

Exploring The Voices Of Change: The Contribution Of Women To The Development Of Kuwaiti Novel Literature

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Citation: Dr. Noor Uddin Ahmed, et.al (2023). Exploring The Voices Of Change: The Contribution Of Women To The Development Of Kuwaiti Novel Literature, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 29(3) 1653-1658
DOI: 10.53555/kuey.v29i3.10748

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This study explores the transformative role of Kuwaiti women in shaping the national novelistic tradition, tracing their literary contributions from the mid-20th century to the present. It situates women's fiction within broader socio-political and cultural shifts, including the impact of oil wealth, modernization, and feminist awakening in the Gulf. Beginning with pioneers such as Sabiha Al-Mishari and Fatima Yousif al-Ali, the research highlights how early female novelists navigated restrictive societal norms to articulate personal and collective experiences. The evolution of women's fiction in Kuwait is marked by thematic expansions, from domestic struggles and identity crises to political resistance and global engagement. Writers like Laila Al-Othman, Khawla Al-Qazwīnī, and Buthaina al-Essa exemplify this literary maturation, employing innovative narrative techniques and confronting taboo subjects such as gender inequality, war trauma, and cultural hybridity. The study also examines the emergence of genre experimentation, including science fiction and autobiographical fiction, as tools for social critique and imaginative redefinition. Kuwaiti women novelists have not only mirrored the changing realities of their society but have also actively shaped its intellectual and cultural discourse. Their voices represent a dynamic intersection of tradition and modernity, resistance and creativity, local rootedness and global consciousness. This research underscores the significance of female authorship in the development of Kuwaiti literature and affirms the novel as a vital medium for feminist expression and national reflection.

Keywords: Kuwaiti women novelists, feminist literature, Gulf cultural transformation, narrative innovation, social critique, literary identity, etc.

Introduction

The emergence of women's voices in Kuwaiti novel literature marks a profound cultural and intellectual shift in the Gulf region's literary history. Long marginalized by patriarchal structures and conservative social norms, Kuwaiti women have gradually carved out a space for themselves within the national narrative tradition, transforming the novel into a medium of resistance, introspection, and cultural critique. Their contributions are not merely additive to the literary canon but foundational to its evolution, offering perspectives that interrogate gender, identity, modernity, and the socio-political upheavals that have shaped Kuwait's historical trajectory.

Historically, Arab women's literary expression was constrained by societal expectations that relegated them to domestic roles and denied them access to education and public discourse. As Ḥusayn al-Awdat observes, the decline in women's intellectual agency during the Abbasid and Ottoman periods was not a consequence of religious doctrine but rather the result of entrenched patriarchal customs and political fragmentation.¹ The Arab Renaissance (Nahḍa) of the late nineteenth century, however, initiated a gradual reawakening of female participation in cultural life. Reformers such as Rifa'a al-Tahtāwī and Qasim Amin championed women's education and civic engagement, laying the groundwork for literary activism.²

In Kuwait, the development of the novel as a literary form began in the mid-twentieth century, with Farhan Rashid Al-Farhan's *ʿAlām Ṣaḍīq* (1948) marking an early attempt at prose fiction. However, it was the pioneering work of Sabiha Al-Mishari, whose novel *ʿAbath al-Aqdār* (The Play of Fate) appeared in 1960, that signalled the entry of women into the Kuwaiti literary scene.³ Her work, along with that of contemporaries

such as Nûriya Al-Sadanî and Fatima Yûsuf al-‘Alî, laid the foundation for a distinctly female literary voice that would flourish in subsequent decades.

The 1970s and 1980s witnessed a surge in women’s novelistic production, coinciding with Kuwait’s rapid modernization and the expansion of educational opportunities for women. Writers such as Taiba Ibrahim and Laila Al-Othman began to explore themes of gender inequality, personal autonomy, and social transformation. Ibrahim’s *Zilâl al-Haqq* (Shadows of Truth, 1979) and Al-Othman’s *Al-Mar’ah wa al-Qittah* (The Woman and the Cat, 1985) exemplify this shift toward introspective and socially engaged fiction.⁴ These narratives not only reflect the lived experiences of Kuwaiti women but also challenge dominant cultural paradigms, offering alternative visions of identity and agency.

