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Book Review

BITTER ORANGE TREE

by Jokha Alharthi, Simon and Schuster UK, UK, pp. 224, ISBN: 978-1646220038.

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Much like the stories in Nora Ephron's romantic comedies, my tale with Jokha Alharthi began with a movie worthy moment. I was in the Kolkata Book Fair, the first big event after the two years of the pandemic that I had hyped myself to attend despite my worry of the virus. I have stayed free of the virus so far, and while I would like to believe it is because of my evolved immunity, the truth is that it is the result of my years of being an introvert. Back at the Book Fair, tending to my anxiety watching the crowd, as my brain appreciated the myriad ways one can wear a mask wrong, in the midst of the chaos of different romances I spied a book that stood haughtily in the middle row. The teens surrounding it were busy calculating on Splitwise how to best buy the most recent romance between the three of them and hardly glanced at the innocuous looking paperback book with three women in hijab walking a dusty road.

I had of course heard of Jokha. A few years back she had won the International Booker Prize and she was notorious about not writing an acknowledgement note for her publishers. She is hardly social and you would find very few interviews with her. In short, if I was religious in any way, I would of course become a Jokhaian – a disciple of the great goddess of introverted life. All of this flashed in front of my eyes in the thirty seconds that I had between making my way to *The Celestial Bodies* and picking up the copy. 'We just got two copies of this for the Book Fair. I am glad you are picking this one up!', quipped my friendly neighbourhood bookstore lady as she stuffed the paperback into a carry bag. 'Make sure you read it soon. Her new book is coming in the next few months and we have heard it is going to be brilliant.'

So that is how I met Jokha and her first book. In the middle of a crowded room, where our destinies locked into each other, and within the first few chapters I knew I had found myself a confidante who I know I will never meet (something which we both appreciate) but who somehow knows exactly how to put into words all the ways I feel.

When *Bitter Orange Tree* came out, I braved a storm on a Friday evening to find myself in my neighbourhood bookstore and brought her home. But here was the catch. I was too worried to read it. Don't get me wrong. From all the reviews I was hearing, it was a brilliant book. But I was worried that somehow I had built her up so much in my head in the last few months that failure was imminent. Oh, I might have forgotten to add that along with being an introvert, I am also a very charming pessimist when it comes to relationships. I knew the honeymoon phase with Jokha must be getting over and this book would put us into the everyday place of being just another writer-reader relationship, with a faint whiff of memories of having been one whom I had mildly been obsessed with for quite some time.

The other reason for this worry was the story itself. It was about a granddaughter's quest to understand her grandmother's and by extension her own story and through that exploring the questions of status, desire, agency and most importantly definition. Having grown up in a household of women (my father and the dog being the only males in the house and completely ineffectual in front of my grandmother and mother), both of us sisters grew up with our grandmother's aphorisms and stories. But it wasn't an easy relationship. My *thakuma* was a refugee as well as a single mother and this had had a profound influence in shaping her. She was not the kind who would cook you your favourite meals or save you from your mother's wrath when you did something stupid. She was rather the one who would take you to bookstores and let you choose your own reading, the one who would fight with your teenage self with equal gusto when you tried to question everything that you were being told. Unsympathetic to tears, she would always tell our pigtailed bleary-eyed selves to never reveal our weaknesses as the world would never let us forget it.

So, with this set of prejudices in my heart, I finally started reading *Bitter Orange Tree* on a sultry June night in my room in Calcutta. I was spending a month at home and I had carried the book like an albatross hanging on my neck from Delhi to Calcutta, hoping that being at home would make me a little more courageous about approaching it.

Bitter Orange Tree is about a lot of things. It is about Zuhur, an Omani student in Britain whose homesickness is intricately tied to the avalanche of stories she buries within herself about the women of her family, having chewed them up like a bitter orange rind, the acidity from it still singeing her tongue. It is about Suroor, her sister Kuhl and the film of slime that wealth creates to cocoon them from the world of Imrans and calloused hands. It is about Bint Aamir, Zuhur's grandmother with a life lived on rent—to make homes which will never be yours, to live in the twilight space of the verandah under the bitter orange tree. It is about Sumayya, the dynamo, that needs to be diffused if it has to fit into the mould of being acceptable. It is about Athurayya and the burden of her soul that had spilled itself like oil over destinies of men and babies, leaving her with the powers to heal others but not herself. Above all it is about the topographies of sorrow and loneliness that women contain within themselves, worlds which have no maps or guides to help the next in line.

