

Laila al-Othman's Novel *Şamt al-farāshāt* (Silence of the Butterflies): Women's Silence and Taboo

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INTRODUCTION

Women and women's issues are important themes in the Kuwaiti writer Laila al-Othman's literary output. This can be seen in many of her compositions, in particular in the novel *Şamt al-farāshāt* (Silence of the Butterflies), published in Kuwait. The present modest study will deal with the treatment of women's issues in this novel, through reading and analysis.

A brief theoretical background survey

In her writings in general, as well as in the novel to be discussed here, al-Othman attempts to shed light on women's concerns and touches on what has been called the "taboo triangle" in modern Arabic literature, defined by the Egyptian critic Fāḍil Thāmir as "what is not mentioned in the texts of the 'new sensitivity' in modern Arabic literature". The theme of women and gender-related issues was an important element of the three topics which al-Othman dealt with at length.

This new awareness of women's issues is clearly due to the new cognitive openness in the information age, the emergence of societies focused on individual liberty, and the global dissemination of Marxist and Socialist ideas, according to which women deserved such awareness and liberty, especially since they constituted half of society.¹ Because Middle Eastern societies were also exposed to this openness, its educated women were drawn towards a cognitive awareness of themselves as a dynamic element of society and began to express their vital concerns as women. Laila al-Othman, for her part, expressed the concerns of Arab women as a Kuwaiti and an Arab, and the concerns of women in general, as an indicator of social and cultural advancement.² Al-Othman treated Arab women in her writings as part of her own society, not as a separate literary genre but as one theme within a greater one, namely that of Arab societies as a whole and the unfair way they treated women.³ Her purpose was not to segregate herself in her analysis of Arab women's problems, but to tear the veil off the social realities of Arab women's lives, and thus of Arab men's lives as well.⁴

The research question and the research method

In this modest study we address the way women's themes are treated in Laila al-Othman's *Şamt al-farāshāt*, focusing on the following research question: "What women's themes did al-Othman address in the novel?"

¹ See Muchalak, 1997, 130-131.

² See Khalīl, 2004, 136.

³ See Şaffūrī, 2006, 136.

⁴ See Majādila, 2011, 64.

We shall attempt to answer this question through reading and a presentation of the gist of the novel on one hand, and through a survey of previous studies on this topic on the other hand. Finally, we present our summary and conclusions.

Presentation of the subject and description of the data: Discussion and analysis

In the novel *Şamt al-farāshāt* al-Othman addressed the afore-mentioned issues. With this she opened a debate among Arabs concerning the complex cultural model of narrative fiction, a debate that poses the following urgent question: "Why does the male/father/husband/brother possess absolute dominion over women?" In the novel under discussion we are presented with literary figures which represent women subject to male control. Nādiya is controlled by her father and is forced to marry a rich middle-aged man. This marriage is considered legitimate by the family, since it conforms to the collective will, expressed mainly through the authority of the patriarchal father. The woman's desire to develop her own independent personality is ignored.⁵ Certainly one factor that made it possible for the father to gain such authority was the weakness of the other, in this case a weak woman, who surrendered her will to the social norms and allowed others to make choices for her.⁶ This aspect of the woman's personality can be seen in numerous passages throughout the novel, for example in the following monologue:⁷ My mother, despite the love between her and my father, was afraid of him. I noticed that she constantly tried to keep up with his moods. She agreed with what he said without thinking. As did we, even if what he said was annoying to us. And no one argued with his requests. Still, my mother was happy, as far as I could tell, and neither complained nor displayed any anger.

In this passage and throughout the novel the father is seen to be very controlling. And the mother clearly supports him; her feminine acceptance is a component of her husband's patriarchal control.⁸ The mother's acceptance is transformed into absolute submission. Thus in the novel Nādiya asks her mother: "Why do you allow him to humiliate you in our presence?" The question angers her mother, who shouts at her daughter and hotly defends her husband: "Your father guides me and does not humiliate me. And it's none of your business".⁹

Male control is also evident in the person of Nādiya's brother Fayṣal, who used to be very close to his sister and shared many of her personality traits but very quickly falls into the patriarchal pattern the moment he begins to suspect the existence of a relationship between her and Dr. Jawād, then between her and 'Aṭiyya, who in his view was still a slave.¹⁰

Yet another image of an overbearing Middle Eastern male in the novel is Dr. Jawād himself, a married man who breaks taboos and maintains romantic and sexual relations with young women, yet at the same time he refuses to allow his wife to have the same kind of extramarital affair. This is the typical male, who permits himself to do what he forbids his daughter and his wife. The butterflies thus continue to fly in eternal silence.

From another perspective, Nādiya's relationship with Jawād also provides insight into the way society views widows and divorcees. They are both scorned and desired at same time, and considered "easy" to obtain. They are considered "second-hand" women, and only men in a

⁵ See Barakāt, 1984, 197.

⁶ See al-Shāmī, 1998, 137.

⁷ See 'Ubayd, 2007, 31.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ See al-Othman, 2007, 48.

¹⁰ Ibid., 47.

similar state will agree to marry them. Another taboo with which the novel deals is incest: The brother's sense of having power over his sister is such that he violates this taboo, too, and rapes her; he then imprisons her to prevent her from telling anyone of his evil deed. He demands that she remain silent, and she obeys; she remains silent until the end, when she commits suicide.¹¹

Another social phenomenon with which the author deals briefly is the tendency of too many people to accept the unfair, often superficial, and extreme judgments of certain people against others with whom they have ideological or theological disagreements. In the novel this is shown in the scene in which Nādiya goes to the doctor's clinic. As she waits for her turn she reads a book by a well-known female author. A veiled woman comes up to her and chastises her for reading a book by that author. Nādiya then discovers that the woman had never read anything by that author, but that she had heard that she was audacious and therefore should not be read.

