross-cultural transition in international students (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001).

Being conscious of one’s identity may be beneficial for Central Asian female students, because such deliberation may help them to better situate their predispositions in a new culture and in a new educational system. The clarification of what they stand for, who they stand with, where they stand, and how they manifest their identities may lead to lesser emotional disturbances when two different cultures and educational systems clash. Knowing participants' experiences may allow those involved in study abroad programs to have a better understanding of what happens intrinsically, emotionally, and behaviorally when crossing cultural boundaries.
Theoretical Framework: An Overview

Three major theoretical strands help to make sense of and trace the details of Central Asian female students' identity construction in American higher education context. First, the shifting nature of identity is explained through the RMMDI (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Jones, 1997; Jones & McEwen, 2000). The model illustrates the nuances of identity by incorporating multiple and intersecting identities, and the influence of contextual factors. The model provides both internal and external definitions of identity: a self-defined core sense of self, and the more macro role of the context. This model captures a temporal snapshot of students' identity construction. The two snapshots drawn for this research study during the individual interviews and focus group interview portray female students' identity construction after they have studied in the U.S. for more than two years. Yet, the RMMDI does not explicate the continuous changes of students' identities, and it does not clarify the specific details of identity changes when individuals create a rupture in their continuous development by crossing borders or cultures.

Thus, Ward, Bochner, and Furnham's (2001) Affective, Behavioral, and Cognitive (ABC) Model of Culture Shock complements the previous model. The ABC model is ideal, because it is comprehensive, longitudinal, dynamic, systemic, and pragmatic. The authors consider acculturation as a process that occurs over time, rather than focusing on a snapshot in time. The pragmatic part of the model is useful in the sense that it provides this study with intervention suggestions for international students. Although interventions such as mentoring and cultural trainings are significant, the model is mainly utilized to
comprehend the intricate details of the process of Central Asian female students' identity transformation with the process of acculturation.

Third, female students' identity construction is analyzed through a transnational feminist perspective (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994), in order to highlight the idea that not all women of the world fall under a unilateral category of global sisterhood and that women are heterogeneous and diverse (Mohanty, 2003). Transnational feminist theorists problematize contemporary feminist theory by arguing that Western liberal feminism cannot represent women of the East under Western eyes or in relation to Western women and consider them within one category as a Third World Woman (Mohanty, 2003). The term transnational is utilized in this new branch of feminist scholarship to refute the ‘international’ conceptualization in which nation states are viewed through comparative lens. The study seeks to investigate Central Asian female students’ identity transformation from transnational feminist perspective to recognize women’s profound differences and to emphasize women’s experiences in their own right.

Each theoretical strand is in place to meet a particular objective of this dissertation study. The first strand offers an understanding of what participants’ identity construction entails after living and studying in the U.S. for more than two years. The second strand explains the intricate details of participants’ acculturation process and their psychological adjustment and pedagogical and sociocultural adaptation with affective, behavioral, and cognitive outcomes (Ward et al., 2001). The transnational feminist perspective recognizes the heterogeneity among women, even among the participants of this study.
Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter II contextualizes the Central Asian women’s identities in historical perspective. It explains how women's gender, ethnic, religious, national, and linguistic identities have been affected by the construction of the Soviet system. First, an overview of the history of Central Asian region is given, which is followed by an analysis of issues related to the identity development of Central Asian women. The major policies implemented by the Soviet regime, such as the women's emancipation campaign in 1927 and indigenization, language and collectivization policies, which impacted women's lives are discussed (Allworth, 1994a). The chapter concludes with a discussion of the current directions the Central Asian countries are taking culturally, socially, politically, and the significance of these policies to women.

Chapter III discusses the theoretical framework, which is composed of three strands of theoretical scholarship. Each strand plays a vital role in explicating women's identity transformation when crossing cultural boundaries for education purposes. First, using the RMMDI (Jones & Abes, 2013), Central Asian female students' identity construction is portrayed as a snapshot in time—that is, their perceptions of their self-identities after living and studying in U.S. higher education for more than two years. Second, the ABC model of culture shock provides insights about how the process of crossing cultures makes a difference in women's lives (Ward et al., 2001). Third, changes female students may experience in the U.S. are explained through the transnational feminist perspective (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994), as Central Asian female students may not carry values similar to U.S. women or other women who live in the U.S.
Chapter IV describes the research design and methods of this dissertation, which uses the basic interpretive approach. Discussed are the design, methods of data collection and analysis, and the trustworthiness of the study. The chapter also details the experiences of navigating the U.S. higher education system and living in a new cultural context with constant negotiation of my own identity as an outsider researcher and an insider member.

Chapters V through VII contain the substantive findings from the study. Chapter V focuses on the participants' self-understandings after studying in the U.S. for more than two years. The chapter explores how certain identities are more salient than others, after experiencing a graduate school and a different culture. The issues of relationality and independence, which compose the individual's core sense of self, are addressed in this chapter, including the expressed ambivalence about certain social identities, such as religious and ethnic identities. The chapter also portrays one common theme, which spans each female participant's experiences, that is about a 'hunger' for knowledge and a strong desire to achieve a better quality of life through education abroad. This chapter does not focus on the process of transformation per se, but rather it lays the groundwork for it. The chapter discusses the main insights of the participants’ identity awareness and their awareness of the various dimensions of identity.

Chapter VI focuses on the processes of the female students’ identity transformation and the key influencing factors that are related to informal education and formal schooling. The themes of this chapter include the changed purpose of education for female students, which becomes about focusing on their own personal growth, rather
than getting education for materialistic achievements. Although in the previous chapter the female students discuss their relational aspect of their identity, they elaborate how such relationality had to be superseded by independence and self-efficacy in order to succeed in their graduate schools in the U.S. The female students also express their changed views on sex, romantic relationships, and marriage.

Chapter VII elaborates on how participants of this study negotiate their self-identity with all its complexities after their exposure to the outside world. The findings of this chapter include the participants’ negotiations with their awareness about the difficulty of demonstrating their strength in terms of having more knowledge and self-sufficient qualities in their home countries. The chapter also includes the participants’ negotiations with the psychological disturbance they experience in terms of feeling incomplete, fractured, and a desire to find where they feel psychologically ‘at-home.’

Chapter VIII focuses on the implications of this research for future research and practice. The findings of this dissertation suggest significant areas for future students from Central Asia or from other similar socio-historical and cultural contexts seeking to study and live in the U.S. for longer than a two-year term. The findings can also be beneficial and helpful to female Central Asian students who participated in this research study, as both individual and focus group interviews pushed these female students to clarify and substantiate their claims sharpening their identity awareness. The chapter wraps up with some suggestions for higher education institution administrators, academic advisors, faculty, and international office staff interested in the outcomes of the international students’ experiences in graduate schools.
Transliteration

Before the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, people in Turkestan used the Arabic script mainly for the literary language Chagatay, and it was accessible to only a limited proportion of the population. Other vernacular languages were only oral. Kyrgyz, Turkmen, and Uzbek people began to use the Latin script in 1927; Kazakh, Karakalpak, and Tajik started using Latin in 1928 (Allworth, 1994a). Eventually all Central Asian nations were required to switch to Cyrillic alphabet in 1940 (Clement, 2005). The following chapters contain multiple words, names, and phrases with roots in Turkic, Persian, Arabic, and Russian languages. To be consistent with extant literature in Central Asian studies, transliteration is consistent with the Library of Congress system for Cyrillic (see Table 1) (The Library of Congress, 2016). Exceptions occur when there is a widely accepted standard English spelling, such as Moscow and not Moskva, Uzbek and not Özbek.

Although there are studies which use transliteration from local Central Asian or Turkic/Persian languages into English, Cyrillic is the focus for a few reasons. Central Asian languages have been written in more than one script since the beginning of the twentieth century. Chapter II of this dissertation focuses on Central Asian history, emphasizing multiple occasions, policies, and practices labeled in Arabic, Persian, Turkic, or Russian languages even in English literature. Cyrillic is used because several resources were published in the Russian language. Also, I focus on the spelling and pronunciation of terms as they would be written and would sound in the Russian
language because Russian became the means of communication among the five Central Asian nations.

All six participants of this study used their names with Russian pronunciation and spelling. Five out of six participants’ names are pronounced the same in their respective local languages as in Russian. Only one participant’s name had a letter which changed the spelling and pronunciation if it were written in Russian, but she spelled and pronounced her name in Russian. Moreover, the interviews with participants were conducted in English, and there were several occasions when each participant switched back to Russian to remember certain phrases. The pseudonyms used to replace participants’ names and all other non-English words are transliterated into English as they would sound in the Russian language.
Table 1

*Library of Congress System for Cyrillic Script*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vernacular</th>
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<th>Vernacular</th>
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<tr>
<td>А а</td>
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<tr>
<td>И и</td>
<td>I i</td>
<td>Ш ш</td>
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<tr>
<td>Й й</td>
<td>Й й</td>
<td>Ь Ь</td>
<td>‘(hard sign)’</td>
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<td>К к</td>
<td>K k</td>
<td>Ы Ы</td>
<td>Y y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Л л</td>
<td>L l</td>
<td>Ь Ь</td>
<td>‘(soft sign)’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>М м</td>
<td>M m</td>
<td>Ь Ь</td>
<td>Ie Ie</td>
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CHAPTER II
CONTEXTUALIZING WOMEN’S IDENTITY IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The purpose of this dissertation is to understand whether and how Central Asian female students' identities change as a result of their studies in U.S. higher education and their cross-cultural encounters. This chapter seeks to contextualize in historical perspective how contemporary Central Asian women’s complex social and cultural identities come into being. This historical contextualization offers a way to gain insight into who the female students were before coming to the U.S. and explains some of the challenges women face while defining their identities and coming to grips with their identity changes. The focus of this chapter is to provide sources for women's possible social identities.

To fully understand the multilayered and complex identities of women in the Central Asian region is not easy. Schoeberlein-Engel (1994) asserts that “each time you peel a layer off, you find more complexity underneath” (p. 19). One important fact must be noted before describing Central Asian population—that is, most available knowledge to scholars interested in Central Asia^3 stems from the works of Russian, European, and United States scholars and adventurers. Given the literacy rates of the Central Asian

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^3 The contemporary Central Asian region once had the name Turkestan. Under the Russian empire, the Khivan khanate and Bukharan emirate remained as protectorates under the Russian sovereignty. They were considered separate from the Turkestan territory starting in 1867, when the Turkestan Governorship-General was established (Allworth, 1994a; Becker, 1994). Turkestan territory was divided into five oblasts: Transcaspian (Ashkhabat), Samarkand, Semirechye (Verny), Syr-Darya (Tashkent), and Fergana (new Margelan) (Menges, 1994). Central Asia was a geographic term, and Turkestan was generally a political one which signified the part of Central Asia that was under direct Russian rule after the late 1860s. For sake of clarity, I refer to the region only as Central Asia throughout this dissertation.
women in the pre-Soviet era, those who wrote down and published histories were either Russian colonizers and explorers, or the elites at the courts of the Bukharan emirate and the Khivan khanate. As Hall (1990) warns, “we all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific” (p. 222). Thus, what is said is always in context or positioned. If the descriptive information about people of Central Asian region given by these Western scholars seems preoccupied with comparison to Western ways of being and living, it is worth remembering that all discourse is placed and in context (Hall, 1990).

Moreover, before discussing what social identities women might have been associated with in the past, I would like to comment on the literature I have used to describe the possible identity transformations of women at different historical moments. I utilized three different types of resources to tackle this phenomenon: Soviet literature, Western sources published during the Soviet times, and a new generation of Western scholars’ sources published after the collapse of the Soviet Union. I find all these sources ideologically-bound, and therefore, each source serves its own ideological goal. For instance, the intention of the Soviet literature is to underline the steps taken for women’s emancipation, collectivization, indigenization, and the educational achievements of the Soviet regime in an illiterate Central Asia (e.g., Shamsieva, 1961). Some Western sources published during the Soviet times seem to be aimed at proving that Muslim Central Asia was doing well in the eyes of Western outsiders before the Russian Tsarist empire colonized it (e.g., Baczkowski, 1958; Kolarz, 1964; Pap, 1985; Zinam, 1985).
These resources were limited in terms of evidence, as most of the archived materials of late 19th and early 20th century were not available to foreign scholars. A new generation of Western scholars, scholars schooled in the West who could mainly read Russian or English languages, published a myriad of work underlining counter arguments about the nature of Soviet relations to Central Asian population. This new generation of scholars brought to the table more nuanced arguments about Soviet policies. The major dimension that makes Soviet literature diverge from all Western sources is its ideology.

Women’s Ethnic Identity

The participants of the present research study represent contemporary Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Pamiri, Turkmen, and Uzbek ethnic groups. An ethnic identity of women is only one category of the highly contextualized and multi-dimensional identities under which individuals operate. In the pre-Soviet era, associations with an ethnic group or a national sense of belonging were not significant part of being. Usually, it was only in a relationship with outsiders that people became conscious of being members of an ethnic group, a religious group, or a geological region (Edgar, 2004; Schoeberlein-Engel, 1994). The way a person identified themselves depended on who was asking the question (Shahrani, 1984). To another fellow Central Asian of the region, they may refer to their city, tribe or clan, but to a Russian person or another outsider they may refer to their nationality (Shahrani, 1984).

It is difficult to establish the historical sequence of events that led to the ethnogenesis of contemporary Central Asian ethnicities. The contemporary ethnic terms have been used by various political and cultural figures at different times for different
purposes. During the Soviet times, Stalin separated Central Asian people into as many ethnicities as he could in an attempt to prevent Muslim unity in the region (Allworth, 1990; Martin, 2001). There are various speculations about the roots of each one of the present ethnic groups, and each ethnic identity has a measure of artificiality about it because of the changes that happened during the Soviet times. The contemporary Central Asian ethnicities were constructed in 1920s by the central government without a clear understanding of the Central Asian history (Allworth, 1990, pp. 202-206).

There is consensus among the historians of the 20th century that the contemporary Tajiks directly derived from the Eastern Iranian people who spoke Iranian language and mainly populated the areas around the Amu Darya basin (Barthold, 1962; Bregel, 2003; Frye, 1963; 1996). Bregel (2003) speculates that Turkmens derived from the mid-tenth century Turks, who were descendants of the Oghuz tribe that converted to Islam. The term Uzbek seems to represent the Turko-Mongol population who mainly spoke the Turkic language, with the literary version called Chagatay, and populated a large oasis region Khorezm (Bregel, 2003). Before the Soviet Union was formed, Tajiks and Uzbeks alike were known as Sarts and the term meant settled peoples as opposed to nomads. However, the Russians started using the term as a derogatory ethnic designation (Allworth, 1990). The name Tajik was applied occasionally to Uzbeks as a synonym for Sart (Allworth, 1990; Atkin, 1993; Bregel, 2003; Niyozov, 2004).

Historians delineate the difference of Pamiri people from the Tajiks, with their own history, preserved native languages, and cultural traditions in the remote territory of the mountain Badakhshan (Allworth, 1994a; Bregel, 2003; Niyozov, 2004; Schoeberlein-
Engel, 1994). The Pamiri ethnic groups, such as Shugnani, Roshani, Wakhi, Ishkashimi, Yazgulami, and Bartangi, almost exclusively belong to the Shi’a Ismaili sect, which acknowledges the Aga Khan IV or 49th hereditary Imam Shah Karim al-Hussaini as their living Imam, spiritual leader (Kreutzmann, 2003; Niyozov, 2004; 2018). Ismailis believe that their living Imam descends directly from the Prophet Mohammad to continue the talim (instruction) and tawi (interpretation) of God’s final message to community of believers (Ismaili Gnosis, 2018). Tajiks, who practice mainly the Sunni branch of Islam, consider themselves different from Pamiris, who practice Shi’a Islam. These forms of identity have remained influential in contemporary Tajikistan despite the growth of national consciousness (Atkin, 1993).

It is difficult to discern the origins of contemporary Kazakh and Kyrgyz ethnic groups as they have a very convoluted history. The contemporary Kazakh and Kyrgyz ethnic groups were intentionally created and placed into certain republics only after the Soviet Union was formed (Akiner, 1995; Martin, 2001). The constant movement of these nomadic populations in the pre-Soviet era, resulting in incessant merging and splintering of tribal groupings, meant there was no clear-cut ethnic division between any of these formations. The Kazakh and Kyrgyz ethnicities referred to different groups at different times. According to Akiner (1995), in Russian sources of the late 16th century the expression Kazakh Horde is used, but then it is replaced with the terms Kyrgyz, Kyrgyz-Kaisak, or Kaisak. One characteristic is important to highlight about these ethnic groups: the inhabitants of present Kazakh and Kyrgyz lands followed a nomadic way of life and
this lifestyle served as a fundamental element of physical and mental qualities it fostered (Akiner, 1995).

Soon after seizing power in 1917, the Soviet government issued declaration of rights of nationalities, proclaiming the equality of all races and creeds (Hirsch, 2000; Jones Luong, 2004; Martin, 2001). The inhabitants of the Soviet Union were granted formal citizenship, and they were not ‘subjects’ as Indians had been in the British empire (Adams, 2005; 2010; Khalid, 2007a). The national delimitation for the republics of the Soviet Union in Central Asia did not exist previously (Martin, 2001). In the pre-Soviet era, the region had neither clear territories based on ethnic groups, nor a national form of identity corresponding to territory upon which republics could be readily established (Jones Luong, 2004; Martin, 2001). Hence, ethnicity and nationality were not commonly used identities in Central Asia at the time; these identities were imposed upon the people of the region by the government of the Soviet Union (Allworth, 1990).

The Bolshevik leadership pursued policies of korenizatsiya (indigenization) and delegated primary responsibility for the implementation of these policies to several committees in the mid-1920s (Martin, 2001). The main idea of the policy was to grow native communist cadres in the governmental administrative offices by a variety of

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4 Bolshevik means ‘one of the majority.’ The group originated at the party's second congress in 1903, when Lenin's followers won a temporary majority on the party's central committee, while insisting party membership be restricted to professional revolutionaries. Later in 1912, Lenin formed a separate Bolshevik organization, splitting into OR the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (Suny, 2011).

5 Those committees were “the Central Executive Committee (TsIK), and its Soviet of Nationalities; the Russian Federated Republic’s (RSFSR) Central Executive Committee (VTsIK), and its Nationalities Department; and the Commissariat of Education (Narkompros RSFSR) and its Nationalities Committee (Komnats)” (Martin, 2001, p. 22).
policies including developing the use of national languages (Fierman, 2009; Martin, 2001). The policy details included the translation of the important documents into local languages and the involvement of ‘working masses’ of various nationalities in the state building projects. For Martin (2001), *korenizatsiya* was more of a prophylactic policy designed to prevent the development of nationalism among the formerly oppressed indigenous people through the provision of national territories, languages, elites, and cultures.

A common interpretation of the Soviet nationality policy is that Stalin intentionally created republics of mixed ethnicities in the 1920s when he was the Commissioner of Nationalities, in order to prevent a unified Islamic resistance to the Soviet rule (e.g., Martin, 2001; Olcott, 1981). However, there are other interpretations of the Soviet nationality policy. For instance, Hirsch (2000) argues that the creation of nationalities was the result of the Soviet experts’ “own civilizing program based on Marx’s proposed stages of human development…in order to push… [the feudal clans and tribes]… along the evolutionary timeline, envisioning the mature Soviet Union as a socialist union of denationalized peoples ” (p. 203).

Regardless of what the intentions were, multiple villages found themselves in the ‘wrong’ national republic or oblast after national-territorial delimitation. Among them were Uzbek villages which ended up in Kyrgyz and Kazakh territories, and Kazakh villages in Uzbek territories. Being on the wrong side of the border brought multiple difficulties as a result of differences in language, custom, culture, and economic orientation (Hirsch, 2000). In 1924, an Uzbek satire magazine, *Mushtum*, demonstrated
how untraditional these ethnic categories were for the Central Asians. For instance, there was an image of a man in Kazakh costume writing Uzbek on a blank form and Tajik-appearing man declaring Kazakh on a questionnaire (as cited in Allworth, 1990).

**Women’s Education and Linguistic Identity**

In the pre-Soviet times, many Central Asian people had little access to formal education, and the concept of mass education did not exist. For the ancestors of currently known ethnicities, such as the Kyrgyz, Kazakh, and Turkmen, the difficulty was partly due to their nomadic lifestyle. For the sedentary population like the ancestors of currently known Uzbeks and the Tajiks, education was delivered through religion, and it had two levels: primary Islamic school, or *maktab* and the Islamic college, or *madrasa*. Maktab students learned religious texts, recitation of Koran, and classics of the Central Asian literature. Boys and girls were taught by *domla* (male teachers) or by *otin* (female teachers) in separate groups. In Bukhara and Khiva, every village had a maktab. However, the number of madrasas was far less than the number of maktabs. The level of education was higher for madrasahs, as the subjects such as law, logic, and philosophy were taught and only men had access to them. Otins in most traditional urban neighborhoods led various religious practices among adult women (Kamp, 2006; Khalid, 1998).

One factor is obvious about the pre-Soviet era - educating girls was not as common practice as educating boys, and education with an otin was not available to all girls in settled areas, and not even a practice among the nomads (Kamp, 2006). Khalid (1998) described how important it was for maktabs to inculcate “proper modes of
behavior and conduct (tarbiya)” (p. 21). Thus, sending a girl to study with an otin was important as it would make her more desirable for marriage (Kamp, 2006). For instance, a Kyrgyz and Soviet author Aitmatov’s (1962) fictional novel *First Teacher: Duishen* paints the portrait of the negative attitudes of the people towards girls' education in the early Soviet period in rural Kurkureu village in Kyrgyz Autonomous Oblast. His significant work enunciates that the representation of women’s social identities in the pre-Soviet period included a low rate of literacy and subaltern way of life in a religious, hierarchical, and patriarchal society (Igmen, 2012; Massell, 1974; Montgomery, 2016; Northrop, 2004).

On the other hand, an Uzbek and Soviet journalist Saodat Shamsieva (1961) demonstrates by writing her own autobiography that she could achieve her dreams despite the socio-cultural difficulties she faced. Shamsieva lived through all three (pre, during, and post) Soviet eras and was born in 1908 in a small town on the banks of Amu Darya (present Uzbekistan). She studied with an otin for three years from 1916 to 1919. Her father was a bread baker and desired to give education to all his daughters. Despite facing various social difficulties, Saodat learned the alphabet in the Uzbek language but in Arabic script, *Haft-yak* (a collection of brief surahs from Koran) in Arabic, and *Chor-Kitob* (a collection of religious practice) in Persian (Kamp, 2001; 2006; Shamsieva, 1961).

The languages were complex in Central Asia in the pre-Soviet era. The people of the region used the Arabic script for the literary language Chagatay, which derived from a Turkic language. It was available to a limited number of people. Other vernacular
languages were only oral (Levy, 2007). The Turkic language remains in existence until today in the new forms as Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Turkmen languages. The Turkic culture and language did not change very often for the people in the remote camps of Kyrgyz herders in the Tien-Shan and Eastern Pamir Mountains because of their nomadic lifestyle and remoteness (Levy, 2007; Menges, 1994; Niyozov, 2004). There were also Iranian languages, but they were not as widely used as the Turkic ones. The direct descendants of the ancient Iranian language and culture now exist in ‘pure’ forms only in the remote Pamir mountains and Yaghnab Valley in Tajikistan (Frye, 1963; 1996).

After the formation of the Soviet Union, the initial changes of the Central Asian education included establishing primary schools, training teachers, and adopting multiple alphabets for multiple languages. In addition to the changes in education, “[i]n accordance with Leninist-Stalinist theory, national delimitation necessitated the creation of distinct literary languages” (Fierman, 2009, p. 1210). Kyrgyz, Turkmen, and Uzbek people began to use the Latin script in 1927. The Kazakh, Karakalpak, and Tajik started using Latin in 1928. Allworth (1994a) conveys that the Latin alphabet was much easier to learn and more beneficial for a rapid increase in literacy, which was important for the economic development of Central Asia. Eventually, all Central Asian republics were required to switch to the Cyrillic alphabet in 1940 (Clement, 2005; 2018). The central government in Moscow mandated the change of the Latin alphabet to Cyrillic and justified it as facilitating the learning of Russian as a second language. Yet, the earlier change from the Arabic alphabet cut people off from the Islamic literature (Clement, 2005).
For the Soviet Education Commissariat (SEC), the maktabs and madrasas of pre-Soviet times were clear signs of stagnation, but the commissariat had to be cautious about radically changing the system to avoid triggering hostility from the Basmachis⁶ and the overall local population. For instance, the Soviet government seized all waqfs [Islamic charitable endowment] that supported religious education between 1918-1922, but the hostility of the locals forced the government to restore waqf properties in 1923(Kamp, 2006).

In addition to these Soviet initiatives, another sort of transformation of women’s identity was taking place. The Islamic modernization movement by the people known as Jadids began taking place approximately a half century prior to Soviet major reforms of education in Central Asia. By questioning religious and communal understandings of identity, Jadids advocated for the education system with a vast subject area, including secular subjects such as sciences, geography, and math (Khalid, 1998; Hitchins, 2012).⁷ With usul-i-jadid (new method), Jadids were interested in educating women by modernizing the practice of Islam from what existed in the Bukharan Emirate, believing that only educated women could raise strong children. Jadids wanted the practice of Islam

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⁶ To Soviets, Basmachis were known as bandits, but the fighters of Central Asia referred to themselves as freemen (Olcott, 1981). The conflict between the Red Army and the Basmachis lasted from 1918 to 1924, and WHICH PARTY? were supported by people from tribal leaders, clergy, landowners, and the merchant class to peasants and tribesmen of the villages (Olcott, 1981). Focusing on Tajikistan, Nourzhanov (2015) portrays different interpretations of how Basmachis were viewed during and after the Soviet times. If the Communist party viewed Basmachis negatively, especially after WWII, the state institutions and individuals scrutinized the origins of Basmachi insurgency after Tajik independence for the purposes of constructing national identity.

⁷ This movement was initially instigated by the Muslim Tatars in Kazan territory (contemporary Russia) with the debate over identity and then was led by the intellectual elites of Central Asia. The most influential external Jadid in Central Asia was a Crimean Tatar Ismail bey Gaspirali (Gasprinski) (Khalid, 1998).
to be based on the texts and their meanings, rather than sole recitation of those texts without understanding (Khalid, 1998). The female relatives of the Jadids received good education and formed the core of Soviet-era feminism (Kamp, 2006; Khalid, 1998).

The era of Jadidism, though, faded between 1917 and 1920. Jadids had prepared the ground for women's rights and education in the Soviet era, but the Soviets accused them of nationalist tendencies. The SEC turned the Russian state schools and Jadid schools for girls into Soviet schools for girls without changing the teachers but gradually modifying the curriculum. The Soviet leaders transformed *otins* and *mu'allimas* (traditional names for teachers) into Soviet educators (Kamp, 2006).

The growth of schools with native language instruction was fast at the beginning of the Soviet era. Allworth (1994b) reports that in 1928, the complex composition of the republics made the Moscow Commissariat of Public Instruction issue principles of transition of national minority schools to their native languages. In 1930, the Central Committee in Moscow made school enrollment and attendance mandatory for all Soviet children between the ages of eight and eleven, regardless of their gender (Igmen, 2012). Later in 1938, Stalin signed a decree to make the Russian language and literature obligatory subjects in all Soviet non-Russian schools (Blitstein, 2001). It was important for Stalin to incorporate Russian into the native schools because he was concerned with the communication issues the Central Asian soldiers had in the Red Army (Dowler, 2001).

One example of Central Asian women’s access to and usage of the Russian language is showcased by Shamsieva’s (1961) publication of her autobiography. The
autobiography does not only represent the linguistic abilities of the author but also showcases how Shamsieva empowered young girls and reminded the older generation of the hardships women went through. Kamp (2001) examines Shamsieva’s three versions of her life story: prior to, during, and after being exposed to Soviet education and women’s liberation. Kamp (2001) highlights how Shamsieva’s “agency is seen in her ability to interpret her experience and re-cast her identity as new politics and new narratives enable and constrain her choices” (p. 21).

Shamsieva (1961) portrays herself before the October revolution as a young girl who was arranged to marry a 75-year-old man with three wives. Although her father tried to educate his daughters, Shamsieva’s mother was illiterate and did not allow her to read or write. During the Soviet period, Shamsieva received an opportunity to get a teacher training in Tashkent with a group of women and later entered the Komsomol (Communist Youth League). Her experiences led her to graduate from the Uzbek Women’s Pedagogical Institute in 1927. As per Kamp’s (2001) observations, Shamsieva was trained to publish using the conventions of Soviet journalism, thus saturating her work with the appropriate ideological tone.

Similarly, in a fictional short story by Chingiz Aitmatov (1962) First Teacher: Duishen, the author emphasizes the social fabric for girls’ education in a Kyrgyz society during the early Soviet times. The storyline includes a young male teacher arriving to a small village Kurkureu in 1924 to open a school for children. Even after facing multiple roadblocks from the illiterate population of the society, the young teacher never surrenders to the socio-cultural norms of condemning education for girls. On the
contrary, with great effort, the first teacher of the village saves a teenage girl Altynai and educates her despite her unfortunate circumstances of being married off to an elderly man, raped, and treated badly by her relatives. The teacher Duishen helps Altynai escape the harshness of the society, get an education in a big town, and become a successful Academician Sulaimanova.

Even though the novel by Aitmatov (1962) is fictional, the author’s characters represent the social and cultural conditions of people of early Soviet era, especially in relation to women. His fiction provides powerful representations of how Kyrgyz women fashioned Soviet Kyrgyzness. Igmen (2012) explicates how women began to see the possibility of accomplishing something significant outside of their homes in 1950s and 1960s following Aitmatov’s ideals and heroines—although women had exposure to the roles outside their home earlier in the Soviet period with the emancipation movement. Furthermore, the Soviet regime focused on making ordinary Central Asian women into heroines, as women started appearing in newspapers articles in the 1950s and 1960s. Some of the Kyrgyz heroines include a beet grower, Zuurakan Kainazarova, who received a gold medal of the Hero of Socialist Labor, an actress, Sabira Kumushalieva, and her compatriots, Saira Kiyizbaeva, Baken Kydykeeva, and Darkul Kuiukova. According to Igmen (2012), these women’s life stories illuminated the activities of cultural institutions and the creation of Soviet cultural leadership.

Meanwhile, two young Uzbek women’s portraits appeared in Russian and Uzbek army newspapers for their labor accomplishments during the last years of World War II (Shaw, 2016). Inobatkhon Kholdarova was celebrated as a competition winner for
surpassing the grape harvest norm by four times each day, and Ogulkhon Kurbanova was praised for gathering 18,000 kilograms of cotton in one season. By examining a collection of 249 soldiers’ letters to two of these Uzbek Soviet heroines, Shaw (2016) argues that print media and epistolary practices accelerated cultural change and transformations of identity by valorizing the Russian language. The author shows how Uzbek soldiers not only learned the Russian language and adapted to Soviet culture, but also, they learned to present themselves in new ways. They also mastered the Soviet culture of frontline letter writing, which included the very non-Uzbek practice of writing to girls they had never met (Shaw, 2016). Similarly, Kyrgyz men were also transformed by their wartime service, and Florin (2016b) demonstrates how Kyrgyz soldiers came home speaking Russian and with new ways of doing things. Ultimately, Florin (2016b) and Shaw (2016) assert that WWII Sovietized Central Asia, unified people across the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and made them part of a single nation in a way that the drastic measures of the 1930s—the collectivization, purges, and language politics—had not (Edgar, 2016; Florin, 2016b; Shaw, 2016).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the newly independent countries were charged with a challenge of creating and developing a new, coherent, idiosyncratic and sustainable educational system which represented each state’s own unique ways of being and functioning (Heyneman, 2000). The present Central Asian countries inherited a Soviet-style educational system which had a lingering effect on women's social identities—almost perfect universal literacy within the rigidly centralized and bureaucratized system (Johnson, 2004). Even though the Soviet education system had a
high literacy rate and developed largely multilingual populations, the education remained underfunded and underdeveloped in the post-Soviet era (e.g. lack of textbooks and teacher professional development trainings; Heyneman, 2000).

To create an idiosyncratic educational system and to strengthen national identity, each nation’s leaders elevated their titular language to official status in 1989, after Gorbachev’s glasnost policy, and used Russian as a secondary source for ‘interethnic communication’ (Fierman, 2009). The areas considered for the titular language were education, media, public services, and administration. Yet the changes in language status and alphabet varied from country to country.

Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan utilized a monolingual approach by expanding the domains for the titular language: Turkmen in Turkmenistan and Uzbek in Uzbekistan. The leaders of these two nations focused on interpreting national documents, speaking and writing in Turkmen or Uzbek at governmental institutions. However, the greatest pressure inside Uzbekistan has been on the Tajik language, particularly in Bukhara and Samarkand (Fierman, 2009). In both countries, the shift from the Cyrillic to Latin alphabet has been successful: Turkmenistan switched to Latin completely in 2000 and Uzbekistan in 2005 (Clement, 2018; Fierman, 2009). During Niyazov’s era in Turkmenistan, most of the non-Turkmen schools were closed and language instruction in higher education shifted to exclusively Turkmen. According to Fierman (2009), in both cases, the shift to the Latin alphabet has been a symbol of rejection of the Soviet identity.

In Kazakhstan, the nation’s geopolitical and economic position in the region shaped and politicized the language issues, and generally, Kazakh was used in the public
domain in tandem with Russian (Akiner, 1995). The large Russian ethnic population in
the country also hindered the rapid transition to the Kazakh language. Yet, the advance of
the Kazakh language has continued with President Nazarbayev’s support, so that the
Russian language is gradually losing some of its previously dominant position in
education, science, and administration (Kellner-Heinkele & Landau, 2012). Recently, the
government of Kazakhstan adopted a road map for trilingual education for 2015-2020 to
enable Kazakhstan to be well-known around the world and for educational and economic
development. This trilingual education emphasizes the Kazakh language as the language
of the state, Russian for international and regional interethnic communication, and
English for integration into the global economy. The trilingual training with an in-depth
study of the Kazakh, Russian, and English languages is currently being conducted in 110
schools and covers 2.3% of students (Kulsariyeva, Iskakova, & Tajiyeva, 2017).
Moreover, President Nazarbayev signed a decree in 2017 to switch the country’s official
alphabet from Cyrillic to Latin by 2025 (Aljazeera, 2017).

This decree deeply affected Kyrgyzstan, as the nation still uses Cyrillic. The
previous president, Atambayev, expressed his doubts about switching to Latin by saying
that the change may “break the link between generations, as many prominent Kyrgyz
writers used Cyrillic when creating their works” (RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 2017,
para. 3). Another major reason for abstaining from switching to the Latin alphabet in
Kyrgyzstan may be a lack of funding, as overall government expenditure on education
decreased annually in the first decade of independence (Kellner-Heinkele & Landau,
2012). According to the Ministry of Education of Kyrgyzstan, teaching is currently
provided in Kyrgyz, Russian, Uzbek and Tajik. The rural areas are dominated by Kyrgyz, while Russian is very common in the cities and towns (Kellner-Heinkele & Landau, 2012).

In the early 1990s, the Tajik language policy was largely built on aspirations to restore the historical links to languages spoken beyond Tajikistan’s borders (e.g. Tehran and Kabul Persian) (Atkin, 1994). The issue of switching to Persian (Arabic-based) script is still being discussed by the nationalists of Tajikistan, and there are signs that support for the Persian script is growing because of the encouragement of Islamic circles (Iran and Pakistan). The Iranian government plays a major role in this discussion as the government provides some of the material supports (Kellner-Heinkele & Landau, 2012). Arabic is being introduced in some schools as a means for studying Persian, and television stations and newspapers have been offering courses in Persian. However, at present, the Arabic-based Persian script has not been officially introduced into Tajikistan.

As for marginalized populations such as the Pamiri people, the 1993 Law on Language guarantees free choice of language of instruction, and Cyrillic is still used in the mountains (Kellner-Heinkele & Landau, 2012).

**Women’s Religious Identity: Lifestyles and Headscarves**

To portray the idiosyncratic identities of 19th century Central Asian women is nearly impossible. The describer is only left to paint the possible social identities of women of the pre-Soviet era with a very broad brush mediated through the lenses of male foreign scholars or local elites. The divide between nomadic and sedentary groups also
influenced the ways of life (Bacon, 1966; Levy, 2007; Porkhomovsky, 1994). Many heterogeneous groups of Turkic tribes were embraced in this process, resulting in the complex composition of the Uzbeks. Sedentary groups who were mainly the ancestors of present Uzbeks, and the ancestors of present Tajiks who had mixed with Uzbeks were also referred to as *Sarts*, a rather generic term for urban dwellers. The ethnic term *Sart* went out of use in the Soviet period (Porkhomovsky, 1994). Currently, the term *Sart* is considered as an offensive ethnic slur (M. Merrill, personal communication, April 29, 2018).

In the pre-Soviet era, the differences between nomadic and sedentary lives had significant consequences in the social, cultural, and religious areas of life. For instance, the settled populations were more Islamized among the Turkic peoples of Central Asia, whereas ethnic groups with nomadic lifestyles Islamized more slowly and superficially (Porkhomovsky, 1994). Furthermore, women with a sedentary lifestyle kept themselves busy with cultivation, crafts, and traded, spun, and dyed the yarn for making special rugs. However, the nomadic women’s lifestyle did not permit them to grow crops or trade, as their lifestyle involved moving constantly with their belongings. The nomadic women also embroidered, made sheep’s wool into felts and made clothes, rugs, and other articles from felts. They also took care of the nomadic yurt and made fermented milk and other

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8 Sedentary people populated the southern parts of West Turkestan on the Iranian Plateau as early as the fourth millennium BC. The transition to a more recent settled way of life after the Genghis Khan era was led mainly by the Uzbeks in the main settlements, such as Fergana, Khorezm, Bukhara, and Tashkent (Porkhomovsky, 1994).
products from animal milk as observers could see the domestic utensils like bowls and ladles hanging on the women’s side of the yurt (Bacon, 1966).

Another important factor influencing the Central Asian women’s social identities was Islam. Most Central Asians were Sunni Muslims and encompassed a great variety of religious practices (Khalid, 1998). The ancestors of the present Uzbeks and Tajiks were among the first people in Central Asia to be converted to Islam due to the high level of traffic along the Silk Road. It took considerably longer for Islam to reach the steppe people, like the ancestors of the present Kazakhs and the mountain Kyrgyz people. Moreover, the practices of Islam (praying, ablutions, and fasting) were easier to follow for settled populations than for nomadic ones (Northrop, 2004). In addition, Islam continued to be mixed with other beliefs. This has resulted in much of people's former beliefs in the mountains, sun, and rivers (Rashid, 2001). These beliefs, so-called *tengriism*, are returning among some parts of the Kyrgyz population (Laruelle, 2007).

Despite the fact that most Central Asians claimed an identity as Muslim, such a common label did not capture the multiple, complex, and layered nature of Central Asian religious and cultural identities (Northrop, 2004).

A few practices of Islam were pertinent to women’s social and cultural ways of being prior to the formation of the Soviet Union. According to Geiss (2003), the customary law *adat* included a set of local and traditional laws and dispute resolution systems by which society was regulated. *Adat* was more frequently practiced among the nomadic populations as nomads did not own land and did not stay on land permanently; the customary law did not focus on the protection of property or personal responsibility.
On the other hand, Islamic law *sharia* was the social compass that shaped and dominated social norms and acknowledged high standards for the protection of property. Prior to the Soviet era, *sharia* was based on the principle of personal responsibility and required punishment of the offender (Geiss, 2003).

The way women practiced Islam depended on their nomadic or sedentary ways of living, their tribal lineages, and their ethnicity. For instance, Edgar (2004) analyzes how nomadic Turkmen women had a murky understanding of Islam and somewhat equal status in the household. This quality was attributed to a constant moving in which survival demanded all the skills and energy both men and women could gather. Nomad Turkmens performed fasting rituals, prayers, and almsgiving, but their nomadic lifestyle did not permit them to attend maktabs or madrassahs, and they did not have the opportunity to deepen their understandings of Islam (Edgar, 2004).

In relation to women’s garments, Northrop (2004) explains how Muslim women in Central Asia had worn different veils over the centuries in response to various historical situations. Upper class Muslim women in Tashkent and other cities of southern Central Asia (mainly Uzbeks and Tajiks, or Sarts) wore a *mursak* until 1870s (Northrop, 2004). Mursak covered most of the woman’s body without covering her face. *Paranji*, which covered women’s full bodies, and *chachvon*, the face screen woven of horsehair, were only recent innovations—partly in response to the Russian colonialism (Northrop, 2004). Moreover, women’s sedentary and nomadic lifestyles heavily impacted how they dressed. For instance, Turkmen women did not cover their full face, but only their mouths with *yashmak*. Most nomadic Kazakh and Kyrgyz women wore small scarves
which did not have any religious connotations, or they did not wear any head coverings at all. Married Kyrgyz women wore *elechek* for more formal occasions (Edgar, 2004; Igmen, 2012; Montgomery, 2016; Northrop, 2004).

The Soviet government greatly impacted women’s religious, as the government attempted to suppress the followers of Islam and promoted atheism. Malashenko (1994) reports that such Islamic religious identity endangered the newly developing Soviet system. One of the frequently discussed innovations the Soviets brought to Central Asian women's lives included women’s emancipation policies. In 1927, the unveiling campaign of the Soviet government, with the slogan *Hujum!* (Attack or Assault), promised Muslim women a new life as such unveiling demonstrations symbolized Muslim women's break with Islamic tradition and embrace of legal equality among men and women (Kandiyoti, 2007).

This unveiling campaign affected each Muslim woman differently as veiling in Central Asia was related to class, ethnicity, tribal and religious practice. Prior to Soviet rule, nomadic ancestors of present Kazakh and Kyrgyz women did not veil (Igmen, 2012), and Turkmen women used the *yashmak*, only applied in the presence of elders and rooted in tribal, rather than Islamic, custom (Edgar, 2004). Only settled Uzbeks and Tajiks had strict veiling practices, which supposedly Tamerlane initiated (Kamp, 2006). Northrop (2001) claims that these sedentary women reinforced veiling practice as a response to Russian representations of their societies and cultures between the 18th and 20th centuries. Even among Uzbeks and Tajiks, veiling depended on social class and location: urban women wore conservative veils that covered the whole body and face,
and rural women wore a *chopan*, a robe that could be pulled up to cover the mouth in the presence of men (Kamp, 2006). The *Hujum* movement affected the sedentary, urban Uzbek and Tajik women the most, but it may also seem so because their experiences are much better documented than those of nomadic women.

The attack on veiling and the campaign of forced desegregation of men and women in public space gained much attention from social historians (Massell, 1974; Northrop, 2004; Kamp, 2006; Edgar, 2004). The image of sedentary women throwing their paranjis and chachvons onto a bonfire during the burning rituals, which took place every International Women’s Day from 1927 to the 1930s, became the highlight of Central Asian history, especially among Western historians. Sedentary women's and their male family members' reactions to such unveiling process varied from one extreme to another. Some husbands endorsed such movement and allowed their wives to take off their paranjis/chachvons and throw them onto a bonfire as a step toward liberation. Some threw their veils in the fire under the government pressure, but when they got home, they put on a new veil. Others were killed for dishonoring the family and society by their male family members or those who defended *sharia* (Edgar, 2004; Kamp, 2006; Massell, 1974; Northrop, 2001; 2004).

The Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) also focused on the destruction of traditional family structures and on refashioning the kinship systems as a step toward socialist transformation and cultural revolution. The CPSU classified some elements of *adat* (local customs) and *sharia* (Islamic law) as crimes (Olcott, 1981). In 1926, the Muslim courts were abolished completely, and instead secular family law was developed.
This new secular law rejected polygyny, underage marriage and forced marriage, and *kalym*, or bride price (Northrop, 2001; Kandiyoti, 2007; Keller, 2001; Khalid, 2007b). Yet, there were many cheats who provided false witnesses on the age of marriage partners or who substituted a child-bride with an older sister. Ironically, Soviet courts were used to enforce the proper practice of *kalym*, as criminal prosecution for bride price took place when the parties failed to honor their promises (Northrop, 2001).

Social historians dwell upon different interpretations of this unveiling process in Central Asia. Kandiyoti (2007) considers these interpretations as indications of multiple unresolved issues concerning the nature of Soviet modernization. For instance, focusing on Soviet Uzbek women, Massell (1974) concentrates on the Communist authority’s efforts to find the weakest point of the Central Asian Muslim society. He argues that the region lacked an indigenous working class that could serve as a revolutionary vanguard with women as the crucial actors. They were the weakest point of the society, whose engineered alienation from their Muslim traditions might subvert traditional Muslim institutions. For Soviet authorities, Muslim women appeared to constitute a ‘surrogate proletariat’ where no proletariat in the Marxist sense existed. Similarly, Northrop (2001; 2004) argues that the Soviets coercively emancipated women, focusing on Soviet Uzbek women, against their will and against the wills of their husbands or fathers. For him, the unveiling situation, the wide-spread murders, rapes, assaults, and classification of Uzbek ethnic women's physique through gynecological examinations by the Russian medical male staff demonstrated the power of the colonizer and the resistance of the colonized.
Kamp (2006) explains such resistance to unveiling policy by the Uzbeks as a struggle between the Uzbeks themselves, fueled by a violent reassertion of patriarchal power. The unveiling process brought multiple restrictions for men in their domestic realm as emancipated women with rights limited men’s opportunities for hegemonic and acquisitive self-assertion (Kamp, 2006). An attempt to restructure the Muslim society was not well received by the Basmachis, and the Soviet’ efforts were resisted by the traditional authorities as well as the peasants and tribesmen of the villages. Over the course of Basmachi revolt (1918-1924), even some Jadids and nationalists of the region supported Basmachis (Olcott, 1981). According to Olcott (1981), “For the first time the Turkestanis began to develop a political identity, primitive and partially submerged though it was. In the shared act of resistance people began to perceive a sense of community and shared fate” (p. 365). For this reason, Edgar (2004) analyses how the local communist authorities were very cautious about undermining the patriarchal social system with the fear of alienating the poor male peasants, who were the system’s main support.

Concentrating on Turkmen women and applying the understanding of ‘surrogate proletariat’ to Turkmens, Edgar (2004) finds little evidence that the Soviet power viewed the Turkmens as significant constituency for the central Soviet economy. Kyrgyz women never veiled as they were nomads (Igmen, 2012). Kyrgyz women’s emancipation in Kyrgyz Republic took place by focusing on the cultural activities—developing libraries with reading rooms and producing theatrical and artistic plays in Kyrgyz. The emancipation policy focused more on eradicating illiteracy, and creating lecture halls, mobile libraries, healthcare facilities with the goal of attacking religion and nomadism.
Although the settlement of the Kazakh and Kyrgyz people was forced through the Soviet collectivization policy and the resettlement of the rural population on new collective farms (Olcott, 1981; Loring, 2008), educational activities and theatrical plays also contributed to nomadic people’s gradual settlement (Igmen, 2012).

**Women’s Gender Identity: Body and Sexuality**

The Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, and all five countries in Central Asia declared their independence. In 1988, Gorbachev’s glasnost policy [openness] allowed the republics to start the redefinition process and sparked public debate on the prior years of the Soviet Union. All Central Asian countries fostered nationalizing policies, ranging from language policies to rewriting their histories (Laruelle, 2011). The Central Asian countries had a chance for self-determination and 'rediscovering' women's place in the society (Kandiyoti, 2002; 2007). One of the factors which impacted the ‘woman question’ in Central Asia was related to women’s gender identity through restoration of Islamic values (Akiner, 1997; Johnson, 2004), and the utilization of a woman’s body and sexuality to represent the society at large.

Gender identity was the problematic aspect of transition after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Lapidus, 2000). Soviet women were supposed to be egalitarian workers and socialists during the Soviet times, yet the leaders of the post-Soviet era still imagined women as biological and cultural reproducers of the state because of the socio-cultural

10 Askar Akayev (Kyrgyzstan); Nursultan Nazarbayev (Kazakhstan); Rahmon Nabiye (Tajikistan); Saparmurat Niyazov (Turkmenistan); Islam Karimov (Uzbekistan).
circumstances (Kandiyoti, 2007). Central Asian women had not only become the majority of the unemployed, but they also lost presence in the political arena, and rarely appeared in the leadership positions in the higher echelons of power (Ishkanian, 2003). In Tajikistan, the collapse of the socialist system further affected women as it came with civil conflicts, competing nationalisms and Islamic values, and large-scale dislocations, specifically in the mountainous Pamir region (Niyozov, 2018).

Kataeva and DeYoung (2017) shed light on the women faculty members’ struggles in the higher education system of Tajikistan. It appears there are no adequate opportunities for women to enter higher faculty ranks and leadership positions in the universities. Tajik educated women face difficulties and challenges with building bridges between being professional educators and trying to maintain and navigate a local culture that apparently is becoming more and more traditional (Kataeva & DeYoung, 2017).

More strikingly, the women of Central Asia, specifically in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, still face the paradoxical phenomenon of bride abduction. The crux of the paradox is that, although it took place occasionally, the Soviet state banned the practice for seventy years, yet such marriage practices are increasingly re-imagined as a national tradition (Werner, 2009).

Bride abduction is a practice in which a man abducts the woman he wishes to marry and in Kyrgyz the act is called Ala kachuu (Kleinbach, Ablezova, & Aitieva,

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There are, of course, a few exceptions to this claim. One obvious female representation in politics was Roza Isakovna Otunbayeva, who served as the President of Kyrgyzstan from April 7, 2010 to December 1, 2011.
Sometimes the woman knows that she may be kidnapped, but other times she may see her groom for the first time on the day of her abduction. Some families in Central Asia maintain a symbolic bride kidnapping ritual as part of traditions surrounding a wedding. In Kyrgyz culture, the future groom may kidnap a woman with his friends and relatives in order to avoid paying the bride price or to pay half of the price (Kleinbach, Ablezova, & Aitieva, 2006). Unfortunately, not all bride abductions have happy endings as there have been multiple cases of suicide among young women who have been abducted. The people of Kyrgyz and Kazakh cultures use shame and tradition to keep the bride after abduction to control and limit her behavior (Werner, 2009). This patriarchal practice of shame, tradition, and abduction demonstrates how some men in post-Soviet Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan attempt to control female mobility and female sexuality.

Furthermore, in most Central Asian countries, discussions of proper behavior for women, shame, and tradition can also be viewed as an opportunity to prevent infiltration of Western fashions and lifestyles. Until today, some families believe the Western influence on their daughters may bring shame to the family. Therefore, this type of thinking justifies the need to reassert male control over female sexuality (Kleinbach, Ablezova, & Aitieva, 2006; Werner, 2009).

Regardless of the challenges thrown on women's way, Central Asian women find ways to resist and develop, and they don’t always have to navigate through these challenges on their own. Since the collapse, the Central Asia receives assistance from international and local institutions and agencies. Some scholars argue that such collaboration with foreign organizations helped women find new avenues for personal
and professional growth—specifically, the arrival of NGOs (Ishkanian, 2003; Kandiyoti, 2007) and influences of Turkish, American, and English educational programs (Aypay, 2004; Chankseliani & Hessel, 2016; Mikosz, 2004). Although the initial post-Soviet NGOs employed most of the Soviet elites, many women succeeded in serving as agents of change because of their tendencies to better deal with social problems than men (e.g. disability, children, and health). With the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goal, which was about promoting gender equality and empowering women (United Nations, 2008), women had more opportunities to receive grants and implement those grants in needy areas of Central Asia (Ishkanian, 2003).

During the transition period in the 1990s, it was vital for the nations’ leaders to distance themselves from their previous Soviet identity. In search of a new and splendid era of the past, people formed new cultural practices in Central Asia. For instance, mass media redefined Islam, and independent politicians made speeches and posted billboards in the streets (McBrien, 2017; Montgomery, 2007; 2016; Tokhtakhodzhaeva, 2008). Islam had never left Central Asia during the Soviet times as it was present in everyday life: weddings took place with nikah and funerals with janaza (religious rituals) (Roi, 2000; Rorlich, 1991; Montgomery, 2007). However, the way people practiced Islam was more symbolic than religious in nature: practicing almsgiving and saying amin after each meal (Roi, 2000; Schoeberlein-Engel, 1994).

After the collapse, the leaders of the states were very cautious of legitimizing their national identity through Islam as they were afraid of extremists, yet they still adopted measures to reassert their Islamic traditions, restored some of the religious holidays, and
built mosques (Akiner, 1995; Khalid, 2007b; Peyrouse, 2012). In the city of Tashkent, some women started wearing hijab again (Tokhtakhodzhaeva, 2008). Similarly, a small portion of Kazakh and Kyrgyz women also began adopting an Islamic dress code and rediscovering Islam as a source of moral and spiritual inspiration (Akiner, 1995).

There was a quite significant debate in Kyrgyzstan in 2016, which sparked controversies on women’s contemporary identity regarding whether they should lean towards Islamic or secular ways of being. Interestingly, once again women's clothing served as a representation of not only their own identities but also of their society at large. The debate began with the postings of large billboards in the city of Bishkek portraying Kyrgyz women in three different types of head covers with the caption, "Oh poor nation [or my poor people], where are we headed?" (EurasiaNet, 2016). The first image portrayed a group of Kyrgyz women wearing traditional Kyrgyz dresses and elechek (traditional headdress), the second included women in white Islamic veils—some with open faces while others left only their eyes open, and the third image included women in fully black niqabs (face covers); EurasiaNet, 2016). The billboards were posted by an unknown educational foundation but later financially supported by the Kyrgyz government to criticize the Islamic style of women’s clothing and to show that Kyrgyz women had never covered their faces and never worn black niqabs in the past (Nasritdinov & Esenamanova, 2017).

An online poll administered by Sputnik.kg on August 29, 2016 generated 659 responses, and the majority of people supported the bill boards, including the patriarchal figures of Kyrgyzstan, the then-President of Kyrgyzstan Atambayev, who at the time had
the power and money to project on the whole country his vision of how women should dress, and former prime minister Temir Sariev, who openly criticized the hijab (EurasiaNet, 2016; Nasritdinov & Esenamanova, 2017). Supporters of the banners believed that women who wear niqabs or hijabs transgress the limits of a ‘normal’ secular dress code. On the opposing side, there were practicing Muslims who perceived this action to be an attack on their values and on the sacredness of the Islamic veil. For these Muslims, like Tursunbai Bakir Uulu, a former member of parliament, ombudsman, and social media activist, the women in mini-skirts transgress the boundaries of Islamic norms and must be reprimanded (Nasritdinov & Esenamanova, 2017).

An even more taboo incident about women’s body and sexuality occurred in Kyrgyzstan in September 2018 when a 19-year-old Kyrgyz student/singer Zere Asylbek posted a video on YouTube wearing bright red lipstick, a short skirt, and a black blazer with nothing under it but a purple lacy bra (EurasiaNet, 2018). The incident not only triggered public debate on women’s sexuality and the representation of their society at large, but the student received death threats from her fellow citizens. A similar incident occurred in Tajikistan fairly recently, when a young female artist Marifat decided to paint half-nude Tajik women’s portraits and showcase them to the public at an art show (Radioi Ozodi, 2018). The artist’s goal was to break the stereotypes of women in the Tajik society about women’s sexuality and show men that women’s body parts do not have to be taboo and that they are only a part of nature. The artist’s enthusiasm about the topic developed after being sexually harassed herself (Radioi Ozodi, 2018). Without a question, this art show received both critiques and support from the local population.
With these debates both in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, it is interesting to observe how women’s bodies and sexualities are used to symbolize the transgression of social boundaries (Ryan, 2011). This tension over women’s clothing and sexuality showcases how gender hierarchies are socially constructed. This contradiction demonstrates that women and their lives are viewed from a multiplicity of perspectives.

After conducting her research in the southern part of Kyrgyzstan in a town called Bazaar Korgon, McBrien (2017) argues that to an extent people’s relationship to Islam has changed since the collapse of the Soviet Union—contemporary Muslim identity is about a belief, whereas it was about collective belonging during and prior to the Soviet Union. Contemporary Central Asians have been exposed to the profound effects of new ideas, peoples, institutions, and objects around the world, including notions, practices, and representations of Muslims and Islam after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This exposure emphasized for Central Asians that being Muslim is primarily about belief. McBrien (2017) asserts that Soviet Central Asians viewed Muslim identity as collective belonging because the “[Soviet] secular state mapped out what ‘religion’ was not allowed, being Muslim as an element of national culture (not as personal religious affiliation or faith) became an acceptable referent for public identification…” (McBrien, 2017, p. 25). The Soviet nationalities policies entailed a constant awareness of one’s own specific ethnonational/religious identity and its difference from the other nationalities of the Union. Even before the Bolshevik Revolution, modes of collective belonging in Central Asia were not only tied to Islam but also to social and economic status, language,
lineage and other kinship groups, and settled and nomadic patterns of residence (Khalid, 1998; Geiss, 2003; Edgar, 2004).

The Muslim identity as a belief is practiced by the Pamiri in the remote mountains of Tajikistan, who exclusively practice a branch of Shi’a Islam called Ismaili. Ismailis of Tajikistan kept their beliefs and have faith in their living Imam (spiritual leader), Shah Karim al-Hussaini, Aga Khan IV, who is the direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad (Ismaili Gnosis, 2018). Ismailis are distinct from Sunni Muslims not only in the fact they could preserve their strong belief in the living Imam during the Soviet times, but also since they stayed connected to Imam’s vast global network (Niyozov, 2018), the Aga Khan Development Network, one of the most powerful development agencies in the world. Also, Ismailis have another network affiliate in London, the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS), which focuses on developing modern Ismaili education called talim (instruction). Talim situates Islam in the context of history and society and adopts the best Western thoughts and practices to learning and teaching (e.g. child-centered pedagogy) in the preparation of the curriculum and teacher training (Niyozov, 2018).

New Avenues for Change: Technology and Study Abroad Opportunities

During the transition era in the 1990s, Turkish leaders expressed tremendous interest in Central Asian republics’ higher education systems because of their common historical and cultural affinity (Aypay, 2004). Within the first ten years after the collapse, the Turkish government offered scholarships to almost ten thousand Central Asian students who were in secondary schools, attending two-year colleges, four-year undergraduate and graduate programs (Aypay, 2004; Mikosz, 2004). In addition, several
colleges and universities were established in Central Asia by the Turkish government and by joint agreement with the central governments, and with the Fetullah Gulen organization in order to strengthen and improve economic, historical, cultural, and scientific ties between Turkey and Central Asia (Aypay, 2004; Yanik, 2004).12

Similarly, the number of both undergraduate and graduate students studying in the U.S. from the Central Asia has increased greatly, and these students’ education was funded not only by the Central Asian governments but also the government of the U.S.13 (Mikosz, 2004). The student mobility increased not toward both the U.S. and toward the United Kingdom. Chankseliani and Hessel (2016) report that contemporary Central Asian internal societal changes, the lesser quality of education, and the perception of education in Central Asia are major factors of more students leaving the region to study abroad. Furthermore, depending on the country, the educational institutions in Central Asia may not have the capacity to accommodate the growing number of youths, plus more Central Asians are able afford to study abroad on their own without any financial support (Chankseliani & Hessel, 2016).

12 International Ahmet Yesevi Kazakh-Turk University in Kazakhstan; Kyrgyz-Turk Manas University; Alatoo International University in Kyrgyzstan; Halkara Turkmen-Turk University in Turkmenistan (Aypay, 2004). In addition, multiple other international higher educational institutions exist in Central Asia: several branches of Russian Universities, Kazakh-British Technical University, Kazakh-German University, International Universities in Uzbekistan, and Slavic Universities in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and the University of Central Asia.

13 The ‘Bolashak’ program was launched in Kazakhstan in 1993, the ‘Umid’ program was launched in Uzbekistan in 1997 (no longer exists), ‘Cadres for the 21st Century’ began in Kyrgyzstan in 1995 (no longer exists), and Open Society Institute/Soros Foundation funded several smaller exchange programs in Kyrgyzstan. The U.S. government funded several large-scale exchange programs: the Future Leaders Exchange (FLEX) program for high school students, the UGRAD one-year non-degree program for students pursuing bachelor’ degrees, and the Edmund S. Muskie Fellowship for those who aspire to get master’s degree in the United States (Mikosz, 2004).
With the advent of technology, the world is connected more than ever. According to Clement (2018), the president of Turkmenistan Berdimuhamedov intends to connect all educational and scientific establishments to the global web of the Internet. In 2011, he began supplying laptop computers to students to promote computer literacy. However, Clement (2018) doubts that these notebooks are being used extensively as teachers are afraid of students damaging them and of being accountable for the laptops. The World Bank (2016) reports that since 2006, the number of internet users in Kazakhstan has increased from 8.3% to 68.1%, and Kyrgyzstan has also launched a portal for e-services. Similarly, the Tajik and Uzbek leaders put the digital transformation a high priority in their countries for economic development (The World Bank, 2016).

Moreover, a new network founded in 2010, called Central Asian Research and Education Network (CAREN), is funded bilaterally by Central Asian countries and the European Commission to provide universities and research centers across Central Asia with a broadband internet (CAREN, 2018). Such pivotal change of the Internet penetration in Central Asia has definitely affected young people’s lives and their identities as they access the web in public cafes, at home, on their mobile phones, and at their workplaces (Blum, 2016).

The last 28 years since the independence of the Central Asian nations have certainly been dynamic with internal social and cultural shifts and external influences. The nations’ leaders focused not only on their economic issues, but also promoted their national identities targeting family and gender relations (Akiner, 1997; Kandiyoti, 2007). The socio-cultural changes in each nation are shaping the society and women’s place in it.
by pushing women to return to more traditional roles, although these changes are different for each country. However, this push is not so much about attempting to return to the pre-Soviet times as it is about redefining the nations’ ‘neo-familial ideologies’ (Kandiyoti, 2007). For instance, after the collapse, Uzbekistan started televising a show called ‘the best daughter-in-law’ by highlighting women’s accepted and celebrated docility, maternal caring, and competent housekeeping (Kandiyoti, 2007). Moreover, Blum (2016) observes how in Kazakhstan young females still find themselves asking permissions from their boyfriends or husbands to do leisurely activities despite being exposed to autonomous lifestyle while studying or working abroad.

Alimova (1998) revisits the Soviet modernization policy Hujum and asserts that the Soviet modernization decultured the Central Asian women by hijacking and derailing the gradual reform proposals of the Jadids. However, not all scholars agree with such arguments or attempt to establish antecedents for women’s place in Central Asian society in their own national past without Soviet interference. On the contrary, what Kandiyoti (2007) presents is that Central Asians had the ability to “infuse a thoroughly local cultural content into their Soviet habits of thought and action that gave resilience to varied facets of their identities” (p. 613). For instance, one can easily observe a Central Asian who consumes alcohol during celebrations and simultaneously reads a prayer after a meal. Similarly, Kandiyot (2007) recalls how she encountered a retired female brigade leader while doing research who spoke with pride both of her recent pilgrimage to the haj, which took place after the independence, and of the numerous red flags her brigade earned as champions at the cotton harvest during Soviet times. Her achievements as a
collective farm worker and her Muslim piety defined different facets of her identity. In summary, it is clear and obvious that there is no going back to some pre-colonial times wherein ethnic or cultural identity existed (Akiner, 1997). The region has always been shaped by complex patterns of ethnic, cultural, and religious hybridity.

**Summary**

In summary, the historical background of Central Asian women’s complex social and cultural identities can help clarify the kind of influences women experienced in the past that are likely to play a decisive role in the future. As mentioned above, the purpose here is to understand whether and how Central Asian female students’ identities change as a result of their studies in American higher education and cross-cultural encounters. Contextualizing how contemporary Central Asian women’s social and cultural identities came into being showcases how dilemmas of identity and self-perception that confront the Central Asian women today have their roots in the past. The chapter demonstrated how women’s complex identities cannot be fully understood but learning the history of Central Asians’ identity development may clarify certain aspects.

After delineating some of the significant historical events that occurred in women’s lives, three concluding components appear as responses to the question—who the Central Asian female students were before coming to the U.S. to study. First, it is almost impossible to fully understand the Central Asian women’s own perspectives of their changed identities as the available historical resources are either from the Soviet literature or they are Western sources. For example, the source written by an Uzbek
journalist Saodat Shamsieva requires a conscientiousness about the ideologies she was catering her work to, as even her narrative serves its own ideological goal.

