

Oman in Transition: A Reading of the Post-colonial Depiction of Oman in Jokha Alharthi's *Celestial Bodies*

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Abstract

Celestial Bodies is Jokha Alharthi's second novel and the first novel from Arabia to receive the Man Booker Prize (2019). Dealing with the themes of love, madness, slavery and heartbreaks, the novel is also noted for its poetic mode of narration. Through multiple narrators, Alharthi makes sure to explain the gradual evolution the lands and minds have undergone in Oman. The long list of narrators range from Abdullah, his daughter London, slave Zarifa, wife Maaya to name a few. Alharthi also makes it a point to make each of these characters contribute in explaining the evolution that their land has undergone. From the days of slavery to the time when naming a girl London is considered normal, beliefs had a gradual and evident evolution. This paper aims at analysing the post-colonial changes that Alharthi explains and also their impact on Omani lives. From Zarifa, who believed herself to be her master's property, to her son who asserts his right over freedom, the novel depicts slavery as one of the most evident postcolonial change that the land witnessed. Apart from slavery, education, emigration and gender equality are also parameters within which the postcolonial changes will be analysed. The paper would shine light upon how this novel depicts postcolonial changes within Oman through its multiple narrators.

Keywords: history, slavery, evolution, multiple perspective, Omani lives, beliefs

I. Introduction

Arabic literature has been always closely allied to the history of its people, from qasida poems and early folktales of 8th century AD, with its representation of the monotony of nomadic life, colonial encounter and modernisation. Apart from a few religious texts, Arabic literature was not read widely due to the lack of translations. There has been a renewed interest in Arabic literature over the past few decades when number of English translations of Arabic books flooded the markets of UK and Ireland along with the sharp rise in applications for Arabic degrees in British universities. Closely aligned with this new trend in literature was the Man Booker Prize of 2019, which was awarded to *Celestial Bodies*, making it the first Arabic novel to win the prize. *Celestial Bodies* created history when Jokha Alharthi became the first Arabic woman to have been translated to English.

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Originally titled Sayyidat al-Qamar, *Celestial Bodies* is the second novel from Jokha Alharthi, Omani writer and academic, who has authored three collections of short stories, three children's books and three novels. Soon after its publication in 2010, it was short listed for Zayed award and in June 2018 Sandstone Press published an English translation of the same in UK. The translation was undertaken by Marliyn Booth, author, scholar and translator of Arabic literature who has acquired popularity with translations like *Girls of Riyadh*, *Thieves in Retirement* and *The Loved Ones*. The novel received worldwide recognition when it was awarded the 2019 Booker Prize.

A richly imagined, engaging and poetic insight into a society in transition and into lives previously obscured, this is how the Booker prize committee commented on the novel. Narrating the story of a family of three daughters, their love and loss, Alharthi also brings in the story of generations and depicts the transition that the land has undergone. *Celestial Bodies* follows a nonlinear, polyphonic narrative, with the long list of narrators comprising of the three sisters (Mayya, Khawla and Asma), their parents (Azzan and Salima), Abdallah (Mayya's husband), London (Mayya's daughter), Zarifa (Abdallah's slave) and Qamar (Azzan's love). Alharthi makes sure to encompass a wide range of perspectives by including narrators from different sections of Omani society. From slave Zarifa to Mayya's daughter London, everyone has a story to tell. This polyphonic narrative can be compared to the one that Bronte uses in *Wuthering Heights*. While narrations of Lockwood and Nelly encompasses events over a long time period and ensures multiple perspectives in *Wuthering Heights*, here too a reading from Zarifa to London shows the reader the transformation that the land has witnessed. The style is metaphor for the subject, subtly resisting clichés of race, slavery and gender, this comment of historian Bettany Hughes indeed rings true as *Celestial Bodies* makes it a point to analyse the postcolonial changes that the land has undergone in the fields of slavery, race, education and gender equality.

Post colonialism is defined as the academic study of the cultural legacy of colonialism and imperialism focussing on exploitation of the colonial people and their lands. Alharthi does not focus her narrative on the exploitation that colonial rule did to Oman, instead portrays the social and cultural transition that the cross-cultural contact initiated. A quick glance into Omani history is pivotal to the understanding of the traits of transition that the novel depicts. Regarded as one of the oldest Arabic nations, Oman owns a history that dates back to as early as 5000 BC. Heydays of Oman can be traced from the time of frankincense trade in Dhofar region to the days when it became a trading hub owing to its position and trade. It was in 1507 that the Portuguese and later the British invaded the Omani ports of Sur, Muscat and Sohar. Oman was under colonial rule for centuries that followed. In 1800, Oman rose to economic prominence once again. But all of it came to a standstill under the rule of Said bin Taimur, who was deeply conservative. Following the Dhofar rebellion, Said was overthrown and was succeeded by Sulthan Qaboos. What followed were days of modernisation. Schools and hospitals were opened and slavery was banned. Alharthi depicts this transition through the depiction of generations, characters like Zarifa and Salima belong to the pre-1970s, Mayya, Khawla and Asma to the period of transition and the generation of London is born into modernised Oman. Alharthi depicts these transitions through the portrayal of changes that came about in the fields of education, beliefs and gender equality.

