

Gender Disillusionment in Marriage: A Reading of Jokha Alharthi's *Celestial Bodies*

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ABSTRACT

Celestial Bodies by Jokha Alharthi portrays a multigenerational narrative of women which is sliced by the patriarchy's violent edge. A patriarchal society that placed faith in marriage reproduced itself in writings. But a society in which women were chafing at the limits of domestic harness reproduced itself in turbulent novels that begin with an inquiry into the realities of marriages rather than ending with the promise of them. *Celestial Bodies* tells the subtle and quietly anguished story of several unhappy marriages. The novel shares an intense preoccupation with its female characters' unhappy marital experience. This paper analyses the inequitable rules and expectations of a traditionally patriarchal Islamic society and how it will lead to the marital misery of women. *Celestial Bodies* at its heart is the story of three sisters who are disillusioned by marriage: Mayya, Asma, and Khawla. They are compelled to follow the notions and rules of the society set by their male ancestors. The rules, regulations and other circumstances of male dominated society drag both slaves and native women in deep silence. It throws light on how these women use the weapon of voice to rage against the unwritten rules of the male dominance which stand as an obstacle in their way towards freedom. The paper tries to question what lies behind the marriage and romance that all the characters seek to find in the novel and also how disillusionment in marriage is gendered in nature.

Key words: Gender, Marriage, Body, Patriarchy

INTRODUCTION

Celestial Bodies, the second novel by the Omani author Jokha Alharthi, and translated into English by Marilyn Booth, becomes the first novel from the Arab Gulf to win the Man Booker Prize in 2019. Alharthi is the first Omani writer whose work is translated into English. The novel portrays a multigenerational narrative of women which is sliced by the patriarchy's violent edge. A patriarchal society that placed faith in marriage and a society in which women were excoriating at the limits of domestic exploitation reproduced itself in turbulent novels that begin with an inquiry into the realities of marriages rather than ending with the promise of them. *Celestial Bodies* tells the subtle and quietly tormented story of several dispirited marriages. The novel shares an intense preoccupation with its female characters' woeful marital experience. This paper analyses the inequitable rules and expectations of a traditionally patriarchal Islamic society and how it will lead to the marital misery of women.

Celestial Bodies recounts the story of three sisters who are disillusioned by marriage: Mayya, Asma, and Khawla. They are compelled to follow the notions and rules of the society set by their male ancestors. The rules, regulations and other circumstances of male dominated society drag both slaves and native women in deep silence. It throws light on how these women use the weapon of voice to rage against the unwritten rules of the male dominance which stand as an obstacle in their way towards freedom. The paper tries to question what lies behind the marriage and romance that all the characters seek to find in the novel and also how disillusionment in marriage is gendered in nature.

The novel explores the experiences of three generations beginning in the twentieth century and extending to contemporary times, an era of drastic social and geographical changes. It presents a picture of the Oman society in transition. The transition is examined through shifting patterns of gender roles, attitude to education, treatment of

slavery, weakening of class distinctions, and breaking of taboos on transgressive love relationships. The country evolves as a modern state from a closed nation under the Sultan's rule.

When we look deep into the life of female characters in the novel, it is evident that the institution called marriage played a vital role in the life of all who live in a society where marriage is considered as the ultimate aim of a girl's life. The character Salima who is the mother of Mayya, Asma, and Khawla gets married to Azzan Inn Mayya at the age of thirteen. Her life has turned upside down when her husband started floating in the ecstasy of the words of another lady and captured by her intensity. She takes all the responsibilities on her head in the absence of her husband which includes the marriage of her three girl children.

Mayya, the eldest daughter of Salima marries Abdallah, the son of a wealthy merchant; Asma marries Khalid, a self-obsessed artist for whom the ideal wife is someone who will fall "into the orbit he had marked out, who would always be there but would also always stay just outside, yet without wanting to create her own celestial sphere, her own orbit"; and Khawla, after many years of loyal patience, marries Nasir, her childhood friend, whose idea of marriage involves spending most of his time in Canada with a girlfriend, returning every two years to impregnate his wife.