Second, Central Asian women were heterogenous, and perhaps that was the element the Soviet leaders missed while attempting to manipulate the position and status of women to meet their ideological and economic goals. Positioning the region’s female population under a general umbrella—that is, seeking to undermine the traditional Islamic patterns of life and attempting to create a new, Soviet patterns instead—may have been the reason why Soviet seven decades earned its status as the times of colonization in the Western sources.

Third, the only way to move forward for the Central Asian nations is to embrace their Soviet history as their own, explore and accept their shared hybrid forms in relation to linguistic, ethnic, and religious identities. As Kandiyoti (2007) asserts, the region’s population learned how to infuse the various facets of their identities by merging the local cultural content into Soviet habits of thought and action. Only accepting the multilingual identities, cultural pluralism, ethnic coexistence, and regional cooperation can help the current and future generations understand the collective past. Therefore, these factors are also vital to understanding female students’ cross-cultural and study abroad experiences, and the impacts of these experiences to their contemporary identities.
CHAPTER III

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: EXPLORING IDENTITY IN MOTION

A key part of this dissertation’s research design is its flexibility\textsuperscript{14} with formulating the theoretical framework (Hatch, 2002), which explains the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supported and informed the research (Maxwell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994). This study seeks to understand the processes of Central Asian female students’ identity transformation, from their own perspectives, after being exposed to foreign cultural and educational contexts. Understanding “what is out there” (Maxwell, 2013; p. 39) in the theoretical realm of the literature about female students’ identities while and after transitioning from one culture to another for the purposes of schooling helped to situate this dissertation within the extant literature. This chapter provides an overview of several strands of theories and research related to the concepts of identity, identity construction, and identity negotiation in educational and cross-cultural contexts. The chapter also seeks to arrive at a more holistic understanding of how identity, self-understanding, power, gender, and being an international graduate student work together when exploring Central Asian female students’ experiences with living and studying in the U.S.

Complexity and Multiple Dimensions of Identity

The concept of identity has been much overused, in many contexts, to mean many things. Scholars working in a remarkable array of social science, humanities, and cultural

\textsuperscript{14} I discuss the flexible structure of the research design in more details in Chapter IV.
studies disciplines have taken an intense interest in questions concerning identity.\textsuperscript{15} Within these disciplines, the concept of cultural identity is the center of lively debates (e.g., Hall & Du Gay, 1996). For instance, Bauman (1996) argues that the meaning of identity has changed from modern understanding as solid and stable to postmodern one that is about avoiding “fixation and keep[ing] the options open” (p. 18). Similarly, Bhabha (1996) supports the notion of identity in its hybrid form and emphasizes power dynamics as one of the most essential factors in identity construction. Bhabha has developed the concept of hybridity “to describe the construction of cultural authority within conditions of political antagonism or inequity” (p. 58). Bhabha (1996) portrays his version of hybrid identities as follows:

Hybrid agencies find their voice in a dialectic that does not seek cultural supremacy or sovereignty. They deploy the partial culture from which they emerge to construct visions of community, and versions of historic memory, that give narrative form to the minority positions they occupy; the outside of the inside: the part of the whole. (p. 58)

Tackling the colonial discourse, Bhabha (1996) asserts that hybrid identities are constructed when the powerful dominates over the powerless with culture, art, language,

\textsuperscript{15} To examine the spread of \textit{identity} in academic discourse, I searched for the progress of the word \textit{identity} in dissertation abstracts within the last thirty-five years from 1980 to 2015. The number of dissertation abstracts containing the word \textit{identity} increased from 62,404 within 1980-1990 to 167,550 within 1990-2000, and to 447,008 within 2000-2015.
and ways of being. Such hybrids construct their identities by mimicking and partially adopting the dominant culture, thus the hybrids always hold an in-between position.

On the other hand, Grossberg (1996) proposes to move beyond the models of oppression and to avoid organizing every struggle over power around the issues of identity. For the author, the models of oppression and resistance are irrelevant when discussing modern societies with various fractions of population including the empowered. Grossberg (1996) believes in rearticulating the question of identity by considering the “possibility of constructing historical agency, and giving up notions of resistance that assume a subject standing entirely outside of and against a well established structure of power” (p. 88).

Other than tackling the questions of identity in humanities, social sciences, and cultural studies, scholars have devoted much new empirical and conceptual research on international student identities in a cross-cultural setting (Koehne, 2005; 2006; Haugh, 2008; Oikonomidoy & Williams, 2013; Tran & Gomes, 2016; Fotovatian, 2012; Prazeres, 2013). For instance, after interviewing two dozen international students in Australia, Koehne (2005) reports how these students utilize different ways to construct and reconstruct storylines about themselves: some base their subject positions in relation to difference and sameness, some attempt to grapple with the fluidity and complexity of identity, and others attempt to reinvent themselves in the form of hybridity (Koehne, 2005). Oikonomidoy and Williams (2013) found in their study that Japanese female students experienced social marginalization while studying in the U.S. As one way of constructing their identities, the students sought ways to resist this marginalization.
individually and collectively. As opposed to above-mentioned studies, Haugh (2008) does not believe that international students can discuss clearly the exact points of their identity transformation. The author suggests that researchers avoid the assumption that what international students say equates with their identities. Haugh (2008) argues that identities are constructed by participants through discourse and that identities are discursively negotiated through interaction, even in interviews and focus groups.

It is essential to develop the discourse around international students’ identities and their transformation because the extant scholarship is often framed around the issues of identity within the boundaries of nation, culture, and ethnicity as if they were an organic entity (e.g., Kashima & Loh, 2006). Trans and Gomes (2013) move away from this narrow perspective and focus on international students as individuals with a range of personal histories and experiences, and a range of personal motivations and desires which have constructed the desire to become an international student.

Despite this newly increased and broad-ranging interest in identity, the concept of identity still remains something of an enigma. Even though the term is commonly understood in everyday discourse, it proves quite difficult to give a short and adequate summary statement that captures the range of its present meanings. According to Torres, Jones, and Renn (2009), the concept is located with each discipline's own lens, however "they share commitments to understanding the individual, his or her social context, the influence of social groups, and various dimensions of identity (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation)" (p. 578).
The concept of identity housed in the field of psychology focuses on the definitions that are developmental, unfolding, and continuous construction of selfhood (Erikson, 1956; 1963; 1968). Psychologists like Leary and Tangney (2012) explicate how interchangeably the terms self and identity are used in the field. Yet others clarify that the term self is defined as the process of reflexivity—namely, the ability to be both subject (I am thinking) and object to oneself (about me) (Côté & Levine, 2002). Thus, psychologists see self as rooted in cognitions that arise out of an individual's experiences, whereas sociologists see the concept of self developing out of interaction (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). The self has also been discussed as the conscious “I” that produces multiple identities, and that identities make up one's self-concept (Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012).

The usage of identity today has diverged tremendously from the linear development of one's traits, characteristics, roles, and social relationships, as Erikson (1968) conceptualized identity development. Various disciplines today discuss identity as fluid, dynamic, and performative (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). According to Oyserman, Elmore, and Smith (2012), "[i]dentities can be focused on the past - what used to be true of one, the present - what is true of one now, or the future - the person one expects or wishes to become…” (p. 69).

In Turner’s (1984) self-categorization theory (SCT), a distinction is drawn between personal identity (unique character traits) and social identity (shared traits with in-group). Both categorical membership and personal meaning must be considered in the analysis of identity as they are interrelated (Deaux, 1993). The crux of identity stability in
any culture lies in the interplay between the social and the psychic (Côté & Levine, 2002). That is, a person requires a viable social identity of some sort, and when the person develops a workable social identity based on commitments integrating the person into a specific culture, the psychological (personal) identity should be nurtured. Once a sense of personal identity is established, people are protected from the vicissitudes of social conflicts and tensions (Côté & Levine, 2002).

Combining psychological and sociological approaches to the understanding of identity, I concentrate on the Central Asian female student's understanding of her self-identity that is both her internal dialectical processes, as well as her recognition of her social roles, and sociohistorical contexts. The term self-identity can signify Central Asian female students’ recognition of her potential qualities as an individual which encompasses multiple personal and social identities. Additionally, the term self-understanding in this dissertation study explains how female students make meaning of their self-identities. The phrases understanding one’s self-identity and self-understanding are interchangeable.

The first research question of this dissertation study tackles how Central Asian female students understand their self-identities after studying in the higher education institutions and living in the U.S. for more than two years. The RMMDI is useful in analyzing the participants’ responses to this question because the model attempts to encapsulate how students’ social identities and contextual influences, such as family background, cross-cultural transitions, peer culture and social norms, impact their core identity and meaning-making processes. The model “…provides for a dynamic process
whereby identities shift and get shaped and reshaped based on changing contexts and the influence of these contexts both on identity salience and on what is in one's core" (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 92).

It becomes crucial to understand the concept of identity when the discussion is about college students, especially graduate students and their experiences in higher education contexts. Student development theories did not always emphasize the importance of responding to the whole person. As Baxter Magolda (2013) puts it, these theories evolved “as though our intellectual, moral, identity, and relational development are somehow separate entities” (p. xvii). Initial theories of student development focused on the systematic change over time as an organization of increasing complexity while in college. These conceptualizations included student changes, such as skills, attitudes, beliefs, and understandings (Josselson, 1987; King, 1994; Marcia, 1966), in addition to the studies that evolved around intellectual and ethical development, maturity models, and personality typology (Knefelkamp, Widick, & Parker, 1978). Newer conceptualizations include college students’ social identities and self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2009) by focusing more on constructivist epistemology that puts students’ meaning making as the main phenomenon (Jones & Abes, 2013).

Initially, Jones (1997) developed the model of multiple dimensions of identity (MMDI) using grounded theory to investigate self-perceived identities among a diverse group of female college students in the U.S. Jones (1997) drew from the foundational student development theories (Josselson, 1987; Marcia, 1966), and scholarship about underrepresented groups and socially constructed social identities (Gergen, 1991). Later,
Jones and McEwen (2000) improved the model representing a dynamic interplay of the core sense of self surrounded by social identities, identity salience, and contextual influences (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

*Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity*

In the center of the model, the authors locate the core of the individual, which is also her personal identity, her inner self that is less likely to be influenced by the outside forces. The core of the individuals "represented the location in their constructions of self where they had the most agency and experienced the most stability" (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 82). The core also represents the relational aspect of the individual along with
her values and personal beliefs. Such a core is also associated with intersecting and multiple social identities, but they are distinct from the core. The social identities are about people's social roles and social memberships (Deaux, 1993). To portray such social identities in this model, the authors attend to the social systems of privilege and inequality and demonstrate how these social identities are socially constructed by placing the intersecting identities on a particular context (Jones, 1997, 2009; Jones & McEwen, 2000).

Another prevalent category for the model is identity salience. The more salient the social identities are, the closer to the core they become. For instance, if a woman's gender is salient for her, the dot on the model for gender would be very close to the core. By discussing difference, structures of inequality, and systems of power and privilege, Jones (1997) explains the reasoning behind why certain identities are more salient than others. For instance, race may be most salient for female students of color as they may have experienced racism and racial discrimination in higher education. Also, the context interacts with social identities, with identity salience, and even with the intersections of identities and their relations to the core. Thus, the contextual influences play a vital role in this model as they impact on all dynamics of identity construction (Jones & McEwen, 2000).

The reconceptualized version of this model examines the relationship between the contextual influences and identity by inserting a meaning-making filter (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). In the revised version, the contextual influences are represented as arrows moving toward identity, and the meaning-making screen is situated between the
context and identity (see Figure 2). The complexity of the meaning-making capacity is about the ability of college students to shape their self-perceptions using the internal meaning-making structure, that is how they perceive and organize their life experiences (Kegan, 1994; Baxter Magolda, 2009). Jones and Abes (2013) convey the following, "[h]ow context moves through the filter depends on the permeability of the filter, and the permeability depends on the complexity of the person's meaning-making capacity" (p. 104). The width and narrowness of the screen openings depends on the complexity of the meaning-making capacity: wider screens represent less complex, and narrower screens represent more complex meaning-making capacity.

According to this explanation, after their study abroad experiences Central Asian female students' identity transformation should highly depend on their level of complexity of the meaning-making process. The higher the female students' ability to make meaning, the less contextual or external forces will influence her self-perceptions. However, the authors assert that "regardless of differences in meaning making capacity, and the corresponding differences in the permeability of the filter, identity is always shaped within contexts" (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 105).

The RMMDI represents a snapshot in time, but the model allows portrayal of an individual’s identity continuously by redrawing to reflect the shifting contexts. At the outset, this dissertation study was not designed to use the RMMDI to continuously redraw by interviewing the participants at different stages of their lives and study abroad experiences because the research is not longitudinal. The flexible research design of the study allowed exploration of the various theories before, during, and after the data was
collected. The study did not begin with the intent of testing or understanding where women stand in relation to the RMMDI. Rather, this model turned out to be useful after the data was collected and the initial report was written (see more details on flexible research design in Chapter IV). The RMMDI was useful in capturing two different snapshots of Central Asian female students’ cross-cultural experiences: first, the participants discussed their understandings of their self-identities during one-on-one interviews, and the second snapshot was during focus group interview approximately two years later.

Figure 2

*Reconceptualized Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity*
These two different snapshots showcased how identities are not static but are fluid and dynamic. For example, a participant responded differently to the same question posed during the individual and focus group interviews. Specifically, she corrected her initial one-on-one response about women’s roles in society during the focus group interview. Another participant changed her opinion about her academic identity by the time focus group interview took place, as she had graduated with her master’s degree and embarked on her Ph.D.

The RMMDI has several positive benefits for this dissertation study. The model serves as a comprehensive framework to investigate Central Asian female students’ self-understanding encompassing both their inner core (personal identity) and their social identities after living and studying abroad. As formulated by Jones and McEwen (2000) and later emphasized by Jones and Abes (2013), the context matters when discussing multiple dimensions of identity, and for Central Asian female students, the context was their acculturation process. The model was essential in understanding how and where Central Asian women place their social identities in relation to their core after living and studying in the U.S. The historical literature provided in Chapter II prepared for the possible social identities Central Asian women may have identified with before coming to the U.S. by elaborating on religion, complex ethnicities, languages, gender issues, and the way women’s sexuality and body are tackled in contemporary Central Asian societies. The RMMDI is essential in emphasizing how such contextualization of women’s identities in historical perspective helps examining why certain women’s social
identities may play such an important or less important role in female students’ lives after studying in the U.S.

On the other hand, the RMMDI represents a snapshot in time and does not necessarily provide the details for the process of women’s identity change as a result of living and studying abroad. It is essential to draw from other frameworks which respond to the how question and tackles the details of women’s identity change process after their intercultural contact. For this reason, the RMMDI is complemented with contemporary theories that are more concerned with students’ psychological adjustment and sociocultural adaptation situated within a broader framework of acculturation theory (Ward et al., 2001).

Identity Construction in Cross-cultural and Global Educational Contexts

This study does not require dwelling on the intricate details of how globalization has evolved. The globalization scholarship is well researched (Appiah, 2008; Appudurai, 1996; Hall, 1997; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010), and it refers to worldwide phenomena in scope and substance. It is about the flow of knowledge, people, ideas, and technology across national borders (Blum, 2007). Gürüz (2011) asserted that the process of globalization has always been driven by the human desire for various kinds of growth, including the quest for new knowledge. Over the past two decades, not only have the educational systems throughout the world undergone significant changes (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010), but the number of internationally mobile students in higher education has jumped from 1.75 to 2.75 million from 1999 to 2006 (Gürüz, 2011).
The number of Central Asian students studying in the U.S. has been on a steady increase since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, standing today at more than three thousand students\(^\text{16}\) in the U.S. higher education system (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2014). These Central Asian students are enrolled at about fifty different institutions across the U.S. (Cosmos, 2012). For Central Asians, the access to higher education in the U.S. was available mainly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, because not only the U.S. Department of State has been sponsoring various educational exchange programs in all five countries of Central Asia (U.S. Embassies in Central Asia, n.d.), but also some of the independent states themselves have been sparing some funding for study abroad programs. For instance, the Bolashak program in Kazakhstan has undergone substantial changes overtime but nonetheless the program funds Kazakhstani students’ master’s and doctoral degrees in addition to other professional development programs in the U.S. for Kazakhstani teachers and professors (Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, n.d.).

Hall (1996) notes how emerging identities in the context of globalization are not fixed, but they are poised in transition, between different positions, which draw on different cultural traditions at the same time. Thus, crossing cultural borders for educational purposes may carry implications for the way female students view themselves by drawing from both U.S. and Central Asian cultural traditions. For instance, Blum (2016) reports that returning migrants bring back home certain ‘cultural

\(^{16}\) The number of Central Asian students studying in U.S. colleges and universities in 1994/1995 was 439, and in 1999/2000, the number increased to 1297 (Institute of International Education, 2009). In 2013, the number of students reached 3,029 in the U.S. higher education system, with the number of students from Kazakhstan being 1884, from Uzbekistan 426, from Tajikistan 299, from Kyrgyzstan 250, and from Turkmenistan 170 (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2014).
remittances’ after living, working, and studying in the U.S. By ‘cultural remittances,’ the author refers to newly gained beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, ideas, and practices. One of such cultural remittances, according to Blum (2016), is the functional knowledge the young migrants appropriate. The functional knowledge, such as having disciplined work habits, thinking analytically, being a go-getter, and being willing to take initiatives, gives the young Kazakhstani return migrants a better chance for a job or promotion and thus increases young people’s self-confidence (Blum, 2016).

The individuals with identities poised in transition (Hall, 1996) experience culture shock as they go through disorienting emotional difficulties in an unfamiliar setting while living and studying in a foreign context (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012; Furnham, 2010). Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, and Todman (2008) assert that in addition to their psychological adjustment and sociocultural adaptation, the “pedagogical adaptation of international students in higher education is a subset of the ‘culture shock’ experienced by a wide range of cultural travelers” (p. 73). An anthropologist Oberg (1960) popularized the term culture shock by defining it as an "occupational disease" (p.1) for people who work abroad. He defined the notion as involving two processes: contact with a different culture and loss of the safety net of predictable social roles and practices. Since Oberg’s identification of culture shock, there have been numerous contributions to its study, models, causes, prevention, and its relation to individuals’ self-identity (Lombard, 2014; Ward et al., 2001; Zhou et al., 2008).

Early theories of culture shock applied to the study of international students have been influenced by the traditional perspectives on migration and mental health. They
“...were clinically oriented and strongly related to medical models of sojourner adjustment” (Ward et al., 2001, p. 36). Various attempts have been made to define culture shock, including adjustment strain (Crano & Crano, 1993), a sense of loss and feelings of deprivation, being rejected, confusion in role expectations, anxiety, and feelings of impotence due to not being able to cope with the new environment (Berry, Kim, Mide, & Mok, 1987). The notion of culture shock encompassed a meaning of going to a foreign context and losing a power of easy communication, which “…can disrupt self-identity, world views, and indeed all systems of acting, feeling and thinking” (Furnham, 2010; pp. 87-8). However, according to Ward et al. (2001), this experience is not necessarily all negative and the notion should be understood as people’s response to unfamiliar cultural environments as an active process of dealing with change through psychological adjustment and sociocultural adaptation.

**Contemporary Perspectives on Intercultural Contact**

Contemporary theories and approaches to culture shock are currently based on affective, behavioral, and cognitive components, referred to as the ABC framework of culture shock (Ward et al., 2001; Zhou et al., 2008). The ABC framework of culture shock suggests the three essential contemporary approaches: ‘stress and coping,’ ‘culture learning’ (Furnham & Bochner, 1986), and ‘social identification’ theories (Tajfel, 1981). These approaches are situated within a broader framework of acculturation theory, which refers to the process of intercultural adaptation (Ward et al., 2001). Thus, this framework is particularly concerned with cultural travelers’ psychological adjustment through stress and coping, sociocultural adaptation through culture learning, and the effects of cultural
transitioning on individuals’ self-identity that has both psychological and sociocultural outcomes (Zhou et al., 2008).

Figure 3

**ABC Model of Culture Shock**

**Culture learning.** The *behavior* aspect of culture shock is based on the cultural learning approach (Furnham & Bochner, 1986), and researchers who adopt this approach see intercultural contact as a skilled and mutually organized performance (Argyle, 1969). The approach assumes that cross-cultural problems arise because cultural novices have difficulties managing everyday social encounters. Such everyday social encounters involve individuals’ interpersonal interactions through verbal and non-verbal forms of communication (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012), the use of time (Furnham & Bochner, 1982), etiquette (Dillard, Wilson, Tusing, & Kinney, 1997), strategies for resolving conflict (Hofstede, 1980), and managing the unwritten rules of U.S. classroom culture for
international students (George, 1995). The cultural learning approach leads to practical guidelines for changing behavior in order to manage the culture shock. Thus, culture shock is seen as the stimulus of acquiring new culture-specific skills that are needed to engage in unfamiliar social situations (Ward et al., 2001).

For example, Tang, Collier, and Witt (2018) conducted a qualitative research on Chinese international students who were still in China but were preparing to study in the U.S. The authors report on these students’ expectations and perceptions of U.S. universities—that Chinese students foresee U.S. classes to be rigorous due to difference in learning experience and English proficiency issues. Considering the behavior aspect of culture shock, these Chinese students may need to learn new educational methodologies, understand the U.S. classroom culture (George, 1995), and alter their behaviors in order to succeed in the U.S. classroom (McCargar, 1993; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004). However, reality does not always equate with one’s expectations. For instance, Liberman (1994) reports in his study that students from Asia studying in the U.S. were critical of the informality in the classroom, perceived lack of respect for professors, and insufficient focus in classroom interactions. Thus, the U.S. classroom may not be as rigorous for all international students as was expected by Chinese students in Tang et al.’s (2018) study. Yet, the changes in the educational practices require behavioral adjustments on the part of the international students and this population does not only need to learn culture specific knowledge in general, but also utilize this culture specific knowledge in the U.S. classroom in order to succeed academically (Zhou et al., 2008).
**Stress, coping and adjustment.** The *affective* component of culture shock revolves around the significance of life changes of individuals in cross-cultural transition: assessing these changes and applying coping strategies in stressful situations (Zhou et al., 2008). Drawing from stress and coping literature, Ward et al. (2001) highlight the individual’s psychological well-being and satisfactions and emphasize how important personal resources can be, such as self-efficacy and emotional resilience. The major elements of stress while living and studying abroad include demographic factors, cultural-specific knowledge and skills, personality, social support, and culture distance (Zhou et al., 2008). Berry (1997) invokes the personality traits of individuals to explain why some people are more prone to suffer from culture shock than others, while Zhou et al. (2008) convey that there are both individual (e.g. personality) and societal level (e.g. educational structure and culture) elements that jointly determine international students’ stress. Berry (1997) suggests that international students experience the affective aspect of culture shock because of acculturative life changes. The author defines *acculturation* as a process that occurs when members of two or more cultural groups come into contact with each other and cultural learning results. Nearly all international students encounter an array of acculturative stressors, including the language barrier, educational environment, sociocultural situations, discrimination, loneliness, and practical or lifestyle stressors (Lombard, 2004; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004; Zhou et al., 2008).

**Social identification theories.** The *cognitive* aspect of culture shock is based on the processes of social identification that focuses on individuals’ identity as a fundamental issue while transitioning from one culture to another (Ward et al., 2001) as
“people perceive themselves in a much broader context – ‘little fish in bigger ponds’” (Zhou et al., 2008, p. 67). During cross-cultural contact, finding oneself in such a broad context can lead to anxiety-provoking change in how individuals perceive themselves and their identity (Zhou et al., 2008). Extant research on social identification processes of individuals crossing cultural boundaries takes its origins in two related bodies of research: *acculturation* and *identity* (Deaux, 1996; Phinney, 1990; Ward, 1996) and *social identity theory* (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

**Acculturation and identity.** Initially, the approaches to acculturation and identity came from ethnic and cross-cultural psychology, and acculturation process was considered uni-dimensional, bi-dimensional, or categorical (Zhou et al., 2008). The uni-dimensional conceptualization implied that an individual gives up her identifications with her culture of origin and only identifies with the culture of contact (Olmeda, 1979). The bi-dimensional conceptualization of acculturation emphasized bicultural identity where individuals mediate between the two cultures and identify with both home and host cultures (Bochner, 1982). The categorical model specifies four acculturation strategies for how individuals categorize home and host culture identities as independent domains: integration, separation, assimilation, and marginalization (Berry, 1997). Individuals identify with both home and host cultures in integration domain, separation implies identification with home culture and not so much with host culture, assimilation is opposite to separation and individuals identify with host culture and not so much with home culture, and marginalization suggests that individuals do not identify closely with either home or host cultures (Berry, 1997).
There are multiple factors involved with individuals’ identity change during the acculturation process (Paige, 1993). The range of factors include individual characteristics (e.g. age, gender and education), group characteristics (e.g. international students or permanent residents), and the broader social context (e.g. the extent of power and privilege apparent in the host society). If a female student came to the U.S. from a homogeneous culture and never traveled before, it is likely that her identity has rarely or never been challenged before. In such circumstances, "the pressures for cultural change are often perceived as intense, immediate and enduring" (Ward et al., 2001, p. 100).

**Social identity theory.** Tajfel's (1981) social identity theory emerged from social psychology, and it highlights the individual's identity and how her group membership affects her identity. The theory conveys the individual awareness of her membership in a particular group, the emotional significance of this membership, and that social identities are part of the self-concept. Tajfel and Turner (1986) convey that social categorization and social comparison is coupled with in-group favoritism and out-group derogation leading to various consequences on individual's self-esteem. Thus, if Central Asian female students feel certain stereotyping by Americans against their ethnic identity and/or religious identity as threatening, they may adopt various responses to change their social identities to restore their self-esteem.

The cognitive aspect of culture shock, which is about individuals how view themselves and their self-identity, can be observed in Blum’s (2016) work on Kazakhstani return migrants’ experiences with the effects of crossing cultures. From the cognitive point of view, Ward et al. (2001) suggest four alternatives for individuals
facing culture shock: 1. Remain monocultural; 2. assimilate totally; 3. synthesize the best elements of both cultures and become bicultural; and 4. vacillate between cultures and identify with neither. One of the major findings of Blum’s (2016) research study is about the participants who achieved the third alternative suggested by Ward et al. (2001) considering some of the author’s participants: synthesize the best elements of both cultures. While redefining their sense of self in society, return migrants emphasize self-sufficiency that is about having financial and decision-making responsibility, as part of their self-identity.

According to Blum (2016), Kazakh culture has never been about individualism but rather networks of extended family. Living, working, and studying in the U.S. causes some young migrants to embrace individualist values by living apart from parents and seeking to define themselves. Such individualism is expressed by adopting certain U.S. modes of casual dress, sitting on the grass, or talking openly about various topics (Blum, 2016). Yet, young return migrants do not completely cut their ties with their immediate and extended families and still participate in collective gatherings, which shows how return migrants synthesize the best elements of both cultures and construct their identity as an ongoing representation of ever-changing internalized viewpoints (Blum, 2016).

**Synthesis**

The purpose of this dissertation is to understand whether and how Central Asian female students’ identities change as a result of their studies in U.S. higher education and cross-cultural encounters. The RMMDI (Jones & McEwen, 2000) was the first student development framework for understanding the complexities of personal and socially
constructed identities. By incorporating meaning-making, Abes, Jones, and McEwen, (2007) assert that the amount of influence any contextual factor has on the different aspects of identity depends on the individual’s capacity for meaning-making. In other words, the amount of influence the acculturation process has on Central Asian female students’ different aspects of identity depends on female students’ capacity for meaning-making. Thus, such meaning-making can have affective, behavioral, and cognitive outcomes (Ward et al., 2001).

In psychology, meaning-making is the process of how individuals understand, interpret or make sense of life events, relationships, and their self-identity (Ignelzi, 2000). Thus, the way female students make meaning of their intercultural adaptation or acculturation process can be psychological with affective outcome, sociocultural with behavioral outcome, and cognitive that has both psychological and sociocultural outcomes (Zhou et al., 2008). These three outcomes are interactive and dynamic as such a significant life event as going abroad to study involves adaptive change. Studying abroad requires certain coping strategies as well as certain culturally relevant skills to succeed in academia, and such gains “will involve responses in affect, behavior and cognition for both stress-management and social skill acquisition, and should result in psychological adjustment and sociocultural adaptation” (Zhou et al., 2008, p. 69). When individuals go through the acculturation process, there are multiple factors involved in the change process, including individuals’ personal characteristics (age, previous educational background, personality, language) and also their situational characteristics (cultural distance, social support).
According to Zhou et al. (2008), “the cognitive aspects of acculturation seem not well integrated with the whole acculturation process” (p. 70). Therefore, the RMMDI serves as a complementary model and helps to clarify students’ cognitive experiences with acculturation as a snapshot in time. For instance, Central Asian female students may bring a certain understanding of gender roles practiced in their respective countries, which may trigger irreconcilable positions when the women are encountering U.S. counterparts with different opinions. Such opposing understandings affect cognition of both Central Asians and Americans, thus affecting how they view each other and themselves. As a consequence of the contact, both parties are influenced to a certain degree, and perhaps may even change their views on gender roles. These changed views can be contextualized using RMMDI to see where a female student’s gender identity stands in relation to her inner core after her experiences abroad.

**Identity Construction through Transnational Feminist Perspective**

In his study, Blum (2016) observes how young Kazakhstani return migrants emphasize the gender equality after coming back from the U.S. Although Kazakhstan is considered to have quite a gender-equal public sphere, the private sphere still struggles with inequality (Blum, 2016). After observing Western women’s lifestyles, return migrants delineate significant ways in which Kazakh women do not fully enjoy this equality. For instance, there is a decision-making inequality between men and women, as men make the final call on most major issues. Moreover, even though women practice modern behavior in Kazakhstan such as going out for a drink, they normally first get permission from their husband or boyfriend. Blum (2016) concludes that female returnees
tend to be far more involved in negotiations on gender issues as compared to male returnees.

This particular finding of Blum’s (2016) work showcases how female and male Central Asian students may not experience similar identity transformations and emphasizes the extant power dynamics between male and female Central Asians. This dissertation is not concerned with understanding the differences themselves in male and female student’s experiences. Yet, it is concerned with female students’ experiences on their own right from a feminist perspective and seeks to examine how being a woman may have influenced their identity transformation. Central Asian female students’ experiences are analyzed and interpreted from a transnational feminist perspective as this lens encapsulates how women are heterogeneous, that one dominant view of being a woman may not represent every woman around the world (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994). To achieve this goal, the study was designed to encourage fundamental participant contribution to the study using participants’ world views, values, and beliefs.

Moreover, it is essential consider the power dynamics of the societies where Central Asian students came from. Yoder and Kahn (1992) note that power differences in cultures frequently underlie what appear to be gender differences in behavior. As societies are currently configured, power and gender are never independent. Yoder and Kahn (1992) delineate and conceptualize power in two ways: power-over and power-to. Power-over refers to domination and control of one person over another, and power-to refers to personal empowerment which has to do with the control one feels over one’s own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Yoder & Kahn, 1992).
boundaries, Central Asian women may not only be involved with power-over issues in relation to their gender but also experience personal empowerment because of the fundamental cultural differences and societal power dynamics. Furthermore, coming from developing countries and representing a Third World or Second World woman may trigger different types of power issues while studying in the U.S.

Transnational feminism is an emerging branch of feminism which is concerned with two specific issues. First, it problematizes the contemporary feminist paradigm by critiquing the ideologies of traditional white, classist, Western models of feminist practices. Second, it refers to the corresponding activist movement (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994). Since Morgan (1990) published her book *Sisterhood Is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology*, many feminists of the East have been alarmed with the unilateral category of global sisterhood that is used to describe all women of the world, which failed to address the profound differences among women regarding race, class, sexuality, and nationality (Blackwell, Briggs, & Chiu, 2015). For instance, it is presumptuous to think that all women who wear hijab are oppressed by their patriarchal society or culture. It is possible that women may have chosen to wear hijab themselves. In her study, Nagar (2002) demonstrates similar concerns that are brought up in a group discussion by three feminist scholar-activists in Pune, India:

> When feminist scholars from Western countries come here to do their research, they often try hard to do everything in our local language and idiom. But why is it that when they return to their institutions, they frequently write in ways
that are totally inaccessible and irrelevant to us? ... The question of access is not just about writing in English. It is about how one chooses to frame things, how one tells a story ... [Suppose] you tell my story in a way that makes no sense at the conceptual level to me or my community, why would we care what you have to say about my life? (p. 179)

The production of the *Third World Woman* as a singular category within colonization discourse has been one of Mohanty’s (1984) major concerns. Colonization implies a relation of structural domination or political suppression, even though the society or subjects being discussed are heterogeneous in nature. Mohanty (1984) encourages the feminist researchers to theorize and interpret male violence, for instance, within specific societies and to avoid generalizing societies in order to understand such violence better and to effectively change it. Thus, the transnational feminist thought emphasizes that, for one, global sisterhood should not only focus on Western values and beliefs and see and analyze others *under Western eyes*, and for two, the heterogenous nature of women of the East should not be portrayed as one category, such as the *Third World woman* (Mohanty, 1984).

