

Speech Acts of Women Empowerment in Jokha Alharthi's Celestial Bodies: A Pragmatic Analysis

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Abstract

Jokha Alharthi's the Man Booker Prize winning novel Celestial Bodies depicts Oman in transition thorough the lives of three women- Mayya, Asma and Khawla. As it always happens with literary works written in the 'other tongue', Celestial Bodies also resorts to a blending of the native language of Alharthi's characters with English, and thereby infuses the native spirit into the story told in a nonnative language.

The centrality of the three women characters works effectively in the novel to present the transitory stages of women empowerment and emancipation in Oman. The various speech acts they perform in the novel serve as an effective agency in achieving the intended purpose of voicing women's autonomy. As messages are planned and crafted, interlocutors select the form and the content that best suit their purpose. An unveiling of the motivations of the interlocutors and the reasons for the choices they make call for pragmatic interpretive strategies.

This paper investigates how the observance and violation of the speech act norms by the characters in Celestial Bodies and their cultural relativity augment its theme. We will focus on (a) a thematic analysis of the novel, (b) the importance of and the need for pragmatic analysis, and (c) an analysis of certain speech acts in the novel that strengthen and carry forward the novel's predominant theme of women empowerment.

Key words: emancipation, patriarchal, pragmatic, speech act, transition, women empowerment

Introduction

Semantics and *Pragmatics* are the two main areas of linguistic study that look at the knowledge we use to convey meaning when we speak or write and extract meaning when we hear or read. Generally speaking, as Peccei (1999.p.2) explains, *Semantics* concentrates on meaning that comes from our purely linguistic knowledge, while *Pragmatics* concentrates on those aspects of meaning that cannot be predicted by linguistic knowledge alone and takes into account our knowledge about the physical and social world. Phonology, lexis and syntax, as objects of linguistic description, constitute only a part of the elements in the language used for communication. The meaning(s) of an utterance (a sentence, a clause, a phrase, a word, etc.) do (es) not depend entirely on its form; a lot depends on who says what to whom, when, where, in what manner, and with what effect. In other words, the context of the situation in which an utterance is said is very important in deciding its meaning.

On the other hand, various schools of literary criticism offer manifold ways of approaching literary works. The most important among them are formalism, reader response criticism, sociological criticism, feminist criticism, Marxist criticism, psychological criticism, deconstruction and structuralism. However, as Kirsznner and Mandell (2017) suggest, no single school of literary criticism offers the 'right' way of approaching what we read (p.1629). Similarly, no single work of literary appreciation or criticism can be taken as the perfect analysis or a complete study of a work. An individual work of literature can be analyzed through different approaches.

A reader or a critic may analyze a work of literature with an open mind and argue for a very authentic interpretation independent of any literary theory. This calls for an intense reading of the text with special attention on every aspect of the work. Yet another possibility is to read a text with a particular literary theory in mind as a frame, so as to take an intended stance. That is to say that the reader applies a particular theory to explicate a particular point of view ('Literary Criticism', n. d.). There are also critics who attempt to refute the interpretation of a work by other critics. Very often, literary criticism calls for blended or an eclectic approach as life, and literature that reflects life, cannot be approached from a linear perspective.

If the attempt is to interpret a piece of literary work using one of the approaches, then the critics need to make a very judicious choice from among the above-mentioned approaches to analyze the work they are concerned with. And this choice depends on several factors, including the critic's philosophy of life, political views, religious affiliations, etc., especially because most works of literary criticism are persuasive in nature. Furthermore, the choice is also driven by one's research interests. As Hartman (1980) puts it, on reading a text, the critic becomes the creator of the text and this process of recreating requires the infusion of the critic into it and takes away any rigid dichotomy between the critic and the text.

