

Original Research Article

Determining the Cultural Dynamic Shift in Jokha Alharthi's *Celestial Bodies*

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ABSTRACT

As Raymond Williams in his work *Culture and Society*, conceptualize the culture as the 'progressive process', which keeps on shifting over time and in order to illustrate the present culture one has to analysis its roots i.e, past cultural changes. *Celestial Bodies* written by Jokha Alharthi is considered as representative novel with transitional theme in Arabic literary circle. It has taken the fancy most particularly of the western readers since it portrays the unseen aspects of Omani society and also captures the spirit of Mid- Eastern transitional societies faced with new challenges and opportunities. Like Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Alharthi also tied her novel intimately to the real history of Oman by capturing the rapid social changes and consequent shift in the cultural panorama through an Omani family over three generation. This paper aims to examine the cultural dynamic shift in Omani author Alharthi's International Man Booker- Prize 2019 winning novel, *Celestial Bodies*. It also examined the shifting cultural outlook through blend of old tradition with the modern, changing patterns of gender roles, breaking the taboos, enfeeblement of social structure, attitude towards education and love- stained relationships etc.

Introduction

Literature has always been conceptualized as a written form of art that makes human values more substantial, showcasing a reflection on these values within and for a community. Dutta (2018) states that myths, epics and folk forms have been used for introducing and eliminating cultural miseries such as caste, gender distinctions and religious fanaticism. From Greek myths to folktales to today's modern conceptualized thoughts like Harry Potter Series and Game of Thrones, all have shared stories that have helped to contour the communities and unify societies. With the rise of the concept of the concept of culture, this has been often understood as a joining thread amongst humans and a reflection of their 'way of life'. Cultural dynamics plays a crucial role in shaping sexual identities, attitudes, and perceptions. As Raymond William in *Realism and the Contemporary Novel: The Long Revolution* (1961) argues that "Every aspect of personal life is radically affected by the quality of general life, and yet the general life is seen at its most important in completely personal terms." He conceptualize the culture as the 'progressive process', that keeps on shifting over time and in order to illustrate the present culture one has to analysis its roots i.e., past cultural changes. In the present research we observe that Jokha Alharthi's *Celestial Bodies* may be considered as representative novel with transitional theme in Arabic literary circle. It poses the fancy, most particularly, of the western readers since it portrays the unseen aspects of Omani society and also captures the spirit of Mid- Eastern transitional societies faced with new challenges and

opportunities. Just like the way Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Alharthi also tries to tie her novel intimately to the past, to the real history of Oman by capturing the rapid social changes and consequent shift in the cultural panorama through an Omani family over three generations .

Mishra (2018) argues that the new concept of social-globalization tries to give different dimensions to women's identity. The story is told through non-linear fashion through the perspective of multiple characters and they focus on this family of three daughters and their loss and love. The novel captures the spirit of Omani culture from 1960s to contemporary times. The real urge for transition within the members of the family creates a lot of complexities amongst generations. Elderly people seem to be troubled by the emerging radical changes in social life.

Blend of Old Tradition with New Tradition

Dutta (2018) further argues that for the woman, the home is said to be expression of her freedom: it is her domain. The novel narrates the story of three generations of an upper-class Omani family from a village named al-Awafi. At the heart, the narrative recounts the stories of three sisters- Mayya, Asma and Khawala- and their marital relationships. Although there are many other characters related to them- relatives, in-laws, children, slaves, Bedouin women, men of significance etc., whose stories are also interwoven together. 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, he was devoted and affectionate towards him. When Mayya gave birth to their daughter London, Salima asked her son-in-law to perform the ritual for the well-being of the new mother and daughter.

"Abdallah, listen about your wife, here. She's had her first child and it's a girl. Girls are a blessing. A girl helps her mother and raises her younger brothers and sisters. What we need for this new mother are forty live chickens and a big jar of good pure mountain honey. Plus, a pot of samna, the best country butter churned straight from a cow. When London is a week old I'll shaver her head and you will make an offering- as much silver as the little one's hair weights. It'll be enough to buy a sheep, you'll have it slaughtered and you'll give out the meat to the poor. Salima pronounced every letter in the name London slowly and distinctly." (9)

Mayya named her daughter 'London' instead of any Arabic name, even though her relatives, husband do not like that name much. Mayya's love for her daughter's name shows her love for modernity.

