
April 2020

Beyond a Black Sea of Sheilas and Abayas: Do Emirati Women Students Have a Space of their Own?

Gergana Alzeer
Zayed University

Omnia Amin
Zayed University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Alzeer, Gergana and Amin, Omnia (2020). Beyond a Black Sea of Sheilas and Abayas: Do Emirati Women Students Have a Space of their Own?. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 21(2), 36-52.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol21/iss2/5>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Authors share joint copyright with the JIWS. ©2022 Journal of International Women's Studies.

Beyond a Black Sea of Sheilas and Abayas: Do Emirati Women Students Have a Space of their Own?

By Gergana Alzeer¹ and Omnia Amin²

Abstract

This paper is concerned with Emirati women students' spaces of inclusion and exclusion with specific focus on both their physical bodies and the places they occupy, and the mental space of their creative work where they forge a space for themselves. The paper employs ethnographic research at a women's federal university campus in the UAE using several levels of data gathering and interviews while utilizing thematic and contextual analysis of the data sets. The work is backed up by the theoretical framework of feminist theory and Lefebvre's perceived and conceived space. Lefebvre's perceived space is represented through the physical presence of the female body, and its pure material representation, while the conceived space represents the mental abstract spaces constructed in these women's writing that come to form a textual space of their own making. The findings emphasize these women's lack of space, their exclusion, and their agency in utilizing their bodies as a space of their own while constructing other mental arenas beyond the material world to assert themselves. The resulting spaces are often seen as a rebellious and dissident medium against what social and cultural norms allow. Such actions, practices and representations of space are culturally and socially driven while being closely intertwined with their unique identity as Emirati women.

Keywords: Women; perceived space; mental space; women's bodies; Lefebvre's perceived and conceived space; Emirati culture, women's writing

Introduction

This paper is an ethnographic study of a Gulf Arab community indigenous to the United Arab Emirates (UAE): the rising generation of Emirati women in higher education. The study focuses on the space these women see themselves occupying or not occupying. This sense of identity linked to space has arisen after dramatic changes, since the founding of the UAE in 1971, in the social roles of Emirati women. With the discovery of oil in the 1960s and the resulting newfound wealth and statehood, the UAE went through a period of massive changes in environment, lifestyle, culture and social structure (Heard-Bay, 2011). The swift nature of the

¹ Dr. Gergana Alzeer is an Assistant Professor in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Zayed University in the United Arab Emirates. Gergana has an interdisciplinary background in architecture, social sciences, education as well as advising and capacity building. Her research interest focuses on issues of space, place, gender and learning including the city and experiences within the city. Her recent publications and research investigate women learners' spatiality with focus on social theories of space and the intersectionality of space, gender and learning.

² Omnia Amin has been a Professor in Humanities and Social Sciences at Zayed University in Dubai, UAE since 2005. She has taught courses including *English and Comparative Literature* and *Culture and Heritage*, in addition to interdisciplinary courses. She joined NYUAD for one year in Fall 2017, as a Senior Humanities Research Fellow to conduct research on Emirati theatre. She is also a creative writer, translator and editor in chief of a book series for Palgrave Macmillan.

transition left no room for a planned adaptation process to help the people acclimatize to their new world. Given the Emiratis' tribal Bedouin background, they found themselves thrust in a quantum leap towards modernity and urbanization. This shift from desert to city, from a tribal³ to an urban community, and from a natural habitat of desert and sea to an open multicultural and complexly diverse society has created a chasm in how people see and define themselves in relation to their inner and outer sense of self and space.

Furthermore, The UAE has a unique demographic composition where UAE nationals constitute a minority in their own country. The country's 9.6 million population is mainly made of expatriates who joined the UAE for employment opportunities following the oil discovery. UAE Nationals constitute only 10-15% (Khoury, as cited in Sabban, 2013). This has contributed to increased fear for the loss of their national identity accompanied by overprotection of Emirati women and increased restrictions on mobility by their families. Such feelings and practices were manifested in the students' spatial practices, physical appearance and commitment to their national dress that covers and protects their bodies while also allowing for spatial appearances of unity and homogeneity (Pillar, 2017).

While the whole of society deserves a thorough study, this paper will focus on the young generation of Emirati women in higher education. They are a generation born in a modern globalized socio-cultural environment but living with parents and grandparents who come from a world deeply rooted in traditions and bound by tribal laws. Thus they find their identities divided between two worlds: the surrounding physical modern space outside the home, and the traditional customs and habits called for by family and the Emirati community (Alzeer, 2018b). Modern day Emirati students go to universities that vie in technology with leading universities around the world, which is a far cry from the simple 'Kuttab' school⁴ their grandparents attended in order to learn how to read and write (Talhami, 2004). While families today are happy to send their daughters for higher education, this does not mean they are fully aware of the need to allow their daughters a different space than what norms and traditions allow.

The researched university started in 1998 as a strictly women's university to encourage parents to allow their daughters to study as Emirati families refused to have their women attend a mixed university, which goes against their cultural and social customs. Today Zayed University boasts over 10,800 students on both its campuses in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. For Emirati women this is a leap in terms of the outer space they interact in and the spatial freedom it affords them. For the first time they are given the right to move in what is not a strictly family or 'safe' outer space which customs deem appropriate. This had a huge impact on how these women carried their bodies in a new and alien environment and came to think about themselves.

