“Unheard Melodies” from Behind the Veil: Male and Female Omani Student Responses to Translated Short Stories by Arab Women Writers

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“"Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter...."”

John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn”

Abstract
This paper focuses on two short stories translated from Arabic: “I Never Lied” by Qumashah al’Ulayyan, and “The Duties of a Working Mother” by Wafa Munawwar. Using a framework of reader-response and schema theory, they will be considered from the perspective of Omani EFL college students (male and female) for whom they were set texts. Under investigation is the extent to which student responses to them are conditioned by cultural and linguistic orientation. The paper then recommends the integration of such an approach into English language and literature teaching, seeing this as a benefit for students, especially ESL learners.

Introduction
The house was quiet and the world was calm.
The reader became the book; and summer night

Was like the conscious being of the book.
The house was quiet and the world was calm.

The House was Quiet and the World was Calm
Wallace Stevens
Literature constitutes the heart of humanities studies because, as Karolides (2000) says, it “reveals the human condition…the triumphs and defeats of the human spirit” (p.22). He also argues that literary texts provide learners with a large and valuable diversity of people, concerns, situations and experiences. Experiencing this enriches readers, bringing them closer to the lives of others; indeed, when this connection is strong, they may even, as it were, exchange lives with characters. This maximizes reader interaction with the text by providing space for considerable personal and emotional involvement. In addition, with its multiple perspectives and possible interpretations, literature can stimulate reflection and promote critical thinking. Hence, as Langer (1990) observes, “They (learners) sometimes go beyond the particular situation, using their own lives and those of others they know…. In doing so, they open possibilities for meaning, leaving room for alternative interpretations and changing points of view. The reading of literature then involves a great deal of critical thought” (p.814). Thus, literature engages learners emotionally, socially, linguistically and cognitively. However, to create positive learner attitudes, texts, helpful and relevant, need effective presentation. Learner background and experience must be considered, as is stressed in reader-response theory.

**Reader-response theory**

Reader–response theory, as the name suggests, foregrounds readers, their reading contexts, and their experiences as key factors in creating meaning. This differs from traditional approaches that privileged the author, the content, and the form of a given literary work. While I.A. Richards pioneered the approach in the 1920s, it was further developed by D.W. Harding and Louise Rosenblatt in the 1930s. In the 1950s, Walker Gibson proposed the idea of the “mock-reader,” stressing the uniqueness of a literary work and suggesting that readers might need specialized training to unlock text-embedded meaning. This led Poulet (1980) to assert that “the literary work is actualized only through a convergence of reader and text” (p.42). Iser (1980) went a step further, boldly crediting the reader with special power: “The reader must act as co-creator of the work by supplying that portion which is not written but only implied” (p.57). The “concretization” of a text in any particular instance requires that the reader’s imagination comes into play. In other words, the text is completed by the reader’s creative activity, and multiple interpretations provide evidence of its “inexhaustibility.” However, amidst the process of creation and interpretation, the reader need not be confined only to what is implicit in the structure of the work.
This, however, is not without its complexity. According to Fish (1980), the reader is engaged in an activity that is “minute, complicated, strenuous, and never the same from one reading to the next” (xvii). Riffaterre (1980) also insists that “the place where sense is made or not made is the reader’s mind rather than the printed page or the space between the covers of a book” (p.36). Thus, meaning is not something that belongs to the text but is a product of the reader’s activity.

Literature by its nature seeks to be engaging, and reading it clearly exposes students to language in various contexts. To cultivate a love of it among EFL learners, however, needs careful fostering. It often requires showing them how literary works are related to their lives or arise from their own contexts. In the present study, they EFL Arabic learners were able to appreciate that the stories under discussion were originally Arabic in both language and context but were translated into English. Hence, the story has a familiar context, which is assumed to engage Arab students, but is presented into English for language enhancement purposes.

