

Article

Visibility of the Dispossessed: Encouraging Female Emirati Students to Develop Their Individual Voices as Writers in a Globalized World

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Abstract

This research is concerned with how promoting creative writing amongst Emirati students throughout Higher Education in the United Arab Emirates led to female students' developing their confidence and independence. Through writing and seeing their work published, students became conscious of the uniqueness of their own contributions and of their own context. In a conservative culture that considers creative writing unbecoming, rather than integral to education and self-development, an online competition was devised for students to experiment with their own ideas in their everyday lingua franca of English, in the form of a 50-word creative text. The majority of these texts were written by female students, and their writing shows themes of identity, locality, globality and struggle. Observation and discussion with the writers of the texts and their peers reveal how writing and publishing these "identity texts" (Cummins et al., 2015) support students' engagement with English literacy as well as articulating and validating their written identities through considering interaction with readerships from different cultures.

Keywords

Creative writing, globalized world, identity texts, individual voices as writers, United Arab Emirates

1 Introduction

This paper concerns early experiences of creative writing among a burgeoning generation of Emirati women in higher education. The study focuses on how these students responded to a safe space in which to express themselves as they explored their identities through their creative writing. These students have grown up amid dramatic social changes following the first large-scale extraction of oil in the 1960s, the resulting new wealth and founding of the UAE state in 1971, and the subsequent growth of "brand Dubai" (Bagaen, 2007). The writing discussed in this paper was submitted by students in a writing competition. The development of the project brought local and international recognition not

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only of the best writers but of the diversity of contributions, and, at the local level, of creative writing as a socially valued activity; while also allowing individual anonymity.

Findings are examined from an unfolding creative EFL writing project involving mainly female Gulf Arab students at a university in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE). The “originator”, a male British instructor of General English and Academic Writing, devised what he envisaged would be a small-scale project directed towards the compilation of a corpus of student-authored text, which developed into an extensive campaign that has inspired considerable national and international linguistic and intercultural research (Hassall, 2006; 2011). Significant data, edited by the originator’s team, were published, distributed and exhibited throughout the UAE and overseas, translated into a number of languages. This body of student writing was subsequently analyzed (as well as translated into Arabic) by the “investigator”, a female Arab professor of Humanities, taking a feminist perspective on the position of women in society, and on the potential for improving this position (Alzeer & Amin, 2020). The first part of this paper describes the background to the research; this is followed by a description of how the data was collected, presented and analyzed.

2 Background to the Research

This paper is based on data from an extracurricular university activity and a subsequent social-literary analysis of the texts produced. We will here review some previous work relevant to these aspects of the study.

One aim in promoting creative writing in L2 English contexts is to develop students’ English writing skills and often their engagement with literacy more generally. In terms of literacy engagement, Al-Jarf (2007) used creative writing activities with Saudi students, who found the self-expression involved enjoyable and motivating; the activities supported writing practice among Freshman students with little interest in writing, even those of low proficiency. Bozkurt et al. (2016) found that the constraints of writing very short texts using Twitter forced students to think about the language they used, and to use creative means to attract and intrigue readers with a few words. Stillar (2013) found that creative writing activities helped raise mainstream Japanese students’ consciousness of marginalized or oppositional groups in their own society. It helped them to understand new perspectives on controversial topics and also to practice English writing. Among other things this activity led to deeper critical discourse on societal and power issues. English itself is of course part of these issues, and the use of English(es) for creative or other purposes has its own significance depending on the particular context.

Creative writing as self-expression or self-reflection also can help to work through some tensions, including those linked to social change. Kachru (1985) highlights the kinds of creativity which bilinguals bring to the creative process. This creativity reflects not only linguistic resources from two or more languages, but also diverse cultural and social experiences. Spiro (2014) suggests that meaningful writing involves “writing because there is something we wish to share; and [...] in the writing, we establish an even closer connection with ourselves and our message”. That is, writing may support self-reflection as we articulate or refashion our own experience for readers. Cummins et al. (2015) discuss how student-written “identity texts” of various kinds, which “generate insight about social and personal realities” (p. 557) can increase student engagement with literacy as well as affirming (through positive feedback from multiple audiences) student identities which may be marginalized by society.