This paper responds to the lack of scholarship on women's spatiality in the Arab Gulf region in general and in the UAE specifically. It is divided into two parts: the spatial surrounding

³ The UAE tribal society has its roots in their seminomadic pastoral Bedouin groupings that occupied the area. The groupings will tend to their herds (mainly sheep and camel) in the desert during winter, then in summer they will move to cooler coastline to fish and later to dive for pearls (Davidson, 1990, pp. 10-11). Their local social fabric is based on the interwoven factors of traditional tribal structures of political organisation with the Arab Bedu as the elite, the limited choices of economic opportunities and the Islamic order of life (Heard-Bay, 2011, P. 19, 151).

⁴ (plural '*katatib*') was a form of religious school that taught Arabic, Qura'an reading, and some mathematics (Talhami, 2004, p. 5). Students were taught in the teacher's house, inside a room, the courtyard or even outside under a tree (Heard-Bey, 2011, p. 156; khelifa, 2010, p. 20). This educational system was known as the 'Mutawa'a system' and was led by individual religious teachers (khelifa, 2010, p. 20). In some cases the mutawa'a (teacher) was the imam in the mosque maintained by the 'Wagf'. The teachers were paid privately by local families, sometimes in food, domestic animals and clothing (Heard-Bey, 2011, p.156).

students interact in at Zayed University which intensifies their feelings about the space they occupy and gives rise to their sense of how they use their bodies as a tool in their environment. The second part is based on their inner sense of space as depicted in their creative writing where they use the text as their abstract conceived space to make their voices heard and create a place of their own. It is important to note that the first part was mainly conducted by Alzeer, G. while the second part was mainly conducted by Amin, O.

Part 1: Women's bodies: Spaces of inclusion, exclusion, dissidence and agency

While on campus, in a federal UAE university for females students only, we find ourselves, on daily basis, in a warm black sea of moving *sheilas* (traditional black head cover) and *abayas* (traditional long black cloak) with small flashes of colour here and there from a shoe, bag or lip colour (Figures 1 & 2). This research is inspired by this sea's waves, rhythms and hidden stories to look further beyond the *sheila* and *abaya* into the way these students represent and move with their bodies, appropriating, utilizing and engaging with the sensory world around them while constructing their own spaces.



Figure 1: Women students in *sheilas* and *abayas* (2019)



Figure 2: A black sea of *sheilas* and *abaya* (2019)

Although there have been a lot of studies on the female body, the focus here is on exploring the material body of these women as a space, the space of the individual. It investigates women's bodies' engagement with and within the sensory world as a way of offering a glimpse into these women's outer space/s or possibly lack of spaces. This is achieved through the utilization of Lefebvre's triad of the perceived, conceived and lived spaces.

Research Methods

Following an ethical clearance from the institution review board, the research included ethnographic observations, interviews, and casual conversations with students to understand their spaces of inclusion and exclusion associated with their physical bodies, movement and appropriation of campus spaces. The interviews included static interviews and what is called mobile interviews or walking interviews, which are conducted on the move while walking with the participants as a form of deep involvement in their world experience (Sheller and Urry, 2006). Data collection took place mainly in Spring 2019 and included over 100 hours of observations of these students with focus on their bodily representations, movements, rhythms and spatial preferences across different campus spaces at different times of the day. This was also supplemented by taking photographs. Participants Undergraduate females students from different colleges between the age of 18-24. They were verbally invited for the interviews through the network of our colleagues and ex-students applying mostly purposeful, incidental and snowball sampling. Consent forms were signed and students were told in general terms that this research looks into their inside and outside spaces. It is important to acknowledge our unique positionality as female western educated researchers with Arabic roots researching our own work environment. This had both its advantages and challenges. It was easy to access participants and observe them on daily basis while talking to many during the times of observations and research. However, This made it difficult to distinguish our role as researcher from our role as professors schools who felt strongly about aspects of dissidents and had different views than many of our students. Additionally many ex-students trusted us and wanted to share more than what we could reveal due to the relationship we already have with our students.

Theoretical framework

Lefebvre's (1991) work in *The Production of Space* highly contributes to our understanding and interpretations of space by presenting a powerful definition and unpacking of the entity and meaning of space. He assumes a theoretical double triad of "the perceived, the conceived and the lived" (ibid, p. 39) that can be translated into a spatial triad of "spatial practice", "representations of space", and "representational spaces" or "spaces of representation" (Stanek, 2011, p. 128). This well-known triad has been discussed, analysed and utilized by many including Middleton (2010, 2013), Stanek (2011), Ferrare and Apple (2010), Singh et al. (2007), Elden (2004), and Harvey (1990). Lefebvre theorizes and presents space as a social construct (product), constructed socially through the movements of our bodies and the social relationship that both appropriate space and emerge from the link between the perceived and conceived space. This link becomes instrumental here as it represents the materiality of the female bodies as a space within the larger campus spaces, and it incorporates the conceived (mental) spaces constructed through students writing.

