

Contemporary Emirati Literature: Its Historical Development and Forms*

OLATUNBOSUN ISHAQ TIJANI (Sharjah, U.A.E.)

Abstract

This article provides a general survey of Emirati literature—poetry, drama, the short story and novel—tracing the history of the development of these genres in the periods before and after the formation of the UAE federation in 1971. While the UAE has now become famous as the commercial and tourist hub of the contemporary Middle East, very little is known in the English speaking world about the country's literary and cultural productions within the context of the wider modern Arabic literary tradition. The article constitutes a preliminary report of an on-going project on the topic in which I am arguing that, contrary to the general perception in academia (East and West), contemporary Emirati literature is not inferior to its counterparts in the Gulf and wider Arab region; and that Emirati women are as active as their male compatriots in literary production.

Key words: Arabic, literature, Emirati, contemporary, history, criticism

Introduction

Located on the southeast corner of the Arabian Peninsula, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a federation of seven states, presently called 'Emirates'. Immediately after the expiration of the Pax Britannica—the 'collaborative cooperation' between the Arabian Gulf sheikhdoms and the British, through which the respective states in the region came under the protection of the latter from the early 1820s onward¹—the UAE federation was formed on 2 December 1971, under the leadership of the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi. The other six emirates are (in alphabetical order) Ajman, Dubai, Fujaira, Sharjah, Ra's al-Khaima, and Umm al-Quwain.

* *Funding acknowledgement:* The initial research for this article has been made possible by a *Seed Grant* granted me by the American University of Sharjah in 2007.

Author's note: An earlier version of this article was presented at the *Mirror Images: Challenges for Arab and Islamic Studies Conference*, held at Villanova University, Villanova, Pennsylvania, USA, 1-4 April, 2009. I am grateful to Dr Adam Mestyan, of Harvard University, for his insightful comments on the manuscript. Please note that, unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine. On transliteration, please note that titles of works that appear in English as well as the names of the authors of such works are spelt herein as they appear in the original.

¹ See ONLEY 2009: 1 ff.

Many factors have shaped the literary and cultural landscapes of the country from independence to date. Those factors will be discussed as this article progresses. But I would like to note here the demographic factor which, as it currently stands, is both encouraging and discouraging at the same time. Emirati citizens constitute less than 20% of the total population of the country, which is around 5.3 million.² The bad news is with these statistics, Emirati culture and identity are continuously becoming endangered,³ partly because a large majority of the residents are non-Arabs and non-Emirati Arabs. The good news, on the other hand, is the UAE is fast becoming one of the most liberal nations in the Arab world. From the point of view of gender, it is interesting to note that, even though the number of Emirati males more than doubles that of females with a ratio of 2.19 males to 1 female, the literacy level among females is higher (at 81 percent) than among males (at 76 percent).⁴ This contemporary Emirati social reality is reflected in the level of women's involvement in literary activities, as we shall see.

Emergence and Development of Emirati Literature

Modern Arabic literature has a history of just a little over two centuries. But this is not with regard to the entire Arab world, especially the Arabian Gulf region. Kuwait and Bahrain in particular had witnessed literary awakening in the modern period earlier than the other four states—Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE—that constitute the regional political-economic bloc known as the Gulf Cooperation Council. Although modern Arabic literary writing in the UAE is relatively new and very little has been written in English about it, this article argues that contrary to the general belief in both Eastern and Western academia, contemporary Emirati literature is not inferior to its counterparts in the Gulf region and the wider Arab world. Relying on several literary historical sources (most of which were written by non-Emiratis, especially Iraqi and Egyptian scholars), this article surveys the development of the body of literature produced by citizens of the present day UAE in the last four decades.

Because of lack of enough documented evidence, it is difficult to describe the development of Arabic literature in the area currently known as the UAE during the classical period of Arab civilization. It is generally known, however, that one of the greatest Emirati poets of all ages was Aḥmad ibn Mājīd, who was from the present-day emirate of Ras al-Khaimah and lived in the 15th century.⁵ The birth of what can be called

2 See Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Fact Book, 'United Arab Emirates'.

3 Abdul Khaleq Abdallah—a professor of political science at the United Arab Emirates University, al-Ain—is very well known for continuously voicing the concern about the 'disappearance' of Emirati identity due to the overbearing number of foreign residents in, and visitors to, the country. See <<http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/uae/general/expert-sees-threat-to-nation-s-existence-1.64975>> (accessed on 10 Feb. 2013).

4 CIA Fact Book.

5 For more on Aḥmad ibn Mājīd, and for a quick reference on the history, culture, and literature of the UAE, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Arab_Emirates> (accessed on 11 Feb. 2013). See also *Cultural Life in the Emirates* [n.d.]; readers may find Jihad HUDAIB's short online article on the Abu

modern/contemporary Arabic literature in the Emirates happened in the 1970s; the only exception here is (modern) poetry, which began to emerge among Emiratis in the early 20th century. The emergence of Emirati fiction, as we shall soon see, coincided more or less with the time of the unification and the commencement of oil exploration in the area.⁶ One of the most detailed studies on the history of Emirati literature is Nizār 'Abāzah's *al-Ittijāhāt al-'asāsiyyah li'l-shi'r al-ḥadīth fī Dawlat al-'Imārāt al-'Arabiyyah al-Muttaḥidah: 1920-1990* [The Main Trends in Modern Arabic Poetry in the UAE: 1920-1990];⁷ this book discusses the factors that had facilitated the rise of literary and cultural awakening among the Emiratis.

First and foremost among those factors was education; the same way it had been a major factor for the rise of national consciousness and literary awakening in most of the modern Arab nations. Until the beginning of the 20th century, the traditional Qur'anic learning (the *kuttāb*) was the main system of formal education available to Emirati children. Some of the earliest modern, western-style primary schools in the UAE were opened in the first decade of the twentieth century in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Sharjah. Between the 1920s and 1930s, there were primary schools opened in the other Emirates. Still at that time, pupils had to travel abroad for secondary education, especially to neighbouring countries such as Kuwait, Iraq, Bahrain, and Qatar.

