

Social Changes in the Emirati Feminist Fiction over the Last Decade: A Thematic Narrative Analysis

Wafa Yousef Alkhatib*

Department of English Language, Alzaytoonah University, Jordan

Mohamad Ahmad Al-Qudah

Arabic Department, University of Jordan, Jordan

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Abstract

This paper explores the social changes in the Emirati feminist fiction published over the last decade with a selection of five Emirati novels, focusing on the circumstances of their publications and the societal diseases addressed in the context of these novels, i.e. the struggle between traditional values and the demands of modern life and the perceived loss of tranquility and simplicity. Utilizing thematic narrative analysis, this study furnishes a confirmation of the role played by the novel in identifying the negative phenomena and issues that need an end by the Emirati people. Through this detailed approach, these negative phenomena and issues are discussed from socio-psychological, historical, and technical perspectives. Highlighting the selected five Emirati novels' ties with societal problems and ills, the analysis emphasizes their continuing relevance in current discussions about individuality and awareness of societal problems. The piece of research not only is an invitation to rethink conventional perceptions but also aims to enrich our understanding of Emirati fiction's legacy as a pivotal figure in contemporary Arab literature.

Keywords: Changes, Creativity, Emiratis, Feminism, Narration.

1. Introduction

Reading the works of writers, thinkers and philosophers makes readers find that the development and reality of life is reflected in human consciousness. Writers, when writing their texts, portray society and humans regardless of their spectrums, thoughts and sufferings. Writers also never write for anonymous; rather they write for an audience, whoever that audience is (Abdel-Ghani 2001). Fiction is regarded as the most closely literary genre attached to society, and the mutual relationship between the novel and society seems to be a relationship of intermingling and in-depth conversations. Hence, whoever traces the fictional scenes, over the last decade, reads the details that he or she does not find and see in any other literary genre (Abu Ali 2017). Fiction can reveal peoples' cultures and every aspect of their lives and shed light on the importance of awareness in human life under various settings and

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* Corresponding Author: w.alkhatib@zuj.edu.jo

circumstances. It has also addressed many intellectual issues and raised various existential questions (Al-Ghalith & Shalabi 2021).

Reading novels, however, contributes to the self-expression and to the expression of historical events, biographies, or life contexts (Hiyaz and Khair Al-Din 2022). Furthermore, it teaches humans how to express and search for the meaning of their existence and how to realize their responsibilities towards overcoming and solving the challenges and problems they encounter (Berrada 2011). Thus, social factors constitute an important basis for criticizing and analyzing fiction. In this context, Bakhtin (as cited in Hamdaoui 2011, 25) believes that fiction “expresses the grass-roots communities and the hard-working proletarian groups. That is the social and linguistic diversity”. There are different opinions on fiction, its importance and role in diagnosing and identifying human reality. Hamdaoui (2011, 25) states “fiction is a dialectical struggle between subject and object, an expression of human alienation in a decadent society that lacks inherent values, and ultimately a portrayal of the prose of today’s society that is engrossed by materialism and wracked by instincts.”¹ In the same context, fiction is one of the most community-based literary arts and the most expressive art that addresses community problems and concerns through describing, deliberating, and investigating various aspects of human life on one hand. On the other hand, Lukács (as cited in al-Sarawi 2019, 635) believes that “fiction is an expression equivalent to the epic in the modern age, as it is the most typical literary genre for bourgeois society”.² He also believes that realistic literature depicts reality or reflects it honestly or accurately.

Many novels have focused on this relationship. There is a generation of contemporary and new novelists, who were able to stand up for human issues and various problems. Moreover, the Emirati women contribute to the enrichment of the creative process, and this is evident in a generation of Emirati female novelists, such as Maisoon Saqer, Reem Al-Kamali, Tahani Al-Hashemi, Salha Obaid, Maith Al-Muhairi, Maryam Al-Ghafli, Hind Seif Al-Bar, Asma Al-Zarouni, Iman Al-Yousef, and Shaima Muhammad Al-Mazrouqi, among others. All of them represent the novelist’s awareness and the true writer of her time and place, as they depict the various issues and facts that their eyes capture in the UAE society (Al-Masmoum 2019).

Notably, the relationship of the Emirati male and female novelists to the Emirati society is a reciprocal relationship that confirms the rooted values, attitudes and human experiences transmitted by the male novelist. However, the female novelist transmits it from her awareness, reality, and imagination to her creativity and innovation reflected in fun, vision and awareness of society and human. Thus, it constitutes a relationship of interest that establishes important values affecting society where important interactions take place. This, however, raises an essential question to both sides of the equation: the writer and the society. Thus, raising this question: Does a writer and his or her literature direct the society? It is a question that Tawfiq Al-Hakim answered when he was asked why you write. He replied, “The writer and the artist are not just spectators. They are both spectators and makers of their society at the same time.” Therefore, Mohammed (2016) points out that the function of literature is the outcome of the writer’s awareness and belief in the role of the word.³ The Emirati fiction was able to assert itself as a

literary genre in the creative scene as well as in expressing the aspirations of the Emirati society, particularly after the advent of oil.

Of note, Arabic Fiction is one of the most significant literary genres in the modern era, outperforming the art of poetry. Given that fiction is more capable of describing society and knowing its reality and details, therefore scholars had to stand up for the role it plays in addressing and revealing the various social problems. The Emirati feminist fiction is one of the literary arts that offers the reader with a clear picture of the UAE society, and expresses the rapid changes that the Emirati society is witnessing. Note that the world today is going through successive stages of development and progress, as well as the explosion of knowledge and technology; therefore, it is necessary to return to this art to keep pace with the knowledge explosion. Hence, resulting incredible discoveries and wide-ranging technological applications that led to a radical change in lifestyles patterns, as well as to the rise of problems where solving them would require further development and progress.