**Reader response and cultural interaction**

Readers’ responses to texts can vary depending on cultural distance. Learners are not blank slates but come to a text imbued with perceptions from their own culture (Al-Mahrooqi, 2003). And because culture instills norms and beliefs in its adherents, which mark their identity as insiders, it is logical for those within one culture to respond to literature differently from those within another (Fish, 1980). When text and reader culture match, involvement is optimized. An effective way to juxtapose a native and non-native language culture is to translate literary work by the native culture’s writers into a foreign language. In an Arabic-speaking country, for example, one might introduce into an EFL class an Arabic short story translated into English and then invite student response to it. This would involve learners in a process both lasting and meaningful (Al-Mahrooqi, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c). The following sections address Arab writers and the short story as the Arab world’s genre of choice.

**The Arabic short story**

Storytelling has deep roots in the Arab world, with Galland’s translation of the 1001 Nights collection, published in 1707, stirring interest across the Western world (Allen, 1994). The emergence of the modern Arabic written short story is connected with the beginning of
printing. Indeed, it is interesting that in his study of narrative genres, Allen (1994) says the preferred Arabic term for the short story is precisely ‘qissah (story) qasirah (short),’ a literal translation of the English term.

**Arab male short story writers**

Tracing the broad development of the Arabic short story is difficult because pattern and pace have varied, influenced by many factors (Al-Mahrooqi & Al-Jahwary, 2011), and with each region having its pioneering figures. Mahmoud Teymour’s collection, translated into English by Denys Johnson-Davies (2006), is seen as a watershed event and Teymour himself is regarded as the pioneer of the Arabic short story. Writers like Teymour, Dhu-al Nun Ayyub, Tawfiq Yusuf Awwad and others have used this form of expression to air pressing societal issues such as the status of women and their roles in the traditional family structure, variations in husband-wife relationships, and other areas of debate. As a result, the short story’s popularity since the 1950s has astounded scholars with its sheer variety and abundance (Allen, 1994).

**Arab women short story writers**

For a long time, male writers dominated the scene, while female writers were completely marginalized (Al-Mahrooqi & Al-Jahwary, 2011). Only recently have women writers slowly emerged in literary circles, with increasing opportunities for higher education and employment fostering their rising energy and creativity (Mor-Cohen, 2005). Suhayr al-Qalamawi (1911-1997), said to be the first Arab woman to obtain a doctorate in the mid-1900s, worked on the *1001 Nights* collection and in 1935, published her own volume of short stories entitled *Ahadith Jaddati* (*My Grandmother’s Tales*). Later, writers like Layla Ba‘ Albakki, Colette Khuri, and Ghadhah al-Samman “shocked and defied the society” with their work, which was their precise aim, according to Halim Barakat (Allen, 2006). By exploring their characters’ inner lives and sensitivities, they widened channels for free expression (Mor-Cohen, 2005; Altoma, 1997). However, Nawal al Saadawi and Hanan al-Shaykh’s brand of feminist fiction is considered “Western” in outlook, and widely viewed with skepticism (Amireh, 1997), while Alifa Rafaat’s implicit championing of gender issues seems to suggest that she is revolting against societal norms related to women’s overall place in Arab society. Situated within a strictly religious and traditional framework, such writings accept that “men are in charge of women” but they interrogate man-made interpretations, assumptions and
contradictions revolving around a woman’s status and seek answers to questions long left unasked (Davies, 1983).

Arab women writers, therefore, are slowly projecting their experience and vision of the world in terms of society, community, family and issues of concern to us all, irrespective of nationality, culture, race or gender. Interest in their work is growing as more of their anthologies are published (Amireh, 1997).

The study and its context
Using a framework of reader-response and schema theory, two short stories translated from Arabic, “I Never Lied” by Qumashah al’Ulayyan, and “The Duties of a Working Mother” by Wafa Munawwar, were considered from the perspective of Omani EFL college students (male and female) for whom they were set texts. Under investigation was the extent to which student responses to them were conditioned by cultural and linguistic orientation. The study took place in Oman, an Arab and Muslim country located in the south of the Arabian Peninsula. Oman has an ancient history and civilization. Embracing Islam voluntarily when Prophet Mohammed’s envoy urged them to do so, Omanis since then have held firmly to their faith. Although Oman built an empire in the 1700s and 1800s, it fell into depression in the 1900s, with life remaining traditional and unprogressive. When His Majesty Sultan Qaboos took the throne in 1970, the country began a rapid process of modernization, using its oil as the main source of income. Formal education on a large scale commenced and girls—long denied education beyond the Islamic madrasa (Quranic schools)—were given equal opportunity with boys to enroll in government schools. Although Quranic schools were coeducational, modern formal schooling has been largely segregated. In tertiary education, however, males and females study together, though they sit separately in the classroom. Customarily, they do not engage in mixed-gender pair or group work.

