

# Breaking Barriers And Shaping Voices: The Pioneering Role Of Laila Al-Othman In The Modern Kuwaiti Arabic Novel

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the transformative contributions of Laila al-Othman to the evolution of the modern Kuwaiti Arabic novel. As one of the earliest and most influential female voices in Kuwaiti and Gulf literary circles, al-Othman has played a crucial role in breaking societal and literary barriers, providing unprecedented depth and visibility to women's experiences in Arabic fiction. Through bold narrative choices, innovative storytelling, and unflinching engagement with taboo subjects, such as gender inequity, family oppression, and personal liberation, al-Othman's novels construct a vibrant space for marginalized voices and redefine the contours of Kuwaiti narrative art. The paper explores how her works, from *Imra'a fi Inâ'a* and *Wasmiya Comes Out of the Sea* to later novels, have broadened the thematic and stylistic possibilities for Kuwaiti literature, challenging cultural conventions and inspiring a new generation of writers. Additionally, it considers al-Othman's wider cultural impact, including her advocacy for young literary talent and her texts' global resonance through widespread translation. By centring her pioneering contributions, the study highlights the enduring significance of al-Othman's oeuvre in forging a more inclusive, dynamic, and representative modern Kuwaiti novel.

**Keywords:** Laila al-Othman, Kuwaiti literature, Arabic novel, Women's empowerment, Literary innovation, social transformation, etc.

## Introduction:

The evolution of the modern Kuwaiti Arabic novel has been indelibly shaped by trailblazing voices willing to challenge conventions, confront taboos, and advocate for marginalized perspectives. Among these, Laila al-Othman stands preeminent as a pioneering figure whose bold literary activism has redefined not only the thematic breadth of Kuwaiti fiction but also its place in the broader landscape of Arabic literature. Emerging during an era of social and cultural transformation in Kuwait, al-Othman's work embodies resistance against patriarchal constraints and offers new narratives for female experience and self-expression.

Laila al-Othman's oeuvre encompasses short stories, novels, and essays that address the inner worlds of women, the dynamics of family and society, and the quest for personal agency in a changing Gulf region. By narrating the complexities of female identity, often in the face of silence, censorship, and familial expectation, she creates protagonists who resonate with readers across generations and geographies. Her stories provide an unflinching critique of gender inequality, bringing previously unspoken realities into the public domain and inspiring dialogue about the roles, rights, and potential of women in Arab society.

In addition to her creative accomplishments, al-Othman's influence extends to her efforts in nurturing literary culture in Kuwait. By supporting and mentoring emerging writers, most notably through the founding of the Laila al-Othman Award, she has actively participated in shaping the future of Kuwaiti literature.

This research paper investigates the transformative impact of Laila al-Othman on the Kuwaiti Arabic novel, examining how she has broken barriers for women writers, expanded the thematic capacity of the national narrative, and encouraged a new generation to find and value their literary voices. Her significance lies not only in her creative output but in her ongoing role as a catalyst for social and cultural transformation in Kuwait and the greater Arab world.

### Biographical Sketch of Laila al-Othman:

Laila al-Othman is counted among Kuwait's most influential literary voices, acclaimed for her substantial contributions as both a novelist and a writer of short stories. Born in 1943 in a small coastal town in Kuwait, she grew up amidst the intersecting challenges of family disruption and a strict, tradition-bound society.<sup>1</sup>

Al-Othman's childhood was marked by hardship following her parents' separation. After this rupture, she lived with her father, Abdullah al-Othman, himself a noted poet and literary patron, his new wife, and her stepbrothers. In this environment, Laila often found herself marginalized, frequently addressed as "the daughter of another woman" and suffering mistreatment at the hands of her stepmother and siblings. Her father's frequent absences, due to work or literary pursuits, further compounded her sense of isolation.<sup>2</sup>

From a young age, Laila discovered a means of emotional survival and self-expression through creativity. She would write and draw on the walls of her home, both as an act of resistance against the emotional neglect and as an outlet for her inner turmoil. These early creative acts foreshadowed her later literary outpouring, as they were shaped by her desire to assert her presence and process an often-hostile domestic world.<sup>3</sup>

The opportunity for formal learning came when she was enrolled in school, a transformative period in her early life. Surrounded at last by teachers who encouraged her burgeoning talents, Laila quickly distinguished herself. She became a star in her school's drama group, writing and starring in simple plays, which further ignited her passion for storytelling and literary creation.<sup>4</sup>