With this in mind, the research problem is reflected in exploring the social changes in the Emirati feminist fiction published over the last decade with a selection of five Emirati novels, focusing on the circumstances of their publications and the societal diseases addressed in the context of these novels, i.e. the struggle between traditional values and the demands of modern life and the perceived loss of tranquility and simplicity. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section two provides an overview of the literature review. Section three presents a review of the methodology adopted in this paper. Section four provides the textual analysis. Subsequently, section five makes concluding remarks.

2. Literature Review

A review of critical studies reveals a growing interest in how Emirati fiction responds to social changes. A recent symposium at the Sharjah Culture Palace brought together critics, novelists, and academics to discuss this topic. The symposium explored themes such as “Fiction and the Aesthetic Responding to the Reality Variables” and “The Emirati Fiction in the Third Millennium: New Visions in Art,” among others. Al-Taei’s (2014) *The Narrative Icon: Critical Studies in the Modern Emirati Fiction* analyses five Emirati novels, tracing the development in technical tools and themes used by fiction writers after 1971. The book also examines the language, narration methods, and social changes reflected in these novels.

Using a different lens, “Umm Zakia *If I Should Speak* and Updike’s *Terrorist*: Two Different Perspectives on Islam”, Al-Ghaliz and Al-Shalabi (2021) assert that in many ways politics and social agendas have shaped a variety of literary works and imposed their views, either implicitly or explicitly. Several studies point to the increasing participation of Emirati women in writing short stories and novels, mirroring a trend across the Gulf countries. Abd Al-Malik, as cited in Omar (2003), highlights the emergence of female voices challenging societal norms and restrictions.

Utilizing an Aesthetic perspective, Al-Hashemi (2021) argues in her paper “The Emirati Novel and the Aesthetic Responding to Reality Variables: A Study in Content and Artistic Form” that Emirati fiction serves as a voice for society and its transformations. These novels not only depict social realities but also use social, intellectual, and cultural criticism to analyse and address pressing issues.

Of late, social changes have always been an issue to discuss in the Emirati fiction by several Emirati novelists in general and female ones in particular. Among the most important social problems that face women in Emirati society are depriving women of their rights, such as the right of education. They also suffer from marginalization, oppression, polygamy and are restricted to a specific gender role. Moreover, women are deprived from their right to be a novelist or a writer, as feminist texts were not accepted in their society. Feminist narrators are also silenced by the restrictions of the society. Understanding how Emirati feminist fiction reflects and is shaped by social reality requires examining the content, events, and atmosphere of these novels. The realities depicted in Emirati fiction are deeply connected to the broader social and cultural changes happening in the Gulf and Arab world. These shared realities, often characterized by daily struggles, touch upon universal human emotions that novelists can draw from to create their narratives.

From a literary standpoint, Emirati novelist Al-Zarouni (2017) emphasizes the importance of social themes in fiction, stating that “there is no novel to be devoid of social character, given that reality is the first step to the fiction writing and is the only factor that attracts the reader who does not accept reading a novel that does not address his problems and feelings.”⁴. He argues that reality is the foundation of fiction and that readers seek novels that address their concerns and experiences.

With adoption of critical analysis, novels by Al-Qasimi, such as “Baby Fatima and Sons of the King,” exemplify this focus on critical social issues. The novel explores social, political, and religious life, highlighting power struggles, societal conflicts, and the changing role of women. A striking feature of Emirati fiction is its ability to capture the rapid social transformations within Emirati society. This includes the development of the country, the changing role of women in education and work, and the resulting expansion of freedoms. These transformations have inspired many Emirati writers, both male and female, to explore these themes in various genres, with the novel being particularly adept at reflecting the complexities of social change.

Therefore, Emirati women have found in writing a means to express their unique experiences and navigate social expectations. Their novels often explore the complex relationship between women and society, along with their personal growth. Examples include Al-Jarwan’s “Letters to My Lord the Sultan” and Ghabesh’s “The Smell of Ginger,” which tackle new social dynamics in contemporary Emirati society. These novels, alongside many other works of feminist fiction, contribute to a rich body of literature exploring these themes. A crucial question emerges: To what extent has Emirati fiction kept pace with and expressed the rapid social changes? Many novelists and critics, including Saleh Howaidi, Ibrahim Mubarak, and Samar Rawhi Al-Faisal, have addressed this question. The consensus is that Emirati fiction, like much of Arab fiction, has successfully captured the essence of a changing reality and even offered glimpses into the future.

Moreover, the earliest novels by Emirati writers, reflecting the social context of the time, explored themes of traditional life, such as hunting, as seen in Rashid Abdullah Al-Nuaimi’s “Shahenda” and novels by Ghobash and Abu Al-Rish. Later works depict the period of rapid transformation, with novels

like Al-Suwaidi's "Diesel," Salim's "A Dream Like a Blue Sea," and Ghabesh's "The Smell of Ginger" serving as notable examples. These novels often use contrasting portrayals of the past and present to highlight the impact of change on people's lives. Additionally, some novels adopted more experimental approaches to explore the concerns of their authors⁵.

Importantly, the novel remains a reflection of its surroundings. Novelists draw inspiration from their reality, society, and environment, expressing their narratives through various lenses, including social, political, economic, cultural, and national perspectives. Regardless of their narrative choices, these writers are inevitably connected to the events and times in which they create their novels. As a result, Emirati fiction tackles a multitude of social issues, with a particular focus on the "social trinity" of love, marriage, and divorce, especially within the context of Emirati feminist fiction. Women writers, with their deeper understanding of these challenges, are able to explore them with a nuanced perspective, weaving them into narratives that utilise artistic tools to engage with societal transformations. Notable examples include Al-Jarwan's novel '*Shajn* the Daughter of Sad Fate' published in 1992, Saqer's novel '*Rehanah*', Al-Zarooni's novel '*The Departed Body*', Kilani's novel '*Yawning*', Ghabesh's novel '*The Smell of Ginger*', and Al-Jarwan's novel '*Letters to My Lord the Sultan*'⁶ (Al-Adwani 2009).

