

**Contemporary Short Stories by Kuwaiti Women:
A Study of Their Social Context and Characteristics**

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The Middle East Studies Association (MESA) 2002 Annual Meetings witnessed a growing interest among contemporary western female/feminist scholars in several aspects in the field of Arab women's issues that are rarely explored in the existing literature, the focus on Kuwaiti women being one of them. Two particular informative papers on this subject were presented at the conference, which are *Women and the Media in Kuwait* by Mary Ann Tétreault of Trinity University, and *Divisions Among Women's Groups: What Does It Mean for Democracy and Feminism in the Middle East?* by Helen Rizzo of The American University in Cairo.¹ The former examines public opinions on the Kuwaiti women's movement reflected in the press coverage and the complex relationship between women activists and news media in Kuwait. The latter scrutinizes the political and social agendas of Kuwaiti women's organizations, the interactions among these groups, as well as the factors behind the divide between them. Needless to say, these studies provide an in-depth analysis of the development of women's movement in Kuwait from sociological and political aspects. Inspired by these research papers, this paper aims to adopt a literary approach to examine Kuwaiti women's issues reflected in the short stories by women writers. The contemporary short stories by Kuwaiti women will then be in the focus. The study covers four major discourses: the history of the Kuwaiti women's movement, the short story

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¹ See Haya al-Mughni and Mary Ann Tétreault, "Women and the Media in Kuwait," Middle East Studies Association Annual Meetings, Washington, DC, November 25, 2002; Helen Rizzo, "Divisions Among Women's Groups: What Does It Mean for Democracy and Feminism in the Middle East?" Middle East Studies Association Annual Meetings, Washington, DC, November 26, 2002.

genre and women precursors, biographical sketches of contemporary Kuwaiti women writers, and current trends in women's short stories.

History of Kuwaiti Women's Movement

A glimpse at the history of Kuwaiti women's struggle for emancipation and the development of eminent women's organizations is presented below. Special attention will be paid to several early Kuwaiti feminists and their contribution to the progress of women's empowerment.

Gender segregation long existed before the discovery of oil. The development of mechanisms for controlling women stemmed from the extended absence of male relatives from family because of their involvement in seafaring businesses. Prohibition from mingling in the public sphere was the most common method. However, women's limited freedom still varied from one social class to another. Women in the merchant class were exempted from housework, which was taken over by servants, and thus their living space was strictly confined to houses and courtyards entirely segregated from the rest of the world. Middle- and low-strata women who could not afford servants handled their own housework and were able to be in both public and private spheres. However, heavy veiling from head to toe when exiting the house is required. In addition to seclusion and veiling, one of the other methods for limiting women's freedom was honor killing. A woman's male guardians were permitted to kill her if they believe that she commits any misconduct that might damage the family reputation.² Later on, the mechanism for controlling women was often designed by government and was systematically implemented from higher level down. Haya al-Mughni, in her study on Kuwaiti women's movements, explains that while the oil economy resulted in unprecedented prosperity, such prosperity in reality enhanced the need of the State to control women's lives in the aspects of health, education, and employment. The government played a dominant role not only in governing people's lives, but also in "defining gender ideologies, conception of femininity and masculinity."³ The manifestation of this idea in the government's implementing strategy was that education was not offered for the purpose of broadening women's career options, but was to provide them with needed skills for certain gender-specific works. Moreover, gender

² Haya al-Mughni, *Women in Kuwait: the Politics of Gender* (London: Saqi Books, 1993), 41–43.

³ al-Mughni, *Women in Kuwait*, 58.

equality guaranteed by state constitution was never put in practice. Thus, one of the long-lasting impacts was that women were and still are denied their political rights.⁴

Fortunately, such phenomena began facing serious challenges from both men and women since the middle of the twentieth century. The idea of women's emancipation was introduced by a group of well-educated Kuwaiti male intellectuals from the wealthy merchant class. They studied the concepts of progress (*nahḍah*) and women's liberation in the works of Rifāʿah Rāfiʿ al-Ṭaḥṭawī (1801–1873), Qāsim Amīn (1863–1908), Aḥmad Luṭfi al-Sayyid (1872–1963), Ṭahā Ḥusayn (1889–1973), and other Arab thinkers, and included them as part of the advocacy for social reform.⁵ As a result of this intellectual movement, the need for establishing women's groups was raised in the early 1950s and again in the early 1960s. Two important women's organizations were formed and licensed, both in 1963, the Women's Cultural and Social Society (WCSS, formerly known as the Cultural and Social Society, CSS), and Arab Women's Development Society (AWDS). WCSS was formed by a group of educated merchant class women and led by Lūluwah al-Qaṭāmī (b. 1931).⁶ AWDS was formed by Nūrīyah al-Saddānī (b. 1946) and a group of middle-class women. Considered as one of the

⁴ al-Mughni, *Women in Kuwait*, 58–61.