The term *transnational* is specifically favored by scholars because the term ‘trans’ “articulates a different relationship to the nation than ‘comparative’ or international analysis, which re-centers the nation as the unit of comparison” (Blackwell, Briggs, & Chiu, 2015, p. 30). For instance, the concept ‘international’ focuses on nation-states as distinct entities and the concept of ‘global’ speaks to liberal feminist theories (Grewal &
Kaplan, 1994). Grewal and Kaplan (1994) assert that "we need to articulate the relationship of gender to scattered hegemonies such as global economic structures, patriarchal nationalisms, "authentic" forms of tradition, local structures of domination, and legal-juridical oppression on multiple levels" (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994, p. 17). The authors encourage feminist activists to avoid linking the women's differences and unifying the multiple and overlapping oppression under one category of gender.

Thus, transnational feminism rejects the uniform description of women’s issues under the umbrella of globalization and capitalism and draws from postcolonial feminist theories calling for activist movements to understand the role of gender, state, race, class and sexuality (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994). Spivak (1994) and Mohanty (2003) argue that subjectivity and identity are constructed in many different ways in any historical moment, and they cannot be conceptualized as unified subjectivities located in the category of woman as a singular subject. Postcolonial feminist thought demands decolonizing self and other, thus eliminating feminist scholarly practices that are inscribed in relations of power (Mohanty, 2003).

Hence, understanding female students’ cross-cultural experiences in their own right from transnational feminist perspective gives this dissertation study an opportunity to recognize Central Asian women’s profound differences and how they internalize power-over and power-to while or after studying and living in the U.S. This perspective provides a chance to explore the unique characteristics or identity changes the women experience, rather than clustering these differences in unilateral category of Western women.
Conclusion

The focus of this study involves examining identity transformation of female students from Central Asia. While each strand of these theories discussed above serves as a source for interview questions and thorough data analysis, the goal of this study is not to fit female students’ experiences into extant theoretical frameworks. Instead, the emerged themes complement the extant theoretical frameworks and the framework complements the analysis of the emerged themes.

Incorporating the RMMDI with affective, behavioral, and cognitive adaptive outcomes and transnational feminist perspective shows that a relationship exists between the psychological, social, and historical contexts and highlights the importance of Central Asian female students’ reactions to social, educational, and cultural changes. The ABC model influences the framework by highlighting how individuals create meaning during social interactions, how they construct and present their identity to others, and how they define situations of co-existence with others. Therefore, student descriptions of their college experience may illustrate how meanings of experiences and sense of self are socially constructed through interactions with diverse others.

Social identities are a product of the environment in which people live and associate with others. Recognizing that identity development is dynamic, fluid, and complex, the RMMDI may clarify how female students negotiate their identity across multiple contexts. With the vast diversity within the U.S., students may actively negotiate more than one aspect of identity at a time. As a result, paying attention to both the social and the individual nature of identity development becomes crucial.
CHAPTER IV
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Research Design

The basic interpretive research design was employed to understand how Central Asian female students' identities change after cross-cultural encounters and studying in U.S. graduate schools. Qualitative research is descriptive and inductive, focusing on uncovering meaning from the perspective of participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002). Conducting interviews with six Central Asian female students using basic interpretive approach, I interpreted their cross-cultural and educational experiences, learned how they construct their self-identity, and discovered what meaning they attribute to living abroad and their experiences of education in the U.S. (Merriam, 2002). The qualitative study was designed “with a flexible structure [emphasis in original]” (Hatch, 2002, p. 38) and included the following elements: research questions, the place of theory, contexts, participants, data collection strategies, data analysis procedures, and the form of my findings which emphasized interpretation (Hatch, 2002; Wolcott, 1994).

Qualitative methodologists emphasize different approaches in terms of flexibility and structure of the design process. Specifically, they diverge from each other about the extent to which researchers must prepare and develop concrete plans or foci before entering the research context. For instance, Bogdan and Biklen (2003) do not favor developing a detailed set of procedures prior to data collection, as they believe “The study itself structures the research, not preconceived ideas or any precise research.
design” (p. 49). Similarly, Lincoln and Guba (1985) call for an emergent design, asserting that the design “must emerge, develop, [and] unfold” (p. 225) for researchers. They reason that familiarity with established theory may lead researchers to see social phenomena in ways that may lead them to processes that feel like confirming or disconfirming a hypothesis or make their qualitative studies more deductive and quantitative in nature than they would like. On the other hand, Marshall and Rossman (2016) support developing a solid design prior to entering the field by linking specific research questions to thoroughly researched theoretical constructs and to the selection of specific methods in order to add to the body of knowledge and to fill a gap in the literature. Hatch (2002) conveys that “knowing something about studies already done gives the researcher a sense of what the field takes to be known, what is possible, and what needs further exploration” (p. 41).

I entered the research context neither with a total freedom (e.g. without concrete plans or foci), nor with a thoroughly developed theoretical framework. Rather, this study was designed with a flexible structure (Hatch, 2002). The beginning was guided by solid research questions, but the theoretical framework was loosely developed to leave room for flexibility, as discussed below. I proceeded with an understanding that my study will develop and change as it is implemented because “…it is better if projects develop within a framework and change when real circumstances dictate than to go into a research setting without a fundamental plan of action” (Hatch, 2002, p. 38).

The research questions were identified in the early stages of the study. Such identification is a critical step in research design as the research questions are the only
component that ties directly to all of the other elements of design (Maxwell, 2013; Ravitch & Riggan, 2012). The structure of the questions was improved and adjusted as the study progressed. The dissertation research questions included three broad questions, but the participants were posed more specific questions that I discuss below in the data collection section. The key research questions included: (1) How do Central Asian female students understand their self-identities after studying in the higher education institutions and living in the United States for more than two years? (2) In what way studying in American higher education system and crossing cultural boundaries changed Central Asian female students' perceptions of their self-identities? (3) How do Central Asian female students negotiate their self-identities when studying and living in a new context and/or after they return to their country of origin?

Methodological and Theoretical Alignment

This dissertation is an interview study based on the constructivist paradigm by interviewing six female graduate students from Central Asia to discover, from their perspectives, what facilitates identity change as a result of studying and living abroad. The basic interpretive approach allowed me to focus on the emergence of findings from data, and consider the context, the relationship of the participant with the researcher, and various forms of expression (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Constructivism is an interpretivist theory rooted in the notions that multiple realities exist and that realities are co-constructed between the researcher and participants through dialogue (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Lather, 2007). The constructivist paradigm conveys that “a world in which universal, absolute reality are unknowable, and the objects of inquiry are individual
perspectives or constructions of reality” (Hatch, 2002, p. 15). The best way to understand how and why identity transformations occur after certain experiences is through co-constructing meaning with the participants themselves.

In terms of substantive theory, there was particular flexibility in describing and explaining theoretically how Central Asian female students’ identities transform after living and studying in the U.S. prior to data collection. It was necessary to have the theoretical framework early on to clarify and explain the readers where I locate my study in relation to overarching theories (Hatch, 2002; Berg, 1998). At the outset, I declared my interest in studying identity transformation of female students from the hybridity perspective housed in postcolonial theory articulated by Bhabha (1994) as hybridization of people as a result of tension between dominant and dominated. I purposefully did not develop the framework thoroughly as “…having strong theoretical predispositions can influence the design and implementation of a study in negative ways” (Hatch, 2002, p. 40). As the study progressed, I found little relevance of the international female students’ positions as dominated and American higher educational institutions as dominant.

Furthermore, Bhabha’s (1994) literary synthesis of hybridity and his abstract conceptualization made it difficult to explain the practical and detailed steps of Central Asian female students’ identity change in socio-cultural and educational contexts.

The flexible structure of my research design did not preclude the importance of continuing with alternative theoretical explanations as the study progressed and reports were written (Hatch, 2002). During the initial data analysis process, I became interested in the particularities of various dimensions of identity and their transformation in higher
education context within contemporary models, such as RMMDI articulated by Jones and Abes (2013) and ABC model of culture shock articulated by Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2001). I focused more attention on female students’ experiences with cultural transition, adaptation, and dealing with culture shock while coming to grips with understanding their multiple dimensions of identity, so my findings were framed within a perspective that was not a part of my initial substantive theory base. Staying flexible with the structure of my research design avoided the possible concerns of bias (see below) by not focusing on strong theoretical predispositions prior to data interpretation (Hatch, 2002).

**Research Contexts: Historical and Physical Settings**

Research contexts in qualitative studies are “complex, dynamic, and nested within larger cultural, political, and historical frameworks that must be considered…” (Hatch, 2002, p. 44). To best answer the research questions, the focus is on the historical context (see Chapter II) in which the participants’ complex social and cultural identities came into being before coming to the U.S. It was essential to consider this historical context because understanding larger political, ideological, and cultural influences to women’s identities before coming to the U.S. offered insight about how and why Central Asian female students accept or reject certain U.S. cultural or educational elements which may essentially affect the way they view their self-identities. Each of the female participants had her own idiosyncratic identity characteristics which were unique to her alone because of how the Soviet and/or post-Soviet historical context influenced in her life.
In addition to the historical context, it was important to consider another contextual aspect of this dissertation study that is “the physical setting in which social action occurs, a set of participants and their relationships to one another, and the activities in which participants are involved” (Hatch, 2002, p. 44). The study focused on Central Asian female students who were pursuing their master’s or doctoral degrees in six different higher education institutions of the Midwestern states and the East Coast of the U.S. Despite the fact that the physical setting served as an invaluable asset to data analysis and interpretation, heavier weight was given to participants’ responses and analysis of their self-understanding and transformation.

The type and location of these institutions was not important as long as it accommodated Central Asian students and offered access to them (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Out of six participants of the study, four of them showed me around their academic campuses during the initial individual interviews. They took me to specific locations such as the libraries, offices, coffee shops, cafeterias, and buildings where they liked to work on their research projects. These four participants preferred to be interviewed on a campus site, as it was more convenient. One participant invited me to her home, and I had a chance to meet her family members while I was served hot tea in a comfortable living room. For another participant, the interview was conducted online using Skype, and I observed her physical setting, her dormitory room, through video. All participants of the study appeared to be content with their physical settings and their homes and spoke highly of their academic institutions.
Participants and Recruitment Process

The focus was on six Central Asian female students who were studying in graduate schools at the time of the initial interview. Five out of six women were studying in the Midwestern states; only one was studying on the East coast. To be included in the study, interviewees had to satisfy all the following criteria: (1) identified as female, (2) born and raised in one of the Central Asian countries, (3) ethnically Kazakh, Uzbek, Turkmen, Pamiri/Tajik, Kyrgyz, or mixed with one of these ethnicities, (4) had least one parent or grandparent from Central Asia, (5) lived and studied in graduate schools of the U.S. for two or more years, (6) visited their home country at least once since they arrived in the U.S., and (7) were 20 years old or older.

Women who lived in the U.S. more than two years were intentionally interviewed. This is because according to Ward, Okura, Kennedy, Kojima (1998), individuals who live longer in a foreign country have different outcomes from those who visit a foreign country for a short term. In addition, Russian and other European ethnic groups, even if they were born and raised in Central Asia, were intentionally excluded. Only indigenous ethnic groups were investigated, because Russian and other European ethnic groups are tied to different historical narratives.

Moreover, studying in a graduate school was not the only study abroad experience for some participants. In fact, the significance of having study abroad experiences at different levels is acknowledged as providing more opportunities to reflect on the cultural exchanges that may contribute to the process of female students’ identity construction. Thus, the participants represent a range of ethnic backgrounds, spoken native languages,
ages, marital statuses, number of children, and years of experience in the U.S. (Patton, 2002). Even though they all represent the Central Asian region, they have different cultural and family backgrounds, and unique higher education experiences, as is reflected in conversations with them.

The Kent State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and approved the research study as Level II/Expedited, project category 6 and 7 [#15-600], on November 24, 2015.17 Having a purposeful sampling in mind (Patton, 2002), electronic mail (Appendix B) was sent to three universities of the Midwestern states with large Central Asian student populations. The same message shown in Appendix B was posted on social media, Facebook, and the professional pages of Central Eurasian Studies Society (CESS) and Kazakh American Association. Furthermore, I networked with female students from Central Asia during the annual meeting of CESS 2015 and requested that they connect me with others whom they might know who match the given criteria for participation (Appendix C). Lastly, the co-director of my dissertation, Dr. Martha Merrill, assisted in recruiting participants by forwarding the message (Appendix B) to her colleagues and various listservs. Unfortunately, the three universities contacted could not help, as their university policies did not permit such processes, but I was fortunate enough to recruit six participants through the other channels (see Table 1).

17 The approval was only valid for one year. Therefore, the IRB was renewed from November 24, 2016 to November 23, 2017, from November 23, 2017 to November 22, 2018, and again from November 22, 2018 to November 21, 2019.
Table 2

Participant Profiles

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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<th>Origin</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Children</th>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: The names of the participants are replaced with pseudonyms to protect students' identity. Also, the years present in the United States were calculated at the time of the initial interview from December 2015 through February 2016.

Data Collection

A key characteristic of all qualitative research is that the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Hatch, 2002). All interviews were conducted in the English language and the process contained two phases. First, I conducted the initial semi-structured interviews with each female student individually from December 2015 through February 2016. Second, I conducted the semi-structured focus group interview with five out of those six participants in December 2017. Semi-structured interviews allow the interviewer to develop a list of questions up front but the interviewer may follow topical trajectories in the conversation that may stray from the preset questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The semi-structured style is one of the core forms of in-depth qualitative interviews and it can be carried out in a responsive interviewing
style. The responsive interviewing style allowed me to focus on building a relationship of trust by questioning gently with little confrontation and asking more questions for clarification (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Additionally, I observed, audio/videotaped, and took notes during all interactions with participants (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

**Obtaining Consent**

Prior to the interviews, all participants were thoroughly informed about the interviewing process, ethical issues, and their entitlement to stop the interview at any time (Hatch, 2002). The participants were given time to thoroughly read the form and ask any questions about the interview process (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). The consent forms were signed in private by the participants in a quiet and comfortable environment. The participant who was interviewed individually through the internet sent the forms electronically. For the focus group interview, all participants signed the focus group consent forms prior to the interview to keep all generated information confidential as everyone learned each other’s names during the interview. The consent forms were sent and received electronically prior to the interview. After scanning and saving all the documents with a password in the researcher’s personal computer, the researcher shredded all original forms.

**Audio/Videotaping**

All individual and focus group interviews were either audio or video recorded with the participants’ permissions (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). Five out of six individual interviews were audio recorded using a cell phone device. One individual interview, which occurred online, was video recorded using QuickTime Player. Out of six
participants, five participated in the focus group interview—they all agreed to be video recorded using QuickTime Player, and they could see each other through video access on Google Hangouts, except one who was only audio recorded as she joined the conference call from Central Asia through a phone line. Audio and video files were saved in the researcher’s personal computer and protected with a password (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012).

**Semi-Structured Interviews**

As a semi-structured interviewer, I prepared a number of questions for the individual interview in advance as an 'interview guide' with plans to ask follow-up questions (Appendix D). Out of six individual interviews, only one was conducted online using Skype. Face-to-face individual interviews took place at a location of each participant's preference, using either her school office or her living room. In responsive interviewing, Rubin and Rubin (2005) suggest that the researchers ask interview questions which elicit “the understandings and experiences of the interviewees in ways that speak to the research problem” (pp. 156-7). Therefore, I focused on eliciting responses from participants on how studying and living in a foreign context serve as a powerful force shaking up women’s identities and their lives (Arar, Masry-Harzalla, & Haj-Yehia, 2013). All of the questions asked during the individual interview generated fruitful discussion, along with new discoveries for the participants themselves.

With Rubin and Rubin’s (2012) quote in mind, I began the individual interviews with basic questions that were relatively easy to answer from the interviewees’ experience by using the prompt “tell me about yourself.” This phrase is a subtle invitation
to the interviewee to begin talking and was also general enough that the interviewee could take the question in several directions with room for new ideas to emerge (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). Additionally, in order to stay within the frame of research purpose, I probed with questions like “Where are you from?”, “What are you studying?”, and “How did you come to the United States?”. These introductory questions allowed participants to avoid being boxed into particular responses and to express themselves expansively (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

One of the most essential parts of this interview process was to understand how participants analyze their own self-understanding. As portrayed in Chapter III, the self-concept entails multiple dimensions of identity (Jones & Abes, 2013) and with a goal eliciting my participants’ understandings on this notion I continued the process with a question “What can you tell me about your self-understanding prior to coming to study in the United States?” followed by a question “What can you tell me about your social identities, as you understand it?” These interview questions were also important because they set a starting point, so that the changes participants experienced as a result of living and studying abroad could be explored.

It was not surprising that participants had not contemplated their identities as part of their daily realities or routines as the notions like self and identity are very elusive in nature. It was difficult for them to answer these questions. Some participants experienced discussing these notions for the first time during the interview process (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997). For instance, Anara from Kyrgyzstan expressed herself: “the word identity always, like, confuses me…”
Yulduz from Uzbekistan was puzzled at first and explained later: “I didn’t know about different identities, like ethnic, religious, gender…I learned new things…about myself” (individual interview, December 23, 2015).

Another wave of questions about changes women experienced as a result of their journey in a foreign context was posed during the individual interview. The questions included “What did you learn about your social identities?”, “How has your life changed?”, “Where do you see yourself psychologically ‘at home’?”, and “Do you move back and forth?” (see Appendix D). These questions generated various discussions of what participants experienced during and/or after their schooling in the U.S. One important response to these questions was about these students who do not believe that the change aspect is only experienced at a certain time in their lives. They expressed how these changes are still in process because of their cross-cultural experiences and education abroad. The wave of questions generated responses that were affective, behavioral, and cognitive in nature (Ward et al., 2001).

Jacob and Furgerson (2012) purport that the researcher is responsible for ensuring that everyone involved in the study has a realistic expectation regarding the length of the interview and that distractions during the interview should be kept to a minimum. The duration of the individual interview for each participant was approximately one to two hours, as expected. The distractions during the interview were minimal and included taking restroom breaks, pouring and drinking tea, having unexpected visitors for a few seconds, and losing the internet connection one time during the online interview.
The second phase of the semi-structured interviews involved an online focus group interview. After sending out a focus group invitation message to all participants (Appendix E), they provided a tentative date and time to meet online using Google Hangouts. Five out of six participants agreed to participate in the interview—two participants were physically located in Central Asia and three were in the U.S. The interview took place on December 16, 2017 and lasted for one hour and twenty-one minutes.

The focus group interview questions were developed in relation to the themes that emerged from the first individual interviews (Appendix F). The group interaction was essential for this study because it assisted in "bringing to the surface aspects of a situation which might not otherwise be exposed" (Punch, 2005, p. 171). The focus group interviewing style allows the creation of group dynamics that can generate new thinking for some participants (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983; Punch, 2005). The goal was to stimulate participants to make their perceptions about their self-identity and transformations after living and studying in the U.S. explicit. As a researcher, I served as a moderator to keep the discussion related to the topic and encouraged those who seemed to be quieter than others (Silverman, 2010).

After introducing the study goals and the interview rules and regulations (see the script in Appendix E), the participants were asked to introduce themselves. The next following questions focused on the specific themes which emerged from the individual interviews (see Appendix F). The goal was to allow all participants to elaborate on the themes discussed by only few of them during the individual interviews and see if anyone
else discovered new aspects of their self-understanding. For instance, only one participant mentioned before that her views on LGBTQ community changed dramatically after studying in the U.S. This change seemed drastic enough to make it one of the themes of discussion during the focus group and allow everyone to provide more depth about the topic. Firuza from Tajikistan noted how careful she has to be as an educator when working with students in the U.S. because of the diverse student population and “… that [changes in her viewpoints] was really through classes that opened my eyes” (focus group interview, December 16, 2017).

The focus group interview provided the participants with a platform to discuss topics they wouldn’t think about otherwise. Firuza did not change her views on the LGBTQ community because of this group discussion. The illuminating aspect was more about being able to discuss these changes. Yulduz from Uzbekistan explained her insights: “I just caught myself after your questioning ‘how do you feel comfortable talking [about the LGBTQ community]’, and I said ‘No, I don’t discuss this’. And then, I caught myself talking to a Turkish male about this topic” (focus group interview, December 16, 2017). As a result of the focus group, the illuminating fact for Yulduz was that she is now comfortable discussing topics like LGBTQ identities, and she didn’t realize it until having a group discussion.

**Observations**

Observations occurred during all interactions with participants. Three out of six participants invited me to stay in their homes overnight during the individual interviews, and I had an opportunity to observe them in interactions with their family members. They
also gave me tours around their respective schools and showed their offices where they conducted scholarship. The other two participants invited me over for tea in their homes before starting the individual interviews. The participant who was interviewed through the internet showed me where she lived through a video camera for observation purposes. During both individual and focus group interviews, I observed the facial mimics, reactions, gestures, and voice tones of the participants either. Observing participants was significant because the observations provided a way to check for nonverbal expression of feelings, determine who interacted with whom and how, and grasp how participants communicated with each other (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Hatch, 2002). I consistently added observation notes in my journal and made meanings of my thoughts and ideas about the research participants (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

**Data Analysis**

In the analysis phase of the study, the collected data was organized and interrogated in ways that identified themes and made meanings of those themes (Hatch, 2002). To analyze the collected data, a constant comparative method was used. This approach of data analysis suited the larger research purposes and questions (Hatch, 2002). This method can be described as an inductive data examination that employs a process like the grounded theory approach (Merriam, 2002). Thus, after the data was transcribed, it was compared, coded, categorized, and described in tentative categories. During the coding process, each participant's initial individual interview was read multiple times to make sense of the data and to gain insight into participants' lives and ideas. While coding, integrative memos were written describing the emergent codes and possible themes. This
coding and categorizing process took place simultaneously with the second phase of the interview process. The focus group interview allowed participants to elaborate on certain categories, and tentative themes. Following the readings and the coding processes for both phases of the interview, shared patterns were identified and revised through constant comparison of the data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Hatch, 2002; Merriam, 2002).

The basic interpretive method also guided the data analysis process to focus on gaining an understanding of the data through the voices of the participants. Participants of the study talked about their experiences retrospectively in both phases of the interview. Their experiences were double mediated by their own recollections of their experiences and by the researcher's analysis of their recollections (Hatch, 2002; Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). The focus group was especially illuminating for the participants themselves, as having a group discussion on identity construction allowed them to reflect on certain aspects of their cross-cultural experiences for the first time (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997).

**Trustworthiness**

This study adheres to the common-sense definition of trustworthiness in relation to transparency in research and whether the collected data is legitimate (Maxwell, 2013). To be transparent about the researcher bias, I simulated the same interview conducted with participants on myself to identify my pre-suppositions and the pre-existing theories to which I have the strongest reactions. The bracketing method was used for keeping a memo to record my pre-existing experiences and used these memos during data analysis (Tufford & Newman, 2010).
To be transparent about the salience of first impressions and soliciting respondent validation and to challenge the findings, the member checking method was used to ensure the accuracy of each participant's captured experiences (Huberman & Miles, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After the individual interviews, the rough draft of emerged themes was sent to the participants via electronic mail, and they were given a month to read and judge the accuracy and credibility of the interpretation of collected data from the interviews (Creswell, 2013). For this validation strategy and to elaborate further on the emerged themes, a focus group interview with five of the participants, using the online collaborative tool Google Hangouts, was convened. The participants not only reflected on the accuracy of the account, but also contributed to what was missing in the findings by adding new, invaluable information as they conversed in a group (Creswell, 2013). They suggested only minor changes to the findings.

**Role of the Researcher**

In qualitative studies, the role of the researcher is considered an instrument of data collection, meaning data are mediated through the human individual, rather than questionnaires or inventories (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Thus in qualitative work, the "researchers are a part of the world they study; the knower and the known are taken to be inseparable" (Hatch, 2002, p. 10). The researcher does not analyze data from the position of an objective scientist because a qualitative researcher's inseparable role is an existential fact (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). However, it is essential for a qualitative researcher to be reflexive and keep track of her influences while getting close enough to understand the phenomenon (Hatch, 2002). Regarding subjectivity, Hall (1990) also
points out that "we all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always 'in context', positioned" (p. 222).

I note that my gender, ethnic, linguistic identities, and my understanding of how religion is contextualized by the Central Asian region helped me recognize and acknowledge the nuances of how Central Asian female students experience identity transformation. I was born and raised in Turkmenistan and arrived in the U.S. first as an exchange student in high school and then for both of my graduate degrees—master's and doctoral. My status as a Turkmen woman, who has dealt with identity negotiations for almost a decade, helped me understand the participants' experiences with identity change at a deeper level. This status also helped me to build an rapport with them.

I only knew one participant, prior to this research, as an acquaintance, but I had lost connections with her for almost a decade. I reconnected with this participant only after we accidentally ran into each other during the annual meeting of CESS 2015. I did not have a close relationship with this participant. However, I had a closer relationship with another female student whom I have known for one year and a half before the individual interview. I met the rest of the participants for the first time during the initial individual interview, and two of those newly found friends opened their homes and invited me to be their guest for one day, which I graciously accepted.

Even though building rapport seemed automatic, I was aware of the importance of managing my own self-presentation and my own subjectivities. I simulated the interview process on myself by requesting another doctoral candidate in my program to interview me about my own experiences with identity change. I recorded this interview and listened
to it multiple times during data analysis. Next, I engaged in reflexivity by writing a memo on my pre-understandings and the preconceived ideas I bring to the topic of crossing-cultural borders and studying abroad (Greenbank, 2003). Additionally, I asked probing questions, listened carefully to my participants' stories, and conducted a second round of focus group interviews to get deeper levels of the conversations with the participants (Janesick, 2000).

As a researcher, my role as an insider was tremendously helpful because I was not only able to identify and understand the discussion patterns and accents of the participants but could also easily translate certain Russian words used by the participants. The participants felt comfortable switching to the Russian language if they could not remember a word or a phrase in English. Ayoub and Rose (2016) have defended a researcher's insider role by asserting,

Consider, for example, qualitative research, where firsthand understanding of a group may enhance a researcher's ability to connect with research subjects. Moreover, a shared identity may promote richer data analysis, facilitating analytical insight that could be lost on others. (para. 14)

Similarly, Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) have emphasized a researcher’s influence on the study and acknowledged that a researcher is the one who judges how a specific respondent should be given voice or how understanding the context relates to a respondent's remarks. According to the authors, it is also the researcher's choice to decide the amount of context presented in relation to specific respondents or situations.
Therefore, growing up in Turkmenistan as a woman and studying abroad in the U.S. for my own graduate degrees provided this research study with firsthand understanding of participants experiences with cross-cultural encounters and with U.S. graduate schools.

**Limitations of the Research Study**

This dissertation study is not about generalizing findings. This qualitative study seeks to access the inner world of perception and meaning-making to understand, describe, and explain social process from the perspectives of the study participants. This approach does not commence with a prior hypothesis, but with a focus of inquiry that takes an inductive approach to data analysis. Research outcomes are not broad generalizations but contextual findings. The task of the qualitative researcher is to provide transferability of knowledge from context to context, rather than generalizability (Hatch, 2002; Patton, 2002).

The central characteristic of qualitative research is that individuals construct reality in interaction with their social worlds and each person has a distinct voice in her own context (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). There are two distinct ways the reader may connect with the emerged themes of the study. These findings are not applicable to men, and they are not applicable to women who are in complete different geographical or cultural contexts than these Central Asian women. However, these findings may resonate with the thoughts and feelings of men and women who have experienced similar transitions in their lives.

In addition, this qualitative study focuses exclusively on adult women who are currently pursuing masters or doctoral degrees. Girls who come to the U.S. to study as
high school exchange students are not included, although they could add interesting data to this area of study. Adult women are the focus because they are more mature and had more time to reflect on their lives and identity; consequently, they might provide more in-depth responses than teenage girls. However, if a woman had both high school and higher education experiences studying specifically in the U.S., she was included in the study.
CHAPTER V

AMBIVALENT NATURE OF IDENTITY

Ultimately the goal of this dissertation is to understand how identities of Central Asian female students change as a result of living and studying in graduate schools of the U.S. The first findings chapter of this dissertation includes analyses of the meanings of multiple dimensions of identity and the salience of certain identity dimensions because of the influences of Central Asian historical context and/or sociocultural and academic environments of participants’ graduate experiences in the U.S. The chapter does not necessarily focus on participants’ identity transformation process, but rather it lays the groundwork for such transformation, which will be discussed in the next chapter. It portrays participants’ reflections on the first research question of this study: how do Central Asian female students understand their self-identities after studying in the higher education institutions and living in the U.S. for more than two years?

At the start of the individual interviews, participants had a difficult time discussing and tapping into their self-identity as the term itself appeared intangible, mysterious, in process, and intermittent. Some participants also contended with portraying their social identities, such as ethnic, linguistic, and religious identities. Much of the participants’ contentions have to do with the influences of their complex historical context and its multilayered interpretations (Schoeberlein-Engel, 1994), their current academic and social environments which require psychological adjustment and sociocultural and pedagogical adaption (Ward et al., 2001; Zhou et al., 2008), and their own personal meaning-making capacity (Jones & Abes, 2013).
Crotty (1998) observes that “…all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context’’ (p. 42). As the study’s methodology is based on the constructivist paradigm, the current analysis of Central Asian female students’ multiple dimensions of identity indicates that the interviewer’s attributions of identities cannot be easily separated from the female students’ own projection of their identities, “…as identities are ultimately discursively enacted and negotiated through social interaction” (Haugh, 2008, p. 218).

The participants’ contentions with articulating their self-identity demonstrate that identities are not social phenomena that simply need to be discovered. Rather, identities are jointly constructed through discourse and sometimes simply by talking out loud (Lightfoot, 1983). As a matter of fact, it was difficult for most of my participants to respond to the simple question 'tell me about your self-understanding.' In a study conducted by Santoro and Morehouse (2011), teachers who quit the profession and left the secondary school system discovered the reasoning behind their decisions during the interview as they spoke out loud and critically thought about the reasoning for the first time. Similarly, the sheer act of posing the interview questions to participants pushed these women to clarify and substantiate their claims about their identities and identity change (Lightfoot, 1983). Conducting these interviews was revealing not only to the researcher, but also to the participants themselves. By speaking through their experiences
in a systemic way, the participants gained new perspectives on their perceptions of their self-identities and how they practice their agency after crossing cultural boundaries.

When asked about who they were, the participants did not hesitate to give their general information: their names, where they come from, what they study, marital status, and the number of children or lack thereof. These facts seemed to be apparent and comprehensible in their minds. However, discussing their self-identity became arduous for most of the participants. Some even formulated their responses conjecturally as they could not justify or substantiate some of the contextual influences or dimensions of their identity. Thus, reflecting upon their experiences and holding a responsive conversation with the interviewer was illuminating for the interviewees.

For instance, during the initial individual interview, Anara from Kyrgyzstan commented on how people in the U.S. have an abundance of conversation about gender equality. She believed in being feminine as a woman (e.g. gentle, caring, taking care of the family) and highlighted what she believed to be unnecessary emphasis on women’s strength and their comparison to men in the U.S. By the time the focus group interview took place two years later, Anara changed her views: “I don’t necessarily agree with that anymore, because when we talked last time I haven’t taken any gender development, gender differentiation, like gender and society classes… it was like an eye-opener for me… like bride-kidnapping is really big problem still in Kyrgyzstan” (focus group interview, December 16, 2017). Since the topic came up during the initial individual interview, Anara noted how she had paid close attention to it while she was in graduate school and took classes on gender issues. Similarly, Maysa from Turkmenistan said how
this study’s interview process helped her to understand her unsettled feelings about her self-identity by saying that the interview questions helped her to “kind of reflect upon [her] displacements” (individual interview, December 23, 2015). Yulduz from Uzbekistan noted similar observation: “I learned new things…about myself, and about like, these concepts [social identities] …I think I need to reflect more… [I am] just puzzled” (individual interview, December 23, 2015).