At the family level, male and female upbringing is similar in some ways, while different in others. Both genders have separate spheres and responsibilities, though government laws do not discriminate between them. Much responsibility is placed on women as guardians of the society’s morals and as the main care givers for youngsters. Their social status, however, is inferior to that of men, who have more freedom and whose mistakes are more tolerated.
Much is expected from women, and even more from working women who bear the dual responsibility of bringing income for the family and attending to their domestic duties.

**Rationale for the study**

Research has shown that EFL students feel that literature classes do not involve them in discussion fully relevant to their lives or directly address their needs and concerns, especially when texts arise from foreign cultures (Al-Mahrooqi, 2003). Since research has found that texts that are psychologically distant from the readers or culturally unfamiliar might not be readily understood by foreign language learners, it is worth exploring how familiar texts presented in a foreign language would be received by learners. Of course, grappling with unfamiliar and difficult to understand texts might lead to frustration and hence stunt student language learning (Ibid). From another angle, reading a text that is culturally close to one’s heart may promote student motivation, which in turn may lead to better student participation and thus better lesson content internalization.

Because the socio-cultural contexts in which the student participants were raised are bound to affect their responses to and interaction with literature, giving them stories from their own culture might provide researchers with insight into the type of texts those same students like to read and the type of involvement and interaction they would experience. Furthermore, it was believed that investigating the reactions of members of both genders to stories familiar in terms of culture but distant in terms of language would demonstrate whether the psychological distance between the texts and readers was likely to vary according to gender.

Within this context, the study's two main questions were:

1. How would female and male Omani students respond to stories written about their culture but translated into English?
2. What is the effect of culture and language on their responses?

**The selected stories**

For the present study, the two stories chosen were “I Never Lied” by Qumashah al’ Ulayyan and “The Duties of a Working Mother” by Wafa Munawwar. Both present female struggles and shed light on societal expectations of women in the Arabian Gulf. “I Never Lied” is about a young woman, Suaad, who marries a man she hardly knows and who asks her on...
their wedding night whether there was ever a man in her life before him. As a schoolgirl, she had gotten to know a young man, Hisham, over the phone, and at his request, had given him her picture, which, unfortunately, he intended to blackmail her with to coerce her into going out with him—a situation completely unacceptable in Arab Gulf culture. Her friend, Layla, who had “introduced” her to him advises her to go out with him; but Suaad consults her mother who resolved the problem by speaking to him herself when he telephoned Suaad. Since Suaad had emerged from the problem unscathed, her response to her husband’s question was in the negative.

“The Duties of a Working Mother” revolves around a female teacher, Laila, a wife and a mother of four children. Her husband wants her to quit her job, but she is reluctant, because she derives much personal satisfaction from it. Hence, she tries to balance her professional and domestic duties and succeeds, without much help from her husband.

**Participants**

A total of 57 male and female students from four EFL reading classes participated in the study. Two classes of 33 students (22 females and 11 males) read “I Never Lied” and two classes (13 females and 11 males) read “The Duties of a Working Mother.” Participants had all completed the English Foundation Program or were exempted from it by a high grade in Placement and Exit Tests—college requirements that determine if a student needs English tuition before registering for credit courses in their chosen colleges. The participants ranged in age from 18-20 years.

**Procedures**

The stories were assigned as a class activity. Students were asked to read each story, write down their free response, and then answer questions about how they interacted with it and what they thought or felt while reading it. They were given the option of responding and answering the questions in English or Arabic or a combination of both if they felt it necessary. Students were told that the most important concern was to express their ideas and emotions in the way they felt most at ease with. After completing the tasks, responses were gathered and analyzed according to Squire’s categories (1964).
These are:

1. Literary judgment: assessing the language of the text in terms of its difficulty level.
2. Interpretation: saying what actions and events mean. This involves trying to determine the meaning of a certain description, emotion or event in the story.
3. Narration: retelling what happens in the story or restating the events and characters’ actions.
4. Association: establishing links between the readers’ past experiences and the story. For example, linking an event in the story with another in a participant’s own life.
5. Self-involvement: writing about how participants felt about what happened in the story. This involves how they have reacted emotionally to the story’s events.
6. Prescriptive judgment: instructing the characters on what they should or should not have done in the story. An example of this is when a participant says, “the character should not have listened to her friend. She should have thought about the consequences of it first.”
7. Miscellaneous: responding in any way that does not belong among the above.

