RESEARCH ONLINE

Middle East Media Educator

Volume 1
Issue 1 *Middle East Media Educator*

Article 10

2011

Writing the Abaya Chronicles

Tina Lesher
William Peterson University, New Jersey

Follow this and additional works at: http://ro.uow.edu.au/meme

Recommended Citation
Lesher, Tina, Writing the Abaya Chronicles, *Middle East Media Educator*, 1(1), 2011, 54-60.
Available at:http://ro.uow.edu.au/meme/vol1/iss1/10

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

RESEARCH ONLINE

Writing the Abaya Chronicles

Abstract
For women of the United Arab Emirates, life has translated to extraordinary change. Just a generation away from a difficult desert existence, today's Emirati women represent the embodiment of oil-rich living, as wealth has afforded most of them with lifestyles marked by advanced educations, fancy cars, professional jobs, domestic help, and increasing leadership roles in the country. As noted in a UAE federal report, "women have always been the backbone of family life and the social structure of the UAE and they continue to remain an integral part of maintaining the nation's Islamic heritage and national culture" (UAE Ministry of State, 2008). For close to a year - 2006-07 - my task as a Fulbright Scholar centered on interviewing Emirati women about how their lives had changed in a region that went from abject poverty to extraordinary wealth in less than a half-century. Interviewees proved to be candid in their remarks, thus generating much interesting information about the way women have moved forward in an Islamic society. But some remained clear in their mandate that their names and photos not be published.

This journal article is available in Middle East Media Educator: http://ro.uow.edu.au/meme/vol1/iss1/10

Writing the Abaya Chronicles

by Tina Lesher | leshertina@gmail.com

Introduction

For women of the United Arab Emirates, life has translated to extraordinary change. Just a generation away from a difficult desert existence, today's Emirati women represent the embodiment of oil-rich living, as wealth has afforded most of them with lifestyles marked by advanced educations, fancy cars, professional jobs, domestic help, and increasing leadership roles in the country. As noted in a UAE federal report, "women have always been the backbone of family life and the social structure of the UAE and they continue to remain an integral part of maintaining the nation's Islamic heritage and national culture" (UAE Ministry of State, 2008).

For close to a year - 2006-07 - my task as a Fulbright Scholar centered on interviewing Emirati women about how their lives had changed in a region that went from abject poverty to extraordinary wealth in less than a half-century. Interviewees proved to be candid in their remarks, thus generating much interesting information about the way women have moved forward in an Islamic society. But some remained clear in their mandate that their names and photos not be published.

As a trained newspaperwoman, I wanted to bring the story of modernity to the fore, but was limited by such restrictions. Giving lectures became my vehicle to inform American audiences about Emirati women. Writing a non-fiction book based on the interviews was impossible without permission of the interviewees.

Then an idea emerged---why not write a novel with characters that encompass some of the information about the lives of these women? Actually, it was a suggestion brought from some of my former Emirati students on a visit to New York 18 months after I had completed the Fulbright stint that included teaching at Zayed University in Abu Dhabi, federal capital of the United Arab Emirates. Asked why I had failed to write a book about the women I interviewed, I reminded them that it would be impossible to secure permission from many interviewees, including the mothers of some of them. Journalists, I noted, want to be specific. By writing a nonfiction book with anonymous interviewees, I would be in violation of the tenets I teach as a writing coach to my students (Lesher, 1988). So the ZU students suggested a novel, and I began to write a fictionalized account about women in the UAE.

History

Today, most women, including those in the senior-age set in Abu Dhabi, reside in well-appointed villas surrounded by walls. They employ drivers, nannies, maids, and others who take on just about every task that an ordinary housewife would handle. Their lives are in direct contrast to the way they grew up in a desert community.

Abu Dhabi town in the 1950s featured scores of barasti, huts made of palm fronds, along the Arabian Gulf, or what Americans call the Persian Gulf. People lived in these dwellings without electricity or plumbing. Heat was oppressive, and health care less than minimal. Susan Hillyard who lived with her spouse, an oil company representative, in Abu Dhabi from 1954 to 1958, found herself the one to whom the women would come for small medically-related matters (Hillyard, 2002). She was the lone Western woman in Abu Dhabi at the time. The town was part of the Abu Dhabi Emirate, an independent territory ruled by the Al Nahayan family, and one of a number of emirates that dotted the area and together were British protectorates known as the Trucial States.

