

Questioning Gender-Slavery Oppression in Jokha Alharthi's *Celestial Bodies*

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ABSTRACT

Gender inequality has always been a crucial part of the grand narrative of culture in Arabia. Women in Arabian society are subjected to gender bias. Analyzing the novel *Celestial Bodies* by Jokha Alharthi, the winner of the International Booker Prize in 2019, the paper will vividly visualize various atrocities that are exercised by men against women in the name of culture and traditions. It will bring to focus how culture is twisted and manipulated by men to exercise their control over women. It will further expose how hiding under the cloak of worn-out misogynist cultural dictates, men oppress women. The paper will explore the different challenges that are faced by slave women in Oman through the characters like Zarifa, Hafiza, Ankabuta, and Masouda. Alharthi portrays various ugly moments in the lives of Omani women wherein they are commodified and sexually abused. It will expose how women are ill-treated as slaves and used by men for their sexual gratification to such an extent that the young slave women remain confused about the paternal identity of their children. The paper will employ slave narratives and gender theoretical postulations to contest slavery as an inhumane practice against men in general and women in particular.

KEYWORDS

Gender; Culture; Challenges; Slavery; Conflict; Identity and Sex.

Jokha Alharthi's *Celestial Bodies* serves as a window to the Arab world and its diverse cultures. It unveils the changing viewpoint that comes up through three different generations of an Omani family shaped by expeditious social changes. It exhumes the change in the perspective and shifts in the outlook experienced by people in Oman across the twentieth century. The novel depicts the cultural conflicts between the older generations, who are disturbed by the younger generations of Omani society. The author portrays the aspects of Omani culture and interweaves

the multiple problems faced by women and also exposes the dilemmas of maintaining traditions in a modern society. It shows how women are discriminated against under the cloak of race, class, gender and ethnicity.

Alharthi questions the institution of marriage in the novel. Marriage in the Arab world is not an expression of love between two people but it is a product of patriarchy that enforces traditional gender roles where men benefit at the expense of women. None of the female characters lives a happy married life in the novel. Salima

wants that all her three daughters should get married soon as “these were her girls and marriage was women’s business” (3). The novel opens with Azzan and Salima’s eldest daughter Mayya who is described as a heartbroken and submissive woman because she loves a man named Ali Bin Khallaf but she does not have the courage to confess this in front of her parents. According to Arabian culture, women only have to marry men who are chosen by their parents. Women are not allowed to marry men of their choice. She unwillingly accepts to marry Abdallah but she silently resists which is seen in her words and eyes filled with tears:

Yes, said Mayya, her face as serious as ever and her voice low. And that I should laugh whenever he laughs, and if there is any tear rolling down his cheeks, there had better be some tears rolling down mine. I must be content with whatever makes him happy and . . .

So who feels sad when I am sad? Mayya wondered. Her voice was barely audible now, yet the word sadness rang out, discordant, to settle uneasily over the sisters. (3-4)

Alharthi also presents the inter-generational traumas experienced by Mayya in the novel. Mayya’s decision of giving birth in the hospital instead of delivering the baby in the house surrounded by the midwives gives shock to the other family members. Abdallah is against this as he does not want his child to be born in the hands of Christians. Mayya’s mother Salima had delivered her babies in the house and she is against the modern way of delivering babies in the hospital with the help of doctors. She criticizes the shameless modern women who give birth in hospitals. Salima says,

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 hospital in Maskad where

those Indian women and daughters of Christians see every inch of you (7).

Another female character Fatima, the wife of Sulayman is very unhappy in her married life because her husband has an affair with a slave woman named Zarifa. Sulayman openly sleeps with Zarifa which hurts Fatima a lot. Fatima yearns to seek revenge from her husband for his infidelity and therefore turns to a slave called Salim for sexual and emotional fulfilment. Sulayman’s sister drops in the hint to him that his wife has an affair with a black slave. Sulayman is unable to digest this and he poisons his own wife. After poisoning his wife, Sulayman leaves on a business trip and thus Fatima’s death becomes a mystery for other people. Adultery becomes the cause of the mysterious death of Fatima and the disappearance of Salim. It is clear from this incident that a man can have as many wives or mistresses as he wants but the wife of a Shaykh cannot dare to do so. Jankowain in “Managing Infidelity: Cross-Cultural Perspective” (1995), discusses that men “have ownership of women’s bodies whereas women can neither own their own bodies nor that of their spouse” (85). Even Olaudah Equiano (1745-1797) in his autobiography *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789) tells that white women having sexual relations with the slaves was not at all accepted by the masters whereas the masters could openly sleep with the slave women. He narrates an incident:

. . . In Montserrat I have seen a Negro man staked to the ground and cut most shockingly, and then his ears cut off bit by bit because he had been connected with the white woman who was a common prostitute: as if it were no crime in the white to rob an innocent African girl of her virtue (70-71).

