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A FEMINIST READING OF JOKHA ALHARTHI'S *CELESTIAL BODIES*

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**Rajेशha H K**

Assistant Professor of English

Sri D Devaraja Urs Govt. First Grade College

Hunsur-571105, Karnataka, India

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**Abstract:** Feminist criticism questions the stereotypes of women created by the patriarchy. It demands social, political, educational and economic equality for women and stop the exploitation of women in the name of religion and culture and release them from the shackles. *Celestial Bodies*, which won the Man Booker International Prize for 2019, shows the precarious condition of women especially in the Islamic state of Oman. Women are considered as procreation devices/machines to bear children all their life and to do the domestic duties which is neither recognized nor rewarded by the society as work. There is a bias in the application of rules and regulations between men and women; harsher punishments are given to women and humiliated. The condition of slaves is unspeakable as they had little to say in any matter including the issue of their marriage. They are brought, sold and made to work like animals. The patriarchal values are projected as universal values to make women accept and assimilate them, and follow without questioning these values.

**Key Terms:** stereotype, patriarchy, Marxism, slavery, socialism, culture, religion, law, labour, motherhood, fashion, jewelry, freedom, blasphemy, gender, sex, class.

Feminist movement which came to the fore in 1960s was not the beginning of feminism. It was just a renewal of an old tradition of thought and action already possessing its classic books which had diagnosed the problem of discrimination and inequality of women in the society and proposed possible solutions to these problems. These seminal books are: Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*(1792), Margaret Fuller's *Women in the Nineteenth Century*(1845), John Stuart Mills' *The Subjection of Women*(1869), Fredrich Angels' *The Origin of the Family*(1884), Olive Schreiner's *Women and Labour* (1911), Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*(1929) and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Feminism is not only a theory but also a

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political stance focusing on gender as a subject of analysis when reading cultural texts, and a platform to demand equality, rights and justice which has been denied to women for ages together for one reason or the other. The basic presumption of feminism is that the gender roles ascribed to women are pre-determined to fit them into the role of subjugation; and her role a mother, daughter, wife, or daughter in law are not natural but social construct to restrict and train her to think, talk and act in a way that the patriarchy want her to be in order to dominate women in all aspects of life. It also argues that the representation of women as weak, docile, passive, innocent, seductress, irrational, emotional et al are rooted in the society and influences the condition and treatment in the society. She has no power (political and financial) to take decisions and merely lead like an animal; treated as a sex object and procreating machine. And abused in all possible manner.

Feminist literature and cultural critics strongly believe that cultural texts like cinema, television, music, soap opera, painting, beauty contests, and reality shows present actual struggles between genders. There cultural texts naturalize the subjugation and oppression of women by associating women with the negative terms of the binary oppositions. The love of women for jewels, fashion, romance et al is not natural but social construct of

patriarchal power structure. If a woman refuses to accept these norms and forms, she would be treated as monster or witch by the society as Soorpanakha was projected as a witch, monster and seductress for not fitting into the established norms of patriarchy. On the other hand, Sita was projected as an epitome of a true womanhood as she accepts the norms of male power structure submissively. Thus, woman is consented to her own subjugation and subordination. The patriarchal education system does not allow a woman to read as a woman, she is trained to read from the point of view of a man. Patriarchal values are projected as universal values for women to follow. The language available for women is patriarchal and inherently sexist. Hence, it does not capture the experiences of women. The aim of feminist criticism is to reveal the underlying ideologies within these texts as these ideologies are used as tools to continue the oppression of women perpetually. Religion, family, education, arts, institution of marriage, and knowledge system are the social and cultural structures used to enable the inequality on women without being aware of them.

It is not disputable that woman is capable of bearing children but certain social constructs associated with this factor is not acceptable: motherhood is the symbol of a true woman; it is the pivotal role a woman must perform in her life; looking

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after children is her natural job etc. These assumptions are not biological but social construct of the patriarchy in order to keep subaltern status and oppress her and this constitutes notion of gender. The pay disparity against women is vindicated by suggesting women as weak, less intelligent and less efficient. Women's writing is not considered worth reading as it deals with less significant subjects like home. The main focus of women writing is heroine's choice of partner for marriage which will decide her social position and determine her happiness and fulfillment of life or lack of these. Hence, social differences are masked in favor of biological differences. Sex is biological but gender is social construct and they are not accidental but constructed by patriarchy to maintain dominance over women and exploit them.

