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'Composing poems, especially meditative ones, heals my soul.'

► Dubai-based poet Geeta Chhabra talks to Suchitra Bajpai Chaudhary about her recently published coffee-table book *An Indian Ode to the Emirates* and what poetry means to her

It all began with a spectacular sunset that Geeta Chhabra witnessed one evening way back in 1995.

"I'd gone to the Jumeirah Beach and I was sitting on the sands staring out into the sea when I saw the sun going down and it looked spectacular," recalls Geeta, 67.

"So overwhelmed was I by the sight that the moment I reached home, I sat down and wrote a few rhyming lines that came to mind about the sunset," she says. Geeta then stashed it away, unsure whether it would make the cut as a poem.

A resident of Dubai for nearly two decades, she says she experienced many more awe-inspiring, humbling, sombre, joyous and moving moments and she began putting down her thoughts about all these into verse.

"I wasn't sure of my works and shared them only with my family," says the former homemaker.

Meeting a mentor

However, a chance meeting in India with the highly respected and admired poet, the late Nissim Ezekiel, changed her poetic life in many ways. He took her under his wing and became her mentor and guide, helping her develop her craft and hone her skills. Geeta recalls spending hours with him going over her works and taking his comments on board.

Today, more than a decade later, she is proud of the coffee-table book showcasing 40 of her poems alongside beautiful images, which



was published last month under the title *An Indian Ode To The Emirates* by Motivate Publishing.

The poems in the bilingual book were translated into Arabic by eminent poet Dr Shihab Ganem.

The 40 poems commemorate the 40th anniversary of the UAE, Geeta says. "I put the poems together around seven months back. The 40-poems idea came from managing partner Ian Fairservice of Motivate Publishing when I met him regarding a book. I felt it was a meaningful idea

as my book expresses the sentiment of a long-term UAE resident and matches with the celebration of 40 years of the UAE's Union."

Geeta now sees poems as the natural outlet to her emotions and reaction to events. Even though she feels she owes it to herself to always be happy, Geeta admits there have been moments when wars and natural calamities have moved her to tears.

"Turbulence can bring out pure emotions in the form of poems," she says. "You see, a poet develops

stimulus from intense joy as well as intense grief. I guess my heightened response to such emotions inspires me to write poetry.

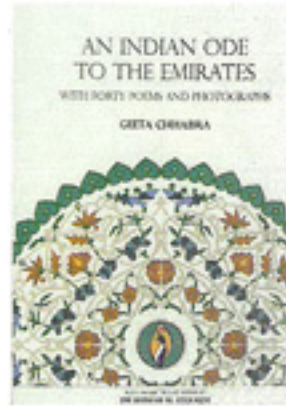
"Composing poems, especially meditative or deeply reflective ones, helps calm my anguish about disturbing incidents or events and heals my soul," she says.

The Indian expatriate who is also a good singer and cut a disc of Hindi songs several years ago, says: "Every poem to me is like a different tree bearing different kinds of flowers. Some are brightly coloured and cheerful, some pale and sombre."

Reading her poems is like going down memory lane - walking through the bustling corridors of a quintessential Arabic souq where the timeless jostles with the postmodern. Through her poems you can get to experience the sights, sounds and scents of Arabia flavoured with a perspective that is uniquely that of the poet.

On familiar territory

Almost all familiar images and landmarks of Dubai - the Shaikh Saeed Al Maktoum House, the Burj Khalifa, the sands of the desert, the minarets of mosques, a man on a



The 40 poems in the book reflect the UAE's 40th anniversary

camel - find a place in her book. Geeta deftly imbues each monument, motif and moment with a perspective that is as touching as it is warm.

"Though there's mystery beyond my dreaming, Yet, in that

mystery I love to dwell.

Every time, I visit Shaikh Saeed Maktoum's House,

By the Creek in Shindagha, Something... something... something...

