VEDA'S
JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE (JOELL)
An International Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal
Impact Factor (SJIF) 4.092 http://www.joell.in

Vol.7 Issue 2
2020

RESEARCH ARTICLE

CONFLUENCE OF CONFLICTING CULTURES: JOKHA ALHARTI'S *CELESTIAL BODIES*

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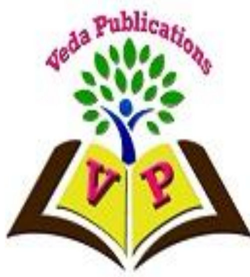
doi: 10.33329/joell.7.2.74



ABSTRACT

Jokha Alharthi's *Celestial Bodies* serves as a window to the Arab world and its diverse culture. It depicts the story of three sisters from a middle class background in the small Omani village of al-Awafi. Presented as a fragmented collection of past and present events in Oman, the novel narrates particular characters in this small village. These intricate storylines assimilate the broader narrative of the novel, of a village going through exceptional cultural change.

Keywords: *Confluence, Conflict, Culture, Transition.*

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> Literature too is pre-eminently concerned with man's social world, his adaptation to it and his desire to change it. In fact, man and his society is the material out of which literature is constructed. So, literature is regarded as the expression or representation of human life through the medium of social creation viz. language (Wellek 94).

Literature featuring life in the Middle East has excited the interest of the western reader for long. The Omanian writer Jokha Alharthi's second novel, *Celestial Bodies*, has recently made headlines by winning the 2019 Man Booker Prize. The first novel by an Omani woman to be translated into English and the first novel in Arabic to be awarded the Man Booker International Prize (which Alharthi shared with her translator, the Oxford academic Marilyn Booth). The novel gives us a picture of Oman society in transition, which ultimately leads to a cultural conflict. This conflict is analyzed through shifting patterns of gender roles, attitude to education, treatment of slavery, weakening of class distinctions, breaking of taboos on transgressive love relationship etc. The Book has everything that would fascinate a western reader and satisfy his expectation about Arab culture. Sway of blind faith and superstitions, exorcism, invocations of love poetry, slave trade and elaborate descriptions of date harvest, lavish weddings and traditional rituals.

Oman, as traditional monarchy or sultanate, represents one of only four types of monarchies in the Middle East. While similar in many ways to its neighbour's in the Gulf, Oman is also unique because of the geographical and social diversity of the country compared to the smaller Gulf states because of its long existence as a quasi-national entity, because its history and political experience have been shaped by the prevalent Ibadi sect, and because of the two and a half century legacy of the AL Bin said dynasty. Oman serves as an excellent illustration of the transitional phase between 'tradition' and 'modernity'

'Post traditional' should be the term used for that transitional stage in which Oman and its fellow states in the Arabian Peninsular presently find themselves. 'Post traditional' is said to lie on a scale where 'traditional' is at one end and 'modern' is at the other. Oman, as well as its neighbours has embarked upon the path towards modernization only recently.

The central theme in many of Arab Gulf writings is nostalgia for a simpler past, which is always presented in contrast to the remarkable material development these countries have experienced with the discovery of oil. The story of *Celestial Bodies* delineates a link between the slave trade in Omani society, which has started to change with the introduction of oil wealth into the region. Locating her story within this narrative of tradition versus social change, Alharti offers an impartial perspective to the practices and history portrayed in the novel. There is neither idealizing of the past nor an overly optimistic focus on the positive aspects of oil revenue in the present. Instead, she realistically depicts the cultural changes that have affected the different members of the village she is writing about.

Extending over many generations, from the final decades of the 19th century to the early years of the new millennium, the novel describes an innovative reconceptualization of the family saga. In the village of al-Awafi in Oman, the author presents

three sisters: Mayya, who marries after a heartbreak; Asma, who marries from a sense of duty; and Khawla, who chooses to refuse all offers and await a reunion with her lover, who has immigrated to Canada. The story unspools an intricate family story of these three women against a backdrop of a rapidly changing Oman, developing from a traditional, slave-owning society slowly redefining itself after the colonial era, to the crossroads of its complex present.

The novel unearths the attitude changes that came up to an Omani family over three generations molded by rapid social changes. It also unveils the consequent change in perspectives and shifts in outlook that the omanians have experienced across the twentieth century especially Oman's materialization as an oil rich nation in the 1960s. The novel presents a complete world of social relations and conventional practices is disintegrating, sending the novel's characters to the very fringes, the frontier between two worlds, one of them a suffocating, taut yet now feeble world and the other one enigmatic, obscure, full of tensions and anxiety, of uneasy surveillance and fear of what will come . It is a perilous contour between one era and another, the border between the world of masters and that of slaves, between the worlds of human beings and of supernatural *jinn*, between living reality and nightmare, between genuine love and imagined love, between the society's idea of a person and a person's sense of self.'