Jokha Alharthi's *Celestial Bodies* can be approached in different ways as it presents a wide panorama of linguistic, social, pragmatic, cultural and psychological scenes with a focus on transition. The most conspicuous fact is that these features of the novel manifest themselves through the female characters more emphatically than the male characters in the novel. In any analysis of a literary work, its theme is of primary concern. The

predominant theme of *Celestial Bodies* is 'women empowerment' in relation to social transition. Therefore, interpreting the novel employing a blended approach of socio-feminist criticism will enhance our understanding of the work and discursal perspectives of how the meaning of gender, to use Kendall and Tannen's (2010, pp. 556-7) words, is culturally mediated and gendered identities are interactionally achieved. Borrowing from Heller's (2010, p. 250) work, our goal is also to explore the nature of discourse in interaction as a way of understanding how social reality is constructed. The paper is an attempt to focus and elaborate on some of the speech acts in the novel that undergird the theme of *women empowerment* through *social transition* and develop a pragmatic analytical perspective of social transition and women empowerment in the novel.

Celestial bodies: A thematic analysis

According to Foucault (1981, p. 58), the function of the author is to reveal or at least carry authentication of the hidden meanings that traverse literary texts. In other words, the author is asked to connect to his/her lived experiences, to the real history, which saw their birth. The author is what gives the disturbing fiction its unities, its nodes of coherence, its insertion in the real. In line with this, Jokha Alharthi's novel *Celestial Bodies* tells the story of three generations of people in Oman through the lives of an equal number of generations of an upper-class family in the Omani village of Alawafi. If the theme of a work has to convey the values and ideas expressed by the story (Kirsznner & Mandell, 2007, p. 444) then the theme of *Celestial Bodies* is that developments in the outer world bring in changes in the inner world too. As Booth puts it in her translator's introduction in *Celestial Bodies*, "The book traces an Omani family over three generations, shaped by the rapid social changes and consequent shifts in outlook that Oman's populace have experienced

across the twentieth century and in particular since Oman's emergence as an oil rich nation in the 1960s". This converges with the view of literature as a reflection of life and the necessity for valuing works of literature not as pure innocent act of creativity (Ruthven, 1991, p. 38). In *Celestial Bodies*, Alharthi presents how the edifice of a patriarchal society has been restructured and reshaped through women empowerment.

As many other effective stories, *Celestial Bodies* is varied and complex and expresses more than one theme. However, the dominating theme is that of how education and other developments in the physical environment contribute to the empowerment and emancipation of women. The three daughters in the story—Mayya, Asma and Khawla—exemplify how socio-economic changes compel the deconstruction of default assumptions of womanhood. If a girl's marriage was a familial affair left in the hands of her mother, as presented in the first chapter of the novel, the last chapter shows how it has moved to the status of an individual affair where the woman concerned is the decision maker. Khawla, who has waited for Nasir not years but decades, decides to divorce him as she could not find his loyalty and his perfect respect (p. 240). A one-time marginalized element becomes the power-center and dictates its directives to the new submissive and volatile element. In such contexts, Foucault's (1979) argument is highly relevant that discourses are 'tactical elements of blocks operating in the field of force relations' (pp. 101-2). Furthermore, Foucault (1977, 1979) has rightly argued that discourses are analytically distinct from practices, institutions and techniques, but both aspects are understood in relation to more important processes, such as invidious spread of 'bio-power' or 'the will to truth'.

Through the centrality of the three women characters—Mayya, Asma and Khawla—the novel vehemently proclaims that the degree of women empowerment is the most adept

index of progress and development. As Duflo (2012) rightly observes, there is a very close relationship between economic development and women empowerment. In one direction, development alone can play a decisive role towards bringing equality between men and women. In the other direction, empowering women bolsters development, as women also become active contributors to the economy and social changes (p.1051). The proper utilization of human resources, with little or zero tolerance to gender discrimination, is sure to bring in such succulent results. *Celestial Bodies*, the plot of which is inextricably intertwined with the history of Oman, is a striking example of how economic growth and increasing opportunities can pave the way for women empowerment and gender equality. When a daughter's job is merely to help her mother bring up the younger ones (p.18), as the Muezzin's wife mentions in the novel, it can be considered akin to the Victorian idolization of women as 'angels in the house'. The novel shows how this traditional stereotyping of women's role changes with the socioeconomic changes in a society and fosters parents' aspirations of their daughters, which, in turn, results in a fair and just treatment of women in society in general and in households in particular.