These novels act as mirrors reflecting the complexities of society and its evolving values. Readers experience the struggles between generations, their contrasting viewpoints, and the desire to break free from outdated traditions. The narratives grapple with themes of realism and modernity, exploring the dynamics between men and women, fathers and sons, and the ever-evolving family unit. Furthermore, some novels challenge established social norms, particularly regarding the traditional view of women, as seen in Al-Jarwan's "Shajn the Daughter of Sad Fate." Emirati fiction extends beyond these core themes, also addressing the role of expatriate workers in the nation's development, as explored in Abu al-Rish's "The Sword and the Flower". Additionally, it delves into themes related to the desert, the city, divorce, exile, and urban renewal.

During the course of these novels, a sense of social transformation emerges, with characters grappling with a new reality defined by rapid progress. Those who once inhabited the desert and traditional dwellings now find themselves surrounded by skyscrapers, trains, and airplanes – a stark contrast to their nomadic past. Writers who witnessed these changes weave narratives that bridge the gap between the Bedouin world and modern life. These spatial and temporal transformations are reflected in their storytelling techniques and language, sometimes showcasing rebellion against the present alongside a nostalgic yearning for the past. Emirati feminist fiction sheds light on the challenges women face within a rapidly urbanizing society. The city becomes a symbol of both progress and alienation, fostering feelings of anxiety and loss due to the conflict between personal identity and societal expectations (Alkodimi 2021).

As a result, this struggle between traditional values and the demands of modern life, along with the perceived loss of tranquility and simplicity, is a recurring motif. These themes highlight the social changes taking place and the clash between the past and present, prompting some novelists to revisit the past as a way of navigating the complexities of the present. Khalifa (2012) argues that Emirati fiction has gone through different phases, reflecting societal concerns and issues." The oil boom and its subsequent

transformations serve as a major focus, with writers exploring the impact of these changes on customs, traditions, and the overall social fabric.⁷ Accordingly, the theoretical framework and the adopted research approach are given in the following section.

3. Theoretical Framework

The scope and nature of this paper requires utilizing a feminist approach as it focuses on the gender inequality between men and women in Emirati society as it is shown in the selected works. It sheds the light on the sufferings of Emirati women in a patriarchal society, as some of them were enforced to marry even without their consent. Most waves and forms of feminism describes patriarchy world as unjust social system that subordinate, marginalize and oppress women. The term feminism first appeared in France in the 1880s (as feminism), Great Britain in the 1890s, and the United States in 1910. In 1963, Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, which argued that women were chafing against the confines of their roles as wives and mothers. Rebecca Walker, the mixed-race daughter of second-wave leader Alice Walker, announced the arrival of feminism's "third wave" in 1992. The third wave of feminism focused on tackling problems, including sexual harassment in the workplace and a shortage of women in positions of power. By applying feminist approach, this approach plays a pivotal role in analyzing the selected works in a societal and cultural context, as shown in the ensuing section.

4. Textual Analysis

This section gives a detailed insight into the selected Emirati feminist fiction that deals with social issues and their impact on society as well as the extent to which they respond to reality objectively and technically. In this context, we deal with selected novels of a number of Emirati female novelists. The selection was consistent with the period specified for this study. The selection does not mean that the rest of the unselected novels are insignificant, rather this selection was based on tracing novels that were published over the last decade that are consistent with the subject of the study. Therefore, this study addresses the work of the following writers: Saqer's novel 'In My Mouth, A Pearl', Al-Kamali's novel 'Rose's Diary', Al-Hashemi's novel 'Not A Word!', Obaid's novel 'Maybe It's A Joke', Al-Muhairi's novel 'From What Substance Did He Create Her?'⁸.

4.1 'In My Mouth, A Pearl' by Maisoon Saqer:

Saqer's (2016) 'In My Mouth, A Pearl' is a 600-page novel published by the Egyptian Lebanese House. The cover designed by the writer herself. The cover art, designed by the author herself, features the iconic actress Marilyn Monroe adorned with a cultured pearl necklace. The novel meticulously traces historical diving sites, each serving as a gateway to the world of pearl hunters and their stories. Saqer masterfully blends two distinct dimensions: the daily routines and struggles of life, and a deeper existential layer that permeates the characters and their experiences. This connection is woven not only through narrative but also through the physical settings, highlighting the interconnectedness of place and people.

Saqer delves into the world of pearl hunting, exploring the lives, circumstances, and tales of the divers. The narrative extends beyond the immediate world of the sea, encompassing social transformations within the Emirates during and after the pearl hunting era. The story travels across diverse landscapes, from forts and camel farms to Bedouin areas, fishing villages, divers' camps, and the *Shihuh* mountains. Saqer celebrates the unique character of each community while seamlessly integrating elements of real-life characters and events into her fictional tapestry, blurring the lines between history and imagination.