The opening chapter 'Mayya' portrays Oman in the late 1970's. Mayya is married to the son of a local merchant and later she became pregnant. She insists that she intends to deliver the baby at a hospital in Muscat. This attitude of Mayya shows the present status of the country Oman which is on the way of transition towards a modern society. Her mother expresses her concern through a comparison of intergenerational norms. Mayya's mother Salima informs about Mayya's birth to her. Salima says:

> There I was holding tight to the pole with both hands, and she was shouting at me, Ya waylik! If I hear even one little screech you'll be sorry! Everywoman brings babies out of her body, and what a scandal you are then, if you so much as whimper! A scandal and you the daughter of the Shaykh! I didn't say one word, I didn't complain. Anyway all I could've said was, My Lord my Lord my Lord! And to think that these days, women have their babies lying flat on their backs, and the men can hear their screams from the other end of the hospital. There's no longer any shame in the world, ayy wAllahi! (*Celestial Bodies*, 7).

The old generation is scornful of the youth's flirtations with modernity. Salima harangues the shameless modern women who give birth in hospitals. "I wasn't even checked by a doctor, never-no creative ever saw my body, no, not me!

Mayya's decision shocked the family because such a birth process would not situate them in an environment amongst foreign expatriates working within hospitals, exposing their private and familial situation to strangers. She is trying to prove herself a part of an urban class of modern society. Thus, the readers can feel the cultural conflicts between the older generation, who are disturbed at the resistance tendencies shown by the younger generation and the modern youth of Omani society.

Mayya's decision to give birth in a modern hospital should be contextualized within Alharthi's wider commentary on encounters with institutional modernity in Oman. Mayya says to Abadalla:

> When her belly was so enormously round that she could not sleep, Mayya said to Merchant Sulayman's son, Listen here. I am not going to have this baby in this place with those midwives crowding around me. I want you to take me to Maskad— He interrupted her. I've told you a thousand times, the name of the city is Muscat, not Maskad (6).

Mayya's resistance continues, though in a more humorous light. She is determined to name her newborn child London, after the British capital. The entire family is shocked and they are under the surmise that it is a temporary decision due to lassitude after birth. But Mayya continues with her decision, for which her husband's uncle's wife castigates her by saying: "Does anyone name their daughter Lonon? This is the name of a place, my dear, a place that is very far away, in the land of the Christians" (8). Initially, readers presumed that Mayya's naming of her daughter London is to remind her of her lover Ali, who lived there. But this action has a larger context. Oman fell under British protectorate rule in 1891 and London was a hard - pressed city that has a prominent role in the colonial and national imagination0. London is both an emblem of western modernity, and a place of extravagance that is extended from contemporary Oman to the city of the former empire. Later in the novel Mayya forgets about sewing, forgets about her ambition to complete her education, and instead shifts her concerns towards domesticity. Desiring to move to bigger and bigger villas, she loses herself to mundane suburbia.

Asma eventually makes her peace with her narcissistic husband, but only by becoming "her own constellation, independent and whole, a sphere unto itself" (167). That sphere is maternal: she devotes herself to the fourteen children she bears. Khawla's marriage ends in divorce; she opens a beauty parlour in Muscat. Mayya stays married to Abdallah, but like Asma, she retreats into an isolated and grimly defended maternity: she sleeps a great deal, and bitterly relishes the liberty of silence. When Abdallah asks her if she loves him- he has always been infatuated with her- she laughs at his face. Abdallah recalls that Mayya didn't laugh on her wedding day; she didn't even smile. A generation later, their daughter London, a physician in Muscat, also divorces her husband, Ahmad, a poet who dedicates every new poem 'to a new girl', and beats his wife. Through this tracing of intimate family relationships, Alharthi tells a gripping story, indeed of the difficult transitions of societies faced with new opportunities and pressures.

The contemporary realities of Oman life is expressed through the character of London. When London graduated from the Medical School at Sultan Qaboos University, she demands for a BMW. She becomes an outspoken doctor, yet falls into the materialism of a post-oil nation. London, grows up to be a doctor. The family's attention is now centered on consumerism, concentrating on expanding their houses, and importing more maids from the Philippines and India.

London, a third generation woman, defies societal restrictions to get engaged to a man of a

lower class (the son of a peasant), though forced to divorce him later. "Her grandmother Salima by then was swearing out loud that she would slit her granddaughter's throat if the rebellious girl really did marry the peasant's son. How could she possibly marry the issue of the man who had threshed the family's grain?"(51). London retains her mother's outspokenness, taking up the cause of her friend Salma, a rape victim whose family hushed up her case and hid it from the courts out of fear of a scandal.

The most isolated and anxious member of the family remains Abdallah, who, caught between the worries over his autistic son and loveless marriage, and the taxing demands of a capitalist lifestyle in Muscat, drifts to his memories, unable to reconcile past and present. Abdallah often hallucinates and talks to the ghost of his deceased father. By discussing with him the looming problems in Oman-suicides, homicides, a stock market collapse, floods – he conveys to him the troubles of urban life.

