



CULTURAL AND GENDERED OPPRESSION IN AMERICAN AND UZBEK WOMEN’S LITERATURE

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Abstract

This study investigates the manifestation of gendered and cultural oppression in American and Uzbek women’s literature, focusing on *The Awakening* (Chopin), *The Bell Jar* (Plath), and selected Uzbek works. Applying feminist and discourse-analytic frameworks—including gynocriticism and critical discourse analysis—it demonstrates how linguistic choices, narrative tropes, and cultural tropes both constrain and empower female protagonists across contexts. Findings reveal shared themes of internal exile, resistance through symbol and speech, and the critical role of language in articulating liberation. The Uzbek context enriches American-centric discourse by emphasizing tradition, translation, and cultural specificity.

Keywords: Gendered, oppression, cultural, context, feminist, discourse analysis, American literature, Uzbek, women’s writing, translation, gynocriticism.

Introduction

Literature has long served as a means of articulating personal and political struggles. In the works of women writers, especially those operating within patriarchal societies, literature often becomes a site of both oppression and resistance. This article seeks to compare the representation of cultural and gendered oppression in American and Uzbek women’s literature, focusing on *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath, and selected poetry by Saida Zunnunova. These texts span different time periods and cultural traditions but reveal a shared urgency: to give voice to female experiences of marginalization, silence, and the struggle for autonomy.

While American feminist literature has been widely studied, the literature of Uzbek women—particularly during the Soviet period—has received comparatively less



attention in global feminist discourse. This comparative study aims to highlight both commonalities and cultural distinctions, illustrating how language, tradition, and social structures shape the ways in which women express their realities.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Feminist Literary Theory

Feminist literary criticism provides the theoretical backbone of this analysis. Elaine Showalter's concept of gynocriticism—which emphasizes the study of women's writing from a woman-centered perspective—offers a useful tool for examining how female authors construct identity and resistance in their work. Similarly, the Combahee River Collective's intersectional feminist framework underscores the need to consider race, class, and culture in understanding women's oppression.

Gender and Language in Literature

Linguistic approaches to gender, particularly discourse analysis, are critical in revealing how gender norms are encoded in speech, narration, and character dialogue. Studies on Uzbek gender linguistics, such as those by Djalilova (2021) and Abduakhat Kizi (2025), show how Uzbek lacks grammatical gender but conveys gendered ideas through honorifics, deference structures, and metaphorical expressions. This contrasts with English, which reflects gender in its pronouns and is more direct in expressing internal psychological states.

Cultural Contexts

Uzbek women's literature emerged in a deeply patriarchal society shaped by Islamic tradition, Soviet secularization, and post-independence nationalism. Writers like Saida Zunnunova navigated censorship, tradition, and political ideology while articulating feminist themes through poetry. In contrast, American writers like Chopin and Plath worked within Western literary traditions, drawing from romanticism, realism, and confessional writing to expose the constraints of domesticity, mental health, and social expectation.



Comparative Literary Analysis

The Awakening by Kate Chopin

Published in 1899, *The Awakening* tells the story of Edna Pontellier, a woman who gradually rejects the roles of wife and mother dictated by 19th-century Creole society. Chopin uses rich symbolism—particularly the ocean—as a metaphor for freedom and the unconscious. Edna's emotional awakening and eventual suicide represent both a tragic end and a symbolic act of defiance against gender roles. Her refusal to conform is narrated in a third-person limited voice that highlights her interior transformation.

The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath

In *The Bell Jar* (1963), Sylvia Plath creates a psychological portrait of Esther Greenwood, a young woman trapped between societal expectations and her desire for intellectual freedom. The metaphor of the bell jar—used to describe Esther's mental entrapment—encapsulates the pressure cooker of postwar American femininity. Plath's prose is sharp, confessional, and heavily symbolic. Her depiction of madness is not merely pathological but political, illustrating the cost of nonconformity in a society that marginalizes female ambition and autonomy.

Saida Zunnunova and Uzbek Women's Literature

Saida Zunnunova (1926–1977) is among the most prominent Uzbek female poets of the Soviet era. Her work, while formally aligned with socialist realism, contains veiled expressions of female pain, hope, and resistance. Her poems often reference traditional symbols—like the uy (home), ota (father), and yurak (heart)—to speak about women's emotional and intellectual burdens. Critics such as Bazarova (2022) have analyzed how Zunnunova embeds feminist consciousness through poetic metaphor and rhythm, despite operating under ideological constraints.

