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VOICES OF RESILIENCE AND REVELATION: EXPLORING THE LIFE AND LITERARY LEGACY OF LAILA AL-OTHMAN IN MODERN KUWAIT

Dr. Noor Uddin Ahmed[1], Dr. Fazlur Rahman[2], Rakit Islam[3]
[1]*Associate Professor, Arabic Department, Cotton University, Guwahati, India*
[2]*Retd. Associate Professor, Arabic Department, Cotton University, Guwahati, India*
[3]*Research Scholar, Arabic Department, Cotton University, Guwahati, India*

ABSTRACT
This paper examines the profound influence of Laila al-Othman, one of modern Kuwait's most celebrated authors, whose literary works have become seminal in representing women's experiences in the Arabian Gulf. Through novels that blend personal narrative with social critique, al-Othman consistently foregrounds themes of resilience, gender, and transformation. Her storytelling, deeply rooted in local culture yet universally resonant, reflects the shifting landscape of Kuwaiti society through decades of political, social, and familial evolution. The study traces her evolution from early journalistic roots to groundbreaking fiction, situating her within both Kuwaiti and wider Arab literary canons. By analysing her most influential works, such as Ṣamt al-Farâshât and Khudh hâ lâ Uridhâ, the paper highlights al-Othman's exploration of taboo subjects, advocacy for women's rights, and resistance to censorship. Attention is given to the critical reception of her work, which spans praise for her courage and artistry, as well as criticism for her depiction of sensitive issues. Ultimately, this research situates Laila al-Othman as a transformative voice of resilience and revelation, an author whose legacy continues to inspire dialogue and progress in the landscape of modern Arabic literature.

KEYWORDS: *Laila al-Othman, Kuwaiti literature, Women's rights, social critique, Resilience, Modern Arabic novel, etc.*

INTRODUCTION
Kuwaiti literature, though comparatively young in the panorama of modern Arabic writing, has produced voices of remarkable power and individuality. Among its most influential figures stands Laila al-Othman, a novelist and journalist whose works have paved the way for candid discussion of women's experiences, struggles, and aspirations in the Arabian Gulf. Born against the backdrop of a rapidly transforming Kuwait, al-Othman's literary journey is both a reflection and a critique of her society, distinguished by her fearless engagement with issues that many considered unspeakable.

Laila al-Othman's contribution is defined by her unwavering commitment to social critique and the nuanced portrayal of women's inner lives. In a literary landscape often constrained by tradition and societal expectations, her novels break new ground by foregrounding the complexities of female identity, autonomy, and resilience amid patriarchal constraints. Her narratives delve into a spectrum of taboo topics, from gender-based violence and family oppression to the psychological toll of silence and conformity. Through works such as *Ṣamt al-Farâshât* (*Silence of the Butterflies*) and *Khudh hâ la Uridhâ* (*Take it, I Don't Want It*), al-Othman crafts stories that defy conventional gender roles and give voice to the often-unheard struggles of Kuwaiti women.

Al-Othman's literary philosophy is inseparable from her life experiences and journalistic sensibilities. Her novels draw upon real-life observations and personal encounters, weaving fact and fiction to expose the emotional and societal realities of her time. The authenticity and immediacy of her writing have not only resonated with readers but have also sparked debate, earning both acclaim and criticism for her boldness in tackling sensitive issues. As a result, she stands as a pioneering figure whose work has both shaped and challenged the conversation about gender, tradition, and change in the Gulf region.

Despite facing resistance from conservative segments of society and navigating the obstacles of limited literary readership and institutional support, al-Othman's oeuvre continues to inspire critical engagement and reflection. Her stories are more than narratives; they are acts of revelation and resistance, encouraging readers to question, empathize, and advocate for progressive change. This research paper explores the life and literary legacy of Laila al-Othman, situating her within the broader currents of modern Kuwaiti and Arab literature, and highlighting her role as a vital force for resilience, revelation, and transformation in contemporary cultural discourse.