The novel begins with a woman thinking, and then with the enforced suppression of that thought. Mayya is at her sewing machine, dreaming of a love unrequited. She has fallen for a young man named Ali, who has just come back from London, where he was studying. Mayya longs for the chance to catch even a glimpse of him. But her mother's emphatic announcement shatters the dream: she tells her daughter that Abdallah has asked to marry her. The union will be fortunate. Mayya thinks that Allah must be punishing her for her secret desires. She whispers;

I swore to you that I wanted nothing...nothing at all... Only I said, I wanted 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. Are you punishing me for the love I feel? But dear god, I never let him know that I loved him. I didn't breathe a word of it to my sisters...why, why did you send Mr.Sulayman's son to our house? (Alharthy 3)

Being a woman Mayya cannot tell anyone that she is in love with a boy for whom she waits. Nobody has asked her permission to marry Abdallah. Seeking the permission of a girl at the time of her marriage is not a question at all in a patriarchal society where girls are considered as a burden of the family. Mayya marries Abdallah dutifully and hopelessly. Mayya gives birth to her daughter in a hospital assisted at the time of her labor by nurses and doctors. This exasperates Salima her mother. "These days you all go to the hospital in Muskad, where those Indian women and where those daughters of the Christians see every inch of you" (p. 6), denigrates Salima. At the birth of the child Salima, an epitome of the traditional beliefs says; "she's had her first child and it's a girl. Girls are blessing. A girl helps her mother and raises her younger brothers and sisters."(p.9) This is generally the attitude of society towards the birth of a girl. Mayya secretly punishes the world by naming her first child London for the man she actually wanted to marry, much to the discontent of Salima and Zarifa, the slave woman. Zarifa expresses her displeasure in the following words , " Instead of naming them Habiba or Maryam or Fatma, they give them names- Mervat and Rabab, and Naabaab, Shaaakaaab, Daaaadaaaab, ... what a world it is ! And you, Mayya, now what's your baby named?" (p.20). Mayya even challenges the patriarchal glorification and mythicizing of motherhood. "She could not suppress the incredulity she felt. So this is motherhood then?" (p.53)

The marriage of Mayya and Abdallah, her husband portrays the perfect blend of an old and new tradition. Mayya does not want to live under her mother's authoritative shadow but on the contrary Abdullah despite his unhealthy relationship with his father, devoted and affectionate towards him. Mayya who is not fully content in her marital life considered "silence to be the greatest of human acts, the sum of perfection. When you were utterly quiet and still you were likeliest to hear accurately what others were saying If she said nothing, then nothing could cause her pain. Most of the time, she had nothing to say." After the birth of her third she comes to realize that sleep is even greater miracle than silence; "sleep. Sleep! She would sleep and sleep, and as long as she stayed asleep nothing could harm her. Asleep, she would not be speaking, not would others speak to her."(p.55). Sleep has become her only paradise. It becomes her ultimate weapon against the pounding anxiety of her existence.

On the day of Asma's marriage her mother Salima puts a lot of restrictions on her that nobody should see the bride before her wedding and she has also forbidden Asma to leave the house. Salima is strictly adhering to the rules of society on girls at the time of their marriage. Marriage is her identity document, a passport to a world wider than home. After marriage she will have the right to come and go, to mix freely with the older women and listen to their talks, to attend weddings and funerals too. With the bridal procession's departure Salima thinks; "we raise them so that strangers

can take them away.” That is the reality of the life of most of the girls even nowadays. Khalid, Asma’s husband knows exactly what he wants and he chooses accordingly; “looking for a woman who would fall instantly into the orbit he had marked out, who would always be there but would also always stay just outside, yet without wanting to create her own celestial sphere, her own orbit.”(p.194). It does not take long for Asma to discover all of this. Asma eventually makes her peace with her narcissistic husband, but only by becoming “her own constellation, independent and whole, a sphere unto itself.” That sphere is maternal: she devotes herself to the fourteen children she bears.

