

Essay

HOW WOMEN SHAPED KUWAIT'S LITERARY SCENE

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 20th century, women have pioneered the advancement of literary efforts in Kuwait. During the years when female representation in creative fields was rare, Kuwaiti women writers played an instrumental role in addressing the social and patriarchal inequalities of their time. They continue to contribute to the literary realms of the region, across genres and languages. In doing so, they are leading the way forward for more international recognition of Khaleeji literature.

Kuwait has had a bustling literary scene throughout the 1900s. This was supported by the founding of modern educational institutions, such as the Al Mubarakiyya School in 1911 and the Al-Ahmedia school in 1921, as well as the emergence of the printing press in 1948.¹ The first journal in the Gulf, *Al-Kuwayt*, was founded in the country in 1928.² In 1930, Kuwait also became the first Arab Gulf state to publish short stories.³ Between the 1930s and the 1960s, the country witnessed a significant proliferation in short story writing, which blended familiar Arabic oral traditions with Western literary movements such as romanticism and naturalism.⁴ Women writers were notable contributors to the short story genre, especially in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In 1952 in specific, Diya Al-Badr published the first fictional narrative by a woman author in Kuwait, titled *Rihlat Farid wa Layla* (Farid and Layla's Journey). This was followed in 1953 by *Al-Intiqam al-Rahib* (The Horrible Revenge) by Hayfa Hashim,

and *Amina* by Badriyya Musaid.⁵

Literary societies also played a prominent role in the development of Kuwaiti literature. A key example is the Writer's Association in Kuwait, which was established in 1964.⁶ The Association brought multiple generations of Kuwaiti writers together to present and discuss their works. It also published a literary journal each month, which featured lectures given at the Association's headquarters, as well as works by its members.⁷ By the 1990s, one-third of the writers registered in the Association were women, writing in a variety of genres, including novels, poems, and short stories.⁸

This essay aims to present a history of prominent women writers in Kuwait since the second half of the 20th century, and highlight the role they have played in shaping both the country's and the Gulf's literary scenes.

PIONEERING WORKS FROM KUWAITI WOMEN

A multitude of writers has paved the way for women to be recognized as significant contributors to the modern literary tradition of Arab Gulf states. Chief among them is Laila Al Othman, a prolific writer whose works have been deeply informed by the political history of the Arabian Peninsula. Al Othman began writing at the age of 22, and in her decades-long career, she has published 14 short story collections and 9 novels. Introducing Kuwaiti culture to an international audience, her work has been translated into French, Spanish, Polish, Russian, Ger-

man, Albanian, and more. Her first novel *Al-Mara'a wa Al-Qita* (The Woman and the Cat), published in 1985, made her a household name. A year later, she published *Wasmiyah Takhruju min Al-Bahr* (Wasmiyah Comes Out of the Sea), which was selected among the 100 best Arab novels of the 20th century.⁹ The unequal treatment between men and women is a persistent theme in Al Othman's work. She regularly discusses the limitations women face, which are imposed upon them by patriarchal structures and constructs.

Another trailblazing work by Al Othman is her 2017 autobiography *Anfud Anny Al-Ghubar* (I Dust Myself Off), which is a rare genre in Khaleeji literature. Its rarity stems from a significant majority of Gulf societies favoring privacy in their personal lives, and looking down on sharing the struggles of families and individuals with the larger public. Al Othman's autobiography, however, defies those expectations. She recounts her mother's attempt to drown her in the sea as a baby after finding out she was not a boy.¹⁰ She then details her childhood, first spent as the fourth daughter of a divorcee, then as the "daughter of the other woman" in her father's second marriage.¹¹ The memoir also explores how womanhood intertwines with Al Othman's literary career. She examines women's social and educational standing in Kuwait, and how writing saved her life. Beyond her personal life, her memoir provides an account of Kuwait in the 1950s, before the discovery of oil. In this regard, it is a formative text that made Kuwaiti women the sub-

ject of their own literary examinations.