In Lefebvre's triad, spatial practice, which views space as "perceived", represents the physical aspect of social practice that "secretes the society's space [...] propounds and presupposes it, in a dialectical interconnection; it produces it slowly and surely as it masters and appropriates it" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 38). Thus, it represents "the material manifestation of social practices" (Thompson, 2007, p. 113), which produces the perceived aspect of space. In other words, it is the space of everyday habitual practices, including the use of our senses and hands, our body movements and our interaction with the sensory world around us (Lefebvre, 1991). In this research

the perceived space will mainly include the physical aspects of the students bodies manifested through their representations and rhythms on campus.

On the other hand, Lefebvre's Representations of space, which view space as conceived, are the mental constructions and abstract conceptualizations of space, (Lefebvre, 1991). It is the space produced through epistemological and theoretical means, rather than an ontological representation of the lived experience, which also makes it the dominant space in any society (Lefebvre, 1991). This space is tied to the relations of production and constructed out of symbols, codes and signs that "allow such material practices to be talked about and understood" (Harvey, 1990, p. 218). As the conceived space represents the manifestation of mental constructions based on our rational and abstract understanding of space, this can, in the context of this paper, be translated into the mental and abstract spaces forged in students' writing and literary productions, including the discursive language used by campus users. In other words it includes all spatial representations that link to how students mentally conceive and construct their spaces and how those spaces are represented for them.

The perceived space of the female students is strongly manifested in the physical presence of their bodies: the materiality of bodies and their associations (e.g. clothes, accessories and smells), and physical movement with its unique rhythms. The body is the medium that allows for our physical existence in space and time, and therefore it appropriates while also being appropriated. In describing Lefebvre's perceived space, Middleton (2010) defines it as "that of the everyday 'social practice, the body, the use of the hands, the practical basis of the perception of the outside world'" (ibid, p. 4). The body in this case represents the object and medium of spatial appropriation. With the help of our hands, legs, and body we manoeuvre, sit, run, wander, and carry other objects, thereby appropriating spaces. More importantly, the body is a place, it is "the location or site, if you like, of the individual" (McDowell, 1999, p. 34). However, bodies have rhythms and movements, our bodies are "traversed by rhythms rather as the 'ether' is traversed by waves" (1991, p. 206). Rhythms are closely associated with the body, "in the body and around it" (ibid, p. 205); they either happen within it or are produced through its movement, thus constituting an important part of the perceived space.

In addition to being our place as individuals, the body is the object upon which different forces impress themselves, including social, cultural, academic, and institutional. Feminist scholars assert how women have been subjugated mainly through their bodies and through socially constructed notions and perceived biological differences from the males (King, 2004). This notion of social and cultural power over the body partially resonates with Foucault's (1977) work in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, presenting the ways different types of institutional punishment were inflicted on prisoners' bodies, thereby making the body the medium upon which physical punishment is inflicted as an institutional spatial practice. However it is important to point out that although Foucault's discussion of the body can apply to the female body, his work has been problematized due to being gender neutral and appearing "blind to the extent that gender determines the techniques and degrees of discipline exerted on the body (King, 2004, p.30).

From interviews and observations, it was obvious that the students had a very strong sense of awareness of their bodies, their movement, gestures, rhythms and particularly 'spatial extensions' like their clothes (*sheilas* and *abayas*), accessories (bags, shoes, jewellery), hair and makeup, and body smells (perfumes and frankincense). Most of them paid special attention to the way they presented themselves to the outside world through their clothes and appearance. Appropriately covering and protecting their bodies by wearing *sheila* and *abaya* was the most visible and important spatial practice governing the body's material aspects and its status as the

place of the individual. To them, physical appearance matters socially and culturally as well as religiously. It has its roots in their religious and socio-cultural upbringing in that females are taught that their bodies are sacred and should not be revealed in public; instead, they should be covered and can only be revealed to immediate family members, other females or husbands. In Islam, showing any part of a female's body in public, except for the feet, hands and face, is considered '*haram*' (sinful). The more religious students will go as far as covering their faces with a veil. At the same time, cultural traditions allow some to uncover part of their hair as long as they wear their *sheila* and *abaya* to conform to practices of modesty in their conservative and patriarchal society.

On the researched campus, three groups of women students were spatially represented through clothing and appearance. The first were the 'modest', the traditional students, representing the majority, usually wearing *abaya* and *sheila* covering the head, though not necessarily all their hair as some intentionally exposed the front of their hair for style. Their *abayas* are usually black, although often decorated with embroidery, beading or crystals. There is a variety of *abaya* styles and designs that cover the whole body, although some can fall open at the front to show the colourful and very fashionable clothing underneath.

The second group is the 'conservative', more religious students who usually cover themselves from head to toe, revealing only their face, hands and feet, while some even cover their faces with a veil. They usually wear their *sheila* to cover all their hair, while their *abayas* are loose with minimal decorations to hide the contours of their body and avoid attention. While smaller than the first group, this group is quite common on campus.