**Exploring the Nature of Identity at a First Glance**

All six female students were highly educated professionals with strong transnational affiliations and had either dual citizenship or permission to study and live in the U.S. They all expressed their strong desires to have a change in their lives; coming to the United States seemed like a good solution. However, not all the participants desired the same kind of change—some focused on personal and professional development, others wanted to help their families financially, and a few emphasized exploring a new geographical context. At the same time, they expressed their longing for their countries of origin, as at times it was difficult for them to be far away from their families and cultures. Yet, only two female students out of six intended to return to their respective countries after their studies, and they did so.

Anara is in her early 30s and a graduate student in a Midwestern university from Kyrgyzstan. She is married to an American citizen, has two children, and she is currently pursuing her doctoral degree in Sociology. Anara asserted that she does not reflect on her identity on daily basis, nor does she contemplate much about how her past experiences impacted her life. She expressed her confusion with the concept of identity:
You see? That’s when you asked this question, now it makes me divide, is it identity or beliefs? Or identity and beliefs is the same... I think that my opportunities in life have been affected by the way I thought about life, not about myself... The word identity always, like, confuses me... (individual interview, December 20, 2015)

As Anara spoke out loud and attempted to define her identity, rather than focusing on her own observations of her self-identity, she focused on how others make observations about her thoughts and behaviors. For instance, Anara’s colleague at school pointed out one day the constant comparisons Anara makes between her host and home cultures. Anara realized that her Kyrgyz cultural context is very important in the way she views her self-identity. She recalled her colleague’s comment: "[Anara], again this is the way how you grew up is affecting your different decisions and stuff like that. And, I [Anara] think, lately I [Anara] was kinda started thinking about [cultural comparison]" (individual interview, December 20, 2015).

Maysa is from Turkmenistan and she is a doctoral student at a Midwestern university. She is in her mid-30s, single, with no children, and she considers herself, in her words, “a global citizen.” It was not Maysa's first time studying in the U.S. She also had an opportunity to study in other Central Asian countries besides Turkmenistan. Maysa first selected her program area in Immigration Studies before choosing the destination for her study abroad program, because she had other opportunities to study in Europe to pursue her doctoral degree. The interview process was illuminating for Maysa
because she started thinking comparatively, as she noted “you’re making me think more about this comparative approach, right like compared between Turkmenistan and the United States” (Individual interview, December 23, 2015).

Yulduz is in her late 40s and came to the U.S. more than a decade ago with her whole family—her husband and her four children. She came to the U.S. for better opportunities in life for herself, her husband, and her children. Yulduz did not necessarily seek a change in her identity. Initially, she traveled from Uzbekistan to the U.S. only by herself for various short-term projects, but later she brought her whole family. Yulduz is also pursuing her doctoral degree in the Midwest, majoring in Health and Family Services. It appeared that Yulduz did not have the habit of reflecting much about her self-identity prior to the interview, as she admitted, "I didn't know about different identities, like ethnic, religious, gender, well maybe I knew about gender identity or national identity… I think I need to reflect more" (individual interview, December 23, 2015).

Discussing various cross-cultural experiences, Yulduz thought that the opportunities she had in life had nothing to do with her identity. She noted "I don’t know if my identity was involved in it" (individual interview, December 23, 2015).

Nodira is in her late 20s, a single woman with no children, and is also from Uzbekistan. She grew up in a multicultural and multilingual city. Initially, Nodira came to the U.S. for her master's degree and then continued with her doctoral degree in one of the Midwestern universities, majoring in Liberal Arts and Communications. Nodira has a clear sense of what she wants from her life and from her experiences in the U.S., thus she discussed her personal identity comprehensively. However, she did not feel comfortable
categorizing certain dimensions of her identity and discussing them separately, such as gender identity or religious identity. She did not see the relations of her core or personal identity to her various social identities as conceptualized by Jones and Abes (2013). She noted on this matter:

I think your questions are great, because I have already thought and answered in the ways that I haven't thought before. So, they did let me think differently a little, …But then on the other hand, that social identities that you're talking about, I am not sure whether they really let you know a lot about like, for example, me. (individual interview, December 21, 2015)

Firuza is in her late 30s, and she is from Tajikistan. However, she does not represent the mainstream Tajik culture as she is from the remote mountains of Pamir. Her geographical location plays a major role in shaping her identity, which came up early in the conversation. Yet, she took a moment to reflect about her self-identity, including her personal and social identities, and requested clarification by saying "if you can give me a small example, what do you mean by that?" After clarification, she seemed comfortable reflecting and giving examples of her self-identity. Firuza is pursuing her doctoral degree in communication studies in one of the universities in the Midwest. It is not her first study abroad experience in the U.S., and she currently lives with her husband, who is also from Tajikistan, and has one daughter.
In contrast to the rest of the participants, Botagoz from Kazakhstan was overly prepared to answer the interview questions of this research study, and it was evident that it was not the first time Botagoz reflected on her self-identity. It was essential for Botagoz to know her self-identity because she believes it shaped her success in life. She was in her mid-30s, and she was getting her master's degree in psychology on the East Coast at the time of the individual interview. However, by the time the focus group was conducted, Botagoz had graduated with her master's degree and moved back to Kazakhstan by choice, although she got her degree through the Bolashak program. This program requires students to return to their home country after graduation, however Botagoz emphasized she would have done so even if there was no such requirement. Pursuing a master's degree was not her first study abroad experience, and border-crossing has been her reality for almost a half of her life. She was precise in her explanation of her self-understanding by saying:

If you know who you are, if you know your inner self,
when something comes in front of you - be it a job,
question, people, decision - you know yourself, so you
know the answer. Yes, that's exactly what I like, that's
exactly what I wanna do …But it [studying in the U.S.] just
made me more confident…just in general. (individual
interview, January 29, 2016)

Although Botagoz seemed very clear about her self-identity at the start of the interviewing process, her later deliberations about life, her single status, and her
relationships with people demonstrated how her inner self is not quite self-certain. As she admitted later, it required a constant work as identity is a fluid concept.

Overall, one fact was clear while interviewing and conversing with participants, which is that the process of change in identity is not an already accomplished fact waiting to be discovered by the participants (Hall, 1990). Rather, some participants articulated their self-identity for the first time as they spoke out loud, and the interview questions helped them to reflect on their self-identity nor deeply. Though, the levels of reflections were different among the participants and that difference depended on multiple contextual factors and individual meaning-making capacity.

**Dreamers for a Better Life and 'Hunger' for Knowledge**

The graduate school experience in the U.S. brought participants’ better selves to the surface. Among those positive qualities were self-confidence, believing in themselves to do anything they put their mind to, motivation for better careers and life conditions, and understanding how the world functions in a new perspective, particularly, women’s roles in it. The participants discussed knowledge as an instrument of internal emancipation, i.e. a path to personal empowerment which has to do with the control one feels over one’s own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Yoder & Kahn, 1992).

All participants expressed some type of intrinsic value for education and sought an opportunity for a better life condition. They were dreamers and curious for knowledge. Dreaming about education abroad was part of their personal identities. Knowledge not only created opportunities for upward social mobility but also helped developed new motivations and desires. One of the traits the participants emphasized repeatedly was
about how much they have dreamed of coming to the U.S. They did not only want to
explore the culture, sightsee, and meet new people, but they also specifically wanted to
gain knowledge. Graduate school in the U.S. was the way out for some of participants to
a different, better life.

Anara's initial response about her self-identity encompassed her desire for
education abroad, but not having the means to realize those wishes. Learning a foreign
language was a dream come true for Anara. She immigrated to the U.S. because she
married a U.S. citizen, so for her getting a degree in higher education did not involve
being an international student. Anara expressed how inspired she became while studying
and developed new goals and dreams by gaining more knowledge and reading more
books and articles. Anara explained how her life was different before enrolling in a
graduate school and that she thought of herself as a scapegoat:

I always felt like I think I was a scapegoat because of the
way I always felt like my relatives treated me. I always felt
like nobody liked me. You know, no matter what I do
wasn't good enough and stuff like that. (individual
interview, December 20, 2015)

Anara lived with her aunt when she was in college in Kyrgyzstan, and it was a very
difficult time for her as she was constantly being controlled. It's in her culture that when a
girl moves to a different city, she must live with her family members in the dormitories if
she doesn’t have relatives. Studying in college in Kyrgyzstan was completely different
than studying in the U.S., where Anara not only learned specific content but also learned
how to believe in herself. Her paradigm shifted in terms of her judgment of other people, as she consciously attempted to see only good in people and to respect them for who they were.

Similarly, Nodira from Uzbekistan loved learning languages, especially English. She started learning English very early as she had a remarkable aptitude for new languages. Nodira thought she had a privileged life as she was the only child and had private tutors. She grew up only with her mother, who was her role model and who invested in her daughter's education. Nodira sees herself as very social, and she never felt that something was missing in her life, even if she grew up without siblings or a father. Her initial trip to the U.S. was involved her curiosity about learning. For Nodira, gaining knowledge is a pleasure.

Maysa also had a strong desire to live and study abroad. The first time she came to the U.S. was in high school as an exchange student, and it was her passion to learn about cultures and societies. She believes that a society does not exist in a vacuum and that members of a society are not isolated units and are connected with one another. She decided to study immigration because the field reflects her personality. She is very interested in human interaction, society, and relationships. After her gender identity, Maysa's academic identity was the centerpiece of her existence:

Coming from the post-Soviet society where math was very important, I knew very well that I could do well in business, engineering, like statistics, whatever. But, I am not the kind of person who is interested in that…like,
intellectually I am able to do, you know, I am able to work
with math. But as a person, I'm much more interested in
humans, human interaction. (individual interview,
December 23, 2015)

Yulduz from Uzbekistan was introduced to the Middle East prior to being
introduced to the U.S. She always desired to travel and see the world, and this desire
enhanced even more when she went to Russia for the first time during the Soviet era. The
trip to Russia with her father opened her eyes to the world. While Yulduz was heavily
influenced by the Soviet system, younger participants of this study were influenced by
the West after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Yulduz was introduced to the U.S. after
she got married and had children. Her dreams about living and studying abroad in the
U.S. derived from listening to the stories of people who have studied in the U.S.

Firuza’s circumstances were less fortunate compared to others, as she did not only
have a lack of resources and means to receive information about the outside world in the
remote mountains but also lacked support from her peers who have studied in the U.S.
Since her community was so tightly connected, some individuals would get jealous if
others achieved something better. For instance, a woman who had traveled to the U.S. for
a short-term program did not want to share any information with Firuza and suggested
that it was too difficult an experience. According to the norms of her community, Firuza
had achieved everything already: she had a higher education diploma, she worked at a
university and earned salary, she married successfully, and she had a baby. However,
Firuza knew there was a much bigger world out there than the mountains where she lived.
Her dreams, intrinsic aspirations and ambitions, and desire to help her family financially inspired Firuza to apply for study programs in the U.S.

Conversely, Botagoz had different conditions in Kazakhstan where information was easily available. She was on a completely different career path in Kazakhstan than she is now, but she never liked her job. She searched for something better because she believed working was not only about earning a salary - the job was supposed to bring some type of internal satisfaction. She explained, "I was kind of searching for more meaningful things to do in life." When she came for her master's degree in psychology, it was not necessarily her dream just to leave Kazakhstan, but rather she had specific plans. She explained that her "hopes were not probably for the future but more to change to make a drastic change in my life" (individual interview, January 29, 2016).

These Central Asian female students were ambitious, motivated, and inspired to learn more and to do more in life. What was interesting to observe, though, was that these dreams and aspirations for knowledge were not only for them alone. Participants were eager to give back to their communities, help their families to better their life conditions, bring information to those who lack the means to receive information, and empower anyone who is interested in bettering themselves and others.

‘Being a Woman’ as the Most Salient Identity Dimension

The reconceptualized model of multiple dimensions of identity captures students’ various social identities, including their relations to students’ core or inner self as a snapshot in time. The model recognizes the contextual influences of students’ multiple dimensions of identity and their meaning-making capacity to interpret those influences
(Jones & Abes, 2013). In the study conducted by Jones (1997), facing and experiencing difference brings the senses of self of college students into sharper focus—when difference is keenly felt, identity is shaped. Although the author discusses the differences emerging from the critical experiences such as being raped, being overweight, and crossing cultural boundaries, the focus of this study is only on the latter which comes with its own particular nuances (Ward et al., 2001). The salience of a dimension of an individual's identity suggests an awareness of that dimension. The more salient a social identity is the closer to the core it becomes:

Salience emerges out of the interaction between the individual's sense of self and the larger sociocultural contexts external to the individual. However, this interaction is dynamic and influenced by structures of privilege and oppression that produce both taken-for-granted dimensions of identity and identity salience. (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 72)

Although participants discussed various other dimensions of their self-identity, the one that stood out to them as most salient was their gender identity or their womanhood. Central Asian female students come from societies where a patriarchic system is still actively practiced (Falkingham, 2000; Kandiyoti, 2007; Khalid, 2007b). The gender roles practiced in participants’ countries do not always correspond with the behaviors and customs in the U.S. This difference brings the way my participants view their self-identity into sharper focus. As discussed in Chapter II, Central Asian societies
are currently at a vulnerable stage of national identity development (Laruelle, 2011) in which emphasizing women’s place in society is seen to be one of the most crucial factors to nurture future generations. Women’s bodies and sexualities have been the heart of strong public debates\(^{18}\) on how societies must practice their religious identity and how they should move forward given their histories with outside influences, such as the Russian empire and the Soviet Union (EurasiaNet, 2016; 2018; Nasritdinov & Esenamanova, 2017; Radioi Ozodi, 2018).

Moreover, female students’ gender identity might be most salient to them as a result of the cognitive outcome of their adaptation process (Ward et al., 2001). The affective, behavioral, cognitive adaptation processes of international students underscore students’ psychological adaptations as a result of stress and coping, their behavioral changes as a result of learning new cultural norms and educational methodologies, and cognitive changes as students now view their self-identity in a much broader context or in comparison to a different context (Furnham, 2010; Zhou et al., 2008). In this sense, Central Asian female students may not only find themselves in a new cultural environment, but also in a new educational one using new and different methodologies.

\(^{18}\) For instance, the debate in Kyrgyzstan in 2016 sparked controversies on women’s contemporary identity, whether they should lean towards Islamic or secular ways of being. The debate began with the postings of large banners in the city of Bishkek portraying Kyrgyz women in three different types of head covers with a title "Oh poor nation [or my poor people], where are we headed?" (EurasiaNet, 2016). A similar incident occurred in Tajikistan fairly recently when a young female artist Marifat decided to paint half-nude Tajik women’s portraits and showcase them to public at an art show (Radioi Ozodi, 2018). Another taboo incident about women’s body and sexuality occurred in Kyrgyzstan in September 2018 when a 19-year-old Kyrgyz student/singer Zere Asylbek posted a video on YouTube wearing bright red lipstick, a short skirt, and a black blazer with nothing under it but a purple lacy bra (EurasiaNet, 2018).
which actively contribute to their cognitive deliberation on various issues, including the ways of being as a woman (Furnham, 2010).

Participants had certain understandings of gender roles practiced in their countries of origin. The types of gender roles discussed by participants depended on their marital status. Three of the participants were married, and three were single. Married participants Firuza and Yulduz discussed their previous responsibilities as a daughter-in-law in the household: sweeping the floors before everyone wakes up in the morning, taking care of the children, cooking, bringing water from the river, and being able to go out in the evenings only with someone’s supervision. Unmarried participants Botagoz and Nodira discussed the difficulty of getting married to local men in their respective countries, the pressures of the society to get married and settle down, and the societal expectations from women to be weaker than men and to have obedient qualities.

Botagoz explained how women in Kazakhstan are considered lesser than men, and how some women would suffer for decades in marriage, even if their husbands beat them. The concept of divorce is not commonly accepted by her society (Kapysheva, 2014). She even debated with herself for a long time while living in Kazakhstan on whether she should pretend to be more vulnerable and whether she should explicitly hide her confidence and strength when in a relationship with a man. She wondered if perhaps her strengths and independence were the qualities that hindered her from changing her single status.

Anara raised a topic about how difficult it was growing up as a girl in Kyrgyzstan with less freedom and fewer decision-making abilities. Only when she got older could
she be brave and stand up for her decisions. As a young schoolgirl, she was restricted from travelling without supervision, and even as an adult woman, her parents disliked the fact she had to travel for work to interpret:

You can't go for trips because there are men there... it was decisive for my career or something to build my future opportunities, I had to go on those trips to interpret or something. And my parents would be totally against this and I couldn't understand that. (individual interview, December 20, 2015)

These understandings of particular gender roles may have triggered irreconcilable positions when women encountered their U.S. counterparts with different opinions. Such opposing understandings affect the cognition of both Central Asian and U.S. women, thus affecting how they view each other and themselves (Ward et al., 2001; Zhou et al., 2008). As a consequence of contact, both parties may have gotten influenced to a certain degree and perhaps may have even changed their views on gender roles. If they haven’t changed completely, at least this contact might have been the reason why women’s gender identity became more salient to them (Ward et al., 2001). According to transnational feminists, women are heterogeneous even within a particular society that seem homogeneous (e.g. Grewal & Kaplan, 1994; Nagar, 2002). Therefore, the extent to which the salience of the gender identity dimension augments also depends on various individual level factors, such as the woman’s personality, language fluency, or length of cultural contact, and
societal level factors, such as her society of origin, politics, economics, and culture (Zhou et al., 2008).

When women from Central Asia arrive at U.S. graduate schools, they find themselves in quite different circumstances, which focus on practicing gender equality and women’s empowerment. Gender identity was more important for female students than their international student identity because participants offered more examples about being a woman than being a student in the U.S. Firuza from Tajikistan explained that being an international student in the U.S. had its own challenges; however, she could always find solutions to her problems as her problems were not so profound. For her, it was easy to navigate the educational and sociocultural systems. Although the educational methodologies were different, everyone seemed to be at a graduate school for one main reason: to get a graduate degree or certificate. Conversely, her gender identity required more deliberation and negotiation because of the difference in how gender roles are practiced in the two cultures and how they are discussed in graduate schools in the U.S. The way girls and women are treated in Tajikistan did not quite match how women live their lives in the U.S. (Firuza, individual interview, January 8, 2016).

The way Firuza grew up understanding what it means to be a girl or a woman in Tajikistan, especially in the Pamir mountains, was influenced by multiple factors: her religion, family dynamic, local customs, and educational background. She asserts that the high school dropout rate for girls in Tajikistan has increased tremendously since the collapse of the Soviet Union; girls go to school up to fifth or sixth grade, and then they get married. Apparently, most of the time these marriages are arranged for them. Firuza
offered as an example her female neighbor with three children, whose life was very
difficult as she couldn't even take her children to the hospital without her husband's
permission. Firuza tied her neighbor’s unfortunate circumstance to her lack of education.
Firuza’s reflection and analysis of her neighbor’s situation demonstrated how Firuza
valued education profoundly as she repeatedly connected having better life conditions to
being educated (individual interview, January 8, 2016).

Firuza’s profound value for education may derive from her Ismaili identity. She
thinks that she is ‘privileged’ to be educated in comparison to other women in her
community. The Ismaili branch of Islam emphasizes the significance of girls’ and
women’s education (Ismaili Gnosis, 2018; Niyozov, 2018). Firuza’s focus on education
comes from her parents because of the type of home training she received as a child and
as a young adult. Education for her family means an opportunity for upward social
mobility. However, the role modern Tajik women occupy within society is not all
equivalent with Firuza’s experiences with education. Modern Tajik women are
influenced both by their Soviet experience, with its emphasis on gender equality in the
public sphere, and traditional Tajik values, where women play a central role in the private
sphere of the family (Falkingham, 2000). Despite their education, some traditional values
mandate certain ‘backward’ roles for women in the remote Pamir mountains and in
mainstream Tajikistan. Firuza noted on this matter, "Tajikistan [is] going backwards to
the pre-Revolution time: women no voice, women have to stay home, women have to be
covered" (individual interview, January 8, 2016).
Currently, religion and women’s place in Tajik society are subject to outside influences, such as Afghanistan and Pakistan (Hyman, 1993; Niyozov, 2004; 2018). Especially the capital city is susceptible to outside influences, because it is the central city for cultural and economic exchanges (Hyman, 1993; Niyozov, 2018). Firuza offered some examples from her previous experiences in the capital city Dushanbe. The foreign organization that she worked for in the past had a difficult time hiring female employees because most women’s husbands did not allow them to be part of a development organization. The husbands feared loss and change. Firuza noted how some women are just fine being second or third wives, and that “they simply do not know any other way [of living]” (individual interview, January 8, 2016).

Cleuziou (2016) analyses the renewed phenomenon of polygyny in Tajikistan after the collapse of the Soviet Union a little differently. Although Firuza may have connected a woman’s choice to become a second or third wife to her lack of education and feeling stuck without knowledge of her other options in life, Cleuziou (2016) reports that even educated women would agree to become someone’s second wife in Tajikistan. The author does not interpret the renewal of polygyny as a sign of growing religiosity, but rather that polygyny was actually a coping strategy before and during Tajikistan’s civil war (1992-1997). The civil war brought not only the economic distress in the country but also caused the loss of many lives, especially of men. Therefore, the gender ratio imbalance, dire economic situation, and single women’s social and psychological vulnerability left women with no choice but to develop this type of matrimonial strategy to reduce poverty and access men’s symbolic and material resources. One of Cleuziou’s
(2016) interviewees emphasizes, “if you don’t have a husband here, you are nothing, really nothing” (p. 77). Women who become second wives are usually divorced, widowed, sometimes educated and with jobs, and want to find moral, social, and economic support through a second marriage. These women attract men because they bring some sort of symbolic beauty or virginity or economic capital, and these qualities come in addition to the sexual and sometimes procreative service women can provide (Cleuziou, 2016).

Despite the fact Firuza appeared more fortunate than others in Tajikistan, and despite her gratitude for her upbringing and her parents’ positive influence (e.g. her higher education, her modern dress style, her job), she still practiced the type of gender roles mentioned by Yulduz from Uzbekistan—cleaning, cooking, and taking care of children. Living in a such distant locality does not only keep people from changes, innovations, and access to information but preserves what has been practiced for centuries. Therefore, after crossing cultural boundaries and living and studying in a graduate school for more than two years, Firuza went through culture shock and adaptation processes with cognitive outcome (Ward et al., 2001). Thus, Firuza experienced a sharper sense of self in relation to her gender identity (Jones & Abes, 2013).

Gender identity was also salient for Botagoz from Kazakhstan, who was very proud to be a woman. One issue Botagoz was not only coping with but also celebrating after studying and living in the U.S. was the acceptance of her reality as an unmarried, single woman. Botagoz grew up in a small town in the northern part of Kazakhstan, and
she described how uncomfortable she used to be presenting herself as a single woman while attending weddings or other social gatherings. Approaching the age of 30 and then surpassing it without changing her marital status made Botagoz's life difficult, as being unmarried at that age seemed uncustomary in Kazakhstan, especially in smaller towns. There is a possibility that a woman’s marital status may not be so emphasized if she was from a big city like Astana or Almaty.

Being unmarried in one’s 30s was also uncustomary in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Getting married was a sore topic for Nodira from Uzbekistan as well. She was the active recipient of the societal pressures on getting married and settling down. However, Maysa intentionally avoided such societal pressures about marriage and focused on her education and travels abroad. Maysa had a strong support system in her family to further her education and her parents invested in her education since childhood, although she understood that not everyone in Turkmen culture has similar opportunities.

The salience of participants’ gender identity was not easy to delineate as their experiences with identity transformation were convoluted, messy and enigmatic. For instance, Anara frequently emphasized characteristics of not only being a woman in U.S. graduate school but also being a Kyrgyz woman. Although Anara had a difficult time delineating what it means to be Kyrgyz at the start of the interview process, she later expressed that being Kyrgyz means being more feminine in its ‘delicate’ sense and being different than U.S. women. She noted that the "gender equality thing" (individual interview, December 20, 2015) was a little too much in the U.S. By this, she meant that U.S. women are trying to be equal to men, thus exchanging these delicate, feminine
qualities for rough ones traditionally associated with masculinity. It didn’t appear that Anara had delved into the literature or had intricate experience with feminism prior to this conversation. However, Anara changed her views by the time of the focus group interview two years later, once she embarked on her doctoral degree. She no longer associated the notion of feminism with concepts like anti-gentle and anti-feminine, rather she understood a deeper meaning which entails fighting for women’s rights.

Participants also discussed other identities seen as important. Botagoz discussed how she sees herself as a women's leadership scholar, Kazakh, a student, a psychologist, a colleague, a group facilitator, a sister, a friend, a daughter, and a woman who is open to relationships with other nationalities with no order of importance. Maysa explained herself as a daughter, a global citizen, and as an academic. They all had one privilege and they understood that very clearly: they had a polyglot identity, and they were very proud of it. Anara from Kyrgyzstan, Nodira from Uzbekistan, Botagoz from Kazakhstan, and Maysa from Turkmenistan explained that their dominant language was Russian, and they feel most comfortable speaking in Russian, whereas Firuza's dominant language is Pamiri, specifically the Shugni dialect, and Yulduz's dominant language is Uzbek. Yulduz and Firuza both grew up speaking Russian in their communities, but not in their households.

Maysa went even further explaining how speaking Russian is so helpful because it allows her to connect with other Central Asians in a more direct way and to find more information on the internet because the websites that most interest her are in Russian. Nodira emphasized similar opportunities her linguistic skills gave her and added that she
has different strengths in different languages. For instance, she knows the Uzbek language in a more literary way as she could easily teach grammar, whereas she is much better in colloquial Tajik, and Russian she uses for everything as she grew up reading literature mostly in the Russian language. Yulduz, being from the same country as Nodira, identifies very closely with her Uzbek linguistic identity because she studied the language as a degree subject. Yulduz did not speak Tajik, however. She spoke a literary Uzbek language with a Tashkent dialect. She explained that while growing up, only the Tashkent dialect was practiced in her household. She started learning Russian when she was in sixth grade, when she was 12 years old.

Participants did not have much to say about their social class identity or tribal identity, as these identities did not play an integral part in their lives while growing up. Maysa from Turkmenistan, Anara from Kyrgyzstan, and Nodira from Uzbekistan did briefly note what social class means to them and to their society, that is, being educated means an individual is higher up in the social layer. The more education one gets the more respected she is, although interestingly, the person's financial situation does not play a major role. Nodira noted how her mother had two degrees which she pursued in Moscow and having a library in the house created privileged lifestyle for her as she had a very easy access to education through her mother.

These assertions underscore how it may still be very important for post-Soviet people to be a member of the intelligentsiya, which is the status class group composed of educated people engaged in shaping their society’s culture and politics (Malia, 1960). Heyneman (2000) conveys that the intelligentsiya was important during the Soviet
system as see from the system’s technical achievements, such as the launch of Sputnik, universal literacy, and excellence in math and science. The system was designed structurally to respond to the demand of central planning, and such design impacted Central Asian people’s membership in intelligentsia. However, the new changes with the outside influences, like Turkey, China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, impact Central Asians lives by creating a new class of ‘nouveau riche’, composed of people whose emphasis is mainly on newly acquired wealth rather than intelligentsiya (Hyman, 1993).

**Relational Identity: “Without the Others There is No Self”**

Hall (1995) reflects on how identity construction is a complex process that calls for the sharing of a common culture on the one hand, and harps on separateness from the other. Hall (1995) argues:

> Far from the still small point of truth inside us, identities actually come from outside, they are the way in which we are recognized and then come to step into the place of the recognitions which others give us. Without the others, there is no self. There is no self-recognition. (p. 8)

One dimension that participants were keen on while speaking of their life experiences and cultural transitions was their relational identity. According to the reconceptualized model of multiple dimensions of identity (Jones & Abes, 2013), this category belongs to the individual’s core or personal identity. Jones (1997) found in her study the relational aspect of college students and explicated that one's sense of self-in-society can be considered to be part of the person's core sense of self. Similarly, Blum’s
findings with return migrants show how relationality was the crucial factor for his participants.

None of the participants saw themselves as separate from their families, friends, and social surroundings while growing up in their respective countries. 'Who they are' was strongly related to who they grew up with or who they were influenced by. The foundation of their 'self' was tied to people in their lives. For instance, Nodira grew up as an only child with a single mother. She considers her mother as a role model because when she was growing up her mother made sure Nodira used their home library. She even competed with her mother on reading books. Until today, Nodira consulted with her mother before making any decisions about her life and her mother seemed to be the closest person to her in the whole world.

Botagoz portrayed herself differently than Nodira. Botagoz describes herself as a very independent woman, and she makes decisions for herself and for her own life as far as she can remember. She did not get any permission from her parents to undertake major endeavors. She laughed out loud when she talked about how she left for a graduate degree in the U.S., as she only told her family about her plans after she purchased her tickets through the Bolashak program.

Although Botagoz portrays very strong 'inner core' and 'independence', she reflected on a few stories where she was influenced by the society or the socio-cultural pressures. Although she values her independence, keeping a healthy relationship with her family, friends, and community is very important to her. Even when she was in graduate school, traveling home one time per semester was not enough for her, thus she tried to
travel at least two or three times per semester. This comment also suggests that Botagoz was in a different social class than the rest of the participants. The Bolashak program allows their students to travel home for a restricted amount of time, therefore Botagoz was either prepared before coming to the U.S. with savings or she was comfortable enough to have those many travels home.

Firuza explained how she grew up in a society with limited resources and access to information. In connection with her relational identity, Firuza brought up a very important piece of information that in Tajik society, there was no understanding of ‘self’: every action, every gesture, every step, and every goal were done for the family. Firuza doesn't blame anyone for this, as such a cultural way existed for everyone in the society. She noted: "...we grew up with not raised understanding of who we are. Actually, nobody teaches us who we are. Nobody even asks us...who we are, what we want, how we want, we never have a decision of ourselves" (individual interview, January 8, 2015).

Firuza’s assertions suggest that her family functioned in a hierarchical manner as most actions were done for the common good of the collective, in this case her family. One of the reasons why Firuza was keen to study abroad was related to upward social mobility, thus helping her family financially. Firuza was also fortunate to have an understanding family, and as discussed, it might be related to her Ismaili identity wherein women’s education is highly valued. However, Firuza also discussed how her family functioned in a hierarchical manner. Although she considered her family liberal and open-minded in a Central Asian kind of way, her mother would still make decisions about her children’s future:
My brother, this is the person you will marry, this is the school you would go, this is … I don't want you to have any friends, you know, it was all decided. And the school - the school would never teach you anything about yourself - no way. (individual interview, January 8, 2016)

Yulduz from Uzbekistan expressed her relational identity through her relationships with her father. Yulduz's marriage was arranged for her, and her family played a major role in shaping her identity. When she was telling her stories, she mostly mentioned how her family, especially her father, made decisions for her, like picking a college and degree. Yulduz discussed her dreams of her early 20s, which were about traveling, working, and living a lifestyle of a professional. Although her family supported her, Yulduz still felt pressured to an extent, mostly by the social norms. She wanted to live the life of a professional, but the norms mandated that she must get married, have children, and follow the rules of obedience at her in-laws’ place. One must remember that her coming of age took place in different times, during the Soviet era, when the social and political situations were very different. Yulduz has a ten to twenty-year difference of age with the rest of the participants, therefore the context is very important when discussing Yulduz's background.

Yulduz expressed how much she is loved and respected in her immediate family and her paternal family, because after all she is the one who found the way to bring her children and her husband to the U.S. However, as a single woman in her early 20s, permission from her father was necessary to travel abroad. Such times required that
women should not travel abroad alone for her own safety. Yulduz explained: "…my dad was worried because I was a girl and could get into unexpected relationship with a man" (individual interview, December 23, 2015). In addition, there was a financial dependency involved. Before Yulduz married her current husband, she requested her future in-laws to allow her to travel to the Middle East to work for a short-term as an interpreter.