Kuwaiti women writers have also made their mark in poetry and literary studies. Sheikha Suad Al Sabah, for example, has produced valuable poetic works since the late 20th century, and published critical and historical studies of Kuwait. Al Sabah is a pioneer in analyzing the society, culture, and history of Kuwait as an academic from the country itself, thus reclaiming narratives that have been predominantly produced by Western scholarship. Furthermore, her interdisciplinary focus has meant that she contributed significantly to the modern poetic tradition of the country, and her poems have regularly explored her positionality as a woman within her society. For instance, in her poem "Female 2000," Al Sabah discusses what she was expected to do with her life as a woman, and declares at the end, "But I betrayed the law of the female/And chose to grapple with words."¹²

Another groundbreaking figure in Kuwaiti literary studies is Dr. Saada Al Daas, an award-winning academic, literary critic, and playwright who has produced numerous monographs on theater, drama, and the novel form. In 2010, Al Daas published *Li'ani Aswad* (Because I'm Black), which tackles racism in the Gulf and the plight of Otherness in this context. Even though Al Daas' novel received significant critical attention, it has not been translated into English. This underlines a significant issue in studying Kuwaiti women in specific, and authors from Arab Gulf states in general. Without translation opportunities, their con-

tributions are only accessible to Arab-speaking audiences.

Most literary critics have paid significant attention to the names mentioned so far as the foundational figures of the literary scene in Kuwait. However, more contemporarily, Kuwaiti women writers who have produced recent works, mainly in the past two decades, remain understudied. In the following sections, I will discuss their contributions in more detail.

MODERN LITERARY EXPLORATIONS

Kuwaiti women writers continue to explore a multitude of genres and themes in their literary production. A popular genre is children's literature, which has gained prominence in recent years in the Gulf. Such books often discuss complex themes such as family relationships and navigating difficult emotions. In 2019, Kuwaiti authors Amal Al Randy and Fatima Shaaban received the Sharjah Gulf Women Creativity Award for their contribution to children's literature with their works *My Father's Surprise* and *The Two Almonds' Journey*, respectively.

Furthermore, Kuwaiti women have also gained prominence in less popular genres in Arab Gulf states, such as crime fiction. Fadwa Al Taweel, for instance, is a crime fiction novelist who discusses contemporary humanitarian issues such as child trafficking and the societal silence surrounding crimes committed against women. In 2016, she became a best-selling novelist with the publication

of *Hadatha fi Soho* (It Happened in Soho). She then turned the popular novel into a trilogy, and the final book in the series is set to be released later this year.

Al Taweel also breaks down preconceived notions regarding what type of literature women writers are expected to be interested in. On this matter, during one of her panels at the Abu Dhabi Book Fair in 2020, Al Taweel highlighted her views on societal expectations of women writers in the Gulf, and the surprise and the contempt she was met with when she first began publishing crime fiction. Nevertheless, many of her readers are young Khaleejis, and have supported her work. Al Taweel herself got involved in this genre as a teenager, after receiving support from the Writer's Association in Kuwait. She continues to be an active member of the Association, and a prominent figure in the country's contemporary literary scene.

However, crime fiction is not the only genre that Al Taweel excels in. As a novelist, humanitarian issues are at the forefront of her work. She has visited several countries to document the lived experiences of oppressed women. Like Al Daas, her work is yet to be translated into English. However, certain strides have been made on this front by literary entrepreneurs. For their "Womanhood Issue" of Spring 2022, for instance, the UAE-based Sekka Magazine has translated a short story by Al Taweel, which discusses the sociopolitical climate in Kuwait and women's political empowerment in the Gulf.¹³

Another significant literary figure is

Bothayna Al-Essa, who is both a best-selling author and the owner of the Takween Bookstore and Publishing House. The bookstore regularly hosts literary and cultural events, as well as annual literary conferences, which regularly attract a large audience.¹⁴ Al-Essa's 2019 novel *Kabart wa Naseet an Ansa*, which has been translated into English with the title *All That I Want to Forget*, discusses the familial dynamics between a free-spirited young sister and her more conservative older brother. The novel stands out in its exploration of the protagonist's agency, life choices, and position in society. As a translated work, the novel contributed significantly to the international recognition of Kuwaiti literature in recent years.

Kuwaiti literature has also been brought to the small screen with the adaptation of novels and short stories to television shows. One example is Mona Al Shammari's 2016 novel *La Musiqaa fi Al'Ahmadi* (No Music in Al Ahmadi), which received notable critical attention. The novel was set in Al Ahmadi, a town built by the British in the Kuwaiti desert after the discovery of oil. It explored, both on paper and on the screen, Kuwaiti identity, and shed light on the history of Kuwaiti heritage. Al Shammari was also longlisted for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction with her 2020 novel *Khadimat Al-Maqam* (The Maids of the Shrine). She continues to write and produce work that investigates Kuwaiti history.