In 1960, when American doctors came to provide the initial medical services in Al Ain, another town in the Abu Dhabi Emirate, the infant mortality rate was 50 percent. The maternal death rate also was high, with nearly one in three young mothers not surviving difficult childbirths. Girls were married at young ages, some at 12 or 13. The bride had little if any say in the decision, despite her right to refuse a match (Soffan, 1980).

While struggling in such an environment, women also took on roles that today are perceived as leadership. In a 2008 address, Minister of State Reem Al Hashimi alluded to UAE history and noted that when the men went pearl diving for months at a time, "the women had to manage the day-to-day activities of family life" (Khaleej Times, 2008).

Then came the discovery of oil by a French-British consortium, with the first shipments leaving the Abu Dhabi Emirate in 1962. With Sheik Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahayan taking over the Ruler's reins from his brother a few years later, things changed rapidly in Abu Dhabi. Sheik Zayed shared the oil revenues and provided monies for families to build homes and start businesses; he ordered that buildings be constructed and bridges erected.

In 1971, when the British ended their association with the Trucial States, Sheik Zayed and the rulers of other emirates formed a new country - the United Arab Emirates. The Constitution called women equal to men, and free education for all was among the rights cited in the document (Sheik Mohammed website). Sheik Zayed remained a strong supporter of women's rights. Sheikha Fatima, one of his wives, founded the General Women's Association and became active in the push for women's rights. Today, as his widow, she is dubbed the "Mother of the Nation."

As the years passed, with Sheik Zayed serving as UAE president (elected by fellow rulers of the individual emirates) the UAE flourished - and so did opportunities for women. When the first university was opened in Al Ain in 1977, with separate campuses for males and females, many young women from throughout the Emirates took advantage of the schooling. Women also started businesses, purchased and drove their own cars, and became active in government work or non-profit organizations.

In 1998, Zayed University was opened with non-residential campuses in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, and one basic objective: to educate national women to be leaders of their country. The American model was evident in the curriculum with many professors coming from the United States and instruction in English, touted as the new business language of the country. ZU secured American accreditation within a decade.

The country's growth proved dramatic as millions flocked to the new oil-rich areas. Dubai, 90 miles north of Abu Dhabi, with a self-styled seven star hotel and gold markets, became known as the New York of the Middle East, yet Abu Dhabi gained the title of richest city in the world (Fortune, 2007). Today, the capital city is preparing to become the world's cultural tourism center, with the Louvre and the Guggenheim and other museums under construction on Saadiyat Island right off Abu Dhabi City. In just a few decades, modernity has brought scores of older Emirati women from the crude conditions of poverty-ridden desert life to the pinnacle of 21st century luxury.

American in Abu Dhabi

My ties to the UAE commenced in early 2001 when I arrived in Abu Dhabi as a visiting faculty member at Zayed University, having been invited by the then-dean of the College of Communication and Media Sciences (CCMS) to spend a semester sabbatical teaching. The university was in its sixth semester of operation, having opened in 1998 with just a first-year class, so there were no fourth-year students during my tenure. In a sense, this new educational

institution was operating much like a high school. Students had to stay on campus all day, five days a week, even when they did not have classes. Cell phones were popular, but not allowed; when one went off at an opening assembly with an important sheik in attendance, the owner of the phone was expelled.

Many students, especially those who had attended government high schools where instruction was in Arabic, struggled with the English language, while others, including skeikhas from the Al Nahayan ruling family, had been educated in private schools and with tutors, and were quite proficient in English. A number of my students were engaged and preparing to marry after they secured their degrees. Marriages, for the most part, were arranged by parents, and, unless her fiancé was a cousin, a bride-to-be would not meet him until the wedding day. By their mothers' standards, these girls would be "older" brides. Every ZU student I taught had a mother who was married as a teenager, some even as young as 12.

Though women could drive in the UAE, few ZU students had cars or licenses in 2001. The girls from wealthy, Abu Dhabi-based families arrived in fancy cars with drivers; often their nannies carried the mandatory laptop computers to the school doors for their charges, but nannies weren't allowed inside.

The UAE students were inquisitive, bright, and often quite shy in the new collegiate environment. They wore abayas, the traditional all-black robes that covered their dresses and skirts, and shaylas, long rectangular scarves that they wound around their heads. Many girls covered their entire hair, while others revealed the top-half of their heads. A few students did not wear shaylas at all, and they were considered a bit radical.

