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## Women in the Social and Cultural Life of Kuwait

It is becoming increasingly difficult for us today to talk of the situation and status of Arab women, for the said differs depending on the country, region and family. We are equally faced with great differences within the limits of individual countries. In tiny Kuwait the position of women is different not only in relation to the women of the Gulf but equally to women in the entire Arab world. Here are evident British and American influences, particularly intense and buoyant in various spheres of life in the immediate aftermath of the Gulf War. Undoubtedly it may be asserted that both in relation to culture in the broadest sense, as equally Kuwaiti society at the turn of the third millennium, there is a strong undergoing process of globalization brought about by, among other things, powerful transmitters of information (computers, satellites, television etc.) and economic interaction. It appears that the influence of the mass media in Kuwait is huge. Kuwaitis have become in the course of a few decades a consumer society. The Internet and satellite dishes on roofs have become an everyday scene. Passive reception is daily superseding earlier forms of amusement, particularly folk singing and entertainment. These are recalled only during cultural festivals, treating them in turn as an echo of a distant past.

The real turning point in the economy and culture of Kuwait came with the moment of the discovery of oil in the 1950s.<sup>1</sup> From then onwards there took place an expansion of the influences of Western societies, bringing with them a different culture and different traditions. The eyes of Kuwaitis in the fields of science and technology were directed towards Europe and America. It is also difficult to evaluate the United Kingdom's, France's and the USA's intentions in philanthropic terms. Their chief aim being the expansion of their economic influence. Yet to no small degree the inputs from crude oil brought about the economic development of the country with the subsequent development of education and cultural life, although in the area of legislation concerning political rights and personal status of women were to have to wait a little longer. The constant presence of foreigners in Kuwait brought about numerous and diverse changes, though in social life were rather

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<sup>1</sup> The first load of crude oil was sent 30<sup>th</sup> June 1946.



slow in evolving. European fashion encroached, for foreign women walked with their heads uncovered in short skirts. In the eyes of the locals it characterised their debauchery for they went unaccompanied to the bazaars and talked freely to men. Such a way of behaviour met, on the one hand with disgust, and on the other with curiosity on the part of the braver Kuwaiti women. Increasingly foreigners were to be found invited to the homes of Kuwaitis on matters of business, which started to link them to the indigenous population. In this way more advantageous conditions for the development of feminism in Kuwait developed, although the problem of emancipation is here a complex one. The close observation of women from Europe, America or even Asia working, or even being bored in Kuwait, led to a decisive change in customs amongst the female population of Kuwait. Kuwaiti women started to leave their homes alone, drive cars and increasingly fail to cover their heads. Anyway *ḥiğāb* was not, and is not after all something culturally distinct to the Arab world. It was not Moslems who started it, and its practice was a custom known to almost all nations which over the course of time renounced its usage with the demands of progress and development (e.g. Greek women, as well as Christians on leaving the house would cover their heads and faces with a *khimaar*). On the other hand in talking of feminism in Kuwait one needs to remember the rebirth of fundamentalism not only within the ranks of men (so often extremely linked to tradition) but first and foremost among women who in adopting *ḥiğāb* exhort a return to the old customs.

Polygamy is a manifestation of the degraded position of women in society, something equally known the world over both before and after the appearance of Islam. Yet in this case as well the economic and civilising development of the country brings a fall off in polygamous practices. It should be mentioned that of late educated Kuwaitis increasingly decide not only on a single wife, but that following study abroad some even choose European or American women in marriage. The matter being different among the Bedouins who often decide to marry more than one woman.

Undoubtedly the situation of Bedouin women in Kuwait needs to be examined in different categories. Their life is fundamentally different from the Kuwaiti women of the towns. Bedouin women chiefly take care of the home, and consider giving birth to numerous children, especially sons, to be the most important of matters, this enables them to enjoy the respect of the position of mother, for as one of the famous Moslem proverbs has it: 'Paradise is situated at the feet of a mother'. A lack of heirs is the basic reason for the man to marry the next woman. Children are for them insurance against old age. And so the clever, childless Bedouin woman advises her husband to take another wife and later the children of the second she brings up as her own. Bedouin women are women poorly educated and exceptionally fierce. They treat other women badly, especially servants, holding things against them right up to corporal punishment, or even committing crimes (with irons or other household objects).

At the beginning of the twentieth century one of the champions of women's rights was 'Abd al-'Azīz ar-Rašīd<sup>2</sup>, a historian and eminent figure in the cultural and social