⁵ Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 78, 164–70, 182. See, for instance, Qāsim Amīn, *Tahrīr al-Marʾah* (The Liberation of Woman) (Cairo: Maktabat al-Taraqqī, 1899). Witnessing the rapid social decay in Egypt, Amīn believed that the foundations of the society and its moral strength were being eroded. To improve the situation, it was necessary to find a cure in the roots of the society, i.e., to strengthen family ties because society consisted of families. Amīn went on to believe that since women played an essential role in the family in bonding to the other members, women should receive a proper education in order to manage a healthy family. However, to maintain a good family is not the only purpose of women's education. Women needed education in order to lead their own lives and be independent of male domination. Pertaining to Amīn's being recognized as the first to write of women's repressed status in traditional society, Miriam Cooke interestingly argues that many women preceding Amīn in Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria had written on the same subject, such as ʿĀʾishah Taymūrīyah (1840–1902), Wardah al-Yāzīgī (1838–1924), and Zaynab Fawwāz (1859–1914). See Miriam Cooke, "Telling Their Lives: a Hundred Years of Arab Women's Writings," *World Literature Today* 60, no. 2 (Spring 1986): 212–216.

⁶ For a biography of Lūluwah al-Qaṭāmī, see Laylā Muḥammad al-Ṣāliḥ, *Adab*

most known feminists in Kuwait, al-Saddānī has also been prolific in writing the history of women's movements in Kuwait and in the Arab world, which have become the primary sources of information in this specific subject area.⁷ The main activities of the CSS, former WCSS, in the early period were strongly related to charities. Not until the mid-1970s did the CSS started to be more involved in advocating women's issues. As for AWDS, from the beginning it aimed to promote the modernization of Kuwaiti women and later further emphasized on the issue of gender equality. In the 1970s both groups were active in organizing conferences and political campaigns to draw public attention to many problematic issues pertaining to women's social status. Amongst issues that generated heated debates were divorce and polygamy, as well as women's suffrage. In light of the realization that both upheld common political interest and that unification equated with more power, CSS and AWDS merged in 1974 and were renamed as the Kuwaiti Women's Union (KWU), later joined by the Girls Club (formed in 1974). However, the unification was short-lived. The split in 1976 represented at large the broadly divided opinions among Kuwaiti women, especially on the issues of campaigns for equal rights. Later on, the AWDS was closed by the government in 1980 due to its alleged financial fraud and consequently, al-Saddānī was forced into exile.⁸

al-Marʿah fī al-Kuwayt (Women's Literature in Kuwait), [n.p.], 1978, pp. 99–100. See also 'Aṭā wa-Wafā': *Sijil Tidhkārī li-Juhūd al-Ustādḥah Lūluwah al-Qaṭāmī Rā'idat al-Ḥarakah al-Nisā'iyyah al-Kuwaytīyah, wa-li-A'māl al-Jam'iyyah al-Thaqāfiyyah al-Ijtimā'iyyah al-Nisā'iyyah, 1963–1995* (Offering and Fulfilment: Memoir of the Efforts of Lūluwah al-Qaṭāmī, Leader of the Kuwaiti Women's Movement and the Works of Women's Cultural and Social Society) (al-Kuwayt : al-Jam'iyyah al-Thaqāfiyyah al-Ijtimā'iyyah al-Nisā'iyyah, 1995), 11–18.

⁷ For a brief biography of Nūrīya al-Saddānī, see al-Ṣāliḥ, *Adab al-Marʿah*, 133–34. Some of al-Saddānī's publications include *al-Masīrah al-Tārīkhīyah lil-Ḥuqūq al-Siyāsīyah lil-Marʿah al-Kuwaytīyah fī al-Fatrah mā bayna 'Āmay 1971–1982: Kitāb Wathā'iqī* (The Historic Journey of Kuwaiti Women's Political Rights between 1971–1982), [Kuwait?]: Nūrīyah al-Saddānī, 1983; *al-Ḥarakah al-Nisā'iyyah al-'Arabīyah fī al-Qarn al-'Ishrīn, 1917–1981* (Arab Women's Movement in the Twentieth Century, 1917–1981), [Kuwait?: n.p.], 1982.

⁸ Al-Mughni, *Women in Kuwait*, 63–88. See also Guity Nashat and Judith Tucker, *Women in the Middle East and North Africa: Restoring Women to History* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 119–20.

The 1980s onward saw the appearance of more women's organizations alongside existing groups such as WCSS and Girls Club. Among these new organizations were such Islamic groups as Bayader al-Salam (established in 1981) and the Islamic Care Society (established in 1982). According to al-Mughni, the appearance of Islamic women's groups was the *de facto* protest against the earlier women's movements that were pro-modernization and -westernization.⁹ In addition to the Islamist groups, there are also service groups and professional organizations, such as the Social and Cultural Group (SHIA, established in 1971), Alaamal Group (SHIA, founded in 1973), Islamic Heritage Society (founded in 1981), Social Reform Society (formed in 1983), and Kuwait Women Volunteers (established in 1991). The service groups encourage Islamic lifestyle and charities, and provide social services activities, whereas the professional groups promote political rights, equal employment opportunities, women's rights in marriage, and women's health.¹⁰ Scholars often define the Kuwaiti women's struggle as a first wave women's movement in western terminology because of the focus on women's suffrage, legal reform in the areas of divorce, inheritance and property, and citizenship, as well as the improvement of educational and employment opportunities.¹¹ Nevertheless, the deep divide between these women's organizations represents the conflicting ideologies they uphold on the one hand, and suggests the incompatibility of Islam, democracy, and women's rights on the other.

