

Jokha Alharthi's *Celestial Bodies*: Art Of Characterization

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Abstract

Sayyidat el-Qamar is the first work by an Arabic-language writer to achieve the Man Booker International Prize 2019, and the first novel by an Omani woman to appear in English translation. Jokha's *Celestial Bodies* – an English translation of Sayyidat el-Qamar has its roots in the long pervaded deserts, canals, busy courtyards and rooms of a village named al-Awafi in Oman. *Celestial Bodies* is a multi-generational depiction of a traditional, rural and patriarchal society. Characters are pleasingly contradictory, fallible and irreducibly individual. Other characters have their intentions, thoughts, and dogmas. This study focuses on the criticism of Jokha's style and art of characterization and exposes the problems of slavery, poverty, and adherence to self freedom. Hence, the present study is a contribution to English literary criticism which will enable the readers to understand literary aspects and its ways of criticism.

Key words- long pervaded deserts, multi- generation, intentions, dogmas, and slavery.

Educated in Oman and in the United Kingdom, Professor Jokha Alharthi was born in July 1978 in Oman. She obtained her Doctoral degree in Classical Arabic literature from Edinburgh University and at present she is working in Sultan Qaboos University. She has published three collections of short stories, three children's books, and three novels *Manamat*, *Sayyidat el-Qamar* and *Narinjah*. Her work has been translated in many languages. She writes in Arabic. Jokha was awarded Sultan Qaboos Award for Arts, Culture and Literature, for the novel, *Narinjah (Bitter Orange)* in 2016. The novel *Celestial Bodies (Sayyidat el-Qamar)* was selected for the Zayed Award 2011. This novel was also written in Arabic and it was translated by Marilyn Booth and published in June 2018 under the title *Celestial Bodies*, and won the Man Booker International Prize 2019. *Sayyidat el-Qamar* was the first work by an Arabic-language writer to achieve the Man Booker International Prize, and the first novel by any Omani woman to appear in English translation. The novel is entirely filled with emotion and imagination. It has poetic strain and keeps engaging the attention of the readers.

Jokha's *Celestial Bodies* has its roots in the long pervaded deserts, canals, busy courtyards and rooms of a village named al-Awafi in Oman. Writing this novel, Jokha's mind was roaming

in Oman while she wrote it in Edinburgh. For a far extent, the novel is autobiographic in the tune. Mayya resembles the character of the novelist. She needed to write the novel in fluent English but felt comfortable to write it in Arabic which she loved more than any language and felt warm and secure. Jokha is influenced by the authors of 10th-century Arabic poets such as Abu al-Tayyib Ahmad and the more recent Mahmoud Darwish, among her favorite writers Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Milan Kundera, Yukio Mishima, Yasunari Kawabata and Anton Chekhov etc. Her first piece of fiction was published when she was eighteen, a short story. She openly accepted that our literature is not only that attracts us but it is something universal in the value. *Celestial Bodies* is the novel of the upper class society members who are traditional in their ways but they don't seem to accept a change in life. We find patriarchal domination on the families of females as well as males and it leads to the suffering and confrontation.

Celestial Bodies narrates the story of three generations of a family living in a village called al-Awafi; Salima and Azzan have three daughters named Mayya, Asma and Khawla, their husbands and the parents of their husbands and the children of these relatives. Salima and Azzan had two sons also named Muhammad and Hamad who had died in their childhood. Salima was from a poor family and knew hunger very well. She did not know what breakfast tasted like in her uncle's home after the death of her father. "The adults drank coffee and ate dates but she always waited for lunchtime to come ... Usually there wasn't anything more than a little broth and some bones with hardly any meat on them. Her uncle's children fought over the remnants of food while her uncle's wife trained her eyes on Salima's hand." (P.112) Sometime lunch was the mixture of onion, lemon and water. Salima is careful for the future of her daughters while Azzan seems careless to it. He does not like to stretch any problem for far, no controversy. If anybody intervened, "He threw a wool shawl over his shoulders and went out as he did every night" (P.110) to love to a Bedouin woman, Najiya. But 'every father knows misery and pain.' When he found his son's fever incurable, he went to Shaykh Said for his Range Rover to carry the son to Muscat; he denied and said that Range Rover does not leave al-Awafi without him. It is because people of his village called this car "the work of the Devil" when he bought it. (P.116)