Critics are of the opinion that socio-globalisation gives new dimensions to women's identity. Being a novel discussing the story of three sisters, *Celestial Bodies* indeed addresses the issue of gender

equality. Oman has travelled a great way from the days when women were considered incapable of addressing the public sphere to the days when they hold respectable jobs in the society. Education, which came along with colonisation, helped to uplift women from the bondage of superstitions that held them captive. A clear depiction of this transition is seen when Asma runs to her books to read out from the Holy Quran an excerpt that breaks away from the superstition that women are impure during periods. This ability to break away from the patriarchal superstitions was aided by education, which cultivated a sceptical mind and gifted the ability to read, which was the sole right of men in the earlier days. Alharthi also makes it a point to depict the attitude towards education in the pre-1970s Oman.

Alharthi depicts it in the form of Asma recollecting about the days of her great-grandfather and the attitude towards education those days; "...of one senior bureaucrat's reaction, expressed in an exchange with an English confidante, which said it all: Are we going to educate Omanis like you educated the Indians, and so they revolted against you, and soon they'll oust you completely"(161). This fear for loss of power was the reason behind illiteracy of earlier generations, but modernisation changed the scenario. After the 1970s education empowered the nation, especially women and they were granted jobs in public spheres.

One of the pressing factors that would aid female empowerment is ample healthcare facilities. From days when children were born in houses with no medical support, Oman has come a great way to evolve into days when cities like Muscat provided advanced healthcare facilities. This transition is addressed when Salima tells Mayya:

I wasn't even checked by a doctor, never- no creature ever saw my body, no, not me! These days you all go to hospitals in Maskad, where those Indian women and those daughters of Chinese see every inch of you. AyyAllahiMayya, I had all of you, and all of your brothers and sisters, standing as tall as a grand mare (Alharthi 6).

Social systems and practices have also evolved a great deal. While men had the liberty to engage in extramarital affairs, women did not even have the right to choose their life partners in pre-1970 Oman. Breaking away from these notions, London chooses her life partner all by herself and also displayed the courage to walk away from a relationship that she found uncomfortable. London's name indeed turns out to be symbolic of the westernised world in which she lives. This change in attitudes is clear from a conversation between London and her friend Hannah; "Life goes on. Where Ahmad is concerned, just hit Delete, okay? Let it go, she said in English to underline her point" (185). The cool and indifferent attitude towards divorce that was a taboo for a generation before clearly marks the transition that the land has undergone.

While women discussed earlier suffered from patriarchal suppression, there is a section of Omani society that was doubly oppressed, the slave women. Slavery was outlawed in Oman only after the 1970s and Zarifa is the representative of a time when slavery was legal. Alharthi discusses this issue with considerable gravity. The generation before Zarifa were the ones who were bought from Africa and sold in Oman. Their life is represented through recollections about Ankabuta, Zarifa's mother who "grew up, after all her brothers were sold away, as an orphan in the home of Shaykh Said" (192). Slavery was legal and slaves believed themselves to be the property of their owner, as Zarifa says; "Merchant Sulyman would kill you! ... Who do you think you

are? Who raised you in his own home and gave you an education and got you married” (103). Education bought about a great transformation. Education aids Sanjar, son of Zarifa, to think different and to resist against the bondage of slavery that was imposed upon him. He tells Zarifa;

Listen to me Merchant Sulyman raised me and, yes, he put me through a little schooling, and he found me a wife, but it was for his own self interest , all because he meant me to serve him, and to have my wife as slave too, and then my children later on....Open your eyes Zarifa. We are free, and everyone is his own master, and no one owns anyone else (104) .

While education helped to break the chain of slavery, it also improved living conditions by dismantling superstitions and substituting them with scientific knowledge. Attitudes towards mental health and the differently abled changed. While Maneen, who was insane, was believed to be possessed by Jinn and Abdallah’s mother was believed to have died due to an evil spirit, people never bothered to find logical reasons for events that happened round them. Educations and innovations in healthcare that came with colonisation explained events that were once covered up with superstitions. The truth that Abdallah’s mother died as a result of poisoning could be brought to light only when London applied her knowledge to the matter.

Apart from these social transformations, Alharthi also depicts the changes that human psyche has undergone as a result of westernisation. Homi K Bhabha describes the concept of hybridisation as the creation of a new transcultural form within the contact zone produced by colonisation. There are a number of hybrid characters within the text, the first one being London. As discussed earlier, she is symbolic of the name she carry, a girl bought up in western systems following Arabian beliefs. Another phase of hybridisation and diaspora is explained through Emigrant Issa and Nasir. Emigrant Issa, who had been at Egypt for trade, is portrayed as a true Arab in all ways as he always held deep in his heart a wish to return back and did so at the earliest possible. While Emigrant Issa depicts the positive responseto westernisation, Alharthi also makes it a point to show the other side of the coin too. The character of Nasir, who lived a part of his life in Canada, depicts the negative impacts that western encounter can have over the human psyche. He is unable to build a concrete identity for himself as he disapproves Arabic culture and blindly adores western ways. This is the possible danger of colonisation where one loses his own self in blind admiration of the coloniser.

With the use of Arabic pragmatics and nativization of language, Marlyin Booth has captured not just the beauty of the text, but also its politics in this translation. Depicting transition of Oman from pre-1970s world of superstitions and slavery to the days of modernisation and westernisation, Alharthi made it a point to depict the transformation that the land underwent. With this multigenerational jigsaw, Celestial Bodies succeeds in the depicting the transformations that Oman has undergone in the fields of education, gender equality and slavery.

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