Unlike Jokha's *The Celestial Bodies*, *Bitter Orange Tree* is told through the eyes of one—who is ironically already split between memory and presence, between Oman and the West, between love and indifference; Zuhur is always the third monkey in all the stories she retells. Yet, the guilt is always hers to bear. In one of the most striking and oppressive images in the novel, Zuhur performs penance every night in nightmares for the loneliness of her now-dead grandmother. As Bint Aamir sits forlorn under the tree and calls to her grandchildren with the imploring 'Don't Go', an invisible hand rises from the pages and drags me back to my younger years when *thakuma* would lay in her bed, hair matted in abandon calling out to me numerous times before I would actually answer—the young me seeing her loneliness as something that was not mine to

figure out. In her last days, whenever I would come back from Delhi for holidays from college, I would first go to her room to give her a hug, and she would start crying—a cry which was mostly tears and an odd growling. It was almost her way of saying ‘Don’t go’, and much like Zuhur I would quickly get away, because I did not have the language to understand or respond to the intensity of her feelings.

Language and its failure lie central to the conflict in *Bitter Orange Tree*. Throughout the novel, language, with its form, structure and straight lines—created to serve the world of man—falls grievously inadequate to express the world of women. Be it Sumayya’s silence regarding the articulation of her fear of her abusive husband, or Kuhl’s inability to string the right words together to defend her love for Imran against her family, language always arrives in retrospect, to pick on the ruins of what remains or worse, as ‘dream-fogs’ that leave you unsettled.

Where language fails, desire blooms. Desire in the novel manifests itself in different forms, each more thwarted than the other. There is the basal and carnal desire to be touched, to be explored as flesh. Many of the women in the story marry multiple men, young women bartered to older men and passed on like cattle after the men’s death. There is carnality in these unions, but none of these awaken the desire that finds itself in the ache that Zuhur feels watching the sweat trickle down Imran’s neck. Zuhur herself stumbles on the edges of desire where her pity for Bint Aamir for never having had a man explore her or trace her eyebrows and her chin, is dangerously mixed with her own arduous gatekeeping of forbidden desires for both Kuhl and Imran. Desire also manifests itself in ownership. In a world where women’s right to possession comes with a large baggage of guilt that grows like a tumour within and without, children fulfil the desire for ownership—they are the ones who ground your identity into something which is real. So, while Shaykha roams about like a ghost awaiting the return of her son, Bint Aamir raises her best friends’ children and grandchildren with the literal milk of her rejected one-eyed self. Desire finally finds itself in transgression, teasing the boundaries set by class, age and destiny, jumping across that taut rope with rage and abandonment. It revels in its most powerful stance as Kuhl finds herself a home in the folds of Imran’s shirt or when marble-stoned Sumayya wills her destiny to bend and reshape itself in her piss-soaked jeans as the world prays far away.

For the longest time I have wanted to write the story of my grandmother. I have felt that by tracing her journey through Partition, through motherhood, and finally through old age, I will be able to give a definition to my search for meaning in my life. This feeling has become more pronounced over the last two years when faced with a personal crisis I focused all my energy in resurrecting my grandmother in my mind—through half-awake dreams and mind-fogs—to get my heart to survive. Zuhur’s reimagining of Bint Aamir’s childhood and adulthood follow the same manic energy of trying to find in history the answer to the listlessness of the present. Borrowed nostalgia is a powerful drug as it benumbs you to act in the present, while the future morphs into nothing but a hallucinatory whirlpool. It makes you feel like you are moving while you are standing still. Much like a bitter orange tree. Or the dome of a church that my

grandmother would point to me every time we would be in a car on the bypass. You don't visit these places, but transform them into shrines of singular truths. Truths that you then burden with centuries of oppression, guilt and expectations. Truths which wilt away as you take away their sustenance by refusing to visit them. *Bitter Orange Tree* is about unravelling these truths, learning to unspool the contradictory versions as you grow from being a young girl to a woman. It is about learning that language will always betray us, deserting us right when we need it. It is about manufacturing a bhasha that can express this betrayal. It is finally about constructing words for the chaos and the guilt that wraps itself like an uncomfortable scratchy quilt that I first felt all those years back and which refuses to go away, something that can answer to the loneliness of the two simple words—'Don't go'.