Asma's eldest daughter Mayya is a sleek personality who is fond of sewing. The novel opens with sewing machine of Mayya and Salima's information to Mayya about the proposal of Abdallah to marry her. She is married with a civil Engineer, the son of a rich Sulayman. Asma is married with another rich person and in the age of forty-five, "her body had sprouted fourteen young plants, living for light and color" (P.197) but Khawla was engaged with her cousin in her childhood who has fled to Canada for education. Salima is dominating character in the beginning of the novel and she wants her daughters to get married soon as "these were her girls and marriage was women's business." (P.3) It seems during the soliloquy of Mayya that she loved some other person. She murmurs in her prayer, "Are You punishing me for the love I feel?" (P.3) At many steps the characters of Jokha are not determined to their intentions. To Mayya husband-wife relations are perplexed. She thinks that she is expected to be happy when her husband is happy and sad when he is sad. She wonders who feels any sadness when she is sad. She is worried to think about the future of her conjugal life and wishes to see her fiancé and she has turmoil inside her. She is going to be married with the son of a rich merchant but she is sad that

she knew nothing except sewing clothes. Before marriage Mayya had to live in seclusion for seven days to follow the custom. She married because marriage was also a custom and it was her “identity document, her passport to a world wider than home.”(P.156)

After some months of marriage Mayya became pregnant and she imagines that she will deliver the baby like her mother with no trouble. She remembers the stories told by her mother, Salima, how she delivered Mayya. Salima is presented here as a ludicrous and traditional old character. She was chasing after a chicken in the courtyard. Her body was exploding and she collapsed. Her husband called a midwife. She herself could not do anything and closed the door. The midwife made her stand straight and hands upside. The midwife says, “Will Shaykh Masoud’s daughter give birth lying down because she is so weak to stand tall and straight? For shame, girl!(P.6) So Salima stood straight clinging to the pole until Mayya came out into her sirwal. She was holding the pole tightly with both hands and the midwife was shouting at Salima. She utters proudly, “I wasn’t checked by a doctor, never – no creature ever saw my body, no, not me! These days you all go to the hospitals in Maskad, where those Indian women and those doctors of Christians see every inch of you ... I had you, and all your brothers and sisters, standing as tall as a grand mare.”(P.6) Not only this, she further adds to humor, “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 is no longer any shame in the world.” There is another reason also that Salima does not like Mayya to go to hospital for delivery. She asks Mayya, “You’d have my child slide out right into the hands of the Christians?” (P.7)

The beginning conjugal life of Yusuf and his wife is ludicrous when Maryam herself tells the story of her married nights before Asma. She was more than fourteen and her mother gave her moral lessons, “watch out, you don’t let that man find you too ready, like a ripe watermelon about to split open. You defend yourself, now, so we can find our heads high. You just go at him with these bracelets on your wrist. Yes, hit him, that’s right, don’t be a juicy watermelon just waiting there for him.” It is a unique kind of marriage where the mother is teaching the daughter to hit her husband with bracelets and this kind of behavior will make their ‘heads high’. The daughter obeyed her mother and she swung bracelets, “right in front of his nose whenever he came near.” Though she “didn’t hate him at all, he was a lot better than her father, brothers or anyone else.”(P.134) Poor Judge continuously asked her why she was attacking on him, whether her parents forced her to marry without her consent. Maryam harassed her husband constantly and usually went off to her family ‘without any cause for it.’

Abdallah took Mayya to Muscat and admitted in the Felicity Hospital where Mayya gave birth to a ‘scrawny infant girl’ and named her as ‘London’. Abdallah’s aunt was surprised at this name and persuaded Mayya to change the name on the ground that it was an odd name in the name of a city, it was very far and it was the land of the Christians. Abdallah also, could not say anything at this because he is, “a man who’s not in the caravan or in the warring band ... a useless fellow, no one listens him.”(P.64) Her suggestion to name the baby is also ludicrous that she should name her on the name of Mayya’s mother. At this Salima became angry. “My dear