Kuwaiti women novelists have also been instrumental in expanding the thematic and stylistic boundaries of Arabic fiction. Taiba Ibrahim’s foray into science fiction with her trilogy, *Al-Insân al-Bâḥat* (The Faded Man, 1986), *Al-Insân al-Muta’addidah* (The Many Man, 1990), and *Inqirâdh al-Rajul* (The Extinction of Man, 1990), represents a bold departure from traditional realist narratives, introducing speculative elements to critique gender roles and societal norms.⁵ Similarly, Thurayâ Al-Baqṣamî’s novels, including *Shumû’ al-Saradib* (Candles of the Catacombs) and *Zamân al-Mizmar al-Ahmar* (The Time of the Red Flute), blend visual artistry with literary storytelling to document the trauma of war and the resilience of Kuwaiti society during the Iraqi invasion.⁶

The 1990s and early 2000s marked a literary renaissance for Kuwaiti women, with authors embracing more daring and diverse themes. Buthaina al-Essa, one of the most prominent contemporary voices, explores psychological depth, existential dilemmas, and social critique in works such as *Earus al-Matar* (The Bride of Rain) and *Airttitam Lam Yasma’ Lahu Dawwiun* (An Unheard Collision).⁷ Her narratives reflect a cosmopolitan sensibility, often transcending regional boundaries to engage with global issues and literary forms.

Thematically, Kuwaiti women’s novels have addressed a wide spectrum of social and political concerns. Issues such as polygamy, divorce, female circumcision, and the hijab are recurrent motifs, often framed within a critique of patriarchal oppression and cultural stagnation. It has been observed that many female authors approach the hijab not as a religious obligation but as a symbol of social constraint, aligning with secular feminist interpretations. Similarly, the trauma of the Iraqi invasion and the occupation of Palestine are explored with emotional intensity and political urgency, as seen in the works of Fawzia Shuwaish al-Sâlim and Khawla Al-Qazwîni.

The literary contributions of Kuwaiti women extend beyond thematic innovation, encompassing stylistic experimentation and genre diversification. Autobiographical fiction, historical novels, and psychological realism are among the forms employed to articulate female subjectivity and challenge normative narratives. As Nazih Abu Nidal observes, early women’s fiction often mirrored male literary conventions, but later generations have developed a distinct feminist voice that foregrounds personal experience and social critique.⁸

Moreover, the institutional and cultural infrastructure supporting women’s literary production has expanded significantly. The establishment of women-led publishing houses, literary magazines, and cultural platforms, such as Buthaina al-Essa’s Takwîn, has provided vital spaces for creative expression and intellectual engagement.⁹ These initiatives reflect a broader movement toward literary activism, wherein writing becomes a tool for social transformation and cultural dialogue.

In sum, the contribution of women to the development of Kuwaiti novel literature is both foundational and transformative. From the pioneering efforts of Sabiha Al-Mishari to the contemporary innovations of Buthaina al-‘Isâ, Kuwaiti women have redefined the novel as a space for feminist expression, cultural critique, and imaginative exploration. Their voices, once marginalized, now resonate at the heart of Kuwait’s literary identity, offering narratives that are as diverse and dynamic as the society they reflect. This study seeks to illuminate these voices of change, tracing their evolution, thematic concerns, and stylistic innovations, while situating them within the broader context of Arab literary history and feminist discourse.

Description:

Khawla al-Qazwîni (خولة القزويني)

Khawla Şâhib Sayyid Jawâd al-Qazwîni was born in al-Kâzimiyyah, Iraq, on February 8, 1963, into a religious family. Her grandfather, Sayyid Jawâd al-Qazwîni, was a Shi’a religious authority in Kuwait. She grew up under the care of her father, Şâhib Sayyid Jawâd al-Qazwîni, with whom she lived for several years in Najaf, where he benefited from the leading scholars of the city. Later, he returned with his daughter and family to Kuwait to resume a normal life.

