The Unspoken Architecture of Story: Translating High-Context Worlds in Jokha Alharthi's Celestial Bodies

Amal Gouda Abdel Aziz

Department of English Language and Literature, College of Languages and Humanities. Qassim University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Abstract
Translating Jokha Alharthi's *Sayyidat al-Qamar* (2010) into *Celestial Bodies* (2018) involves more than linguistic transposition; it requires putting into words a whole mode of thought—it entails a complete cognitive map. Employing Edward T. Hall's high-context culture paradigm as the central lens, I argue that Alharthi's novel is structurally and stylistically articulated through the norms of its Omani milieu—a landscape in which meaning is passed down via social knowledge, symbolic implication, and penetrating silence. Rather than take apart this subtextual architecture to suit a low-context readership, the translator Marilyn Booth engineers an elaborate mimetic experience in English. By means of a careful comparative assessment, this research shows how Booth's reading of the novel's chronological disjunctions, its culture-derived metaphors, and its strategic pauses are an analysis of learning to interpret. As a result, the English text emerges as an important venue for interaction, not as a neutral medium which masks the translator's interpretive role and suppress cultural divides to sound natural in English, but as a space in which the reader comes face to face with the cultural, linguistic, interpretive, and structural realities of the original text. The English translation exhibits the pains and pleasures of cross-cultural interpretation and involves readers in the shaping of meaning. It becomes a site where meaning is negotiated, not just given.
Keywords: High-Context Communication, Cultural Translation, Arabic Literature, Omani Novel, Narrative Interpretation, Jokha Alharthi, Marilyn Booth

1. INTRODUCTION: MORE THAN ONE VOICE.

Marilyn Booth's *Celestial Bodies* (2018), translated into English from Jokha Alharthi's *Sayyidat al-Qamar* (2010), is a remarkable example, as the first Arabic literature to win the Man Booker International Award in 2019. Showing a multi-generational family saga in an Omani village, the novel explores family relations, gender roles, and the tension between tradition and modernity in a non-linear way. Al-Harthi's work possesses characteristics of a Bakhtinian polyphonic novel, in which a plurality of single and independent "voices" of characters interplay independently of one authorial viewpoint (Jianing, R. et al.).

While critics have widely praised the multivocal narrative structure and historical assessment in Jokha Alharthi's *Celestial Bodies*, this focus may obscure the novel's more salient artistic accomplishment: its deep cultural expression. Through a rich description of the rituals, material practices and traditional economic pursuits the author presents her narrative as an extremely layered portrait of Omani culture and society (Zaydu 2019). Everything, from birth and marriage rites to eating habits, dress, and trade, is embedded in male and female characters' social roles and experiences, creating the village of al-Awafi as a symbolic epitome of Omani

society (Zaydu, 2019). This narrative also prioritizes popular heritage, particularly proverbs and colloquial expressions, as a means of advancing shared values and ways of thinking and highlights social transformations that add the culturally rooted quality (Hanina, 2021).

This high-context story presents major challenges in translation to English, a language that favors blunt and direct expression. Exploring these issues can be undertaken using Edward T. Hall's (1976) typology of high-context (HC) and low-context (LC). His model has become ubiquitous and widely applied as a framework for showing how cultures convey different meanings. HC cultures focus on indirect cues about meaning based on common experiences, relationships, and even situational signals, while LC cultures emphasize overt communication via direct, deliberative, and clear sharing of information (Hall, 1976). Oman is a good example of a high-context society in which communication is not merely a matter of transmitting information, but a culturally situated practice, shaped by social ties, collective memory, hierarchy, and shared history.

As a result, *Sayyidat al-Qamar* can be regarded as a literary territory grounded in HC principles, as evidenced by its nonlinear structuring, its symbolic density, and its meaningful use of silence. The challenge of translation has thus evolved from being concerned with textual fidelity to cultural mediation, translating the implicit meanings but making them available to audiences without sacrificing their integrity. Ultimately, the aim of this study is to highlight Booth's foreignization as strategic approach, as one that maintains the cultural quality of the texts while allowing English to retain its unique functions and serve to enhance the interpretation of the new readership.