The third and smallest group is the non-conservative modern group, who we chose to call the dissidents. They are considered dissident because of the way they project their image and their creative writing. Nawal El Saadawi says "when the law is unjust you have to break it; this is dissidence" (2016, p.163). El Saadawi believes that creativity and dissidence go hand in hand and cannot be divorced as she demonstrates in *The Novel* (2009) showing there is no deliverance and no hope except through writing. It is through creativity that students rebel and liberate themselves. There are few of these students who are usually half Emirati (i.e. with non-Emirati mother and Emirati father) or Emiratis with a very liberal background, or the very rare international students. These students wear modern western clothes like jeans and shirts with no *abaya* over them, with short, modern hairstyles and recently sometimes face and/or body piercings. Although this is the smallest group, it is the most visible, controversial and interesting to observe. It is the one criticised by their peers, thus constituting the focus of this paper. These students are easily recognised as they stand out in the perceived space against the black majority of *sheilas* and *abayas*. There are also other groups that situate themselves between the two of these three groups.

In general students love wearing their *sheilas* and *abayas*, as well as shoes, bags and accessories; they are attached to them and often referred to them in different contexts. They were also always interested in observing, commenting, approving or criticising the clothes and physical appearances of each other. We could regularly observe the looks and gazes students direct towards each other, especially in the campus most public and exposed bright areas including the hallways, parking lots, cafeteria and the elevators. Such spaces were often associated with this kind of social criticism, disapproval and exclusion. One student from the group of dissidents told Alzeer in an interview, "the elevator is the worst", as she felt totally exposed and disapprovingly gazed at. The same student ended up going back to wearing her *sheila* and *abaya*. She said "I could not take it anymore, it is too much stress, I do not want to bother, especially that I am close to graduation". This repeatedly appeared in the interviews with the dissidents and the other more conservative groups. One student from the modest group said she specifically dislikes a particular open public

space on campus as people tend to “stare” and criticize her physical appearance. She went on criticising how “some” exaggerate their makeup and clothing, with statements of disapproval like “It’s TOO MUCH...it’s not a wedding”. This resonates with McDowell’s (1999) affirmation of how the ways bodies are represented in the material world can vary according to the space they occupy at that moment. Being in a wedding is very different than the way the body is presented next day on campus. However, the way these students (dissidents) presented their bodies seemed unacceptable and in defiance of the majority; it was a sign of dissidence. One student (modest) from the Student Council told Alzeer in an interview “ they should at least respect the *sheila* and *abaya*’s they are wearing”.

This spatial practice of observing and criticizing has its roots in the socio-cultural formations of Emirati society in conforming with their social status. Despite the contradictory views of some students in disapproving of such spatial practices while still practising them themselves, and regardless of the reason, it is quite prevalent in both the observers and observed as part of their perceived space. The students’ physical appearance represented by their *sheilas* and *abayas* was also considered a symbol of their cultural and national identity. Students were quite vocal in criticising and strongly objecting to the appearance of dissidents, who were not conforming to social practice by abandoning their *sheilas* and *abayas*. This appeared both in students’ (modest and conservative) casual comments made directly to the dissidents who reported it during their interviews and the comments made by the modest and conservative groups about the dissidents during their interviews. As mentioned earlier, despite being a minority, these students’ spatial practices were quite visible in the perceived space. One of the interviewed students seemed upset and confused while referring to this group of people: “but, *ya’nni* [I mean], our Emirati, *ya’nni*, okay..‘why you don’t wear your *abaya* and *sheila*?”. She represents the common fear of losing their identity due to their unique demographic composition of being a minority in their own country, which is exacerbated when some do not wear their national dress. This fear and need to protect who they are and what matters to them has manifested itself indirectly and subconsciously in their cultural practices of the perceived space and daily practices of identifying who they are, and how they appropriate space with their bodies and clothes. These include the women students’ need to gather in groups both in and outside class wearing their own cultural dress, in a collective (Alzeer, 2018b), creating their own unique spaces on campus (Alzeer, 2018a), and often distancing themselves from the outside society while physically occupying and constructing their own private spaces (cocoons) (Alzeer, 2017).

According to Spradley (1980, pp. 152-153), one of the universal themes found by ethnographers in every society involves practicing “informal techniques of social control”, which are ways to get people to conform to specific social rules and regulations, allowing social life to continue. In this case, it was the pressure women students put on each other to wear *sheilas* and *abayas* by staring, gossiping, socially excluding others and even verbally criticizing each other. Such practices of social control are even more escalated when the group feels the threat of extinction or loss of identity. Furthermore, due to the tribal nature of the UAE society as members of the society are closely related and intertwined, almost every family knows the others, so disappearing in the crowd is not an option for these women students. On the contrary, spatial visibility in the perceived space leaves them socially exposed and culturally confined to the socio-cultural rules of the majority.

This practice even culminated in a campaign initiated in the past by Student Life (an institutional division of Student Services at the university) to enforce proper conduct and dress code. The same campaign continues today 6 years later, however it has been adopted by the Student

Council. In the initial campaign, they used a strong visual and spatial representation in the perceived space of what is considered proper appearance for an Emirati female, producing several brochures that are still reproduced today. The initial campaign had life-size two-dimensional stands with the image of an Emirati woman wearing a 'proper' *sheila* and *abaya* (Figure 3 and Figure 4). A smaller poster of the same 2-dimensional stand continues to be replicated and plastered around the students lockers area by the Student Council (Figure 5 and Figure 6) carrying a sign with the following words in Arabic:

Rules of dress and conduct

XXXX University holds the name of a great man

Being respectful on campus reflects your respect to its name

Your ethics are like a mirror and modesty is the master value of these ethics

Femininity means gentleness, proper conduct, calmness

The success of the initiative is the result of cooperation and commitment.

