

A Feminist and Cultural Studies Perspective on Jokha Al Harthi's Novel *Celestial Bodies*.

¹NANDINI SAJJU.J, ²Dr. K. BALAKRISHNAN

ABSTRACT--*Though the world bellowed its modernized phase every day, women, the so called weaker sex in all quarters undergo social subjugation in multiple forms in many parts of the world. The condition in the Arab world is a glaring case in point. They are expected to be well bread, dainty and sultry--another flesh of beauty on which men exercise nothing short of exclusive property rights. But the women of the new era have been fighting against all these stereotypes in order to claim their deserved place in society. The Omani author Jokha Al Harthi's 2019 Man Booker Prize Novel Celestial Bodies (Arab novel Sayyidat al- Qamar, English Trans. Marilyn Booth,) can be seen as one such instance of powerful headways of changes in social perception and the metaphorical conditions of women in that environment. The purpose of this paper is to unveil the contours of the cultural evolution which occurred in the Arab nation of Oman, traditionally quite immune to socio-cultural changes owing to the rigidity of religious and other cultural orthodoxies. Both the domestic/private and public spheres of life are punctuated by a host of conventions, customs and traditions, all weighing heavily on the women folk. Through a cultural analysis of the life experience of the women characters in the novel the paper seeks to explore the nature of the trials and tribulations, the struggles and resistance, and the consequences of such a process towards social liberation.*

Key Words--*Women, society, culture, religion, private/public sphere, struggle, resistance, liberation.*

I. INTRODUCTION

“Women are half the society. You cannot have a revolution without women. You cannot have a democracy without women. You cannot have equality without women. You can't have anything without women”.-Nawal-Al-Saasawi. Those lines by an Egyptian feminist writer in her book ‘The Hidden Face of Eve; Women in the Arab World’ depicts the momentousness of women in every society. Likewise, Jokha Al Harthi had brought life to the *Celestial Bodies* through her strong women characters who are densely woven and deeply imagined. Blending the rhythm of daily life of womanhood and suppression, the author had ambassador the readers to the Arab society and their culture where this book is a saga of several Omani families, though it highlight brisk evolution through the prism of single family of three daughters- Mayya, Asma and Kwala.

The female characters in her book are exactly the epitome of Arab women life; they represents the whole women folks who are racked with the cultural norms and blackballed from the society in which they are born and bought up. Masked desires are their identity card. Arab women are more factored out when observed closed in Oman which Jokha Al Harthi portrays effective through the women characters and through the slaves. The book is exactly the mirror image of Oman discussing the life of the three major women character Mayya, Kwala and

¹ Integrated MA English, 10th semester, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi Campus, India.

² Professor (Guide) Department of English and Languages, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi campus, India.

Asma – their life, passion, marriage and the society revolving around them along with the troubled past and present in slave trade and Slaves. This paper makes a study on how women are portrayed in Oman and how the transformation from traditional culture to modernisation had refined them. The term ‘Changing Oman’ or Oman’s Modernisation is used to explain their life, who pushes themselves against the limits that are thrust on them by the Arab society. This paper explore on feminism by taking the women characters in the book as central roles with the matters they overt in the society.

II. OBJECTIVE

This paper focuses on the Arab women and their changes over the years bringing Jokha Al Harthi’s *Celestial Bodies* as a primary source. The books cannot repress the unspoken history of Oman’s that the three generation portrayed in the novel shows the drastic suffering and confrontation of unacceptable liaisons. Female life and their dilemmas are the core subject of discussion in the novel which is clubbed with the history of the nation and this is the matter which made the novel a unique work among the nominees of MBP. In this paper the female oriented issues are pinpointed through a feministic point of view and the socio-political and economic changes of Oman are attributed to bring the readers in close contact with the mythical and cultural stigmas.

III. HYPOTHESIS

Woman in Oman and Cultural Stigma

From the time being or over a few decades women are subjected many changes in an Arab nation like Oman. Multiple layers of mutations were faced by women which had made them find a deserving position in the country. As we see Muslim families, the very picture that represents an Arab nation is that a woman wearing burka. From time being, all their desires were are suppressed under the veil or burka as they have no voice in and out of the family. Quarantined from the society and family they have undergone multiple layer of oppression. The most common non-speaking part of the Omani woman is still the title role of housewife. These housewife work hard to support their family and plays the key part to the upkeep of the family and all agricultural production while her husband is away for months at a time. These women essentially work hard to support a family and tend to many matters traditionally seen by the man. But the time had manipulated the life of Arab women on the web of darkness. In the past women were restricted from venturing alone without a male guardian and even they were lockdown in rooms to cut their glance with other sex. Years after, the whole Omani world at large and body of laws is based on the Islamic Sharia law brought forth men and women with different rights and responsibilities. The country's growing interpretation of Sharia law claims that women are allowed to participate in politics, society and workforce to the fullest extent possible, but at the same time not allowing them to ignore their responsibilities they have towards their families. For every women family became the centre point in their life and this have bought both positive and tyrannical practices against women in the society. Marriage is a defining moment in the life of an Omani woman and marks her transformation from dependent girl to an independent woman. As time passes the transition in the society results in the mutation of their positions where they can be also claimed as liberated woman or a feminist. Apart from their masked identity and life under the burka they began to think and raise their voices for their freedom in which they found their respective places in the world where they were subjected as minor

creatures. The independent thought in woman and the view of earning brought an evolution in these species and this is the basement of '*Celestial Bodies*'.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Theory of Feminism.