A much more developed state at that time, Kuwait provided the UAE with technical assistance on education in the 1950s by sending and sponsoring teachers—mainly of Palestinian and Jordanian origins—to teach at Emirati schools. This phenomenon led to the adoption by Emirati authorities of what was known then as the 'Kuwaiti Curriculum'.⁸ The first university in the country was founded in 1977. It is named the United Arab Emirates University and is situated at al-Ain, a town under Abu Dhabi Emirate. Most contemporary Emirati writers are graduates of this university. Thus, modern Emirati literati are classified into three categories: i) the early twentieth century generation who had no formal education; ii) the mid-twentieth century generation, who can be tagged the *mukḥaḍramūn*,⁹ for they witnessed the transition period when the UAE began to transform from rural/pastoral to urban lifestyle; iii) and the contemporary, post-oil (post-unification) generation, who are largely university educated.¹⁰

Several other related factors had contributed to the intellectual awakening of the Emiratis during and after the colonial era. They included charitable donations by some individuals from the famous merchant families in the UAE. For instance, one of those

Dhabi International Book Fair website very handy: <<http://www.adbookfair.com/the-literary-scene-in-the-emirates-by-jihad-hudaib/>> (retrieved on 13 March 2014).

6 See AHMAD 1985: 14 ff., cited in MINŪ 2000: 83 and 89.

7 'ABĀZAH 1997: 9-19.

8 On the role of Kuwait and other Arab countries towards the evolution of modern education system and on the adoption of the 'Kuwaiti curriculum' in the Emirates, see 'ABĀZAH 1997: 60-61.

9 Originally, the term *mukḥaḍramūn* in the Arabic literary tradition refers to the group of 7th century Arab poets who witnessed both the latter part of the pre-Islamic period and the early Islamic period. For more on this and on the history and development of Arabic literature in general see, for example, NICHOLSON 1997 and ALLEN 2000.

10 'ABĀZAH 1997: 79.

merchants, named Sultan al-‘Uways (also al-Owais), provided financial assistance to some of the earliest schools and gave scholarships to students to study abroad. He was a poet himself, just as were some of his brothers and children. Since the 1920s, the al-Owais family has continued to encourage learning and scholarship. Today, the famous al-Owais Cultural Prize, awarded by the al-Owais Foundation and first launched in 1988, is now one of the most prestigious literary awards in the entire Arab world.¹¹

A part of the Arabian Gulf socio-cultural life is the *majlis* (usually pronounced as *maylis* in the Emirati dialect); it is a social gathering in the form of a literary/cultural salon often hosted by a rich and influential man. It usually takes place in the evening, and is traditionally open to/attended by men only.¹² Literary activities are a part of the events that usually take place in the *majlis*. In a related development, several bookshops and cultural/literary clubs were established by some individuals or groups during the colonial era. One of the earliest book shops was opened in Sharjah in 1912 by a merchant called Ali al-Mahmud.¹³ Similarly, libraries and departments of culture were founded in several of the Emirates beginning from the 1960s.

Since its establishment in 1981, the Sharjah Department of Information and Culture (SDIC) has been encouraging literary writing in several ways. It is one of the most active UAE-based publishers of creative works as well as scholarly monographs on literature—history and criticism; it publishes works by Emirati and non-Emirati authors, as evident in most of the primary and secondary sources cited in this article. Furthermore, the Department has a literary magazine, called *al-Rāfid* [The Stream], which appears monthly and features creative/fictional and non-fictional writing in Arabic by authors from any part of the world.

Another government sponsored literary-cum-cultural activity that has continued to flourish in the UAE is the organization of book fairs. The popular Sharjah International Book Fair began in 1982, while the Abu Dhabi version was launched in 1990. In addition to featuring the exhibition of classic and modern books in Arabic and on as many subjects as possible, the book fairs also feature side literary, cultural, and educational events. Each year literary competitions are held and awards are given to the authors of books adjudged the best in creative writing and literary criticism.

The formation of Emirates Writers’ Union in 1984, with its headquarters in Sharjah, also contributed to the development of modern Arabic literature in the UAE. Apart from being, as expected, a forum for writers (UAE citizens, residents, and visitors) to meet and exchange ideas, this association publishes literary works by its members in particular. It usually awards prizes and has a monthly magazine, called *Shu‘ūn ‘Adabiyyah* [Literary Affairs], which first appeared in 1987. As expected, this magazine as well features articles, poetical compositions, short stories, and other forms of creative writing.¹⁴

The UAE press has played a significant role in the dissemination of information about Emirati and wider Arab and world literatures. The following magazines had contributed

11 See *Cultural Life in the Emirates*, 27-29; and ‘ABĀZAH 1997: 71-74.

12 See *ibid.*: 67.

13 *Ibid.*: 64.

14 See *ibid.*: 70-71.

toward the process of inspiring and encouraging literary-minded Emirati youths in the 1960s and 1970s: *Akhbār Dubayy* [Dubai News] (1965), *al-Shurūq* [Sunrise], (1970), *al-Mujammaʿ* [The Collective] (1973), *al-ʿAhlī* [The Native] (1975), *al-ʿAzminah al-ʿArabiyyah* [The Arab Times] (1979). Most of these public-funded weekly magazines have ceased to appear. Among the pioneering daily newspapers that are still functioning in the country today are the Abu Dhabi-based *al-Ittiḥād* [The Union],¹⁵ founded in 1969; the Sharjah-based, privately owned *al-Khalīj*, established in 1970 (its English edition, *The Gulf Today*, was started in 1996); and the Dubai-based *al-Bayān* [The Clarity], which first appeared in 1980.¹⁶

The visits to, or travels through, several of the Trucial States (the Emirates) by some of the famous (early)modern Arab-Muslim intellectuals constituted another factor that had aided intellectual awakening among the Emiratis of the colonial era. Those visits—most especially by the Lebanese-American poet ʿAmīn al-Rayḥānī (also Ameen Rihani), the Afghan-born Muslim reformist Jamāl al-Dīn al-ʿAfghānī, and his disciple, the Syrian-born Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā¹⁷—had served as a source of encouragement for the early twentieth century generation of Emirati men of letters. The trend of visiting by scholars or, more appropriately today, inviting scholars and literary luminaries to the UAE has continued, with three Emirates in particular—Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Sharjah—seriously competing with each other in this regard.