The novel is a treasure trove of details about pearls. Saqer vividly portrays their significance, weaving them into the narrative through letters and descriptions. She doesn't shy away from depicting the radical transformations that impacted the region, particularly the shift from natural pearl diving and trade to the introduction of cultured Japanese pearls and the subsequent dominance of the oil industry. Saqer creates a vast space within the novel where pearls become a central motif, symbolising the cyclical nature of life, encompassing joy, suffering, death, and countless stories imbued with both beauty and pain. As Saqer states (2016, 16):

Death has its aesthetics, a joy that wobbles with the waves, the journeys of the dead going into the bottom, the last journey of the diver, where he dives in and does not return with a pearl or an oyster, rather he becomes a guard for the diving sites that have been dug in search of pearls. The diving sites say: 'Here was a hand harvesting an oyster, to take pearls for a strange woman'. Nevertheless, the sea was still generous, they took its pearls, and it accepts their bodies without any objection. Has the sea ever objected? No, it has not, but rather it argued with them, so that their bodies might remain in it⁹.

According to Bakri (2018), the characters' interactions, the glistening pearls, and the ever-present sea gradually paint a vivid picture of the Arabian Gulf region. The novel depicts the lives of simple pearl divers and their struggles with this traditional way of life, facing its decline in the 20th century with the arrival of artificial pearls and the rise of the oil age. The novel's closing scene portrays the return of Marhoon, a pearl diver, to his homeland after years of exile in India¹⁰.

Saqer employs a multifaceted narrative approach. She introduces a modern young woman named Shamseh, who embarks on a research project about pearl hunting. Shamseh's journey allows her to delve into the stories of past divers and their wives, filled with conflicts, betrayals, and violence, as recounted by her mother. Shamseh's chapters function as a lens through which the past is viewed, offering a colorful perspective. In contrast, another narrative thread utilises black and white imagery, portraying historical struggles and suffering related to pearl hunting, including the conflicts during the era of the British commissioner in the Emirate, intertribal conflicts, and marauding tribes. This "live camera" captures the essence of the narrative, particularly the love story between Amneh and Marhoon. The novel employs multiple narrative streams, resembling successive waves of the sea. These diverse perspectives contribute to a nuanced and detailed portrayal of the social transformations taking place, all conveyed through Saqer's evocative language and masterful storytelling techniques. A key element in her approach is the concept of "diving," serving as a metaphor that carries the reader on a captivating journey of exploration.

In this respect, Bakri (2018) states that “there are, for example, philosophical diving, mythical diving, historical diving, community diving, psychological diving, dream diving, etc., and there is always aesthetic diving...”¹¹

“In My Mouth, A Pearl” sheds light on the social history of the UAE, particularly the Emirate of Sharjah. By weaving together details of pearl hunting, divers’ tales, and the region’s cultural heritage with its customs, traditions, and practices, Saqer constructs a rich tapestry of narratives that blend social, political, economic, and emotional aspects. The novel’s structure reflects a complex and fragmented narrative style, utilising various linguistic registers, from classical Arabic to colloquial dialects, incorporating the specificities of the Gulf region, Egyptian influences, and the contrasting languages of the desert and the city. The narrative seamlessly navigates between two distinct time periods: the past, imbued with its heritage and traditions, and the present, with its complex emotions. Saqer skillfully blends fantasy with historical reality, drawing upon historical narratives based on letters, documents, notes, and diaries. The novel traces the decline of the pearl hunting profession, the discovery of oil, and the subsequent establishment of the modern state. It highlights the shifting power dynamics and the evolving Western perspective on the Gulf region.

Saqer’s narrative transcends the confines of the UAE, transporting readers to diverse locations across the globe, including Egypt, Kenya, and India. This continuous movement fosters a deeper exploration of the past in the context of the present, questioning the distinction between the private and the public. Ultimately, the novel reveals the profound social transformations that have reshaped Emirati society, contrasting its historical roots with the achievements and transformations of the contemporary era (Al-Yasi, 2019). Saqer’s meticulous attention to detail allows readers to experience the world of the pearl divers firsthand. She employs a highly descriptive narrative style, documenting the various stages of diving, from preparations and rituals aboard the fishing boat to the divers themselves – their routines, sleep patterns, meals, and the unique camaraderie that bound them together. One passage exemplifies this immersive approach:

Moments before the dawn, all the divers are cautious. They begin their day. A fuss occurs on the ship until it gets dark at night till the movement calms down. They sit in semi circles. While singing, reciting poems and talking, they start opening the oysters they hunted during the day, or the oysters of the previous day, in which the shellfish has died.

“In My Mouth, A Pearl” is a multilayered text, encompassing a multitude of interwoven narratives. These include the story of Marhoon, the sea, and Amneh; Shamseh’s journey of discovery guided by her teacher; a meditation on the changing nature of writing and the power of ideas; the complex relationship between William and Victoria, documented through letters and photographs sent to the British Commissioner or his companion Gerrard; and the story of Catherine, Victoria’s disguised daughter who captains a ship in the Gulf and encounters Amneh. The narrative also explores the fate of a unique pearl retrieved by Marhoon, its theft from the ship, and its eventual transformation into a precious necklace

inherited by Shamseh's grandmother. The novel concludes with an exhibition of pearls and the rediscovery of letters from William¹².

According to Qadri (2016), Saqer has spoken about the novel's development, revealing that it took seven years of dedicated research. This journey involved linguistic exploration, reading, introspection on the region's transformations, and meticulous research into maritime archives, myths, diving expeditions, seafaring ballads, and folklore celebrating the beauty of pearls. Saqer also traced the rise and fall of the pearl trade, culminating with the invention of cultured pearls by Mikimoto, the Japanese innovator. The novel's cover image featuring Marilyn Monroe adorned with his cultured pearl necklace serves as a powerful symbol, perhaps signifying Saqer's commentary on the dismantling of the complex relationship between "the forgotten" and the false "the present"¹³. The novel 'In My Mouth, A Pearl' has not been detached from the reality of society, even if it followed the path of fantasy, but rather in the end it was based on awareness of society, awareness of the world, and its deep vision of the details of community relationships.