The responses were classified according to the above categories and then tabulated. Percentages for each category were calculated on a gender basis to allow comparison. Total response numbers (from both genders) were calculated for a quantitative comparison. Quantitative and qualitative results are both discussed in the following section.

**Findings**

**Responses to “I Never Lied”**

Responses to “I Never Lied” are presented first. The total number of male responses was 200 and female responses 306. This difference arises from the difference between the number of female and male respondents: 22 females and 11 males. The table below shows the distribution of responses under each category.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response category</th>
<th>No. of male responses</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>No. of female responses</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Literary judgment</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>10.74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretational</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>7.67%</td>
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As Table 1 indicates, the percentages of male and female responses showed more similarity than divergence, signifying the influence of a uniform culture to which both genders belong. The highest response percentage was for the “narrational category” for both males and females, followed by “associational category” responses. The nature of the story, as judged by all participants, being simple and drawn from their culture, might have made recalling the story’s events and associating them with their actual lives easy. Females and males were emotionally involved in the story almost to the same degree, although the main character, Suaad, is a woman. However, females had more “associations” with the story (21.24%) than males (17.5%), probably because the protagonist is a woman, and many female participants identified with her and her struggle. However, that Suaad is a woman from their culture who broke, or was about to break, a moral code (e.g. having a relationship with a man she is not married to), made female respondents rather judgmental of her actions. Hence, many “prescriptive judgment” responses were registered. In fact, females showed more “prescriptive judgment” responses than the males. They said Suaad should not have listened to her friend and spoken to the man on the phone, and should have never given him her picture. They also attempted more “interpretations” of the story in order to make sense of its events. Most males showed some understanding for Suaad’s situation, but not all placed the blame on Hisham.

Though for the most part similar, there were also significant gender differences in the responses, which can be attributed to societal expectations. In their “interpretations” and “associations,” female respondents described men as wolves, were-wolves, foxes, and monsters, ready to pounce on their “prey.” They were perceived as immoral, unethical, conniving and deceitful beings who would betray girls once they had established a bond with
them. Thus, they placed the responsibility for Suaad's involvement with Hisham on the man. To them, she was a victim of Hisham's scheming. Except for one, no males used the adjectives as the females to describe Hisham. In fact, two males placed the responsibility for what happened on Suaad alone, one simply declaring that she deserved what happened to her. Nonetheless, all respondents, male and female, agreed that the story portrayed what is now happening in our Arab Gulf society due to the spread of cell phones and the Internet. Unsuitable friends, it is felt, are a main reason for leading people astray. Almost all females disapproved of the question that Suaad’s groom asked her once they got into the plane: “Was there any man in your life before me?” Feeling for the newly-married girl, females thought it insensitive of her husband to ask this question on the first day of their marriage. They wondered what kind of a man he was to do such a thing. On the other hand, only two males commented on this question, both seeing it as dangerous and thinking Hisham brave to ask it! Hence, there were distinctly different stances taken by both genders regarding this matter.

Nearly all respondents (with the exception of two males and four females) said they became involved in the story, but the females seemed to be more intensely so. They responded significantly more than males about Suaad’s mother and liked the way she acted. They were also especially involved at the beginning of the story when the mother was crying because Suaad would be leaving her to go to London with her newly-married husband. Many females spoke about their own anticipation of what would happen on the day they got married. One said she would ask her mother to prepare her for the wedding, but she would not go to a salon as this is not part of Omani culture. Another mentioned that her mother had told her that one day she would get married, whether she liked it or not, because “someone is already waiting for you.” A number described weddings that had taken place in their families: cousins’ and sisters’ weddings and the family’s emotional reactions to this bittersweet event. One remembered her mother, who had passed away when she was eight. She said she would still find someone to take care of her if she needed anything, as she had “the best father in the world” and a very wonderful stepmother.