One of the contemporary literary events of this nature is the Emirates Airlines International Festival of Literature (EAIFL), the first edition of which took place in 2009. This annual literature festival is not just a regional, Arab/Middle Eastern event. Rather, it is a global one that brings many internationally-renowned Arab and non-Arab writers and poets to the UAE on an annual basis. Those that have attended previous editions of the festival include Wole Soyinka, Ben Okri, Margret Atwood, Adonis, Vikas Swarup, Chris Cleave, and Jeffery Deaver.¹⁸ It can be said that the EAIFL echoes the famous pre-Islamic annual fair, Sūq ʿUkkāz, which was one of the ancient market places in Arabia where classical Arabic *qaṣīdah*¹⁹ (ode) was first developed. While the Dubai-sponsored international, intercultural literature festival is targeted primarily at sparking contemporary Emirati youths' interest in reading and writing, the event also serves to promote the UAE and project its image as not only the leading business and tourism hub of twenty-first century Middle East, but also, an emerging meeting point for the promotion of what can be called 'global literature'.

15 The naming of this newspaper, *al-Ittiḥād*, seems anachronistic, since its foundation date (1969) predated that of the UAE federation (1971) by two years. It may be that, by this name, the founders of the newspaper (Abu Dhabi government) were trying to lay the foundation for the unification of the Emirates, using the newspaper as a medium for propagating the idea.

16 For more on these dailies, see ʿABĀZAH 1997: 67-68; and MĪNŪ 2000: 88.

17 ʿABĀZAH 1997: 63-64.

18 For more information on this annual literature festival, see <<http://www.emirateslitfest.com/>>, <<http://archive.gulfnews.com/articles/09/02/27/10289871.html>>, and <<http://gulfnews.com/in-focus/festivalofliterature/must-sees-at-the-festival-of-literature-2010-1.594271>> (all accessed on 11 Feb. 2012).

19 For several studies on the classical Arabic *qaṣīdah* see, for example, STETKEVYCH 1993 and 2002.

Poetry

‘Although poetry is no longer the “Arab diwan,” the record and archive of Arab life stories, aspirations, feats, and wars, as it was of ancient times, it remains formatively present in Arab life and thought. It is still acclaimed by some as central to a so-called Arab frame of mind.’ This is a statement of fact with which Muhsin al-Musawi begins his ‘critical introduction’ to *Arabic Poetry: Trajectories of tradition and modernity*.²⁰ As has been noted earlier, whereas there were people writing the highly-refined *qaṣīdah* form of Arabic poetry in the Emirates back in the 1920s, the writing of other forms of literature in the area did not begin until the late 1960s. Unfortunately, much of the poetry of the first half of the 20th century was lost due to a lack of proper documentation and the non-availability of printing presses in the Emirates at that time.²¹

Arabian vernacular poetry, known as *al-shi‘r al-nabaṭī*, is the most popular form of poetry among the peoples—especially the Bedouins—of the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf, from Jordan to the UAE, from Iraq to Yemen. *Nabaṭī* poetry is traditionally used to celebrate Bedouin lifestyle, in addition to treating other themes like *ghazal* (love), *rithā’* (elegy), *madḥ* (eulogy), and *hijā’* (invective). One point of similarity between the *nabaṭī* and the *qaṣīdah* forms of Arabic poetry is that, like the latter, the former is composed in conformity, albeit a bit loosely, with the prosodic rules of *wazn* (meter) and *qāfiyah* (monorhyme). The difference between them lies, basically, in the variety of the Arabic language used: while *al-fuṣḥā* (standard or literary Arabic) is used for the *qaṣīdah* form, the *nabaṭī* form is composed in colloquial Arabic, using the respective Arabian Peninsula/Gulf dialects.

It seems that *nabaṭī* poetry is becoming more and more popular than the elite form among scholars/researchers writing in English. The reason for this may be that *nabaṭī* poetry is largely delivered through an oral rendition—as was the case with classical Arabic poetry—and is often rendered at important occasions/gatherings marking tribal/national events. By contrast, the elite form—in both its *qaṣīdah* and free verse patterns, to be discussed shortly—is today largely written/published, not necessarily rendered orally; whereas the reading culture in the UAE, as in many Arab nations of today, is almost non-existent.

In their introduction to *The Nabaṭī Poetry of the United Arab Emirates* (2011) as well as in *Poetry and Politics in Contemporary Bedouin Society* (2009), Clive Holes and Said Salman Abu Athera highlight the structural and thematic features as well as the socio-cultural functions and significance of this form of poetry among the peoples of the Arabian

20 al-MUSAWI 2006: 1; see also NICHOLSON 1997, for more on the role of poetry in Arab culture and thought over the centuries.

21 Most Arabic books published in Egypt and other parts of the Arab world at that time could not be brought directly into the UAE, but via Bombay (Mumbai) in India (see ’ABĀZAH 1997: 66). This is mainly because, at that time, there were no direct links, or bilateral relations, between the UAE and the so-called centres of modern Arab civilization (Egypt, the Levant, and Iraq). Because of this policy of isolation of the Trucial States from the rest of the Arab world, the British Empire was seriously criticized and fought, diplomatically, by the Arab League, under the indefatigable leadership of the Egyptian Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1950s. See ONLEY 2009: 15-19.