Gender is not a fixed category. Gender is a continuous performance; it could not be fixed forever or universal. Its meaning depends on the location, time, and cultural framework within which it is performed. Therefore, gender and its meaning are constructed through repeated performances. Clothing, mannerism, speech and language are signs used by bodies to declare their gender to the society and/or the world. Men and women use language, clothing, and mannerism as signs of their being men and women. A woman becomes a woman, because she plays the role of woman repeatedly. Hence, gender means

repeated enactment of signs. Post-structuralism and Deconstruction have argued that the text is a system of signs, it is open ended and it never finalizes a text in terms of meaning. The signs of the text must be repeated endlessly and the meaning emerges in the context of reading at that point of time. The meaning of the text is made possible in the process of interaction between the reader(context) and the text(sign). If there is a reading, there is a text, if not there is no reading there is no text. Hence, there is no fixity in terms of gender and meaning. The postmodern theory also rejects the notion of authenticity, authority, universality and objectivity.

Socialist feminism includes class in its study of gender oppression and disparity. It argues that both capitalism and patriarchy work in tandem to subjugate women and tries to connect a link between gender roles and issues of household economy, labour and wages. We can't think of a common denominator of gender-based suffering when class matters, financial power and social prestige superimpose gender roles in these contexts. A woman Professor of French with five digits salary and with enormous prestige in metropolitan city in Europe can overcome some of the disadvantages of her gender; where as a tribal woman is triply disadvantaged by virtue of being a poor, tribal, and a woman. Therefore, these two women can't be

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measured using the same yardstick. Socialist feminism also focuses not only about industrial labour but also domestic labour. This labour is performed almost entirely by women but always unpaid and even unacknowledged. The work of women inside house is considered invisible. Hence, the sexual division of labour replicates unequal power relations of capitalism and patriarchy.

The task feminist criticism(gynocriticism) is to concentrate on how patriarchal structure/forces operate within texts written by male writers, and to evaluate how male values are assimilated by female writers. Literary texts are a vital mechanism of men for the naturalization of unequal power structure in a society. Literary texts stereotype virtuous women, the seductress and the sacrificing mother to ensure that these roles become not only acceptable but also to make desirable by girl children to acquire when they grow up. Hence, literature is an ideological tool in the hand of patriarchy to continue the subjugation of women. There is a dire need for a canon of women's writing as literary canon constituted by men has been against development of women. A woman's text will provide and suggest an alternative picture of the conditions, desires and psychology of women. The gynocritics are not happy the literary canon as it replaced one tradition(male) with another(female). Later there has been an attempt in 1980s to

homogenization of all women into one category(western white women) but gynocritics did not accept as women in different part of the world their own experiences and they are not interchangeable. Thus, it led to inclusion of race, ethnicity and class and geography as analytical category within feminism and produced new forms of feminist cultural theory: black, lesbian, third world, postcolonial, aboriginal and cyber feminism. As language available at present is patriarchal and inherently sexist, there is a need for a new language for women's writing. This new language fluid, non-linear, elliptical, partly mythic and partly mystic, and slippery; it should be partly autobiographical and partly fictional and thrive on the sexualized imagery and seek to capture the fluidity of women's bodies.

Women's body has been represented, for ages together, as mother, seductress, material, sexual and procreative device and certain patriarchal values are attributed to it: woman as self-sacrificing mother, faithful wife, dutiful daughter or obedient sister became stereotypes; beauty pageants are co modifying women's body for the pleasure of men; cosmetic surgery and body adornments became feminine modes; slimness of body is associated with feminine beauty, as shown in advertisements, films and fashion shows, forcing young girls to take drastic measure to reduce weight risking their life and

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health; the country itself imaged as female body(motherland) demanding protection by men. Though it is women's body they have little say in these assumptions. Their bodies are only an object of study, control, discipline and gaze. Their sexual desires or identity is determined by social norms that have been produced and propagated by men to continuously oppress women.

Nationalism is a masculine construction and women seldom acquire position of power in the state power structure and also, they are victims of unjust legislation. A woman is not only a biological reproducer of a country/nation but also a cultural producer. It is because of this reason men in every country want to control women's dress codes, behavior, rights and they are closely monitored and regulated according to the patriarchal value system by fundamentalists across the world and no country and no religion is exception to this. If we take India as an example, the constitution of India promises equality and freedom from discrimination, but it does not work for women due religious fundamentalists. There are many religions in India especially in Islam where women are governed by personal law of their community. Even today the practice triple talaq cannot be done away with.