By contrast, no males mentioned anything about their future wedding, or how their mothers and family would react to the event. All except one male, and all females, mentioned that they had read or heard of stories, watched films, read poems, or listened to songs similar in theme to “I Never Lied.” These respondents also agreed that what they had read, heard or
watched differed in terms of denouement because the endings they recalled were always catastrophic or disastrous. All except three (two females and one male) liked the story’s ending, but the three who did not thought it did not reflect reality and disliked the fact that the “bad people” (Hisham and Layla, Suaad's friend) did not get punished for their wrongdoing.

**Male associational responses**

Here are two examples of male associational responses:

1. I felt that this story was explaining what is going on in our society. It explained the fact that most girls might face problems like this and might be victims at the end and they might damage their life by their hands [sic]. The text is a good one because it is trying to solve a common problem in our society and this problem might cause a lot of negative reflections.

2. I felt so sorry because such things are happening in Arabian countries. I remember many girls who fall in [sic] this trick with boys. The story is interesting and every event in this story is really happening in our life, to our friends or people around us. It reflects the reality of the relationships between girls and boys.

**Female associational responses**

Female associational responses were more intense. Examples are as follows:

1. I remember that the same story exactly happened to one of my classmates in school. Actually this story reminds me of the time when my mother told me to choose good friends because now I know what they can do for you. Hisham is a stupid guy. If the girl made a mistake, why did he threaten her and use her picture to force her to go with him? If she is his sister would he like that to happen to her?

2. I felt sorry for Suaad and also afraid for her because I could imagine how she was in real trouble. I could also see how women in our society are treated and exploited. I could feel the tenderness of the mother and how she dealt with the situation patiently. I recall many things, weddings, and how most of the problems are connected to marriage. I could see our Arabian society through the story and how such an issue is very common nowadays. I have also seen a lot of Arabian series which discuss a lot of the same issues. They discuss the male’s attitudes towards their wives’ past. In addition, they discuss how women who behave randomly pay the price at the end. Hisham didn’t know the real meaning of love because he was only entertaining
himself. He didn’t think about Suad’s family and its reputation. If he imagined one of his sisters in Suad’s place, he would have killed her. Since this had nothing to do with him individually, he was ready to ruin her reputation.

3. I focused on the image of the mother when she was weeping over her daughter. It presents the image of eastern mother when her daughter gets married. The story is very interesting because I felt things in it - especially these kinds of things which happen in our society.

4. I remembered a Kuwaiti family which lives in a luxurious and spectacular house like Suad’s and a simple and typical family (Layla’s) that their furniture smells dusty.

5. The text is something we used to hear about, so the place, event, sights, smells and attitudes are usual things for us. The text brings memories of things we heard about or stories we have seen happening with some girls.

**Female self-involvement responses**

As mentioned earlier, females felt more intensely and personally involved in the story. Here are some of their responses that reflect their level of engagement:

1. At first I felt embarrassed because in our society it is not allowed to read such a story and I feel that girls should not speak to strangers or trust boys who call them because this will lead to a dark end. I am interested in the story because nowadays we hear about a lot of stories like this. I feel so embarrassed while reading this story because our class has boys and girls. So this is not a suitable place to talk about this issue.

2. This story is related to my life, because I know someday I will have to leave my mother and my home to go to my husband and live another way of life. Only thinking of what will happen next makes me feel terrified.

3. It awakened my conscience because there are many girls who love from their heart but at the end the heart gets broken. As I read through the story, I felt that I am that girl, as if I lived in her place.

4. The text represents the typical Omani house with all of its details and actions, so it immediately calls to my mind my own house because they share many details. I felt very involved in the text because it dealt with an issue that is close to my life as an Omani girl who knows exactly what the other females in her society are facing.
5. The text calls to my mind the memory of my mother when she said that one day you will not be here. There is someone who is waiting for you even if you want or not that day must come. So I just sit by and hope never to grow up!!

