

From Silence To Self-Expression: Representations Of Gender Inequality In Uzbek Literature Of The Independence Period

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Abstract: For decades, gender inequality in Uzbek literature was viewed through a patriarchal lens, with male authors largely representing women's issues. Consequently, twentieth-century women writers rarely challenged gender stereotypes. In the twenty-first century, however, new feminist-oriented perspectives have emerged. This article seeks to deepen understanding of gender, feminism, and the representation of women in Uzbek literature while rethinking traditional views.

Keywords: Uzbek literature, gender inequality, women writers, feminism, post-independence, female identity, social transformation.

Introduction: In the years following independence, the issue of gender inequality in Uzbek literature has gained new dimensions, shaped by the challenges of societal transition. Problems such as unemployment, labor migration, and human trafficking have become pressing themes. In the works of novelists such as Salomat Vafo, Iqbol Mirzo, and Zulfiya Qurolboy qizi, female protagonists are portrayed as victims of cruelty and social chaos, struggling to find a path toward freedom and dignity.

As previously noted, during much of the twentieth century, gender inequality in Uzbek literature was predominantly explored by male authors. However, by the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, an increasing number of female writers began addressing these issues from their own perspectives. In the early twenty-first century, a new literary trend emerged in which women authors offered fresh insights into the complex relationships between men and women, revealing new dimensions of gender identity and equality.

In her novel *The Adventures of a Wanderer Woman* (2008), Salomat Vafo presents a heroine who challenges the stereotypical portrayals of women that dominated twentieth-century Uzbek literature.

The novel portrays a female protagonist whose suffering does not stem from personal flaws or overt gender discrimination, as was common in earlier twentieth-century narratives. Instead, she endures severe hardship through no fault of her own. Despite her attempts to resist domestic violence and her husband's indifference, she eventually leaves him. Yet, societal expectations continue to hold women accountable even when they are victims of abuse. The heroine is condemned for abandoning her violent marriage, accused of selfishness for failing to endure it for the sake of her children and parents. Divorce is perceived as a shameful burden on the family, leaving her and her two children homeless and unsupported by relatives or friends.

Unable to fulfill the traditional roles of the devoted wife and nurturing mother, she faces moral judgment from society, which demands impossible virtue from women in her position. As the renowned 20th-century French existentialist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir observed in her seminal work *The Second Sex* (1949): "Women are doomed to immorality, for in order to be moral, they would have to embody a being of superhuman qualities: the virtuous woman of Proverbs, the perfect mother, the honest woman, and so on. But if she thinks,

dreams, sleeps, desires, or breathes without permission, she betrays the masculine ideal” (p. 580). The novel’s protagonist embodies this paradox: judged for her survival rather than her morality. In her despair, she becomes the mistress of her employer, an older, wealthy man who exploits her vulnerability.

As depicted in the novel, “He pulled me towards him, gave me a kiss on the cheek. I was trembling with shame and embarrassment. I immediately composed myself. Well, he kissed me, so what? What’s important is that I can get to work. I don’t have any other options anyway right now” (p. 152, translated by Shaira Narmatova).

While interacting with him, she experiences conflicting emotions—both attraction and resentment:

“Abbos Sulaymon carried a beautiful bouquet of flowers, but I didn’t want to dwell on the potential outcome of our encounter. At that moment, only the present mattered to me. My children no longer asked about their father, and I had changed as well. Weary from life’s hardships and disappointments, I found myself mistaking the kindness and care of a stranger for love” (p. 168, translated by Shaira Narmatova).

Overcome with guilt and shame, she decides to end their relationship. Soon after, her life turns into a nightmare: the man seeks revenge, leaving her homeless and unemployed. Although she receives help from kind-hearted people, she also faces cruelty and exploitation. Desperate to survive, she accepts any work available, even at the cost of her dignity. In a moment of despair, she pleads with the man to take her back, but he refuses. In an act of retaliation, she sets fire to his house. He then uses the incident to destroy her completely. Unwittingly, she becomes a criminal and is imprisoned, where she endures inhumane violence and abuse.