As the lone woman teaching in CCMS on the Abu Dhabi campus - and this surprised me immensely as I assumed that the university would seek out female role models - I became a sounding board for the girls; they asked questions repeatedly about my life and family, and related stories about their family lives to me.

Family constituted the basis of their social lives. The students spent little time with each other outside of school, and most had never stayed at friends' homes. What intrigued me most about the young women were their relationships with their grandmothers, probably because the latter were my age - or younger.

In Emirati tradition, if a woman were widowed, she usually moved in with the family of her oldest son. The tradition continued in modern families; thus, many students had paternal grandmothers residing at their homes. The students made it clear that the relationship between their mothers, usually in their 30s, and their grandmothers was not always the best. The grandmothers considered their daughters-in-law lazy and unproductive. After all, these women were waited on by nannies, cooks, maids, drivers, etc. Even today, grandmothers are vexed about the lifestyles of young Emiratis, or as one stated in a recently published book, "the generation that has lost its way and the will to do anything other than show off fancy cars and clothes" (Bristol-Rhys, 2010). My association with adult Emirati women was limited. Zayed University had few of them in its employ in 2001 as the school depended on expatriates for faculty and professional positions. What I knew about Emirati women came through dialogue with the students.

During my tenure that semester at ZU, I penned monthly email newsletters to friends and colleagues in the United States, and regaled them with tales of my experiences in the UAE. Selected sections of those communiqués were published by my university, and thus a wider audience read how I loved the challenge of teaching media-related courses in a country where a newspaper license can be suspended if the publication incites people against the government, or

offends Islamic beliefs. I also noted how I expected to face "culture shock" after returning home, when I no longer would be residing in a fully serviced apartment and enjoying the amenities of a beachfront upscale Middle East city (WP Newsletter, Fall 2001).

Over the next few years, I maintained a fascination with the UAE and the progress being made by its women. Every day I would read online the two English –language newspapers in the UAE---the Khaleej Times and The Gulf News---and print out stories about Emirati women who owned their own businesses or held unusual jobs or moved into the sports world or assumed leadership posts. I yearned to be able to return to the Emirates and conduct interviews on the changes in the lives of Emirati women, including older ones who had truly experienced the move from poverty to wealth. When I was named a 2006-07 Fulbright Scholar to the UAE, I got the chance to return.

Back to Abu Dhabi

With a lecturing/research joint award, I sought affiliation with an Emirati university and got that opportunity when Zayed University invited me to return and teach half-time while pursing my Fulbright project of interviewing Emirati women about the changes in their lives. So, five years after completing my first stint at ZU, I returned in August 2006 - and immediately saw changes. No longer were students required to be on campus all day, but only when they were scheduled for classes - as in the American model they were emulating. Students carried cell phones - some had two. The abayas no longer were all black, but often featured various kinds of colorful trim. Quite a few students wore nothing on their heads, and a few scrapped the abaya and shayla altogether in favor of jeans and T-shirts. Many of the girls drove to school, and those who arrived in chauffeured cars - the sheikhas and others from the wealthiest families, for example - longed to get licenses, too.

English language skills had increased dramatically, perhaps because students took more English classes prior to college and thus were better prepared. And the shyness in 2001 had given way to outgoing personalities. With a plethora of technology available to them, the students were well-versed in international affairs and understood the power - and the liabilities - of the media.

During the intervening five years, the professional staff of ZU had moved from a mostly expatriate group to one with many Emiratis. (The faculty remained mostly expatriate as Emiratis lacked the requisite academic credentials for English language universities). These UAE citizens - staffers and students - proved invaluable to me as they recommended interviewees and often made arrangements for me to meet with women they knew.

Slowly I built up a cadre of Emirati women who agreed to interviews, and learned about the way life was changing for all of them. Unlike in the past when girls were married as young teens, the number of unmarried women has increased dramatically. Unmarried, educated, professional females represent the fastest-growing sector of women ranks in the country. Interviewees in this category explained that they did not want to marry less educated men - and women in the UAE make up the majority of college students. The number of available bridegrooms is dwindling in other ways: while women are expected to marry only Emiratis, men can marry foreign women.