Reductive biological determinism has been a butt of criticism for all humanists as it has been a tool effectively employed by those attempting to dominate the 'softer sex'. Traditional societies have used this successfully in restrictively defining the role of women both in private and public spheres. This stereotyping along the gender lines decided what men and women should speak about, wear, do, and how they should behave in public. The novel presents several such examples of what Pope (2012) describes as the mutually reinforcing binary oppositions that underpin people's expectations of what it is to be a girl/woman or a boy/man (p.165). It also presents the evolutionary process of

iconoclastically pulling down these beliefs to the ground over the three generations of a grandmother, a daughter and a granddaughter – Salima, Mayya and London.

Literature, as modern critics opine, is an act of creativity only to the extent that it can create a fanciful halo around reality. Attempts to view literature, as a pure, innocent activity of creativity will only help in taking the sinews of life away from it. Literature, in fact, is very much part of the larger socio-cultural politics of a society. Unless approached from this perspective, *Celestial Bodies* cannot create the pungency it otherwise makes. It is within the web of the then Omani society that Alharthi entwines the alluring story of the three generations of people in the Omani village of Alawafi.

A vivid array of Omani practices, customs, beliefs, superstitions, and geographical features permeate the narrative so much that, as Veettil (2020) suggests, the reader needs to have some understanding of the Omani culture and heritage to get into the heart of *Celestial Bodies*. It also portrays the transitory stages of a country that was one of the last to abolish slavery. However, it would certainly go awry if the novel is judged as a mere depiction of the Omani culture and its period of transition. The most compelling thematic concern of the narrative is the revisionist, rather radical, struggle against the patriarchal social strata and the indomitable strife for emancipation as manifest through Mayya, Khawla and London.

The feminine authorhood of the narrative helps break the one-time state of feminist criticism as an impasse due to the male ascendancy in art and literature. It also opens up the possibility of approaching the novel from the two distinct modes of feminist criticism—the ideological reader approach of woman as a sign of semiotic systems and Gynocriticism that looks at literature as the expression of liberation of womanhood from patriarchal

dominance. Mayya's demystification of the idolized motherhood is an example of the binary of patriarchal attributions and the real experience of women. Alharthi portrays it in the following lines:

Asma went on asking about motherhood and what she called the warm intimacy of nursing! But all that nursing meant, as far as Mayya could see, was no sleep all night long and a constant struggle with the baby to get her open her mouth, not to mention the back pain she had after sitting in the same position for so many hours. Life appeared to her sharply divided into two parts, like night and day: what we live and what lives inside us (p.54).

Mayya refuses to succumb herself to what Showalter (1981) calls 'patriarchal methodolatory' (p.181) and speaks with her authority of experience. Put the other way, meanings constructed through social interaction are modified and redefined through experiences. It is this redefining of meanings that leads to a renewed sense of self and empowerment. Mayya, Khawla and London move out of the patriarchal mode of thinking that subordinates women to men in familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal and artistic domains (Alhajj, 2017). This, in turn, helps them extricate themselves from the patriarchal ideology internalized in the process of socialization.

This realization of a different 'self' is emphatically manifest in most of the speech acts the women characters in the novel perform, and so an improved appreciation of the novel requires an interpretation of those speech acts that strengthen and help carry forward the central theme of the novel.

The need for pragmatic interpretation

Literature cannot be understood fully merely through our linguistic knowledge. Words are suggestive and can convey more than what they literally mean depending on the context of the utterance or the act of communication; therefore, pragmatic interpretive

strategies need to be involved. As Veettil (2018) suggests a knowledge of the socio-cultural contexts of the interlocutors is also imperative for the readers to fully comprehend all the nuances of the speech acts they perform (p.79). That is to say, critical readers need to use pragmatic interpretative strategies. As Thakur (2008) puts it, a pragmatic analysis of the interpersonal communication profitably amplifies and facilitates a broader perspective of interpretation, appreciation and criticism of literary texts. A gainful way of doing it is through an analysis of the Speech Act as developed by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969).

Speech act, as Searle (1969) proposes, is the basic unit of communication. Every speech act is also an attempt to accomplish something with words. As speech acts are performatives comprising locutions, illocutions and perlocutions, it is important to understand what the interlocutors really want to achieve through their utterances. Moreover, speech acts are also not always performed directly. According to Thakur (2008), whatever we say is not always compatible with what we mean (p.149). In other words, speech acts can be performed indirectly. In such cases, if the recipients fail to go beyond the general outline of the sentence or the utterance, they cannot infer what the sender wanted them to infer from a particular speech act. This heightens the necessity of pragmatic analysis in the interpretation of literature.