Short Story Genre and Women Precursors

The short story (*qiṣṣah qaṣīrah* in Arabic) genre appeared in the Gulf region in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Two factors may have played an important role in the appearance of the short story in Kuwait: the founding of educational institutions, and the emergence of print press and literary/cultural clubs and societies.¹² According to Sulaymān al-Shaṭṭī, a Kuwaiti literary critic, the emergence of the short story as a genre in modern Kuwait coincides with the birth of journalism in the late 1920s. A short story *Munīrah* by Khālid al-Farj (d. 1954) published in *al-Kuwayt* (founded in 1928) in 1930 is considered

⁹ Al-Mughni, *Women in Kuwait*, 89–91.

¹⁰ Helen Rizzo, *Islam, Democracy and the Status of Women: the Case of Kuwait* (Ph.D. Dissertation, 2001, The Ohio State University), 79–101.

¹¹ Rizzo, *Islam, Democracy*, 130–34.

¹² al-Sayyid Mursī Abū Dhikrī, *al-Qiṣṣah fī al-Adab al-Mu'āṣir* (The Short Story in the Contemporary Literature), ([n.p.], 1988), 113.

as “the first journalistic story.”¹³ Furthermore, modern public schools first founded in the first decade of the twentieth century contributed to the promotion of the short story genre together with drama and novel. The fact that major contemporary Arab thinkers and writers were now introduced into school curricula encouraged a young generation to be familiar with modern Arabic culture and literature. Thus, it is not surprising that the short story genre became popular in a relatively short period of time.¹⁴ Another reason why the short story was quickly accepted by the public is its easy adaptability to both realism and impressionism. A realistic story objectively deals with a real event, person, or place, while a story characterized with impressionism is in the sense that a tale is “shaped and given meaning by the consciousness and psychological attitudes of the narrator,”¹⁵ or the combination of the two. The broadening influence of this genre on public life along with the further expansion of journalism and education encouraged the participation of more writers in this field. In addition, other important facts which helped form a perfect cradle for the development of the short story in Kuwait should not be ignored, such as the establishment of educational institutions, the political, cultural and educational influences of other Arab nations, the expansion of literary activities and clubs, and finally the 1938 Congress supporting national intellectual activities.¹⁶

¹³ Munīrah is a female name in Arabic. For the entire story, see Ibrāhīm ʿAbd Allāh Ghalūm, *al-Qiṣṣah al-Qaṣīrah fī al-Khalīj al-ʿArabī: al-Kuwayt wa-al-Baḥrayn, Dirāsah Naqdīyah Taʿṣīlīyah* (The Short Story in the Arabian Gulf: Kuwait and Bahrain, a Fundamental Critical Study) (Beirut: al-Muʿassasah al-ʿArabīyah lil-Dirāsāt wa-al-Nashr, 2000), 735–44. For an analytic study of the story, “Munīrah,” see Sulaymān al-Shaṭṭī, “Madkhal al-Qiṣṣah al-Qaṣīrah fī al-Kuwayt” (Introduction to the Short Story in Kuwait), *al-Bayan* 277 (1989): 73; and Sulaymān al-Shaṭṭī, *Madkhal al-Qiṣṣah al-Qaṣīrah fī al-Kuwayt* (Introduction to the Short Story in Kuwait) (Kuwait: Maktabat Dār al-ʿUrūbah, 1993), 12–20.

¹⁴ Abū Dhikrī, *al-Qiṣṣah*, 113. See also Ghalūm *al-Qiṣṣah al-Qaṣīrah*, 75.

¹⁵ “Short Story,” *Encyclopædia Britannica* (Accessed at <http://www.search.eb.com/eb/article?eu=119376&tocid=0&query=short%20story> [accessed December 28, 2002]).

¹⁶ Ismāʿīl Fahd Ismāʿīl, *al-Qiṣṣah al-ʿArabīyah fī al-Kuwayt: Qirāʾah Naqdīyah* (The Arabic Story in Kuwait: A Critical Study) (Beirut: Dār al-ʿAwdah, 1980), 15–18.

It is not surprising that the short story genre, capable of combining reality and imagination and reflecting the concerns and problems of people's daily life, appeared at an appropriate moment, came into view exactly when the Arabian Gulf countries were undergoing tremendous social, political, and economic changes.¹⁷ The period between 1928 and 1959 is seen as the formative years of the short story, during which two major trends are identified: romanticism and realism, despite the fact that the distinction between the two at times may not be easily made since both can often be found in one story.¹⁸ Nonetheless, numerous experiments were made during this period prior to the paradigm of the genre was outlined. It is also believed that in addition to being influenced by Arabic literary tradition, early Kuwaiti short stories were also under the influence of western literary movements such as romanticism, symbolism, realism, and naturalism. Thus, it is not surprising to discover a great extent of social realism in Kuwaiti short stories.¹⁹ Contemporary short stories continue to carry this characteristic by raising a wide range of social issues, for instance, social reforms, problems between social classes, the tensions between rulers and the ruled, and the poor and the rich, nationalism versus foreign domination, socio-political development and change, and reminiscences of the pre-oil Bedouin society.²⁰ As for women writers, they did not play any essential role until the late 1940s.