ANGLOPHONE-KUWAITI LITERATURE

There are a number of Kuwaiti women authors who choose to write their works, across genres, in English. These authors raise interesting questions about the dual identity of navigating between languages. The use of English inherently puts the author at a certain distance from issues that are tied to a non-English speaking culture. Writing in English allows Kuwaiti authors to directly share their culture with an international audience in the way they choose to do so, and not through a third-party translator.

One example is Mai Alnakib, a renowned author who won the prestigious Edinburgh International Book Festival's First Book Award in 2014 for her short-story collection *The Hidden Light of Objects*. The collection examined Kuwait's historical and social landscapes, weaving together different stories and voices of women and men. Each story dealt with a different theme, such as loss, nostalgia, belonging, and agency, and utilized literary devices such as multiple viewpoints and interconnected plots. Alnakib's other works have also discussed prominent themes in Kuwaiti culture. Her latest work, a novel titled *Unlasting Home*, dives into Kuwaiti history and social realities, and invokes a sense of nostalgia for a pre-oil Kuwait. It is a family saga that examines the lives of matriarchs, and follows a philosophy professor's struggle to find a sense of belonging in her country. Furthermore,

Layla Al-Ammar published two novels written in English, *The Pact We Made* and *Silence is a Sense*, in 2019 and 2022, respectively. The former, her debut novel, represents a portrayal of Kuwaiti society and family politics, and the personal and public domains in which the protagonist must navigate. *The Pact We Made* explores themes of trauma and isolation through the protagonist's inability to find peace and belonging. *Silence is a Sense* also deals with trauma, albeit through a personal and political lens, and examines the life of a Syrian refugee.

In terms of Anglophone poetry, Kuwaiti poet and writer Nada Faris is a leading figure in the field. Faris has promoted traditional forms of poetry as well as spoken word poetry in Kuwait. In her work, she questions social and political landscapes, and challenges ideas of language, identity, and belonging. Perhaps most significant in Faris's journey is her insistence on "Anglowaiti literature," a term she coined that refers to Kuwaiti writers who write in English. Today, many English majors in Kuwait hold regular spoken word poetry competitions, and invite her as a performance poet who continues to inspire them as a generation of rising poets.

Beyond poetry, Faris has published three international books, one of which is *Mischief Diary*. The book stands out as it was written in the Young Adult genre, which is scarce in Kuwait, and to a larger extent the Gulf region as well. The book follows a teenager's journey while contextualizing a local Kuwaiti setting, and uses humorous anecdotes throughout the nar-

rative.

Similar to Faris, author Nejoud Al-Yagout writes both poetry and prose. Al-Yagout has published numerous poetry collections that present questions about life and spirituality. Her poetry collections include *This is An Imprint* and *Ounces of Oneness*. Her latest novel, *When The Haboob Sings* questions freedom of thought, voice, and agency. The novel places a female protagonist at its center, and challenges dominant and patriarchal ideologies. As an author, Al-Yagout attempts to create a more tolerant and just society through the works she produces. Her themes almost always center on a longing for a better world. She is also the founder of Interheart Kuwait, a community that seeks to empower marginalized voices.

Finally, as an academic and author, I have produced Anglophone works including poetry collections and prose. My first collection was *On Love and Loss*, published in 2015, in which I explored themes of love, loss, and the degeneration of the body. Later, I published bilingual works of prose poetry, including *Forget the Words* and *The Secret of 50/50*. Recently, I wrote an illness narrative entitled *Head Above Water: Reflections on Illness*, which was published in 2022. As the first illness narrative from Kuwait, it aims to introduce the genre to readers and examines understandings of illness, disability, and agency. The stigmatization of illness and disability is common and is seen through various literary and media depictions. Another collection of my stories is called *Notes on the Flesh*, in

which disability and women's narratives are explored. As a disability studies scholar, I aim to demystify disability and its negative tropes, and create more inclusivity in the storytelling process as a whole.

CONCLUSION

Despite significant strides, Kuwaiti women's literature remains largely unknown to international audiences. The resources that discuss their works are scarce, even when it comes to contemporary literary contributions. Lacking translation opportunities, in addition to being understudied in global academic contexts, Kuwaiti women authors have not gotten the recognition they rightly deserve.

As a Kuwaiti author myself, it is my hope that this essay encourages further study into the role of women in shaping the literary scenes of the wider region as well. This essay is also a call to action for scholars, literary agents, and readers to support opportunities for Khaleeji literature to gain further prominence in international discourse.

About the Author

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