Unlike Mayya and Asma, Khawla has her own decisions about her marriage. When her mother Salima comes up with a proposal she says an absolute No to it. She says; “WAllahi wAllahi! May my throat be slit, my neck carved like a lamb, silver by silver, if my family insists on marrying me to the son of Emigrant Issa. I will kill myself, I swear to God I will.”(p.99). she has the courage to speak out that she is waiting for her childhood friend Nasir and later she gets married to him. Nasir who finds pleasure in some other relations comes home only to impregnate her. That leads her marriage to divorce. That too is a revolutionary decision taken up by her. Khawla decides to divorce Nasir for whom she has waited not years but decades. “She couldn’t see his loyalty, his perfect respect” (p.240) and she divorces him. Everyone thinks that she has gone insane. But she has not. She who cannot forget anything of the past is very bold in her decision to separate and she opens a beauty parlor 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, she laughs in his face. Abdallah recalls that Mayya’s face 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. At one moment, Ahmad, London’s husband, promises her that she will be the wife of the greatest poet in Oman; at another, he whines, “I didn’t mean to hit you. I was just angry I don’t want to lose you, and anyway, you are my property, my London. You are my victory and my inspiration.” Abdallah tells us his story about London’s marriage: “He divorced her. We paid him the dowry and so my daughter got herself out of that marriage. London, I said to her, today you are free. You are a successful physician and you have your freedom.”

One of the liveliest characters in the novel is the most ambiguous in status, a woman named Zarifa, a slave who became Sulayman’s mistress and who largely raised Abdallah, after his mother’s early death. Born to a woman owned by the local sheikh, Zarifa was sold to Merchant Sulayman at the age of sixteen. The relation between the slave and the master is more than it. Forceful, large, illiterate, a woman of proverb and traditional wisdom, she can come and go as she pleases among higher-born women, protected by Sulayman’s favor. Alharthi tells us that Zarifa’s forebears were kidnapped from Kenya, via Zanzibar, by pirates in the late nineteenth century, when wealthy Omanis were craftily evading the pact that the Sultan had made with the British to outlaw the slave trade. But she shares with the more privileged women her own struggles with modernity. Her son, Sanjar, upbraids her for living in the servile past: “Open your eyes. The world has changed While everybody’s gotten educated and gotten jobs, you’ve stayed exactly where you always were, the slave of Merchant Sulayman. . . . We are free, and everyone is his own master, and no one owns anyone else. I am free and I can travel wherever and whenever I like.” But she thinks she is more safe and secure in the hands of Sulayman despite all the hardships that she has there.

Najiya is an exception to all the other women characters in the novel. She with her wisdom and uniqueness in thoughts deconstructed the very concept of marriage and love relation. Azzan, Salima’s husband caught in the mad ecstasy of her charm. She introduces her to him; “I am Najiya. I am Qamar, the Moon. It is you I want.”(p.41). When Khazina, her friend informs her that Azzan is married Najiya laughs that famous ringing laugh of hers and says; “who said I want to marry him? Qamar doesn’t let anyone give her orders. I wasn’t created to serve and obey some man.”(p.4). She says that Azzan will be hers but she will not be his. She continues to say; “he’ll come to me when I want him, and he’ll go away when I say so.”(p.43) Azzan once tells her; “A true beloved is like you- someone who can’t be owned.”(p.170) Najiya who is different from other women gets uneasy with all his talks on „possession“. She just wants to be his lover. She does not want anything else from him. With the introduction of a character like Najiya, Alharthi makes it very clear about the transition which happens in the Oman society.

Even though marriage is still important to many, the nature of marriage is changing, becoming more inclusive with less specified gender roles. Disillusionment in marriage is quiet common in any marital relations as it becomes a power relation between two where one is getting subordinated due to the unwritten laws of patriarchal society. Disillusionment in marriage involves a patriarchal politics in it. By analyzing the marital relationships in the novel we can come to a conclusion that most of the marriages leave the wives in miseries and invisible wounds, thereby the disillusionment in marriage is mostly gendered in nature. What marriage expects from women cannot cope up with the strong and intense desires that they have for their life. In some women like Salima all the traditional notions on the institution marriage are

deeply rooted and she tries to pass it onto her girl children too. Women like Khawla are very rare. As Emily Dickson says; “she rose to his requirement, dropped, /The playthings of her life/ To take the honorable work /Of woman and of wife.” Every woman has to rise up to the requirements of whom she marries by dropping even the identity of herself which will eventually lead her to eternal silence.

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