Feminism, the word itself creates many confusions in the society as well as among the women. It has become so common to address woman with clear thoughts a feminist and they are socially criticised everywhere. Many of us firmly think that feminism implies hating men and wanting women to set up their own environment and rule every creature.

Feminist theory is the supplement to feminism into theoretical or philosophical perorate. Though it aims to valuate the nature of gender equality, it is often shivery and chaotic word to many. Feminism examines both the women's and men's social behaviour, interest, backgrounds and their feminist in different field. Social discrimination, oppression, objectification and patriarchal essence are the major themes explored in feminism. In 1794 Mary Wollstonecraft published her first feminist theory named *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* which marked the beginning of evolution.

Equality was the core subject of feminism that it suggests the cognitive process where both men and women are equal in the society and none should be considered superior over the other. It propagates the idea that neither is stronger than the opposite and neither ought to be treated with additional respect; everyone is equal in all quarters of life and also in the society. The concept of 'othering' women by the opposite gender in the society was questioned through feminism and this blip dismissed the raising inflation on woman.

There is another kind of cancer existing in the society called gender discrimination, it happens for men and women but feminist are trying to tackle it from the women's angle. It extends for equality for both men and women but it is a colossal fact that woman suffer a lot of discrimination than men and they are subjugated to many transition that the society imposes. Feminism doesn't mean degrading men. But it helps woman to understand that they are no longer the weaker sex. Gender discrimination is harmful to both men and women. There is a strong belief in the society that women are meant to look after the household works and raise children as society demands where men are free to move around without restrictions and commitments. Being a feminist never demands one to stop fancying the muliebrity or womanishness. Distracted from the goals of empowering women, to not push them to stand ahead of men but to stand with them. Feminism is all about being more than fragile showpieces to be decorated and secured at homes but humans with same limbs as men to go out and stand for themselves. They should never be denoted as default home-makers and instead be encouraged by the society to earn her own bread.

V. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Being the *2019 Man Booker International Prize* (MBIP) winning work, the novel can be praised for its fineness in portrayal of the Arab world and the historical depth interweaving the life of women and their metaphorical acceptance. The novel bagged the MBIP of 2019 claiming it to be the first Arab woman novel to get the fame. Alharthi, representing the first Muslim author had stood as mark of acceptance among the Arab nations and brought the fuel for other upcoming talents in a Muslim continent. The novel was reviewed by many

newspapers and magazines after being a winning work and no more studies had been done on this. Though a book from other side of the world where literature had no flourished, the book is still under the progress of accumulating familiarity among the readers and the recognition being an award winner had helped it well to reach the audience. Freshly authored and least noticed the book is still on its way of scrutinising by the critics and review vloggers. Some interviews of European Channels and the review and analysis done some magazine writers were the source of knowledge. My personal interview with the author Jokha Alharthi helped me understood core emotion of the book and that influential talk with her is presented in this paper.

VI. ANALYSIS

Elegantly put together, *Celestial Bodied* is a novel of people of modern Oman told through one family's losses and loves where the past life of these characters depicts the history of Oman and this work is narrated against a carefully evoked historical canvas. Alharthi constructed public tribulation in the novel along with the domestic setting thereby engaging the life of three sisters shows the changing Oman with a blend of various ways Omanis deal with the logjam of tradition and the uncertain freedom of expanding world. This book pulls out the stereotype about Arab language and culture replacing a distinctive and strong voice to the world literature. Alharthi pinpoints the remodelling of Oman through the three generations of a family tracking the shift of Oman from a `typical dessert bloodline to urban gnamma of the city Muscat.

There is a strong undercurrent of violence in the novel that is masked with their countries oppression and a lot of capitulation is a core theme but it turns out to be love strained. The novel is built upon love strained relationship and it appears that the position of woman is very important from beginning till the end. "Mayya, forever immersed in her Singer sewing machine, seemed lost to the outside world". (1)

The novel deeply encapsulate the plight of Arab women being silent and immersed into their own objective isolation in male dominated society. This long silence captured her into the sewing machine depicts the idea that she is stitching her own world where no male dominant powers and social politics overthrow her desires. The word 'hope' thirsts the human beings with a desire to move on but in the novel every craving had turned into hopelessness and barrenness. The society concludes silence and patience as a moral code for women who sees family as the central point. Mayya is represented as one who has little hope in life after her deep longing for someone whom she never knew anything about other than the country he studied, London. She is silent and still that she heard everything in the world there was to hear. She notices the brilliant huges of life could have, however motionless her body might be. Her muzzled attitude is well depicted by the author when she pray to Allah.