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<sup>2</sup> 'Abd Al-Azīz ar-Rašīd, born in 1883 in Kuwait, studied in Madinah and Constantinople. In Egypt he met the Al-Azhar *ṣayḥs* and under their influence started to teach in the spirit of reformism moving away from



life of Kuwait. He considered that care should be taken to educate women in accordance with religious and ethical principles. Ṣaqr aṣ-Ṣabīb<sup>3</sup> and Hālid al-Faraġ<sup>4</sup> also were involved in the problem of the education and rights for women. The latter being the author of the first Kuwaiti short story *Munīra* (published in 1929) which voiced the hidden drama of women. The heroine of the story is Munīra of the title, an uneducated girl living in a backward and severe society where everyone, and especially a woman, has a designated stereotyped role and is socially evaluated according to the degree she fulfils this role. In a case where one did not conform to the prevailing model one was faced with ruthlessness and the condemnation of one's surroundings, forcing one even to commit suicide. Munīra is a typical representative of her sex in Kuwait at the start of the century. She marries her cousin to please her family. She is not, however, happy for she is unable to have children and this brings about a personal crisis in her sense of worth as a woman and a member of Arab society. Her husband, with his constant complaints about the lack of an heir, adds to her tragedy. Munīra driven by despair and a desire to right social requirements resorts to various, often illusive means e.g. she seeks the help of magicians and partakes of their spells. The fear of losing the favour of her husband mobilises all her psychic powers in expectation of the miracle which will give her the desired child. The people she turns to for help cheat her, steal her money, gold and jewellery. The drama is completed by the dishonesty of the old woman Umm Ṣāliḥ, who takes her before the highest magician and recommends in a crafty way that he take everything she owns. Finally Munīra, ruined financially and mentally, not possessing the experience which would have insured that she did not fall easy prey to wheeler dealers and exploiters, commits suicide. In this short story especially drastic is the way the character of Umm Ṣāliḥ is sketched – an old woman who not only fails to help a representative of her own sex, but cheats her finding in her unhappiness a source of profit and advantage for herself.

Although the Prophet Muḥammad did much to improve the situation of the women of his era, those self same regulations which regulated the lives of Muslim women in the

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his prior orthodox viewpoints. Besides which he was headmaster in the first school Al-Mubārakiyya, founded in 1911 encouraging the young to read books and journals. He himself published the first Kuwaiti journal "Al-Kuwayt" in 1928, while in 1923 he had been the co-founder of the Literary Club An-Nādī al-Adabī. (cf. Hālid Su'ūd az-Zayd *Udabā' Al-Kuwayt fī qarnayn* /Writers of Kuwait in Two Centuries/, part I, Kuwait 1976, p. 93 and on).

<sup>3</sup> Ṣaqr aṣ-Ṣabīb, born in Kuwait 1896, died 1963. In the age of 9 he lost his sight. In 1915 he left for Al-Ḥasā'. He came under the influence of Egyptian Islamic modernism. He wrote poems: elegies, panegyrics and satires, in which he touched on social subjects e. g. education and women's rights, or fought with the Muslim orthodox clergy (cf. Khālid Sa'ūd Az-Zayd *Udabā' Al-Kuwayt fī qarnayn*, part I, Kuwait 1976, p. 115 and on).

<sup>4</sup> Hālid al-Faraġ, born in 1898, died in 1954. He attended the Kuwaiti school Al-Mubārakiyya and after completing it, worked there as a teacher. In 1918 he left for Bombay. There he founded his own printing house. In 1922 he left for Bahrain where he befriended the ruler 'Īsā Ibn 'Alī al-Ḥalīfa. He returned to Kuwait for a short time in 1927 in order to leave for the court of the Saudi ruler 'Abd al-'Azīz Ibn Su'ūd in whose honour he composed an epos describing the life and works of the King of Hijaz. During his almost 30 year stay in Saudi Arabia he was active in cultural and political fields. (cf. Barbara Michalak-Pikulska, *The Contemporary Kuwaiti Short Story in Peace Time and War 1929–1995*, Kraków 1998).

first age of Islam are unable to appease the demands of the contemporary world. Arab society is in a certain way hermetic from comments on religion which is the religion of the state and the law and therefore globalization processes also meet with opposition, sometime insurmountable, which in certain cases constitutes an obstacle delaying integration with other countries. The law once progressive does not appease the aspirations of modern women in Kuwait. I would like to mention, however, that many are indeed completely happy with their situation and willingly place themselves at the disposition of their family in the full realisation of the Prophet's words that a woman 'should please the eyes of a man when they look at her, be obedient when commanded and never dispute her husband's decision when he decides for her and himself'<sup>5</sup>. Broad contacts with the world have meant, however, that many aspire to significantly more emancipation.

Many men traditionally forbade their wives from taking up employment or travel; for the taking of employment outside of the home was, and often is, an insult to his masculinity and an affront to his prestige as the head of the family. Masculinity is still perceived as the ability to be dominant over women, and a man must ensure a roof, food and clothing for his wife or wives. If she is used to servants then he must ensure her staff.<sup>6</sup> And therefore women – at least according to the law – can not be made to work or their fortune be used to maintain the house.

At present, however, urban Kuwaitis educated often in Europe and the United States, do not identify totally with this model of masculinity and often even encourage their wives, sisters or daughters to take up education and employment. They also support them materially and psychologically in their literary and artistic endeavours as for instance Muḥammad al-Qadīrī – the husband of the Kuwaiti writer and artist Thurayyā al-Baqṣamī. Finally educated women through work can achieve a certain independence from their father or husband. Many of them decide not to marry so as to avoid the arbitrary authority of the male relations in the family. Others upon getting married decide on divorce when their independence is threatened. In this matter Laylā al-‘Uṭmān<sup>7</sup>, has shown especial bravery as she recalls her father's death in her memoirs: 'I must admit, and God forgive me, that my father's death did not sadden me whatsoever, for he was the enemy of my freedom. Of course I cried but internally I felt joy and the possibility of taking the first self-dependent step'<sup>8</sup>.