[translation author's own]



Figure 2: A life-size two-dimensional stand with an image of an Emirati woman (2013)



Figure 3: The sign carried by the stand (2013)



Figure 4: Replicated small posters (2019)



Figure 5: Posters plastered in all lockers' areas (2019)

Wearing traditional dress is very important for the majority of Emiratis since it links to their sense of identity intensified by the fear of losing it being a minority in their country. Therefore, publicly calling for it through such visual banners and linking it to proper conduct alongside other practices like the disapproving looks and gazes and even verbal criticism can be considered informal techniques of social control (Spradley, 1980). Replacing the students' long *abayas* with modern clothing or even displaying modern revealing clothing under the abaya was socially resisted and institutionally contested. That the students' clothes, hair and accessories are seen as an extension of their bodies and a strong spatial and symbolic representation of the local Emirati culture is a testament to Foucault's observation that "in every society, the body was in the grip of very strict powers, which imposed on it constraints, prohibitions or obligations" (1977, p. 136). In fact, when asking one of the students during a mobile interview to explain the meaning of the poster (Figure 5), she said:

Student: I think it's the right thing to post because it shows like a person should be wearing something respectful.

Researcher: So modesty, yeah?

Student: Yeah. Because some people wear like *sheila* and *abaya* and...but THEN when you see the clothes underneath...It's all very revealing.

Several other students, including one from the Student Council, explained that the posters displayed (Figures 5 & 6) are mostly for the ones who exaggerate in their appearance with piercings and being overly revealing. Another student told me her mom was quite upset when she visited the campus, commenting: "why would the university allow them to wear like that?".

While for the majority these acts were acts of defiance, for the dissidents they were acts of self-expression and longing for freedom and female agency. In an interview, one of the dissidents passionately said "we are more than *sheila* and *abaya*, this does not define who we are".

In Lefebvre's terms, spatial practice of the perceived space ensures cohesion and continuity in terms of the competence and performance of each member of a society in relation to that space to allow for production and reproduction (Lefebvre, 1991). In this case, the majority produces and

protects the university public space, thus ensuring social unity and accepted visual representation of the body.

Public spaces on campus were not inviting or inclusive of the dissidents; their forged spaces were limited. These forged spaces that these students presented as spaces of their own included the classroom, which the majority of the dissidents interviewed presented as an inclusive and welcoming space. In class, students will freely socialize with the dissidents but will avoid them outside the class. The class also seemed safer as it was facilitated by the professors, who were mostly western or western educated. It was a common space for debates, discussions and construction of knowledge, which usually allowed actions of defiance and dissidence for the purposes of learning. Other freer spaces were the space outside the country borders when they travel aboard and they get to freely take off their *sheilas* and *abaya* without being criticised or reprimanded by their parents.

The perceived space (the real space of social and spatial practice) was extremely dominant in the students' conversations and understanding of space, as well as in the observations due to its practicality and materiality. Above all, a better understanding of this perceived space and its representations through the women's bodies, its associations and rhythms offered us a glimpse into the socio-cultural practices and representations of Emirati women students. It is important to note that the findings of this research represent only one trajectory and one view of such perceived space in time and space, many others are awaiting to be discovered and named.

Part II: The Textual Space And Feminist Geography

Over the past two decades we observed how the shy demeanor of the young Emirati women wrapped in black *sheilas* and *abayas*, complemented their mannerism and creativity in class. Because we teach literature and humanities, this encouraged students to share their writing with faculty. We found that some of their work deserved recognition and publication. As a result, we held a number of workshops inviting speakers to guide them on how to get published especially as the Ministry of Culture in the UAE highly encouraged the youth and gave them many incentives. Although the state was taking bold steps towards helping its citizens, families did not encourage the youth, especially women, to take advantage of opportunities related to creative or artistic spaces in public. Some professions were looked down upon by the community – especially writing and publishing as this exposes young women to public opinion, thus running the risk of sullyng their reputation and that of their families. Seeing this made some faculty members at the researched university campus, especially Hassall (2015) who ran the Literature club, introduce a creative writing competition to be run by the university in order to provide a 'safe space' for students that is accepted by their society. For those who still ran the risk of being controlled by overtly conservative families, the competition allowed them to remain anonymous by adopting pennames if they so desired. This resulted in a considerable number of women submitting, in many cases several, pieces of writing to make themselves heard. The project was a success and the winning pieces were compiled and published in an anthology under the name *Facets of Emirati Women* in 2015 by CreateSpace. This act comprises a milestone in the encouragement of young women's creativity and the competition continues to be run on a yearly basis by Hassall since its introduction in 2006.