Another major difference was in the type and number of “prescriptive judgment” responses both genders made to the story. Females especially, were disappointed with Layla and Suaad and instructed Suaad to act differently so that she would not get into trouble. In these responses, both females and males used Qur’anic verses, such as “Follow not Satan’s footsteps” and Prophet Mohammed’s popular proverb “A friend is a dragger,” meaning a friend can drag you into doing many wrong things.

**Female prescriptive judgment responses**

However, female responses were more elaborate and contained such advice as:

1. Before you take a step forward, think about the consequences.
2. Be careful in choosing friends. Bad friends can ruin ones’ life. Don’t trust or love anyone you don’t know, unless he accepts to marry you and talk to your family.
3. There are a lot of bad stories happened around us but no one learns from them. I think if anyone makes his/her thinking clean without bad thoughts, they will have a good life. Also we cannot forget to remember what God said – that it is not a good thing and it destroys our societies. I advise everyone to think from his mind not from his heart.

The differences are, again, attributable to culture and its different expectations of both men and women. From a patriarchal society’s point of view, women are held accountable for any action considered immoral or unethical by the culture, even if the action is committed by two agents—a male and a female. Women are shamed for life if they are found to engage in any illicit relationship with men. Men, however, suffer no such shame and reputational damage. While this is view is engrained in Arab culture, it completely contradicts Islamic teaching, which places equal responsibility on both men and women for any shared action. However, Qur’anic instruction is overridden by Arab cultural practice, which unfortunately has existed since pre-Islamic times.
The response differences from both genders mark the distinction between them as two different sub-communities within Omani culture. Females share more similarities among themselves than with the male community - yet both communities belong within the same society with its cultural norms and practices. Hence, Fish’s (1980) idea of “interpretative communities” (p.171) seems relevant when considering responses to “I Never Lied.”

As indicated in the reflection task, in terms of language and comprehension, the story was well understood by all participants. All but three liked to read culturally-relevant stories translated into English. In their opinion, this would help them develop their language skills, particularly their reading speed and vocabulary. A few mentioned that reading translated stories would motivate them to read more as they reflected their own realities. Al-Mahrooqi (2003) found similar results. In the words of one participant:

“When students are familiar with the main ideas of the stories, it encourages them to read more. Translated stories can help to develop their English and increase their vocabulary. Also reading translated stories is better for students than foreign stories because these stories show their culture and their customs. Therefore, they will not be confused while reading why the characters behave in a certain way.”

The three respondents who preferred to read authentic English stories rather than translated ones believed that authentic stories would enrich their vocabulary and expose them to new experiences, ideas and cultures unfamiliar to them. Hence, they would learn more about the world. This is vividly expressed in the following response:

“I do not like to read more translated stories like this one because I think these stories would speak about experiences that I was exposed to before. Reading English stories can make my mind open to new experiences, and make me know about other cultures and their traditions. Also the English stories can provide me with a great deal of vocabulary.”

In the reflection task, a few participants mentioned a difficulty with vocabulary, but almost all remarked that this was eased by familiarity with the story due to cultural background. Hence, participants arrived at a good understanding of the story, and their recall of its events was comprehensive and accurate. This in turn led to a better and more complete recall.
Responses to “The Duties of a Working Mother”

Eleven male participants and thirteen females read the story’s English translation and responded to it. Male responses totaled 145 and female responses, 191. Overall, there were fewer responses to this story than to “I Never Lied” possibly because it is much shorter. Table 2 shows the distribution of responses across the categories:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response category</th>
<th>No. of male responses</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>No. of female responses</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Literary judgment</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8.27%</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9.38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretational</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5.51%</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7.29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narration</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>41.37%</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>40.62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associational</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15.17%</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>11.97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-involvement</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8.96%</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>13.02%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prescriptive judgment</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>14.48%</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7.29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Male and Female Responses to “The Duties of a Working Mother”