For Kuwaitis themselves Laylā al-‘Uṭmān is for certain one of the most important figures and an irreplaceable spokeswoman for creative thought and literary culture. As an individual actively participating in public life she has influenced and influences enormously

<sup>5</sup> Wiebke Walther, *Die Frau im Islam*, Leipzig 1980, p. 37.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Laylā ‘Abd Allāh ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-‘Uṭmān born in Kuwait in 1945. She started to write for Kuwaiti newspapers in 1965. She is an active member of the board of the Union of Kuwaiti Writers. (cf. Barbara Michalak-Pikulska, *At-Turāt wa-al-mu‘āṣira fī ibdā’ Laylā al-‘Uṭmān* (Tradition and Novelty in the Works of Contemporary Writer Laylā al-Uṭmān), Damascus 1997.

<sup>8</sup> Laylā al-‘Uṭmān, *Min as-sīra ad-dātiya wa-at-tağriba al-qassaṣiyya wa-ar-riwā’iyya* (From my Life and Experience in Short Stories and Novels), Al-Adāb, Bayrūt 1990, p. 50.



attitudes advocating the relaxation of the despotic laws limiting a woman's freedom and her dignity as a creative partner. The translation of her works into other languages is obvious proof of her presence on the world cultural market. Her treatment of social themes is an undoubted plus in her writing: the presentation of the realities of Arab patriarchal structures, of their despotic laws as well as her broad treatment of feminine themes. Such a rich introduction into the social life of women concurs with the radical changes that are entering their consciousness resulting both from globalization and general education and the fairly bold emancipation that has appeared. Laylā breaks many 'taboos' in the Arab society with a boldness and modern view point on social problems that is displayed in several short stories e.g.: *Al-Faṣl al-qādim* (The Next Time) where the heroines are: the mother fettered by the handcuffs of society, human hate and the guard of genies and her young little daughter as fresh and innocent as 'green spring'. The hastened marriage arrangements for the daughter raise hope in the mother for a change of circumstance and the lifting of the dependence on her dead husband's brother, *At-Tawb al-aḥar* (Different Attire) in which the heroine – in disagreement with her own self rebels against such widely accepted values like the riches, fame, status which her husband provides – making use of the psychiatric help of a friend she decides to change her life, *Min milaff imra'a* (From a Woman's Diary) where the author colourfully presents the fate of an Arab woman sold against her will by her parents which leads her finally to revolt and crime, *Al-Awrām* (Swellings) which is the study of unrequited love, grief for which causes serious problems paralysing the ability to have genuine contacts with reality, *Hazīma* (Defeat) which is a study of the feelings of a crippled woman who experiences love and yearning for an unknown man. The confrontation with reality hinders her in recalling her own infirmity, *Al-Ġudrān tatamazzaq* (The Walls are Crumbling) describing an act of violence and violation of a young girl by her sister's husband, as well as the murder of the infant in the school toilet. The scenes of unwanted unconscious birth are among some of the most dramatic descriptions in Arabic literature. Dozens of Laylā al-'Uṭmān's other short stories, arising spontaneously, create a valuable record, of a documentary nature, of an era of fundamental changes<sup>9</sup>.

The next talented literary lady and painter, Ṭurayyā al-Baqṣamī<sup>10</sup> represents in herself a rare type of artistic activity where both areas of creativity are treated professionally which can be borne out by the fact that the same hand that wrote *Šumū' as-sarādīb*

<sup>9</sup> Collections of Laylā al-'Uṭmān's short stories: *Imra'a fī inā'* (The Trapped-Woman) Kuwait 1976, *Ar-Raḥīl* (Departure), Beirut 1979, *Fī al-layl ta'tī al-'uyūn* (Vision at Night), Beirut 1980, *Al-Ḥubb lahu ṣuwar* (Images of Love), Beirut 1982, *Faṭḥiyya taḥtār mawtaha* (Fathiya Chooses her Death), Cairo 1987, *Ḥālat ḥubb maġnūna* (An Incidence of Crazy Love), Kuwait 1992, *Al-Ḥawāġiz as-sawdā'* (The Black Control Points), Kuwait 1994. She is also the author of two novels: *Al-mar'a wa-al-qitṭa* (The Woman and the Cat), Kuwait 1985 and *Wasmiyya taḥruġ min al-baḥr* (Wasmiyya Comes out of the Sea), Kuwait 1987.

