

Feminism In Jokha Alharthi's Celestial Bodies

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Abstract

“Celestial Bodies” is a 2019 ‘Man Booker Prize’ winning novel by the Omani writer ‘JokhaAlharthi’. She is the first Omani writer who won this prestigious International literary award. The literary style and the way of presentation of the story of this novel are really admirable. Its story is centred on three sisters who witness the transformation of Oman from a traditional slave owning society to its present state. As we know well, Omani women never enjoyed freedom of any kind until 1970’s and in fact, the fate of a slave woman was even so terrific. But, the women characters' in ‘Celestial Bodies’ are presented as powerful ones who took the freedom to determine their own destiny by taking decisions of their lives. The story of this novel progresses through the story of the life of Mayya, Asma and Khawla, the three sisters. Our aim in this paper is to show how the women characters in ‘Celestial bodies’ became agents of transformation by changing their own ‘life history’.

INTRODUCTION

“Celestial bodies” is one of the three novels of JokhaAlharthi and it is the first Omani novel to be translated into English and the first Arabic novel to be awarded the Man Booker International Prize. This novel has its settings in the fictional village al-Awafi in Oman. The story which follows a very peculiar narrative style is developed through different characters. The ‘threesisters’ Mayya, Asma and Khawla are the central characters of this novel, around them the story revolves. Their story shows the transformation and development of the Omani women that happened in the modern history of Oman.

JokhaAlharthi

JokhaAlharthi is a unique voice among the new generation writers in the world. She is an academic and a writer. She had her formal education in Oman and in UK. She obtained her PhD in classical Arabic Literature from Edinburgh University. At present, she works as an associate professor in the Arabic department of Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. “Celestial Bodies” is an excellent work of JokhaAlharthi where she narrated the story of the transformation of Oman through the transformation of the lives of Omani women.

Marilyn Booth

Marilyn Booth is a very talented translator who translated “Sayyidat - al - qamar” into English. At present, she holds the Khalid bin Abdallah Al Saud Chair for the study of the contemporary Arab World. Apart from her academic publications, recently she has translated several works of fiction from Arabic into English such as: The Penquin’s Song and No Road to Paradise (both by Lebanese Novelist Hassan Daoud). Indeed, the originality of her translation makes Celestial Bodies more beautiful.

Feminism

Feminism is a social theory and a political movement informed and motivated by the experience of women. It aims at understanding the nature of inequalities that exist (discrimination, stereotyping, objectification, oppression and patriarchy etc.) in society in general and focuses more on gender politics, equality and sexuality etc. Though it is culturally specific, it addresses the universal issues such as: rape, incest etc., in the modern world.

In the past, women's life was confined to their houses and the public life was the right of men. In the medieval Europe women had no right to own property of their own and to seek education. At the end of the 19th century in different parts of the world, women were compelled to cover their heads, when they appear in public. The false assumptions regarding the biological differences of both sexes resulted in the marginalization of women and the empowerment of men both in public and private life. Slowly, women started to be marginalized and side-lined from the main stream of the society.

The feminist movement started in the west, especially through the reform movement of the 19th century. In 1869, John Stuart Mill published his book 'The Subjection of Women' and it demonstrated the legal subordination of one sex to another as wrong and chief hindrance to human empowerment. Over a century and half, the feminist movements had grown to include diverse perspectives that constitute the discrimination against women. Early and primary feminist movements are often called the first-wave movements and it comprised struggle for legal and political rights. The feminist movements after 1960's are known as the second wave movements and even there is a so-called third-wave movement, but the feminists disagree among themselves with regard to its necessity, benefits and ideas. As a matter of fact, the gender equality is the central issue in all most all the feminist debates in the modern world. Feminist movements enabled women to become independent in their thoughts and actions and fight against the false concepts that existed in the society.

"A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" written by Mary Wollstonecraft is one of the few works that can be included in the so called feminist writings before 19th century and it is a pioneering text in the history of feminism. The author contributed significantly to the debates concerning women's role in politics and society and fought against gender inequality in her own way. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* is another important work in the line of feminist writings. She finds pervasive inequality that exists among men and women in all levels of life: social, political, economic and literary life. As we know in Oman's history until 1970, women never enjoyed any kind of freedom and the fate of a slave woman was so terrific. But when Sultan Quaboo became the head of the nation, he encouraged women education and thus Oman started its all-round development.

Mayya

As we have already said, Alharthi's novel "Celestial bodies" is a great work in the field of feminist literature. Among the three sisters in the story, Mayya is the eldest one in the family. She is the daughter of Azzan and Salima. Their family is very familiar to all in that locality. Since there was no freedom for women, the female children were totally submissive to their

parents in their childhood and to their husbands after the marriage. In spite of all these, character of Mayya in this novel is an exception to the system that prevailed in the society. For, she showed extraordinary courage in facing the realities of her life.

