

Women's Leadership in Politics and Literature: Zhor Ounissi as a Model

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Abstract

This study examines women's leadership in politics and literature through the career of the Algerian writer and political figure Zhor Ounissi. It highlights the historical marginalisation of women in Arab and Algerian societies and considers women's political participation, particularly in Algeria, within the context of legal, social, and cultural constraints. The study presents Ounissi as a pioneering model of female leadership, emphasising her political responsibilities, cultural contributions, literary career, and engagement with questions concerning women's status in society. It also explores her representation of Algerian women's sacrifices during the War of Liberation and her contribution to women's writing. The study concludes that Ounissi's political and literary presence represents an important step towards challenging patriarchal structures and strengthening women's participation in intellectual, professional, and public life.

Keywords: Zhor Ounissi; women's leadership; political participation; women's writing; Algerian women

Introduction

Any discussion of Zhor Ounissi begins with politics before literature, since she was the first woman in post-independence Algeria to hold a ministerial portfolio. This distinction is particularly significant because women in that period, despite their participation alongside men in the War of Liberation, experienced marginalisation within the family and in professional and educational spheres. Some families permitted their daughters to pursue education and training, work, and writing, while the various fields of public life remained the exclusive preserve of men.

This situation was not confined to Algeria; it extended across the Arab world, where women were marginalised and their roles restricted to child-rearing and care. Later, however, the situation underwent a radical transformation as women demanded their rights, including the right to education, the right to work, the right to make their voices heard in society, and recognition as important partners within it. Numerous women's organisations emerged to defend and protect women's rights. By way of illustration rather than exhaustive treatment, this paper considers the position of women in the political sphere.

1. Political Participation among Arab Women

Women are not merely members of the family but essential members of it; they should therefore participate in decisions that concern them, their families, and, consequently, their society. From this standpoint, social participation may be regarded as the first step towards political participation for men and women alike.¹

Following the wars of liberation, Arab women secured a considerable number of rights, including the right to education and the right to work, while conditions appropriate to the circumstances of each country were created to facilitate their participation in public life, including politics. Nevertheless, the extent of that participation was, and remains, limited in comparison with what it ought to be.²

Article 1 of the United Nations Charter proclaims 'respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all and encouragement thereof, without distinction as to sex, language, or religion and without differentiation between men and women'. Reports of studies conducted by the United Nations indicated that, as of August 2015, women constituted only 22 per cent of all national parliamentarians, representing a slow increase from 11.3 per cent in 1995. As one account observes, 'The proportion of women's participation in political life varies from one country to another and from one society to another according to the system of laws, values, and ideas governing that society.' Recent decades have seen a marked increase in calls for women's empowerment and for greater participation by women in public life as essential actors. In recent years, Arab states have adopted quota systems requiring political parties to nominate women and strengthening women's participation in political life and decision-making.

Among Arab states, Tunisia has taken the lead in women's political participation, particularly after the Jasmine Revolution, when 76 women participated in the parliamentary elections and accounted for 35 per cent of the assembly's members. Women have also participated politically in Egypt, Mauritania, Kuwait, and Algeria. The proportion of women's participation in political life varies from one country to another.³

Algerian Women in the Political Sphere

Algerian women participated alongside men in achieving independence and liberating the country. The Algerian Constitution established equality among citizens. Article 29 states that 'citizens are equal before the law, and there shall be no discrimination in treatment among them on the basis of birth, race, sex, opinion, or any personal circumstance' (Harizi, 58). However, after independence, during three periods - 1964, 1972, and 1980 - the Algerian system failed to

¹ Iman Bibars, *Women's Political Participation in the Arab World*, Association for the Advancement and Development of Women, registration no. 3527.

² Abdelalim Mohamed Abdelkarim Saleh, *Women's Political Participation in the Arab World*, accessed February 10, 2020, at 18:21, <http://jilrc.com/>.