<sup>10</sup> Ṭurayyā al-Baqṣamī was born in Kuwait in 1952. She studied from 1972 to 1974 at the College of Fine Art in Cairo. In 1974 she started studying at the Surikov Institute of Art in Moscow where she gained her MA in graphic design and illustration in 1981. She was awarded in 1993 the prize from the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences for her collection of short stories *Šumū' as-sarādīb*, cf. Barbara Michalak-Pikułska, *Ṭurayyā al-Baqṣamī. Bayna ar-rīša wa-al-qalam* (Ṭurayyā al-Baqṣamī. Between a Brush and a Pen), Kuwait 1997.



(Cellar Candles), for which she received the prize from the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences in 1993, painted the illustrations for it. All of Ṭurayyā's short stories have a realistic pedigree. In their composition as a whole they are drawn from observed and experienced reality. Besides which they bear the stamp of painting which is apparent equally in the construction of the short stories saturated with light and hues of colour, which once darken and lighten in accordance with the contents and course of the works. In her first collection entitled *'Al-Araq al-aswad* (The Black Sweat) Ṭurayyā al-Baqṣamī presents details from the lives of women and girls in traditional Kuwaiti society. In the short story entitled *Yā al-mašmūm* (Musk) the social division into Bedouins and people from the town is clear, the Bedouin heroine of the short story is marked by her origin and so says about her situation: "Women test at their homes, give birth to children like sheep, fill their husbands' stomachs with food. There is nobody here who could guarantee them safety and safeguard the future", while the short story *Umm Adam* acquaints us with the life of women of yester-year. The short story tells the tale of a servant married at sometime by her owner, later widowed who does not want to leave the house where her husband's grave is. Living alone in the company of black cats she is accused of witchcraft and murdered. The second collection *As-Sidra* (Lotus) is devoted to the social and psychological situation of a woman still partly conditioned by the old, yet partially entering into the new relation of thinking about oneself. The heroine of the short story *Buq'at lawn* (The Colourful Stain) belongs to the modern society, she is already independent, she works and drives her own car. In Ṭurayyā's post-war short stories we detect the influence of European reading and the penetration of the cultural ideas of the East and the West. The heroines no longer have hang ups, to an increasingly greater degree they are independent e.g. the heroine of the short story *Qalbuhā aḥḍar* (Her Green Heart) where the heroine takes care of a wounded man much younger than herself. An additional aspect of the work is its attachment to the form of European literature in *Lolita*. In addition the names of the great painters Salvador Dali and Van Gogh appear in comprehensively studied contexts.

Ṭurayyā al-Baqṣamī has overcome with her work many barriers, not only those connected with the existence of a woman artist. Her talent is a 'thorn in the eye' for the Al-Baqṣamī family that come from Iran where religious ties are strong. As the only one of the family to dress according to European fashion, which arouses even stronger animosity towards her, especially following Khomeini's return to Iran, when the population of Kuwait of Iranian descent supported materially and morally the Iranian Islamic leadership. Ṭurayyā finds support only in the persons of her husband and daughters. She is an individual open to changes in civilisation and culture and a loyal witness of her age. Possessing a broad and continued education abroad she has since the 1980's published and developed her artistic techniques, achieving constant success as well as actively participating in public life<sup>11</sup>. It is impossible to separate her art work from her literature for she writes in images.

<sup>11</sup> Ṭurayyā al-Baqṣamī collections of short stories: *Al-'araq al-aswad* (The Black Sweat), Kuwait 1977, *As-Sidra* (Lotus), Kuwait 1988, *Šumū' as-sarādīb* (Cellar Candles), Kuwait 1992, *Raḥīl an-nawāfiḍ* (The Windows'



She does not paint objects but concepts. Turayyā belongs to those creators for whom one could place an equals sign between their lives and creativity. In her artistic interior there are many ideas. Her work intertwines with journeys, days filled with work and meetings. She is unusually gentle in disposition, perceives the taste and beauty of life, she loves beautiful objects and beautiful thoughts. She is a genuine creator, and that creator is a person who understands the present before contemporaries recognise him. She fights for her originality, for she does not want to be categorised in the intellectual and social concepts of Kuwait. She is a citizen of the world occupying a popular position amidst contemporary writers and painters.

Munā aš-Šāfa'ī<sup>12</sup> belongs to the young generation of Kuwaiti writers. She made her literary debut in 1992 when she published her first collection of short stories entitled *An-naḥla wa rā'iḥat al-hīl* (Palm and the Smell of Cardamon). It contains a dozen or so short stories dealing with social and cultural problems. The majority of short stories, however, concentrate on the problem of a woman's fate in modern Kuwaiti society. The author pays particular attention to the love life of her heroines, showing the world of their dreams, and their yearnings for romantic love and to meet a sensitive partner who would be conscious of their emotional needs, as for example in the short story *Rā'iḥat al-hīl* (The Smell of Cardamon). The heroine is a rich girl from the town who falls in love with a poor Bedouin. The young pair love each other but even so her parents do not agree to the union and force her to marry her cousin from whom she is quickly divorced and again returns to her lover. The author points out how despite the wave of modernity sweeping the country a Kuwaiti woman still experiences enormous difficulties in the realisation of her personal and professional aspirations. Her second collection of short stories entitled *Al-Bad' marratayn* (The Second Time) appeared in 1994. Here two questions are dominant: the emotional life of a woman and her position in society. In the short story *Ġarba* (Desire) a woman's disadvantage in social life is dramatically presented. It is the story of a weak woman who is forced to marry someone older. However, after twelve years she decides to finish this unhappy life she has led and return to her old lover. The author's third collection, however, entitled *Drāmā al-ḥawāss* (The Drama of the Senses) published in 1995 is totally different from the others in terms of subject matter being the testimony to the enormous influence the Iraqi invasion had on the consciousness of Kuwaiti society.