Spiro (2014) also cites Maxim’s (2006) principle that “language choice impacts profoundly on the formation of one’s identity” (p. 252) and she frames L2 creative writing (L2CW) as “activating the sense of freedom and ownership they might experience in the mother tongue” - although, as we will see in our analysis, the second language may provide a greater sense of freedom than the mother tongue. Disney (2014) argues that at a personal level, L2 creative writers can “deepen connections with their own emergent voice” (p. 3). However, this individual voice engages with socially constructed experience: L2CW “facilitates discourses of memory-keeping and truth-disclosing which retain (if not the shape,

then the sound of) community and cultural identities” (p. 8) and forms “a mode of cosmopolitanism which can present, preserve, and promote shifting (or emerging) patterns of subjecthood” (p. 4). Thus the self, shaped in part by social discourses, can be re-presented publicly in new ways (perhaps ways repressed in everyday life - cf. Freud, 1983) in creative writing. Furthermore, “creative processes in L2 contexts can generate engaged and emancipatory critique in both mother and other tongues” (p. 1) and offer “a forum for dissent, resistance, and speaking out” (p. 8). However, this process of self-reflection, social engagement, emancipation and resistance is by no means inevitable. Various creative, linguistic and social resources are involved in realizing the potential that Disney refers to.

The most notable changes in world societies in recent decades include globalization and modernization. Globalization has been described as “a dramatic kind of rupture from the past in which the flow of economic and cultural forces have swamped the borders of nation-states” (Jay, 2011, p. 33). Ironically, in the case of the UAE, it was pressures of globalization itself (particularly a global reliance on oil) which forced a region of largely nomadic desert-dwellers and fishermen to form a nation-state in 1971. In the fifty years since, this state has modernized at incredible speed. Modernity means not simply the latest technology, but

a powerful set of cultural, political, economic, and spatial relationships [including] an emphasis upon rationality and science over tradition and myth; a belief in progress and improvement; confidence in human mastery over nature; a focus on humanism, individuality, and self-consciousness; a close association to the birth and development of market capitalism; and a strong reliance upon the state and its legal and governmental institutions. (Linehan, 2009, p. 157).

A shift to modernity began in Europe from about the seventeenth century (Giddens, 2013) with the Western world taking over four centuries to adapt to this; while in the UAE it has swept through society over a mere period of 50 years. The region went through a period of massive changes in environment, lifestyle, culture and social structure (Heard-Bay, 2011); and Emirati society found itself amid modernization’s consequences without a firm plan to face the changes taking place in society.

Emirati tribal society has its roots in the semi-nomadic pastoral Bedouin groupings that occupied the area. These groupings used to tend their herds of sheep and camels in the desert during winter, then in summer they would move to the cooler coastline to fish and later to dive for pearls (Davidson, 2005). Their local social fabric is founded on traditional tribal structures of political organization, with the Arab Bedu as the elite, interwoven with limited choices of economic opportunities and the Islamic order of life. In living memory, education in the UAE was undertaken through the “mutawa’a system” led by individual religious teachers. In some cases the mutawa’a (teacher) was the imam in the mosque, being paid privately by local families, sometimes in food, domestic animals or clothing. Students were often taught at the teacher’s house, inside a room, the courtyard or even outside under a tree (Heard-Bey, 2011; Khelifa, 2010). This was in stark contrast to 21st Century tertiary education funded by the Government in futuristic, air-conditioned universities which became increasingly connected globally through the internet and ubiquitous personal devices. To cater for the deep-rooted conservative culture of local families, segregation in federal tertiary education was rigidly enforced with females and males having different campuses for the same institution; however, faculty of either gender, drawn from a wide variety of countries, were permitted to teach both males and females.

The UAE nowadays has a unique demographic composition, in that Emirati nationals constitute a minority in their own country. The country’s 9.6 million population comprises mainly expatriates attracted to the UAE for employment from almost every country in the world following the large-scale extraction of oil. Today, indigenous UAE nationals represent only 10-15% of the population (Khoury, as cited in Sabban, 2013). According to Johannsen (1996) and later confirmed by Hassall (2004), English became used by young Emiratis for shopping, with domestic helpers, at hospitals, and even with siblings or friends (to keep secrets from their parents). Today, English has become the lingua franca of the UAE and the medium of instruction in tertiary education (Hopkyns, et al., 2018; 2021). This situation has resulted in the influx of large numbers of English-speaking academics in Higher Education together with

massive disorientation of the student body given the conservative Bedouin background of Emirati society, and a concern about the loss of Emiratis' national identity. Official and unofficial responses to this have included a national dress code (white kandoras for men, black abayas and shaylas for women), as well as overprotection of Emirati women, and considerable restriction on their mobility by their conservative families and peers. The modernization that swept the country is most clearly observable in the social and cultural dilemmas reflected in the intensive struggles that women face in their newly reconceptualized communities. This study highlights feelings manifest in female students' spatial practices, physical appearance and commitment to their national dress that covers and protects their bodies on the one hand, while also allowing for spatial appearances of unity and homogeneity on the other (Piller, 2018).