Since the brunt of paying for weddings falls to the man and his family, males are choosing foreign brides who don't require the elaborate weddings that please Emirati families' sense of position. The number of men with multiple wives is declining as it is simply too expensive to provide for them. The unmarried professional women seemed happy for the most part, as they are ascending within the ranks of their jobs and becoming increasingly independent. My interviewees stretched from young women helping to support their families after their uneducated spouses lost their jobs to members of the ruling family. I interviewed bankers,

scholars, the highest-ranking woman in the UAE Army, the nation's top woman golfer, the heads of ministry departments, businesswomen, and officials of universities.

In many cases to my surprise, these women had ties to the United States; some owned homes in America and others had been educated there. In addition, I interviewed several American women who married Emiratis, converted to Islam, and took up life a half-world away. All provided rich information about their lives and how they viewed the changes for women in the UAE. They talked about their professional jobs, their travel, their education, and their love of family and country. Their candor was mixed with the desire of many to remain anonymous.

ZU students offered to assist with interviews especially those that had to be conducted in Arabic and brought back rich data from older women who recalled the desert days. Many of these "seniors" yearned for the socializing that existed in the past, before people spent lives in villas built behind walls.

With a wealth of information from many interviews, I returned to the United States with the realization that I would not be able to write a nonfiction work but could educate others about Emirati women through lectures. People appeared almost mesmerized as they learned about a different culture and saw photos comparing the Emirates in the 1950s to its skyscraper skylines today. I retained my ties with ZU through a year of online teaching.

Then, when the idea for a novel arose from my ex-students, I successfully applied for a semester sabbatical from my university post, and took on a novel assignment, literally. While Emiratis have written books about the UAE's history and its people, novels based on characters in the Emirates are non-existent.

Penning The Chronicles

My objective from the outset was to write a nonfiction work that incorporated much of what I had learned and experienced during my stints in Abu Dhabi where most of the interviews were conducted. Basically, I wanted to create interesting composite characters who represented the new UAE but also to include some who had been raised in the formerly poor region before it became officially a country.

Friends and colleagues suggested I start my project at a writing colony where the entire emphasis is on spending days at a laptop and creating a great amount of copy in a short time. Thus I traveled to Eureka Springs, Arkansas, for a two-week stay at the Writers' Colony at Dairy Hollow, the flagship program of the Communication Arts Institute. There, ensconced in a private two-room suite, I wrote from dawn to late night, with breaks to take advantage of the historic town and its spa facilities, and to dine with the other writers-in-residence. My output was extensive, and a bit surprising to some other writers focusing on poetry and short stories. Yet, like others, they were curious about the United Arab Emirates, my personal experiences there, and the way of life for nationals and others in an oil-rich country.

The process for producing a novel from my personal perspective mirrors that for writing as a journalist. One needs to collect information, as I had done in the UAE, then order the material, develop the story, and edit it. To contrast the time periods from pre-oil days to the present, I centered the work on a 60-year-old woman, Farah, who years before had divorced her wealthy spouse after he took a second younger wife. She resides with a single professional daughter who enjoys playing golf even in groups with males. They live across the street from one of Farah's sons who is married to an American he met while studying at the University of Pennsylvania. Farah's granddaughters attend a university where they are taught public speaking by an American professor who becomes friendly with the family.

Farah, independent and wealthy through varied business ventures, is encouraged by her granddaughters to become more active physically, so she and her childhood friend, Amna, become regulars at an Abu Dhabi women's gym where they befriend an American ex-journalist whose life is clouded by a mystery. To emphasize the growing number of businesswomen in the UAE, I had one of Farah's Emirati-American granddaughters join her close friends in setting up a cake-making operation with the help of a pair of Philadelphia bakery owners who acted as consultants.

Much as I did from Abu Dhabi, the professor-character sends lengthy email newsletters detailing interesting happenings in her own life, from attending a university graduation that could be termed "over the top," to celebrating a golf championship won by Farah's daughter. Of course, I thought it was important to create characters who represent the ruling family, so several sheikhas have significant roles in the novel.

Emiratis make up a maximum of 20 percent of the population in their own country, with millions of expatriates working there. Many Filipino women, for example, work in nail salons and beauty parlors, and live together in cramped apartments. A few of them became characters too, and their relationship with demanding Emirati clients and each other is another focal point of the tale.