Peninsula and the Gulf in past and present times.²² Much of this ‘improvised oral poetry,’ writes Roger Allen, provides ‘invaluable insights into the “view from the other side” [i.e., from the less-educated, mostly illiterate or semi-literate, Bedouins] in the contemporary Middle East.’ ‘Perhaps one of the most revealing features of this poetry,’ Allen continues, ‘is the way in which the propagandistic rhetoric of the Western world finds itself parodied through the filter of the relentless gaze of the Bedouin poet.’²³

While this article is concerned more with the elite form of Emirati poetry composed in standard Arabic—be it the conventional metrical patterns or the modern, Western-influenced free verse—than with the more popular *nabaṭī* poetry, I would like to note here, as several other scholars have done, that one of the renowned living *nabaṭī* poet in the UAE today is the ruler of Dubai, (His Highness) Sheikh Muḥammad bin Rashid Al Maktum (b. 1949). A collection of his *nabaṭī* verse, translated under the title *Poems from the Desert*, was published in 2009.²⁴

The names of the elite *qaṣīdah*-style Emirati poets of the early/mid-twentieth century include Mubārak al-‘Uqaylī (also al-Oghaili or al-Oqaili; d. 1954), Sālīm al-‘Uways (also al-Owais; d. 1959), Sheikh Ṣaḡar al-Qāsimī (d. 1993), and Mubārak al-Nākhī (d. 1982). Not many women are known to have flourished at that early stage in the history of modern Emirati poetry. But one woman seems to have stood out among her peers. She is ‘Ushah bint Khalīfah al-Suwaydī (also Osha bint Khalifa al-Suwaidi), who was born in 1920 and is still alive; she has stopped writing due to old age, though. In recognition of her contribution to the preservation of Emirati heritage and culture through poetry, ‘Ushah is nicknamed *Fatāt al-‘Arab* [The Arab Girl] by the current ruler of Dubai, with whom she had several poetical exchanges in the 1990s. All of her works—largely *nabaṭī* poems and some *qaṣīdahs*—have recently been compiled and published.²⁵

By the 1990s there were about 50 Emirati poets writing in standard Arabic, and women made up of around one third of this number. Today, the figure has grown and continues to grow rapidly. Notable women’s names in Emirati poetry today include Dhabyah Khamīs (also Zabya Khamees; b. 1958), Maysūn (also Maisoon) Ṣaḡar al-Qāsimī (b. 1958), and Nujūm al-Ghānim (also Nujoum al-Ghanem; b. 1962). Among the most famous contemporary male voices in Emirati poetry, *nabaṭī* and elite alike, are Mānī‘ Sa‘īd al-‘Utaybah (also al-Otaiba; b. 1946), Ḥabīb Ṣāyigh (also Sayegh; b. 1955), and the late Jum‘ah al-Fayrūz (also al-Fairouz; 1955-2000).²⁶

The early-twentieth-century Emirati poets belong to the traditionalist, or neo-classical, school of modern Arabic poetry. Apart from conforming to the prosodic rules in their *qaṣīdahs*, the themes of their poetry centre on issues that were prevalent at that historical

22 HOLES / ABU ATHERA 2011: 1-37 (‘Introduction’); and HOLES / ABU ATHERA 2009; other studies on contemporary *nabaṭī* poetry include PAINE / LODGE / TOUATI (eds.) 2011 and al-GHADEER 2009.

23 ALLEN, ‘Forword’, in HOLES / ABU ATHERA 2009: vii.

24 AL MAKTUM 2009.

25 For more on this acclaimed Emirati woman poet, see GHUBASH (compl. and ed.) 2012. I acknowledge Ayesha al-Shared, my student in the ‘ARA 102: Introduction to Arabic Heritage II’ class of Spring 2013, for introducing me to ‘Ushah al-Suwaydī’s poems.

26 For more on the poems of these and other Emirati poets, see ‘ABĀZAH 1997: 81 ff. and ‘Aḥmad Mohammed OBAID, ‘Poetry in the UAE’, in *Cultural Life in the Emirates* [n.d.]: 91-109.

epoch in modern Arab history: Islamic reformism, Pan-Arabism, nationalism (at least, each Emirate considered itself as an independent entity or nation during that period), social criticism, and the other conventional themes of classical Arabic poetry, as enunciated earlier. On the other hand, Emirati modernist poets of the second half of the twentieth century tend to follow the general trend of the 'free verse'/'prose poetry' movement—championed by modern Arab feminist figures like the Iraqi Nāzik al-Malā'ikah—that has dominated the poetical tradition in the Arabic speaking world in the last six decades or so.²⁷ As is the case with the free verse movement in mainstream modern Arabic poetry, Emirati modernist poetry differs from its neo-classical counterpart largely from the technical/structural perspective; the former frees itself from the shackles of both the mono-rhyming and mono-metrical natures of the classical *qaṣīdah* form. The themes in the schools of Emirati poetry are almost the same. But, as 'Abāzah has noted, the Emirati modernist poets demonstrate some personal/emotional attachment in the treatment of their themes more realistically than their neo-classical counterparts.²⁸

Thus, like their sisters elsewhere in the Arab world, most contemporary Emirati women poets favour the free verse through which they explore various issues: human/women's rights (as in Dhabyah Khamees' characteristically short poems: 'Letter', 'Glance', 'Standing Worship', 'Loneliness', and 'Gulf'²⁹); love, sex, and sexuality (as in Maysūn al-Qāsimī's 'The Morning of Every Sin', 'The Cusp of Desire', and 'A Dream Recalling a Temptation'); the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (as in Maysūn al-Qāsimī's 'Cycle'³⁰ and Nujūm al-Ghānim's 'Sand in Flames' and 'From Trespasses'³¹).

Unlike Saudi Arabian and Kuwaiti literatures, for instance, not much research works have been published in English on Emirati literature. Even then, most of the works in English on Gulf literature are anthologies of translated poems or short stories. The introduction to each anthology usually makes mention of the thematic concerns of the selected pieces. Even then, there are many such anthologies that do not include a work by an Emirati writer. One of the earliest anthologies that recognises Emirati literary output was edited by Salma Khadra Jayyusi and published in 1988. It contains translations of works by ninety-five writers and poets from the countries of the Arabian Peninsula. Only six of them are Emiratis.³² Moreover, a Nathalie Handal edited, gender-specific anthology

27 For more on the modernist trend in modern Arabic poetry, see for example, al-MUSAWI 2006: 56-67; and STARKEY 2006: 78-96.

28 See 'ABĀZAH 1997: 198. He classifies the schools of Emirati poetry into three: *madrasat al-'aṣālah* [the traditionalist/neo-classical school]; *madrasat al-tajdīd* [the revival/renewal school]; and *madrasat al-ḥadāthah* [the modernist school]. However, I consider the last two as the same, and so, I have referred to them in this article as one: the modernist school. From his explanations and from my perusal of the sample poems he provides for each school, I do not think that they differ significantly in terms of both form and content.