Laylā Muḥammad Šāliḥ<sup>13</sup> is well known in Kuwait because of her literary broadcasts on Radio Kuwait. Besides this, she is the author of two collections of short stories: *Ġirāḥ*

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Flight), Kuwait 1994, *Mudakkirāt Fatūma al-kuwaytiyya as-saġira* (Recollections of a Small Kuwaiti Fatuma), Kuwait 1992.

<sup>12</sup> Munā 'Abbās aš-Šāfa'ī was born in Kuwait in 1946. In 1970 she received her diploma in history and literature from the University of Alexandria. At present she works in Kuwait University's administration. She writes articles for newspapers, cf. Barbara Michalak-Pikulska, *The Contemporary Kuwaiti Short Story...*

<sup>13</sup> Laylā Muḥammad Šāliḥ was born in Kuwait in 1950. She finished the Kuwait University's Department of Literature. At present she works in the Ministry of Information for the Radio Kuwait Broadcasting Station presenting cultural programmes, cf. Barbara Michalak-Pikulska, *The Contemporary Kuwaiti Short Story...*



*fi al-'uyūn* (Wounds in the Eyes), published in 1987, and *Liqā' fi mawsim al-ward* (Meeting in the Season of Flowers) published in 1994. She is also a researcher into Arabic literature particularly women's writing from Kuwait and the countries of the Arabian Peninsula. She has written the following books on the subject: *Adab al-mar'a fi Al-Kuwayt* (Female Literature in Kuwait) 1978, as well as a two-part work *Adab al-mar'a fi Al-Ġazira wa-al-Ḥaliġ al-'Arabi* (Female Literature on the Arabian Peninsula). Part one was published in Kuwait in 1983 and part two in 1987. Besides her book with biographical information on all Kuwaiti writers and poets appeared in 1996 entitled *Udabā' wa-adibāt Al-Kuwayt* (Kuwaiti Writers).

Laylā Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ's collection of short stories entitled *Ġirāḥ fi al-'uyūn* (Wounds in the Eyes) tells of the internal experiences of a contemporary Kuwaiti woman and about her possibilities of acting in society. The author presents the dreams of women and their dependence on the society in which they live. The short stories are played out between reality and dreams, dreams that are in her works accessory and ennobling coordinators of reality. In the short story entitled *At-Taḥdīq fi ad-dākira* (The Lost in Recollections) the sick heroine leaves for treatment in London where she meets a student yearning to befriend her. She tries not to allow this to happen due to her poor state of health. All the time however she gives herself up to the dream that one day she will be healthy and capable of love. In another short story *Ar-Risāla wa-al-ġamāġim* (The Letter and Bald Heads) Laylā again describes the internal state of her heroine who has been left by her lover. She talks to herself considering people to be a collective of heads devoid of human feelings. Such a state of affairs leaves her depressed and with the desire to commit suicide. The heroine of the story entitled *76 'alāmat istifhām* (76 Question Marks), turns out to be also a dreamer who, on New Year's Eve, instead of having a good time and enjoying herself like everyone else, locks herself in her room and dreams of what she would like that new year to bring for her.

Worthy of mention is one more writer, poet and painter of the young generation in Kuwait, 'Āliya Ṣa'īb<sup>14</sup>. The international notoriety that led to her losing her lectureship post at Kuwait University in 1996 was due to the interview entitled *Aṣ-Ṣudūd al-ġinsī muntaṣir bayna ṭālibāt Ġāmi'at al-Kuwayt* (Sexual Perversion is Rife among the Female Students of Kuwait University) which she gave to the journal "Al-Ḥadaṭ"<sup>15</sup>. She presented in this interview the situation of lesbian students of the University of Kuwait. The problem of homosexual relationships in Kuwait is widely known yet none had brought it up publicly before, hence the interview generated controversy not only in Kuwait but in the entire Arab world. 'Āliya's literary output is undoubtedly innovatory with the chief problems touched on being the life of the young generation of educated women who have fought for a personal identity for themselves. In the collections of short stories *Imra'a tatazawwaġ*

<sup>14</sup> 'Āliya Muḥammad Ṣa'īb was born in Kuwait in 1964. In 1985 she received her diploma in philosophy from the Department of Literature of Kuwait University. In 1991 she defended her MA thesis at the University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom. She was awarded the title of doctor of philosophy at the same University in 1994, cf. Barbara Michalak-Pikulska, *The Contemporary Kuwaiti Short Story...*

<sup>15</sup> An interview for the Kuwaiti monthly "Al-Ḥadaṭ" of November 1996 given by Hanān Al-Ḥāġarī, pp. 22–25.