In the beginning of the novel, she appears as a powerless woman who is yearning for her lover and praying to God that she needs nothing except seeing her lover once. She seems to be like a girl who knows nothing except sewing. Unfortunately, she is forced to marry a man whom she does not love. In fact she has no other options than accepting the decision of her family members. But we see a sudden change in Mayya after her marriage. Traditionally Omani women give birth to their children in their own home by the assistance of maidservants and they were not encouraged to go to hospital. For, they believed that if they go to the hospital, Christian girls and Indian girls will see their body.

Being a courageous woman, she insists that she wants to give birth to her child in a hospital. Though her family and her husband are against her decision, she doesn't want to give it up. Her mother explained her own experience of birth giving, but she clings close to her decision. She gives birth to her daughter at a hospital in Muscat in the midst of all the adverse circumstances. At the time of naming of her daughter, she selects an unusual and an Arabic name for her daughter, i.e., 'London'. She loves her own culture, but she doesn't like to become part of Al-awafias her only world. She always dreams a world without barriers and boundaries. She is not ready to be totally submissive to others. Rather, she has her own decisions and calculation concerning her life. She takes and executes her decisions, whenever she feels necessary. When her husband scolded their son Salim for being drunkard, Mayya justifies her son by saying that he is not a child but an adult. It seems that she is a representative of the modern woman who always has her own decision to act. In the story she buys a lipstick for her younger sister Khawla without the consent of her mother.

When she learns the love affair of her daughter 'London' she is not ready to accept it, because she knows that this relationship will not remain long. She showed the courage to speak openly about the love affair which she doesn't like. She tries to learn English and driving to become independent and to improve her life situation. She makes her life so meaningful by engaging herself in her father's home. She spends her time in sewing and after her marriage she is busy with her husband and engaged in the matters of her children and their schooling. She brings her daughter up as a free spirit. Though London married a man whom she loved, later she divorced him after realizing the fact that he is not fit for her life.

Asma

Asma, the middle one among the three sisters is a courageous and straight forward character in the novel. She loves reading books and keeps a good collection of books. She receives fairly good education. She accepts after serious consideration the marriage proposal that her father brings to her. According to her, marriage is an identity document and passport for a world greater than her home. She loves freedom and likes to enjoy life. When her neighbours and relatives make comments on her wedding jewellery and dress, she says that she doesn't want to wear things that are going to scratch her legs and feet. For Khalid (her husband) she is

dream wife and he demands a wife who has some speciality in herself. In fact, he finds his dream wife in Asma because she is interested in reading and learning different from many other women. He always encouraged her desire to read and acquire knowledge. However, he seems to be self-centred and tries to control Asma. Therefore she is not fully satisfied in her married life.

Khawla

Khawla is the most attractive character in the novel who exhibits her femininity whenever it is demanded. She has a passion towards life and she wants to celebrate it. When she wants a lipstick she tries to get it with the help of Maya her sister without the knowledge of her mother. She is so concerned about her bodily beauty and according to her reading will spoil the beauty of eyes. Khawla rejects the marriage proposal brought by her father, for she loves a man who is her sweetheart from childhood. She is very bold and she is ready to give up her life to achieve her dreams.

It was not usual in Oman that a girl argues for her right to marry a person whom she loves. Khawla rejects her family's proposal and she waited for her lover long years. Despite of her ceaseless love, he was unfaithful to her and at last she got divorced from him. She knows that divorce is unusual in her culture but she decides to keep her freedom. Khawla after her divorce opens a beauty saloon in Muscat. Despite of shocking pains in life she is always smiling and thus she proves that she is a heroine.

Najiya

Najiya, lover of Azzan is a typical feminist in the novel. She is a woman of extraordinary courage and hope. In her words "I wasn't created to serve and obey some men. Some fellow who would steal what should be mine and keep me from seeing my brother and my girlfriends! One day saying, no you cannot go out another time saying No, doesn't even get dressed; don't even think about going out! One minute saying, come here! And the next, go away". According to her Azzan belongs to Najiya but she does not belong to him. She chooses her friends very carefully. Her dedication to bring up her brother is highly appreciable. To make him stand in his own legs she took lot of suffering and pain.

CONCLUSION

Jokha Alharthi's uniqueness as a feminist writer is really unfolding through this novel. The musical quality and appealing narrative is really appreciable. This novel upholds the value of female child because when London born to Maya others are saying that the first one is a girl and a girl comes to raise her little brothers.¹ Alharthi clearly says that a home without a girl child is incomplete. It is their courage and free will that help them to come out from some of the false notions of their culture. They are faithful to their life and thus they are achieving their identity as radiant females. Themes like slavery, patriarchy, social changes and feminism are interwoven in this novel.

References

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