In modernizing/ globalizing societies generally, social and cultural tensions are especially visible in the position of women. Women may be enlisted as workers in growing economies, without being truly empowered or freed from domestic/sexualized expectations (Young, 2014). Such tensions are especially salient in transitional stages of life, including adolescence, becoming an adult, and marriage. They may be associated with "generation gaps" – which can be very pronounced in societies like Emirati society, where a first-generation student may live in an extended family with grandparents who received no formal education at any level. At a societal level, women may be caught between contradictory and shifting representations of themselves as workers, as mothers and as objects of desire (Doumato & Posusney, Eds., 2003).

The new university at which the research project originated with campuses in Abu Dhabi and Dubai was inaugurated in 1998 as a university for female Emiratis only, to encourage parents to allow their daughters to study, since Emirati families refused to let them attend a mixed university because this went against their cultural and social mores. For Emirati women, universities greatly expanded the space they interacted in. For the first time they were allowed to disregard to an extent what was considered appropriate within the family or in public (highly internationalized) spaces and move in an environment which was both more (female) peer-oriented and oriented to (largely Western) knowledge. This strange new environment made an impact on how these women interacted, carried their bodies and came to think about themselves (Alzeer & Amin, 2020). This young generation of Emirati women in higher education are a generation born in a modern globalized socio-cultural environment but living with parents and grandparents who come from a world deeply rooted in traditions and bound by tribal laws. Thus, tertiary students find their identities divided between two worlds: the surrounding physical modern space outside the home, and the traditional customs and habits called for by family and the Emirati community (Alzeer 2018). Modern day Emirati students attend universities and colleges with technology comparable to that of leading universities around the world, which is very different from the simple education their parents and grandparents received in order to learn how to read and write (Talhami, 2004). Indeed, the student population of government universities in the UAE is predominantly female (Ridge, 2009). However, while families today are prepared to send their daughters for higher education, this does not mean they are fully aware of the need to allow them a different space to what norms and traditions allow; and peer pressure in the university tends to support community norms.

A feminist approach to the study of literature stems from "a politics and cognition of the historical and cultural subordination of women [...] and a resolve to do something about it" (Goodman, 1996, p. x). As discussed by Disney (2014) in relation to L2CW (see above), representations and insights articulated in creative writing have the power to move readers and potentially to make a difference, to change minds and perhaps society: "If we can fictionalize ourselves, and consciously, we are freed into a new kind of communication" (Winterson, 1996, p. 60). In the Emirati context, Alzeer & Amin (2020) found that in an environment where women lack a valid space of their own, they resorted to using their personal writing as a creative and rebellious space to assert themselves. Individuals' personal writing (for example of poetry in Arabic) became a dissident media to express a different kind of identity for Emirati women outside the restrictions of social, cultural and gender norms. The present study examines how these processes played out in an English creative writing activity which encouraged female students' reflection on their own experience for an audience in a foreign language.

3 Methodology

As noted earlier, the initiator of the writing competition (Peter John Hassall) is a male, British teacher of composition; while the investigator (Omnia Amin) is a female Arab scholar of comparative literature and cultural studies. We feel it relevant to mention this because our positionality and our past experience (including our relationship to this student population) influenced how we approached these texts as creative products. The competition was envisaged by Hassall as a means of engaging students creatively with (English) language and literacy. Hassall (2006) provided a progress report on the project and positioned the contest theoretically within a proposed world Englishes corpus: an International Corpus of Creative English (ICCE), lying somewhere between the authoritative International Corpus of English (ICE) suggested by Greenbaum (1988) and the pedagogical International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE) initiated by Granger (2001). The ICCE would include features related to the broad community perspective of ICE, coupled with the educational focus of ICLE; but rather than having purely pedagogical aims, the ICCE would “encourage the tertiary population to develop their individual creative English resources and take their creative contributions, i.e., what “they want to mean” out into the wider community” (p. 132). Thus the contest is framed not as a coercive classroom-based activity with instrumental language development aims; but as an opportunity to engage in a creative process, at the student’s own level of proficiency, and to find their own voice.

Omnia Amin, encountering these texts as a reader and translator, became interested in a feminist perspective on them, based in her affinity with this student population as an Arab woman and in her local knowledge from teaching them for some years, coupled with some critical distance as an academic from a different generation and cultural background (Egyptian rather than Emirati).

The texts to be analyzed here are from a student writing competition on the theme of “Emirati women”, which formed one iteration of a long-running project. In 2003, the originator, as Advisor to the Student Literature Club, initiated a long-running 50-word writing competition to be held by email between the two campuses of this very new University in Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Hoping for success with L2 students, the originator based this competition on previous anthologized 50-word competitions for UK and New Zealand writers/readers (Aldiss, 2001; Edwards, 1997). The intent of the 50-word constraint is to offer an accessible task that focuses writers’ attention on how they express their thoughts. Since the student participants had a wide range of proficiency in English, the title and rubric for the competition required simple English - hence “story” rather than “saga” (Aldiss, 1985) and “extremely” in preference to “incredibly” (Edwards, 1997). The rubric was written in exactly 50 words in order to show the students what this looked like (Fig. 1).