*al-baḥr* (The Woman Married to the Sea, Kuwait 1989) and *Bilā waġh* (Without Face, Kuwait 1991) love is expressed through fear alternating between hope and agitation. The heroines aspire toward freedom, a free choice of the object of emotions and the risk connected with fate.

Contemporary Kuwaiti literature came about with the formation of a new state. The writers, both men and women, of prose works, along with the possibilities afforded for foreign education, observed in their own way the cultural and social changes occurring in their country, describing it to leave witness to the times they lived through. It appears that the favoured literary form of the short story has been taken from European writers, as, for example, Maupassant and Čehov. For their short story writing is based on an observation of the world in realist conventions. They are linked with other world literatures by the function of the writer – spokesman of a just and noble matter. In turn they find affinity with the literary output of neighbouring countries through a joint cultural and historical inheritance and the Arabic language. One may say that the writers of Kuwait identify themselves with the words of the eminent Egyptian writer Muḥammad Taymūr who stated that 'the closer a short story is to life the more useful it is'.

Kuwaiti writers have not only adopted realism though. Women writers have tried to express themselves through symbols. Symbols in Kuwaiti short stories concentrate the reader's attention, around them occur crucial decisions and it is they that decide on the final mood and tone of the short stories. The most often used word symbols with the widest range of varied connotations are those taken from the world of nature and man's environment: the sea, the sun, rain, cats, palms, etc. Yet there is no absence of other individually created carriers of content and imagination.

Laylā al-‘Uṭmān in the short story *Al-Af’ā* (The Viper) shows a viper as the symbolic expression of danger. The symbolic ants in Laylā's story entitled *An-Naml al-ašqar* (The Red Ants), also constitute a threat to the life and existence of man. This short story reminds one of Edgar Allan Poe's stories in terms of scenery. Symbolism is equally visible in Turayyā al-Baqṣamī's short stories, who first became acquainted with symbolism during her studies in Moscow. And so the cockroach *Aṣ-Ṣurṣūr* (The Cockroach) from the story of the same title is according to Turayyā a symbol of the fate following man, on the one hand leading to life's failures and on the other arousing aversion and disgust. In another short story *Al-Ḥafāfīš* (Bats) bats symbolise impediment and lack of freedom. Longing for freedom is also symbolised by the butterfly in Munā aš-Šāfa'ī's short story *Aġniḥa min rīḥ* (Wings from the Wind).

The novel as a literary form also reached Kuwait, though its development is less dynamic than short forms of narration. Though here equally women have left their mark. And so for instance Laylā al-‘Uṭmān is the author of two novels: *Al-Mar'a wa-al-qitta* (The Woman and the Cat) and *Wasmiyya taḥruġ min al-baḥr* (Wasmiya Comes out of the Sea)<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> Laylā al-‘Uṭmān's novel *Al-Mar'a wa-al-qitta* was published in Kuwait in 1985, and the novel *Wasmiyya taḥruġ min al-baḥr* was published in Kuwait in 1987.



Fāṭima Yūsuf al-‘Alī<sup>17</sup> is the author of the novel *Wuḡūh fī az-zuḡām* (Faces in the Crowd)<sup>18</sup>. Ṭayyiba al-Ibrāhīm<sup>19</sup> has published a two-part social novel entitled *Mudakkirāt ḥādim* (A Servant’s Recollections)<sup>20</sup>. All the works mentioned are realist in form, with their authors drawing their inspiration from the surrounding reality. The subjects covered are to do with customs and social problems. An image of Kuwait in its day-to-day colours, together with the pace of the actual social, cultural and economic changes emerge from them.

Obviously, the contemporary Kuwaiti literature has been enriched by female poets. One of them is Dr. Su‘ād aṣ-Ṣabāḥ<sup>21</sup> a member of the Kuwaiti ruling family and a representative of the Arab female elite. She is an outstanding poet, widely known all over Arab countries. By nationality a citizen of Kuwait, she graduated from the University of Cairo and continued her studies in Great Britain. She is an active member of many organizations including: The Human Rights Organization, The Arabic Thinkers Club, The Organization of Unity for Islamic Women. She represents, in a distinct way love poetry, which however, considering its character, form of utterance and formal shape transcends both traditional Arabic forms as equally their female European counterparts. Although the subject area and range are embraced within the question of love. Su‘ād’s poetry is extended distinctly by the expanse of events felt here. She is the author of the following diwans of poetry: *Min ‘umrī* (My Life) 1964, *Umniya* (Desire) 1971, *Ilayka yā waladī* (For you my son) 1982, *Fatāfīt imra’a* (Pieces of a Woman) 1986, *Fī al-bid’ kānat al-untā* (In the beginning was the Female) 1988, *Hiwār al-ward wa-al-banādiq* (A Dialogue between Roses and Guns) 1989, *Barqiyyāt ‘āḡila ilā waṭanī* (A Cable to my Country) 1990, *Aḥir as-suyūf* (The last Swords) 1991, *Qaṣā’id ḥubb* (The Poems of Love) 1992, *Imra’a bilā sawāḥil* (A Woman without a Margin) 1994.