woman, why would you want to name her for me when I'm still alive and now I'm blessed with a grandchild? I suppose you're ready and waiting for me to die? That's why you'd like the little girl to inherit my name? As God's compensation." (P.8) This shows an unprecedented instinct of Mayya that she did consult her husband or anybody else about the name of the child. It is also not clear why she named the child with odd name. Anyway, her husband's aunt along with other family members surrendered before Mayya and changed the topic, "Girls are a blessing. A girl helps her mother and raises her younger brothers and sisters." (P.9) Moreover, she "despised children more than she did anything or anything else" (P.129) due to "lack of luck with men: she had been divorced twice, by two brothers ... that dry, sticklike body of hers was barren." (P.130) Salima also remarks the same, "The first one's a girl, and a girl comes to raise her little brothers. Ten boys will follow her." (P.18) These traditional women give more importance to boys than girls. She commands to buy a sheep to slaughter, forty chickens, and a cow and as much silver as the little one's hair weighs so that it may be given to the poor.

Abdallah seems to be a peaceful character but he is the man of conflicts. He could not say anything to Mayya to change the name of the baby when his family members were not happy at it. There is little possibility to doubt on Mayya's dedication for Abdallah but he time and again in the novel asks Mayya, "Do you love me?" (P.11) Mayya also could not sweep away this suspension and always she smiled at this question. She cares children more than her husband. Whenever Abdallah returns home in the afternoon he finds 'Mayya asleep'. He finds her sleeping with the son or 'to sleep herself'. This style of mutual linking of the relations of the characters makes the novel hypnotizing. Abdallah, though the father of three children, is always called as 'boy' by his father. He loves his father, Sulayman well but always scared that he may scold him. Love and fear between father and son is mingled and inseparable. Sulayman is rich enough, in the death-bed of the hospital, he shakes his cane towards Abdallah, "Tie up that Sanjar, tie up that Sanjar so he won't steal a sack of onions ever again." Abdallah remarks, "I remain silent and he waves his cane at me in fury." (P.14) More than his health he is worried to tie Sanjar with the eastern column.

Though the government has declared slavery as illegal, yet he says, "Sanjar is mine; he doesn't belong to the government. The government can't free my slaves. I bought his mama Zarifa for twenty silvers thalers." (P.14) Zarifa was bought by Sulayman; later on he married Zarifa with Habib. Sanjar was their son but the property of Sulayman. Zarifa's mother Ankabuta used to tell free stories to the women so she was imprisoned by Shaykh Said when she refused to sleep with his slave Nasib, her husband. She was compelled to stay in the cell for months. "Once a day her food arrived and once a night her husband arrived." People listened her scream daily. She was freed because Nasib was tired, "to tie her limbs to the rusting iron bedposts and stuffing her mouth with his turban-cloth, just to get his husbandly rights." (P.65) The same disaster takes place with Masouda that she has been closed in the room and whenever she looks any person she yells, "I am Masouda." (P.75) She was patient about all the toil and misery, and about her husband. "No sooner would Zayd finish with one woman than he would go after another" (P.122) Now and then her daughter Shanna with eyes like a tiger's, made unexpected visits to her. Fortnightly she filled her "pitcher in toilet, gave a bath, washed and plaited her hair, swept

the place out and sprinkled water across the dirt courtyard.”(P.76) Shanna married with Sanjar. Both of them are slaves but they revolt against slavery and parents and run away to abroad. She did not love her native village. She hated water-carrying, cooking and its smoke, dust and cloud but what really “disgusted her more than al-Awafi was its people and animals and poverty and service, and her mother Masouda.” (P.105) She was ashamed of her father why he married her mother. Her father could marry with another woman but did not. To Shanna, marriage is a need – an ambition for luxurious life not love.

Hunger is another theme of the novel about which the hungry characters compromise with their fate but the rich characters have the hunger of love. It seems that to suffer is the fate of Jokha’s characters: Abdallah’s father died in the hospital from heart attack, Zayd drowned in the flood, Hafiza died of AIDS, Maneen was killed by a bullet, Zarifa died unknown, Abdallah’s mother was poisoned, Najiya died unknown and Marwan killed himself with his father’s dagger. People are rarely sad to recollect these memories because knowledge means pain and not knowing keeps sane. Abdallah is haunted by the punishment from his father. This constant fear haunts him like a ghost even after the death of his father. He was hung head down in the well because he once had stolen his father’s rifle to eat magpie. Marwan was a saint, dedicated to god’s service yet a thief who could not escape his hands in stealing the things which were useless to him. He stole, perfume, money and dagger from his own house also. He cut his vein by the sharp blade of the dagger and bled to death.