4.2 'Rose's Diary' by Reem Al-Kamali

Al-Kamali's "Rose's Diary", published in 2021 by Dar Al-Adab Beirut, offers a powerful female perspective. The story unfolds between two locations: Khan Sharjah and Shindagha Dubai. The narrative opens with Rose, a student grieving the loss of her mother, reflecting on her life in Sharjah. After her mother's death, she leaves her home and travels to Dubai's Shindagha neighborhood (Rose's Diary, p. 5). The novel delves into the experiences of Emirati women in the 1960s, highlighting societal values and the challenges they faced.

Al-Kamali (as cited in Ajeez, 2020) explains her motivation for writing the novel. During a conference, she was struck by the neglect Emirati authors showed towards Dubai. Determined to bridge this gap, she embarked on creating a story centered on a Dubai woman's experience.

Before I wrote the novel, I had met the writer Abdul Hamid Ahmed, during a conference organized by Al-Owais Foundation. At that time, he told me a few words that were like an arrow in my heart. He was wondering how the writers and novelists had neglected the Emirate of Dubai, the global icon, from their literary works. Upon that moment, I felt a sense of dereliction towards the Emirate of Dubai and decided to focus on it in my future writings. Rose's Diary came out because of that feeling ... I decided that this literary experience would be completely feminine, so when I created the heroes, the story and the plot, I gathered my thoughts to meet that goal. I felt that the women who excelled in the past were writing only to satisfy men with their works.¹⁴

The protagonist, Rose, embodies a passion for literature and writing. Earning titles like "Rose, the Queen of Literature" and "Rose, the School's Writer," her love for the craft is ever-present. A pivotal moment arrives in a dream where the renowned Taha Hussein encourages her to write and stay true to herself (Rose's Diary, 32)¹⁵.

Rose's diary becomes a repository for her pent-up emotions. The denial of a scholarship to Damascus after her mother's death, due to her uncle's restrictions, leaves her devastated. The diary foreshadows the hardships and struggles she will encounter, including the loss of both parents and the forced relocation to Dubai¹⁶. She also says: "Writing is nothing but a woman whose dowry is the true word"¹⁷. The novel poignantly portrays the oppression women faced on various levels. Rose's intellectual aspirations are stifled, her desire for education thwarted. She is then subjected to an unwanted marriage. Tragically, the groom dies on their wedding night, leading her family to view her with suspicion. As punishment, they force her to wear her clothes reversed for a week, hoping to ward off misfortune (Rose's Diary, 175-176)¹⁸. A second marriage proves no better, further highlighting the limitations placed upon women's choices. Al-Kamali's narrator describes Rose's husband as "lifeless" (Rose's Diary, 9)¹⁹.

The novel is rich with detailed descriptions that expose the realities of women's lives. Rose's experiences living with her uncle, societal restrictions on her freedom, and the challenges she faces throughout the narrative paint a vivid picture of this era. Al-Kamali employs a captivating narrative style. Flashbacks, memoirs, diary entries, and dreams seamlessly weave together, creating a tapestry of Rose's life. For instance, Rose recounts a dream to her uncle's wife, revealing her yearning for a life dedicated to writing (Rose's Diary, 42-43):

I was sitting cross-legged beside my uncle's wife, forgetting my promise to myself
to be silent, to tell my dream happily:

Oh grandmother, I dreamt of a well-known writer telling me kind words.

- Is he a good man?

- Yes, grandmother.

- And what does he write?

- He writes about significant and serious issues.

- About religion?

- About poetry and literature, and by linking this to history and religion.

- What is the point of such a dream? As if you dreamt of a popular poet²⁰.

Through Rose's story, we gain insights into the lives of families in Sharjah and Dubai. Descriptions of Rose's family home and the bustling markets she visits alongside her uncle's wife bring the past to life. The narrative also sheds light on the historical and social transformations taking place in the UAE during this period, contrasting the lifestyle by the sea with the desert traditions. It is as if we are witnessing a sequential unfolding of the significant developments that shaped the UAE over the past five decades, encompassing social, educational, cultural, and economic spheres. The novel even touches upon the changing architectural styles. The narrative transcends stereotypes. Al-Kamali utilises paradoxes and contradictions to expose social, historical, and cultural complexities. Rose's yearning for security and a life free from the limitations imposed upon her is a constant undercurrent. She occasionally expresses her deep emotions, whispering about love, loss, and the memories of her childhood (Rose's Diary, 83-84):

I talk to my heart repeatedly and it confirms me as a lover, and a lover who knows
me and does not know me, but he remains sweet and staying in the mirror of my

eyes. A lover with courage and bravery, as I portrayed in my mind. But I return to my pen which I left a little while ago, and what annoys me now is my lack of joy after I finish writing the story of the pearls, it is a mysterious rhythm that confused me. Is it the love that controls me, my surprise and my pen?²¹

The novel tackles the societal perception of women and the expectation that they remain subordinate to men. Rose's experiences with marriage expose these ingrained beliefs. Furthermore, the narrative highlights the restrictions placed upon women's movements, often confining them to the domestic sphere. Rose's Diary emerges as a powerful voice for women's rights. The novel lays bare the various forms of suffering endured by women, including limited access to education, forced marriages, and societal expectations that curtail their aspirations. It exposes the deep-rooted patriarchal structures that restrict women's freedoms and control their lives. Al-Kamali emphasises the ongoing struggle for women to be granted their basic rights.

In an interview, Al-Kamali acknowledges that Rose's Diary differs from her previous works. The page count positions it somewhere between a novella and a short novel. She expresses her belief that the novella form is often disregarded in the Arab world and aims to contribute to its recognition (Zaidan). The printed version contains around 223 pages²². A significant portion of the novel explores the theme of domestic confinement and its impact on women. Rose's fear of punishment by her family compels her to hide her passion for writing. She mentions accumulating diaries and notebooks, seeking opportunities to dispose of them before they are discovered (Rose's Diary, 118, 138).