However, her education was soon interrupted. In keeping with conservative customs that expected girls to remain at home, especially after their siblings married, her father withdrew her from school. Laila's deep disappointment and refusal to accept this fate prompted her to plead for continued education. Seeing her distress, her father allowed her access to his private library, thereby supporting her intellectual growth in one sense, but simultaneously forbidding her involvement in his literary gatherings and refusing to let her publish under her real name out of concern for the family's reputation.<sup>5</sup>

In her candid autobiography, *I Dusted Myself Off*, al-Othman offers rare insight into this difficult upbringing, narrating with honesty her complex relationship with her father and the pain of being silenced. As the only Kuwaiti female author of her generation to write a full autobiography, she exposes not only familial dynamics and the pervasive social conservatism of Kuwait in the mid-20th century, but also the formative experiences that shaped her voice as a writer.<sup>6</sup>

Despite these early obstacles, Laila al-Othman's resilience would become her hallmark. Her eventual literary breakthrough began in 1965, when she started publishing essays on literary and social issues in Kuwait's newspapers (albeit initially under pseudonyms or with restrictions imposed by her father). Over the ensuing decades, al-Othman would go on to author numerous short story collections and novels, many of which foreground the struggles of women in Arab societies and confront issues of gender, tradition, and emancipation. Her pioneering place in Kuwaiti and Arab literature is inseparable from her willingness to draw on a childhood of adversity to create works of both artistic and social importance.<sup>7</sup>

A defining turning point in Laila al-Othman's life came in 1965, when she made the bold decision to leave the restrictive environment shaped by her father's conservatism. Rejecting prevailing social norms and the tradition that encouraged marriage within the extended Kuwaiti family, she married a Palestinian physician. This union marked not merely a personal declaration of independence but a moment of profound transformation; as she later reflected, it was the first time she truly experienced freedom.

Her husband's support proved pivotal; he encouraged her to pursue her literary ambitions, emboldening her to write and to bring her voice to the public. These newly found freedoms, however, were not without opposition. Even after marriage, her father continued to impose limitations, determined to prevent her from publishing her works. This resistance was short-lived, for soon after, his passing removed the last significant barrier to her public literary life. With this liberation, Laila al-Othman's name began to appear regularly in the Kuwaiti press, where she developed a tangible presence as a columnist.

### Expanding Literary Influence

Laila al-Othman's entry into journalism saw her contributing extensively to local newspapers. Notably, she became a columnist for *Al-Siyâsa*, one of Kuwait's widely read daily newspapers, establishing herself as a keen observer of social issues and a challenger of conventional wisdom. Her column-writing offered a platform to address both literary and societal topics, further solidifying her reputation.

Beyond journalism, al-Othman is widely credited as one of the foundational figures in the development of the short story and novel genres in Kuwait.<sup>8</sup> Her works are considered transformative in bringing new forms and perspectives to the nation's literary landscape.

### Her Major Works and Literary Milestones:

In 1976, she released her first short story collection, *A Woman in a Vase (Imra'a fi inâ')*, which introduced her distinctive narrative voice, focusing on the inner world and struggles of Kuwaiti women.

### Her Important Novels:

- (i) *The Woman and the Cat (al-Mar'a wa al-qit'a)*, 1985): Her first novel, marking her transition into long-form fiction and consolidating her role in Kuwaiti narrative art.

- (ii) *Wasmiya Comes Out of the Sea* (*Wasmiyya takhruj min al-baḥr*, 1986): Her most acclaimed novel, praised for its evocative storytelling and fearless exploration of gender and tradition. The novel was celebrated across the Arab world, chosen as one of the best 100 Arabic novels of the century, and later adapted into a television series.
- (iii) *The Trial: A Glimpse of Reality* (*al-Muḥâkama: maqṭa' min sîrat al-wâqî'*): Recognized for its critical perspective on social institutions and banned in Kuwait due to its controversial themes.
- (iv) *The Tail* (*al- 'Uṣ' uṣ*): Also banned locally, this novel drew attention for its satirical style, humour, and its sharp critique of patriarchal and familial dynamics. Its layered narrative, filled with hidden meanings, exemplifies al-Othman's mastery of the art of suggestion and parody.