Table 2 above shows that “narration responses” received the highest percentage rate among both males and females, followed by “associational responses” for males and "self-involvement responses" for females. Females offered more “interpretations” and “prescriptive judgments” than males, a finding recalling that from responses to “I Never Lied.” As can be seen from the table, 8.27% of male responses and 9.3% of female responses focused on "literary judgment.” The free-response task showed that the majority of females and males liked the story because it reflected a common and serious social issue, with one female describing issue as “universal” and not specific to Omani society. A male respondent who did not like the story attributed his attitude to the “lack of solution” [sic] at the end of the story. His reaction resembles that of participants who did not like the first story’s ending because they felt it did not reflect reality. Individual differences manifested themselves in
responses from the same gender groups. Even when they made similar responses, their reasons varied. For example, three females who said they did not like the story gave different reasons. One thought that it contained new vocabulary and another thought it might discourage women from working. The third said that she found it boring. The rest said the story was easy because its style and ideas are clear, its language simple and its vocabulary familiar. However, nine mentioned encountering new words, but said they were no obstacle to comprehension due to familiarity with the cultural context. Most respondents said they liked reading stories arising from own culture and translated into English, hence echoing an opinion expressed about “I Never Lied.” Hence, integrating familiar stories into literature teaching might be advisable.

“Interpretational responses” were few (5.5% for males and 7.29% for females). This can be attributed to the story’s simplicity, its clarity, and the familiarity of its theme. “Narration responses” were also negligible, compared to the two main response categories involving association and self-involvement. Males constituted 22 (15.17%) of “associational responses” and females, 23 (12%). Though the responses were very similar, many females associated Laila’s story with their own future and how they would be able to manage the dual responsibility of both attending to their families and working outside the home. They wondered: Would such a balance be possible? That said, they all seemed to accept that they are the ones who must attend to the domestic duties of cooking, cleaning, raising and tutoring children, while working at the same time. All admired Laila and a few saw her as a role-model for themselves; a few responses mentioned female teachers, relatives or neighbors, who faced a problem similar to Laila’s. All male “associational responses” were of this type, except for one who was reminded of his very busy brother whose work was extremely demanding. Interestingly, no males linked the story to their own future as family heads and professionals. Clearly, most shared their society’s idea that housework is the wife’s and not the husband’s duty.

While more than half of the females said they would discuss Laila’s husband if given a chance to write about one of the story’s characters, only two males said they would do so and consider how he should play a more active role in helping his wife within the family. While females were irritated by Mahmoud, Laila’s husband, and society’s negative attitudes towards women’s work, males simply appreciated Laila’s devotion and were sympathetic
towards her for accepting her duties as a teacher, housewife and mother. The following are examples of male and female “associational responses”:

**Male associational responses**

1. I know many women who have same job and they do their work perfectly. I have seen many wives in our village that did the same thing.
2. I know a teacher in my village that goes to school in the morning and when she finishes her work, she has to take care of her children at home. Her husband tries to convince her with retirement but she always refuses. Nowadays she is very sick. Her health has become worse and now she thinks that she will retire soon. Women in Oman are having jobs nowadays. They should plan their time well.
3. I remembered my uncle’s wife who is also a headmistress in school. She is doing the same duties as Laila but she doesn’t complain like Laila.
4. I remember many devoted women who are living in our neighborhood who are working hard to make balance between home duties and work. This story indicates problems faced by women around the world.
5. It reminds me of my brother because he is always busy (and doesn’t do any house work).

**Female associational responses**

1. I think Laila is a kind of role model for all of us. I think am I going to be like her in future?
2. Actually I do not think I will be patient like her but I will try in the future. Some people adapt with what they have and accept this life. I do not think I can manage like her.
3. This story reminds me that there are people in our society who still have a negative attitude towards women’s work. They think that women can’t manage both responsibilities, at work and also at home. In spite of modernity and development, there are still people who can’t accept the change of some points even if they benefit the society.
4. Actually I remembered my school, exactly the teacher’s room. I remembered this place when I read “Laila sits hugging her student’s note books.” I would like to dwell
on my memories of school in grades 10, 11 and 12 and the funny situations with teachers.

5. I remembered my teachers in school. Now I feel that they are good ones and that I should be grateful.

There were far more female than male responses (8.96% and 13% respectively) in the “self-involvement” category. This can be attributed to the story’s theme and main character—a female struggling to find a balance between her duties as a mother and wife and her work as a teacher. Since many of the female participants are preparing to be professional English teachers, the story relates directly to their lives – hence their intense personal involvement. The following is a representative sample of male and female “self-involvement” responses.