As white feminism did not address the problems and oppression black women by patriarchy, a branch of feminism called

black feminism came into existence. It was against patriarchy, white feminism and also against black power movement as it failed to address issues of black women. This black feminism also had its own limitations as it did not deal with the issues of Asian Americans and Chicanos. Hence postcolonial or third world feminism came into the fore. It argues that their experiences are different from that of African Americans. Postcolonial feminism extends black feminism's concern in order to address the experiences and oppression of Chicanos, Asian American of other cultural, national and geographical locations. This gives importance to the differences and opposes the white feminist homogenization of a universal women's question. It demands the emancipation and empowerment of women keeping in mind their cultural differences.

Science as well as technology also has its own impact on feminism and it has been used by men to limit the women's sphere. Science is based on division of emotional and intellectual labour in which objectivity and reason and mind are projected as male, and feeling, nature and subjectivity are cost as female celebrating the domination of mind over nature. Cyber feminism not only questions the patriarchal nature of ICTs but also developed feminist appropriation of the same. The appropriation of cyberspace for the empowerment of women has taken many

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forms: the creation of online communities, cyber-solace, information network of women entrepreneurs etc. They constitute a means for women to enter the public sphere. Computer literacy and networking provides a woman a mode to exit the circumscribed space of home rather than be reduced to a sexual object.

It is indispensable to have a look at the predicament of women in Oman before we make a feminist reading of Jokha Alharthi's novel *Celestial Bodies* which won Man Booker International prize for the year 2019. The opinion of an individual is not just his/her opinion but the collective opinion of the society and culture one lives in. Therefore, an individual is a spokesperson of his/her culture and nation/state. The rules and regulations of Omani society and legislation are based on Islamic Sharia law. This Sharia law discriminates between men and women(gender)as it provides different rights and responsibilities for men and women. Though women are allowed to participate in politics, workforce and society to some extent, they cannot forgo or escape from their basic duties like procreation, caregiver and nurturer. The first and foremost duty of a woman is as mother and wife. The marital status and procreation determine social status of women. Unmarried women and childless women are not respected in the society and are considered cursed women. It is the

father who takes all the decisions regarding marriage of his daughters. Women have hardly any say in choosing their life/sexual partner and most of the girls are married off as soon as they reach puberty; and they are expected to be virgins at the time of marriage, if not they have to face dire consequences. Education is denied to the most of the girls and young women designating it as evil to perpetuate the subordination of women. Women are forced wear only certain type of dresses and have very little to say in this regard. It is compulsory for them to wear burka or head scarf when go out and at homes when the male members of house are present. In nutshell, women are controlled by patriarchal forces in the name of culture and religion to elongate their subjugation.

Feminism explores the cultural aspect of material life of women. The institution of marriage is used as a tool to control women and it has been projected to the women via cultural texts like cinema, television, soap operas and literature as it is an integral part of women's life. It is the fundamental duty of every women to marry, bear children and care them. Women have accepted this stereotype of them without questioning the rationale behind this and also following even to this day. Mayya, one of the central characters in the novel, waits to get married as if it is the only thing she has to do in her life. Marriage is an apparatus in the hand of men to control

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women after which she almost becomes the property of her husband who can do anything with her. In our classical literary texts also if a woman follows the steps and wishes of her husband, she would be called an ideal woman otherwise she will be projected witch, bitch and monstrous. Women also accepted that it indispensable for to enter into marriage. When a marriage proposal comes to Mayya, her like or dislike was not considered at all. Her mother just informs her that somebody wanted to her and she does not ask Mayya whether she likes the proposal or not. Hence, the preparation for the marriage begins. Mayya was in love with somebody else and wanted to marry him but she does not tell her mother, because she has no freedom to speak on such matters.

Mayya was also denied education which is one of the tools for the empowerment of women. On the one she was not given an education any kind, on the other hand she was chastised repeatedly for not pronouncing the word 'Muscat' properly. She was forced to do whatever told by her husband and follow him as if she is an animal without any desire and opinion. Mayya was even afraid to dream because she knew it can't be realized in the patriarchal society. Men were more concerned with their pride rather than comfort and safety of women. Mayya's mother, Salima, forced to give birth to their children standing like an animal. Men

would not allow her to lie as it was an issue of prestige for them: "Shame on you! Will Shaykh Masoud's daughter give birth lying down because she's too weak to stand tall and straight? For shame, girl!" This shows how women are ill-treated in the name prestige and honour of the family.