It was in this environment that Khawla al-Qazwîni began reading the works of the martyred writer Bint al-Hudâ, whose personality she studied and by whom she was deeply influenced. She refined her own talent through intensive reading. She was particularly drawn to Arabic and world novels and stories, such as the works of al-Manfalûtî, whose style, precise expressions, and descriptive language left a strong impact on her. She then read the works of Naguib Mahfouz, Yûsuf Idrîs, Ihsân ‘Abd al-Quddûs, Dr. Bint al-Shâtî, and

Mustafa Amin, and her reading extended to international novelists as well, taking from each writer the distinct quality that set him or her apart from others.

Inspired by this wide literary exposure, she considered writing for newspapers and magazines under pseudonyms. Her first story was published in *al-Siyâsa* newspaper, and she also began writing in *Afâq University Journal*. She continued her contributions to daily newspapers until she was allowed to become a regular writer for *Şawt al-Khalij* magazine, where she was offered the role of editor for the “Women and Family” section. At the same time, *Afâq University Journal* entrusted her with the “Islamiyyât” column. Through these experiences, her writing matured further, enriched by her interaction with people and her growing intellectual horizons.¹⁰

Her Novels:

- (i) *Mudhakaraat Mughtaribah*, 1995
- (ii) *Haifa Ta'tarif Lakum*, 2001
- (iii) *Jiraahaat min al-Zaman al-Radi'*, 2002
- (iv) *Al-Bayt al-Dâfi'*, 2006
- (v) *Rajul Taktubuhu al-Shams*, 2006
- (vi) *Sayyidât wa Aanisât*, 2006
- (vii) *Mutallaga min Waqi' al-Hayaah*, 2006
- (viii) *Ahlan.. Siyada al-Ra'is*, 2008
- (ix) *Nisaa' Naajihât*, 2008
- (x) *Indamaa Yufakkir al-Rajul*, 2009
- (xi) *Bayni wa Baynaka Hikaaya*, 2009
- (xii) *Zaynab... Bint al-Ajaawid*, 2011.¹¹

Fâtima Yûsuf al-'Alî (فاطمة يوسف العلي):

Fâtima Yûsuf al-'Alî (b. 1953) is a pioneering Kuwaiti journalist and short story writer, affectionately known as “the little journalist” for beginning her media career in her teens. She earned her General Secondary Certificate in 1970, followed by a BA and Diploma in Arabic Literature from Cairo University (1987, 1989).

She began her career in 1969 with *Dâr Al-Rai Al-Aam* and *Al-Nahda* magazine, where she edited the column “Once a Week”. She later joined *Al-Qabas* newspaper, contributing to the semi-daily column “A Word Said” and overseeing its cultural supplement. Her work extended to radio and television, and she published in both Arabic and English-language outlets.

Fatima has been deeply involved in Kuwait's literary and journalistic circles, holding memberships in the Kuwaiti Writers Association, Journalists Association, Human Rights Watch, and the International Federation of Journalists. She co-founded the Arab Women's Society and actively participated in the Social Cultural Women's Society and the Kuwaiti Girls' Club.

She represented Kuwait in numerous regional and global conferences, including the Nairobi and Moscow World Women's Conferences, and was elected deputy president at the 1975 Arab Women Journalists' Conference in Cairo under Amîna al-Sa'îd.