As a result of the spread of the women's education and liberation in the Arab world advocated by pro-westernization and modernization intellectuals, and economic boost following the discovery of oil, the role of women gradually changed in society. They also began to participate in the activity of short story/essay writing to express thoughts and beliefs. Their writings first appeared in the late 1940 and the 1950s, including *Khawāṭir Ṭīflah* (Desires of a Baby) (1948) by Ibtisām ʿAbd Allāh ʿAbd al-Laṭīf, *Nuzhat Farīd wa-Laylā* (Farid's and

¹⁷ Ghalūm *al-Qiṣṣah al-Qaṣīrah*, 27–31.

¹⁸ For a detailed analysis of the trend of realism in the short story genre in the Arabian Peninsula, see Abdulaziz Alsabail, *The Short Story in the Arabian Peninsula: Realistic Trends* (Ph.D. Dissertation, 1991, Indiana University).

¹⁹ Barbara Michalak, "The Beginnings of the Literary Movement and the Development of the Short Story in Kuwait. The Literary Production of a Contemporary Kuwaiti Writer – Laila al-Utman," *Folia Orientalia* 28 (1991): 83–87.

²⁰ Abdulaziz Alsabail *The Short Story*, 12, 16. See also Sulaymān al-Shaṭṭī, "Madkhal al-Qiṣṣah al-Qaṣīrah", 72–73. Ismāʿīl, *al-Qiṣṣah al-ʿArabīyah*, 15–18.

Layla's Trip) (1952) by ʿAḥmad Ḥāshim al-Badr (b. 1941), and *Amīnah* (1953) by Badriyah Musā'id al-Ṣāliḥ (b. 1929).²¹ From the 1960s onward, women became even more active in publishing short stories. A broad variety of issues related to women have been raised and have drawn significant amount of public attention and recognition. Thus, in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the women in Kuwait, the short stories by them are one of the important resources.

Biographical Sketches of Contemporary Women Writers

Contemporary women writers highlighted in this study are: Fāṭimah Yūsuf al-ʿAlī (b. 1953), Thurayyā al-Baqṣamī (b. 1952), Wafā' al-Ḥamdān (b. 19??), Ṭībah al-Ibrāhīm (b. 1944?), Laylā Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ (b. 19??), Hayfā' al-San'ūsī (1963), Munā al-Shāfi'ī (b. 1946), ʿĀliyah Shu'ayb (b. 1964), and Laylā al-ʿUthmān (b. 1945). Most of them belong to the middle to upper class and have received higher education. Al-San'ūsī and Shu'ayb hold doctorate degrees from British universities. Many of these writers are also active in the fields of journalism, mass communication and education, such as al-ʿAlī, Ṣāliḥ, al-San'ūsī, al-Shāfi'ī, Shu'ayb, and al-ʿUthmān, while others specialize in the field of art and science fiction writing, as in the case of al-Baqṣamī and al-Ibrāhīm. Despite the fact that women's issues are a common interest among these writers, some are more involved in women's movement than the others. This discrepancy is also perceived applicable in the matter of religiosity. As a matter of fact, the variety of social and educational backgrounds of these writers bring about intriguing and diverse observations on the issues of women's rights, gender relations, and related social problems in Kuwait.

According to Bouthaina Sha'aban, a Syrian woman writer, the short story by Arab women began its feminist phase in the late 1950s and early 1960s, during which more political and social concerns pertaining to women's status were raised.²² Generally speaking, such statement is also applicable in the case of Kuwait, in the sense that this literary form is often used to express the need for women's self-awareness and

²¹ al-Shaṭṭī, *Madkhal al-Qiṣṣah al-Qaṣīrah*, 7–48; al-Shaṭṭī, "Madkhal al-Qiṣṣah al-Qaṣīrah", 121. For biographical sketches of the early women writers of the short story, see Laylā Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ, *Adab al-Mar'ah fī al-Kuwayt* (Womens Literature in Kuwait) ([n.p., 1978]), 25–27, 29–34, and 75–80.

²² Bouthaina Sha'aban, "Arab Women and Literature: an Overview," *Arab Women: Between Defiance and Restraint*, ed. Suha Sabbagh (New York: Olive Branch Press, 1996), 236–37.

to voice women's suffering in marriage and family. Nevertheless, the short stories have not been utilized purposely to carry political agendas as by such feminist writers as Nawāl al-Sa'adāwī of Egypt and Fāṭimah al-Marnīsī of Morocco, who aim to use writings to challenge existing socio-political structures and cultures hostile to Arab women. To label Kuwaiti women's short stories as feminist literature seems to run a risk of incorrectly adding an activist intonation that does not necessarily match reality and therefore of ignoring the literary values of these writings. It is more accurate to assert that Kuwaiti women writers are characterized by their sophistication and subtlety in tackling women's issues. In other words, the short story genre is often used by women to pursue liberation as a form of protesting male domination without causing fractures in the existing socio-political structures.²³