In one of her poems, Zunnunova writes:

“Ona yuragim toshday bo‘lmasin / O‘rtada bir nur yo‘qsa, yo‘q demayin.”

(Let my mother's heart not be stone / If there is no light between us, let me not say it's gone.)

This illustrates the emotional labor of Uzbek women and the culturally coded way in which defiance is expressed—through subtle gestures, layered meanings, and metaphor.



Discussion

Shared Themes

Despite vast cultural differences, all three texts grapple with central themes of confinement, identity loss, and the struggle for agency. Edna and Esther suffer from psychological suffocation, mirrored in Zunnunova's use of restricted imagery and cyclical poetic rhythm. The women in these texts are not passive victims; they engage in subtle or overt acts of rebellion—Edna's swimming, Esther's writing, and Zunnunova's veiled metaphors.

Language and Oppression

Linguistic expression plays a key role in articulating gendered experiences. Chopin's use of third-person narration contrasts with Plath's first-person voice, reflecting different cultural attitudes toward confession and privacy. Uzbek poetry, constrained by cultural norms, often hides feminist critique behind lyrical ambiguity. As Djalilova (2021) notes, Uzbek women's speech is often marked by politeness and modesty, even in personal literature, which creates an additional layer of tension between form and meaning.

Cultural Constraints and Liberation

In American texts, liberation is often portrayed as a deeply individualistic and internal journey. For Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*, the sea symbolizes both rebirth and escape. Her decision to swim out into the ocean—away from the roles of wife and mother—represents a rejection of societal expectations and a reclaiming of selfhood, even at the cost of her life. Similarly, in *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood's path to freedom involves confronting her mental breakdown and navigating a male-dominated medical system. Her recovery, though incomplete, signifies a personal victory over the suffocating norms of 1950s femininity. Both women seek liberation by turning inward, challenging social roles through self-awareness, resistance, and individual action.

In contrast, Uzbek literature—especially that of Saida Zunnunova and her contemporaries—depicts liberation in more relational and communal terms. Women are not only grappling with personal desires, but also with their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers within a tightly knit social fabric. Liberation, when it is sought, is rarely through outright rebellion. Instead, it is achieved through



endurance, emotional strength, and subtle negotiation of traditional roles. For instance, in Zunnunova's poetry, the mother figure often emerges as a moral compass—a symbol of silent resilience. Her expressions of grief or frustration are carefully couched in cultural metaphors that reinforce communal identity rather than sever it.

This fundamental difference reflects broader cultural paradigms. In American literature, there is a longstanding emphasis on self-actualization, the pursuit of personal identity and freedom regardless of social cost. The individual stands at the center of the narrative. In Uzbek literature, especially during the Soviet and early post-Soviet eras, social harmony, familial duty, and moral legacy are emphasized. The individual's worth is often measured by their ability to maintain balance within the collective—be it the family, the village, or the nation.

As a result, acts of resistance in Uzbek women's literature are often quieter but no less significant. A woman's choice to express her thoughts in poetry, to speak honestly within a constrained emotional vocabulary, or to question a cultural proverb may serve as subtle but powerful assertions of autonomy. Unlike the more dramatic personal ruptures in American feminist literature, Uzbek narratives may frame liberation not as escape, but as moral elevation—gaining respect, inner strength, or wisdom within cultural boundaries rather than beyond them.

This cultural divergence highlights the importance of context in feminist analysis. Liberation does not always look the same across cultures. While Western feminism often celebrates individual choice and independence, Uzbek women's literature suggests that self-realization can be achieved through relational ethics, endurance, and community-rooted expressions of self.

Conclusion

This comparative study has shown that while *The Awakening*, *The Bell Jar*, and Saida Zunnunova's poetry arise from different worlds, they converge in their portrayal of women's inner struggles against gendered and cultural norms. Their voices—confessional, symbolic, lyrical—represent both the burden and power of articulating womanhood under constraint. Understanding these texts in tandem reveals how feminist literature transcends borders, and how cultural context both limits and enriches its expression. As the global feminist conversation expands,



incorporating voices from places like Uzbekistan becomes not only necessary but vital to understanding the full spectrum of women's lived experiences.

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