The pride in her stories for her father's education is clearly visible. Yulduz's father grew up during the era of the Sputnik launch, when math and science fields were skyrocketing in the Soviet Union. Her father pursued his education all the way through and became a Specialist of Academy of Sciences, also known as ‘Doktor Nauk’. Yulduz' parents instilled in her the value of education, yet still they were worried and troubled to send her abroad by herself. As opposed to her times, Yulduz sent her own daughter to study abroad in the Middle East all by herself. This gesture suggests how socio-historical context plays a vital role in women’s opportunities in life.

**Ambivalence: Which Ethnic Group is Mine?**

These participants have not experienced the socio-cultural changes in their lives for the first time. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, some major changes have occurred in people's lives (Blum, 2016; Iğmen, 2012; Montgomery, 2016). Participants’ meaning-making capacity (Jones & Abes, 2013) becomes crucial when delineating their ethnic and religious identities because of their complex socio-historical context. A few participants had contradictory explications, ideas, or mixed feelings about their ethnic and religious identities. For instance, Maysa explained how ethnically, she strongly identifies as a Turkmen woman. However, this is not how she is viewed in her society
because she is light-skinned, and her dominant language is Russian. Customarily, Turkmen people are dark-skinned with brown hair, and they speak the Turkmen language fluently. Maysa differentiated her national identity from her ethnic identity. The difference between these concepts for Maysa was very crucial as one can be ethnically Russian but can also belong to the nationality of Turkmenistan. In Maysa’s case, she relates more to her nationality than to her ethnicity because her experiences are that societies invest in people's national identities, and not so much in people's ethnic identities.

Maysa was brought up as a Turkmen even though she was ethnically mixed. In her household, her family members practiced different religions and spoke multiple languages, including Russian and Turkmen. Since ethnicity is a socially constructed concept, especially in post-Soviet nations, many people don’t recognize Maysa as Turkmen because of her physical appearance. It appeared that this created some ambivalence for Maysa because she raised a question about the nature of typical Turkmen woman by saying "then what is a typical Turkmen woman?" (individual interview, December 22, 2015). Maysa’s mother was born in contemporary Russian territory, but she was of another minority ethnic group. She moved to Turkmenistan at a very young age. Maysa’s mother doesn't know anything other than the Turkmen culture and invested all her life in one culture and nation. Therefore, Maysa’s national identity as Turkmen is more salient as it relates to her emotions and sense of belonging, even though ethnically she may look different.
Similarly, Nodira expressed ambivalence toward her ethnic identity. Initially, she asserted that she identifies as Uzbek, and after requests to substantiate her claims, she questioned the nature of ethnic identification in general. Nodira expressed dissatisfaction with the societal division based on one's ethnicity. Nodira, like Maysa, has the dominant language of Russian. Like Maysa, Nodira grew up within multiple ethnicities, although heritage-wise, she asserted she is not mixed. Since her dominant language is Russian, she even wondered if she should be identified as Russian. However, during the process of member checking, Nodira corrected this assertion that she doesn’t identify as Russian, even though she feels most comfortable with the Russian language. Upon reflection, Nodira understood that belonging to a certain ethnic group requires more than just speaking that group’s language and that she belongs to multiple linguistic and cultural groups.

The changes in Nodira’s views or her ambivalence about her ethnic identity may derive from the fact that she spent her impressionable years of young adulthood in the multicultural and multilingual city of Uzbekistan. Her ethnic identity was never questioned while she was living her life in that city. As soon as she found herself in a broader context, she was tasked to define and present herself to others who didn’t know much about Uzbekistan. Such ambivalence might be related to the cognitive outcome of her adaptation process (Ward et al., 2001).

Firuza focused on a slightly different angle of ethnic identity. She was clear on her understanding that she is Pamiri ethnic and not Tajik. She sees herself as a resident of the remote mountains. She both speaks Pamiri and belongs to the Pamiri culture. She
speaks one of the dialects of pure Iranian descent, a distinct culture apart from the mainland Tajikistan. The Pamir mountains have their own spoken dialects. Firuza explained there are seven dialects, and each region has its own dialect. Hers is Shugni.

She considers herself more secular than the mainland Tajik ethnic people:

… women are much more open in terms of dress…in compared to the rest of Tajikistan we are actually, the highest…we are more equal to the men, rather than the rest of Tajikistan…so we are more free in terms of dress, even in terms of having your own little opinion…you can actually tell your husband, this is what you don’t like. But, in the rest of Tajikistan - No. We also differ religiously. We are Muslim, but we belong to the Shi’a faith. (individual interview, January 8, 2016)

This was not exactly the same for Firuza. While explaining her geographical location and ethnic identity, Firuza did not demonstrate much ambivalence. The ambivalent part came into play when Firuza discussed how she does not represent her Pamiri ethnic identity at a more global level. As Pamiri, she considers herself different from the mainstream Tajik culture, and at times, while in Tajikistan, Firuza even considers herself closer to U.S. culture than her own Tajik culture. Yet, she faces difficulties when she travels abroad and interacts with people who know very little about Tajikistan, and that’s when she finds no other way but to represent herself as a Tajik ethnic.
Firuza regretfully recalled how there are negative stereotypes of being Pamiri within her country, as Pamiris were on the losing side during the civil war and receive few benefits from the Tajik center and being Tajik in the global society. Morrison (2016) describes the negative stereotypes in Moscow associated with the Tajiks. Accordingly, Firuza always felt the double burden of being ostracized. Firuza explained how being Tajik was always a barrier when she travels, especially through Moscow (Morrison, 2016). Firuza feels ostracized in the capital city Dushanbe because she is Pamiri. For Firuza being Pamiri was a problem in Tajikistan and being Tajik was a problem in broader society. Firuza was the only participant who experienced such unease with her ethnicity. Others did not talk about such discrimination.

**Believing or Belonging to a Certain Faith**

The Central Asian female students discussed religion in a somewhat ambivalent way. The way Central Asian people practice Islam varies, and people’s religiosity depends on multiple factors (McBrien, 2017; Montgomery, 2016). For instance, Nodira identifies with Islam, however she leads her life following ethical rules that are common sense, the sense of doing right or wrong. She emphasized how her ethical understandings do not derive from religion. She grew up understanding she was Muslim, however the older she became the more she focused on her own interpretations of it. For her, all religions are bad and good in their own way, thus her own interpreted version works much better for her. For instance, Nodira believes that there is a higher power beyond humans, but she doesn't believe that the religion should come with many restrictions, especially for women. She admits she doesn't know much about Islam to substantiate her
claims, and it is the subject she worries least about, but at the same time she respects everyone's faith.

Botagoz grew up understanding that she was Muslim, but she no longer associates herself with Islam. Studying in the U.S. made a big impact on her decision. In her graduate school, she was exposed to different people with different faiths, and being in an academic environment allowed Botagoz to learn about new faiths and to interrogate them. Now, Botagoz views herself as a spiritual person who can easily practice her spiritually in a temple, mosque, synagogue or park. Botagoz respects Islam and its traditions, and she welcomes all religions. She focuses on generating positive energy and follows spiritually self-directed ways to make herself happier, healthier, stronger, and calmer. She declared firmly that she no longer identifies as a Muslim woman. She grew up observing her grandparents' religious behaviors, and certain rituals for birth and death. However, she was never taught how to pray five times a day. Therefore, she decided to follow whatever makes her feel good and complete. She said, "I am not practicing what Muslim people are doing. It was more about my way of understanding myself—like why do I come to this temple or why do I come to this church and I feel so nice" (individual interview, January 29, 2016).

Yulduz contextualized her understanding about her ambivalent religious identity situation. Her childhood took place during the Soviet era, and she had slightly different social and political influences growing up than the other participants of the study. Yulduz's religious views are combined with her culture. She explained how everyone in the contemporary country has a murky understanding of the religion, and the religious
practices and rituals were very tightly intertwined with culture. For instance, Uzbek culture demanded a wife to wake up every morning and sweep the floors, and Yulduz followed the cultural norms for ten years. Yulduz explained other religious practices, such as readings and prayers from Koran when someone dies, or celebrations when the baby is born, and how paradoxically, men could drink alcohol, but women could not.

Similarly, Anara emphasized that the only thing she did to be Muslim was being born into a family with such understandings. Anara believes in God, but she doesn’t believe in religious institutions. For her, religion is a socially constructed concept. She admits she grew up being influenced by Islamic perceptions, especially those delivered by her grandmother, but she does not identify with any religion as an adult. Anara has certain habits that may have derived from the Islamic influences, such as avoiding eating pork, but it may also be related to health reasons as Anara leads a healthy lifestyle. The ambivalent and murky understanding of Anara’s understanding of Islam was noticeable as she described Kyrgyzstan as a Muslim country and emphasized how it is not as strict as some Arabic countries. After probing further into this statement, she clarified that Kyrgyzstan was a secular country with the majority of the population practicing Islam.

Conversely, eating pork was strictly prohibited in Firuza's household in Tajikistan. Firuza practices and identifies with Islam, specifically the Shi’a branch known as Ismaili, and her religious identity is more salient than the other participants' identities. Firuza’s dedication to her religious identity could be related to such an isolated geographical location where she grew up. This isolation might be the reason why Ismailis lead certain non-restricted lifestyles in relation to women’s clothing. As opposed to
mainstream Tajiks, Ismailis are allowed to wear more liberal clothing. Ismailis have a particular living Imam (preacher), the descendant of the Prophet Mohammed, and they emphasize less restrictive teachings in relation to gender equality and women’s education.

Unique from others, Maysa’s family practiced two religions, Islam and Russian Orthodox. Maysa was influenced by her mother who practiced the Russian Orthodox faith, and her brothers were influenced by their father who practiced Islam. When her father passed away, the family followed the rituals of both faiths. Maysa has belonged to the Russian Orthodox faith since she was a child because of her mother, but she deliberately accepted her faith by her twenties. In the U.S. she stayed within the boundaries of this faith even after being exposed to a new culture and studying in graduate school.

Maysa raised an interesting concern about how religion in the U.S. plays a vital role in determining one’s social positions. Maysa kept her faith in a private space. and her religious identity seemed subtler than her other social identities. She disapproves of the way Americans make their religious identities so public. She keeps her beliefs only to herself without preaching others how to be or how to practice. However, having a Russian Orthodox faith played to her favor in the U.S. as she noted:

In the United States, there is a lot of prejudices against Muslims… It is in public and private spaces in the United States. Like you have people like Donald Trump who say we shouldn't allow Muslims to come to the United States
because of ISIS…I know so many crimes that were
implemented by those who identify as Christians but no
one ever says 'oh, we shouldn't allow Christians come to
the United States'. So, I understand that being, identifying
as a [Russian Orthodox] Christian in the United States
places me in a more like privileged positions. (individual
interview, December 23, 2016)

The participants of this study started questioning themselves after facing various
differences in the U.S.: who they were ethnically and why their religion appeared
different from others who believe in the same faith. As Botagoz said earlier, once one
knows their inner core, it is easier to face a challenge and the adversities that come with
it. The ambivalence the participants demonstrated was about coming to the U.S. without a
clear understanding of ethnic and religious identities.

The historical chapter of this dissertation demonstrated the possible reasons why
the participants of this study are ambivalent about their social identities. First, the policies
of the Soviet regime redefining nationalities of the region, banning Islam and removing
women’s veils created certain expressions of Muslim identity that are more secular than
restrictive or fundamental (Allworth, 1994a; McBrien, 2017). Yulduz explained such
secular Muslim identity by delineating certain practices that were also considered
cultural, rather than religious in nature (individual interview, December 23, 2015). On the
other hand, an attempt to return back to Islamic roots by restoring women’s veils in some
countries after their independence (Tokhtakhodzhaeva, 2008) might have been another
reason why the participants question where they belong. Besides, five out of six
participants are around the same age, so they might be growing up only now and
questioning their various ways of being and believing. Although almost all the
participants attested to the fact that while they don’t strictly follow fundamental Islam,
they construct their religious practices by choosing the type of Muslim they want or don’t
want to follow.

Summary: Main insights of the Participants’ Identity Awareness

This chapter set out to explore the participants’ understandings of who they were
at the time of the initial interview, and then later at the time of the focus group interview.
The main insights of this chapter include how participants could easily define who they
were, as long as the characteristics they discussed were tangible, visible and easily
definable (e.g. age, gender). Yet, pinpointing their self-identity with its complexity and
various dimensions was not easily attainable for them. They required elaboration,
discussion, examples, stories, and further reflections to understand who they were, yet
such understanding seemed still in process.

As noted above, identity is not an entity that is static. First and foremost,
participants expressed their grand desire to study abroad; it seemed as if this desire was
the essence of their being. Second, the exposure to difference brought participants’
gender identity to the surface because of cultural and gender role differences in the two
countries. Third, women viewed their self-identity mostly in relation to others. Fourth, at
the time of the interview, the participants demonstrated their ambivalence about their
ethnic and religious identities because of the complexity of their historical and current socio-cultural contexts.
CHAPTER VI
TRANSFORMATIVE EFFECTS OF EDUCATION TO WOMEN'S IDENTITY

"...during the class my thinking changed because of the readings that we did, because of the videos that we watched, because of the speakers that we had. That's what I call education... I am not going to be behind men anymore. I will be always next to men because that's my personality" (Botagoz, individual interview, January 29, 2016).

Differentiating education from schooling becomes crucial when developing an understanding of what happens to Central Asian female students’ identities as a result of their studies abroad and cross-cultural encounters. Schooling means getting an instruction in school, and it denotes a formal curriculum that occurs in a particular place, whereas education can mean the formation of life through a process that prepares the mind with knowledge and understanding which does not require a school. Education and schooling can be different processes; although they can overlap, there is still a possibility one can have one without the other (Shujaa, 1993). However, the findings of this study in the context of women from Central Asia studying in U.S. graduate schools demonstrates that the processes of education and schooling not only overlap but can also be mutually inclusive.

Both education and schooling had transformative effects on participants’ identities as students’ education became the outcome of their schooling. In this sense, schooling produced education. For instance, Botagoz changed her views on LGBTQ individuals by taking classes in her graduate school on the gender binary; she did not believe this community should exist before her classes but became an advocate in graduate school. Participants’ main purpose in the U.S. was to study in graduate schools, so they could not have had education without schooling, although schooling was not the
only source of their education. The students also learned about alternative ways of living, being, thinking, feeling, behaving, and representing their self-identities from crossing cultural boundaries, attending social events, and living among those who were different from them. The interactions with various individuals and institutions, including their professors at their graduate schools, and peers from Central Asia, other foreign countries, and from the U.S., impacted participants.

The way participants experienced identity transformation also depended on multiple other factors, like their age, gender, previous cross-cultural experiences, motivation to study abroad, how long they stayed in the U.S., broader social context such as cultural pluralism and prejudice, and finally their meaning-making capacity when they faced difference (Jones & Abes, 2013; Paige, 1993; Zhou et al, 2008). This meaning-making ability, especially during the acculturation process, had a direct connection to how participants adjusted psychologically and experienced sociocultural and pedagogical adaptation (Ward et al., 2001).

For instance, Yulduz discussed her pedagogical adaptation by bringing an example of ethical procedures through the IRB when doing research in the U.S. She explained that formal academic ethical codes of conduct are non-existent in Uzbekistan, especially when conducting research in social sciences. Yulduz trained herself and adjusted her behaviors to stay within the accepted and permissible ethical regulations, not only when conducting research but also when working with colleagues and interacting with peers. Firuza discussed the affective outcomes of her psychological adjustment by learning how to “walk again” (Firuza’s words), in a sense that she gradually learned how
to cope with stressful situations of her new context by exposing herself to various social events with peers, exploring her new surroundings, and essentially feeling comfortable to troubleshoot essential life matters for herself and her family who depended on her.

Learning new cultural elements and pedagogical methodologies, adjusting psychologically, and behaving according to new cultural norms were significant factors to participants’ perspectives of their self-identity, thus the cognitive outcomes of their acculturation process (Ward et al., 2001; Zhou et al, 2008). As their new cultural context became broader, they no longer represented themselves only as Kazakh or Turkmen but could also portray themselves as Central Asian, which was not a popular term while they were in their home countries. The way participants portrayed their self-identity demonstrated how the notion of identity runs deep and that identities are not only about ethnicity, religion, or related to some other social membership but also that identity is a complex entity with multiple dimensions and with a core which holds these dimensions (Jones & Abes, 2013).

One essential finding on participants’ transformation process must be underscored, and that is their continuous struggle to shed their previous identities completely. They are still in the process of understanding what it is that they should know about themselves and how they have transformed. Hence, the idea of transformation as a process of changing from one state to another still remains in process. For instance, some of the participants conveyed how much they have changed and became more independent than before coming to U.S. to study, but they still took certain actions in order to please others, like listening to elders’ advice despite its lack of effectiveness. The participants
became aware of their contradictory self-identities as they talked through their life events and that showed they are still in the process of changing and reflecting.

**From Relational to Independent Identity: “I’m the One in Control” or Not?**

Reflecting on their life stories, the participants of this study underscored indirectly that their existence in this world would not have been present without their relationships with their families, friends, children, neighbors, and society at large, which is in accordance with Hall’s (1995) statement that “without the others there is no self” (p. 8). Although this relational factor was still big part of participants’ lives, they have experienced transformations with how they view their relationships with others, which caused at times a cultural clash and questioning of their self-identity. Living, studying, and navigating through the new cultural context forced the participants to rely on themselves more instead of calling home for help. Being dependent on oneself could also be the consequence of the education women received while interacting with their peers and professors, in addition to their experiences of schooling at a graduate level, considering that formal and informal education helps build opinions and develop a perspective of looking at life and identity.

It becomes important, then, to highlight how women do not bring the same qualities even though they represent the same region or country. For example, the feelings of independence was enhanced for Botagoz. She did not necessarily transform in this sense because Botagoz represented herself as a very strong individual who mostly made decisions for herself, even before her travels abroad. Transnational feminists like Grewal and Kaplan (1994) would argue that Botagoz’s experiences with independence
will never be the same as Firuza’s or Maysa’s. The participants’ experiences with independence are not only related to their idiosyncratic meaning-making abilities (Jones & Abes, 2013), but also how power dynamics play out in their families and societies of origin (Yoder & Kahn, 1992). Nodira and Yulduz from Uzbekistan struggled with judgmental views of people in their societies and Firuza struggled with aspects of power dynamics with her in-laws regarding household chores, whereas Botagoz seemed to worry minimally of what people think of her in her society, except for her initial discomfort with being single.

Botagoz became happier, and she started seeing more meaning in her life. She loved what she studied in her graduate school, and she felt empowered. She felt braver every time she came back to the U.S. after visiting home and the more she stayed in the U.S., the more those feelings grew stronger. Such feeling of empowerment was tied to both her academic experiences and the dynamic city she lived in while studying in graduate school. Botagoz became wiser and more confident because of the associations she was part of and intellectual discussions she held with peers and professors in her academic environment. One quality Botagoz discussed repeatedly was related to her ability to be her own friend and not need anyone’s acceptance or assertion. For instance, the changes of her views on LGBTQ individuals put her mostly on the unpopular side of the argument in Kazakhstan. Despite this fact, she doesn’t allow antagonists of the LGBTQ community to affect her decisions and beliefs as now she fully practices her agency and independence.
Similarly, Firuza’s and Anara’s willingness to integrate with a new culture and their willingness to cross the boundaries by adapting allowed them to create a new space to be a new independent person. Anara highlighted: “I feel like I changed a lot in a way that I started believing in myself and I feel like now I'm the decision maker and I'm the one in control” (individual interview, December 20, 2015). However, Firuza understood very clearly that each person's context, personal characteristics, and many other factors mattered in creating such space. Firuza heavily relied on herself and her own motivations to succeed:

- It really depends on…yourself. Even in [the Midwest] then
- I made so many friends, even if I was at my school, I
- checked just the events on campus and I went out and
- spend my time. I wasn't stuck in my room. (individual interview, January 8, 2016)

According to Firuza, women in her society in Tajikistan grow up waiting for someone to show them the way while depending on everyone else. Firuza explained how she depended only on her family and her husband before coming to the U.S. Being part of U.S. society helped her to better understand herself, and she changed her perspectives on life and behaviors as she became more independent. Now it is her husband who completely depends on Firuza in the U.S., because he does not speak English. Firuza no longer waits for someone to fix her problems. She makes decisions for herself and for her family.
Nodira also discussed how she changed her views from relying on others to relying on herself:

I just felt everything, even just living by myself, I was telling what a big influence my mom was, and how much I listened to her, and authority. But, I went back after two years of living by myself and nobody telling me what to do and how to live, I suddenly go back and my mom starts saying nothing has changed, it’s really same. But I probably I have changed, right? In a way that I don’t want to hear anymore, even if it's my mom. I don't want her to tell what I should wear, even that basic. (individual interview, December 21, 2015)

Yulduz confirmed that living and studying in the U.S. made her very independent as she noted "…we can make our own decisions…we're not limited to talk certain topics…weddings, family, children" (individual interview, December 23, 2015). Yulduz appreciated how in the U.S., people have so many interests, including sports, volunteering, etc. Out of all these novel experiences, Yulduz appreciated the most that people do not judge each other She conveyed: "Here, we have rights, and also, we're not judged a lot. There, it's you're under pressure all the time, you have to follow certain rules. Maybe it's good, I don't know, but here you get used to [being free]" (individual interview, December 23, 2015). It was very important for Yulduz that people do not force her to do anything that she doesn’t want to do as she valued her freedom and life without
pressure. She experienced some pressure from her in-laws and society before coming to the U.S. Yulduz discussed an incident she had with her mother-in-law while visiting Uzbekistan. One evening she went for a walk with her classmate until ten o'clock in the evening, and later she had to listen to the naggings of her mother-in-law about coming home late. Yulduz smiled while reminiscing this situation because she wondered what her mother-in-law would say if she knew that people sometimes run errands at two or three o'clock in the morning in the U.S.

This type of societal pressure was visible in Anara's stories as well, which was enhanced or clearly visible only after she left her country and lived and studied in the U.S. Anara described circumstances which brought tensions between her and her family when she visited Kyrgyzstan with her child. Anara’s family accepted the fact that she married an U.S. citizen. However, the elders in her family attempted to teach her how to live her life after marriage, which made Anara upset. The elders tried to tell her what to wear, how to behave, and how to take care of her child. Anara repeated many times during the individual interview, "I am my own person… I am the one who creates my own life. I am the one who controls my life. I am the one who makes decisions" (individual interview, December 20, 2015). Anara related this type of tight-knit relationship within family in Kyrgyzstan to how people view authority of elders in her society, which definitely didn’t play well with her newly gained independence and the gender roles she practiced in the U.S.

I was frustrated with a gender identity. The way women are treated back home. About the… especially about the
authority. I don't know if the last somehow related to identity or not but… just older people always having authority… like my mom and dad. (individual interview, December 20, 2015)

These authority figures could be either male or female in Kyrgyz society, but it was always the younger females who had less voice than everyone else.

Firuza discussed another aspect of gender role besides having authority figures and explained that young women’s unfortunate circumstances when having emotional issues with their husbands. If a woman complained about her well-being or about her relationship with her husband, her own parents would say "deal with it" (Firuza’s words). For instance, people would react to a woman’s unfortunate circumstances only if they could see that she doesn’t have food to eat, or if there is something physically wrong with her. The invisible matters, such as being unhappy in marriage, were considered unimportant, and relatives would probably even blame the woman by saying "well, we told you not to do that" (individual interview, January 8, 2016). According to Firuza, a woman normally was blamed for malfunctions in the family, and for not being able to keep the harmony in the family, even if she was the victim. Thus, Firuza felt free and relieved to be on her own for the first time in her life when she first came to the U.S. She expressed these feelings enthusiastically:

…for the first time I am feeling freedom, I am just feeling myself. I am feeling space - the understanding of space...just physical space that 'yes', you can knock on my door [as there
is no privacy back in Tajikistan]. There isn't that understanding in my home, in my culture. (individual interview, January 8, 2016)

This particular change about becoming more independent after living and studying in the U.S. was an important theme of discussion during the focus group interview, which was built upon ideas expressed in the individual interviews. The participants agreed that despite their gained independence after living and studying in the U.S., keeping healthy relationships with friends and family at home is important to them. Firuza admitted: "…since we were raised with this idea [of functioning with and through others], that's still part of us" (focus group interview, December 16, 2017). Although Firuza learned the world could function differently for her since she has more skills in terms of independence, she cannot completely abandon the way she was raised.

Anara added how she still thinks about what her family members or distant relatives would think if she took certain actions independently. With the context in mind about making important life decisions, Anara conveyed: "So, it is still there that I think, partially prevents me from doing from what I truly want to do and just being happy because you want this, and not constantly feeling like you need to please others" (focus group interview, December 16, 2017). Similarly, Yulduz discussed how she was torn in between while her daughter's wedding recently. Yulduz would have been completely satisfied with inviting one hundred guests or less to the wedding, but it was customary in Uzbekistan to invite at minimum five hundred guests. Yulduz constantly thought about what others would think for organizing such a small wedding as she commented: "It's
hard to become apart from all this past history of yourself and in my case at my daughter’s marriage, I felt somewhat pressured… because you can’t remove this heritage” (focus group interview, December 16, 2017).

These life events and decision-making proved that identities are complex and there is no one way of being and living. It was difficult for participants to shed their old identities completely, even though they gained some new ones. The idea of transformation was still in process for them, and it will continue to be in process.

**Changed Views on Sex, Romantic Relationships, and Marriage**

The participants were explicit about their changing views on the concepts of sex, romantic relationships, and marriage because of both formal coursework part of their graduate experiences as well as the social part of living and being within academic environment. The coursework of the graduate school in the U.S. opened most of participants’ eyes to new perspectives about gender roles in marriage. For example, Anara noted how her coursework on ‘gender development’ transformed the way she views women’s roles within a society, whereas Botagoz discussed how her coursework on the ‘gender binary’ transformed her opinion about LGBTQ individuals. Besides coursework, the participants of this study were heavily influenced by the social aspects of living and studying in the U.S. They did not experience so much impact from their Central Asian peers, but rather from their peers from other countries or the U.S.

After spending two years in a graduate school in the U.S., Botagoz’s focus was not about trying to please the societal norms in Kazakhstan, and instead she took a different approach such as defining herself confidently and firmly defending her stance
regarding her single status. Before Botagoz’s experiences in the U.S., her single status bothered her. Botagoz expressed how uncomfortable she would feel going to wedding parties in Kazakhstan as everyone’s attention was on her, wondering when and who she plans to marry. However, studying feminism at her graduate school and living among women from the U.S. and from other countries who enjoy their freedom changed her views on marriage completely. Botagoz emphasized:

I think I am [feel complete] with husband or without, this is me. I am strong enough. I am confident enough. I am… you don’t need anyone to prove the society that you are who you are… I don't think I have to get married to be who I am and tell everyone my social status. I am who I am…if I don't get married I can [still] be successful…it just means that there is no one way of living for anyone. (individual interview, January 29, 2016)

Nodira, who is also single, discussed how she felt "way behind" [Nodira’s words] after making new friends from different countries, who enjoy life as it is without assigning any restrictions to themselves. She reflected on her understandings prior to her experiences in the U.S. as follows: "I would think of marriage that is something perfect, that's how your life ends… Getting married and it's all connected to love and everything as they show it in the movies (focus group interview, December 16, 2017). Nodira realized after her experiences living among liberal-minded individuals that romantic
relationships can also end and change, and people can move on. She understood that it’s not so tragic if lovers grow apart or their relationship falls apart.

Conversely, prior to coming to the U.S., Firuza’s understanding of marriage was different because she focused on her own realities rather than movies’:

… my understanding of the marriage was I have to be very obedient wife because this is how we grew up, and this is how we [were] taught and this is how we [were] raised, you know. Your job as a woman - be quiet, be obedient to your husband, to your in-laws. Do whatever they want you, not whatever you want and not whatever is good for you… It's not good for me, I am not happy… (individual interview, January 8, 2016).

Firuza got married when she was 24 years old. The chores in her in-laws' house were her responsibility. She had a child soon after getting married and this added pressures to her well-being in the house of her in-laws. She had a professional job, but she still had to fulfill the duties of the household in addition to caring for her child. It was customary in Tajikistan to have multiple married couples in one household: the parents, married brothers, and their children. By the standards of her society, she reached the highest level of success in life: she was married, had a child, and had a job. However, Firuza’s internal satisfaction did not match with such standards as her life seemed dull and unmotivating.

Being in an academic environment in the U.S., learning about personal development through reading, and observing her successful female peers from other
countries, Firuza stressed her experiences occasioned a phenomenal change in the way she values her self-worth. It almost seemed like Firuza was experiencing the process of awareness of her self-worth as she was discussing these life circumstances. She reminisced how at the beginning of her arrival to the U.S. she was even afraid to go outside on her own, but she became empowered by interacting with others who valued their independence. Firuza emphasized how she learned how to “walk again” [Firuza’s words], but this time she was all by herself. Since such realization, Firuza's world has changed: her attitude toward her child changed, she learned how to take care of herself first, she no longer not thinks about everyone else's problems, and she learned how to love herself. Firuza emphasized: "unless you are not loving yourself or you are not praising yourself, actually nobody is…there is more 'me' now" (individual interview, January 8, 2016).

As for Yulduz, the situation was a little different but with similar customary aspects. She also married young and moved into her in-laws' household and swept the floors for ten years. However, after moving to the U.S. with her husband and her four children, Yulduz expressed how she became closer to her husband as they were each other's support system. She said "there [in Uzbekistan] I think a lot of outsiders come into [your marriage and meddle with it] … and when we go there [to Uzbekistan] we will be judged" (individual interview, December 23, 2015). She discussed how gender roles are very different in her home country, but her husband has also changed his approach to family dynamics. Now, he equally shares the burden of keeping the family running harmoniously. She explained that this type of relationship does not work in Uzbekistan
and that if her mother-in-law knew about such equality, she would be very quick to say, "No, my son is doing more [than he should be doing]" (individual interview, December 23, 2015).

Anara considered herself lucky because she married to a U.S. man. However, she conveyed how in childrearing, she still values some Kyrgyz cultural elements. For instance: "if I have a daughter, the way I would raise her...as if I was still in Kyrgyzstan" (focus group interview, December 16, 2017). Even though, there are multiple socio-cultural restrictions for women in Kyrgyzstan, Anara values certain childrearing elements such as respecting elders and putting family first. About her marriage, she emphasized: "I definitely feel more equal in my marriage and the relationship now...our culture influences us, and I still do things maybe I shouldn't do sometimes. So, it's almost like contradicting...myself, the way I think and what I do" (focus group interview, December 16, 2017). Anara favored both keeping certain qualities of a Kyrgyz woman (respecting elders and running the household) and having equal relationships in marriage. Although she enjoyed having freedom in her household, she is not ready to give up certain Kyrgyz values, and she plans to pass them on to her future daughter. Anara did not necessarily favor such hybrid qualities because of her formal schooling, but rather she observed the social component by living the life with someone who is from a different culture than her own.

In addition to the discussion on marriage, Botagoz mentioned how her relationship to sex has changed after living and studying in the U.S. Botagoz grew up in a conservative household and did not believe in the act of sex before marriage. Similarly,
Nodira noted: "I think the idea that even like this word 'sex', I don't even think that I pronounced it ever before I went to the States" (focus group interview, December 16, 2017). Botagoz had a difficult time reconciling with her decisions, since she did not get married at the age when normally women get married in Kazakhstan. She reflected "I loved it [sex] and I hated it [sex]… what if someone will find out " (individual interview, January 29, 2016). She found peace with her decisions about having premarital sex as her attitude toward openness, even talking about sex, has changed.

Both formal schooling and socializations with peers influenced such open-mindedness. Nodira emphasized how she felt 'backward' when she observed her peers she met in the U.S., who were also from post-Soviet countries: "…just listening to them, just everything they said made sense and I could see them in practice: … my friends dating people, breaking up, and moving on, and they were fine" (focus group interview, December 16, 2017). Similarly, Botagoz now views sex as just a natural part of life and not as something that one should be ashamed of. She has intentionally decided to live her life freely without having to necessarily report her affairs to others. She emphasized how being clear about where she stands with her relationship to sex removed many confusions, and Botagoz stressed her comprehension that not all romantic relationships bring a couple to marriage. She believes that every woman should enjoy such natural and beautiful things, such as sex, and not look at it as something very important, but as just something that is ordinary part of life.