An analysis of the speech acts of *questioning* and *warning* in *Celestial Bodies* unveils how emphatically they contribute to the novel's theme—concomitance of women empowerment and socioeconomic transition.

Speech acts of women empowerment in *Celestial Bodies*

Mayya, one of the central characters in the novel, is secretly in love with Ali bin Khalaf, who had returned from London empty-handed. Though he came back without completing his diploma, the sight of him electrified Mayya. Abdulla, merchant Suleiman's son, asks for her hand. The conversation below between Mayya and her sisters Asma and Khawla ensues from this context.

Dialogue 1:

Khawla: Mayya, you mean you would really leave us?

Asma: Are you ready for it? Just keep in mind the Bedouin woman's advice to her daughter, those words to the bride we found in that old book stuffed away in the storeroom, you know, on the cupboard shelves where all those ancient books were put. The *Mustatraf*.

Mayya: It wasn't in the *Mustatraf*.

Asma: What do you know about books, anyway? It was too there. In *al Mustatraf fi kull fann mustazraf.*, the book bound in red leather, the one on the bookshelf. *The novel Parts in the Lively Arts* – you know the book. The Bedouin woman tells the bride to use plenty of water for washing, and pile lots of kohl onto her eyelids, and to always pay attention to what there is to eat and drink.

Mayya: Yes. And that I should laugh whenever he laughs and if there are tears rolling down his cheeks, there had better be some tears rolling down mine. I must be content with whatever makes him happy and __

Khawla: What's wrong with you Mayya? The nomad woman didn't say all that. She just meant you'd be happy as long as he is happy and sad when he is sad.

Mayya: So, who feels any sadness when I am sad?

Analysis: Syntactically speaking, there are five questions in this discourse unit between Mayya and her sisters. The preliminary context of the discourse, as discussed above, is a marriage proposal for Mayya. The discourse begins with the 'Mayya, you mean you would really leave us?' This is followed by yet another question 'Are you ready for it?' It is important to note that their conversation is built around a book entitled *Mustatraf* which seems to talk about woman's role as a housewife and her responsibility to keep her husband happy.

The two questions uttered in a sequence express almost the same concern. Speakers ask questions with the expectation that their questions will be identified as requests for information. To identify 'Mayya, you mean you would really leave us?' and 'Are you ready for it?' as questions, we need to consider how particular conditions that constitute questions are both linguistically and contextually satisfied. To this end, let's first have a look at Searle's (1969) rules for questions and then examine the extent to which the above-mentioned utterances of Khawla and Asma fulfill these rules. We will also consider how this discourse unit enhances the development of the novel's principal theme of women empowerment.

Searle (1969) lays down three rules for the constitution of questions- preparatory rule, sincerity rule and essential rule. The preparatory rule says that in a real question the speaker lacks knowledge of a particular state of affairs and it is not clear either to the

sender or the receiver that the latter will provide the information without being asked. The sincerity rule says that the sender wants to gain the knowledge that he/she misses. The essential rule is related to the sender's intention of eliciting the required piece of information (p.66). Let's now consider the above-mentioned utterances in the light of these rules to see if they are real questions.

As Clark and Clark (1977) observe, an utterance is a request for information when marked by the use of the interrogative form (p.28). And, as interrogatives are incomplete propositions, Khawla's 'you mean you would really leave us?' and Asma's 'Are you ready for it?' should be requests for the required information- Mayya's willingness and preparedness for marriage. Thus, they fulfil Searle's first preparatory rule to be questions. As regards the second rule, nothing ensures us that Mayya, reticent as she is, would discuss the marriage proposal and disclose her views on the institution of marriage without being asked. Thus, the second preparatory condition also seems to be in order. Further, the two questions and the discourse built around them clearly show the two sisters' intense desire to know whether Mayya is really prepared for the marriage and fulfils the sincerity condition of questions. The eagerness with which these questions are raised and the pieces of advice Khawla and Asma offer Mayya, as seen in the discourse, show that their questions are attempts to elicit the information they want. Thus, they also satisfy the essential rule for questions.