During the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, she continued her advocacy from Bahrain, contributing resistance journalism through Saudi outlets like *Riyadh* newspaper.¹²

From her literary works, we find two novels, which are as follows:

- i. *Wujûh fî al-Zihâm* (Faces in the Crowd), published in 1971
- ii. *Thartharah bilâ Dîfâf*, 2013

Her stories have been widely published, broadcast, and incorporated into educational curricula, reflecting her lifelong dedication to cultural enrichment and women's issues.¹³

Taibah Al-Ibrâhîm (طيبة الإبراهيم):

She was born on February 8, 1945. Throughout her career, she held several significant professional and cultural roles in Kuwait. She worked at the Kuwaiti Ministry of Information as a supervisor of drama, where she contributed to the development and oversight of media productions. In addition, she worked as a mathematics teacher in the schools of the Ministry of Education and later served in the Libraries Administration of the ministry, reflecting the breadth of her professional experience. She was also an active member of the Kuwaiti Writers' Association, establishing herself as a recognized figure in the country's literary and cultural circles.

She holds the distinction of being the first writer of science fiction in Kuwait, pioneering a genre that had not previously been explored in the local literary scene.

In 2006, she entered the political arena, running as a candidate in the fifth constituency (Qadsiya–Mansouriya) during the first parliamentary elections in Kuwait in which women were allowed to participate as candidates for the National Assembly. In doing so, she defied traditional electoral customs by refusing to open a *diwaniya*, a traditional reception space, for meeting voters, a move that drew considerable attention.

Her declared political and social positions further marked her as a controversial and progressive figure. She advocated for the separation of religion from the state, called for legislation restricting men to marrying only one wife, and insisted on the principle that a woman's consent must be obtained in cases of divorce. These views sparked both admiration and criticism: some praised her for adopting forward-looking and progressive stances ahead of her time, while others condemned her for opposing societal traditions and even accused her of going against religious principles.

After a long struggle with illness, she passed away on December 28, 2011, at the age of 66.

Her Novels:

- (i) *Zilâl al-Ḥaqîqa*, 1979
- (ii) *Mudhakirât Khâdim – al-Juz' al-Awwal*, 1986
- (iii) *Al-Insân al-Bâhit*, 1986
- (iv) *Al-Insân al-Muta'addid*, 1990
- (v) *Inqirâḍ al-Rajul*, 1990
- (vi) *La'nat al-Mâl*, 1995
- (vii) *Mudhakirât Khâdim – al-Juz' al-Thânî*, 1995
- (viii) *Al-Bulahâ'*, 1999
- (ix) *Al-Qarya al-Sirriyya*, 1999
- (x) *Al-Kawkab Sâsûn – 'Âlam Majnûn*, 2001
- (xi) *Al-Qalb al-Qâsî wa-Ashwâk al-Rabî'*, 2004¹⁴

Munâ al-Shâfî (منى الشافعي):

Taibah Al-Ibrahim (c. 1945–2011) was a pioneering Kuwaiti novelist and among the earliest writers of science fiction in the Gulf. Born around 1945, she broke ground in Kuwaiti literature with a notable trilogy in the 1980s and 1990s that dealt with themes like cloning and cryogenic freezing, depicting worlds where men lose their sexuality through modern technology.¹⁵ In her oeuvre are key works such as *al-Insân al-Bâhit* ("The Faint Human," 1986), *al-Insân al-Muta'addid* ("The Multiple Human," 1990), *Inqirâḍ al-Rajul* ("Extinction of Men," 1990), *La'nat al-Mâl* ("The Curse of Money," date unspecified), and *Mudhakirât Khâdim* ("Memoirs of a Servant") parts one (1986) and two (1995), as well as later titles like *Zilâl al-Ḥaqîqa*, *al-Bulahâ'*, *al-Qarya al-Sirriyya*, *al-Kawkab Sâsûn – 'Âlam Majnûn*, and *al-Qalb al-Qâsî wa-Ashwâk al-Rabî'*.¹⁶

Politically, Al-Ibrahim made history by running in the 2008 electoral race (third constituency), where she campaigned on a progressive platform advocating for gender equality, divorce rights requiring consent from both spouses, and the separation of religion from the state, formulating a secular vision of governance.¹⁷

Her literary achievements were formally recognized: she received an appreciation award for her science fiction works (specifically *al-Insân al-Bâhit*, *al-Insân al-Muta'addid*, and *Inqirâḍ al-Rajul*) from Kuwait's literary and artistic services.¹⁸