"I swore to you that wanting nothing.... nothing at all. Only, I said, I want to see him. I promised you I wouldn't do anything wrong, I wouldn't say a word about what I felt deep down. I made a vow and I made it to you". (3)

Here the submissive and plaintive nature of Arab woman is pinpointed by the author but the generation she belonged was liberal in all sense which is proved through her marriage. She got her own voice where she began to build herself. The characters in the novel especially the three sisters were always stifled by the traditional practices. When Mayya was pregnant her mother recited her story of delivery and the midwife system.

“- may god be forgiving to that woman! - shame on you! Will Shaykh Masoud’s daughter give birth lying down because she’s too weak to stand tall and straight? For shame, girl!” (6).

The transition of traditional to modernisation is the major theme of the book and that is evident after Mayya’s marriage. These traditional practices of giving birth by standing and considering lying down to do so, a shame made Mayya demand Abdallah, her husband, to take her to a hospital.

“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”- (7).

Though she respected him she always raised her sound for everything. The thought that she deserves more had brought a consciousness within her. She prioritised herself and even found ways to bring her other siblings to that position of wanting. She introduces the Lipstick among her sibling and this was another phase of transformation of traditional Oman. Asma and Kwala were well read sisters though they were denied from higher education. These three belonged to the second generation in the novel that they were somewhat free to think when considered to the one their parents lived. We will see the transformation of generations from the shift of camel carts to Mercedes- Benz. The girls are under the surveillance of all the family members especially their mother till marriage and marriage was considered as a token of freedom for starting a free living.

“Marriage was her identity document, her passport to the world wider than home.” (156).

The cultural practice of marriage allowed them to acquire a position in their surrounding entitling them as some man’s wife. This book pulls out the stereotype about Arab language and culture replacing a distinctive and strong voice to the world literature. The first generation in the novel considered the ownership force exerted by the man was the thread of sustainability. But as the years passed the generation changed along with which there came the cultural mutation. Mayya’s strongest move to name her daughter *London* was another a stepping stone of liberating herself. Though Mayya belonged to an orthodox Arab Muslim family, she named her daughter a Christian nation name which provoked every member in the family. She was so adamant that even after being criticised she never thought of changing it. This was never questioned by Abdallah even after he was scrutinized by the slave Zarifa in her every conversation with him. Though modernised, Mayya in some sense stucked on the traditional ways of cooking for her kids. Abdallah travelled a lot that after every tour he brings tin food for the children. But Mayya never accepted those modern ways of filling her kids tummy but she always keenly practiced the base of womanhood through cooking. She prepared every food with her own hands and were purely home-made. Mayya, after her marriage had stopped sewing her own world as she had started living her own life. She became so silent that she had less conversations with her husband and her actions portrayed her way of living. Whenever he asks her whether she loves him, all she did was laughing loudly like thunderbolts with no reply. This loud voice of her can resemble her freedom because when being in her own house with parents she was always constrained between the four walls not even being able relieve her true self. She was in way always thankful in her deeds to Abdallah as he was the source of self-liberation. Asma and Kwala had similar experiences in their life. Asma after marrying Khalid completed her education and became self-capable. Kwala waited for her childhood love Nasir and married him ignoring her parent which later ended up in divorce when she found Nasir having relationship with another woman and herself as a machine for him to produce children. Later in the third generation, London lives a life of a doctor with absolute strength from her father who was much different from the old generation parenting. He supported her for love affair and later for the divorce where he advised her to have stern

decisions to live her own life. The life after generations are always different and even the practice is polygamy had limitations in the novel. In 1970 Oman became the last country to abolish slavery but it is still an open opportunity. Other than the strong women characters, the story circles around slave owners and slavers highlighting all walks of women life. The cultural practices which they follow are so vague that an unexpected side of Oman is portrayed. In the case of slave, Zarifa, she had more freedom in Abdallah's family than anyone else. She was the pillar of Abdallah during his childhood and she was the one who bought him up when his mother died. Remaining a slave throughout her life she was so strong in every sense. She had a secret relation with Abdallah's father Sulayman, the merchant and slave owner, which had given her more position among the family members. In the absence of Sulayman she was always the head of authority and she was the one who practices all offerings to the jinn and deities. She believed in all sort of rites and doings and she carried the slave ship even after the abolition of slavery. The identity of slave was very much questioned in the case of Zarifa throughout the novel. The rhythm of daily life represented by each and every major and minor characters in the novel is responsible for the feeling of familiarity experienced by the readers.

VII. CONCLUSION

We are constrained to live according to the whims and fancies of the society where both men and women have separate definition for living. The evolution of women from the traditional expectation of Oman to that of a cluster of educated and modernised female population had changed the face of the nation. Now women had spread their roots in all major positions to rule the nation and in all sense they are equal to men. The superiority that man demanded in the society is balanced when they started accepting the women and no longer considering them as weak and fragile. The public life enjoyed by the men are well enjoyed by the women folks and they are no longer meant to bring forth the children and maintain the household. The intended boundaries of being house bound vanished when men diverted their way of thinking and recognised their other half. This acceptance from the opposite gender somewhat changed the view of society in large sense. The whole way of rejection for being fragile to that of understanding their spirit and abilities to the present scenario is well depicted by Alharthi in the novel.

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