For this research we have selected some short pieces from *Facets of Emirati Women* that demonstrate how students use the text in a dual form: as a space and as no space. Just as these young women, as demonstrated in the first section of the paper, appropriated campus spaces with

their bodies while using them as a representation of space to make a statement, here too the space which the written text affords has been adapted to address their needs. First of all, they used English as a medium of expressing themselves and avoided using Arabic, their mother tongue. This comprises a rebellious act against using their traditional language, which conjures in its use all the taboos and confinements placed upon them. The adopted second language in this case takes the place of a marginalized lingual space within their traditional community. English becomes a language of their own free choice and symbolizes for them a liberated space (Bista 2010).⁵ Thus, the resulting forged textual space becomes a place they can call their own. This serves two purposes: it breaks down taboos around using certain idioms in Arabic that would raise eyebrows and wagging fingers; it also shrouds them as many of their parents do not use or speak English. This appropriated lingual and abstract conceived space is seen as a safe haven and a no space as it cannot be seen or comprehended by their families and community. Thus, it becomes their earned and owned textual place as it is of their own shaping and molding. It is a place their families cannot touch – but at the same time it is made public by being published and read. While these writings did not have much influence on the traditional group and their families, they did help the more open minded university students to shape the structural inequalities of women’s lives and made parents open to having their daughters publish their creative work because it is done through an academic institution. Resorting to the use of pennames helped as it means that these students exist and do not exist. Their opinions are heard but they cannot be identified and made to pay a price for the nature of their thoughts. Under this pretext their work guarantees their visibility and their anonymity in one and the same time and becomes a newfound land that they can occupy.

The written pieces vary in themes. They cover a wide range of topics from definition of self and women to themes of isolation, love, disappointment, dreams, rebellion, loss of identity, modernity or anything that preoccupies them in their current stage in life. The following poem is by a student who chooses to use her first name Alanood. Since Alanood is a common name the young woman is satisfied by having asserted her identity by revealing her actual name, but by eliminating her family name she cannot be identified. This makes her a spokesperson for other young women by capitalizing on a place she can be present in and absent from, represented in yet remaining safely unknown.

*Far away from the shore
You hear nothing but “Alnahaam”
Singing “Ho ya mal” for the hungry hearts
Far away from the shore
You lose the sense of time
Today is like yesterday
And yesterday is like tomorrow
Your elbow will rust
And the shore is still far far away*

The first striking thing in this poem is that Alanood mixes two languages, Arabic and English, to show the two worlds she lives in. The English language is used in education and interaction while Arabic is used at home and among the Emirati community. The Arabic words in the poem are the actual words of the sailors who sung them in the not too far away past on their

⁵ English is generally regarded as the language of the colonizer and a force of oppression but in this context the use of English is seen as liberatory.

voyages out to sea. Their journeys were wrought with dangers and quite often they perished in the act of risking their lives during pearl diving. Pearl diving was the main source of income for many families before the discovery of oil. The poem is constructed on the duality of words and worlds. First, we have the world of the past in contrast to the present. Then the world of the sea where men venture out on unknown adventures in contrast to the dry desert land where women stand on the shore watching and waiting. It also shows the words used in the past in the sea songs of Al Naham, the singer who prompts men into action as he raises his voice with the verse “ho ya mal”. The verse depicts the language of men who boldly rode the sea in contrast to women’s lingual silence whose voices never rise with song as they wait behind in anguish.

The images used by Alanoud are quite symbolic and indicative of women’s marginalization and silence. The *hungry hearts* describe the women who are left out of action, out of danger and out of history standing forgotten on the shore and helplessly bidding farewell to their menfolk without knowing whether or not they would return and when. As women continue to wait, they “lose the sense of time”. This eternal timelessness does not only describe the world of yesterday but extends to the present time and predicts the future since *Today is like Yesterday, And yesterday is like tomorrow*. She shows how women’s lives continue to be an endless repetition of a silent space. Modern times have not brought about change in women’s representation as they rest their heads on their elbows signifying their helplessness. The fact that they will come to “rust” in this position rips the peace out of the sea imagery and song. While the men sing and toil, the women sit and stagnate. The poem’s last line predicts that the shore or delivery is still *far, far away*. Alanoud is no longer speaking about the men at sea but is referring to the rusting and stagnant space women are in. They have no land to sail to and no shore to receive them. The poem lends a space to express them and thus the text becomes the shore that lives beyond the present moment, beyond the past and beyond all tenses as the text is an eternal space. In this poem women have come to be seen by all the eyes that read the poem and their inner land is made known. In a few words Alanoud highlights the dichotomy of her life and feelings by invoking a call to be heard and celebrated just like the men raise their voice with their own song.

In the book *Opening Spaces*, Yvonne Vera (1999) comments on African women’s writing, in which they also use the text as their voice since the social constructs around them do not leave them room to express themselves: “If speaking is still difficult to negotiate, then the abstract non material conceived space of writing has created a free space for most women – much freer than speech. There is less interruption, less immediate and shocked reaction. The written text is granted its intimacy, its privacy, its creation of a world, its proposals, its individual characters, its suspension of disbelief. It surprises in the best carnival way, reducing distances, accepting the least official stance. The book is bound, circulated, read. It retains its autonomy much more than a woman is allowed in the oral situation. Writing offers a moment of intervention” (Vera, 1999 P.3).