³ 'How Can Arab Women's Participation in Political Work Be Supported?', published January 17, 2019, accessed February 10, 2020, at 19:57, <https://www.bbc.com>.

adopt legislation equitable to women. Women were not granted a share in all fields despite the economic and social changes experienced by society. This situation was facilitated by legal texts that obscured women's rights and status; moreover, traditional social frameworks and strict Islamic reference frameworks were entrenched, leading to the emergence of feminist activism represented by the National Union of Algerian Women. Despite its limited representation, the union was regarded as an opportunity for women to express their circumstances.⁴

The Algerian political system adopted a compulsory quota system, also used in many European countries, to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women. A quota of 30 per cent, approximately one-third, was adopted on the basis that, in most democratic experiences employing compulsory quotas, the proportion ranged from 20 to 50 per cent.⁵

Zhor Ounissi as a Model of Female Leadership

Ounissi was regarded as a model of female leadership because of her broad intellectual formation, having studied under Sheikh Abdelhamid Ben Badis. She promoted reform and the protection of the Arabic language, even refusing to write in French, which was widely used among Maghrebi writers. A mujahida, writer, and minister, her career was crowned by the National Order of Merit and the Medal of Resistance.

In 1982, she became the first woman in Algerian history to hold ministerial office, serving as minister of social affairs and later as minister of national education. She held several senior cultural, media, and social positions, thereby establishing a pioneering record in numerous fields. She was also the first woman to serve as editor-in-chief and director of *Al-Jazairiya*, a magazine for Algerian women.

She worked in education, contributed to the establishment of the Union of Algerian Writers and to the national media after independence, and directed and served as editor-in-chief of the first women's magazine published in Algeria. She published in numerous Arab and foreign newspapers, and her works were translated into several languages. Her name was recorded as a Maghrebi writer in Norwegian and French literary dictionaries, in the literary encyclopaedia at New York University, and in the encyclopaedia *Arab Women's Writings in the Twentieth Century*. She was a leading member of the National Liberation Front and was elected to the People's National Assembly, serving from 1977 to 1982. She was also regarded as the first woman appointed to the Algerian government, in which she held several ministerial portfolios.

⁴ A quota is a system that reserves specified shares for women in legislative councils. The English term quota means a share or proportional allocation and represents a form of positive intervention intended to help women overcome obstacles that limit their political participation in comparison with men. Belkacem Ben Zennine, 'Algerian Women and Change: A Study of the Role and Performance of Public Policies,' *Insaniyat*, nos. 57-58, <https://journals.openedition.org>.

⁵ Samira Bara, 'Political Representation of Algerian Women in Elected Councils: A Field Study of the Attitudes of Female Students at the Faculty of Law and Political Science, University of Ouargla, towards Women's Participation after the Application of the Quota System,' *Dafatir al-Siyasa wa al-Qanun*, no. 13 (June 2015): 236.

She was a member of the Council of the Nation and is currently a member of the Scientific Council of the Centre for Studies and Research on the National Movement and the Revolution of 1 November 1954. She received several decorations and certificates of appreciation. Her publications include novels, short stories, and essays, among them 'The Sleeping Pavement' (Cairo, 1967); 'On the Other Shore' (1974); *From the Diary of a Schoolteacher* (Algiers, 1978); 'The Extended Shadows' (Algiers, 1982); *Lunja and the Ogre* (Algiers, 1994); 'The Old Women of the Moon' (Algiers, 1996); 'Rusicada' (Algiers, 1999); and *Illuminating Points*, a collection of essays on Arabic literature, politics, and society.⁶

In her memoir *Flowers and Thorns ... A Woman's Journey ...*, Ounissi writes:

The role and tasks of Algerian women were integrated and grew with the days, the days and years of the Great War of Liberation. She is the woman who stands guard in the streets and on the pavements, monitoring the enemy's movements; she is the woman who opens her home and prepares her entire family to serve a group of fedayeen who arrive suddenly and remain for a period that often becomes prolonged; she is the woman who carries equipment, clothing, reports, leaflets, and various secret documents from one place to another, crossing military and moral barriers; she is the woman who girds herself with a bomb while being subjected to various forms of harassment and humiliation; she is the woman who braids bullets into her braids; she is the woman who acts as a link of communication and transmission between cells of revolutionaries in the large city; she is the woman who, when her identity is exposed to the enemy and one of her comrades is arrested and tortured, departs for the countryside, leaving behind family, husband, and children, to participate directly in the major battles, where she is wounded and martyred; she is the woman who cooks, washes, feeds, and laboriously obtains the needs of groups of mujahideen; she is the woman who thrusts her entire family into the furnace of battle and mourns them with ululations and national songs; and she is the woman who is divorced and expelled because of these choices.⁷

Through this statement, Ounissi offers a vivid account of the sacrifices made by Algerian women during the Great War of Liberation. They risked their lives in support of the country, sacrificing themselves, their families, and their children. Their sacrifices were not confined to the liberation struggle: within the family, they assumed responsibility for care, child-rearing, and cooking, while in the struggle itself they fought and provided treatment. At independence,

⁶ Samira Menad, *Female Leadership in the Social Imaginary: A Field Study of Perceptions of Leadership among a Sample of Women in Algeria* (master's thesis, Cultural Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Algiers, 2001-2002).