It appears from the literary works of Laila al-Othman that she wrote the following works related to Travel and Social affairs:

- (i) *Days in Yemen* (*Ayyâm fî al-Yaman*): Reflects her experience and observations during travels, highlighting her literary versatility.
- (ii) *Diary of Patience and Bitterness* (*Yawmiyyât al-ṣabr wa al-murr*): Written in response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, this novel stands as an intimate record of national trauma and resilience.

### Her Short Story Collections:

- (i) *The Departure* (*al-Raḥîl*)
- (ii) *Fifty-five Short Tales* (*Khams wa khamsûn ḥikâya qaṣîra*)
- (iii) *Fathieh Chooses Her Demise* (*Faṭḥiyya takhtâr mawtahâ*)
- (iv) *Aba'at al-Maqam* (2012)<sup>9</sup>

Laila al-Othman's work has transcended linguistic barriers, with translations available in English, Spanish, French, Italian, Russian, German, Serbo-Croatian, Polish, and more. This international exposure has allowed her narratives, perspectives, and advocacy to resonate with readers far beyond the Arab world.

Demonstrating commitment to literary progress, al-Othman established the Laila al-Othman Prize in 2004. This initiative reflects her dedication not only to her craft but also to the nurturing of future voices in Kuwaiti literature. Laila al-Othman's journey is characterized by courage, creativity, and cultural significance. By breaking away from tradition and championing new narrative forms, she has left an enduring impact on Kuwaiti and Arabic literature, inspiring countless writers and earning both widespread acclaim and, at times, official controversy. Her work continues to challenge boundaries, celebrate women's experiences, and contribute meaningfully to the literary heritage of Kuwait and the broader Arab world.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout her prolific literary career, Laila al-Othman has distinguished herself as one of the most forthright voices in Kuwaiti and Arab literature, never shying away from engaging directly with the pressing social and political issues of her time. Her works reflect a consistent willingness to address subjects that many in her society would consider too controversial or dangerous, such as political repression, gender inequality, and the impact of regional conflicts on ordinary lives.

Al-Othman's writing has frequently drawn upon major developments in the Middle East, using her fiction and non-fiction as a mirror to collective traumas and pivotal historical moments. Notably, she has woven the consequences of landmark events, including the Persian Gulf War, the Iraqi invasion and subsequent occupation of Kuwait, and the Israeli military actions in Lebanon in 2006, into the fabric of her narratives. Through her novels, short stories, and memoirs, al-Othman has given personal and psychological depth to these politically charged events, often focusing on how war, displacement, and violence reshape private destinies and identities.

A hallmark of al-Othman's public persona and creative output is her clear and persistent criticism of religious extremism. She is recognized for speaking out against Islamist movements and the influence of religious conservatism in both Kuwait and the broader Arab world. Her opposition extends to Salafi interpretations of Islam and other forms of religious fanaticism, which she holds responsible for the suppression of free thought, artistic expression, and the advancement of women's rights. Such critiques not only permeate her fiction but also inform her public commentary and interviews.

Al-Othman's outspokenness has not been without serious personal risk. In 2000, she was sentenced to two months in prison on the allegation that one of her books contained blasphemous material and promoted immoral ideas. The case, widely covered and debated in the region, highlighted the fraught relationship between literary freedom and conservative legal frameworks in Kuwait. Although she ultimately avoided jail through legal appeals and payment of fines, the experience inspired one of her works and reinforced her commitment to defending intellectual freedom.

Despite being celebrated as a major literary figure across the Arab world, al-Othman has repeatedly faced censorship at home. No fewer than six of her books have, at various times, been banned in Kuwait. The reasons cited for these bans often revolve around charges of obscenity, social provocation, or alleged threats to public morality and religious values. Through these acts of censorship, al-Othman encountered not only institutional resistance but also social backlash from conservative elements, demonstrating the obstacles faced by writers seeking to challenge prevailing norms.