Figure 1

Rubric for the Competition on the Theme “Facets of Emirati Women”

WRITE 50 WORDS
Win Great Prizes and Get Published

All you do is write anything on the theme
“Facets of Emirati women”.

You can write fact or fiction,
poetry or prose or even things that are “nuss-u-nuss”.

Use the Word Count on your
computer to check. Remember the
title and author’s name are extra.

There are 50 words here.

Inspired by the world Englishes paradigm of Kachru (e.g. 1985) and the literature on L2CW reviewed earlier, the Arabic phrase “nuss-u-nuss” meaning “half-and-half” suggests that student participants are permitted to mix genres and to insert their own Arabic words if they choose. Oral explanations, coupled with exemplar texts from Edwards (1997) were presented at the Literature Club at both campuses to make sure students and interested faculty understood exactly what they needed to do to enter the 50-Word-Contest. In these workshops, it was made clear that a “story” could refer to any text of exactly 50 words (not necessarily narrative) in order to encourage students to write whatever they wanted to - including poetry, lists, description, stream of consciousness or any other text type.

All submissions to the competitions, from even the weakest students, were accorded rigorous proofreading (as in Aldiss, 1985; Edwards, 1997) and then displayed cumulatively in print and on public screens at the busiest locations around the university campuses in Dubai and Abu Dhabi. As noted above, the texts analyzed here are from an iteration of our 50-word contest on the theme of “Emirati women”. Of the 29 texts included, all but one are by authors identifiable (from their given name and/or from the content of their text) as female. In general the great majority of participants in the competition were female, partly because of the student population targeted.

Public recognition of students’ writing is a key part of the competition, to promote writing as a valued activity. In the case of “Facets”, fifty winning texts were published locally in 2009. Twenty-nine of these texts were then matched with student photographs and explanatory panels to form the Facets of Emirati Women Exhibition, which was displayed at a competition Awards Evening and at many venues in the UAE and internationally. This exhibition was later translated into Japanese by Takeshita and Tanaka (Hassall, Takeshita & Tanaka, 2011) and into Arabic by Amin (Hassall & Amin, 2015) - see figures in the Appendix. Participants were encouraged to use a pseudonym or single name to preserve the anonymity of the student-authors in this very conservative society. All participants also signed a consent form for texts to be proofread, for display and publication, and used for international linguistic research, and by signing this form students also confirmed their sole authorship of the text.

For the purposes of this study, the investigator re-read all the published 50-word texts, noting the identifiable gender of all authors. She then considered the texts by varied and overlapping themes in relation to women’s self-identification in the context of the UAE. Close analysis of the texts involved evaluating each word in relation to its context and identifying feelings and salient topics, in relation to the writers’ gender, culture, age group, social and religious background, as well as some intimate knowledge of parallel personal experiences. In analyzing the texts, the investigator drew also on her ongoing relationship with this student population and an understanding of some of their concerns and creative impulses.

4 Analysis: A Creative Space for the Visibility of the Dispossessed

The texts in this paper are not all organized as narratives, nor laid out as prose. However, in a sense such identity texts help the writers and readers to sketch and infer an identity “narrative” underlying them. In addition to the texts themselves, the following, more ethnographic data helped to provide different perspectives on issues of identity and belonging in the texts: long-term observation of the student population in educational contexts, and discussions with them in informal contexts.

In this analysis I (the investigator) focus on the majority of the texts, which were written by female university students. During my 18 years’ experience teaching in a conservative federal institution in the UAE, I struggled to find a suitable environment for Emirati female students to express themselves freely without fear. I found the 50-word story competition encouraged students to write openly about themselves as the nature of such creation gained them visibility using the support of the university. It provided a “safe” gateway especially as the identity of the participants remained anonymous providing an

environment for the “voices of the dispossessed” to be heard (cf. McDowell, 2016). The 50-word contest shows that encouraging creativity is one of the most empowering educational tools as the experiment resulted in the students’ visibility both locally and globally. In this context, the “identification and announcement of one’s visibility” became “the radical move and the end in itself” towards educational empowerment (Gray, 2013).

We begin with a 50-word text by “Crimson Rose”, titled Children of the Desert (Hassall & Amin, 2015, p. 43):

*I run on this Eden, the desert’s sand,
Gold-like sun smiling against my back, and hair black.
I am not alone, laughter follows my every footstep.
-years passed-
Grandmother’s house is gone;
Children all grown and drifted apart;
Salty tears feed barren earth, no green shall flourish –
By myself – cold.*

The text above depicts how “dispossessed” Crimson Rose feels as she looks at herself and her local environment. She realizes she no longer belongs to the desert that housed her ancestral line for generations on end. This search for geographical identity and affinity towards a sense of belonging is an important universal theme that arose during the age of globalization in which the local identity linked to place became replaced by the agenda of becoming one global village. Although the harmonious message of living as one nation under globalization seems a way forward towards bridging cultures and developing tolerance among nations, its threatening aspect is not lost upon the student-author who feels an impending loss of self and belonging, and a severing from her ancestral roots.