Finally, we could also construct contextual arguments for the fulfilment of the felicity conditions. Here, we need to recall the sincerity condition that the speaker wants this information. The compelling motif behind these questions was the very nature of

Mayya as it appeared to them. To them, 'Mayya seemed lost to the world' (p.1). It never occurred even to Mayya's mother that 'pale Mayya, so silent and still would think about anything in this mundane world beyond her threads and the selvages of her fabrics or that she would hear anything other than the clatter of her sewing machine' (p.2). The concerns surfacing in the questions of Khawla and Asma become relevant in this context.

Further, as the speech acts are built into success and appropriacy conditions, there is a need for hearer response. As proposed in the essential condition of questions, the speaker attempts to elicit information from the hearer. Mayya's response to her sister's questions and the pieces of advice astounds and bewilders them. In her response, we find Mayya adjudicating and ridiculing the traditionally held view that a woman's job is to make her man happy and to always pay attention to what there is to eat and drink. She is full of sarcasm when she says that she should laugh whenever he laughs and if there are tears rolling down his cheeks there had better be some tears rolling down hers and that she must be content with whatever makes him happy. Her question 'So who feels any sadness when I am sad?' epitomizes her criticism of the patriarchal semiotics of woman presented as a subservient married partner. The pungency of her question is strong enough to consider it as a strong emotional challenge and call for inter-gender equality which is liable to shake the foundations of patriarchy. Silent and abstemious as she was, "Mayya heard everything in the world there was to hear" (p.2). However motionless her body might be, hers was a soul turbulent and open to the hues of life.

Let's now consider another discourse unit from the novel that enriches the theme of women empowerment and emancipation. It is a conversation between two Bedouin women- Qamar and her friend Khazina. Qamar, whose real name is Najiya, is called so because of her stunning beauty. In a moonlit night when Azan, Mayya's father, was returning home from the evening's conviviality at the nomad's settlement, 'he was startled by the sight of a human shadow between the rises of the sand' (p.40). It was Najiya waiting for him. Najiya, 'An houri of paradise' as she appeared to him, expressed without any circumlocution, her desire to have him. She bluntly said, "I am Najiya. I am Qamar, the moon. It is you I want." On hearing this, Azan gripped his sandals, shoved them tightly under his arms and fled. Immediately after this, Najiya goes to her friend Khazina. The interaction given below is subsequent to this.

Dialogue 2:

Khazina: This man is married to the daughter of Sheikh Masoud, and he is the Shaykh of their whole clan. You think he will really leave her to marry you?

Najiya: 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. Some fellow who would steal what should be mine and keep me from seeing my brother and girlfriends! One day saying, no, you cannot go out another time saying, No, don't even get dressed, don't even think about going out! One minute saying, come here! And the next go away! No, no, Khazina. Azan will be mine but I won't be his. He will come to me when I want him, and he will go away when I say so. Ever since I saw him that evening, sitting with others, talking and laughing, I knew this man would be Qamar's. And he runs away? He flees? That man

scampered of, like I was a jinni taking him by surprise, so he fled! Refuse me? Qamar? There's ever yet been a man created who can refuse me.

Khazina. Azan will come to me on his knees" (pp. 42 – 43).

Analysis: Our attempt here is to analyze Azina's "This man is married to the daughter of sheikh Masoud, and he is the sheikh of their whole clan. You think he will really leave her to marry you?" as her speech act of warning. The success conditions of warning say that the speaker believes that the event involved in the warning, if it occurs, is not in the best interest of the hearer. The utterance counts as an undertaking that the event is not in the hearer's best interest.

We have no reason to believe that Najiya is unaware of the fact that Azan is married to Shaykh Masoud's daughter. Thus, Khazina's utterance is best considered more as a speech act of cautioning than anything else. However, there is also the illocutionary effect of warning Najiya about the consequences of marrying a man who is married to a Shaykh's daughter. In this indirect speech of warning, Khazina is asking Najiya to forget Azan or to be careful in her plans to espouse him.