DESCRIPTION
Biography of Laila al-Othman
Laila al-Othman was born in 1943 into a large and well-known Kuwaiti family. Her father, Abdullah al-Othman, was among Kuwait's prominent men. She began her literary pursuits as a student, publishing her first writings in local newspapers in

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1965, with a focus on literary and social issues. Since then, she has been a consistent contributor, maintaining regular daily and weekly columns in both Kuwaiti and Arab press.

Beyond her prolific journalism, Laila al-Othman prepared and presented a variety of literary and social programs for radio and television. She also served as the Secretary-General of the Kuwaiti Writers Association for two terms, totalling four years. Al-Othman has remained actively engaged in cultural life inside and outside Kuwait, continuing to produce short stories and novels, many of which have been translated into several languages.

Her novel "Wasmiyya Comes Out of the Sea" was named one of the best 100 Arabic novels of the twentieth century and was adapted into a television production representing Kuwait at the Cairo Radio and Television Festival; it was also staged during the Youth Theatre Festival in 2007. Laila al-Othman is a member of the Kuwaiti Writers Association, the Arab Writers Union, Amnesty International (Kuwait branch), and the Kuwait Society for Human Rights.[1]

Laila al-Othman is considered one of the most prominent literary voices in the Gulf and the Arab world in general. She began her career as a poet before transitioning to short story and novel writing. Most of her works have been translated into international languages, and her novel *Wasmiya Takhruj Min al-Baḥr* (Wasmiya Comes Out of the Sea) was selected as one of the top one hundred novels of the twentieth century. Among her most notable publications are *Imrâ' Fî Inâ'* (A Woman in a Vessel), *Ḥulm al-Layla al-Ulâ* (The First Night's Dream), and *Yawmiyyât al-Ṣabr wa al-Murr* (Diaries of Patience and Bitterness). Numerous critical studies and academic papers have been dedicated to her work.

For the first time, attention to her oeuvre has come from a Tunisian scholar, Fatima Ben Mahmoud, who devoted her recent book to a study of Laila al-Othman's creative experience: "Laila al-Othman and Writing from within," published in its first edition by Dâr Al-Watan Publishing, Rabat, in August 2022 (121 pages, medium size).

The book includes an introduction and a collection of readings analyzing Laila al-Othman's narrative achievements. The researcher focused especially on her novels: *Ṣamat al-Farâshât* (Silence of the Butterflies), *Ḥikâya Ṣafiya* (The Story of Safia), and *Al-Muḥâkamah* (The Trial), as well as two short story works: *Fatḥiya Takhtâru Mawtahâ* (Fathiya Chooses Her Death), and *Ḥâlah Ḥubb Majnûna* (A Mad Love Affair), in addition to her autobiography *Anfaḍ 'annî al-Ghubâr* (I Dust Myself Off). The book concludes with an interview with Laila al-Othman herself.

In her introduction, Fatima Bin Mahmoud points out Laila al-Othman's commitment to Kuwaiti society and her preoccupation with its issues, which has made her the voice of Kuwait's streets and alleyways, just as novelist Naguib Mahfouz was the voice of Egyptian society. Al-Othman denounces social restrictions and openly rejects them, writing about Kuwaiti society in all its details. She moves from the particular to the universal/human, which has granted her a special place in the overall Arab literary scene. For this reason, the researcher deliberately diversified her readings of al-Othman's work, combining analyses of novels, short stories, and autobiography to provide, in her view, a relatively comprehensive vision of a facet of al-Othman's literary achievement, given the common thread that connects her writings.

The critic focused on textual thresholds as key entry points into the novel "Silence of the Butterflies," considering both linguistic elements (such as the novel's title) and non-linguistic elements (like the cover illustration). She also examined the central character, Nadia, describing her as a dynamic, multifaceted figure who represents "the novelist's viewpoint, a complex personality that is never settled, gradually revealed to the reader, and whose actions cannot be predicted. Nadia consistently maintains an air of mystery in her reactions and attitudes, which adds suspense to the novel" (p.18).