Women are represented in Omani society, like all other societies in the world that they are strange, unusual, mystic and difficult to understand. This has been proved true when Mayya names daughter as London which is odd and which has not been done by anybody they know. She was told name her child with any name which is part of their religion and tradition. The woman was made to accept and assimilate the idea that she was born to be a mother, a device for procreation and nurture by patriarchy. The responsibility of bringing up children fell on Salima and she also did it as her primary duty. Even when her daughter Mayya gives birth to a daughter it was Salima and Zarifa who take care of her. When London was born, they were very happy because she will after her brothers and sisters. The role of women as caregiver, nurturer and woman as a device of procreation has been instilled in the mind of girl children since their childhood days by male power structure: "It's God's will, this is right! The first one's a girl and a girl comes to raise her little brothers. Ten boys will follow her, God willing... Prayers be on the blessed Prophet". The patriarchy has

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used religion and culture to keep women in their control. Women are conditioned to behave as women do in TV shows and they are thought weak need a protection from the men. The superstitious beliefs of the society are spoken through women in order project her irrational. It is Mayya who says London would get polio if she plays in the muddy water.

Women's love for jewelry, cosmetics, fashion, romance and beauty are not natural to women but the social construct of the patriarchy. Women are associated and framed to behave as if these things make her truly feminine. Women's movement was restricted and not allowed go outside, hence, men thought that best way to keep women calm is to make them assimilate that fashion, beauty and such things are truly feminine. Women too assimilated things unknowingly and following it as these are natural to them. Women were told that it is duty to make their husbands happy but no speaks anything about their happiness. Khawla, Mayya's sister, keeps the lipstick, a tool of beautification exclusively used by women, hidden from others. She asked Mayya to bring it from Muscat when latter went hospital in Muscat to have baby. When Asma's marriage was fixed, Salima goes to Muscat to bring Jewelry: a heavy link necklace, one with several thin strands, ring bearing a variety of stones and a diamond ring, bangles, and bracelet etc. and

fashionable shining clothes for the marriage. Even to this day these social constructs are followed by women as this has been reinforced the patriarchy through cultural texts like cinema, advertisement, TV, soap operas. Therefore, cosmetics have become an integral part of women's life.

It is not contentious that biologically women can bear children but there are certain social constructions which are associated with this biological factor which are not acceptable: motherhood is the symbol of true female; barrenness is a curse on women; they do not go to heaven if they don't get married and give birth to children; it is the primary duty of women to bear children; nurturing children is the natural duty of a women. These are social constructions to convince women to do these duties and control women. When Mayya gives birth to London everyday Asma would come and ask her: 'What does it feel a motherhood? Is it the greatest feeling in the world?' But Mayya would not answer because it is only a cultural construction. For Mayya motherhood and nurturing meant: 'No sleep all night long and constant struggle with the baby to get her to open mouth not to mention the back pain she had after sitting in the same position for many hours.' Mayya didn't say any of this to Asma, though. Because giving free expression such feelings would be considered blasphemy and she would be

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punished by the patriarchy in the name of culture and religion.

Rape has been used as one of the weapons to control women and impose patriarchal values and ideology for many centuries across world. If a woman tries to break away from traditional patriarchal values, she would be brutally raped or gang raped at order of tribal council or village panchayath which gives judgment based their personal law. One of the examples for gang rape of an innocent woman, who has not done anything wrong, is the case of Mukhtaran Mai, a Pakistani woman was gang raped and paraded naked through the village only because her brother had an affair with woman of different tribe and as the local belief says adultery must be punished with adultery. The patriarchal society expects such women to commit suicide. The family of the girl does not go to the police station as it would become a scandal and women also keep quiet to keep the honour of the family intact. This does not happen in one place but it happens in all the countries whether it is developed country or underdeveloped across the world: 'London shook head. It's not Hanan. Even though, you know, her family refused to go to court about the rape because they were afraid of the scandal and she gave in to them'. Domestic violence against women is another crime committed even in educated affluent families for refusing to abide by the patriarchal values, even

London, a doctor, does not go to police station or court against it just keeps quiet and takes divorce and leaves it as a bad experience. She does not fight against such crime which encourages men to continue such crime without fear of any sort.