29 HANDAL (ed.) 2001: 152-154.

30 Ibid.: 249-251.

31 Ibid.: 101-104.

32 JAYYUSI (ed.) 1988.

of Arab women's poetry (published in 2001) includes poems by eighty-three women from across the Arab world. Only three of them are Emiratis.³³

Drama

Dramatic literature seems to be the least patronised literary genre by the Emiratis. It is similarly the least patronised by researchers writing in English. Whereas there are several anthologies that include translated Emirati poems and short stories, as noted above, one can hardly find any on drama. The only exception to this, as far as I know, is *Modern Arabic Drama: An Anthology* (1995),³⁴ edited by Salma K. Jayyusi and Roger Allen. This book includes one of the plays of the current ruler of Sharjah, discussed below. Thus, much scholarship on contemporary Emirati drama and theatre is in Arabic.

In *al-Masrah fī 'l-Imārāt* [Theatre in the Emirates],³⁵ 'Abd al-'Ilāh 'Abd al-Qādir notes that theatrical performances began in the UAE in the late 1950s with the help of Arab immigrants from neighbouring countries. Some of the earliest performances were staged in Sharjah, Dubai, and Abu Dhabi at different intervals around that time. Most of those plays were written, produced, and directed by non-Emiratis. Among the earliest Emirati playwrights—in the modern Western concept of the genre—is the current ruler of Sharjah, (His Highness) Sheikh Sulṭān bin Muḥammad al-Qāsimī (b. 1939), with his *Nihāyat Ṣahyūn* [The End of Zionism], to be discussed below.

Like poetry, there are two categories of Emirati drama. The first category is popular drama, which is written in the Emirati dialect and, thus, is potentially restricted in its scope of readership. Even fellow *khalījīs* (people from the Arabian Gulf region) may not understand some aspects of such plays. Thus, translating them into a language like English is much more problematic, as Nuhā Maṭar Khamīs has noted.³⁶ Most of the texts belonging to this category are written as scripts and meant for the primary intention of being performed on stage to a local audience. In some cases, the scripts are later turned into publications. Among the prominent writers of this category of Emirati drama are Nājī al-Ḥāy (b. 1963), the late Sālim al-Ḥattāwī (1961-2009), Maryam (or Mariam) Jum'ah Faraj (b. 1956), and Bāsimah Muḥammad Yūnus (b. 1964).³⁷

One of the most common themes in popular Emirati plays is the status of women in that society in both the pre- and post-oil eras. The stereotypically passive and conformist is a recurring image of women in plays by both men and women writers. It is more prominent, though, in male writing: for instance, it is represented in most of Nājī al-Ḥāy's plays, e. g., *Bint 'Īsā* [Isa's Daughter] and *Ḥabbat raml* [A Grain of Sand]. By contrast, the late Sālim al-Ḥattāwī's plays often present varied images of women in Emirati society: whereas some

33 HANDAL (ed.) 2001.

34 JAYYUSI / ALLEN (eds.) 1995.

35 'ABD AL-QĀDIR 2004a: 14-24.

36 KHAMĪS 2010.

37 For more on the plays of these writers, see 'ABD AL-QĀDIR 2004a: 16-17; and Habeeb G. al-ATTAR, 'Theatre in the UAE,' in *Cultural Life in the Emirates* [n.d.]: 69-75.

of his plays portray the image of the weak and passive woman—as in *Zamzamiyyah* [Zamzamiyya], some others depict the rather idealized (and utopian), non-conformist, and domineering woman—as in 'Aḥlām Mas'ūd' [Mas'ūd's Dreams].³⁸

The second category of Emirati drama can be labelled 'intellectual drama' in line with the Egyptian Tawfīq al-Hakīm's model.³⁹ The dramatic texts of this category are written in *al-fuṣṣḥā*, and so, they attract wider readership. A leading Emirati playwright of intellectual drama is the above-mentioned Sheikh Sulṭān b. Muḥammad al-Qāsimī, who writes mainly historical plays and fiction. His first play—the above-mentioned *Nihāyat Ṣahyūn*, was written between 1958 and 1959. Constituting what is presumed to be a stern condemnation of the so-called Zionist agenda in Palestine and the wider Middle East, this play is said to have caused some tension between the UAE ruling families and the British colonial authorities.⁴⁰

Others plays by Sheikh Sulṭān include *Namrūd* (2008)—which depicts the rise and fall of the ancient tyrannical Babylonian King Nimrod; *al-Iskandar al-'Akbar* (2007)—about Alexander the Great, the phenomenal Macedonian leader of the third century BC; *al-Qaḍiyyah* [The Case] (2000)—about the Fall of Granada in al-Andalus (Muslim Spain/'Islamic Iberia') circa. 1492; and *'Awdat Hūlākū* [The Return of Hulegu] (1998)—about the events leading up to the Fall of Baghdad in 1258. On appearance, most of his plays were immediately performed on stage during the annual Sharjah Theatre Festival. Most, if not all, of his writings—both creative/fictional and non-fictional (his historical and auto/biographical books)—have been translated into English and few other languages.⁴¹

One question that often crosses my mind each time I read and teach his works is: why does he always write historical texts? Is it because he wants to avoid the likely controversies that social realist texts might generate in his domain of authority? While the answer to this might be in the affirmative, one can also possibly argue that the Sharjah ruler is being textually ironic and non-confrontational in his agitation for good governance in the Arab world. Appearing on the first page of each of his historical plays is this epigraph:

I have written this play about an aspect of the history of the Arabs in the past, which, I believe, shares some semblance with the bitter reality of the contemporary Arab world; as if history is repeating itself.

So, although the author is merely representing and fictionalising in a given text the history of Arab rule in a particular domain in the past, he is indirectly addressing Arab political leaders and their subjects to learn from the mistakes of their past ancestors.

38 See 'ABD AL-QĀDIR 2004b: 25 ff.

39 On Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, see for example, BADAWI 1987, JOHNSON-DAVIES (ed.) 2008, and STARKEY 2006: 169 ff.

40 'ABD AL-QĀDIR 2004a: 16.