The American connection is evident throughout, and the story winds up with a number of characters, including sheikhas, visiting Ground Zero in Manhattan. Two of the reported 9-11 hijackers came from the northern Emirates, but I wanted readers to know that the Emiratis were devastated by that terror attack and retain close ties to the U.S. government. After thinking a long time about the title, I settled on The Abaya Chronicles as the national dress remains a cultural part of the UAE.

Into Print

Completing a novel is only the first step to getting the work published. From the outset, I had decided against seeking an agent who would, according to other writers, spend a year or so trying to find a small publishing company to take on the work of a first novelist. Many authors report that their publishers have been weak in marketing. But I already had some experience in the self-publishing world, having written a book in 2006 about 12 women, all born in 1943 and all residents of Westfield, the New Jersey town where I live. Club '43 (Lesher, 2006) was published through authorhouse and put on the market during my Fulbright year. Frankly, I did little to promote it although it probably ranks as a "top-seller" in Westfield since residents wanted to read about people they know.

My objective was to publish The Abaya Chronicles as quickly as possible, so that I could return to my professorial post after my sabbatical with a finished product in hand. So with my husband, I established Haverford Publishing, an LLC under New Jersey state law, and contracted with IUniverse to have the book printed/published. This allowed the book to be available for sale on all major websites, including amazon.com, and to be available as an e-book or as a selection for portable reading devices. Thus, The Abaya Chronicles would be available to anyone - even in the Middle East.

The cover was designed by Linnea Rhodes, an artist-friend, who had read the manuscript and asked if she might do the cover. The kickoff for the book with an author's talk was at the Westfield Memorial Library, where a standing-room-only crowd heard the story of my treks to Abu Dhabi and my path to publication. I had purchased books at cut prices and sold many copies that night.

Recognizing that I was not going to hit the New York Times book review list or any other major one, I geared marketing to the local area, as well as to a wide audience of e-mail contacts. As expected, in a country where books can be banned, Emirati bookstores have been reluctant to feature a work that has Emiratis marrying Irish Catholics and references to topics like 9-11. I know that Emiratis have read the book as some have sent me photos of themselves holding it. Their comments have been guarded as they deal with a work of fiction that questions some of their rigid structures.

Early on, I received a call and was interviewed by The National, today one of the two major English-language papers in the UAE. I even sent photos to the reporter. The article was never published as I suspect the editors were reluctant to promote a novel that might not gain the support of the sheikhas, some of whom have read the book but not commented on it. An interview on Dubai Nightline radio did win some support, even from the Fulbright program that promoted a podcast of it on its Twitter site.

Today I am again on the local lecture circuit to book clubs and civic organizations that want to hear about the UAE and its women. To these audiences, I say that I wrote what I term "an educational novel," as its purpose was to create characters of women in a country far away in the Gulf. Many attendees at these talks later email to say they enjoyed reading about another culture and about the women who wear abayas.

Would I have fared better had I utilized my journalistic background to write a nonfiction book about the women? Perhaps but it would have taken much longer. In a sense, it was my education and work in the newspaper field that allowed me to conduct in-depth interviews and thus secure information needed to write about interesting women in a far away nation. Moreover, I now have the experience to describe to my graduate students how to combine the tenets of professional writing with the creativity of fiction.

References

Bristol-Rhys, Jane. Emirati Women, New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

Gimbel, Barney. The richest city in the world. CNN money.com, March 12, 2007.

Hillyard, Susan. Before the Oil. Bakewell, England: Ashridge Press, 2002.

http://www.sheikhmohammed.co.ae

Lesher, Tina Rodgers. The Writing Coach Movement: Teaching Composition in a New Context. Unpublished dissertation, Rutgers University, 1988.
Lesher, Tina. "Dateline Abu Dhabi: All the Gnus and Camels, Too," WP Magazine, Winter 2001.
Lesher, Tina. Club '43. Bloomington, Ind.: authorhouse, 2006.
Lesher, Tina. The Abaya Chronicles. Bloomington, IN: IUniverse, 2010.

Soffan, Linda Usra. The Women of the United Arab Emirates, London: Croom Helm Barnes & Noble, 1980.
Staff reporter. "Reem says UAE women always showed the way," Khaleej Times, March 11, 2008.
UAE Ministry of State. Women in the UAE: A Portrait of Progress, 2008.