After a prolonged illness, Taibah Al-Ibrahim passed away on December 28, 2011, at the age of 66, leaving behind a legacy marked by bold innovation in fiction and fearless advocacy in public life.¹⁹

Thurayâ Al-Baqsamî (ثرى البقاسمي)

She was born in 1952 in Kuwait into a culturally conscious family that encouraged education and creativity from an early age. Her childhood between Kuwait and Lebanon exposed her to diverse artistic and intellectual environments, which later shaped her identity as both an artist and writer.

Her formal artistic journey began in 1966, when she studied painting at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Cairo. Driven by her passion for creativity, she pursued advanced studies abroad and obtained both her bachelor's and master's degrees in fine arts from the prestigious Surikov Institute in Moscow in 1981. During her seven years in Moscow, she specialized in graphic art and book arts, disciplines that profoundly influenced her later works.

She expanded her artistic horizons by taking specialized courses in Dakar, Senegal, where she trained in silk-screen batik printing and ceramics, exploring traditional and modern techniques. Her quest for knowledge also took her to London, where she studied various forms of printmaking, such as zinc etching and silk-screen (screen printing), acquiring technical mastery that she would later integrate into her distinctive artistic style.

Upon returning to Kuwait, she collaborated with her fellow artists in establishing the Friends of Fine Art Group for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Through this platform, she actively participated in regional, Arab, and international exhibitions, presenting her vision of contemporary Arab art to a global audience. She also organized numerous workshops in silk painting (batik art) at Beit al-Sadu and the Handicrafts Association and contributed to the execution of several public murals that enriched Kuwait's cultural landscape.

Parallel to her visual art, she engaged with journalism and illustration, contributing motifs and artistic visuals to major Kuwaiti newspapers and magazines such as *Al-Qabas*, *Al-Waṭan*, *Al-'Arabî*, and *Al-Kuwait*.

Her prolific career included 61 solo exhibitions across various countries. Among her notable achievements was her participation in the 1991 exhibition of the Friends of Fine Art Group for GCC countries at the National Museum of Damascus, as well as her solo exhibition at the Arab Cultural Centre in Damascus.

Her literary works and paintings received multiple awards and critical acclaim, and some of her writings were translated into Chinese, Russian, Slovak, and English, underscoring her international recognition.

Her life reflects the journey of a Kuwaiti woman who, through dedication, education, and creativity, became a pioneering figure in the fields of fine art and literature, leaving behind a legacy that continues to inspire.

Her Novels:

- (i) Zaman al-Mizmâr al-Aḥmar, Dâr al-Fârâbî, 2012
- (ii) Tuffâḥa fî Hawdaj, 2024.²⁰

Buthaina al-'Isâ (بثينة العيسى):

Buthaina al-'Isâ was born in 1982. She holds a bachelor's degree from the College of Administrative Sciences (specialization in Finance and Financial Institutions) at the University of Kuwait, as well as a master's degree in business administration (specialization in Finance) from the same college, which she completed in 2011 with distinction.

Her literary journey began before her first publication, as she started writing on websites and online forums, developing her voice as a storyteller. In 2005, she published her debut novel, *Irtitâm... Lam Yusma' Lahu Dawî* ("A Collision... That Made No Sound"), marking her official entry into the world of literature.

She is a member of the Kuwaiti Writers' Association and the Arab Union of Internet Writers, highlighting her active role in both national and regional literary communities. Beyond her novels, she has contributed significantly to the promotion of creative writing, delivering numerous workshops in creative writing that inspired emerging talents.

She is also the founder of the Takwîn Project, where she serves as the head of the Training Program as well as the Translation and Publishing Program. Through this initiative, she has played a pivotal role in cultivating a culture of literary production, translation, and dissemination in Kuwait and beyond.