We need to look at Khazina's 'this man is married to Shaykh Masoud's daughter' under Omani felicity conditions. If we juxtapose her declarative with western felicity conditions, it would not mean more than a statement of a piece of information. However, when studied under Omani felicity conditions, it turns out to be a speech act of cautioning and warning. When Khazina says that Shaykh Masoud is the head of their whole clan, it implies that Najiya and Khazina belong to a different clan—the clan of Bedouins. This note of cautioning and warning needs to be seen in the context of

the powers shaykhs wield/wielded in the Omani society. As Hudson (1980) observes, felicity conditions are not the same in all cultures. The realization of a speech act is largely realized by the culture of the speech act community (p.111). It is in the cultural context of Oman that Khazina's statement becomes a speech act of cautioning and warning.

What is more pertinent to the topic of our discussion is Najiya's response to Khazina's cautioning that Azan is married to a shaykh's daughter. Khazina's speech act of cautioning and warning creates an environment to give vent to her views on marriage. Her perspectives on marriage and the role of a woman as a wife are on par with those of the modern feminist Greer (2000) who argues that marriage reinforces patriarchal relations from the outset. Greer condemns the view that in a patriarchal society a woman 'must not only be seen to be at her husband's side on all formal occasions, she must also be seen to adore him and never to appear less than dazzled by everything he may say or do. Her eyes should be fixed on him but he should do his best never to be caught looking at her' (p.263). There is a striking similarity between Najiya's disparagement of the subservience a patriarchal society demands of a wife and Greer's observations on the same.

Yet another speech act in the novel that vehemently trumpets the empowerment of women is that of persuasion. As Walton (2007) puts it, persuasion is a speech act that involves some sort of change of opinion or acceptance of a belief, from an initial state to a new state that is the outcome of the act of persuasion (p.46- 47). There are several occasions in the novel where the female characters dominate in situations of conflict and make their counterparts accept them. Khawla's refusal to marry Emigrant Issa's son instantiates this. Her parents found no reason to turn the proposal down; however, it was unacceptable to

Khawla. “Khawla dropped her jaw and began saying ‘no’, faintly at first but then fiercely. She went semi-hysterical and kept saying no, no, no, no. She ran towards the girls’ room at the other end of the courtyard and shut the door behind her. She refused to open up to anyone before her father’s return. She would talk to him herself” (p.86).

On her father’s return home, we find the unrelenting Khawla giving vent to her protests unrestrictedly. In an attempt to persuade her father, she even threatens to kill herself if she is forced into a marriage that is not her choice. She is expressive and emphatic when she says ‘WAllahi, 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 tells her father that she would never stop talking the way Mayya had stopped talking when they married her off without asking her opinion. Mayya had not had an education but Khawla had (p.89).

Khawla’s success in persuading her father to retract his proposition exemplifies how education empowers women and raises them from being subservient to others to domineering decision makers. Mayya, the uneducated, had no say in her marriage. She was unruffled when Salima, her mother, told her about the proposal. However, In Khawla, the educated, we find a colossal amount of unrelenting resolution and women empowerment.

Conclusion

As we have seen, *Celestial Bodies* eloquently talks about how the developments in the physical world can invariably affect the inner world of thoughts, ideas and values. As the context and environment change, meanings are interpreted differently and modified to suit

the new environment. Developments in education, science and economic conditions expose the members of a community to things unknown to them otherwise, and motivate them to think divergently. In the words of Stibbe (2015), people start resisting 'the cognitive imposition of stories and reframe the frames employed to structure a particular area of life (p.48). In the case of *Celestial Bodies*, the sign 'woman' acquires new meanings through the refusal of the central women characters in the novel to live by the stories that placed them in patriarchal frames. An analysis of the speech acts in the novel clearly manifests this woman empowerment, which took place during an epoch-making period in the history of Oman.

The analytical discussion of speech acts used for women empowerment in Jokha Alharthi's novel *Celestial Bodies* suggests that communicative competence includes the whole of linguistic competence plus the whole of the amorphous range of facts included under sociolinguistic-pragmatic competence i.e., the rules and conventions for using language items in contexts, and other factors like attitudes, values, socio-cultural, and socio-political motivations.

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