The sway of blind faith and superstition is predominantly explored through the portrayal of characters like Najiya, the Bedouin women. The description of Najiya beauty adds the magical element in the novel and because of her beauty *people began calling her Qamar for she was as radiant as the moon. (44). When her brother suddenly developed polio and couldn't move (45), she tried every medicine, every herbal treatment but nothing worked but, in the end, Said slaughtered a pair of camels for almsgiving, her brother was walking on his own two feet. (45)*

Attitude towards Education

Mishra and Mishra (2017) expresses that the education plays a very crucial role in bringing desirable and required changes in any culture. It endorses the continuity of the culture through its diverse activities and programs. Synchronous activities involve the exchange of ideas and information with one or more participants during the same period of time. Culture pivots the knowledge of ethics, tradition, symbols, norms and value whereas education shaped the individual's outlook towards a different aspect of the community. Same can be seen in the novel through the changing attitude of characters towards education. Mayya's great-grandfather was head of their Tribble clan. He did not allow her grandfather to pursue his dream of studying in the Saidiyya School in Muscat because he believed that life would be hard and dangerous in Muscat for the future shaykh of the tribe. *"In 1940s the mere idea of educating Omanis terrifies the rulers"* (161) of the clan because in their percept education would give birth to the rebellion in the clan. Modern education was foreign to Omanis before the

1940s, the people were educated by “*shaykhs and imams in mosques, moving between the centres of learning that existed then in Nazwa and al-Rustaq.*” (161)

In Abdallah's childhood when he attended school for the first grade he was already “*ten or twelve*” (15). He was promoted to grade three because he knows how to write his name. Ustaz *Mamduh said, Abdallah knows how to write his name and he will be moved to grade three.* (16). Like Mayya's grandfather, Abdallah's dream of pursuing education at university was crushed by his father, Sulayman.

“Please, father! I want to go to Egypt or Iraq, I want to study at university there. He grabbed me by the neck and barked at me. By this beard of mine, I swear you are not leaving Oman.” (12)

There were lots of restrictions regarding educations in first-generation. They were not allowed to attend school for education. In second-generation, lot restrictions were removed but only for patriarchs. During Asma's childhood, “*girls older than ten weren't allowed*” to attend schools (34). English education was introduced in the curriculum. One generation ahead, lot more liberation is given to both man and women. London, Abdallah daughter graduated from the Medical School at Sultan Qaboos University. English becomes an inevitable part of Omani society for conducting a profitable business.

My Arab country, where restaurants, hospitals and hotels all announced that ‘only English is spoken here’ (153)

Abdallah had face lot of embarrassment due to his ignorance toward English.

Why didn't you learn English when you were little? Now do you realise how important it is? It's the most important language in the world. (26).

With developing time, Mayya started learning English and Asma continued her studies in Muscat.

Shifting in Gender Roles

Prakash and Mishra (2015) asserts that feminism is used to describe a political, cultural or economic movement aimed at establishing equal rights and legal protection for women. It involves political, cultural and sociological theories as well as philosophies concerned with issues of gender difference. French Philosopher Charles Fourier is credited with having originated the word in 1837. Since then literature has presented feminism in multiple perspectives and explored the complex world of women, their anxiety, pain and sufferings. Till 1970s women were treated as secondary beings and had not given equal rights. Even they are not allowed to work professionally with men. They were seen as beings that serve men and were submissive. Similar, portrayal can be seen in the novel *Celestial Bodies* also. Mishra (2018) opines that the female characters in the novel are depicted strong but in the limited domestic sphere. So they attempt to reconstruct the code in process to preserve their identity, i.e. their own planted, real identity endures to be significant to them. The lives of three sisters demonstrate the transformation of the country over time. The novel sharply contrasts the condition of women before 1970 and after 1970. As the novel opens, Mayya was portrayed as submissive and plaintive, who sews alone, girl longing for her lover, punishing herself and suppressing her desires. She loved a man named Ali bin Khallaf but never confessed in front of anyone. Later, she married the son of merchant Sulayman, Abdallah whom she does not love because her parents compelled her. She named her daughter London and defies the social restrictions. Although, her relatives and family do not like that name much. London was brought up in a very liberated and free spirit environment, which shaped her percept accordingly. Like her mother, she also revolted against the orthodoxical ways of society by marrying a man from the lower class. She took the responsibly of her own actions and ‘divorced the man when she realized that he is not the man of her dreams’. Other women character that represents the transforming Oman is Khawla, the youngest sister who practiced her right of divorce and “*opened a beauty salon in one of Muscat's fanciest neighborhoods*” (30)

Generational transitions demonstrate the understanding of gender roles, approach towards secular education, erasing the border between the slave and master, desire for individual freedom, weakening class distinctions and breaking of taboos on love transgressing social limits. The old generation was troubled by youth's archness in the modern age.