⁷ Mohamed Bouazara, 'Algerian Women from Armed Struggle to Political Practice,' Regional Seminar on Women's Participation in Political Life, Centre for Mediterranean and International Studies, Tunisia, April 14-15, 2017.

Algerian women expressed their joy through ululations, slogans, and public celebrations. Yet despite all these sacrifices, they did not receive appropriate care and recognition, nor did they attain their place within the society they had helped to build.

A patriarchal society is one whose culture places control and authority in the hands of the head of the family or kinship group and is grounded in the belief in men's physical and social superiority. Patriarchal structures were evident, for example, among the Romans and Muslim Arabs, where wives and children were subject to the authority of the 'omnipotent' father and 'master'. Manuel Castells considers this model to be moving towards decline and disappearance through the convergence of several factors, including the increasing number of women in education and the labour market and families' movement towards a more 'democratic' model characterised by rationality and by a departure from treating the father as omnipotent and as master.⁸

Zhor Ounissi and Women's Writing

After consolidating women's position in the political sphere and opening a path to leadership, Ounissi took a second courageous step through writing. Through her writing, she affirmed women's ability to contribute to literature and to reconcile their role as homemakers with literary interests; indeed, the former could serve as an incentive. Her first novel was *From the Diary of a Free Schoolteacher* in 1979. She described writing as follows: 'Reaching ideas is like picking flowers, whereas thinking is like gathering and arranging those flowers into delightful garlands. That is the most difficult process, yet it is the most splendid and sweetest.' She succeeded in asserting herself within a society that insisted that women remain confined to the home and subordinate to men, performing domestic obligations while the world beyond the home remained exclusively men's domain. For a woman to transcend and break this perception was, in itself, a significant achievement, because the traditional conception of women confined them to reproduction and assigned them a clear, predetermined path: raising younger siblings, learning to cook and sew, and marrying the man approved by the family without being consulted. Production and the construction of society were regarded as exclusively male domains, which helps explain women's absence from centres of decision-making in the state. According to readers, her writing was regarded as imitative of men's writing because she addressed revolution and liberation without disclosing her feminine inner world, a circumstance linked to the marginalisation experienced by women at the time. The situation remained largely unchanged until the 1980s, when the names of more liberated novelists emerged, most notably Ahlam Mosteghanemi, Fadela El Farouk, and others.⁹

⁸ 'Patriarchal Society,' Mominoun Without Borders for Studies and Research, accessed February 18, 2020, at 20:40, <https://www.mominoun.com/articles>.

⁹ 'A Book on the Algerian Arab Women's Novel,' published November 11, 2019, at 11:36, accessed February 11, 2020, at 19:39, https://omannews.gov.om/Arabic_NewsDescription/Art.

Ounissi explained that 'the process of writing takes on complex and ramified dimensions when it is undertaken by a woman, as most creative women believe that women everywhere in the world - not only in our Arab homeland, and everything is relative - live in a vast, dark prison founded on obsolete ideas and enclosed by sick, degraded mentalities. Arab women therefore categorically reject the separation between men's literature and women's literature and the division of society's issues into women's issues and men's issues.' According to Ounissi, the family environment in which she lived helped her develop her abilities because it allowed her to receive an education and attend university at a time when education and school attendance were a dream for many girls. All these factors contributed to the position she attained, without overlooking her personal abilities and innate talents.¹⁰

Conclusion

Zhor Ounissi's attainment of leadership positions, together with her professional career as a novelist, represents a creative achievement and a qualitative shift in the history of Algerian women within Algerian society. The presence she established in the political and literary spheres inevitably inspires the ambitions of many women, contributes to women's pursuit of their rights, and challenges the patriarchal idea that prevented women from participating alongside men in intellectual and professional production.

The genuine construction of society rests on educated and cooperative women and, consequently, on the development of a generation endowed with higher values. As Ibn Arabi stated in this regard, 'A place that is not feminised is not to be relied upon.'

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¹⁰ Menad, Female Leadership in the Social Imaginary, 91-92.

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