These works are moments of intervention. Like the African women writers they are intervening in language to suspend a space for themselves in which they can be represented. In another piece of writing a young woman using the penname of Ashy attempts to define who she is in *Definitions of Woman*:

... FACET... polished surface of ... DIAMOND ...
 Very expensive ... STONE ... piece of
 ... mountain ... REASON OF EARTH’S STABILITY!!
 COULD BE A facet, WITH NO INNER MEANING!
 COULD BE A diamond, expensive when buying

*Cheaper when selling! Could be a STONE,
Meaning behind strength! Could be a
MOUNTAIN, life's stability source!*

Ashy's definitions range from the most precious to the worthless. The verse likening women to a diamond speaks about the value of women in Emirati culture. A diamond is expensive to buy just like an Emirati woman whose dowry is very high but cheap to sell as women once divorced lose their value. While this applies to women it does not apply to men as they retain their social value no matter what their status is or age. The above definition also touches upon one's inner worth and alerts to the fact that some have 'no inner meaning'. Ashy here is referring to some young women who remain unaware of their rights as separate educated individuals in the modern world.

The struggle with space and identity is taken up by a number of the writers. Sunshine in *Jungle* describes the space she finds herself in:

*I am an Emirati woman working inside a
jungle of issues; issues floating from right
to left, left to right, upwards and
downwards, there is no escape: even if I
could where do I head? Issues deeply
rooted in my soul, so eager to survive in a
jungle of issues.*

Finding a space of her own is of vital importance as Sunshine searches in all directions and finds no space for an Emirati woman. She asks *where do I head?* as all directions are denied her. Like Alanoud's far away shore, space is survival as she says she is *eager to survive* and explains that she is dealing with issues that are *deeply rooted* in no other place but inside of herself, in her soul. Her only escape is into the world of words as she slips into the textual narrative space to survive.

Places here compose an interesting variety of meanings since "places are contested, fluid and uncertain" (McDowell, 1999, p. 4). There are different kinds of places lending 'the criteria of difference not so much between places as between different *kinds* of places (Smith 1993, p. 99). According to Smith geographical scale 'defines boundaries and bounds the identities around which control is exerted and contested' (Ibid, p. 101). The creative pieces in *Facets* prove that Emirati women are trying to bond in the geographical boundaries of the book they are all composing. The text becomes their space. Brutal Romance in the poem *I'm the ...* writes:

*I'm the poet who writes about her release.
I'm the tormented soul who strives to be free.*

Writing is her shore, her space. The spatial importance of the text binds all these women as they write about issues deeply rooted in their souls or as this poem puts it in their *tormented soul* and they all strive to free themselves through the act of writing. For Brutal Romance the act of writing itself releases her from spaces forced upon her and unites her in a chosen space with her peers. Space also extends to the virtual space as depicted in *Black and White*:

*A Woman in black befriends a
man in white. They meet at a
place where they both feel at
home. They talk about themselves, but can't hear each
other. They spend hours
together, but haven't seen each
other. Still they know one another very well, since they
met in cyberspace.*

Cyberspace accessed through mobiles and technology tools is another area that deserves independent study. These technology tools are considered an extension of the self by “expanding the reach of the human senses, and allowing humans to experience, influence, and participate in events by reducing the constraints of time and distance” (Vishwanath and Chen, 2008, p. 1761). These devices act like prosthetics allowing female students to access virtual space, providing a gate to the outside world, beyond the fixed physical borders of campus space, and an escape from their everyday lives (Cahir and Warner, 2013). Cyber space is also considered an extension of the women’s “private room”, offering a space for them to be heard (Kimball, 2019). In the above poem the cyber space becomes a space for a rendez vous between an Emirati couple who live in a society that forbids interaction between the sexes. The poem is interesting as it involves young men who, just like women, feel bound and confined by traditions. Young Emirati men face the same difficulty in finding a space in which they can interact freely with women thus they resort to a virtual space where they cannot be caught.

One of the most important spaces mentioned in *Facets* is the space under the *sheilas* and *abayas*. While the former part of this paper deals with this issue, the creative writing part touches on the significance of the space signified by their clothing. In the short story *Beyond What We See*, Mahra says:

*Beyond what we see
Under the veil is another story,
seldom explored. Beyond black
is a beacon of wit and determination.*

The Shayla and Abaya gain their significance as they are seen to shroud and weave their own story. They symbolize a tale hidden and untold thus alluring the readers or the viewers with the idea that there is more than meets the eye.

F. Al Mazrouei in *Lost Soul* expresses the lost space a young Emirati woman feels in today’s modern world:

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

We also have Girl of Love defining in *Normal Hard Working Women* what a day of a working woman is like who has to work inside and outside of the house taking care of her family. Her life becomes one of slavery where every day is similar to the one before and the one coming after. Work here is not seen as part of liberating women but is a space of slavery where they lead a life devoid of pleasure for no space is left for themselves. Crimson Rose in *Untamed* touches upon the wild and untamed side of an Emirati young woman where she is ready to 'leap over boundaries' onto 'open paths; exciting lanes.' Her vocabulary focuses on space and she feels that spaces will open up for Emirati women bringing them a wild and exciting life.