To conclude, this rich and courageous novel treats the ills of Arab societies credibly and creatively.

CONCLUSION

From the preceding discussion we conclude that Laila al-Othman in her writing has followed a well-thought-out plan with respect to the novel's contents and ideas. In *Şamt al-farāshāt* she tried to shed light on the issues of Arab women in the Gulf region by means of a semi-realistic tale and succeeded in showing the problems of women in the Arab world who are socially oppressed in a patriarchal, male-dominated society.

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APPENDIX

A digest of *Şamt al-farāshāt* by Aḥmad Khalīl

The novel tells the story of the nineteen-year-old Nādiya, who is forced to marry a rich man in his sixties. She is his third wife, about the same age and mindset as his grandchildren. Her mother Zaynab, originally from Aleppo, married her father Muḥsin, then a Kuwaiti youth who

¹¹ See Manāşira, 2002, 435.

often visited Syria with his family. That is also where he met Zaynab and they fell in love. They married and she moved with him to Kuwait, where they lived a simple and humble life. They married off their only daughter to a rich man, as old or older than her father, in the hope of eventually putting their hands on his wealth after their daughter would inherit him, according to her mother.

After the wedding, Nādiya went to live in her husband's palace. Her journey of silence began in the first night of her marriage, silence about everything she saw and all that she went through. The first thing her old husband, Nāyif, told his virgin bride on the night of her wedding was not to reveal the palace's secrets to anyone. At first she did not understand the true import of this warning, but she very quickly became aware of the evil secrets which her husband so wanted to hide.

The old man was aware of the limitations of his sexual prowess ordered his obedient slave 'Aṭiyya to deflower his wife in his presence and with his help, in order to make it easier for him to copulate with her afterwards. The reality of what happened was more than Nādiya can bear and she was shocked into silence.

The huge palace became a prison that robbed her of her liberty. She was not permitted to leave it and, in order to further ensure her silence, her husband permitted her parents to visit her only once a month, in his presence. She was so extremely lonely that she attempted to soften his heart and convince him to allow her to visit her family. Eventually he lost his patience with her entreaties and ordered his slave 'Aṭiyya to whip her cruelly. She was whipped until her blood flowed and she was left as nothing more than a cold and silent piece of flesh.

Her sufferings did nothing to change his feelings towards her. She remained the slave whom he had bought with his money in order to satisfy his lust. In fact, the female servants of the palace were in a better situation than she was, as she discovered one night when he entered her bedroom in order to have sexual intercourse with her. Usually he slept far from her and did not enter her bedroom except when he lusted for her. When he sensed her coldness and her disgust he became very angry and wanted to force her to learn about sex.

He summoned his female servant Georgette, who entered the room nearly naked. The two of them had sex on her bed in her presence. She discovered the ugly truth from 'Aṭiyya, who agreed to tell her if she would promise not to inform his master. The truth was that her husband had sex with the servant girls in the palace, and 'Aṭiyya would help him every time it was necessary to deflower a girl, as had happened with her on her wedding night.

Nādiya spent four years like this in the palace, until she fled to her family, who were shocked by what she told them. As fate would have it, her husband Nāyif died and her mother's prophecy came to be: Nādiya inherited enough money to become independent after having been delivered from her servitude to her husband.

Because she now had independent means her family could not forbid her to do as she liked. She fulfilled the dream she had before her marriage, of obtaining a college education and became a teacher of Arabic. She lived near the sea, far from the palace and its disgusting memories. Her family moved into the same building, in order to suppress the evil tongues that constantly prattled about the young widow.

'Aṭiyya, too, was freed by his master and also received a sum of money. He became the guard in the building in which Nadiya lived, after she forgave him what he did to her on her wedding

night and the day she had been whipped at her husband's command. She did not hate him; indeed, she made excuses for his behavior and discovered virtues in him that she had not found in her husband.

In the course of her university studies she fell in love with Jawād, who hid from her the fact that he was married to a foreign woman who lived with their two children in America while he remained in Kuwait. She quickly became disillusioned with him and realized that he only sought physical pleasure. When his attempts to obtain her favors failed he proposed that they should enter into a temporary marriage (*mut'a*).

This new disappointment caused her to come closer to 'Aṭiyya, whom she taught to read and write. She treated him with a generosity that did not escape those around her. Her brother was very displeased with her behavior, as was her mother, while her father did remain neutral, explaining that "the money is hers and she can do with it what she pleases".

Gradually Nādiya became a slave to untamable sensual desires. In her dreams 'Aṭiyya became the knight of her dreams and in her waking hours she gave free rein in her thoughts to her repressed desires towards him.

Soon her dreams became reality. Her father died and her relations with 'Aṭiyya became ever stronger. She confessed her feelings towards him and allowed herself to frequent his apartment or to call him to hers under various pretexts. This aroused the suspicions of her mother and her brother, who tried to restrict her. She had no choice but to tell her brother of her love for 'Aṭiyya and her intention of marrying him, thus breaking with all social norms and traditions.

But things turned out differently than she thought. 'Aṭiyya refused to marry her, and instead moved far away. By this act 'Aṭiyya became master of his own fate while Nādiya was transformed into a slave awaiting her redeemer.