The novel concludes with Rose envisioning a life of freedom and self-determination. She drafts a constitution outlining her aspirations for equality between men and women, encompassing inheritance rights, freedom of expression, and more. While acknowledging the dreamlike nature of this vision, it serves as a powerful symbol of her hopes for a more just and equitable future (Rose's Diary)²³.

The novel invites comparisons to Latifah's story in Maryam Al-Ghafli's "The Girl of the Rain" (2009). Both characters grapple with loss, forced marriages, and societal constraints. This suggests a recurring theme of women's struggles within Gulf societies, despite advancements in other areas. A study by Yahyaoui (2021) delves deeper into this thematic connection²⁴. Thus, the novel, as in the attached drawing, looked at three scenes (past: the loss of place), (present: slavery and submission) and (future: dream and freedom). Al-Kamali's "Rose's Diary" is a powerful and poignant novel. It sheds light on the experiences of Emirati women in the 1960s, weaving a compelling narrative that explores themes of loss, societal constraints, and the yearning for freedom. Through Rose's journey, Al-Kamali delivers a powerful message about the ongoing struggle for women's rights and the importance of pursuing one's dreams despite the obstacles (Al-Qassas 2016).

4.3 'Not A Word!' by Tahani Al-Hashemi

Al-Hashemi's "Not a Word!", published in 2017 by Medad Publishing and Distribution, delves into the complexities of life in Abu Dhabi. The narrative explores the paradoxes within Emirati society, contrasting wealth and poverty, joy and sorrow, kindness and manipulation, and permitted actions with

forbidden ones. These contradictions intertwine and diverge, shaping the behaviors of many characters, with women facing particular struggles due to the pressures of work.

Al-Hashemi paints a vivid picture through precise details that showcase the conflicting realities working women experience. Her prose is characterised by short sentences, a fast pace, and a narrative style that borders on poetic language. However, the narrative ultimately emphasises the importance of reason in setting boundaries. Characters must carefully consider their actions to avoid straying from their chosen paths. While Abu Dhabi serves as the backdrop for the story, time itself is divided into distinct realms: day and night. Night is depicted as a heavy black curtain that cloaks the world – humans, structures, and everything in between. It conceals scandals and their aftermath, offering a refuge for broken hearts, souls, and unspoken words. These long nights become a canvas for the helpless and lovers to dream freely. Muhammad (2019) stated that ‘Not A Word’ is a strange and bizarre novel in its contents, narration, disturbances, tastes, and cultural and intellectual backgrounds²⁵.

In an interview, Al-Hashemi explains her approach: “‘Not A Word’ has used up all the words. It is a realistic novel that drew its characters from reality. She meticulously crafted each character's story, placing them within a context that best suited their development. Her goal was to give each character their due justice, a challenging feat within the novel's framework. The novel's success led to its nomination for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF) by Midad Publishing and Distribution²⁶. Youness (2014) interviewed Al-Hashemi about the novel, her writing process, and the literary landscape. The discussion also touched upon her criticism of the “cronyism” that pervades literary circles²⁷.

“Not a Word!” holds a significant weight within the narrative. It can be interpreted in several ways. On a literal level, it reflects the pressure women may feel to remain silent about their struggles and disappointments, particularly within the confines of their marriages. The fast-paced, almost fragmented style of writing could also be seen as a manifestation of this enforced silence. The characters grapple with complex emotions but may lack the space or opportunity to fully express themselves. The portrayal of night in the novel is multifaceted. As previously mentioned, it offers a refuge for those burdened by the day's hardships. However, it can also be a breeding ground for secrets and hidden desires. The darkness allows characters to shed their public personas and explore their vulnerabilities. This duality reflects the complex realities of human emotions and the internal struggles that may not be readily apparent on the surface. While “Not a Word!” exposes the harsh realities faced by many women, it can also be seen as a call to action. By bringing these issues to light, Al-Hashemi encourages readers to engage in critical reflection and potentially advocate for change. The use of a polyphonic narrative allows readers to connect with the characters' experiences on a personal level, fostering empathy and understanding.

Accordingly, this emotional connection can inspire readers to challenge societal norms and fight for a more equitable future. “Not a Word!” stands out for its unique voice and unflinching portrayal of social issues. Al-Hashemi's masterful use of language and her focus on human complexity have garnered critical acclaim and nominations for prestigious awards. The novel's enduring impact lies in its ability to spark conversations about gender roles, societal pressures, and the importance of finding one's voice in the face of adversity²⁸.

4.4 *'Maybe It's A Joke'* by Salha Obaid

Obaid's *'Maybe It's A Joke'* is a 224-page exploration of life in the Emirates. Published in 2018 by The Mediterranean Publications in Italy, the novel centers on two main characters: Muslim, an elderly man with a puzzling scratch, and Mira, a young neighbor. Their lives intertwine in a close-knit community where houses seem like extensions of one another. Together, they embark on a journey through space and time, investigating the social, historical, and psychological transformations that have shaped the Emirati landscape and its people from the 1930s to the present day. This narrative reflects the experiences of two contrasting generations who lived through these significant changes²⁹.

Obaid's novel traces the dramatic social and historical transformations in Sharjah between 1920 and 2017. The narrative journeys from a simpler past, marked by pearl diving, to the era of oil discovery, and ultimately the city's progression into the modern age. It follows the lives of numerous characters – Muslim, Mira, Matar, Hilal, and others – each with their own mysteries and experiences. The story unfolds across various locations in Sharjah, with evocative names hinting at the city's past. Chapter titles like “demolition,” “marginalisation,” and “death” suggest the hardships endured, yet the narrative also balances the past with the present. Despite the seemingly grim nature of some chapters, the novel's beautiful language – a blend of smooth and challenging styles – keeps the reader engaged. Obaid masterfully weaves together events across time, creating a clear connection between past and present. As Saeed (2021) notes, the author's strong and precise language effectively conveys his message without unnecessary embellishment³⁰.