Abdallah also serves as a conduit to discuss Oman's past with regards to slavery and manumission. His father, Sulayman, was a ghastly figure and a rich merchant who maintained ties with illicit slave trade, despite its abolition in 1970. Abdallah's father represents the merchant who transitioned from an imperial socio-economic structure into one governed by the state. Deluded by power and wealth, he refuses to make transition into a new society and world in which the individuals around him are free from slavery. He believes in his right to own and govern subjects from East Africa to Balochistan, and he understands his position in society through a master-slave relationship, not through a secular conception of a businessman in a nation state. Sulayman could not accustomed himself to the ending of slave trade. He speaks to Abadalla:

> Boy – have you tied that thieving slave Sanjar to the eastern column yet? I took his hand and kissed it but he pushed me away. Father, the government freed all of the slaves, and Sanjar . . . the government, Father. He growled under his breath as though he had finally heard me. What's the government got to do with it? Sanjar is mine, he doesn't belong to the government. The government can't free my slaves. I bought his mama Zarifa for twenty silver thalers! I fed her, when a sack of rice cost a hundred pure good silver coins (13).

Sulayman was a ghastly figure and a rich merchant who maintained ties with illicit slave trade, despite its abolition in 1970. Describing Sulayman, Alharthi informs us that "to all appearances, dates were what occupied his workdays, although his real profits were built on the slave trade" (192). When Sulayman was on his deathbed, he himself would hallucinate, imagining that he was still in his house, looming over it as a patriarch. He'd yell "tie Sanjar up, tie him to the column on the east side of the courtyard, out there, out in front of the house. Anyone who gives that slave water or shade has to answer to me" (12). Abdallah would then kiss his hand, intercede, and repeat to him that the government had abolished slavery and that Sanjar is no longer his. Becoming enraged, Sulayman would yell, "Sanjar is mine, he doesn't belong to the government. The government can't free my slaves I bought his mama Zarifa for twenty silver thalers! I

fed her, when a sack of rice cost a hundred pure good silver coins" (13).

Sanjar's mother calls him ungrateful to have abandoned the family of the merchant Sulayman, who raised him. Sanjar angrily replies: "No, Zarifa, no! Merchant Sulayman has no claim on me(88).0 We are free – the law says so, free, Zarifa. Open your eyes. The world has changed but Zarifa just keep on saying the same words over and over: Ya Habābi, ya sidi, my master, my honoured master. While everybody's gotten educated and gotten jobs, you've stayed exactly where you always were, the slave of Merchant Sulayman like that is all there is? (89). Zarifa, who herself was romantically involved with merchant Sulayman. And is unable to understand this modern conception of citizenship that her son is speaking of. She sees him as ungrateful and delusional. She is unable to adapt herself to the culture change that results in a new, national way of being in Omani society.

Second generation women also exercise their right to divorce. Khawla, London's maternal aunt, puts up with her beloved's neglect till he comes back to her, having been spurned by his Canadian mistress. It is his return after ten years of abandonment that re-awakens her festering wound leading to the divorce. After divorce, instead of wallowing in self-pity, as traditionally brought up Muslim women are want to do, she runs a beauty salon in one of the Muscat's fanciest neighborhoods and drives cars. Third generation women, by contrast, acquires education, express their views and desires fearlessly and are capable of living independently even when marriages break down.

The new socio cultural change brought about changes in all levels of Omani society and the old generation found it difficult to cope up with the new changes. Eventually, this leads to a cultural conflict between the older generation and the younger generation. For instance, Zarifa calls the air conditioners 'heretical'. Abdallah's father has nothing but scorn for the paper riyals that replaced the traditional silver coins. The younger generation invoking the scriptures to arrive at their own conclusions about traditional beliefs and practices and taboos associated with childbirth and menstruation. When the Muezzin's wife warns against sharing food with the woman who is 'unclean' from childbirth, Asma knows the Hadith permits this: "a woman could eat and drink in company no matter what her condition" (20). The Prophet did not place any restrictions on menstruating women: "When the messenger of God was praying, he said to his wife, Aisha, hand me my robe. She said, but I am having my period. He said, that isn't your fault and it doesn't matter"(20). But Asma does not voice these objections as she knows that it would invite accusations of blasphemy from the old generation.

One generation ahead, social restrictions easing, even for women. Abdallah's daughter, London, graduates from the Medical School at Sultan Qaboos University and has dreams of going to Canada for a higher degree in paediatric medicine. English becomes inevitable for successfully conducting business in Oman. As a merchant, learning English becomes indispensable for Abdallah. He reflects sadly on the change that has come over his country. "My Arab country, where restaurants,

hospitals and hotels all announced that only English is spoken here" (129).

The vigour of the novel lies in the ways in which this cultural change of Oman society is presented not as a stable development from old to new but as a far mere complicate series of microscopic transitions. Alharthi's characters are compelling and eloquent and the author succeeds in giving her characters the power of their own voices against chorused typecasts. In *Celestial Bodies*, Alharthi depicts the incongruities and contradictions between the old generations, who wants to maintain the traditional order of things and the unconventional new generations of people in Oman. While chronicling the cultural continuum from the past to the present, Alharthi presents the intergenerational trauma experienced by the characters vividly. She also exposes the dilemmas of maintaining traditions in a modern society.

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