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BA English Honours | Semester V | Calicut University

Narratives of Middle East

Course Code: ENG5EJ304(2) • Module 3 Notes

Unit 9: Celestial Bodies – Jokha Alharthi

Jokha Alharthi and the Man Booker International Masterpiece

Jokha Alharthi made global literary history when her novel *Celestial Bodies* (*Sayyidat al-Qamar*, translated into English by Marilyn Booth) became the first Arabic novel to win the prestigious Man Booker International Prize in 2019. Set in the village of al-Awafi in Oman, the novel offers an intricate, polyphonic chronicle of three generations of an Omani family, mapping the country's turbulent transition from a rural, slave-owning, highly stratified traditional society into an oil-rich modern state.

Three Sisters: Mayya, Asma, and Khawla

The novel centers on the interior lives of three sisters, each embodying divergent responses to the mandates of marriage and patriarchal duty:

- **Mayya:** Married to Abdallah, the son of a wealthy merchant. Mayya endures domestic life in cold, stoic detachment; having secretly loved another man whom she could never marry, she names her firstborn daughter London as a silent, defiant gesture of longing for an unreachable cosmopolitan horizon.
- **Asma:** Marries out of pragmatic familial obligation, finding an intellectual sanctuary in literature, poetry, and scholarly education.
- **Khawla:** Refuses all local suitors, spending decades waiting in romantic fidelity for her beloved Nasir, who has emigrated to Canada, only to face bitter disillusionment when he finally returns.

The Ghost of Chattel Slavery and Patriarchal Guilt

Alharthi bravely breaks one of the deepest taboos of Arabian Gulf historiography by exposing the pervasive legacy of chattel slavery, which was officially abolished in Oman only in 1970. Through characters like Zarifa (an enslaved concubine who effectively raised Abdallah) and Sanjar, Alharthi reveals how the psychological scars of bondage continue to haunt contemporary social relations. Abdallah's haunting memories of his tyrannical father Merchant Sulayman and the brutal physical punishments inflicted on slaves expose the dark underbelly of patriarchal power, revealing that oil-fueled modernization has not erased historical guilt.

Unit 10: Cities of Salt – Abdul Rahman Munif

Abdul Rahman Munif and the Poetics of Petrofiction

Abdul Rahman Munif (1933–2004), one of the greatest Arab novelists of the twentieth century, was stripped of his Saudi citizenship due to the uncompromising political critiques embedded in his literary corpus. His monumental masterpiece *Cities of Salt* (*Mudun al-Milh*, translated by Peter Theroux) is widely recognized as the foundational text of global "petrofiction," investigating the catastrophic environmental, social, and cultural devastation wrought by the discovery of petroleum in the Arabian peninsula.

The Destruction of Wadi al-Uyoun and Neocolonial Rupture

The novel opens in the idyllic, ancient desert oasis of Wadi al-Uyoun, where Bedouin communities have lived for centuries in sustainable balance with water springs and date palms. The arrival of American oil company prospectors—accompanied by bulldozers, barbed-wire fences, and armed guards—shatters this ancient world. The sacred date groves are uprooted, the freshwater streams polluted, and the oasis completely obliterated to construct oil derricks and refineries. Munif captures the profound ecological bereavement of the local inhabitants, symbolized by the legendary patriarch Miteb al-Hathal, who mounts his camel and vanishes into the desert wilderness, refusing to submit to American corporate dominion.

"Cities of Salt": The Illusion of Petro-Modernity

Munif coins the devastating metaphor of "cities of salt" to describe the mushrooming petro-cities (like Harran) that erupt overnight along the coast. Salt cities are fragile, unnatural mirages built purely on oil revenues: when the oil runs out or when the waters of global capital shift, these cities will dissolve into nothingness, leaving behind ecological desolation and cultural ruin. The local Arab population is transformed into an alienated, underpaid proletariat working under humiliating, segregated conditions beneath American engineers, exposing petroleum extraction as a brutal continuation of Western imperial plunder.

Unit 11: Persepolis I – Marjane Satrapi

Marjane Satrapi and the Graphic Memoir Revolution

Marjane Satrapi's autobiographical graphic novel *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (2000) transformed global comics studies, demonstrating that the visual-verbal medium of the graphic memoir can tackle complex political history, religious totalitarianism, and state trauma with extraordinary sophistication and devastating emotional resonance. Satrapi chronicles her upbringing in Tehran between 1979 and 1984, witnessing the overthrow of the brutal US-backed Shah Reza Pahlavi, followed by the hijacking of the revolution by Ayatollah Khomeini's fundamentalist theocracy and the bloody horrors of the Iran-Iraq War.

Adolescent Rebellion Against Fundamentalist Hegemony

Growing up in an educated, Marxist, intellectual household, the young Marji finds her free-spirited childhood crushed by compulsory state theocracy: the veil is mandated in schools, bilingual and secular academies are shut down, and boys and girls are segregated. Satrapi uses minimalist, stark black-and-white ink drawings that deliberately subvert orientalist visual tropes, emphasizing the universal humanity of ordinary Iranians resisting totalitarian control. Marji's domestic sphere becomes a sanctuary of subversive rebellion: her parents host clandestine parties with homemade wine, while Marji smuggles Western punk-rock cassette tapes (Iron Maiden, Kim Wilde), wears Michael Jackson buttons, and defiantly talks back to the moral enforcement brigades of the Guardians of the Revolution.