According to the researcher, Laila al-Othman chose to employ the technique of an omniscient narrator, controlling the course of events using the second-person narrative. This choice allowed the narrator, the implied author, to deeply penetrate the protagonist's psyche and explore her inner world. In this way, the reader can closely follow Nadia's development, understand her complex psychology, and empathize with her diverse emotions. The researcher also confirmed that the author made use of flashbacks to construct the narrative timeline, aiming to break the monotony of linear events within the story.

The analysis was grounded in the concepts of masculinity and femininity, and the interactions between them, whether at the societal level or within literature. Through this lens, several issues were explored, including masculinity and femininity between science and reality, masculinity and femininity between society and literature, male authority versus female status, woman as both victim and executioner, the equalization of gender "games," violence and counter-violence/the aggressiveness of culture, domination and subjugation, and the question of responsibility. The researcher concludes that interpreting these stories through the dual lenses of femininity and masculinity should not mislead the reader into labelling Laila al-Othman's body of work as "radical feminist writing," because such a claim would be inaccurate (p.63). Rather, al-Othman sides with women in these stories as a form of victory for humanity at large, aiming to foster a mature and conscious relationship between men and women.

Triumph Over Life

The critic also focused on textual thresholds, analysing the linguistic elements exemplified by the nominal sentence titled *Fatḥiya Takhtâru Mawtahâ* (Fathiya Chooses Her Death) and

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exploring the symbols and connotations it carries, alongside the non-linguistic/semantic elements represented in the cover art. Following this, she addressed key issues dominating the stories in this collection: the role of writing in dissecting society, delving into heritage and traditions, the perception of women as the weakest link, and how pre-oil Kuwaiti society viewed women. The critic concluded that Laila al-Othman, in these stories, emphasized the use of retrospection as a narrative technique, enabling her to effectively capture emotional states by conveying the inner worlds of her characters, their feelings, anxieties, and contradictions.

The critic similarly approached other works through textual thresholds, both linguistic (such as the novel's title: "The Trial") and non-linguistic (like the cover image and the style of the font). She then discussed further analytical levels in this narrative, including:

- The relationship between religion and literature.
- Literature, religion, and the act of self-writing.
- Laila al-Othman and "The Trial."
- Creativity and moral judgments.
- Mechanisms of religious authority.
- Hostility toward creativity.
- The adversary: woman as the weakest link.
- Confrontation by all means.
- The creator's belief in writing, with a focus on both emotional and creative levels.

In this context, the researcher concluded that Laila al-Othman's technique in constructing *Al-Muâkamah* (The Trial) centres on her attention to minute details. She creates a kind of intersection between the subjective and the objective, the individual and the collective. She also adopts the flashback method to handle events without disrupting the narrative structure.

Fatima Ben Mahmoud, in her treatment of this autobiography, focused on several elements: writing as magic, writing as a gateway to salvation, and writing as life itself. She concluded that this narrative text offers the reader a new approach to the art of the novel through a human and social experience that intersects, in one way or another, with psychological and cultural dimensions. The researcher concluded her book with an interview she conducted with the writer Laila al-Othman (p. 107), in which she raised many literary issues as well as objective and subjective factors that contributed to the development of Laila al-Othman's creative experience.[2]

Her Literary Life

Laila al-Othman discovered her affinity for writing while she was still a student, developing an early interest in literature and the art of expressing herself. Her formal entrance into the literary world, however, came in 1965, when she started publishing poems, opinion columns, and commentaries on social and cultural themes in Kuwaiti newspapers. Her ability to articulate intricate emotions and portray the social dynamics of the region earned her recognition at a young age.