Rich and beautiful,

I readily make for myself" (from An Ode to Shaikh Saeed Maktoum's House, 2009).

Geeta, who is married to Ved, 76, has three children - son Viresh, 44, and daughters Vibha, 41, and Vrinda, 35. Born and brought up in an arts-loving family in Punjab, northern India, Geeta imbues some of her poems with a touch of nostalgia and longing for her homeland:

"Even the butterfly in your park drops a smile on my homesick eye - it flies with my memories:

in the same old-fashioned way" (from To Dubai My Second Home, 1995).

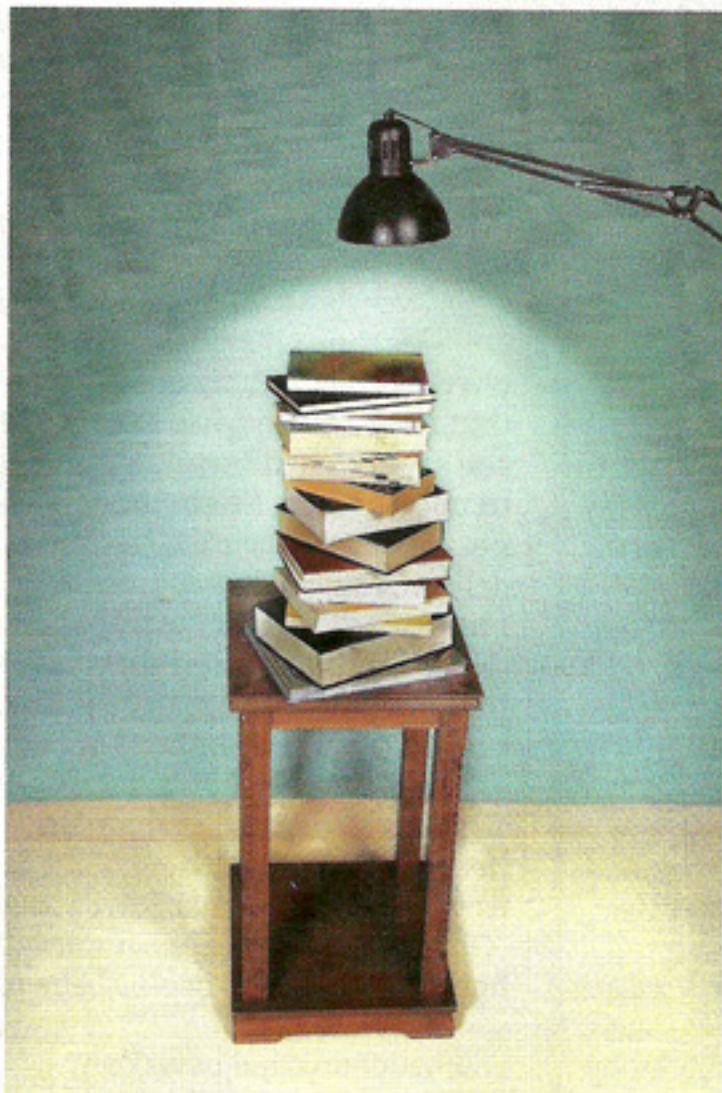
Geeta says the UAE is an intrinsic part of who she really is.

"This book is dedicated to the everlasting ties between India and the UAE, some personal ones that I can clearly trace to my childhood when I remember tales told to me of how one of my uncles, a trader from Amritsar, Punjab, used to supply traditional *rumals* (scarves) to people who were living close to the Empty Quarter.

"My memory still retains images of well-stacked, assorted linen and mixed yarn fabrics with hand-embroidered geometrical patterns in a thick chain-stitch.

"Seeking to expand on the same memory lane: in the immediate vicinity, I can still feel my dear mother's presence when she presented to me at my marriage a pair of gold bangles with world-famous Basra pearls.