London, a rebellious woman, goes against her family and society and marries the son of a peasant.

Her grandmother Salima by then swears out loud that she would slit her granddaughter's throat if the rebellious girl really did marry the peasant's son. How could she possibly marry the issue of the man who had threshed the family's grain? (51)

Even her mother Mayya is against this marriage. Though London loves Ahmad and marries him, he literally changes after marriage. He thinks that marriage has given him the license to oppress his wife. London shares it with her friend Hanan:

Can you imagine, he searches my phone every time we meet, he goes through all the numbers on it to make sure to make sure that there is no new one that he does not know (237).

Her love marriage turns out to be an unhappy one. London even spots her husband with some other woman and later happens to see that woman's photo in her husband's wallet. She tolerates everything for one year but eventually she realizes that her decision to marry Ahmad was wrong and she finally divorces her husband. Apart from her divorce, the other thing that drives London mad is the rape of her dear friend Hanan. Hanan is a teacher at an elementary school and "A gang of teenage boys had assaulted the teachers' dormitory . . . There had been rapes. Hanan- She was raped. And people were silent" (31). The disturbing thing is that the rape victims are suffering but the culprits are roaming around freely.

Another failed marriage where the woman suffers is that of Khawla (Mayya's youngest sister) to Nasir. Khawla rejects the marriage proposal of Ali and waits for Nasir to return from Canada. Khawla marries Nasir because she loves him but Nasir marries her because he has no other choice. While in Canada, Nasir had already

consumed all the funds and now his mother has made it clear that he will get his share only if he marries Khawla. He marries Khawla, takes his share and returns to Canada. He comes to Khawla after every two years, impregnates her and returns to Canada. He has a girlfriend back in Canada. Khawla bears everything silently until Nasir returns to her when his girlfriend leaves him after ten years. Khawla wanted her husband to return fully to her but finally when he returns, she no longer wants to live with him.

Khawla did not forget anything she had gone through, day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute, everything inside her sapping her spirit. [...] But she didn't say any of it . . .the seed planted in those first ten years had suddenly erupted in her body, growing thorns that tore her into shreds. (241)

She divorces him because she was sad that Nasir never fulfilled his responsibility as a husband to her and a father to her children. After practising her right to divorce, she "opened a beauty salon in one of Muscat's fanciest neighborhoods" (30).

The other very important thing which Alharthi points out is the concept of women being "unclean." According to the religious patriarchal beliefs, women during periods and post-delivery interim are termed "unclean." Both Salima and Muzzein's wife in the novel are against sharing food from the same platter with the "unclean" women. Asma, Mayya's sister is against this and gets very annoyed when she hears all this. The myths related to menstruating women are even discussed by Shamsudeen Mohammed and Roderick Emil Larsen-Reindor in their paper titled "Menstrual Knowledge, Sociocultural Restrictions, and Barriers to Menstrual Hygiene Management in Ghana: Evidence from a Multi-method Survey among Adolescent Schoolgirls and Schoolboys" (2020). They point out that:

In Ethiopia bathing during menstruation was believed to lead to heavier menstrual bleeding. Formerly, menstruating women and girls in western Uganda were prohibited from drinking milk because it was believed to affect milk production from cows. . . a menstruation was regarded as a secret only known to oneself (2).

Being educated and spending a lot of time reading books, Asma knew that having periods didn't mean being "unclean." She tells that:

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, it isn't your fault and it doesn't matter (35).

Asma makes it very clear that "childbirth and periods are what have you didn't soil anyone" (35).

Alharthi unravels the condition of slaves in Oman and depicts their miserable condition. For the masters, the slaves are their possession and are obliged to obey them. They are treated as commodities or as animals. The slaves in Oman are transported from Africa and both Habib and Zarifa share their experiences of being transported. The slaves are huddled together in the ships and while transported many of them die due to starvation. The slaves who suffer from contagious diseases are directly thrown into the sea.

Sulayman is depicted as a cruel master who shows his authority over Sanjar even after the abolition of slavery. He could not come to terms with the ending of slavery. He says to his son Abdallah,

Boy- Have you tied that thieving slave Sanjar to the eastern column yes? . . . Father, the government freed all of the slaves and Sanjar . . . the government, Father . . . What's the government got to do with it? Sanjar is mine; Zarifa for twenty

silver thalers! I fed her, when a sack of rice cost a hundred pure good silver coins. (13)

Even when he is on his death bed, he yells "tie Sanjar east side of the courtyards . . . that slave water or shade has to answer to me" (12). Zarifa's husband Habib suffers a lot because of being a slave. After the death of Sulayman when he disappears with his son Sanjar, always desired that "he would go back to that land from which he'd been snatched away, back to his freedom, plundered by pirates and merchants" (78). He even tries to convince Zarifa and says that "Your ancestors are not from here. They were as black as you are, they were from Africa, from the lands from where they stole you, all of you and sold you" (123).