41 For more on the life and works of Sheikh Sulṭān al-Qāsimī, see his auto-biographical book al-QĀSIMĪ 2009.

Fiction

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Arabic short story began to emerge in the Emirates. At that time, a small number of educated Emirati youths began to write and publicise their works to a specific audience—in some of the UAE sports and cultural clubs—rather than to the general public.⁴² Unlike in the cases of Kuwait and Bahrain, for example, there is a controversy over the first short story by an Emirati. However, critics and historians of Emirati fiction—e.g., Thābit Malkāwī,⁴³ ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd ‘Aḥmad⁴⁴ and Muḥammad Muḥyī al-Dīn Mīnū (also Mino)⁴⁵—seem to agree on two people as the pioneers of the Emirati short story.

One of them is ‘Abd Allāh Ṣaqar (b. 1952), from Dubai, whose earliest stories were written in the late 1960s and appeared in the in-house bulletins (or notice boards) of the Dubai-based al-Nasr Sports Club. He also made an ‘attempt’ to publish them as a collection in the same period. But that attempt failed because the ‘contents [of the stories in the collection] were antagonistic to the British colonial authorities,’ and so the printed copies of the collection were burnt immediately after their appearance. Entitled *al-Khashabah* [The Plank], the collection soon went into oblivion; it was ‘as if it had never been published.’⁴⁶ However, it was re-published in Dubai under the same title in 1975.⁴⁷

The second person presumed to have pioneered the Emirati short story is a woman, named Shaykhah al-Nākhī (from Sharjah) who—interestingly, like her male contender from Dubai—was also born in 1952. Her *al-Raḥīl* [The Departure] was written in 1970. However, it was not published (formally?) until 1992 when it appeared as part of the collection *al-Raḥīl*.⁴⁸ As was the case with Kuwait (when its pioneer fiction writer, Khālid al-Faraj, stopped writing stories after the publication of his first and only story, ‘Munīrah’, in 1929,⁴⁹ there was coitus in the writing and publication of fiction in the UAE after the pioneering efforts of both ‘Abd Allāh Ṣaqar and Shaykhah al-Nākhī. Just as these two pioneers themselves stopped writing stories, so too did a number of other people who had attempted this art in the 1970s.⁵⁰

As has been noted earlier, journalism played a significant role in the development of Emirati literature in the 1970s and 1980s; this is especially true in the case of the short story, which was greatly promoted (through publication) by the earlier mentioned Emirati magazines and newspapers. Through an active press, new names—like the above-mentioned Maryam Jum‘ah Faraj, Ibrāhīm Mubārak (b. 1952), and ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd ‘Aḥmad—emerged on the Emirati fictional scene. The names of other writers that emerged

42 MINŪ 2000: 84-85.

43 MALKĀWĪ [n. d.].

44 ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd ‘AḤMAD, ‘Tawṣīfāt ‘āmmah’, cited in MINŪ 2000: 89.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 ṢAQAR 1975 (1999).

48 For a complete reproduction of Shaykhah al-Nākhī’s ‘al-Raḥīl’, see MINŪ 2000: 99-103.

49 See TIJANI 2009: 31-32.

50 For more on the Emirati short story writers who emerge in the 1970s and 1980s, see MINŪ 2000: 88-90.

around the 1980s include Muḥammad al-Murr (b. 1952), who is perhaps the most famous Emirati male writer in the West and the author of, among others, the famous *Dubai Tales* and *The Wink of the Mona Lisa*;⁵¹ Muḥammad Ḥasan al-Ḥarbī, ‘Abd al-Riḍā al-Sajwānī (also al-Saghwani; b. 1957), and Laylā ‘Aḥmad (also Laila Ahmed; b. 1960). Najībah al-Rifā‘ī, ‘Ā’ishah al-Ka‘bī are among the emerging women’s voices in contemporary Emirati fiction.

An interesting trend in the history of the Emirati short story is the practice of joint publication. Apparently because of the dearth of writers in the 1980s, most of the earliest collections of Emirati short stories consist of works by several or many writers. For instance, the collection *Kullunā nuḥibb al-baḥr* [We all Love the Sea]—published in Sharjah in 1985—consists of stories by 26 writers.⁵² Another example of a joint collection is *al-Nashīd* [Songs]. Published in 1987, this collection features stories authored by a group of three Emirati women writers namely, Maryam Jum‘ah Faraj, Salmā Maṭar Sayf (b. 1968), and ‘Amīnah ‘Abd Allāh Bū-Shihāb (b. 1960).⁵³

As shown in their dates of birth, most of the pioneers and frontrunners of Emirati fiction were born in the 1950s and 1960s. They were among the beneficiaries of the modern education system provided/supported by Kuwait and other Arab nations, and they are largely university educated. Elements of the influence of westernisation and the sudden urban transformation of the country on their social and psychical beings are reflected in their writings: through the treatment of common themes like the changing sociological and topographical climates of the UAE in the 1970s through 1980s. They also wrote on social criticisms, treating issues like women and gender and the overall effects of oil exploration on Emirati culture and society. The ancient traditions, occupations, customs, and practices of the people of the Gulf region are also depicted in some of their works.

As the fastest growing and most popular form of prose fiction in the UAE, the Emirati short story has developed into different trends. In *Madkhal ‘ilā ‘l-qiṣṣah al-qaṣīrah al-‘Imārātiyyah* [An Introduction to the Emirati Short Story], al-Rashīd Bū-Sha‘īr identifies four major—sometimes interwoven—trends in Emirati fiction:

1. *al-ittijāh al-rūmansī* [the romantic trend], represented by the works of writers like Shaykhah al-Nākhī, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Sharḥān and Su‘ād al-‘Uraymī;
2. *al-ittijāh al-wāqi‘ī* [the realistic trend]: which is characteristic of the writings of Muḥammad al-Murr and ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd ‘Aḥmad, for example;
3. *al-ittijāh al-ramzī aw al-‘usṭūrī* [the allegoric or mythical trend]: reflected, for instance, in most of the works of ‘Abd Allāh Ṣaqar, Maryam J. Faraj, and Salmā M. Sayf;
4. *al-ittijāh al-wujūdī* [the existential trend]: the works of ‘Alī ‘Abū al-Rīsh (also al-Reesh; b. 1956), for instance, mostly represent this trend.⁵⁴

51 al-MURR 1991 and 1994.