Fāṭimah Yūsuf al-ʿAlī received her higher education at Cairo University in the 1980s. She started her journalistic career at an early age. In 1969, al-ʿAlī joined *al-Rawī al-ʿAmm*, a Kuwaiti newspaper, and *al-Nahḍah*, a weekly magazine. She published a substantial number of articles in which many social, economic, and cultural issues were touched upon. al-ʿAlī later transferred to *al-Qabas*, another Kuwaiti newspaper, and continued to publish daily columns with the focus on establishing communications with writers and poets, and writing criticism, opinions, and essays. al-ʿAlī was also involved in producing radio and television programs. The fact that she attended many conferences abroad in the field of women's studies indicates a clear interest in women's issues. She has authored several publications, including literary studies of important Arab writers and two collections of short stories.²⁴ The two collections of short stories, published in 2001, are

²³ Rashīdah Binmas'ūd, *al-Mar'ah wa-al-Kitābah: Su'āl al-Khuṣūṣiyyah: Balāghat al-Ikhtilāf* (Woman and Writing: A Question of the Specific: Literature of the Difference) ([Casablanca]: Afrīqiyyā al-Sharq, 1994), 75–76.

²⁴ The biographical information of these writers is mostly based on the book by Laylā Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ, *Udabā' wa-Adībāt al-Kuwayt: A'ḍā' al-Rābi'ah 1964–1996* (Kuwait Writers: Members of the Association, 1964–1996) (Kuwait: Laylā Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ, 1996), 264–47. Several Arabic websites also provide basic biographies of Kuwaiti writers and information of their publications, such as Kuwaiti Writers Association [<http://www.kuwaitwriters.net/writers.htm>], and Maraya.net [<http://www.maraya.net/Main.htm>]. The latter also offers comprehensive information on other Arabic literary genres and writers throughout the Arab world in addition to Kuwait.

entitled *Wajhuhā Waṭan* (Her Face is a Nation), and *Tā Marbūṭah* (Suffixed Tā).²⁵ The majority of al-‘Alī’s short stories reveal female characters’ viewpoint on love, sexuality, victimization of women, and gender inequality, as well as men’s immature and manipulative nature.

Thurayyā al-Baqṣamī takes on not only the role of a short story writer but also of a celebrated artist and a poet. She studied art in Cairo and Moscow, and received a master’s degree in graphic book illustration and design from the Art College of Surikove. al-Baqṣamī has held numerous collective and personal exhibitions in Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and America throughout the past three decades. Her short story collections include: *al-‘Araq al-Aswad: Majmū‘ah Qiṣaṣīyah* (Black Sweat: A Collection of Stories) (1977), *al-Sidrah: Qiṣaṣ Qaṣīrah* (The Lotus Tree: Short Stories) (1988), *Raḥīl al-Nawāfidh: Qiṣaṣ Qaṣīrah* (Departure of the Windows: Short Stories) (1994), and *Shumū‘ al-Sarādīb: Qiṣaṣ Qaṣīrah* (Cellar Candles: Short Stories).²⁶ al-Baqṣamī’s early stories show certain extent of socialist influence by highlighting the achievements of the workers. The appraisal of Kuwaiti ancestors’ endurance in hardship and industriousness is ubiquitous. Her later works, on the other hand, shifts the focus to description of the painful scenes in the 1991 Gulf War and the resistance movement from women’s perception.

Ṭībah al-Ibrāhīm is prolific in short story as well as science fiction writing. Two short stories of hers, *Sa‘īdah* and *Mudhakkirāt Khādīm* (A Servant’s Diary) won the Ministry of Information award twice.²⁷ What

²⁵ *Wajhuhā Waṭan: Qiṣaṣ Qaṣīrah* (Her Face is a Nation: Short Stories) (al-Qāhirah: Markaz al-Ḥaḍārah al-‘Arabīyah, 2001). *Tā Marbūṭah: Qiṣaṣ Qaṣīrah* (Suffixed Tā: Short Stories) (al-Qāhirah: Markaz al-Ḥaḍārah al-‘Arabīyah, 2001). Other publications by al-‘Alī include *Wujūh fī al-Ziḥām* (Faces in the Crowd) (Kuwait: Wizārat al-‘Ilām, 1971); *‘Abd Allāh al-Sālim: Rajul ‘Āsha wa-lam Yamūt* (‘Abd Allāh al-Sālim: a Man Who Lives and Does Not Die) (Kuwait: Wizārat al-‘Ilām, 1983).

²⁶ *al-‘Araq al-Aswad: Majmū‘ah Qiṣaṣīyah* (Black Sweat: A Collection of Stories) ([Kuwait]: n.p., 1977); *Raḥīl al-Nawāfidh: Qiṣaṣ Qaṣīrah* (Departure of the Windows: Short Stories) (Kuwait: n.p., 1994); *Shumū‘ al-Sarādīb: Qiṣaṣ Qaṣīrah* (Cellar Candles: Short Stories) ([Kuwait]: Maktabat Dār al-‘Urūbah lil-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī‘, 1992); *al-Sidrah: Qiṣaṣ Qaṣīrah* (The Lotus Tree: Short Stories) ([Kuwait]: n.p., 1988).