Soon after, al-Othman took a position as a journalist with Al-Siyasah, a prominent newspaper in Kuwait, further expanding her influence as a writer. Throughout this period, her husband was a significant source of motivation and support, encouraging her efforts and instilling in her the confidence to publish broadly and pursue her ambitions in the literary field.

Nonetheless, Laila's path was marked by substantial family resistance. Her father, himself active in literary circles, was adamant in his disapproval of her publishing work, viewing it as potentially harmful to the family's social reputation. Due to this opposition, Laila initially faced considerable constraints and had to navigate the tension between her creative drive and conservative family expectations.

Major change came after al-Othman was married and, particularly, following her father's passing. Free from the earlier restrictions, she embraced her writing career more openly, turning her attention to challenging subjects, especially those involving women's lives under patriarchal norms. The emotional hardships and tensions from her upbringing significantly influenced her narrative voice and the issues she chose to explore in her fiction.

These personal experiences are echoed throughout her body of work, where she interrogates the dynamics between men and women, the limitations imposed on women by society, and the possibilities that arise when women are afforded autonomy. Her stories are imbued with a pointed critique of gender-based injustice, offering a window into the broader struggles that women face in the Arab world.

Al-Othman's literature, rooted in her own experiences of pain and a heightened awareness of social realities, has become an emblem of women's empowerment in contemporary Kuwaiti and Arab writing. By confronting emotional and social conflicts head-on and exposing the realities of women's lives under patriarchy, she has greatly influenced the Gulf's literary realm and paved the way for future generations of writers. [3]

Laila al-Othman has long stood at the forefront of Kuwaiti literary life, noted especially for her trailblazing efforts in both short fiction and the novel. Her reputation began to rise in 1976 with the publication of her inaugural short story collection, *Imra'a fi Inâ'* (*A Woman in a Vessel*). This first book was instrumental in highlighting her distinctive narrative voice, a style that delved deeply into the psychological realities and daily challenges facing women.

Building on the acclaim of her short stories, al-Othman entered the realm of the novel with *Al-Mar'ah wa al-Qitta* (*The Woman and the Cat*) in 1985. This work immediately marked her as a significant contributor to the Arabic novel form. The following year, she released *Wasmiya Takhruj min al-Baḥr* (*Wasmiya Comes Out of the Sea*), a novel that was met with widespread admiration for its daring themes and engaging narrative. The

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significance of this book was later affirmed when it was recognized as one of the top 100 Arabic novels of the 21st century.

Al-Othman's storytelling has reached audiences well beyond the Arab-speaking world. Her books have been translated into a range of languages, such as French, Spanish, German, Russian, Yugoslavian, and Polish. Through these translations, her sensitive exploration of personal and societal issues became accessible to diverse global readerships, earning her accolades for her ability to speak to universal human concerns.

Further demonstrating her commitment to the literary community, Laila al-Othman established the Laila al-Othman Award in 2004. This biennial literary prize recognizes promising young Kuwaiti authors, regardless of gender, for outstanding work in novel writing. The award underscores al-Othman's dedication to fostering new talent, as well as her desire to inspire and mentor the next generation of Kuwaiti writers.

Al-Othman's body of work stands as a testament to her pivotal role in shaping both Kuwaiti and Arabic literature. Her stories and initiatives continue to inspire writers and readers alike, bridging cultures and fuelling future creativity.

Her contributions to literature and advocacy have extended beyond writing. She has been an active participant in numerous cultural and academic events across the Arab world and internationally. Some of the notable forums and conferences she has taken part in include the Arab Women and Cultural Creativity Seminar, the Women's Union meetings, the Women and Media Symposium in Tunisia, the Women's Culture in the Gulf Conference held in Abu Dhabi, and sessions organized by the University of Charles de Gaulle focusing on sciences, humanities, and women's organizations.