Readers of *"Maybe It's A Joke"* are drawn into the intricate details of the story. Obaid's narrative seamlessly shifts between past and present, reflecting the social transformations sweeping through Sharjah. The novel explores the impact of modernisation on families, highlighting the disruption caused by residents moving to new neighborhoods while others remain behind, as in the case of Matar. Mira, on the other hand, experiences this change from a different perspective, having moved with her family. This societal shift creates a state of psychological unease for the characters. The transition from a traditional to a modern society is met with a range of emotions: sadness, nostalgia, and a struggle to adapt. Obaid meticulously portrays these internal conflicts, particularly through the events of 2003. This year, deliberately chosen by the author, coincides with the American invasion of Iraq and the devastation it brought. It is also the year Matar experiences a traumatic assault by an unknown Asian worker. As Nasser (2019) observes, Obaid expresses her profound anger through a powerful and dynamic language. The narrative relies heavily on verbs for action and employs short, impactful sentences that border on symbolism and poetry. Despite its depth, the prose remains clear and engaging³¹.

'Maybe It's A Joke' transports readers on a captivating journey through Sharjah's history, encompassing social and economic transformations that resonate across the region. The narrative sweeps from the era of pearl diving to the bustling modernity of the present day. It weaves together memories of a bygone era – filled with love, loss, and hardship – with the vibrant energy of a city in constant development. The novel paints a hopeful picture of the future, where aspirations for a better reality fuel progress. Obaid's work can be seen as a call to social responsibility, a testament to her unwavering belief

in the power of positive change. By reviving Sharjah's past and confronting its transformations, the novel compels readers to reflect on both the challenges and triumphs of the region.

4.5 'From What Substance Did He Create Her?' by Maitha Al-Muhairi

Al-Muhairi's novel 'From What Substance Did He Create Her?' published in 2014 by Madarak Publishing and Distribution House in Dubai. The novel explores the complex relationship between men and women, highlighting the contradictions, power struggles, and underlying tensions. Al-Muhairi paints a vivid picture of these opposing realities. The man's world is portrayed as domineering and predatory, even towards a romantic partner. The woman's world is one of limitations, where patriarchal norms restrict her freedom of expression, choice in love, and even basic human agency. This central conflict unfolds through the novel's interwoven narratives. Al-Muhairi utilises a clear and insightful voice to expose the hypocrisy in male behaviour, contrasting their sweet words with the reality of female subjugation. The following quote from the protagonist exemplifies this dynamic, underscoring the cyclical nature of their relationship and the deep-seated conflict between the sexes, further amplified by the social constraints of Arab societies:

Oh, *Meta'b!* You came to my mind last night, but this time you came in a different way. I did not go through the pain in my soul. I did not feel anything pulsing in the left side of my chest, nothing ... nothing at all ... so I wished you a happy life and prayed for you to be well. That is how I realised you came into my life suddenly like miracles ... like torrents ... like rain ... so you came out of my life suddenly like miracles ... like torrents ... like rain.³²

Al-Shawakh's (2018, 66) thesis "The Artistic Construction of the Emirati Fiction" highlights a unique narrative technique employed by Al-Muhairi by observing that Al-Muhairi utilises a nested narrative structure. She inserts stories within the main narrative, creating a web of interconnected tales. These interwoven narratives seamlessly blend past and present through flashbacks, allowing the reader to understand the characters' motivations and the development of the central conflict. Examples include the stories of Alia, Nadia, Idris, Malika and her uncle, which explore themes of blame, love, societal pressures, and the protagonist's personal disappointments in love. Al-Muhairi (2012, 2) says:

I know for sure that you are always looking for yourself among my letters, and I know with greater certainty that I am writing it all for you. This text is not a novel or a memoir or anything else. Indeed, it is a prolonged reproach that I sent to him so that he may read it.³³

The author masterfully balances the novel's pacing. There are moments of intense emotional release, followed by quieter stretches that allow the reader to process the complexities. This keeps the reader engaged as they navigate the labyrinthine web of characters, both present and absent. The narrative delves into the concept of love as a burden, raising questions about its purpose when it disregards emotions and submits to societal pressures. The protagonist's unwavering devotion ultimately leads to suffering, highlighting the limitations on women's freedom in the Arab world. They are often silenced, unable to

express their love for fear of defying tradition. This is reflected in the narrator's dedication, which speaks to the hidden stories of love and loss buried within Arab cities:

To the Earth and to the Homeland.

To all Arab cities, where we carry love with incest, and then bury it secretly in an unknown cemetery.

To someone who lives somewhere in one of our rebellious Arab cities, who allowed me to write it to a close friend.