Her presence in the cultural field is not limited to writing and teaching. She has participated in numerous cultural evenings, seminars, and events in Kuwait, establishing herself as an influential figure in the intellectual and literary scene. Her achievements have been recognized with several awards, attesting to the quality and impact of her work.

One of her notable novels, *Kharâ'it al-Tîh* ("Maps of Wandering"), published in 2015, was banned from circulation in Kuwait, sparking controversy and drawing attention to her bold engagement with sensitive social and cultural issues.

Her Novels:

- (i) *Irtitâm... Lam Yusma' Lahu Dawî*, 2005
- (ii) *Si'âr*, 2005
- (iii) *Arûs al-Maṭar*, 2006
- (iv) *Taḥt Aqdâm al-Ummahât*, 2009
- (v) *Ā'isha Tanzil Ilâ al-Ālam al-Sufî*, 2011
- (vi) *Kabirtu wa Nasîtu An Ansâ*, 2013
- (vii) *Kharâ'it al-Tîh*, 2015
- (viii) *Ḥâris Saḥ al-Ālam*, 2019
- (ix) *Al-Sindibâd al-A'mâ*, 2021
- (x) *Dâr Khawla*, 2024.²¹

Findings:

- (i) The study finds that Kuwaiti women novelists have played a central role in shaping the thematic and stylistic development of modern Kuwaiti literature.
- (ii) It establishes that women's voices introduced new perspectives, particularly in addressing issues of identity, gender roles, family relations, and societal transformation.
- (iii) The research demonstrates that female novelists challenged traditional norms by engaging with sensitive subjects such as marriage, divorce, female autonomy, and the intersection of religion and social life.
- (iv) Findings indicate that women writers such as Taibah Al-Ibrahim, Bothayna Al-Essa, Laila al-Othman, and others expanded the literary landscape by experimenting with narrative techniques and tackling taboo subjects.
- (v) The paper reveals that female authors contributed significantly to the rise of social realism and psychological exploration in Kuwaiti fiction, moving beyond romantic or folkloric themes.
- (vi) It shows that literature became a tool of resistance and social critique, with women novelists addressing censorship, gender inequality, and political participation.
- (vii) The study concludes that the inclusion of women's perspectives diversified Kuwaiti narrative traditions, making them more reflective of the complexities of modern Kuwaiti society.
- (viii) The findings highlight that translation of women's works into multiple languages helped internationalize Kuwaiti literature, allowing these narratives to reach wider audiences.

- (ix) Finally, the research affirms that women novelists are not only chroniclers of social change but also active agents of cultural transformation in Kuwait.

Conclusion:

The research paper affirms that women have been pioneers and catalysts of transformation in the development of the Kuwaiti novel. By breaking silences, confronting social taboos, and engaging with pressing questions of identity, gender, and modernity, Kuwaiti women novelists have expanded the scope of literary expression in the Gulf region. Their narratives reflect not only personal struggles but also the collective experiences of a society in transition, thus positioning literature as a mirror of cultural, political, and social change.

Through the works of writers such as Laila al-Othman, Taibah Al-Ibrahim, Bothayna Al-Essa, and others, the Kuwaiti novel has moved beyond traditional confines to embrace social realism, psychological depth, and experimental narrative techniques. These contributions highlight how women's voices have reshaped the thematic map of Kuwaiti fiction, bringing forward issues of female agency, family dynamics, political participation, and the negotiation between tradition and modernity.

The study concludes that women's engagement with the novel form is not only a literary achievement but also a socio-cultural intervention that challenges patriarchal structures and opens spaces for dialogue on reform and progress. By pushing the boundaries of subject matter and narrative style, Kuwaiti women novelists have ensured that their works resonate both locally and globally, with translations amplifying their reach.

Ultimately, the contribution of women to Kuwaiti novel literature demonstrates that the novel has become an arena of resistance, empowerment, and cultural renewal. Their literary voices continue to inspire new generations, confirming that the evolution of Kuwaiti fiction cannot be understood without acknowledging the vital role of women in shaping its course.

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