Laila al-Othman is also an active member of several prominent literary and human rights organizations. Her affiliations include:

i. Kuwaiti Writers Association
ii. Arab Writers Union
iii. Public Union of Palestinian Writers and Journalists
iv. Kuwaiti Journalists Association
v. NSC International Association, Kuwait Branch
vi. Amnesty International
vii. Human Rights Association

Through her literary achievements and social engagement, Laila al-Othman has become a powerful voice for women and a leading figure in the modern Arabic literary renaissance. Her legacy continues to inspire aspiring writers and advocates across the Arab world and beyond.[4]

Exploration of Her Life

Laila considers her wedding day in 1965 to be the true day of her birth. Her husband was a Palestinian doctor who encouraged her to write and to publish her articles and stories. She said, "My father used to pressure my husband so that I would not write in newspapers and magazines, and when my father passed away, I felt like a little bird that had grown wings. I wrote boldly. The repression I had inside me exploded."

She added, "My ambition was to become a prominent writer on the Arab world stage. I strived and worked hard to reach the position I am in now."

She continued, "With all humility, I say that, even after 22 books in the field of writing, I am still crawling on the writing path."

Laila recounted how several of her books had been banned from publication within Kuwait until recently and shared her story with the Islamic current in Kuwait, which in 1996 filed a lawsuit against her, accusing her novels of promoting immorality and debauchery. She indicated that she appealed a ruling that sentenced her to two months in prison in this case in 2000.

She added, "My son paid the fine instead of imprisonment, but I decided to appeal the ruling to defend my right and prove that I am not a promoter of immorality, even though I considered serving the prison term to write a novel about female prisoners."

However, things did not go as she had wished; after the appeal, the new sentence was two years in prison instead of two months, which she said was unbearable, so she chose to pay a fine instead of serving two years behind bars.

She said, "I wrote the novel 'Al-Maḥâkim' (The Courts) and dedicated it by name to those who filed the complaint against me. The novel is an autobiography about what happened to me during this trial."

Laila expressed her concern over the rise of Islamists in power in several Arab countries and praised the Egyptian army's ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood government after a year in power. She said, "In Kuwait, after the Brotherhood came to power in Egypt, the Islamists' strength and influence grew, and if they had not been removed from power in Egypt, they would have been preparing to establish an Islamic state in Kuwait. But today, the country is recovering."

Laila criticized the existence of censorship over books, saying, "Government censorship of books is pointless. The internet has abolished this censorship."

During the evening, Laila also spoke about her relationship with Palestinians through her friendship with the late Palestinian cartoonist Naji al-Ali, describing the night she bid him farewell as very sad when he left Kuwait.

Laila described her presence in Ramallah as "historical moments—to be on the land of Palestine is a dream come true."

She said, "There were two things that bothered me during the visit: first, standing on the bridge (the border between Jordan

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and Palestine, under Israeli control), which is a source of much humiliation for the Palestinian people; and second, handling the Israeli currency, which is used here."

Laila presented a shield to the Mahmoud Darwish Museum, along with a financial donation (one thousand Kuwaiti dinars) to support its activities, while the museum's director gave her the "Eye of Palestine" medallion in appreciation of her works and her presence.

During the evening, the Palestinian novelist Yahya Yakhlaf commented, "We have long awaited your arrival. The Palestinians hold you and Kuwait in great affection. You are a writer, intellectual, and national and social figure characterized by courage and boldness in your life and writings, and in spreading a culture of enlightenment in the face of darkness."

The young woman Haifa Majadleh from the town of Baqa al-Gharbiyye said she chose to dedicate her master's thesis to "The Concerns of Arab Women in the Novels of Laila al-Othman."[5]

DISCUSSION

The research paper, "Voices of Resilience and Revelation: Exploring the Life and Literary Legacy of Laila al-Othman in Modern Kuwait," offers a profound reflection on one of the region's most courageous and influential literary figures. Laila al-Othman's life and work construct a narrative that is both a testament to female resilience and a challenge to restrictive norms in Kuwaiti and broader Gulf society. Through her novels, journalism, and activism, al-Othman continually confronts taboos, articulates the intricacies of women's lives, and forges a bridge between personal revelation and collective struggle.