To you all where every heart has a story worth reading.³⁴

The novelist did not choose a name for her protagonist in order to make her a symbol for everyone she loved or lost in the Arab cities. She says: "In the Arab cities, we are forced to neglect forgetfulness, because we only know love, meeting and parting in secret."³⁵ In the novel, the protagonist lives in a state of remembrance and recollection of the friendly and tiresome moments she spent with (*Meta'b*) with all her manifestations and struggles, until she reached an inevitable conclusion that "love is only women's concern, while men's love does not exceed being only a chapter in a novel."³⁶ However, in the end, she returned as a girl who loves life, and harshly addressing *Meta'b*, when she said to him: "You disappeared and I returned as I was, a female who dreams, lives and searches for love in all the details of life and among the cities of the world."³⁷

The writer indicates the social frustrations that women face; particularly when people think that she crosses the red lines, which is a negative thing leaving the women in a state of thinking to make the appropriate decision despite the cultural openness and development witnessed by the Emirates. In this respect, the narrator (as cited in Al-Shamani) says:

Although the Emirati society is a very conservative society, it still refuses to talk about many things publicly. At the beginning of my writing of the novel, I was accompanied by a lot of hesitation and fear of approaching the red lines that my society rejects. I was also afraid that this hesitation would confuse the structure of my novel, and make me fail to present the work at the level and image I aspire to. Therefore, I resolved to write the novel with ease and without restrictions. I wrote it and the decision to publish it is up to the end. I told myself when I finish writing the novel, I will decide whether I had the courage to publish it or not, and indeed I wrote it without paying attention to all those restrictions. Thanks be to God [Allah], I had enough courage to let this novel see the light.³⁸

At this point, I agree with Al-Shawakh's view that the narrator's boldness and freedom of expression are key factors behind the novel's success and its recognition by the Emirates Novel Award. By confronting societal taboos in conservative Emirati society, the novel openly addresses women's rights, concerns, and challenges (Yaqtin 1989). The author avoids shying away from potential consequences, driven by the belief that Gulf women are intellectual, educated, and culturally vibrant, on par with their Arab counterparts. This translates into a strong portrayal of women in the novel, distinct from how they are often depicted in Emirati fiction. Turning to the novel's artistic structure, we find a blend of eloquent everyday language that seamlessly transitions into poetic flourishes when appropriate for the characters.

The narrative employs dialogue and storytelling techniques effectively, incorporating vivid imagery and suspenseful elements. Notably, using real place names grounds the stories in reality and strengthens the overall artistic structure (Yaqoub 2014).

5. Conclusion

In a nutshell, Emirati feminist fiction has emerged as a powerful force in the past decade, driving significant social, artistic, and narrative transformations within the Arab novel. Its impact is so profound that it often matches or even surpasses the genre's broader evolution. This influence stems from a fresh approach to themes, ideas, and storytelling. By embracing a global perspective and drawing inspiration from both Arab and international experiences, Emirati feminist fiction explores a wider range of human emotions and viewpoints. It delves beyond a purely objective understanding of life, recognizing the rich tapestry of culture, art, and personal experiences that shape us. The human experience takes center stage in these works. The stories explore characters' social awareness, internal struggles, and connection to the world. Social issues are a core concern for the writers, who use their intellectual perspective to depict the challenges and transformations faced by individuals and society.

Moreover, as Malkawi (2002, 89) aptly states, "social content of the literary work does not actually derive from the reality of life in society, but rather from the writer's intellectual position on life in society."³⁹ While other trends exist, Emirati feminist fiction is particularly known for its focus on realism. The stories are firmly rooted in the social and cultural landscape of the Emirates, reflecting the lives, concerns, and experiences of its people. This, however, has been confirmed by Al-Maamari's (2021) observation: "Emirati fiction comes within this context, as its issues were inspired by the surrounding environment, and that the environment formed the incubator for the events in the novel."⁴⁰

Besides, these novels showcase a new spirit in Emirati fiction, characterized by a deep immersion in local realities. Drawing on the writers' own experiences, the stories raise questions about the rapid social transformations impacting the cultural, economic, political, and educational landscape. This period of change, marked by the establishment of the modern state in 1971, witnessed a blossoming of new literary and artistic genres, including the novel. The examined novels reveal three distinct trends in social transformation. The first adheres to conservative values, often portraying a patriarchal structure. The second embraces a more open approach, acknowledging societal changes. Finally, the modernist trend rejects limitations and champions women's rights and perspectives. This feminist fiction provides readers with a clear picture of women's experiences in Emirati society, critiquing social norms and highlighting the struggles women face. The novels employ clear language with rich vocabulary, making them accessible to a broad audience.

التحولات الاجتماعية في الرواية النسائية الإماراتية في العقد الأخير: دراسة موضوعية سردية

وفاء يوسف الخطيب

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، جامعة الزيتونة، الأردن

محمد أحمد القضاة

قسم اللغة العربية، الجامعة الأردنية، الأردن

الملخص

تستكشف هذه الورقة التحولات الاجتماعية في الرواية الإماراتية النسائية التي صدرت في العقد الأخير مع نخبة من خمس روايات إماراتية، من خلال التركيز على ظروف نشرها والأمراض المجتمعية التي تناولتها في سياق هذه الروايات، أي الصراع بين القيم التقليدية ومتطلبات الحياة الحديثة والخسارة الملحوظة للهدوء والبساطة، ومن خلال استخدام التحليل السردى الموضوعي، فإن ذلك يؤكد الدور الذي تلعبه الرواية في تحديد الظواهر والقضايا السلبية التي تحتاج إلى نهاية لدى الإنسان الإماراتي. ومن خلال هذا النهج التفصيلي، نوقشت هذه الظواهر والقضايا السلبية من وجهات نظر اجتماعية ونفسية وتاريخية وتقنية، ومن خلال تسليط الضوء على علاقة الروايات الإماراتية الخمس المختارة بالمشكلات والعلل المجتمعية، يؤكد التحليل على استمرار أهميتها في المناقشات الحالية حول الفردية والوعي بالمشكلات المجتمعية، ولا يعد هذا البحث دعوة لإعادة التفكير في التصورات التقليدية فحسب، بل يهدف أيضاً إلى إثراء فهمنا لتراث الرواية الإماراتية كشخصية محورية في الأدب العربي المعاصر. الكلمات المفتاحية: التغيير، الإبداع، الإماراتيون، النسوية، السرد.

Endnotes

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