Identity as defined by a local geographical space is jeopardized for Emiratis whose young nation of 50 years witnessed relentless changes after the discovery of petroleum. This young woman’s childhood is connected to a generation who lived before oil wealth; the text conveys a feeling of dispossession as she struggles with the contrasts between her childhood environment and her adulthood lifestyle. The childhood place rings as an Eden filled with “gold” spaces and “laughter” shared with others. Her every move falls in harmony with the surrounding sand of the desert. The transition of being dispossessed and uprooted from her serene locale is anchored in the word “gone”. The piece is not simply a personal mourning for a lost childhood or a nostalgia for bygone times per se but is more complex; it sounds the complaints of a whole generation of Emirati youth who woke up from the race of catching up with modernity, to find that the places and buildings that housed their memories and gathered the community, are replaced by skyscrapers and modern modes of existence that swept the whole Gulf region. Rightly so, the poem shows that the places that housed generations of her ancestors no longer exist. The maternal reference in “grandmother” is a symbol of the homeland, as the motherland landscape is changed to give way to a western lifestyle; the umbilical connection to generations of a close-knit community is severed and replaced by a modern space where all members in her family “drifted apart”. Modernization appears as a state of separation in geography and identity. In the past, the individual and the community were one; but now modern communities are alienating as individuality takes the place of communality. They are no longer “part of” but are “apart from” their ancestral roots; the future appears menacing as the earth has become “barren” where “no green shall flourish”. The text foretells the exile from self and belonging as salty tears replace the smiling sun that warmed the young girl at play. Her adult life is a state of being “alone”, exiled in coldness as she is no longer a child of the desert sand but a citizen of a wilderness of modern concrete buildings, artificial and alienating.

For these students in a region which was influenced by the anglophone world but not colonized, English is a foreign language but also a familiar one for daily transactions. It seems that expressing themselves in English language afforded students a “safe” distance from some cultural taboos connected to the use of their mother tongue. By writing in English, they felt more at liberty to express themselves without pushing against the conservative fabric of their own society (cf. Alzeer & Amin, 2020). They are not unique in seeing English as a helpful medium. Somali writer Ubah Cristina Ali Farah in an interview for the BBC said that writing in English has given Somali women “more space” in finding their voice away from cultural expectations placed on them by their male-dominated society (BBC, 2021). Under these conditions, the written texts became an expressive environment for young women (and perhaps men to a lesser extent). The publication of students’ 50 words further encouraged them to continue their creative writing, especially as their pieces were published and translated into other languages. This latter step played a major role in boosting their confidence and making them take their writing seriously, as they saw that other countries were interested in knowing what an Emirati young woman thinks of and is concerned about. Japan was the first country to acknowledge their effort and matched it with a competition of their own using the same format as the paper indicated in the previous section. Following Japan’s interest in young Emirati women’s writing, the students explained in conversation with me that they were amazed to find themselves received in other cultures and began to explore the creative writing of those others. Interestingly, later translation of their writing into their first language (Arabic), after “incubation” in English and other languages, further boosted their confidence. It is true that they participated because their identities were not revealed; but once my translation of their pieces came out in Arabic (see Figure 2), several of them approached me and revealed their identity, proud to claim authorship at this stage. I used the *Facets of Emirati Women* in class discussions where we highlighted themes and used the pieces as an exploration of identity and belonging by using close analysis of the pieces and allowing other students to explore their identity through their own creative writing.

Once published, students felt that they no longer had to remain confined by what they can write about themselves in a conservative environment that regards writing as a threatening and unsuitable profession that can sully a girl’s reputation (Alzeer & Amin, 2020). El Saadawi in *The Hidden Face of Eve* says: “Freedom has a price, a price which a free woman pays out of her tranquility, her peace, her health, when facing the opposition and aggression of society against her” (1980, 311). Knowing this made female students express themselves anonymously. For them it became a victory as their opinions were heard for the first time without having to face social punishment. Although their identities are still hidden, they had the compensation of knowing that their words were carried forth for the world to see.

The writers’ texts are replete with themes about themselves that intersect with those of students of similar age in Japan and other countries. This intersection across cultures is explored by Matsubara (2016). In the space they had forged for themselves through creativity, feeling they are nowhere to be seen or heard, this creative space became a place to voice “the view from nowhere” (Haraway, 1988). It enabled them to write their particular position as Emirati women: they did not want to appear as western or non-Arab.