"My grandmother had given those bangles to my mother when she became a bride," recalls Geeta of the precious heirloom that acquired so much meaning after she chose Dubai as her home - a place where historically pearl



Friday Readers Competition

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The following list is compiled to list most famous literary works of all time. Match column A with column B and send in your entries.

Column A	Column B
1. Bleak House	<input type="checkbox"/> George Bernard Shaw
2. Emma	<input type="checkbox"/> Charles Dickens
3. Pandora	<input type="checkbox"/> William Shakespeare
4. Pygmalion	<input type="checkbox"/> Henry James
5. The Merry Wives of Windsor	<input type="checkbox"/> Jane Austen

Name: _____ Tel No. (Mob): _____

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Post your entries to: Friday Readers Comp, P.O. Box 6519, Dubai or drop them off at any Gulf News office in Dubai (Sheikh Zayed Road, Deira or Karama), Abu Dhabi, Al Ain or Sharjah, or fax them to 04 3421527. Winners will be drawn by lots from all correct entries received. Prizes can be redeemed in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, or Sharjah.

Closing Date: 01.05.12

Solutions & Winners' names: 11.05.12

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Solutions to the Friday Readers Competition of April 13th, 2012: 1. Before I Fall 2. How to Train Your Dragon - 1 3. Wolf Hall 4. Macbeth: A True Story 5. Wild Child
Winners' names: 1. Jessica Perera, P.O.Box 36956, Abu Dhabi. 2. Linta Philip, P.O.Box 125983, Dubai. 3. Neena Paul, P.O.Box 772, Sharjah

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The Sand

*The Sand is like grasping
A hot coal,
Seething enough to burn
My hands.
The Sand!*

*The Sand, in the blink
Of an eye,
Rides on wind's fickle back.
The Sand!*

*The Sand is the language
Of my silence,
Gone wrong.
The Sand!*

*The Sand is the song
Of my silence,
From loss to reason.
The Sand!*

*The Sand reflects
Upon the changing vision
Of the world.
The Sand!*

*The Sand moves
Like shifting patterns
Of our lives.
The Sand!*

*The Sand moves
Theirs and sacred,
Long and living soul of Nomads.
The Sand!*

Dubai, January 2007

diving and trading were a way of life. Geeta says it was Nissim's comments and encouragement that convinced her she could create meaningful poems.

"He had great faith in my work. His feedback helped me immensely. I've preserved his written comments and I cherish them hugely," she says.

Evolution of a poet

She is also proud that the poems were translated into Arabic by one of the most famous names in Arabic and English poetry in the region.

"Dr Ganem's reaction was almost instant after he went through a couple of poems of mine," Geeta recalls. "I remember him saying that he liked the poems, the style..."

Some of the poems reflect her own evolution as a person and poet where the violence and events around

the world shape her expressions. In a poem entitled *The Way I Feel* she laments the loss of innocence that the violence of the world has taken away from the future generations.

"We all know:

*From the violence of the 'main-few',
Brews the wrath in entire nations.*

We also know:

It is of no consideration to 'them' -

Why the young die so young -

Killed while picking strawberries,

Or, on their way to school.

How the trays of love and laughter,

Are easily snatched away!

From our sons, daughters, grand-children"

(from *The Way I Feel*, 2011).

Geeta says she is overwhelmed by the response she has been getting from the readers, describing it as "unbelievable".

"The comments they have left in the Viewer's Corner on my site/blog

www.geetachhabra.com is proof that they are enjoying the poems," she says. "When I read my first poem to my husband, I remember he did not show any surprise, but some delight. He, of course, knew that I have a passion for writing.

"As for my children they now know that my passion has turned into a serious commitment and are happy to go with the flow."

Geeta is already working on her second book, although she is unwilling to say what it will be about. "Oh yes, there are plans for another book. And another book..." she says.

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An Indian Ode to the Emirates (Dh185) is available at leading UAE retail outlets and at www.booksarabia.com.