For Botagoz, prior to her graduate experiences it was difficult to deal with people’s judgmental reactions to her openness about sex. So, she worked on flourishing
her inner core or personal identity by contemplating on her relationships with people and developing her self-esteem. Botagoz discussed the changes on her views of sex as follows:

I feel more comfortable in a way that I don't feel guilty and I don’t have to explain anything to anyone. I don't allow anyone into my space. If they try to enter it, where I don't want them to be, I definitely let them know that they should back up. On the other side, I feel more comfortable sharing with my close ones like my sister, or my, you know, cousins, my sister cousins. (individual interview, January 29, 2016)

Her liberal philosophy entails that everyone should decide for themselves and not judge each other: women can have babies on their own without husbands, and women should be able to have sex without worrying about what society thinks of them. Botagoz never said she wants to end up alone, and actually she stressed she would have much energy for multiple children and a husband. However, she changed her perspectives and approach to this goal because she understood that whether she is married or not, she is determined to find happiness.

The main reason why participants felt emancipated from the restrictions of openly discussing the concept of 'sex' was related to "caring less about what people are saying and… you kind of become emancipated as a woman" (Nodira, focus group interview, December 16, 2017). Most participants agreed that people in Central Asia are very
judgmental. Anara highlighted: "I think we came from very judgmental cultures and coming to the U.S., I feel like, allowed me to accept people as they are" (focus group interview, December 16, 2017). Thus, participants expressed they try very hard to live their lives without judging others and freeing themselves from judgmental societal restrictions.

In terms of romantic relationships between people of the same sex, participants expressed how their graduate education opened their eyes to different ways of thinking. After taking classes on gender issues, Anara started truly accepting every person, even if they are transgender or gay, and believing that each person has their own right to do whatever they want to do with their body. By truly accepting this notion, Anara expressed how much she emancipated herself from judgmental thoughts.

Nodira had never even thought about LGBTQ individuals prior to coming to the U.S., and she never questioned herself about what she thinks of romantic relationships between people of the same sex. She explained how open-minded she became after her schooling: "Everyone has their own body and this kind of right every individual has, and there is no like shame of being certain way or anything" (focus group interview, December 16, 2017). Similarly, Firiua highlighted: "It [the LGBTQ community] simply didn’t exist for me because it was not part of our society. Some of you said that you have read about it before coming, but for me it just simply didn't exist" (focus group interview, December 16, 2017). Botagoz gave an example of the class she took named Gender Binary. The class was about the issues of the LGBTQ individuals. Botagoz came to graduate school with an understanding that men should date women and that women
should date men, and she did not consider any other alternatives to this argument.
Botagoz expressed this type of belief in her 'gender binary' class and the instructor respectfully thanked her for her opinion and carried on with the class discussion.

This type of open discussion about various problematics of societal issues and complex conversations occurred in a safe environment in U.S. graduate school, and it truly impressed Botagoz. She asserted how much she appreciated U.S. education "because every stupid opinion here is never called stupid" (individual interview, January 29, 2016). That is reason why Botagoz believes that the U.S. is one of most successful countries in the world. She noted how among all those stupid ideas, there will be ideas of people like Mark Zuckerberg or Bill Gates. These bright minds shine out of all these ideas, so Botagoz noted how it was worth listening to all by the instructors and that is exactly what her instructor did. Botagoz changed the way she thinks about critical topics after she took this class:

So, I stood up and said that, and I was thanked for my opinion. And, during the class my thinking changed because of the readings that we did, because of the videos that we watched, because of the speakers that we had.
That's what I call education. (individual interview, January 29, 2016)

The participants clarified that the change in the way they think about other people and themselves does not happen in a vacuum, but it takes time and that process is very gradual. Botagoz observed her change patterns: "It was gradual education, constant
learning, constant trying to understand, what's behind it, is it a choice? No, it's not choice." (individual interview, January 29, 2016). By tackling the topic on LGBTQ individuals, participants showcased how they have not only changed their views and attitudes towards others but also learned how to think critically, make sound analyses, and be open to alternative ways of being and living.

**Schooling is “For Me,” Not For Money**

Participants in the study highlighted how formal education or schooling in the U.S. helped them to think creatively, analytically, critically, and deeply. They emphasized how class discussions in graduate schools to allow students bring simple matters to a different level and find ways to tackle the problematic from all angles. Even though students' peers or professors disagree with each other, in the end, they respect each other's viewpoints. The participants valued the student-centered approach the most in graduate schools. Firuza noted her individualized education contributed to her growth not only in academia, but also in her personal life: “The education, so every class…my professors were so kind to tailor the assignments to my needs. They would always talk to me individually” (individual interview, January 8, 2016).

These ethics, manners, rules, and regulations appeared to be foreign in the education systems in some of the Central Asian countries. Firuza reminisced the times when she was a schoolgirl at a secondary school in 1990s and explained how rote learning was practiced with a ‘commanding’ style, where teachers were considered superior and more authoritarian. Troublesome students would be scolded and shamed in
public. She discussed how "the school system blocks" students' self-understanding. She also brought examples from her experiences as a faculty at a university:

Whenever I taught before [an undergraduate English course at a university in Tajikistan] not having that self-understanding, I taught my class, I went for my class, doors closed, my mind is closed. I never, ever thought about what went good, what went wrong, what went, you know, what could I improve. (individual interview, January 8, 2016)

Firuza conveyed she was not trained in Tajikistan how to evaluate and think critically about her teaching style. She followed the general guidelines and spent a certain amount of time with students regardless of if they learn anything or not. So long as she educator earned a salary and had a respectable job at a university, Firuza was considered successful in her community. The quality of her classes or whether she grows personally and professionally did not matter.

This particular experience could have been relevant to Firuza alone or to people of similar contextual circumstances, because the Soviet era strictly emphasized the increase of qualifications for professionals (Heyneman, 2000; Heyneman & DeYoung, 2004). Firuza taught at a university after the Civil War in Tajikistan, and she may have had such negative experiences because of the transition period or as a result of the war. Although she emphasized her intrinsic abilities and constant desire to better herself, there is also a high chance that she was influenced by her Ismaili identity which supported education and open-mindedness. She highlighted: ““what you want to be and how you
want to kind of enhance your career [was in my own hands]" (focus group interview, December 16, 2017). By learning new methodologies and adapting to her academic environment in the U.S., she learned new skills that are necessary for her workplace, and these skills allowed Firuza to lead a life that reflected her values and beliefs.

Nodira and Yulduz joined the discussion by noting how freedom is practiced and independence is encouraged in graduate schools of the U.S. Yulduz appreciated the fact that she can still go to school being in her late 40s and being able to study alongside people of different ages. Such an opportunity wouldn't have been available for Yulduz if she lived in Uzbekistan. In addition, Nodira highlighted how being alone as an unmarried female student in the U.S. gave her no choice but to grow personally and professionally as she noted: "It's just about moving out of your comfort zone, [and not] having people who are usually there to support you around" (focus group interview, December 16, 2017).

Anara raised an interesting discussion about such personal growth as a result of graduate education in the U.S. She said: "the more I stay in education, I am not even sure why I am doing this Ph.D." (focus group interview, December 16, 2017). Gaining more knowledge in her doctoral program she learned that the lifestyle of a faculty after graduation may not be right for her and that in a way could also be considered a personal growth. Anara did not necessarily change her mind about her doctoral journey. She was planning to complete it. Her studies opened her eyes to various societal problems in the U.S., and she questioned how her doctoral knowledge could bring solutions to these problems. Anara learned more about her interests and academic identity and discovered
that those in the U.S. identify themselves through their jobs, which makes their careers a very important part of their lives. She was weary of becoming one of them as she emphasized:

Through these years, I got to the point of understanding where I don't want to live to work. So, I just want to work to live... I don't want to spend all this time just doing this—working constantly. (focus group interview, December 16, 2017)

On the other hand, Maysa from Turkmenistan highlighted that being in a graduate school puts her in a higher social class in the U.S. and in Turkmenistan. Maysa discussed how being in graduate school in the U.S. gives her more privileges in terms of her social class status. She commented:

Turkmen society in general values education. So, when people know that you come from an educated background, they tend to appreciate you more. So, I guess my socioeconomic class is improving and being a more appreciated member of Turkmen society. (individual interview, December 23, 2015)

In addition, Maysa commented on how being in a graduate school among academics in the U.S. helped her feel very proud that she is representing her country among highly educated individuals in the U.S. She added that her country prepared her well for her studies in the U.S. She noted: "I come from the context of diversity from
Turkmenistan…I can easily navigate the spaces, this diversity that exists in the United States…In Turkmenistan, I was exposed to so many nationalities" (individual interview, December 23, 2015).

Graduate education in the U.S. is preparing Botagoz to tackle the problems she faces differently. She asserted: "I looked at the concept of feminism absolutely differently. I looked at a women empowerment, human empowerment absolutely differently. So, I came back to Kazakhstan completely different person" (focus group interview, December 16, 2017). The personal growth she experienced includes not taking any lesser respect from others than she deserves. Botagoz brought up an example of women who are abused in marriage. Although she was never proponent of such abusive relationships, she now actively seeks to discuss these matters openly and publicly even if she knows she may receive some backlash from her Kazakh society.

Graduate education in the U.S. affected these Central Asian female students' academic and career paths, as well as their personal lives. Different learning styles, a student-centered approach, individualized curriculum, exposure to different cultures, and interactions with various professors prepared participants to think, reflect, criticize, and synthesize the given knowledge and not blindly accept knowledge for the sake of gaining a degree.

**Summary: Main insights of the Participants’ Identity Transformation**

A question was posed by a committee member of this dissertation study whether the transition process and identity reconceptualization are universal phenomena or not. What are the specifics of identity reflection that is Central Asian in nature? This
particular finding chapter suggests both: certain transformations may seem universal, while others may be specific to Central Asians. However, it becomes difficult to separate their level of their certainty because even if the changes may seem Central Asian in nature, anyone with similar cultural and societal contexts can relate to those changes.

For instance, multiple empirical studies demonstrated that studying in a foreign country has certain implications the way students practice their agency and view their self-identity (e.g., Ellwood, 2011; Galucci, 2014; Haugh, 2008; Koehne, 2005; 2006; Qin, 2009; Zhang, Satlykglyyova, Almuhajiri, & Brown, 2013). Figuring out how to live independently in a foreign context may impact all international students one way or another, regardless where they come from. However, the difference in their experiences may vary depending on how similar the culture of origin and host culture are to one another (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012). A student from France or Germany may not experience such drastic changes in their independence or personal growth after studying in the U.S. as opposed to students from Central Asia.

Certainly, the participants of this study have concerns that arise from being female and being from their particular Central Asian cultures. For instance, it was discussed in Chapter V that some participants view their ethnic and religious identities ambivalently. This ambivalence was enhanced as the participants lived, studied, and viewed their social identities in a broader context, that is, outside their countries of origin. This ambivalence is unique to female students from Central Asia because of their particular sociohistorical contexts. However, the changed views of participants on sex,
romantic relationships, and marriage may not be unique to them as female students from similar contexts may experience similar transformations.
CHAPTER VII

A SEARCH FOR HOME: 

NEGOTIATING IDENTITY AS AN ONGOING PROCESS

The participants in this study demonstrated that acculturating to new cultural and educational contexts gives strength to Central Asian female students in the way they view their whole self-identity with all its dimensions. However, such processes also brought more uncertainty, ambivalence, and even disturbance to the way participants view themselves. This disturbance was even more unsettling after the interview process as they brought various unresolved, untapped, and untouched problem to the surface. Participants learned that they do not belong to one place in psychological sense, that they are in-between spaces, cultures. They saw themselves displaced and fractured, and such unsettling processes taught them to navigate through multiple cultural realms and learn how to bend at certain circumstances but fight at others. Moreover, the women were very different from one another, yet very similar. From transnational feminist perspective, each participant created her own space of existence, the way it makes sense to her only. At the same time, they all shared common understandings about where they come from, they shared a common Russian language, and they all were at some stage in the process of recognizing how their identities were shifting.

For instance, Botagoz confirmed that her self-identity is in flux by saying that she shifts her identity and in ten years from now, what she has said for this interview may not align with what she will think of her self-identity in the future. She noted:
…that is one of the reasons when I joked with my friends I say when I become famous I don't want to give interviews because if people ask me, you know, if I gave interview ten years ago and what I am saying now, it will be absolutely different. And when I am saying now, and if you interview me [in ten years] it will be absolutely different. (individual interview, January 29, 2016)

Like Botagoz, Maysa also believed that the world will end up hybrid in the end as she asserted "people like us will be the dominant group" (individual interview, December 23, 2015). She believed that the process of globalization will change individuals and that was a privilege because such qualities allowed her to travel easily. Maysa conveyed that if the social and political contexts change, individuals change even faster, and these changes created 'fractured' identities and formed hybrid identities. Maysa believed that an individual can never have everything at once and in one place. There is always going to be constant exposure to difference and globalization, while longing for the past, and for the loved ones who do not share the same space.

**How Strong Can I Be as a Woman?**

All the participants of this study traveled at least one time to their home country during their studies in graduate schools. A few of them were exchange students or undergraduate students in the U.S. in the past. Visiting home was one of the most significant criteria for this research study as this criterion allowed the participants to observe the difference between two cultures. One question that kept coming up during
both interview processes was about how strong should or can the participants be in their home countries, because strength in self-sufficiency sense could hinder certain life opportunities for them. Kandiyoti (2007) discusses several examples in Uzbekistan about newly emphasized gender roles in the nation, for example, the best daughter-in-law TV show to underscore and promote women’s feminine, gentle, and obedient qualities. Because of such emphasis in certain areas of Central Asia, some participants experienced certain disturbance with their strength, independence, and self-sufficiency.

These qualities were the result of their schooling and living abroad alone, and they did not align with what was expected from women back in their home countries. Botagoz explained how some Kazakh men potentially seeking to date see such strong women automatically as a threat. Strong, independent, and intelligent women, educated in the U.S., can make Kazakh men look vulnerable and more likely to avoid such romantic relationship. Firuza tackled another aspect of this problem by extending this issue to the professional workplace in Tajikistan. She explained that colleagues may be afraid of women taking their positions or calling them out if they are doing something unfairly. Nodira conveyed how she had to watch and think of what she says before saying it as people in her home country may misinterpret her. She learned that the jokes she learned in the U.S. were not always context-appropriate in Uzbekistan. Also, living in a Western culture made Nodira appreciate physical contact with people, such as shaking hands and giving hugs. Nodira realized quickly how these social behaviors were not very welcome in her home country. For this reason, she intentionally learned how to control what she says, how she says it, and how she behaves in Uzbekistan.
Switching back and forth was not always an easy task to do for all participants because certain qualities became deeply ingrained in who they are today. Thus, participants lived with a dilemma after their exposure to the outside world, and often, they asked themselves how strong they should be and how to present themselves in their home countries. For instance, Botagoz analyzed how she questioned her self-identity after her undergraduate degree and before coming back to the U.S. for her master’s degree. She wondered: “I knew what I wanted to do. I knew I was very resilient. I faced difficulties and I overcame them… I thought maybe [my strength is] what hurt me. Maybe, that’s… a disadvantage” (individual interview, January 29, 2016). For Botagoz, her strength and independence may not have been the consequences of graduate school as she has studied in the U.S. in the past. However, graduate school has definitely confirmed these qualities and heightened her abilities to analyze them. Her awareness about her strength was enhanced:

I am very very strong…I have a lot of, how to say like, masculine features in me because I am go-getter, I am very determined. I can tell you exactly what I think about you. I might apologize later, but like I am not gonna hold it inside me anymore. You know, I am not afraid, I am not scared, I can…whatever. (individual interview, January 29, 2016)

After much deliberation, Botagoz understood that she cannot erase what is in her core, even if erasing this quality could bring some new opportunities like getting married and having children. She emphasized how this struggle made her weaker and less-confident.
Coming to the U.S. for her master’s degree, being among academics, deliberating on and observing various lifestyles made her experience this “new air, fresh air” (Botagoz’s words) with full of new ideas and other empowering factors. Botagoz understood that she should not settle for anything lesser than what she deserves, even if that means she would have to settle with a non-Kazakh partner. She explained how she couldn’t force herself to be someone else when she said, “I was trying to get used to [being lesser than men]… You are behind men, you have to be subordinate and I tried to enjoy it and I tried to learn it because I was dating a Kazakh man” (individual interview, January 29, 2016).

One paradoxical side of this dilemma was about the desire to keep practicing some of the cultural elements related to women being weaker or “behind men,” as Botagoz suggested. During the focus group discussion, the participants raised a topic about how they enjoy certain treatment from men when men open the door for women, pay the bill in a restaurant, or help carry their bags. In this sense, it almost seemed as if some participants enjoyed appearing vulnerable as that equated to ‘being treated like a queen.’ For instance, Firuza emphasized how she misses being treated like a woman in the U.S., getting a seat in the bus and getting help with heavy bags. Yet, all participants wanted to have equal responsibilities in the household regarding the house chores, taking care of the children, and doing leisure activities. This paradox about ‘wanting to have it all at the same time’ disturbed Botagoz. She was most vocal out of all by reminding fellow female students the reality of paying the high price of giving up their gender equality for wanting to have this luxurious attention. She clarified:
Our societies are very patriarchal and me being a psychologist, and seeing all these social problems that we have in the society, starting from a domestic violence, wherein statistically every third family has a domestic violence case. That's a very high price for that door to be opened. We better open that door ourselves. (focus group interview, December 16, 2017)

Botagoz discussed the customary expectations in Kazakhstan that men must have education, they must have a good job, they must buy a car, and they must support their wives and children. Often times, when they don't meet those expectations, men cannot handle such a failure. She stressed:

Statistically, Kazakhstan takes/holds the tenth place in the world on suicide…[it] happens more often among men...[and] usually their ages are from 35 to 44… we hold sixteenth place in the world on death from alcoholic dependency, and among people who have that dependency are mostly men. I also think that because we have a lot of pressure on men, we have a lot of expectations from men, and gender equality can really solve some of it. (focus group interview, December 16, 2017)

After listening to the arguments of other participants, Anara joined the conversation by adding similar opinions. Anara had enough time to reflect since making
her first statement with the help of classes she took in her graduate education. She brought up the example of bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan, which almost always happen against the will of the bride and has brought some women to die by suicide. Anara underlined how the education about gender equality must begin early in age, and it should start at home with parents' help. All agreed that if it was essential for women to ‘be treated like a queen,’ they must also understand what price they must pay for such treatment.

In order to negotiate the strength gained after their experiences in graduate school, participants actively work on finding solutions. They intentionally do not stay quiet when receiving comments devaluing their strength. For instance, if men are surprised to notice how Botagoz is smart, she responds sharply: “Well, excuse me, smart men are always rare… they are actually dying out like dinosaurs… maybe like two years ago I would be quiet, you know like, ‘oh, thank you, I am so smart’” (individual interview, January 29, 2016). Botagoz asserted, "I am not going to be behind men anymore. I will be always next to men because that's my personality" (individual interview, January 29, 2016).

Living with a “Fractured” Identity in a Disturbing Kind of Way

At the time of both interviews, the participants demonstrated how often they experience emotional disturbance in relation to their self-identity. Maysa explained that her acculturation process is constant. Every time she goes back home, she must adapt to dealing with multiple differences, like being physically closer to people in public spaces or dressing and behaving appropriately. When she returns to the U.S., she relearn to
respect people's privacy and their space. Maysa used the phrase 'fractured' to explicate her state of mind after studying and living in the U.S. She said:

Can I use the word fractured? I'm so fractured, so I don't know if I belong like completely psychologically in one space or another…It's like a puzzle…It's fractures, right. So, there's no just one whole being as people… There's an expectation of, if you're Turkmen or if you're an American, this is where you belong or that is where you belong. I belong everywhere and nowhere, if that makes sense.

(individual interview, December 23, 2015)

Maysa could not embrace her host culture fully because she constantly missed her family, and she knew for sure that she could not live without seeing them often. She said, "I just wish I was a little closer to my family. Like being in the United States is just so far away and it's so expensive to travel to Turkmenistan and I miss my family all the time [cries]"

(individual interview, December 23, 2015).

Anara explained how much she misses big birthday parties and getting together with cousins and children to make food and socialize. She said: "Sometimes I feel like I am… contradicting myself or maybe I still feel like I haven't really completely shaped my identity, like I'm in a process" (individual interview, December 20, 2015). She acknowledged that she is not settled with her sense of belonging and wondered whether her frustrations with going back and forth in terms of her identities is the process of shaping her identity. Anara puts it eloquently by stating that identity is never in its final
stage, and that an individual goes through identity changes throughout her life. She believed that this process was always contradictory. She noted:

It's like my past is pulling me back but my new identity's like 'No'. It's like almost fighting you know [laughs] and I'm not and I'm trying to figure out which one is better… I almost feel like I haven't reached this state of happiness and I don't know if the person will ever - any other people like person can reach that state of happiness. But I feel like when I can find that middle ground for myself, when I feel comfortable, and I can reach that state of happiness. And I think it will be when I can stop finally contradicting.

(individual interview, December 20, 2015)

The specific disturbances Anara experienced were about not being able to express her opinions to people, especially elders, in her home country. Respecting elders and keeping her opinions to herself were big part of her upbringing in Kyrgyzstan. Even if she bursts out sometimes with certain dissatisfaction, Anara feels guilty afterwards because she never intends to hurt other people’s feelings and ways of living.

This disturbance also seems to be present in some of the participants who have unclear plans for future, especially those who are studying in graduate schools with international student status (e.g., Maysa, Firuza, and Nodira). Although Botagoz was an international student, she was clear about her goals regarding returning home, although the Bolashak program required her to return home regardless. Firuza’s circumstances
were different as she desired to stay in the U.S. She was mainly disturbed about her professional identity: where to channel her energy while in graduate school as the Tajik educational system, work ethic, and professionalism are quite different than the U.S. ones. For this reason, Firuza was puzzled about how to proceed as her professional future depended on the type of classes she takes and topics she focuses on while in school. She emphasized: "Maybe because whatever I am thinking and doing is tailored to go back because I realized that staying here is not easy. I think I will be crushed [if I don’t stay in the U.S.] " (individual interview, January 8, 2016). By the time the focus group took place, Firuza had received her permanent residency to live in the U.S.

Botagoz also demonstrated some uncertainty at the beginning of the individual interview with what she wants in the future. She discussed her two realities in Kazakhstan and in the U.S. It seemed to her as if she was the only person in her social circle who understood both realities. Botagoz expressed her worries by saying: "It makes me feel scared because I don’t know which reality I belong to" (individual interview, January 29, 2016). Nonetheless, she enjoyed having access to both realities as each one separately brought her some type of internal peace. Her family was very important to her, and she cared deeply about her mother with a disability who lived in Kazakhstan. At the same time, Botagoz enjoyed her independence and flourished on a personal and professional level in the U.S.

One element of ambivalence Botagoz demonstrated was related her general understanding of a married woman’s behavior. Even though she had a liberal understanding about women's behaviors in a society, she truly believed that once a
woman is married, she was sacred, or respected. She had a difficult time understanding how married women in the U.S. can easily go out for drinks or eat with their male friends. This behavior was never acceptable in the household where she grew up, and this understanding stayed with her ever since. Botagoz expressed, "there is something wrong with that. She is a woman, she doesn’t respect her husband. What would her children think of her?" (individual interview, January 29, 2016).

On the other hand, Botagoz reflected on how she doesn't agree with domestic violence, which often happens in Kazakhstan. For her, women should not suffer even for a second, but some Kazakh women live with domestic violence all their lives. She believes that divorce is an option. Her way of thinking about divorce became more Western since her education in the U.S.:

Yes, divorce is not an option and ahh, many women take, you know, humiliation and violence, as something that… that it's a destiny, so that's when my American identity wakes up and I think that's absolutely unacceptable - you are beautiful, you can, you know, ahh be happy on your own or get married again, or it's just... not worth taking.

(individual interview, January 29, 2016)

Botagoz’ perspectives entail both some restricting and liberating behaviors for women in marriage. For her, if a woman is married, she should stay faithful to her husband and limit her friendships with males. Yet she should also have the freedom to discontinue her marriage if she is unhappy.
At the time of the interview, it was Botagoz’s goal to find solutions to combine her two realities. She wanted to develop a project that would allow her to travel back and forth from Kazakhstan to the U.S. By the time of the focus group interview, she had permanently relocated to Kazakhstan, but she never lost her ties to her U.S. university. She finds ways to collaborate with her colleagues remotely, and she advocates for the LGBTQ community on social media. The reason why Botagoz may have moved back to Kazakhstan was related primarily to her mother, as she wanted to be closer to her, and also, she has to fulfill her home residency requirement as per the Bolashak program of Kazakhstan. Botagoz appears to be happy with her choice of returning home as she found a job she wanted, she frequently travels to other countries for presentations, and she is very socially active in her community.

Despite the fact that one participant transitioned smoothly to her home country, the thought of ‘future plans’ or ‘future’ made the rest of the participants anxious. Nodira expressed an interesting thought about being happier prior to her exposure to the outside world. She left Uzbekistan when she was twenty-one years old and “not knowing anything else” (Nodira’s words) other than her mother and familiar people and places. Nodira named this process of acculturation an illness which exists in every person who has ever left their home country to live elsewhere for longer period because once exposed to difference and new knowledge, there is no coming back to a peaceful ignorant state of mind. Nodira, like most of the participants of this study, was disturbed as she learned new alternative ways to living and being. She feels unsettled in both countries and expressed it as follows: "you just don't know where exactly, but you are somewhere in the
middle…[However], I would definitely do the same thing again" (individual interview, December 21, 2015).

**Feeling Psychologically Nowhere 'At Home'**

Participants had a difficult time explaining to which culture they psychologically belong. Botagoz initially thought she is psychologically 'at home' whenever she is with her significant other whenever she is in a relationship. Even though Botagoz talked about being comfortable being alone for her society, she still valued companionship for her own well-being. She was flexible and demonstrated with her stories that she can easily navigate through different cultural spaces. After deliberation, Botagoz rephrased her comment and admitted that to be fully aligned with herself, she needs a combination of relationships: seeing her family often, being with her significant other, and being happy in her profession. She asserted, "I can't focus only on one human being… I can live anywhere with him, but I have to have all my life … otherwise… eventually I am gonna become unhappy… it won't be enough for me" (individual interview, January 29, 2016).

Defining her psychological at-homeness was a difficult phenomenon to explain for Yulduz. Regardless of where she is, it was very important for her to have her family around. Yulduz appreciated the fact that her children found new friends in the U.S. and they had good schools. These ties bonded Yulduz to the U.S. more tightly. At the same time, she had her own siblings and parents who lived very far from her, and longing for home, where she grew up, was a significant part of her life. After some deliberation, she confirmed she is somewhere in between cultures because she could not firmly say she belongs to one place alone.
There were more opportunities for Anara in the U.S., yet she still practices certain gender roles as she would back in her home culture. Anara clarified her certain habits by placing her self-identity in relationship with others. If the task at hand is only about her, without affecting other people, she pursues these tasks by following the new functional knowledge she learned in her host culture. However, if the question affects others, she switches back to the way she grew up by putting others first and respecting others' wishes.

Even though Anara responded that she feels psychologically 'at home' back in Kyrgyzstan, she had to reflect more about the scenarios when she gets frustrated in her home culture regarding her relatives and how they attempt to meddle with her life. Anara, just like all other participants, wants to have her family nearby. Yet she is not ready to give up her independence and decision-making abilities. Similarly, Nodira commented on her in-betweenness:

I am somewhere in my own culture, which is probably hybrid of two… I could say I'm moving back and forth, but that wouldn't be true because I'm never one hundred percent here and one hundred percent there… It's really a fusion of both, I think now. (individual interview, December 21, 2015)

Although she considers herself a global citizen, Maysa feels most comfortable in her apartment in Turkmenistan with her family around. However, for her the psychological at-homeness really depended on which social identity she was considering.
For instance, if the question is on a peaceful and calm lifestyle, then she is most comfortable in Turkmenistan. Yet he understands that her academic identity can be best flourished in the U.S. She added another important factor:

The age definitely matters, because you start thinking about, you know, you like go through this middle age crisis… I'm not there yet but I'm getting close to it like where you reflect more and more on life and who you are and where you belong…So I think about it more often now. Where is my home? It's tough to say. Like ultimately, like yes, I would choose - if someone said the U.S. or Turkmenistan. Let's say someone put it that way, I would definitely choose Turkmenistan… because everything is so familiar to me. (individual interview, December 23, 2015)

Like Maysa, familiarity and age were important factors for Firuza. She noted two important problems with feeling 'at home' in both societies. First, she doesn’t feel fulfilled by just being comfortable in her peaceful town in the mountains in Tajikistan after her exposure to a “better life” (Firuza’s words). Firuza emphasized basic life conditions which hinder her from belonging to her home culture alone, including no running water and no privacy. However, Firuza also recognizes the problems with living in the U.S. as well, as being away from familiarity and from family makes her feel very lonely. Firuza considers growing old in the U.S. to be very depressing, so she must find some negotiation to be in-between and have access to both cultures.
Summary: The Process of Identity Negotiation

Two out of six participants moved back to their home countries by the time of the focus group interview; one may still come back to the U.S. and the other is comfortable working and living in her home country. The participants raised complex questions in relation to their self-identity, although their reflections did not bring closure to their self-understanding or pinpoint exact description on where they stand after their experiences. Rather, such reconceptualization brought disturbance as certain unsettling concerns (e.g., related to their gender roles, being in an unhappy marriage, being single, keeping healthy ties with family in the country of origin) showcased that the participants’ feelings of in-betweenness are constant, still in process, and the feelings may stay in process.

The way Anara dealt with her unsettled feelings focused on her attempts to be a good person with only good intentions for others, no matter where she lives. She names this quality as being a person with a capital letter ‘P.’ Kindness to others stem from Anara’s upbringing, the values she learned from her paternal family while growing up, and that focus has not changed even after changing cultures and studying in a foreign context. Although she mentioned her frustrations about demanding rules by authority figures in Kyrgyzstan (e.g., her grandparents, parents, elder relatives), she tries to see only the good parts of this scenario. Anara grew personally and professionally and learned new ways of raising her child and leading a household, yet she still finds space to accept suggestions from her family in Kyrgyzstan despite their lack of effectiveness. She highlighted:
I would be like, even if I become like super rich or whatever, please let me be, [God], always who I am and keep the way I treat people. And that's part of how I respect myself, is that I can do those things where I can actually sacrifice myself because to me, it's not a big sacrifice, you know, not to hurt someone or do something good.

(individual interview, December 20, 2015)

The relational aspect of Anara’s self-identity was one of the salient identities. Although she values her independence and self-sufficient qualities, Anara is not ready to give up her quality relationships with her beloved family in Kyrgyzstan. Anara worked on keeping elements from both cultures while raising her child in the U.S. and instilling in her son not only the sense of respect for elders, but also the sense freedom and independence she acquired in the U.S.

Maysa perfected her code-switching skills while travelling back and forth between two countries. Making herself aware of the cultural nuances helped her to easily fit in both cultures. For instance, dressing up in Turkmen style as soon as she arrives home became a sign of respect to the culture and community where she lives in Turkmenistan. Maysa deliberately worked on teaching young girls about different ways of living, various complexities related to studying abroad, and finding solutions to the problems. This teaching and advocating moment made Maysa content, as giving back to her community brought not only pleasure, but it created a sort of purpose in her life. Maysa understands that U.S. communities are diverse, and she is aware of her privileges.
because of her physical appearance—she blended in with the majority race in the U.S. For this reason, Maysa attempts to portray her experiences from an objective point of view.

Helping others and spreading knowledge did not stop with Maysa’s experiences in Turkmenistan but became one of the main goals of Firuza from Tajikistan after her experiences in graduate school and living abroad. Firuza came across individuals in Tajikistan before her exposure to the outside world who discouraged her to study abroad. The reasons for such discouragement might have been jealousy or the desire to stay the only expert in the region who knows about study abroad programs. This life experience made Firuza create her mission to make sure that anyone she encounters in her home region knows about all the steps of applying and finding ways to study in a foreign country. Firuza developed a desire to change women’s attitudes toward each other and to help them achieve envisioned dreams. Firuza became the resource for those who cannot receive information, and gives multiple presentations, even speeches on TV, about studying in a foreign country. Empowering others became very important for Firuza and that is how she found meaning in her self-identity after the drastic changes she experienced by studying and living abroad.