There is an emphasis in their writing on giving voice to the modern Emirati woman, who tends to appear in everyday life as a silent observer dressed in the traditional black *abaya* and *shayla*: their traditional black cloak and headdress that cover the body. They realize that black is the no-color that reflects nothing outside itself and thus they express it endowing it with the magic of their own perception about themselves (cf. Alzeer & Amin, 2020). Latefa, in her piece *A Lady in an Abaya* explains how she feels about women covered in black:

*I walk the night desert: a dark mist in the
dryness of your existence. You feed from me
because I have an abundance when there is*

*no light. You fear me for what I might take
from you, but the fear is tempered with love:
a love, secret and black.*

(Hassall & Amin, 2015, p. 30.)

This piece has psychological depth, uncovering the fear of the hidden woman. As the UAE took bold steps towards change, women tended to suffer and pay the price because the community did not know how to blend them in with the fast pace of the surrounding advancement. They were expected to assume a modern look but at the same time to preserve traditions and values: the burden of keeping the family together was placed upon their shoulders. In this piece, the young woman evokes the desert as the motherland, but her setting is the night, the color of her black attire blending with the mother. She speaks to the world by addressing her audience as “you”, including Emirati men and society who are the first to judge her appearance and behavior. In one of the myriad interpretations of the piece, she refers to the men’s living in “dryness” while the women are the “dark mist”. The woman here is synonymous with the night, holding the secret of the feminine, feared and unknown to the menfolk. The desert, the motherland, that once protected and provided, has been left behind and is now the haunting ghost of the ancestors. The woman is the element that now “feeds” as she has preserved the “abundance” of the desert at a time where there is “no light”. Though she is the preserver, the sustainer and the giver, men feel threatened as they can no longer understand her. They fear what she might take from them in retribution for deserting her. Fear and love do not go together so the expressed “fear tempered with love” is an indication that deep beneath the “secret and black” is “love” hidden waiting to be uncovered. This text shows some of the “critical orientations and [...] culturally situated zones of experimentation, exploration” see Disney (2014, p. 1) as a potential of L2CW.

The piece by F. Al Mazrouei entitled Lost Soul follows the same vein, expressing the loss of place through intermarriage between different cultures. It shows how young Emiratis with parents of different nationalities grope for a sense of belonging:

*In this ever-changing multicultural
world, I am a lost soul. My father says I
am an Arab. My mother says I am
English. Most people around the world
say I am an oppressed Muslim woman.
Conversely, many others say I am a
fundamentalist, a terrorist.
Tell me, who am I?*

(Hassall & Amin, 2015, p.65.)

Emiratis who have a foreign parent are not considered full Emiratis by their peers and are categorized in their social milieu as less of an Emirati than those who boast of having full Emirati lineage. This social discrimination is not a condition faced only by women but by men too, and is often an obstacle when it comes to marriage. The more traditional a family is, the more they shy from being linked to a family that has mixed lineage. This mixing is seen as a kind of impurity, leading to discrimination at work or and in society more generally. What is at stake is acceptance on a personal and social level. This young woman is at odds with herself and the social environment that confines her and insists on labeling her. In the domestic sphere her parents label her differently as one calls her “Arab” and the other “English”. She is also not immune from more global media stereotypes, that she is “oppressed” due to her gender and

Muslim identity. She is also seen as “fundamentalist” because of her home, and as a “terrorist” because of her religion. Her label for herself is “a lost soul”. In a mere 50-word piece there are more than six different labels that are attached to her identity. Furthermore, the young woman inhabits what she sees as an “ever-changing” place that is also “multicultural” and supersedes her dual cultural background. It is the heart of a globalized world where she is spotlighted, labelled, and seeking a belonging. Instead of seeing the multiplicity of her position as an enrichment of her identity, the text presents a subject who seems mixed up and confused. She chooses “lost soul” to suggest that her feeling of confusion surpasses gender, space, and geography; even as she searches for a space within herself, she finds that deep down she is not anchored. The text “tell[s] truths that protect memory from lapsing into absence” (Disney, 2014, p. 8).

This theme is extended in the piece *She lives up to global standards*. While written in the first person, the title uses third person, indicating that the experience of this young woman represents others of her generation. There is an undertone of loss of identity as the cosmopolitan globalized world in which the average modern Emirati citizen lives expresses hardly anything local. Given the demographic of 90% foreign workers, Emiratis are rare to find. M Humaid writes:

I wear a Gap t-shirt, Levi jeans, Nike shoes. For breakfast I have a cup of Sri Lankan tea, a piece of French bread and some Danish cheese. I drive my Japanese-made car to the movies where I see an Indian movie and for lunch I have Chinese food.

(Hassall & Amin, 2015, p.79.)