Abdallah’s student life is a satire on the contemporary education. He needs to learn English for his business. He is decorated by his foster mother Zarifa. He is the tallest boy of the class. As he enters into the school, his pockets are searched by the teacher where he had a gift of the holy day, coconut bar and half a riyal. The teacher was searching some rich edible things there. The teacher, Ustad Mamduh laughed with some bitter sound. Abdallah says, “When people laugh, they look like monkeys. Their bellies shake and their necks shudder, and worst of all, their yellow teeth display all the decay.”(P.15) The teacher asks his age and without any answer declares that he was not fit for first grade. Students are making a noise. Further, Ustad demands jelly-sweets from Abdallah. Zarifa is astonished at home when Abdallah demands jelly-sweets in place of pen, notebook or book. After taking sweets Mamduh declares, “Abdallah knows how to write his name and he will be moved to grade three... with four others, all of whom could write their names successfully on the blackboard. Or they had brought chunks of dark Omani jelly-sweets for the teacher.”(P.16)

Abdallah’s schooling is a satire on the teachers and education system of Oman where the habits and discipline of the teachers is not better than beggars and laborers. There were many occasions when there was party in the school and the students had to arrange sweets from their house “for the sake of diploma.”(P.67) Students here are allowed to eat last of all whether these sweets were tasty or not. Abdallah had to comment before the teacher that the Ministry of Welfare gave them thirty riyals per month yet they are begging food. The teachers have nourished bad habits and shamelessly say that thirty riyals are not sufficient even for cigarettes. After flood, the riches became richer and poor became poorer. The novelist herself assumes that

in 1940s the mere idea of educating Omanis terrified rulers. Day schools were prohibited to married women. Masoud and his friends in a discussion with senior bureaucrat expressed “Are we going to educate Omanis like you educated the Indians, and so they revolted against you, and soon they will oust you entirely.”(P.161)

In *Celestial Bodies* males are not dominant characters or it can be said that the females of Jokha are superior to males. Zarifa is Abdallah’s foster mother, a slave to whom Sulayman had bought and married with some near but since the beginning of the novel she lives in the house like a mistress of house. One of the important striking things in *Celestial Bodies* is the refusal to easy assumptions about power, and role of the characters in the world. Salima focuses on the childhood of one of the main characters, a matriarch, who started off as a poor female relative but she was not allowed to eat or be clothed as an equal with rich relatives, as well as she was not allowed to mix with the servants, to bathe like them, or to dance as the slave girls do. Salima cannot live like Zarifa, a former slave from her son-in-law’s family, who runs the household, has the love and devotion of her supposed master and his son, and has the power in all. Zarifa has no husband now and her son has fled like her husband yet she is a posture of inward glory of light as she is ‘beloved’, ‘mother’, ‘daughter’, ‘slave’ and ‘lady’ to Sulayman.(P.168) She has many reasons to be sad but it is momentary. She is the patient of diabetes but never cares about physicians and eats whatever she likes. She believes in God and never afraid of death. Her husband fled and her son left Oman and her daughter-in-law threw her out of home and “tried to get Zarifa locked up as a madwoman” yet she is not always sad.

London is a girl of modern generation. She nearly ‘went mad’ when she found that her friend Hanan was raped by the gangs of teenagers in the teachers’ dormitory and nobody was investigated as guilty. Hafiza is a slut who does not know the name of her baby’s father. She tells her mother that it may be Zatar, Marhum or Habib. First time she is decreed for hundred lashes for adultery by Yusuf but in other cases he denied to decree. It is a dilemma that only the females are culprit for adultery not men. “Three more years and her third daughter appeared.”(P.142) Female slaves are victim of adultery.