Al-Othman's autobiography offers one of the most detailed and unflinching examinations of Kuwaiti society available from a woman's perspective. In this work, she interrogates the layers of conservatism that define many aspects of public and private life in Kuwait. She does not hesitate to criticize the entrenched patriarchal attitudes, the limitations imposed on literary and artistic production, and the broader reluctance to embrace reform and freedom of expression. Her self-narrative serves as both a manifesto for personal liberation and a wider call to reexamine the structures that suppress individuality and dissent.<sup>11</sup>

Despite criticism, legal battles, and periods of censorship, Laila al-Othman's voice remains influential in shaping the intellectual currents of modern Kuwait and the Gulf. Her willingness to confront taboo topics and advocate for change has encouraged other writers, especially women, to engage critically with their societies. Ultimately, al-Othman's legacy is that of a pioneering author whose courage and literary innovation have continued to inspire public debate and progression in the Arab world.<sup>12</sup>

### Discussion

Laila al-Othman stands as an emblematic force in the evolution of the Kuwaiti Arabic novel, having persistently challenged social, cultural, and literary norms in her pursuit of authentic storytelling. Her literary journey, spanning several decades, encapsulates a broader movement within Kuwaiti literature, a transition from restricted expression to bold engagement with topics crucial to both personal and collective identities.

Al-Othman's writing emerged out of a conservative environment that often-silenced women's voices. By centring the inner struggles, desires, and resistances of her female characters, she not only documented but actively confronted the oppression and expectations facing Kuwaiti women.

Her novels address themes once deemed too controversial for public discourse, gender inequity, abuse, familial oppression, and moral hypocrisy. By spotlighting these issues, she instigated dialogue and paved the way for a more honest literary depiction of Kuwaiti society.

Al-Othman injected her fiction with narrative devices, such as shifting perspectives, psychological realism, and flashbacks, that were relatively new to the Kuwaiti novel. These strategies deepened emotional nuance and gave readers unprecedented access to her characters' inner lives.

While her work often foregrounds women's issues, she resists narrow classification as a "radical feminist" writer. Her project, instead, is a humanist one, seeking mature, equitable relations between men and women while universalizing her narratives beyond mere advocacy.

By writing openly about subjects like censorship, religious conservatism, and individual freedoms, al-Othman has played a direct role in stimulating public debate across Kuwait and the Arab world. Her candid autobiographical accounts further demystify the writer's craft and her battle for creative space.

Al-Othman's introduction of the biennial Laila al-Othman Award to support emerging writers underscores her belief in literary renewal. She has actively encouraged the development of younger generations, particularly women, within the Kuwaiti literary scene.

Her works, such as *Wasmiya Comes Out of the Sea* and *Silence of the Butterflies*, are hailed for their courage and artistry, earning a place among the best of modern Arabic fiction. At the same time, her willingness to address religion, sexuality, and politics has attracted censorship, bans, and, at times, legal sanction within Kuwait.

The translation of her novels into multiple languages highlights the universal resonance of her themes and establishes her as a figure of global literary significance.

Laila al-Othman's persistence has transformed the Kuwaiti novel from a form circumscribed by tradition to a vibrant platform for nuanced social critique and self-expression. Her journey, marked by personal hardship, creative resistance, and unwavering advocacy, ensures that the voices of Kuwaiti women and the realities of contemporary life continue to shape the narrative and intellectual horizons of Gulf literature. Through her body of work, al-Othman reaffirms the power of the novel as a vessel for both personal revelation and societal transformation.

### Conclusion

Laila al-Othman's life and literary oeuvre stand as a powerful testament to the transformative potential of storytelling within Kuwaiti and Arabic literature. Her relentless commitment to breaking social, cultural, and literary barriers has not only carved out a path for her voice but has also paved the way for future generations of writers, especially women, to explore previously uncharted thematic and artistic territories.

By fearlessly engaging with sensitive topics such as gender inequality, family oppression, and personal emancipation, al-Othman expanded the horizons of the modern Kuwaiti Arabic novel. Her characters, frequently shaped by real experiences and deep psychological insight, mirror the complexities of Kuwaiti society while challenging its conventions. Through narrative innovation, candid exploration of taboo subjects, and advocacy for creative freedom, she has fundamentally redefined the boundaries of what Kuwaiti literature can express.

Al-Othman's impact extends far beyond the page. Her establishment of the Laila al-Othman Award and her role as a mentor underscore her unwavering dedication to nurturing literary talent and fostering a vibrant



cultural landscape. Despite facing censorship, legal challenges, and societal resistance, she persisted in amplifying marginalized voices and reshaping the literary dialogue.

Ultimately, Laila al-Othman's pioneering role is characterized by her resilience, vision, and lasting influence. She has not only given Kuwaiti and Arab women a new language for their stories, but has enriched the Arabic novel with honesty, empathy, and daring. Her legacy endures in every writer empowered to challenge boundaries and every reader who discovers new possibilities within Kuwaiti fiction.

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