Becoming an advocate for positive behaviors and doing good deeds made up what Firuza believes her life should be like. The positive elements she learned in the U.S. — the way people treat one another very warmly, greet each other, and say 'thank you' — opened new horizons for Firuza. She negotiated what she learned in the U.S. by bringing those qualities home and fighting for fair treatment for women in her society. She
rationalized and observed why people put their personal agendas before everyone else’s and attempted to find solutions to the problems she faced through communication and deliberation. Her value and advocacy for women’s education in Tajikistan was the driving force for Firuza to move forward towards her life goals. Firuza believed from the bottom of her heart that anyone can achieve their set goals and dreams with the right guidance and direction.

Botagoz also focused on advocating for those who need help in her society. After drastically changing her views on LGBTQ individuals while in graduate school, Botagoz interviewed a gay person living in the U.S. who was from Kazakhstan, and with his consent, she posted that interview on her Facebook page. Botagoz received an ample amount of negative responses from people who were homophobic blaming her for using government money through the Bolashak program and leading such useless social advocacy. Botagoz explained how the interacting individuals on social media claimed that they would have rather seen a post about a person with a disability rather than a gay person. Despite this sort of adversity, Botagoz has never stopped fighting for what she believes is right. She encourages LGBTQ individuals to take necessary steps to advocate for themselves: “The best population that can gain right[s] is that population itself. That's the best way to make change. If you have other people doing it for you - but you are not doing anything …” (individual interview, January 29, 2016). Although Botagoz wishes the best for this community, this problem carries a much deeper level of complexity as Kazakh society may not be ready to accept such a community just yet.
Other than advocating for others, Botagoz also values the time she spends on ameliorating her self-identity and appearance. She believes she is a strong individual, which does not always align with what is customarily accepted by Kazakh tradition. She learned how to combine her strength, or rather her ‘masculine qualities’ as viewed in Kazakh culture, with her feminine qualities. She stated, “I try to work on my femininity… I like feeling beautiful…[being] treated like a…queen. I like…putting more time on how I look before I go for a date… having good body, having…good hair style, good clothes, looking sexy” (individual interview, January 29, 2016).

Botagoz emphasized it was essential for her to maintain the balance of both her personal and professional life when negotiating her self-identity. She knew that her "private life is important, but that should be very much balanced with who I am with my personal needs and with my professional aspirations" (individual interview, January 29, 2016). She focuses on enjoying life regardless of the adversities she faces. Ideally, she would like to have her own family with multiple children. If she does not realize these wishes, Botagoz would still try to find happiness in life, and as she put it: "the wisdom of life, the strength of life is to learn to be happy in both outcomes" (individual interview, January 29, 2016). Botagoz is clear about her goals and objectives in life, but she also understands these goals may bring different outcomes, thus she makes certain she is prepared for them. Botagoz noted that being happy in any life circumstance is very important even if loved ones are lost: "we have to learn to live without them and still be happy, which some people think it is impossible, but it is possible” (individual interview, January 29, 2016).
CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSIONS: ELUSIVE IDENTITIES OF STUDENT LIVES

The aim of this dissertation study was to understand whether and how Central Asian female students’ identities change as a result of their studies in U.S. graduate schools and cross-cultural encounters. Specifically, the transformative effects of studying in the U.S. on the identities of female students who were living and studying in the U.S. for a minimum of two years were explored. Three research questions included:

1. How do Central Asian female students understand their self-identities after studying in the higher education institutions and living in the United States for more than two years?

2. In what ways do studying in the American higher education system and crossing cultural boundaries change Central Asian female students' perceptions of their self-identities?

3. How do Central Asian female students negotiate their self-identities when studying and living in a new context and/or after they return to their country of origin?

The findings of this dissertation study were divided into three chapters. Each chapter had its own specific goal and each focused on one of these research questions. Similarly, the theoretical knowledge utilized in this study was formed with specific objectives in mind. Drawing from transnational feminist theories, the varying contexts of Central Asian female students' lived experiences and their identity transformations was highlighted, as was that the global sisterhood (Morgan, 1990) may no longer represent all
women of the world as one unilateral category. The tendency of such theoretical conceptualizations of women's concerns and issues toward Westernization (Mohanty, 2003) may not represent the varying experiences of Central Asian female students. This study ought to investigate Central Asian female students’ identity transformation from a transnational feminist perspective to recognize women’s profound differences and to emphasize women’s experiences in their own right.

The reconceptualized model of multiple dimensions of identity (RMMDI) to be useful in analyzing the participants’ responses to the first research question, which is about participants’ own understandings of their self-identities after studying in the U.S. higher education institutions. The model encapsulates how students’ social identities and contextual influences, such as family background, cross-cultural transitions, peer culture, and social norms, impact their core identity and the ways they make meaning of the world around them. The model “…provides for a dynamic process whereby identities shift and get shaped and reshaped based on changing contexts and the influence of these contexts both on identity salience and on what is in one's core" (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 92).

Chapter V, the first findings chapter, suggested that participants could easily define who they were, as long as the characteristics they discussed were tangible, visible and easily definable. For instance, participants discussed their age, gender, marital status, and how many children they have or lack thereof. The participants discussed easily their enthusiasm and strong desire to study in the U.S. and their intrinsic thirst for knowledge. Yet, it was difficult for them to discuss their social identities and they required
elaboration, discussion, examples, stories, and further reflections to understand who they were in this context, yet such understanding seemed still in process.

Both individual and focus group interviewing processes invited participants to think deeply about their gender identity, ethnic identity, religious identity, and the relational aspect of their identity, which is mostly familial in nature. By talking out loud, they expressed how their relationships with their families in their countries still affect the way they view themselves. Furthermore, by reflecting on their childhood experiences during the Soviet times, participants brought more complexities to the surface about their understanding in relation to their ethnicity, religion and gender. As discussed in Chapter II, a common interpretation of the Soviet nationality policy is that Stalin intentionally created republics of mixed ethnicities in the 1920s in order to prevent a unified Islamic resistance to the Soviet rule (e.g., Martin, 20010; Olcott, 1981). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, each Central Asian country’s leaders focused on reinforcing the national sense of belonging (Laruelle, 2011). Yet participants expressed ambivalence about their ethnic identity during the interviews as each ethnic identity in Central Asia has a measure of artificiality about it.

Chapter VI was integrated with Ward et al.’s (2001) affective, behavioral, and cognitive (ABC) model of culture shock to understand how participants’ behaviors changed, what new cultural elements they learned, and how they changed their thinking in terms of their social identities (e.g., gender, religion, ethnicity) since now they are “little fish in bigger ponds” (Zhou et al., 2008, p. 67). Ward et al.’s (2001) model specifically tackles the second research question of this dissertation study, which is about
understanding how Central Asian female students’ identities change in the context of U.S. higher education and intercultural transition. The ABC model (Ward et al., 2001) complements the RMMDI (Jones & Abes, 2013) as the latter does not capture the continuous transformations the students’ experiences and does not clarify the different aspects of identity change processes when individuals cross cultural borders.

Chapter VI focused on the transformative effects of education on participants’ self-identity. Education can be different from schooling because schooling denotes a formal curriculum that occurs in a particular place, whereas education can mean the formation of life through a process that prepares the mind, and this process does not always happen in a particular place (Shujaa, 1993). This chapter demonstrated that participants experienced identity transformations not only by attending graduate school, but also by living among those who are different than them. However, the findings of this study demonstrate that the processes of education and schooling not only overlap but also can be mutually inclusive. Schooling and education were equally important part of the process of identity transformation. Participants expressed how they became more independent and self-sufficient than before coming to the U.S. They changed their views on sex, romantic relationships, and marriage. Moreover, schooling in a graduate institution made participants value their own self-identity more than they used to, which led them to focus on their well-being and personal development with the help of gaining knowledge about new ways of being and living. These self-reflections would not have occurred if my participants studied in their home countries, but it might have if they have
studied in another Western country because of experiencing a rupture regarding cross-cultural encounters.

Chapter VII, the final findings chapter, demonstrates that the transformations participants experienced were not easy or linear. Rather, these changes brought disturbances to the way participants view their self-identity. Although considering the common understanding of identity construction, this disturbance may seem negative in nature; the participants of this study expressed the positive effects of this feeling, however, and questioned the extent to which they should demonstrate the level of their newly gained strengths (e.g., strengths of independence, self-sufficiency, decision making, etc.) in their home societies. Their new behaviors, practiced based on their sense of freedom, did not always align with what was expected in their home societies.

Although participants valued their newly gained skills, they also learned how to navigate through two distinct cultures and suppressed certain aspects of their strength when necessary. They conveyed how they do not feel ‘whole’ anymore but instead ‘fractured’ in terms of their identity, as they no longer belong to one space and one country. Consequently, this process of transformation is continual. The participants negotiate their self-identity by enhancing their awareness that they are part of different worlds and spaces and they are constantly working on combining those spaces to make sense of their lives.

**Implications and Suggestions**

The findings of this dissertation suggest some insights for future students from Central Asia or from other similar socio-historical and cultural contexts seeking to study
and live in the U.S. for longer than two years. However, the findings were especially beneficial to participants themselves, as both individual and focus group interviews pushed these students to clarify and substantiate their claims sharpening their identity awareness. The participants explored some of the reasoning behind the decisions they made, the opportunities they had as they spoke out loud and spent some time thinking about their feelings and behaviors. Some of them even reflected on their identity changes for the first time. The identity construction of Central Asian female students in higher education contexts is not only about understanding students’ development with regard to their multiple dimensions of identity; it is also about understanding how heterogeneous female students are in the sense of transnational feminism. Each one of the participants demonstrated the changes of her various identities which had affective, behavioral, and cognitive outcomes as a result of her psychological adjustment, pedagogical, and sociological adaptation in the U.S. Below are a few recommendations for practice and ideas to build upon for future research, based on the lessons learned from my participants’ experiences.

The key for implications for practice is to help students make sense of their experiences but to not force them to explain themselves or their culture to everyone they meet in the U.S. One student cannot represent her entire culture when in a foreign context. There is a tendency in U.S. higher education institutions to ask international students to bring traditional dish, wear traditional clothes, or talk about the gender roles in their respective countries (Glass et al., 2005). The culture is not static enough to give it
a definite form; each individual experiences and understands her culture and identity in her own unique way.

It is very important for the stakeholders in U.S. higher education institutions to understand who the students are, in their own right, and how they construct their own identities and understand their own culture. Unfortunately, despite the phenomenal growth in the numbers of international students from Central Asia, not many individuals working at U.S. colleges universities know post-Soviet Central Asian countries and the students who come from this region because these nations are recently so recently formed (Chankseliani, 2015). Glass et al. (2005) convey how a number of international students, in general, perceive prejudice and discrimination during their interaction with the host nationals regarding how these students are identified or recognized only through their nationality, which is not enough to understand how students from Central Asia cross borders, make sense of their time abroad, and construct their identities.

First and foremost, stakeholders in U.S. higher education institutions need to make an effort to understand who their students are, and specifically in this case, who their Central Asian students are. In order to accomplish this, it is essential for administrators who create school policies and faculty who develop programs and curriculum to learn the complexity of the histories of Central Asian region, specifically histories which greatly impacted the societal change the Central Asian students, their parents, and their grandparents experienced historically and even experience today. Having such a background knowledge will increase stakeholders’ understanding on the
types of stress and anxiety these students feel, as well as the cognitive outcomes they may have upon arriving to or after living in a new culture and a new academic environment.

Were this type of deep understanding to happen, the faculty, staff, and administrators would be better equipped to provide the students with the necessary knowledge and prepare them for their inevitable transformations regarding their self-identity. It is essential to keep in mind, though, that the goal is not to help students go through a smooth and linear acculturation that is expected to be fitted into a step-by-step process. Stakeholders in need to be mindful about identifying cultural learning processes, which come with stress, anxiety, and disturbing feelings about students’ psychological sense of belonging. The participants of this research study recognize that their experiences with psychological adjustment and sociological adaptation came in tandem with variety of disturbances. However, participants did not focus on the negative aspects of these experiences. Their experiences suggest that such a disturbance is the key to growth. Their responses about their changes and disturbances did not demonstrate that these students desired help from their host institutions.

Focusing on domestic students’ intercultural sensitivity, Klak and Martin (2003) found in their research that large-scale university sponsored international events do not make “intercultural global citizens.” Indeed, these campus events reify cultural identities and reinforce cultural stereotypes. Therefore, it should be emphasized that it is not necessary for administrators to try to shape or intervene in the process of students’ identity changes by creating some sort of formal programming. Only understanding the students’ in ‘betweenness’ may be enough. Administrators should avoid implementing
events and activities which highlight the campus diversity only on the surface without understanding what happens to whom after living and studying in the U.S. and without understanding who may identify with what culture regardless of where they come from.

A number of alternative approaches are more viable. To foreground cultural diversity and the transformative process within a culture, listening to students is paramount. If a student took such an important step in her life and came to the U.S., she may already have heightened cross-cultural sensibilities. For instance, Firuza mountains brought her young child and her husband who does not speak English. Firuza not only pushed herself and excelled in her academic environment, but she served as a harbor for her family. While her husband was a functionally illiterate without linguistic skills, she managed to maintain the assigned gender roles to her of being a mother and a wife and to find ways to enjoy the opportunities available to her in the context of foreign but new freedom.

Therefore, individuals such as Firuza may not fit well within one-size-fits-all approach, meaning individuals like Firuza may not be the international students who gain assistance through campus events and activities organized. Looking beyond such conceptualization and avoiding making assumptions that domestic students and international students may learn a great deal about the process of intercultural transitioning through cook-offs or fashion shows. Instead, it may be fruitful to just be available to listening to students like Firuza, only when they are ready and desire to communicate about their intercultural experiences, about the way they understand their culture and identities.
Even though campus activities around diversity-focused themes and scenarios with inclusive participation are important to create space for those who need them (Johnson & Lollar, 2002), these events, such as international cook-offs and fashion shows, should be implemented with caution. For instance, it would not be wise to invite a student like Firuza who is from Pamir mountains and expect to learn more about a Tajik culture. For this reason, Klak and Martin (2003) suggest incorporating numerous cultural elements and knowledge of cultural complexity to increase awareness and sensitivity by including the international content that is cognizant of this complexity in related courses and creating supportive campus environment, which may also require faculty development programs to delve into the complexities of identity transformation.

Similarly, students could benefit from working with their academic advisors and faculty, especially while studying in graduate level. Graduate students appear to be more attached to their academic advisors than the undergraduate students simply because they spend more time with their advisors. They work on long-term projects, collaborate on professional articles, and execute their dissertations with their advisors. The faculty of graduate programs can play a vital role in assisting students with their acculturation process with an individualized approach by listening and trying to understand the cultural and identity complexity the students experience.

I highlight a few fruitful areas for cross-disciplinary research which could benefit the scholarship of international students’ experiences with studying abroad and the consequences of their experiences. Since the identity construction is complex and multifaceted, there are a plethora of reasons why researchers should focus on conducting
more research on international students’ identity. Focusing on Kazakhstani return
migrants and their identity transformation, Blum (2016) emphasizes in his study that:
“...identity formation is truly multifaceted: it is at once social and personal; it is also
structurally conditioned and, at the same time, creative” (p.186). One of the
methodologically focused avenues for future research includes expanding resources of
collected data in order to understand international students’ identity transformation. For
instance, rather than focusing solely on students’ reflections on their past experiences, it
would be fruitful to also interview their academic advisors who have witnessed the
tremendous changes the students have undergone. If the participants identified particular
people with whom they had connections with since the beginning of their study abroad
journey, these people would also provide opportunities to expand this research by
examining the phenomenon more holistically. Moreover, it would also be beneficial to
observe the international students’ experiences in a longitudinal study in order to learn
their expectations about their journey at the beginning of their arrival to the U.S. and after
spending several years studying in graduate schools. This longitudinal study would help
to understand the difference between how participants understand their identities prior to
and after their graduate experiences and provide an opportunity for the research
participants themselves to observe the changes they experience. These longitudinal
studies might provide a richer basis for the participants themselves as they are going
through the change process.
Conclusion

Côté and Levine (2002) conclude their discussion on identity and its complexity by emphasizing that the “lesson at hand is that we all need to be mindful when telling each other what we think ‘identity’ is and how it should be understood. We must listen to what the other has to say” (p. 12). This dissertation primarily represented six individuals’ experiences with identity transformation. It is not possible to assume that the experiences of six Central Asian female graduate students’ experiences with identity transformation will transfer to all international students and higher education institutions across the country.

The participants of this dissertation study raised complex questions in relation to their self-identity, and these processes of questioning and reflecting were far from finding closure. Rather, this reconceptualization awakened certain unsettling concerns related to participants’ gender roles and about such things as being in an unhappy marriage, being single, and keeping healthy ties with family in the country of origin. Yet, all these unsettling feelings and thoughts served as a key to participants’ growth and identity construction. Participants’ feelings of in-betweenness are constant, still in process, and may stay in process. In light of this, it is essential to focus on understanding this process and not trying to fix it.
APPENDIX A

GLOSSARY OF TERMS
## Appendix A
### Glossary of Terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Terms</th>
<th>Definitions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adat</td>
<td>Variety of local customary practices (Geiss, 2003).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ala-kachuu</td>
<td>Bride kidnapping (Kleinbach, Ablezova, &amp; Aitieva, 2006).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amin</td>
<td>Amen, exclamation uttered at the end of a prayer (Roi, 2000).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Basmachi</td>
<td>Anti-Soviet militant group uprising against Soviet rule (1918-1924) (Olcott, 1981). For Soviets Basmachs were known as bandits, but the fighters of Central Asia referred to themselves as freemen (Olcott, 1981). The conflict between the Red Army and the Basmachs lasted from 1918 to 1924 and they were supported by people from various sectors of Central Asian society from tribal leaders, clergy, landowners, and the merchant class to peasants and tribesmen of the villages (Olcott, 1981). Focusing on Tajikistan, Nourzhanov (2015) portrays different interpretations of how Basmachis were viewed during and after the Soviet times. If the Communist party viewed Basmachis negatively, especially after WWII, the state institutions and individuals scrutinized the origins of Basmachi’s insurgency after Tajik independence for the purposes of constructing national identity.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bolshevik</td>
<td>The term means ‘one of the majority’. The group originated at the party's second congress in 1903 when Lenin's followers won a temporary majority on the party's central committee while insisting party membership be restricted to professional revolutionaries. Later in 1912, Lenin formed a separate Bolshevik organization splitting Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (Suny, 2011).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chachvon</td>
<td>A part of a traditional robe, which covers a face and made from horsehair (Northrop, 2004).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chopan</td>
<td>A robe that could be pulled up to cover the mouth of a woman in the presence of men (Northrop, 2004).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chor-Kitob</td>
<td>A book that is written in Persian, which describes Islamic rules of ablution, praying, and fasting (Khalid, 1998).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Domla</td>
<td>A male teacher in Islamic traditional school (Kamp, 2006).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elechek</td>
<td>Traditional Kyrgyz headdress (EurasiaNet, 2016).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Glasnost’</td>
<td>The term means ‘open’ or ‘public’: a policy initiated by Gorbachev in 1985 to practice more openness and wider dissemination of information (Fierman, 2009).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Haft-yak</td>
<td>A book written in Arabic which was a collection of brief surahs from the Koran with all vowels and pronunciation marks included (Khalid, 1998).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Haj</td>
<td>Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca (Akiner, 1997).</td>
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<td>Term</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hijab</td>
<td>Islamic veil which covers a woman whole body, but not her face (Northrop, 2004).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Horde</td>
<td>A historic sociopolitical and military structure in steppe nomad cultures (Akiner, 1995).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hujum</td>
<td>Attack or assault. A Communist Party campaign to liberate Central Asian women from tradition. The campaign began in 1927 and continued into the 1930s (Kandiyoti, 2007).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Imam</td>
<td>An Islamic leadership position (Niyozov, 2018).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intelligentsiya</td>
<td>The term represents a status class of educated people engaged in the complex mental labors that critique, guide, and lead in shaping the culture and politics of their society (Hyman, 1993).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jadid</td>
<td>Muslim modernist reformer that functioned during the Russian Empire and early Soviet period. Jadids maintained that Muslims in the Russian Empire had entered a period of decay that could only be rectified by the acquisition of a new kind of knowledge, European-modeled cultural reform (Khalid, 1998).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Janaza</td>
<td>Islamic funeral prayer (Roi, 2000).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kalym</td>
<td>Bride-price or marriage payment made by a groom or his family to the bride’s family (Northrop, 2001).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Khanate</td>
<td>A political entity ruled by a Khan: equivalent to tribal chiefdom, empire (Khalid, 1998).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Korenizatsiya</td>
<td>The term means indigenization. The policy of indigenization was the early Soviet nationalities policies promoted mostly in the 1920s (Allworth, 1990; Martin, 2001).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Madrasa</td>
<td>Islamic College (Kamp, 2006; Khalid, 1998).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maktab</td>
<td>Islamic traditional elementary school (Kamp, 2006; Khalid, 1998).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mulla</td>
<td>A Muslim learned in Islamic theology and sacred law (Roi, 2000).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mursak</td>
<td>Women’s veil which covered most of the woman’s body without covering her face, similar to paranji (Northrop, 2004).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mushtum</td>
<td>The term means ‘fist’, also a title of a humor magazine published that started being published in 1923 (Allworth, 1990).</td>
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<td>Nikah</td>
<td>Islamic passage read from Koran when two people get married (Roi, 2000).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Niqab</td>
<td>A woman’s full body veil that covers her face leaving only her eyes (Northrop, 2004).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oblast’</td>
<td>Administrative division during Soviet era (Martin, 2001).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Otin</td>
<td>A female teacher (Kamp, 2006).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Otstaliye</td>
<td>The term means ‘backward’ (Martin, 2001).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Palas</td>
<td>Pileless, handwoven floor covering made in most of the rug-weaving areas of Central Asia (Bacon, 1966).</td>
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<td>Term</td>
<td>Definition</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paranji</td>
<td>A traditional robe worn by mainly women from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, which wraps the whole body from head to toes (Northrop, 2004).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharia</td>
<td>Islamic law based on the teachings of Koran and the traditions of the Prophet, prescribing both religious and secular duties and sometimes retributive penalties for lawbreaking (Geiss, 2003).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talim</td>
<td>Instruction of God’s final message to community of believers (Ismaili Gnosis, 2018).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tarbiya</td>
<td>The term means the process of training and disciplining the soul in Islamic tradition (Khalid, 1998).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tawi</td>
<td>Interpretation of God’s final message to community of believers (Ismaili Gnosis, 2018).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waqf</td>
<td>The term means Islamic religious endowment in Islamic law, typically donating a building to Muslim religious or charitable purposes with no intention of reclaiming the assets (Kamp, 2006).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yashmak</td>
<td>Turkmen women in Central Asia did not cover their faces fully, but only their mouths with a piece of cloth or their scarves (Edgar, 2004).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B
Recruitment Scripts

(1) Recruitment Email (to faculty or staff):

Dear [Mr./Ms. LAST NAME],

My name is Mayagul Satlykgylyjova and I am a Ph.D. candidate at Kent State University in Cultural Foundations of Education. For my dissertation, I am currently conducting a research study with a title* Toward Identity Construction of Central Asian Women Students in American Higher Education. *I am writing to request you to deliver this letter of recruitment to potential Central Asian female students who are currently studying at [NAME OF THE UNIVERSITY]. The purpose of my study is to learn how Central Asian women students understand their identity through making meaning of their experiences of crossing cultural, geographical, and psychological borders.

The Institutional Review Board of Kent State University has approved this research study. If you have any questions or concerns about your university’s engagement in this research study, please contact:
Office of Research Compliance at Kent State University
Division of Research and Sponsored Programs
Room 222, Cartwright Hall
(330)-672-2384
researchcompliance@kent.edu

I would greatly appreciate if you could forward the following message by copying and pasting to only Central Asian female students who are currently enrolled at your university. Thank you very much for your time and help.

Respectfully,

Mayagul Satlykgylyjova
Ph.D. Candidate in Cultural Foundations of Education
School of Foundations, Leadership, and Administration
Kent State University
P.O. Box 5190, 316 White Hall,
Kent, OH 44240
Dear Participant,

My name is Mayagul Satlykgylyjova and I am a Ph.D. candidate at Kent State University in Cultural Foundations of Education. You are invited to participate in a research study I am currently conducting with a title Toward Identity Construction of Central Asian Women Students in American Higher Education. The purpose of my study is to learn how Central Asian female students understand their identity through making meaning of their experiences of crossing cultural, geographical, and psychological borders.

I would like to interview you on your experiences of living and studying in the United States. I would like to hear about your educational achievements and other consequences of your cultural transition. The interviews will be conducted during a face-to-face or online meeting (using Skype) on a date and location of your preference. If you feel comfortable sharing your experiences with your peers from your university I would like to invite you for a second face-to-face or online group interview (using Skype). The amount of time required for each interview will be about 1-2 hours. You have an option to opt out from the group interview. However, 15-30 minutes of your time will be required for future e-mail exchanges/follow-up. Interviews will remain confidential and you will be assigned a pseudonym for the protection of your identity. This pseudonym will also be used in the transcription and analysis processes, as well as any write-ups.

In the following link, you may find more information on the selection criteria for the research, the interview consent form, and a short questionnaire to get started with the research process. [https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1JmGxY4ZfoqNzCu5zcwWJOQtw-9ZXoX_dkJ5HVzTEc/viewform?usp=send_form](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1JmGxY4ZfoqNzCu5zcwWJOQtw-9ZXoX_dkJ5HVzTEc/viewform?usp=send_form)

As incentive for your participation in this study, you will receive 25$ for all your time spent for this research study. If you have any questions or concerns please do not hesitate to contact me at msatlykg@kent.edu or (234) 284-3664. I appreciate your time and consideration.

Respectfully,

Mayagul Satlykgylyjova
Ph.D. Candidate in Cultural Foundations of Education
School of Foundations, Leadership, and Administration
Kent State University
P.O. Box 5190, 316 White Hall,
Kent, OH 44240
Appendix C

Participant Interest Form

To be eligible to participate in the study you must meet the following criteria: 1) be and identify as female; 2) born and raised in one of the Central Asian countries (can be raised in more than one country); 3) be ethnically Kazakh, Turkmen, Uzbek, Tajik or Kyrgyz (other indigenous ethnicities are welcome); 4) have been pursuing a higher education in the U.S. for a minimum of two years; 5) have visited your home country since you arrived in the U.S.; 6) must be of age 20 or older.

If the questions do not apply to you please note "Not Applicable".

What is your name? Last, First, and Patronymic

What is your date of birth?

Are you married? If so, how long have you been married? Does your husband live with you in the United States?

Do you have children? If so, how many? Do they live with you in the United States?

What is your citizenship? If you have dual citizenship, what are they?

What is your ethnicity? What is the ethnicity of your parents and grandparents from both sides?
What is the ethnicity of your husband? What is the ethnicity of his parents and grandparents from both sides?

Where are you currently studying in the United States? Which Degree and Level? What is your major? How long have you been studying in this program?

Have you visited your home country since you started this program? When did you travel? For how long?

Have you been to the United States before you started this program?

Have you been to other countries before or during your current stay in the U.S.? Which countries have you visited? Why?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME AND PARTICIPATION! Please leave your contact information to arrange face-to-face/online interviews.

Email address and Phone number
APPENDIX D

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Appendix D

Individual Interview Questions

1. Tell me about yourself: where you come from, what you’re studying, and how you came to the U.S.

2. What can you tell me about your self-understanding prior to coming to study in the US? *I will give the participant some time to reflect. The response may take any direction. I will keep the following questions as probe questions.*
   a. What were your hopes?
   b. How did you think your education would help you?
   c. Did you plan to return to your home country after your studies? Why or why not?

3. What can you tell me about your social identity, as you understand it?
   a. *Probing:* If the participant mentions her national, linguistic, ethnic [tribal], gender, social class, or religious identity, I will elaborate on the particulars of those categories by asking why and how questions. If the participant does not mention those categories, I will probe further about those unmentioned categories and cover all of them to see where they stand in relation to those categories. I will elaborate why they did not mention it/them.
   b. How did the identities you have just talked about shape your opportunities in your home country? How did they shape your opportunities here?

4. Have you been back home since you started your current program? If so, how many times and for how long?

5. What did you learn about your social identities, that we discussed, when you went back home for the first time? i.e. Did your trips back home made you think/feel differently about your social identities?
   a. What do you think has changed in your self-understanding of your gender/ethnicity/religion/social class/national identity/other identities you mentioned earlier?

6. How has your life changed as a person who has crossed geographic and cultural borders? How do you understand yourself and your identity now?

7. Do you move back and forth between your culture of origin and the host culture as you think about yourself or are you predominantly in one culture? Is there a place where you are psychologically “at home”? Why? What has changed about your sense of “at home” ness?

8. Would you like to add anything else about your self-understanding that my questions have not captured?
APPENDIX E

FOCUS GROUP INVITATION SCRIPT
Appendix E

Focus Group Invitation Script

Dear Participant,

This is Mayagul Satlykglyjova, a Ph.D. candidate in Cultural Foundations of Education at Kent State University. You participated in the past in my research study entitled Toward Identity Construction of Central Asian Women Students in American Higher Education. So, I thank you for your time and for the invaluable information you have provided. When we met before for the individual interview, you have agreed and signed the consent forms to participate in the following Focus Group interview.

I am following up with you about setting up a possible dates and times for us to meet. There will be four other Central Asian female students at this Focus Group interview, and the interview will take place online and we will use Skype. I would greatly appreciate if you could provide me with the possible and times that are convenient for you between December 1-20, 2017.

The focus group interview will be based on the emerged themes from the first individual interview I have conducted with you. With the group of women from Central Asia, I would like to discuss and elaborate on certain aspects of your experiences you had while studying in the United States. The focus group interview will last approximately 1-2 hours.

If you have any questions or concerns please do not hesitate to contact me at msatlykg@kent.edu or (234) 284-3664. I appreciate your time.

Respectfully,

Mayagul Satlykglyjova
Ph.D. Candidate in Cultural Foundations of Education
School of Foundations, Leadership, and Administration
Kent State University
P.O. Box 5190, 316 White Hall,
Kent, OH 44240
APPENDIX F

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Appendix F

Focus Group Interview Questions

Opening Script: Hello everyone. Thank you so much for coming. As I have noted before, I am interested in Central Asian female graduate students' understandings of their self-identity after studying in the United States. I am interested in your reflections on the first individual interviews and I hope we can discuss some your experiences in more details. I have developed a series of questions related to the preliminary findings and I will let the tone of the group determine where the questions will go. I want to emphasize that there are no right or wrong answers. You should not feel that you must agree with everyone else if that's not how you really feel. There are five people in this focus group, and I expect that people will have different views and experiences.

I want you to feel comfortable saying good things as well as critical things. If you find yourself feeling upset about the talk, you can leave anytime. I am not here to promote a particular way of thinking. Finally, when you say something, please say your name first so that the person transcribing will know who's talking. The information you provide here will be confidential and I will use your pseudonyms for data analysis and the write-ups.

1. Can you please introduce yourselves very briefly by stating your name, where you are from, and where you have pursued or still pursuing your graduate education?

2. Some of you mentioned before that education in the United States helped you for your personal growth, whereas before your studies your understanding of education was mainly about getting a job or about earning money. What are your thoughts on this?

3. One participant noted during the individual interview that her views changed about LGBT people and community. She didn't understand this population before, but now she not only understands them, but she advocates for them because of taking classes on gender issues and listening to thought-provoking arguments. Did you experience any major changes similar to this because of your studies in the United States?

4. Do you agree with the fact that you changed from being relational women to being independent women? If so, could you please elaborate on the process of this change?

5. Some of you mentioned that your relationships in marriage changed, others mentioned their views on romantic relationships and views on sex and talking about sex changed. What do you think influenced these changes?

6. One participant noted that 'gender equality thing was a little too much in the United States'. What are your thoughts on this topic?
7. Your experiences with living far from your families obviously made you more self-confident and stronger. Some of you mentioned how it is difficult to be a strong woman in your home countries. One of you even noted how you tried to erase certain personal qualities in order to fit in your society. If that is the case, how do you negotiate these changes?

8. All of you explained how you see yourselves in-between cultures. You noted how you like certain aspects of the American culture, but you also do not want to give up your heritage culture completely. How do you negotiate such state of being in-between cultures? Can you please give examples of what you exactly do to negotiate your identities?

9. How do you think being in-between cultures affects the people that surround you in your home country and/or in the United States?

10. Would you like to add anything additional?
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