The Trauma of War and the Cult of Martyrdom

Satrapi captures the terrifying horror of the eight-year Iran-Iraq War: Iraqi Scud missiles raining down on residential Tehran neighborhoods, the horrific bombing of her Jewish friend Neda Baba-Levy's home, and the regime's cynical manipulation of impoverished working-class boys who are sent into minefields with plastic "keys to paradise" promised by the clergy. When Marji's fearless outspokenness threatens to result in her arrest and execution, her desperate parents send her into solitary exile in Vienna at the age of fourteen. *Persepolis* stands as a timeless monument to human resilience against political authoritarianism.

Unit 12: The Wrong End of the Telescope – Rabih Alameddine

Rabih Alameddine and the Syrian Refugee Crisis

Rabih Alameddine's National Book Critics Circle Award and PEN/Faulkner Award-winning novel *The Wrong End of the Telescope* (2021) provides a profoundly moving, queer, and decolonial perspective on the contemporary Syrian refugee catastrophe. The narrative centers on Dr. Mina Simpson, an Arab American transgender physician working in international oncology in the United States, who travels to the Greek island of Lesbos to volunteer at the notorious Moria refugee camp, the primary entry point for thousands of desperate asylum seekers fleeing the Syrian civil war across the perilous Aegean Sea.

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Deconstructing the Western Humanitarian Spectacle

Alameddine directly interrogates what Teju Cole terms the "White Savior Industrial Complex." On the beaches of Lesbos, European NGO volunteers, social media influencers, and documentary crews converge like voyeurs, eager to film crying Syrian children stepping out of inflatable rafts to bolster their own moral vanity. Alameddine exposes the profound absurdity and structural impotence of international humanitarianism: while well-meaning volunteers hand out dry blankets and hot soup, Fortress Europe erects razor-wire fences, criminalizes rescue boats, and systematically deports desperate families back to active war zones.

Queer Arab Identity and the Politics of Belonging

Through Mina's deep friendship with Sumaiya, a fiercely resilient Syrian mother dying of terminal liver cancer within the camp, the novel explores the entangled complexities of exile, trauma, and bodily autonomy. As a trans woman who fled conservative homophobia in Lebanon decades earlier, Mina recognizes that both refugees and queer individuals are forced into exile by societies that cannot accommodate human difference. Alameddine refuses simple sentimentality, offering instead an exquisite meditation on empathy, human fragility, and the enduring dignity of the displaced.

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 3 Middle Eastern Geopolitics & Decolonial Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 1)

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The literary and cinematic narratives explored in this course operate as powerful acts of epistemic counter-insurgency. By centering local voices, regional historical memories, and intricate domestic realities, writers like Jokha Alharthi, Abdul Rahman Munif, and filmmakers like Scandar Copti and Dania Bdeir shatter orientalist hegemony. They reveal a region pulsating with internal ideological contestations, where subaltern subjects continuously resist both domestic authoritarianism and external imperial interference.

2. Petrofiction, Neoliberal Urbanism, and Ecological Displacement

The discovery and extraction of petroleum remains the single most transformative and traumatic geopolitical event in modern Middle Eastern history. As theorized by Amitav Ghosh and developed in the literary scholarship on "petrofiction," the transition to an oil-dominated economy disrupted millennial-old agrarian rhythms, sustainable nomadism, and communal social structures. The resulting wealth did not democratize the region; rather, it consolidated rentier state monarchies, subsidized authoritarian surveillance apparatuses, and fostered speculative neoliberal urbanism built upon the hyper-exploitation of disenfranchised migrant laborers.

In literary works such as Munif's *Cities of Salt* and anthropological analyses like Ahmed Kanna's study of Dubai, petro-modernity is unmasked as an ecological and social catastrophe. Ancient oases and desert coastlines are replaced by fragile, unsustainable "salt cities" characterized by deep social apartheid and precarious migrant servitude. Literature emerges as an indispensable ecological archive, documenting the irreversible loss of ancestral landscapes while mourning the displacement of indigenous wisdom by corporate transnational capitalism.

3. Gender, Bodily Sovereignty, and Subaltern Transgressions

Middle Eastern women writers and queer creators occupy an extraordinary forefront in the struggle for human liberation. Resisting both the patronizing "white savior" narratives of Western liberal feminism and the suffocating repressions of indigenous religious theocracies and feudal patriarchies, these artists construct autonomous spaces of defiance. Bodily mobility—whether Manal al-Sharif seizing the steering wheel of a car, Marjane Satrapi wearing punk rock badges beneath her mandatory veil, or Mohammad performing aerial queer drag atop a Beirut crane—becomes a revolutionary site of political struggle.

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 3 Middle Eastern Geopolitics & Decolonial Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 2)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 3 Middle Eastern Geopolitics & Decolonial Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 4)

1. Orientalism, Imperial Epistemologies, and the Subversion of the Western Gaze

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 3 Middle Eastern Geopolitics & Decolonial Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 5)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 3 Middle Eastern Geopolitics & Decolonial Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 6)

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Supplementary Scholastic Discourse: Module 3 Middle Eastern Geopolitics & Decolonial Hermeneutics (Extension Cycle 7)

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