²⁷ Laylā Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ, *Udabā‘ wa-Adībāt al-Kuwayt: A‘ḍā‘ al-Rābiṭah 1964–1996* (Kuwait Writers: Members of the Union, 1964–1996) (al-Kuwayt : Rābiṭat

distinguishes al-Ibrāhīm is her science fiction, a genre rarely adopted by women writers. There is no doubt that this unique talent will gradually draw more western attention. Although less prolific in short story writing, it should also be noted that al-Ibrāhīm is one of the few writers who try to deal with the ambiguous and complex relationship between foreign male servants and their female employers.

Laylā Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ is both a short story writer and a scholar whose comprehensive biographical publications about Kuwaiti writers are among of the most important sources for those who conduct research in the field of contemporary Kuwaiti literature. Ṣāliḥ works for the Ministry of Information as a writer. She also participates and co-produces many cultural and literary radio programs. Ṣāliḥ's short story collections include *Jarāḥ fī al-ʿUyūn* (Injury in Eyes) (1986), *Liqāʿ fī Mawsim al-Ward* (Meeting in the Flower Season) (1994), *ʿItr al-Layl al-Bāqī* (The Remaining Night Perfume) (2000).²⁸ Ṣāliḥ's stories cover a wide range of topics, from women's exclusive experience in everyday life to the lamentation of Lebanese civil war and nationalist inclination inspired by the 1991 Gulf War.

Hayfāʾ al-Sanʿūsī is both a short story writer and a professor at Kuwait University. She has studied in Tunisia, Egypt, and Scotland, and holds a Ph.D. in modern Arabic literature from the University of Glasgow. One of al-Sanʿūsī's achievements is her introduction of Kuwaiti literature to western readers through her English translation of famous Kuwaiti writers' works. She has published on Arabic literary criticism and children's literature. As one of the few writers who write short stories in both Arabic and English, al-Sanʿūsī maintains that it is essential for western readers to establish a correct understanding of Kuwaiti/Arab women and to realize that the problems and dilemmas they confront are universal and are not necessarily associated with the

al-Udabāʾ fī al-Kuwayt, 1996) pp. 173–77.

²⁸ Laylā Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ's short story collections include *Jarāḥ fī al-ʿUyūn* (Injury in Eyes) ([Kuwait?]: L. M. Ṣāliḥ, 1986); *Liqāʿ fī Mawsim al-Ward* (Meeting in the Flower Season) (Kuwait: Dār Suʿād al-Ṣabāḥ, 1994); *ʿItr al-Layl al-Bāqī* (The Remaining Night Perfume) (Damascus: Al Mada, 2000). Biographies of Kuwaiti writers include *Adab al-Marʾah fī al-Kuwayt* (Womens Literature in Kuwait) (n.p., 1978); *Udabāʾ wa-Adībāt al-Kuwayt :Aʿdāʾ al-Rābiḥah 1964–1996* (Kuwait Writers: Members of the Union, 1964–1996) (al-Kuwayt: Rābiḥat al-Udabāʾ fī al-Kuwayt, 1996).

true meaning of Islam.²⁹ This idea is manifested in one of al-San‘ūsī’s primary short story collections, *Women in a Swirl*.³⁰

Muná al-Shāfi‘ī writes short stories as well as journal articles. She was the first director to the office of instruction and advice at Kuwait University, and the first administrative director to Girls’ College at Kuwait University. al-Shāfi‘ī won many literary awards in the Gulf countries for her short stories. Her publications of short stories are *al-Nakhlah wa-Rā‘iḥat al-Hayl* (The Palm and the Scent of the Cardamom) (1992), *al-Bad’ . . . Marratayn: Majmū‘ah Qiṣaṣīyah* (The Beginning . . . For the Second Time: A Collection of Stories) (1994), *Dirāmā al-Ḥawwās: Majmū‘at Qiṣaṣ* (Drama of Senses: A Collection of Short Stories) (1995), *Ashyā’ Gharībah . . . Taḥduthu: Majmū‘ah Qiṣaṣīyah* (Strange Things Are Happening: A Collection of Stories) (2002).³¹ al-Shāfi‘ī observes women, men, and society with her unique female sensitivity, which generates a unique taste of romanticism, humanitarianism, and idealism. The subjects of her short stories also ranges from love, gender relations to the physical and psychological suffering of the people in the 1991 Gulf War.

‘Āliyah Shu‘ayb holds a Ph.D. from Birmingham University. She is one of the contemporary women writers who boldly tackle in literary writings taboos in Arab society. Such subjects include homosexuality and marital rape. This courageous attempt, however, predictably has resulted in harsh criticism from Muslim fundamentalists.³² Shu‘ayb has

²⁹ Hayfā’ al-San‘ūsī, Personal interview (Private e-mail message to An-Chi Hoh Dianu), July 14, 2001.

³⁰ al-San‘ūsī, Hayfā’: *Women in a Swirl: A Collection of Short Stories* ([Kuwait]: n.p., 2000).