Salima criticized the modern way of child delivery by doctors by saying *"I wasn't even 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 daughters of the Christians see every inch of you."* (6)

Later in the novel, Muezzin's wife apprises against sharing food with the woman who is "unclean". Asma was annoyed by this statement. She spends a lot of her time reading books. So, she knew that God permits this and does not place any restriction on menstruating women. *"When messenger of God was praying, he said to his wife, Aisha, hand me my robe. She said, But I am having my periods. He said, that's isn't your fault and it doesn't matter."* (35)

Apart from 'unclean women', slaves were also not allowed to eat from the same platter as of masters. But Zarifa *"had always been the only woman of slave origins who ate from the same platter of food as the free women did. In fact, she'd given herself this privilege, imposing it on the ladies"*. Bedouin women were also exploited in the hands of patriarchs in early Oman society. Najiya *"could truly consolidate her authority over her life, her property and her freedom."* (44)

Blurring the borders between Master and Slaves

Slavery is one of the major themes of the novel after love- strained relationships. Alharthi demonstrated her sense of history and depicted the stages of evolution of her own culture in her novel *Celestial Bodies*. When Oman became the British Protectorate in 1891, slave trade became very normal. British people exported slaves almost to all their colonies from African and Asian countries. Slaves were not seen as a human being rather they were seen as the commodity or animals. They were the possession of their masters and were obliged to obey them. Both Habib and Zarifa have resentful memories of their transport from Africa to Oman. Like commodities, there were packed into filthy and cramped ships, many slaves were died because of starvation, slaves with contagious diseases were thrown in the sea. Zarifa's narration throws the light on the condition of Oman before 1970. Through her, Alharthi illustrates the cruel treatment, injustice, discrimination, and exploitation of slaves which slowly became the part of Oman tradition. The children born in slave's family, also had to wear the chain of slavery. Even, abolishment of slavery in constitution Oman in 1970, it was not abolished from the country. Abdallah's father was portrayed as cruel father as well as the master.

Even after abolishment of slavery, Abdallah's father was showing his authority over Zarifa's son:

Sanjar is mine, he doesn't belong to the government. The government can't free my slaves. I brought his mama Zarifa for twenty silver thalers. (14)

Slaves were tied up with ropes like animal as ordered by Abdallah's father: *tie up that slave, tie up that Sanjar so he won't steal a sack of onions ever again (13)* They were also not allowed to eat from the same platter as masters except Zarifa. Slave women are forced into the sexual relationships with their master and punished if they disobey them. They even did not have the privilege to marry the man of their desires. *I (Abdallah's father) married her off to Habib (14)*. But on the contrary, Bedouin women like Najiya enjoys the privilege of choosing her innumerable suitor and also lead a sexual relationship with him (Mayya's father, Azzan), despite the fact that he is married and have three daughters. Their relationship stands for unrestrained pursuit of freedom. A man is permitted to keep as many wives or mistresses as he wishes, but women are forbidden to such a privilege in the contemporary society. (Sinha & Mishra, 2019)

After the death of Abdallah's father, Sulayman in 1992, who belongs to the first generation, the condition of slaves gradually improved. Sanjar was free now and he settled in Muscat, the capital of Oman. The border

between the masters and slave was almost erased. Slaves became the acceptable part of Omani society. *An Omani married Sanjar's daughter and she came back with him to live in Muscat (13).*

Conclusion

The novel provides a glimpse into the social and political past of Oman i.e., booming of slavery trade from 19th century onwards, fight for territory control within the Oman, the British rule over coastal areas of Oman, development in the field of education and changing perspective towards education, shifting class and gender hierarchies, internal as well as external migrations, shifting from agriculture to more profitable professions like medicine, laws, export of camels etc. Mishra and Mishra (2018) expresses that language personifies a nation as well. It gets modified and updated as per historical/political, technological, regional, economic, social, cultural changes occurred in a country. Dynamics in Omani culture is highlighted through the portrayal of characters and their inner feeling over three generations. The transition of society results in the freedom of the slaves; political factions have reached an uneasy truce; women have careers and voting rights, they can choose their partner etc.

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