Al-Othman's literary output is marked by a bold engagement with topics often marginalized or silenced within mainstream discourse. Her novels, such as *Ṣamt al-Farâshât* (Silence of the Butterflies) and *Khudh hâ lâ Uridhâ* (Take it, I Don't Want It), bring to the fore the psychological and social burdens endured by Kuwaiti women, including familial oppression, gender violence, and the cost of societal expectations. Through complex female protagonists, she reveals the inner workings of resistance, guilt, hope, and self-discovery.

Her literary narrative is uniquely layered, blending autobiographical elements, journalistic realism, and rich fictionalization. This hybrid style enables al-Othman to critique societal norms while offering an empathetic portrayal of her characters' struggles and aspirations. Her writing thus represents a mode of resilience, surviving, enduring, and voicing out, in a landscape where silence is often imposed.

One of the paper's central observations is al-Othman's fearless confrontation of social taboos. She addresses gender-based injustice, the silencing of women, and the complexities of familial relationships, consistently challenging both the patriarchal system and conservative traditions. Al-Othman does not merely chronicle victimhood; instead, she underscores the agency of her protagonists, depicting their journey toward self-awareness and empowerment.

The discussion also highlights the reciprocal relationship between al-Othman's personal history and her fictional worlds. Her battles with censorship, public criticism, and legal obstacles reflect the very dynamics she explores in her literature. This union of life and art intensifies the authenticity of her voice and amplifies the resonance of her novels with readers in Kuwait and beyond.

The research details the critical reception of al-Othman's work, noting that while she has earned admiration for her candour and narrative strength, she has also faced criticism for allegedly breaching traditional or moral boundaries. Nonetheless, scholars and contemporary critics recognize her as a pioneering voice, especially in advancing women's rights and challenging the conservative boundaries of Arabic fiction.

Additionally, the discussion emphasizes the limited visibility of Kuwaiti literature due to broader societal factors, such as weak reading culture and the absence of local novels in educational curricula. Al-Othman's canon, therefore, serves not only as literary achievement but also as a rallying point for broader dialogues about cultural development, critical scholarship, and the importance of narrative in social progress.

Ultimately, the research paper positions Laila al-Othman as a transformative figure whose literary legacy shapes and reflects the complexities of Kuwaiti society. Her work embodies resilience in the face of repression and revelation in the act of storytelling, marking her as an indispensable voice in both Kuwaiti and Arabic literary contexts.

CONCLUSION

Laila al-Othman's literary journey stands as a beacon of both resilience and revelation within the landscape of modern Kuwaiti literature. Through a career marked by courage, innovation, and unyielding commitment to the exploration of women's experiences, al-Othman has helped redefine the boundaries of storytelling in the Arab world. Her novels and short stories do not merely chronicle the challenges faced by women but illuminate the personal and societal forces that shape identity, agency, and hope.

Al-Othman's work is distinguished by its honest confrontation of taboo topics, patriarchal oppression, the silent suffering of women, and the intricate interplay between tradition and modernity. She intertwines personal memory with collective reality, transforming individual struggles into universal narratives that resonate far beyond her native Kuwait. By giving voice to the voiceless and empowering her protagonists with nuanced depth, she has inspired dialogue and fostered empathy across generations of readers.

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Despite facing censorship, criticism, and social resistance, Laila al-Othman's legacy endures as a testament to the power of literature to challenge, heal, and provoke change. Her authorship continues to be a rallying point for conversations about gender, cultural transformation, and the fundamental importance of artistic freedom in society.

In sum, Laila al-Othman redefined the Kuwaiti and Arab novel not just as a chronicle of personal or social experience, but as an act of resilience, one that speaks with honesty, relevance, and courage. Her voice remains indispensable in the ongoing evolution of modern Arabic literature, ensuring that the stories of women, and the transformation of their realities, remain central to the region's literary conscience.

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