Zarifa's mother, Ankabuta, was a slave married off to another slave, Nasib, without her consent by her master. As she did not like that man, she refused to sleep with him. Hence, she was imprisoned in a room, hands and legs tied she was raped for days together. She was pregnant when she was released from the imprisonment. This is the horrific condition of slave women. They are triply oppressed: by patriarchy, poverty and slavery. A woman has no freedom or little freedom in choosing her husband. The decision is taken by her father or master. She cannot marry anybody outside her religion, sect, or caste. If she did it would be considered an insult to the family and severely punished for this, even killed in order protect the honour of the family. If a woman chooses within her community, seldom it would be accepted as in the case of Khawla. Women have been projected as emotional, irrational and romantic lacking practical knowledge by patriarchy as in the case of Khawla, who is addicted with romantic novels and books. "These books were beautiful stories about love and they always take place in forests or green pastures or verdant plains. The heroine always had a delicate prettiness and

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the hero was always strong and handsome and noble...she drew red heart pierced by arrows on the long letter she wrote, and when she found she had no picture of herself to give him( that's what the heroine in romance novels always did) she imitated what he had done years before".

In Islamic Sharia Law, punishment for adultery is biased and severe towards women and not with the men. When Hafiza commits adultery, she punished by confining in isolation for forty days and sentenced to hundred lashes in public. But rule does not apply to the men who slept with her. If a woman accuses somebody of rape, she has to produce four witnesses who have actually seen the incident and all of them have to give the same descriptions of the incident, which is impossible. That is the reason most of the rape victims do not go the court for justice which is least likely to happen in Sharia law. In turn the issue will become a scandal embarrassing the girls' family. Even though there is no mention of stoning women to death for adultery in Quran, it has been practiced by many Muslim tribes, sects and countries till recently. This shows the hypocrisy of male power structure which has one rule for women and different one for men for the same crime. Azzan, Salima's husband was not punished for adultery or for having an illicit relationship with a woman even though everybody knew. The patriarchal society expects the women to be loyal to

their husband and not vice versa. This shows the hypocrisy of men.

In Omani society, the decision of marriage of young girls is taken by the male members of the society even though women have legal rights to choose their husbands. But the patriarchy never allowed women to choose their life partners. Women were also sold like animal to for the bride price which degrades them to lower status in eyes of men. The incident of Salima's marriage is one such example which shows the helplessness of women towards their marriage. The paternal uncle of Salima informed her mother that he is go, slaves, men and women belonging to the Shaykh Said came and forcefully her and maring to marry off Salima to Azzan, one of his kinsmen, but when her mother refused to the marriageried of to Azzan, where Salima has to live all her life whether she likes it or not. This incident shows the terrible condition of women. The condition of slave women was even worse. They were married to other slaves without consent and also kept as concubines by their masters all their life. For the patriarchy women are sexual objects and procreative devices to continue their lineage.

Marxism deals with class struggle within the society that is the exploitation of vast majority of population by the minority of bourgeoisie. In the same line, socialist feminism argues importance of women's

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labour in the society. Their main focus is not only about industrial labour but also about domestic labour. The domestic labour, as indispensable as industrial labour, is mostly done by women but it was always unpaid and unacknowledged by the society. Therefore, both the patriarchy and capitalism join hands together to exploit women. If we look at the entire novel, the domestic works such as cooking, cleaning, nursing, nurturing, educating, socializing are almost entirely done by the women. But nobody recognizes this important and strenuous job performed by the women. Despite all these works, women are projected as weak, irrational, and less intelligent therefore not fit for the equal status with men. It was really impossible even to imagine what went through Khawla when her husband leaves her to take care of many kids not for weeks and months but for a decade. She has to beg her neighbors to take her kids to hospital for treatment. Her husband leaves to some other woman in Canada but she does not complain, she just bears everything from suffering in hospital while delivering the kids to their bringing up. This work is neither recognized nor appreciated nor rewarded. A woman was treated just as a machine doing this work for years together till the end of their life.

Women are stereotyped as weak, emotional, irrational, and dependent and hence need to be protected from dangers by males as motherland (which is compared to

women) needs to be protected by men. But in the form of Naziya, one of the female characters in the novel, we have a very strong woman character that is as strong, rational, independent, practical and self-confident like men, takes care of her and her family, looks after the business of her father single handedly, and protects her brother from the men who attack and insult him. She does not allow others to choose things for her, but chooses herself what she needs including her sexual partner. She does not want to marry as the institution of marriage is a trap to control and subjugate as it happens in the case of London. Naziya had a good knowledge of medicine too, she cures the illness of her brother even though doctors said his illness beyond cure. This is an example to show that if a woman makes her mind to do anything, she can do that very well and be a role model like men. Therefore, the projection of women as weak, emotional, irrational et al is a social construct of male power structure in order to keep women in control and subordination perpetually.

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