This text shows the disorientation of identity as well as the absence of anything Emirati. Does it express pride? Or a criticism? The dividing line is kept unclear, but the array of nationalities and brands clearly omit the writer’s birthplace, while not entirely Western either. The title itself seems ironic, promoting a globalized standard which erases her origin.

The intensity of generational change and difference is particularly intensely felt in the modernizing society of the UAE. In *Three Generations*, the gap is apparent:

*Grandma in her golden burqa, narrating tales of hardships yet simplicity of the good old days.
Mum, graduate of UAE University’s first batch, pride of her family, the first woman to hold a bachelor’s degree. And myself, born with a golden spoon in my mouth, oblivious to what struggle means*

(Hassall & Amin, 2015, p.85.)

This poem illustrates memory, truth and disclosure (Disney, 2014) as the writer speaks about three generations of women separated by a mere 40 years but whose worlds are completely divorced from one another. The writer presents as truth her “oblivious” state to the meaning of struggle that her mother and grandmother had to put up with in the transition from a Bedouin community to a modern globalized one. She acknowledges the truth of her elders who did the work, juxtaposed with the privilege she was born

into, with a golden, not silver, spoon in her mouth.

Her nom-de-plume, BornConfuzed, suggests a state of intergenerational displacement. Her grandmother, a simple woman who faced hardships, was not an obstacle to her daughter attending university and attaining her bachelor's degree, the first woman in her family to do so. The Emirati society overall accepted and even celebrated the move to modernization: they rode the wave with full force, careless of the generational gap and its toll on the mentality of their younger generations. By the time BornConfuzed is born, she calls herself "oblivious" to the advantages she is born into. This privileged student, in her grandmother's time would have attended what is known as "Kuttab" which is a circle formed around a teacher who guides students through the elementary knowledge of writing and math but mainly focuses on religious teaching from the Koran. This was attended by young girls and boys alike but as soon as they grow older it is only the boys who have the chance to pursue their education by travel while girls stay at home to tend to domestic matters and prepare to get married.

The texts have a wide range of themes starting with the definition of a woman and moving to complex emotional and psychological spaces to make sense of identity and surroundings. In one, a young woman called Maitha reflects on two separate worlds that she and her grandmother occupy, conveying her grandmother's sense of self in modern times in *A Gaze of Time*:

*She walked steadily, dragging her
abaya along the sun-baked sand. The
wrinkles time had carved upon her
face grew deeper as she squinted,
staring at the horizon lined with
skyscrapers.
"Things have changed," she sighed.
A shadow approached. A tap on her
shoulder: "Grandma, it is time to go
home."*

(Hassall & Amin, 2015, p. 29.)

This text illustrates "shifting (or emerging) patterns of subjecthood" (Disney, 2014, p. 4). The grandmother is "dragging" her abaya - a national dress that should be worn with pride - as if it is a burden. She squints to see, unable to recognize the new world around her. It is an alien environment, where a younger relative (or perhaps the figure of Death?) ironically tells her it is time to head home, away from this world of skyscrapers. It seems there is no home for her in this new world as things have changed beyond her recognition. It is interesting to note how the grandmother figure appears in a number of students' writings, symbolic of a distant past they have never lived but can only glimpse in the figure of the older generations.

We can see from these examples of student writing that "more than any other appropriated space, creative writing has expressed young Emirati women's thoughts. It allowed them to exercise their control and define their own boundaries in a textual geography that transcends the physical, cultural and limiting surroundings" (Alzeer & Amin, 2020). Creative writing in the educational context allowed the students to explore themselves in bolder and more critical terms. In the 50-word text, they found a space and a window onto the rest of the world. The availability and fluidity of publishing in printed and electronic format has enabled the rest of the world to see who they might be, and they have also come to see themselves through the eyes of the other students who replicated the 50-word project in their own institutions worldwide. We aim to develop this work to include an international corpus of creative English in the future providing a rich pool for undertaking research.

5 Conclusion

There is no doubt that creative writing holds great potential for encouraging students, especially those living in a traditional and restrictive environment, to express themselves and to explore their own position in society, purposefully drawing on the linguistic resources of their context. Creative writing also enables students to see themselves in a different light as they project their own experiences for different audiences. Honna & Takeshita (2014, pp. 73-76) are optimistic about explorations into the pedagogy surrounding the 50-word contest as providing “a ripple of hope in ELT” since it focuses on English as a self-expressive language. Future studies are recommended to compare writing and publishing experiences of students from different cultures, especially those who use English as a medium to explore tensions within their own societies. The authors recommend growing such corpora of learner creative-writing as a resource for future research.

Appendix

The five texts from Hassall & Amin (2015) showing juxtaposition of English and Arabic as published and exhibited.