³¹ *al-Nakhlah wa-Rā‘iḥat al-Hayl* (The Palm and the Scent of the Cardamom) (Kuwait: Dar Su‘ād al-Ṣabāḥ, 1992); *al-Bad’ . . . Marratayn: Majmū‘ah Qiṣaṣīyah* (The Beginning . . . For the Second Time: A Collection of Stories) (Kuwait: Sharikat al-Rabī‘ān, 1994); *Dirāmā al-Ḥawwās: Majmū‘at Qiṣaṣ* (Drama of Senses: A Collection of Short Stories) (Kuwait: Sharikat al-Rabī‘ān, 1995); *Ashyā’ Gharībah . . . Taḥduthu: Majmū‘ah Qiṣaṣīyah* (Strange Things Are Happening: A Collection of Stories) (Kuwait: Dār Qirtās lil-Nashr, 2002).

³² See ‘Āliyah Shu‘ayb: *Kull Man Arāda al-Shahrah Rafa‘a Da‘wā Diddī* (‘Āliyah Shu‘ayb: Whoever Wants Fame Raises Lawsuits Against Me), *al-Majallah* no. 1148 (2002): 62–63.

published a collection of short stories entitled *Imrā'ah Tatazawwaju al-Baḥr* (A Woman Marries the Sea) (1989).³³

Laylá al-'Uthmān is undoubtedly the most celebrated short story writer in Kuwait. Her writings have been translated into many foreign languages and have drawn much attention in western academia. al-'Uthmān's stories deal with women's issues, but she also sheds some light on socio-political problems from the female perspective, such as the Palestinian question, moral decline in Kuwaiti society, and the Iraqi invasion in 1991. Her stories are romantic and metaphorical, often filled with symbols and interwoven with reality and imagination. al-'Uthmān is probably the most prolific Kuwaiti woman author, as a writer of poems, novels and dramas. Her short stories include *Imrā'ah fī Inā': wa-Qiṣaṣ Ukhrá* (A Woman in a Receptacle: and Other Stories) (1976), *al-Raḥīl* (The Departure) (1979), *Fī al-Layl Tawtī al-'Uyūn: Qiṣaṣ* (At Night the Eyes Come: Stories) (1980), *Fathīya Takhtār Mawtahā* (Fathīya Chooses Her Death) (1987), *Ḥālat Ḥubb Majnūnah* (The Condition of Love Is Crazy) (1989), *al-Ḥawājiz al-Sawda': Majmū'ah Qiṣaṣīyah* (Black Barricades: A Collection of Stories) (1994), *Zahrah Tadkhulu al-Ḥayy* (Zahrah Enters the Quarter) (1996), *Yaḥduthu Kull Laylah* (Talking Every Night) (1998), *al-Muḥākamah: Muqta' min Sayrat al-Wāqī'* (Prosecution: A Passage from the History of the Event) (2000).³⁴

Characteristics of Short Stories by Women

The analysis of Kuwaiti women's short stories here is primarily from the angle of contents. In other words, the central questions in the anal-

³³ 'Aliyah Shu'ayb, *Imrā'ah Tatazawwaju al-Baḥr* (A Woman Marries the Sea) (Kuwait: n.p., 1989).

³⁴ *Fathīya Takhtār Mawtahā* (Fathīya Chooses Her Death) (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1987); *Fī al-Layl Tawtī al-'Uyūn: Qiṣaṣ* (At Night the Eyes Come: Stories) (Beirut: Manshūrāt Dār al-Ādāb, 1980); *Ḥālat Ḥubb Majnūnah* (The Condition of Love Is Crazy) (n.p.: al-Hay'ah al-Miṣriyah al-'Āmmah lil-Kuttāb, 1989); *al-Ḥawājiz al-Sawda': Majmū'ah Qiṣaṣīyah* (Black Barricades: A Collection of Stories) (Kuwait: Laylá al-'Uthmān, 1994); *Imrā'ah fī Inā': wa-Qiṣaṣ Ukhrá* (A Woman in a Receptacle: and Other Stories) (Kuwait: Dār Dhāt al-Salāsīl, 1976); *al-Muḥākamah: Muqta' min Sayrat al-Wāqī'* (Prosecution: A Passage from the History of the Event) (Damascus: Dār al-Madā lil-Thaqāfah wa-al-Nashr, 2000); *al-Raḥīl* (The Departure) (Beirut: Manshūrāt Dār al-Ādāb, 1979); *Yaḥduthu Kull Laylah* (Talking Every Night) (Beirut: al-Mu'assasah al-'Arabīyah lil-Dirāsāt wa-al-Nashr, 1998); *Zahrah Tadkhulu al-Ḥayy* (Zahrah Enters the Quarter) (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1996).

ysis are what issues are raised in this literary corpus and what characteristics there are in these writings. The answer to the first question, like women's literature elsewhere, the short stories by Kuwaiti women are evolved around the female self with her as the nucleus of the orbit. Two basic tactics utilized to examine the contents are internal and external approaches. Internal approach puts a stress on the exploration of women's inner world, i.e. their feelings and thoughts. The female perspective on such matters as self-identity, love, sexuality, marriage, motherhood, and sorority is therefore manifested. As for the external approach, it examines women's interaction with others, i.e. men and society. In addition to the fact that gender inequality and female victimization are frequently protested in the short stories, women's enormous interests in politics and social affairs should not be ignored. Particularly after the Iraqi invasion in Kuwait, many women writers wrote about the suffering of the people and their perception of the war and the resistance movement. Such war literature is deemed significant because it not only represents a different interpretation of the warfare, but also declares to the world that Kuwaiti women care for their society as much as their male counterparts do, and have proven it by making tremendous contributions in awakening citizens' patriotic consciousness and in defending their country's security.