Under the influence of the influx to Kuwait of books and critical literary works from abroad there has arisen indigenous literary criticism in which women also have made their names. Hence Nuriyya Ṣāliḥ ar-Rūmī<sup>22</sup> – the present professor of Kuwait University

<sup>17</sup> Fāṭima Yūsuf al-‘Alī was born in Kuwait in 1953. She works for many Kuwaiti newspaper: “An-Nahḍa”, “Ar-Rā’y al-‘Amm”, “Al-Qabas”, – compare: Laylā Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ, *Udabā’ wa-adibāt...*, pp. 264–267.

<sup>18</sup> The novel *Wuḡūh fī az-zuḡām* by Fāṭima Yūsuf al-‘Alī was published in Kuwait in 1971.

<sup>19</sup> Ṭayyiba al-Ibrāhīm was born in Kuwait. In 1991 she was awarded with Diploma of Recognition by the Ministry of Social Affairs in Egypt for the whole of her literary and artistic output and particularly for her collection of books: *Al-Insān al-bāhit* (Clean Man) 1986, *Al-Insān al-muta’adid* (A Man with many Faces) 1990, *Inqirāḍ ar-raḡul* (Disappearance of a Man) 1990. Besides, she is the author of the novels: *Zilāl al-ḥaqīqa* (The Shadow of the Truth) 1990, *La’na al-māl* (The Curse of Money) 1994, compare: Laylā Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ, *Udabā’ wa-adibāt...*, pp. 173–177.

<sup>20</sup> The novel entitled *Mudakkirāt ḥādim* by Ṭayyiba al-Ibrāhīm, part I was published in Kuwait in 1986 and part II in Kuwait in 1995.

<sup>21</sup> cf. B. Michalak-Pikulska, *Su‘ād Al-Ṣabāḥ – In the Beginning was the Female*, Kraków 1998: *Folia Orientalia* vol. XXXIV, pp. 129–140.

<sup>22</sup> Nūriyya ar-Rūmī was born in Kuwait. She obtained her MA (1976) and Ph.D. (1979) from the ‘Ayn Šams University in Cairo. She is the author of many articles concerning contemporary Kuwaiti Literature as well as Gulf Literature, compare Laylā Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ, *Udabā’ wa-adibāt...*, pp. 228–232.



– published in 1978 the monograph *Ši'r Fahd al-'Askar* (The Poetry of Fahd al-'Askar), devoted to the well-known Kuwaiti poet Fahd al-'Askar, later in 1980 she published her thesis entitled: *Al-Ḥaraka aš-Ši'riyya fī minṭaqa Al-Ḥalīğ al-'Arabī* (The Poetry of the Arabic Gulf Region), then in 1982 another study devoted to poetry, entitled: *Muḥammad Šawqī al-Ayyūbī – hayātuhu wa turātuhu aš-ši'rī* (Muḥammad Šawqī al-Ayyūbī – his Life and Posthumous Works).

Fahd Rāšid Būrsli only divan of Kuwaiti folk poetry was preserved thanks to his daughter Wasīma who published and edited in 1978 in Kuwait the monograph *Dīwān šā'ir al-Kuwayt aš-ša'bī Fahd Rāšid Būrsli* (Fahd Rāšid Būrsli' Divan of Kuwaiti folk poetry). Kuwaiti poetry found one of its most interesting synthetic formulations in the book written by 'Awāṭif Ḥalīfa aṣ-Ṣabāḥ entitled *Aš-Ši'r al-Kuwaitī al-ḥadīṭ* (Contemporary Kuwaiti Poetry) published in Kuwait in 1973. Following an analysis of the above works on literary criticism one notes that literary criticism in Kuwait diverges from European conventions even though its creators attempt to imitate European methodology. In Kuwaiti criticism general thematic formulations are dominant, while their authors display a tendency to reconstruct the contents of works. Besides in the literary heritage presented there is a lack of objectivism or text interpretation, although literary critics try to register Kuwaiti literature in a European cultural context.

Kuwaiti poets, writers, and literary critics, both men and women, meet every Wednesday at the headquarters of the Union of Kuwaiti Writers (Rābiṭat al-Udabā') for discussion meetings where they talk about the latest publications in Kuwaiti, Arab and world literature.

An important figure in Kuwaiti cultural life is princess Ḥiṣṣa aṣ-Ṣabāḥ, who is the director of Dār Al-Aṭār al-Islāmiyya. The aim of the association is to organise lectures on Islamic culture and art. Their newsletter "Barīd ad-Dār" is published monthly. Ḥiṣṣa aṣ-Ṣabāḥ invites academics from all over the world who specialise in this field. Given the Spartan nature of cultural life in Kuwait they are significant occurrences. At the same time she travels a lot to other Arab, and European countries with lectures and exhibitions in order to bring Kuwaiti achievements in this field closer to an international audience.