Alharthi also brings to light the plight of women who face double oppression. They are oppressed firstly because they are women and secondly, because they are slaves. Ankabuta, a slave woman is first forced into marriage and is later ill-treated and beaten by her husband. She is a slave woman who is imprisoned by her master Shaykh Said when she disobeys her husband. She is compelled to stay in the cell for months and "Once a day her food arrived and once a night her husband arrived" (65). Her husband Nasib rapes her. He used to, "tie her hands to the rusting iron bed posts and stuff her mouth with his turn-cloth, just to get his husbandly rights" (65). A wife is expected to have sex with her husband at any time and she is not expected to deny her husband's sexual advances but this stereotyped gender role is the most serious violation of a woman's bodily integrity. Matthew Hale in *History of the Pleas of the Crown* (1880) points out:

. . . the husband cannot be guilty of a rape committed by himself upon his lawful wife, for by their mutual matrimonial consent and contract the wife hath given up herself in this

kind unto her husband which she cannot retract (629).

This act of forcefully having sex with one's wife is termed as marital rape. Fatima Mgomba in "Rape is Rape: The Need to Criminalize Marital Rape in Tanzania" (2020) defines marital rape as

Any unwanted sexual act by a spouse or ex-spouse committed without consent and/or against a person's will, obtained by force, or threat of force . . . These sexual acts include intercourse, anal or oral sex, forced sexual behaviour . . . victim as degrading, humiliating, painful, and unwanted (114).

Marital rape not only results in physical and mental trauma but also deprives a woman of her basic human rights. Ankabuta is not only raped but she also becomes a victim of forced pregnancy and later when she delivers her baby, she rips off the only cloth she has in order to wrap her baby and stuff the rest into herself to stop the flow of blood. Female slaves are the victims of adultery and it is very disturbing that only females are considered culprits for adultery and not men.

Women had to suffer the most because of slavery. Women slaves are the cheapest is clearly seen when Abdallah says about Zarifa:

I bought her for twenty coins, my father would say. At the worst of the economic crisis, when a big sack of rice imported from Calcutta and Madras cost one hundred coins, and Zarifa costs twenty (206).

Even Zora Neale Hurston in *Their Eyes were Watching God* (1965) describes that women have to suffer the most. Through the character of Nanny, she says:

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white

man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. (14)

The women slaves in Omani are even forced into multi-tasking by their owners. Claire Robertson in "We Must Overcome: Genealogy and Evolution of Female Slavery in West Africa" (2015) quotes Kevin Bales and Jody Sarich who differentiate between the effects of slavery on men from that on women as follows:

Habitual sexual assault shapes the experience of women slaves... Women do all the types of work that male slaves do, but they are also viewed as permanently available for sexual use. It is an appropriation and control of the interior as well as the exterior of their physical beings. If slavery transforms work from vocation to suffering, for women it also transforms an act of potential pleasure, love, and procreation into torture..... [T]here is no exact parallel in male enslavement... [T]he enslavement of women [therefore] achieves a totality exceeding that of men. (71)

Women are tortured by men and are used for their sexual gratification and often these slave women are unaware of the fathers of their children. This is evident in the case of Hafiza. When Hafiza becomes pregnant at a very young age, she discusses her child with her mother. She says, "Mama, if it wasn't Zaatara then it was either Marhum or Habib" (142).

Another slave woman, Zarifa is the daughter of the raped slave woman. She is a descendant of Seneghor and spends her entire life serving her master Sulayman, who purchases her from her cruel owner Shaykh Sa'id. Zarifa lives with Sulayman as his mistress who fulfils all his sexual needs but is never married to him. Later,

Sulayman marries her to Habib (an aggressive disobedient slave) when she fights with him. Later when Sulayman dies and her husband flees from there, she does not go with him. Both her mind and body are colonized. She decides to stay there and Sulayman's son Abdullah is brought up by her. Later when Zarifa grows old, she eventually moves in with her son Sanjar. When she dies Abdallah does not even come to attend her funeral as he suspected that she was responsible for his mother's death.

The novel thus depicts various female characters who suffer differently throughout. It presents the people of Oman who move towards modernism by reversing the traditional mode of socially accepted binaries, eulogizing the vernacular, and questioning the religious and cultural narratives. It gives voice to each female character and shows how women go against the culture that ties women. They go against their own family members to live their lives on their own terms.

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