From all of the above, there is no doubt that more than any other appropriated space, creative writing has expressed young Emirati women's thoughts. It allowed them to exercise their control and define their own boundaries in a textual geography that transcends the physical, cultural and limiting surroundings. It also allowed them to find a range of spatial areas that are truly authentic to their experience.

References

- Alzeer, G. (2018a). Spatializing higher education: Emirati women learners' hot and cold spaces. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 28(1), 46-62. DOI: 10.1080/09620214.2018.1470021
- Alzeer, G. (2018b) Women's spatial experiences in Emirati higher education: Between modernity and traditions. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 39(8), 1175-1194. DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2018.1478278
- Alzeer, G. (2017). Cocoons as a space of their own: a case of Emirati women learners. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 24(7), 1031-1050. DOI: 10.1080/0966369X.2017.1352567
- Bista, K. (2010). Factors of code switching among bilingual English students in the university classroom: a survey. *English for Specific Purposes World*, 9(29), 1-19.
- Elden, S. (2004). Between Marx and Heidegger: politics, philosophy and Lefebvre's, *The Production of Space, Antipode*, 36(1), 86-105. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-8330.2004.00383.x.
- Elsaadawi, N. (2016). *Diary of A Child Called Souad*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan (English Translation and Introduction by Omnia Amin).
- Elsaadawi, N. (2009). *The Novel*. Northampton, Massachusetts: Interlink Books (English Translation by Omnia Amin).
- Ferrare, J. J. & Apple, M. W. (2010). Spatializing critical education: Progress and cautions. *Critical Studies In Education*, 51(2), 209-221. DOI: 10.1080/17508481003731075
- Foucault M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. New York: Vintage Books (English Translation by Alan Sheridan). First published in French in 1975 by Editions Gallimard.
- Harvery, D. (1990). *The condition of postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Hassall, P. J., & Amin, O. (2015). *Facets of Emirati Women: English/Arabic Extremely Short Story Competition [ESSC]*. Charleston (SC): CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.
- Heard-Bey, F. (2011). *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates*. Dubai: Motivate Publishing.
- Khelifa, M. (2010). Trading Culture: Have Western-Educated Emirati Females Gone Western? *OIDA International Journal of Sustainable Development*, 1(3), 19-29. Available at: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1663362>
- Kimball, G. (2019). Media Empowers Brave Girls to be Global Activists. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 20(7), 35-56. Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol20/iss7/3>
- King, A. (2004). The Prisoner of Gender: Foucault and the Disciplining of the Female Body. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 5(2), 29-39. Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol5/iss2/4>
- Lefebvre, H. (2004). *Rhythmanalysis: Space, time and everyday life*. London: continuum. First published in French in 1992 by Editions Syllepse.
- Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing (English Translation). First published in French in 1974 by Editions Anthropos.
- McDowell, L. (1999). *Gender, identity and place: Understanding Feminist Geographies*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Middleton, S. (2010). Labourers' letters from Wellington to Surrey, 1840-1845: Lefebvre, Bernstein and pedagogies of appropriation. *History of Education*, 39(4), 1-21. DOI: 10.1080/00309230.2010.534102.

- Middleton, S. (2013). *Henri Lefebvre and education: space, history, theory*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Morrow, O., Hawkins, R. and Kern, L. (2014). Feminist research in online spaces. *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*. 22(4), 526-543.
doi:10.1080/0966369X.2013.879108
- Pillar, I. (2018). Dubai: Language in the ethnocratic, corporate and mobile city. In D. Smakman, and P. Heinrich (Eds.), *Urban Sociolinguistics: The city as a linguistic process and experience* (pp.162-180). Oxon: Routledge.
- Sheller, M., Urry, J. (2006). The new mobilities paradigm. *Environment and Planning*, 38(2), 207-226. DOI:10.1068/a37268.
- Sabban, R. (2013). الحداثة و التطور و تأثيرهما في العادات و التقاليد في المجتمعات الخليجية [Modernization and development and their influence on the norms and culture of the Gulf societies]. أبو ظبي: مركز الإمارات للدراسات والبحوث الاستراتيجية [Abu Dhabi: UAE The Emirates centre for strategic studies and research].**
- Singh et. al (2007). Student mobility and the spatial production of cosmopolitan identities. In K. Guslon and C. Symes (Eds.). *Spatial theories of education: policy and geography matters* (pp.195-214). New York: Routledge.
- Smith, N. (1993). Homeless/global: Scaling places. In J. Bird, B. Curtis, T. Putnam, G. Robertson and L. Tickner (Eds.), *Mapping the Futures: Local cultures, global change*. London: Routledge
- Spradley, J. P. (1980). *Participant observation*. US: Thomson learning.
- Stanek, L. (2011). *Henri Lefebvre on space: architecture, urban research, and the production of theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Talhami, G. H. (2004). *Women, education and development in the Arab Gulf countries*. Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates: Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research.
- Thomson, P. (2007). Working the invisible geographies of school exclusion. In K. N. Gulsona & C. Symes (Eds.) *Spatial theories of education: policy and geography matters* (pp. 111-129). New York: Routledge