We are able to gain an insight into the development of democracy and the participation of women in social life following the crisis of the Gulf War from press reports and the political situation following the elections of 7<sup>th</sup> October 1996 which resulted in an increase in the significance and influence for fundamentalists. The effect of which included the case laid against Laylā al-'Uṭmān who is considered to be a rebellious writer in Kuwait. Her brave, for Arab conditions, collections of short stories cause consternation amongst the conservative part of Kuwaiti society (both male as well as female). She demands a woman's right to love and a free choice of partner. As is quoted by the French Press Association (AFP) on the 10<sup>th</sup> November 1999 in a new process Laylā and her friend 'Āliya Ša'īb were accused of propagating liberalism and offending religious principles. The matter appeared to have been apparently suspended, but the disturbing influences of fundamentalism on social and cultural life say that the success of feminism in Kuwait is not the final victory. Arguments against women's rights in Kuwait also rely on appeals



to tradition to keep women in their "natural" place<sup>23</sup>. The only concrete measure in relation to the Emir's promises concerning the maintaining of existing obligations for the democratisation of the life of women and the raising of their role in Kuwaiti society – following the heroic attitude of women during the Iraqi occupation – was the appointment of two women ambassadors to Austria and Zimbabwe.

However, in the field of literature and particularly in short story writing women writers gave their retentive expressions to the course of the war, as well as the long lasting effect of its outcome. One should mention, as a striking feature of all the stories devoted to the subject matter of the war, the expression of national identification as it was in Laylā al-‘Uṭmān's short story *Al-Biṭāqa* (The Identification Card). The very stories themselves, their origin, quantity, variety can be evidence of the immense shock that the events of the war represented for all<sup>24</sup>. The works which should be mentioned here, are: *Raḥīl an-nawāfīd* (The Window's Flight) and *Ṣumū‘ as-sarādīb* (Cellar Candles) by Ṭurayyā al-Baqṣamī, *Liqā’ fī mawsim al-ward* (Meeting in the Season of Flowers) by Laylā Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ, *Drāmā al-ḥawāss* (The Drama of Senses) by Munā Aṣ-Ṣāfa‘ī and *Al-Ḥawāḡiz as-sawdā’* (The Black Control Points) by Laylā al-‘Uṭmān.

A revolutionary break through in Kuwaiti social life for women was the acceptance of, and invitation to meetings at *dīwāniyyas*. *Dīwāniyya* is a traditional assembly of notable heads of families, officials in a special room in front of the house – something unique to Kuwait. During such sittings the presence of women was impossible, until recent years when two mixed *dīwāniyya* were opened: the first at Dr Raṣya aṣ-Ṣabāḥ's, the vice rector of Kuwait University and a member of the royal family, and the second in the home of Ṭurayyā al-Baqṣamī and her diplomat husband Muḥammad al-Qadīrī. As it appears the peculiar side of Kuwait is the authority of eminent personages. Laylā al-‘Uṭmān, gifted with the highest of authority, has emphasised the participation of women in *dīwāniyya* to be a sign of a new era in Kuwait which will help in the building of relations between women and men based on the rights fought for and learnt during the period of war.

Despite the many changes in the situation of Kuwaiti women, especially after the Gulf War, their position is still dependent chiefly on the material status and background of their family. The right to education and work does not cover all, while the promised right to vote has remained an unfulfilled slogan, for on the 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1999 the Kuwaiti parliament rejected the Emir's decree on giving women the right to vote and the right to stand for election. Forty one of the fifty male strong members of parliament were against, 'for' a mere eight together with the thirteen ministers sitting in the Assembly. As is easy to see the opponents of giving women political rights played heavily on religious considerations. Thus, women have no format right to public access, although élite women

<sup>23</sup> cf. Mary Ann Tétreault, Haya al-Mughni, *Gender, Citizenship and Nationalism in Kuwait*, "British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies", Vol. 22, no. 1&2, 1995.

<sup>24</sup> cf. B. Michalak-Pikulska, *The Contemporary Kuwaiti Short Story in Peace Time and War 1929–1995*, Kraków 1998.



are visible in a number of public arenas and they hold powerful positions in government agencies<sup>25</sup>.

The customs and ethics of every nation are formed in relation to the intellectual state of its members and the times they live in. They are witness to the degree of civilisation that a given society has reached and manifest themselves the best in the relations people have to their family and fellow citizens. Consequently there exists a strict link between the customs of every nation and their level of education and civilisation. Societies intellectually backward are therefore defenceless in the face of a force where customs are deeply rooted in the mentality. And only unceasing and constant intellectual development can change the hopeless situation found. In this case the understanding of globalization means that modern man – the writer or the artist is subject to an external creative stimulation imposed on his own individuality. In a wider discussion on problems of globalization it has been already stated that these processes do not have to mean the domination of one culture over another. As never before all of them derive benefits from the dissimilarity and differences between societies and the dissimilarities of geographical roots as equally historical experience.

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<sup>25</sup> cf. Mary Ann Tétreault, Haya al-Mughni, op. cit.