As critic Qozakboy Yo’ldoshev (2008) observes in his article *Nothing in the World Exists Except My Imagination, The Adventures of a Wanderer Woman* “raises significant issues against the backdrop of the often-confusing fate of women—the complex relationship between men and women” (p. 8, translated by Shaira Narmatova). He notes that although civilization has transformed women’s social status, the process of changing deeply rooted attitudes formed over millennia has not kept pace with modern developments.

Among Uzbeks, men still possess the power to determine women’s destinies. When women are reduced to the role of laborers and forced to bear the heavy burden of providing for their families, it erodes their moral and spiritual well-being. In the novel, the author vividly illustrates that most of the suffering

endured by the heroine, Saltanat, arises not from her own actions or societal circumstances but from men’s harmful attitudes toward women—their violence and persecution (pp. 8–9, translated by Shaira Narmatova).

This approach provides a fresh perspective on the concept of gender equality in national literature. The analysis demonstrates that Uzbek literary traditions have evolved in line with global trends toward gender equality, while simultaneously reflecting cultural stereotypes and the distinctive worldview of the Uzbek people.

Furthermore, our observations reveal that approaches to this issue have varied across different historical periods. Political regimes, ideological shifts, and processes of social transformation have all played significant roles in shaping these differences.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Jadid writers addressed gender inequality as one of the fundamental problems of the old social order that needed to be dismantled. Consequently, their works explicitly called upon women to fight for their rights and to assert their place within a modernizing society. However, in the Uzbek prose of the 1930s to 1950s, when the Soviet regime was already dominant, gender inequality was seen as a thing of the past and was mostly addressed in works that dealt with historical themes. Until the late 1950s, it was widely believed that the cause of gender-related problems did not stem from the regime or politics but rather from relics of the past that were deeply rooted in the minds of some people.

During the period known as Khrushchev’s Thaw, writers were afforded greater freedom of expression, which allowed for more open engagement with social and political issues. Many authors seized this opportunity to critique the injustices of state policies that disproportionately affected women, particularly those in rural communities.

In the early years of Uzbekistan’s independence, gender equality was frequently interpreted through the lens of socio-economic transformation. It was regarded as a challenge arising from the hardships of the transitional period, marked by widespread unemployment and shifting social structures. These social realities were inevitably reflected in literature, where questions of women’s status and identity became intertwined with broader narratives of national renewal and change.

Throughout the twentieth century, however, gender discourse in Uzbek literature remained largely dominated by male writers, whose portrayals often reflected entrenched patriarchal assumptions. Female authors, for their part, seldom transcended the traditional gender stereotypes that had long defined

women's roles in both literature and society.

Entering the twenty-first century, new trends have emerged in Uzbek literature regarding the understanding, interpretation, and artistic expression of gender inequality. In particular, female writers have begun to challenge entrenched stereotypes of the "ideal" woman that have long shaped the collective consciousness of society.

Our review of Uzbek literary scholarship on female-centered themes reveals that traditional approaches continue to dominate this field. Research remains largely confined to topics such as women's creativity, the representation of women in literature, and the psychology or spiritual nature of the female character. While such studies provide valuable insights and new perspectives on conventional female themes, they often remain framed within patriarchal assumptions. Moreover, the exclusive focus on "women's themes" tends to marginalize these studies, relegating them to a secondary position within the broader literary canon.

At the same time, there is insufficient attention to the artistic representation of gender inequality in literature. Gender discourse is frequently reduced to the glorification of women's images, and literary analyses often rely on biological determinism—emphasizing so-called natural feminine traits. This approach overlooks broader social and cultural dimensions of gender relations and neglects the systemic factors that sustain inequality.

An examination of the historical development of gender discourse in Uzbek prose also reveals several unexplored dimensions, including the influence of religion, national mentality, gender psychology, and the subconscious. Comprehensive and in-depth research into gender—particularly gender inequality in literature—can contribute to shifting societal attitudes and promoting meaningful progress toward gender equity in both culture and thought.

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