Celestial Bodies have some glimpses of supernatural treatment also as Zarifa informed to Abdallah, “Daytime is for people but night-time for the jinn” (P.143) because all the evil deeds of human beings are hidden by them in the name of these supernatural elements, not seen by anybody. Shanna once tried to tempt Abdallah in the farms and to win his love she expatiated the story based on the dream of her father, “Your mama isn’t dead, and she’s alive! They bewitched her and then they took her away ... wizard took her mind away and made her his servant.” (P.144)

In the parties of females at homes, laughter rises, voices mingle with complaints about husbands and children, news of marriage, divorce, recent childbirths, comments on the TV serials and fabric shops and the gifts exchanged to one another are the main subjects of females. Criticism of one another and theft of lipsticks are the symptoms of feminism.

“Al-Awafi people were firm believers in the past: they did not look to the future.”(P.141) Abdallah’s son Salim loves Muscat not al-awafi as he was born there but London hated Muscat because she has had bitter experience there. Shyakh Sulayman loves his village and says why we, “should leave the land that is ours, the place where we live, the country of our family and our ancestors for some strange world where we don’t know the people.”(P.122) Ghaliya was born in Cairo but her parents were Omani so after her death they buried her in al-Awafi as their native country.

Ahmad married London and beat her at many occasions as “he was a treacherous lover and so the heroine left him.”(P.186) She was scolded by Mayya also not to have any relation with Ahmad. She used to chat with him so Mayya broke her mobile. He was not as rich as London. She was obstinate enough not to follow the advice of parents so she was divorced. She is not firm at her decision and unites with him at last.

Marriage is another main theme of the novel. It seems sometimes that love and marriage are the main motto of the characters. Nasir was hardly twelve and Khawla not more than nine years when they were engaged. In this age they started to love and imagine each other as husband and wife. It is a kind of infatuation in the beginning but later on it becomes one-sided from Khawla. She will kill herself if not married with Nasir. In her earnestness, at last, Khawla wins and Nasir married her. But this victory is the victory of her earnestness not of her love because Nasir was ruined in Canada and he needed money which he would get if he will marry with Khawla according to the Testament of his mother. After marriage he again went to Canada to live with his girl-friend. He visited Khawla once in two years. At last after ten years Asma divorced Nasir. In the process of marriages in *Celestial Bodies*, we find that jewelry, robes, feasts and social status has an important role in place of love.

Jokha’s characters are pleasingly contradictory, fallible and irreducibly individual. There are other characters that have their own intentions, thoughts and dogmas. They have different tendencies but all of them are adhered to their nativity and love the culture of their own time. It seems as nobody wants to have a change in their lives except poverty. Mutual relationship of the characters is complicated enough and they seem authoritative except some characters like Zarifa. Female characters are very strong to bear the pangs of poverty, slavery, adultery and unlucky conjugal lives. *Celestial Bodies* is very good novel for the characterization and their adherence to their nativity and a revolt against slavery. There is no list of Contents in the beginning of the book. Abdallah is represented as a man standing on the hill and watching all activities throughout the novel yet he seems unable to watch everything. He demonstrates all incidents during his reverie. Maximum chapters have been entitled in the names of the characters while some major specialties of the characters have been entitled with irony or humor. Though Abdallah is the demonstrator yet he could not investigate the reason of his mother’s death. Abdallah has the authority of a rich merchant yet he is a bare failure as a merchant, husband, father, son and master. Roots of satire lie very deep in the novel as we find Azzan-Najiya episode. Azzan claims

himself as ardent lover and Najiya is *Qamar* – a moon. If it is love, then what is philandering, adultery or extra-marital relation?

Celestial Bodies is a multi-generational depiction that simplifies what Jokha has done, to narrate the story of how Oman was changing over the last century, from a traditional, rural and patriarchal society where Islam was complemented by Kingship. It was slavery which was to abolish from the country. Pirates and merchants caught the males and females from African countries and sold them. They used males in agriculture and females for homely works. This slavery was to abolish in 1970, to an urban, oil-rich Gulf state. The novel depicts the people of transitional period of Oman where slavery was abolishing and modernism was beginning.

REFERENCE

All quotations have been taken from:

Alharthi, Jokha: *Celestial Bodies*, translated by Marilyn Booth (New Delhi: Simon & Schuster) 2019