52 EMIRATES WRITERS’ UNION 1985; second edition, 1992.

53 See MĪNŪ 2000: 89.

54 BŪ SHA‘ĪR 1998: 33, cited in MĪNŪ 2000: 90.

Some of the above-listed thematic trends can as well be identified in the Emirati novel, which is the only modern Emirati literary form that obviously still remains in its infancy. In ‘al-Madkhal al-ta’rikhī ‘ilā al-riwāyah al-‘Imārātiyyah’ [A Historical Introduction to the Emirati Novel]—a chapter in an edited volume on the Arabian Gulf Novel—‘Abd al-Fattāh Ṣabrī remarks that, unlike poetry, the short story, and drama, the novel is the least patronized form of literature among the Emiratis. Just like most literary commentators and critics have always conjectured, Sabri notes that the slow development of the Emirati novel can be attributed to the fact that the novel is conventionally longer and much more complex and difficult to write than most other genres in modern literature.⁵⁵

Shāhindah [Shahinda] by Rāshid ‘Abd Allāh al-Nu‘aymī (also al-Nuaimi; b. 1937) is generally considered the first Emirati novel. It is a love story that is shrouded with elements of epic and folktale. First published in 1971, the novel portrays the pre-oil traditional lifestyle of the people of the region, especially their engagement with both the sea and the desert.⁵⁶ Other Emirati men writers who have published at least one novel include the above-mentioned ‘Alī ‘Abū ‘l-Rīsh, Thānī al-Suwaydī (also al-Suwaidi; b. 1966) and the earlier discussed ruler of Sharjah.

Emirati women writers are not left out in the novel genre. Some of the novels by the women are *Ḥulm ka-zurqat al-baḥr* [A Dream like the Blueness of the Sea] (2000) by ‘Umniyyah Sālim (also Omnia Salem); *Rayḥānah* [Rayhana] (2003) by the above-mentioned Maysūn al-Qāsīmī; *al-Jasad al-rāḥil* [The Departed Body] (2004) by ‘Asmā’ al-Zar‘ūnī (also al-Zarouni, b. 1961); *Tathā‘ub al-‘anāmīl* [The Yawning of the Fingers] by Riḥāb al-Kaylānī (also al-Kailani). There are novels written in English by Emiratis as well, at least I know of one: *The Sand Fish*, written by a woman, Maha Gargash (b. 1985), and published in New York in 2009.

Like poetry and drama, there is still dearth of scholarly works in English on Emirati fiction: its history, form and content. While there are many anthologies of modern Arabic fiction in translation, a large majority of them do not include Emirati stories. Hence, the statistics of their short stories included in some of the anthologies show a gross lack of popularity of Emirati writers in the Arab and global literary arenas. Even the anthologies dedicated to the Arabian Gulf short story reflect this phenomenon. For instance, Deborah S. Akers and Abubaker A. Bagader’s anthology⁵⁷ contains forty-nine stories by writers from the region. Only four Emirati writers are included: three men and one woman; Dalya Cohen-Mor’s⁵⁸ contains sixty stories by women from the Arab world, only a story by an Emirati woman is included; Denys Johnson-Davies’ *Under the Naked Sky: Short Stories from the Arab World*⁵⁹ contains thirty stories by Arab men and women writers, only one Emirati writer—a woman—is included. Thus, *In a Fertile Desert: Modern Writing from the United Arab Emirates*,⁶⁰ also edited and translated by Denys Johnson-Davies, is of

55 ṢABRĪ (ed.) 2006: 7 ff.

56 See Fatima Khalifa, ‘The Novel in the UAE’, in *Cultural Life in Emirates* [n.d.]: 125-132.

57 AKERS / BAGADER (eds./trans.) 2008.

58 COHEN-MOR (ed./trans.) 2005.

59 JOHNSON-DAVIES (ed./trans.) 2000.

60 JOHNSON-DAVIES (ed./trans.) 2009.

special significance to a study of Emirati fiction in translation. It features twenty short stories, nine (45%) of which are women-authored. Finally, it is very rare to find in print, with the exception of the works of the above-mentioned Muḥammad al-Murr, a single collection of translated works of an individual Emirati writer.

Conclusion

Even though by no means inferior to its counterparts, the literary writing of the Emiratis is still much less explored—indeed, it is often ignored—within the context of mainstream modern/contemporary Arabic literature. Being a young and burgeoning corpus, Emirati literature remains a fertile ground for research, most especially through the medium of English and other foreign languages. As natural, Emirati writers have used the medium of literature either to reflect/reminisce on the social and cultural life of their people in the pre-oil era, or to represent the socio-economic and urban transformations that the country has witnessed in the past four decades. More in-depth textual analyses—even in Arabic—of the written and oral forms of this literature would provide a much deeper understanding of the past and present circumstances of Emirati society, which the writers are trying to project.

References

- ʾABĀZAH, Nizār. 1997. *al-Ittijāhāt al-ʾasāsiyyah liʾl-shiʾr al-ḥadīth fī dawlat al-ʾImārāt al-ʿarabiyyah al-muttaḥidah: 1920-1990*. Dār al-Fikr, Damascus.
- ʾABD AL-QĀDIR, ʿAbd al-ʾIlāh. 2004a. *al-Masrah fī ʾl-ʾImārāt: al-Marjiʿiyyāt wa-tajalliyyāt al-wāqiʿ*. Department of Information and Culture, Sharjah.
- . 2004b. *Ṣūrat al-marʾah fī ʾl-kitābāt al-masraḥiyyah fī Dawlat al-ʾImārāt* [Images of Women in Emirati Drama]. Emirates Writers' Union, Sharjah.
- ʾAḤMAD, ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd. 1985. "Tawṣīfah ʾammah ḥawla ʾl-qīṣṣah waʾl-riwāyah fī ʾl-ʾImārāt". In: *al-Multaqā al-ʾawwal liʾl-kitābāt al-qaṣaṣiyyah waʾl-riwāʾiyyah fī ʾl-ʾImārāt* [Proceedings of the First Symposium on the Emirati Short Story and Novel]. Sharjah Department of Information and Culture, Sharjah.
- AKERS, Deborah S. / BAGADER, Abubaker A. (eds. and trans.). 2008. *Oranges in the Sun: Short Stories from the Arabian Gulf*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, CO.
- AL MAKTUM, Muhammad Bin Rashid. 2009. *Poems from the Desert*. Motivate Publishing, Dubai.
- ALLEN, Roger. 2000. *An Introduction to Arabic Literature*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- BADAWI, M. M. 1987. *Modern Arabic Drama in Egypt*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- BŪ SHAʿĪR, al-Rashīd. 1998. *Madkhal ʾilā al-qīṣṣah al-qaṣīrah al-ʾImārātiyyah*. Emirates Writers' Union, Sharjah.
- Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Fact Book, 'United Arab Emirates', <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ae.html>>, accessed on 11 Feb. 2013.
- COHEN-MOR, Dalya (ed. and trans.). 2005. *Arab Women Writers: An Anthology of Short Stories*. State University of New York Press, Albany.
- Cultural Life in the Emirates*. [n.d.]. UAE Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Community Development, Abu Dhabi.