**Male self-involvement responses**

1. I feel sorry for that poor woman who hasn’t enough time to rest.

2. While I am reading the text, paragraph by paragraph, my heart beats are increasing, yet not because of fright but because of admiration. This very strong woman amazes me a lot. Scanning the text aroused a colorful mixture of feelings in me, such as pride, amusement and admiration.

**Female self-involvement responses**

1. I felt completely involved in the text. I think I cannot do what she does for ever. Very few people can manage to live this kind of life. My sister manages teaching and household work without making it tough for herself.

2. I felt sorry for all the women in the world who are trying their best to balance between their career and housework.

3. When I read the text I felt that I would face the same situation when I graduate and find a job. I think I would manage my time like her.

4. I feel that she is a superwoman who can manage her time successfully. If I were her, I will get frustrated. I sympathize with her. I remember my uncle’s wife who had same qualities as Laila. Everybody in my family praises her.

5. I dwell on the image of Laila working so hard without complaining and I think, am I going to be like her in the future?
In the “prescriptive judgment” category, females again showed far more responses (10.4% compared to the males’ 6.2%). Many females instructed Laila to get a servant to help her, or at least to get some kind of help to lessen her load. Unsurprisingly, more females than males wanted Laila’s husband to help with the housework. Thus, although the females have accepted the dual responsibility of home and professional work, it is apparent that they want some kind of assistance to lessen their responsibilities and help them to balance work and home life.

**Female prescriptive judgment responses**

Examples of female responses include the following:

1. The husband should not be careless and should treat his wife in a good way.
2. We should make a balance between work and the family. Each one of them has their rights. The husband also has responsibilities towards his family. He didn’t appreciate her efforts.
3. I think she needs some help from her spouse. I saw that he finds time to sleep but she doesn’t. She should at least find a servant.

As mentioned earlier, only three female students and one male student disliked the story, while those who liked it said it reflected what is happening in their own society.

**Conclusion**

Responses to the two stories revealed many gender similarities that derive from belonging to the same culture. Differences can be attributed to Omani societal norms and how men and women are perceived. Clearly, women are held more accountable for their conduct than men, and working women are expected to shoulder the dual responsibility of professional work and housework, even if at the same time they are desire help to ease their burdens. Males showed an appreciation of women’s hard work, while a few even wanted husbands to undertake some housework too.

The two translated stories were judged to be engaging and interesting by most participants, indicating that their use in the EFL classroom could be both effective and productive. As one male respondent suggested, translated local short stories could be used at the intermediate and advanced levels to introduce language in a familiar context. In addition, including familiar
stories translated into English in the EFL literature or reading classroom validates students’ identities and allows them to see their own reflection in the curriculum. In addition, it shows them how language can be used to convey their personal life situations and address their hopes and struggles, hence acquiring meaning and relevance for them.

The respondents’ background knowledge, prior experience, and culture were apparent in their responses, showing that these elements cannot be sidelined while reading (Al-Mahrooqi, 2011a). Many responses were emotional but many also insightful. Intertextuality was evident in the use of proverbs – with reference to the citing of Prophet Mohammed’s sayings and Qur’anic verses. This sort of knowledge alone, it should be stressed, could be used in literature and reading classes to break the ice and establish a link between new stories and the learners’ backgrounds. Teachers in such settings could ask students if there are proverbs or Prophet Mohammed sayings on a certain topic or moral dilemma, which might explain their reaction to certain kinds of material in literary texts.

Most respondents liked to read stories translated into English that are culturally relevant to them because they can enrich their vocabulary and improve their language skills. This implies that new vocabulary problems can be surmounted with greater ease when there is familiarity with the context, a finding that echoes Al-Mahrooqi (2003). The few students who preferred to read authentic English stories said they favored them because of their novelty and potential for exposing readers to new experiences and cultures. This suggests that language teachers could use a mixture of translated and authentic English stories so that no preferences are ignored and no student feels left out. While literature has a universal appeal, student response to it sometimes depends on its quality in terms of theme and style. The language teacher, therefore, should carefully consider these variables and choose appropriate stories that may appeal to the greatest number of students.

References


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