أطفال الصحراء
أجرت في هذه الجنة
على رمال الصحراء الذهبية -
مثل الشمس الضالقة
وشعري الاسود يتطاير من خلفي
لمست وحدي
فالتضحك يطارد كل خطواتي
- مرت سنوات -
وبيت جدتي لم يعد موجودا
الأطفال كبروا و تفرقوا بعيدا
الدموع المالحه تغذي الارض الجريده
فلن يزدهر اي اخضرار
وحدي - اشعر بالبرد
Crimson Rose DXXB
كريمزون روز، دبي

Children of the Desert
I ran on the Eden, the desert's sand,
Gold-like sun smiling against my back, and hair black.
I am not alone, laughter follows my every footstep.
-Years passed-
Grandmother's house is gone,
Children all grown and drifted apart;
Salty tears feed barren earth, no green shall flourish -
By myself - cold.
Crimson Rose, DXXB

السيدة ذات العباد
أمشي في ليل الصحراء :
مثل ضباب حالك في وجهك الغامسي.
تفتت مني لأن لدي وفرة في غياب الضوء.
تتوحي خيفة عندا يمكن أن أمسك اباء.
لكن خوفك مشوب بالحب:
حب خفي وأسود.
Latefa, AUH
لطيفة، أبوظبي

A lady in an ABAYA
I walk the night desert: a dark mist in the
dryness of your existence. You feed from me
because I have an abundance when there is
no light. You fear me for what I might take
from you, but the fear is tempered with love:
a love, secret and black.
Latefa, AUH



بها تعيش وفق المقاييس العالمية
أرتدي في شرت من جاب
وجينز من ليفي وحذاء نايكى.
لأفطار اشرب كوبا من الشاي السري لانكى
وأكل قطعة من الخبز الفرنسى
مع جبنة دنماركية.
أسوق سيارتى اليابانية الصنع إلى الميتما
حيث أشاهد فيلمًا هنديًا
ووقت الغذاء أتناول طعامًا صينيًا.

M. Humaid, DXB
د. حميد . دبي



She lives up to global standards
I wear a Gap t-shirt, Levi jeans, Nike shoes. For breakfast I have a cup of Sri Lankan tea, a piece of French bread and some Danish cheese . I drive my Japanese-made car to the movies where I see an Indian movie and for lunch I have Chinese food.
M. Humaid, DXB

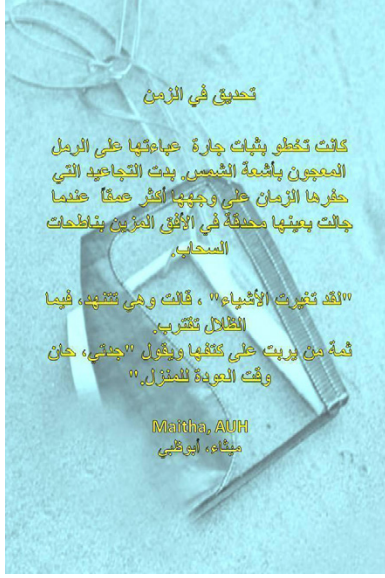


ثلاثة أجيال
جئت من تربية برقعها الذهبى
تغنى لنا حكايات عن الأيام الماضية
ما بين البساطة والظنفر
أمي، خريجة أول دفعة لجامعة الإمارات،
فخر لعائلتها ، وأول امرأة
تتحصل على شهادة بكالوريوس.
وأنا ولدت بملعقة ذهبية في فمي
ولذا أدرى ماذا يعنى الكفاح!

BornConfuzed, AAN
بورن كونفوزد . العين



Three Generations
Grandma in her golden burqua, narrating tales of hardships yet simplicity of the good old days. Mom, graduate of UAE University's first batch, pride of her family, the first woman to hold a bachelor's degree. And myself, born with a golden spoon in my mouth, oblivious to what struggle means!
BornConfuzed, AAN



تحديق في الزمن
كأنت تخطو بثبات جارة عباؤها على الرمل
المموجون بأشعة الشمس. بدت التجاهيد التي
حفرها الزمن على وجهها أكثر صفاً عندما
جالت بعينها حديق في الأفق المزين بناطحات
المسحاب.
"لقد تغيرت الأشياء" ، قلت وهي تنهد، فيما
الظلال تقترب.
ثمة من يريت على كتفها ويخول "جذتى، حان
وقت العودة للمنزل."
Maitha, AUH
ميثاء ، أبو ظبي



A Gaze of Time
She walked steadily, dragging her abaya along the sun-baked sand. The wrinkles time had carved upon her face grew deeper as she squinted, staring at the horizon lined with skyscrapers.
"Things have changed," she sighed. A shadow approached. A tap on her shoulder; "Grandma, it is time to go home."
Maitha, AUH

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