In regard to the literary characteristics of the short stories by Kuwaiti women, generally speaking, the temperament of romanticism,³⁵ humanitarianism, symbolism, and idealism, as well as the inclination toward introspection and meditation are apparent, despite the differences in approaches among these writers. Among many examples is *Ajnihā min Rīḥ* (Wings of a Breeze)³⁶ by Muná al-Shāfi'ī, which serves as a paradigm of a short story combined with romanticism, symbolism, and idealism. It is essentially a dialogue between the female protagonist and a butterfly. Two ways to understand the symbolism in the text are as follows. Firstly, the protagonist is identified with the butterfly.

³⁵ The meaning of romanticism adopted here is one of those that were popularly circulated in the eighteenth century, "a tendency to exalt the individual and his needs and emphasis on the need for a freer and more personal expression" (J. A. Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc.) p. 576).

³⁶ al-Shāfi'ī, Muná, *Ajnihā min Rīḥ* (Wings of a Breeze); *al-Baḍ' . . . Marratayn: Majmū'ah Qiṣaṣīyah* (The Beginning . . . For the Second Time: A Collection of Stories) (Kuwayt: Sharikat al-Rabi'ān, 1994) pp. 73–76.

Namely, the protagonist sympathizes the butterfly for she sees in it her own suffering from the desire to love and affection. Therefore, her dialogue with the butterfly is indeed a self-reflection.

– My butterfly, O beautiful [creature], why this sorrow? Why this silence? The sky is wide. Flap your wings, O you who have wings. Fly far beyond the land. Discover the dreams of the sky . . .

– I like exuberance. I love open space. But I have a stronger desire.

I remembered my bruise. I felt pain. I put my hands on the wound of the heart. I slowed down its heartbeat and released its grief. I excused my butterfly for a moment, which was coiling behind a damp bush and resting in sleep. The wind flirted in the place. Its whistling trembled the desire inside me. So I was fond of sitting observing my butterfly and bringing her grief my eagerness and desire. I asked her:

– Why do we love?

– . . .

– Is the desire to love more powerful than life?

– . . .

The butterfly continued to coil behind her bush crying for her loneliness in the shore of silence, as if she was crying for her days that were gone, and my days that I was still retrieving its loneliness, and my days that would never return.”³⁷

Secondly, the butterfly’s wings symbolize liberty and the freedom to love. At the end of the story, the advent of this enlightenment, together with the fact that the butterfly shows up with its partner, keeps our protagonist optimistic.”

al-Aḡā (The Snake)³⁸ by Laylā al-‘Uthmān is an example that integrates symbolism and female introspection and meditation. The story aims to understand sexuality from both female perspective and that of men and society. The protagonist believes her confession of love and physical attraction to a man she admires to be necessary, whereas her mother, spokesperson of the traditional point of view, foresees and warns the possible devaluation this behavior might cause to the protagonist. Simultaneously, al-‘Uthmān juxtaposes another storyline, describing how a

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 74–75.

³⁸ al-‘Uthmān, (1979) *al-Aḡā* (The Snake), *al-Raḥīl* (The Departure) (Beirut: Manshūrāt Dār al-Ādāb, 1979) pp. 71–79.

snake gains physical pleasure by brutally torturing and devouring a rabbit. Obviously it is opposite of female sexuality that is associated with love and pleasure. The snake, symbolizing penis, refers to aggressiveness, selfishness, and greed, in contrast to the image of the rabbit trapped by a spider's web, metaphorically meaning an innocent woman who is imprisoned by a set of traditional values that fail to instruct her to enjoy sexual intercourse but to see it as a duty of procreation. Sexuality implied in this scene represents pain, suffering, and female victimization. As a result, female sexuality is always surrounded by unpleasantness.

It should be noted that although the commonality of Kuwaiti women writers' short stories have been pointed out, the uniqueness of each writer in literary expression and rhetoric, attributed to the difference of age, family background, education, political ideology, etc., should be recognized. Hence, it is not surprising to see that some subjects are tackled more often than the others because of the level of controversy they may cause, and certain topics are rarely discussed or almost absent from this literary corpus for one reason or another, such as voluntary abortion and women's religious faith. Nevertheless, Kuwaiti women's short stories cover a wide range of thought-provoking subjects and successfully project a series of challenges to society and its conventional values. Consequently, a unique literary spectrum is shaped, which helps the reader understand more profoundly the complexity and sophistication of Kuwaiti women and their social context.