- EMIRATES WRITERS' UNION (ed.). 1992. [Twenty-six authors:] *Kullunā nuḥibb al-baḥr*. 2nd edition, Emirates Writers' Union, Sharjah. (1st edition 1985).
- al-GHADEER, Moneera. 2009. *Desert Voices: Bedouin Women's Voices in Saudi Arabia*. Tauris Academic Studies, London.
- GHUBĀSH, Raff'ah 'Ubayd (compl. and ed.). 2012. *Ūshah bint Khalīfah al-Suwaydī (Fatāt al-'Arab): al-'A'māl al-kāmilah wa'l-sīrah al-dhātīyyah* [Osha bint Khalifa al-Suwaidi (The Arab Girl): Complete Works and a Biography.] Second edition. Women's Museum, Dubai.
- HANDAL, Nathalie (ed.). 2001. *The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary Anthology*. Interlink Books, New York.
- HOLES, Clive / ABU ATHERA, Said S. 2009. *Poetry and Politics in Contemporary Bedouin Society*. Ithaca Press, Reading, UK.
- / —. 2011. *The Nabaī Poetry of the United Arab Emirates*. Ithaca Press, Reading, UK.
- HUDAIB, Jihad. 2014. 'The Literary Scene in the Emirates'. <<http://www.adbookfair.com/the-literary-scene-in-the-emirates-by-jihad-hudaib/>> (retrieved on 13 March 2014).
- JAYYUSI, Salma Kh. (ed.). 1988. *The Literature of Modern Arabia: An Anthology*. Kegan Paul, London.
- / ALLEN, Roger (eds.). 1995. *Modern Arabic Drama: An Anthology*. Indiana UP, Bloomington.
- JOHNSON-DAVIES, Denys (ed. and trans.). 2000. *Under the Naked Sky: Short Stories from the Arab World*. The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo.
- (ed. and trans.). 2009. *In a Fertile Desert: Modern Writing from the United Arab Emirates*. The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo.
- (ed.). 2008. *The Essential Tawfiq al-Hakim: Plays, Fiction, Autobiography*. American University in Cairo Press, Cairo.
- KHAMIS, Nuha Matar. 2010. "Translating Emirati Dramatic Texts". Paper presented at the First AUS Symposium on Translation and Interpreting, held at American University of Sharjah, 4 May, 2010.
- MALKĀWĪ, Thābit. [n.d.]. *al-Riwāyah wa'l-qīṣṣah fī 'l-'Imārāt* [The Emirati Novel and Short Story]. al-Mujamma' al-Thaqāfī, Abu Dhabi.
- MĪNŪ, Muḥammad Muḥyī 'l-Dīn. 2000. *Fann al-qīṣṣah al-qaṣīrah: muqārabāt ūlā* [The Short Story: Preliminary Attempts]. Maṭābī' al-Bayān al-Tijāriyyah, Dubai.
- al-MURR, Muhammad. 1991. *Dubai Tales* / translated by Peter CLARK. Forest Books, London.
- . 1994. *The Wink of the Mona Lisa* / translated by Jack BRIGGS. Motivate Publishing, Dubai.
- al-MUSAWI, Muhsin. 2006. *Arabic Poetry: Trajectories of Tradition and Modernity*. Routledge, London.
- NICHOLSON, R. A. 1997. *A Literary History of the Arabs*. Kegan Paul International, New York.
- ONLEY, James. 2009. *Britain and the Gulf Shaikhdoms, 1820-1971: The Politics of Protection*. Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar, Doha.
- PAINE, Patty / LODGE, Jeff / TOUATI, Samia (eds.). 2011. *Gathering the Tide: an Anthology of Contemporary Arabian Gulf Poetry*. Ithaca Press, Reading, UK.
- al-QĀSIMĪ, al-Shaykh Sulṭān b. Muḥammad. 2009. *Sard al-dhāt* [Narrating the Self]. al-Qasimi Publications, Sharjah.
- ṢĀBRĪ, 'Abd al-Fattāh (ed.). 2006. *al-Riwāyah al-Khalījīyyah: Tawṣīfāt wa-ru'ā*. Department of Information and Culture, Sharjah.
- ṢĀQAR, 'Abd Allāh. 1999. *al-Khashabah*. 3rd edition, Dubai Press, Dubai. (1st edition 1975).
- STARKEY, Paul. 2006. *Modern Arabic Literature*. Georgetown University Press, Washington, D.C.

- STETKEVYCH, Suzanne. 1993. *The Mute Immortals Speak: Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Poetics of Ritual*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY.
- . 2002. *The Poetics of Islamic Legitimacy: Myth, Gender, and Ceremony in the Classical Arabic Ode*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington.
- TIJANI, Ishaq. 2009. *Male Domination, Female Revolt: Race, Class, and Gender in Kuwaiti Women's Fiction*. Brill, Leiden.

OLATUNBOSUN ISHAQ TIJANI, Dept. of Arabic and Translation Studies, American University of Sharjah, Sharjah, U.A.E.
◀ otijani@aus.edu ▶