2. Hypothetical Grounds: Logic of Implication.

Only through cultural theory interlaced with translation dynamics do we develop a conceptual apparatus that is able to see the narrative as a cultural act.

2.1 Jokha Alharthi and *Celestial Bodies*.

Jokha Alharthi is an Omani novelist and academic who broke new ground with *Celestial Bodies*, a novel that merges oral storytelling techniques with modernist ones. The story's nonlinear structure and multiple perspectives echo the oral tradition of Oman and its emphasis on gender and slavery speaks to international literary interests (Franklin 2019). Critics laud its lyrical prose and cultural specificity, which in turn bring forth unique translation challenges, especially when it comes to translating Omani tribal hierarchies and the legacy of slavery (abolished in 1970). The authors of recent studies highlight self-Orientalism as an area in which Alharthi creates an 'authentic' Omani society to attain the global stage by weaving together tradition with Western influences (Sayadani et al., 2020).

The novel turns out to be an episodic account of the stories of past and present in Oman but set against the lives of characters in the village of Oman, al-Awafi. It centers on the three sisters — Mayya, Asma, and Khawla — and their wider family connections to examine the transform of a previously established slavery-based society into a more modern one of Oman's post-colonial" rule. Madhu (2020) contends that it is not a linear path to progress but rather a "post-traditional" change, a time of anxiety, ambivalence and "microscopic transitions" (p. 79). Alharthi, then, neither glorifies the hierarchical past nor blindly applauds oil-based modernity; rather she presents a world hanging in the balance between two cultures, haunted by transgenerational stress and the ongoing battle to come to terms with past and present values (Madhu 2020).

The clash between tradition and modernity manifests in shifts in gender roles, attitudes towards education and slavery and the slow breakdown of class divisions. The older

generations, represented by Salima and Merchant Sulayman, shun modern inventions like air conditioners and paper money and cling hard to the slaveholding regime — as shown by Sulayman's brutal punishment of the slave Sanjar. In contrast, Mayya's childbirth in a Muscat hospital and the provocative naming of her daughter "London" land in her mother's face in scandal and indicate an uncertain entry into the West. But this middle-class generation remains entangled: the sisters accept arranged marriages and withdraw into quiet, unfulfilled domestic lives. The novel's most thoughtful narrator, Mayya's husband Abdallah, embodies the mental toll of such ambivalent existence, troubled by the past of his father's brutality and the persistent shadows of slavery.

The youngest generation, represented by London, enjoys more freedoms in an oil-changed Oman. An educated, outspoken doctor who attends graduate school overseas and selects a husband across class lines, London seems to be breaking the path of history. While she gives in to modern materialism under the embrace of luxury cars and bigger homes, she exposes the pressures and constraints of modernity. Through such complex pictures, Alharthi demonstrates the uneven and ambivalent nature of social progress. Achievements in female autonomy and education sit side by side with a new type of consumerism and unresolved historical wounds, resulting in a society that is neither wholly traditional nor assertively progressive.

2.2 Narrative as a System of High Context.

Though *Celestial Bodies* has been investigated for its literary and feminist aspects, few studies use cultural communication theories such as Hall's to its translation. This article serves to address this gap by examining the way in which high-context Omani elements are translated into low-context English, giving a new emphasis for the globalization of Arabic literature.

Hall's HC/LC model (1976) provides a useful framework for studying cultural produce. Hall then proposed high-context and low-context cultures to describe different ways of communicating and cultural orientation and to gain understanding of high-context and low-context cultures with the aim of facilitating cross-cultural communication. According to him, meaning and context are inextricably interrelated. HC culture versus LC culture distinction refers to how much of the meaning comes through context in comparison to the language. In low-context cultures — as Anglo-American cultures —meaning is carried throughout the language itself and with marginal dependency on context. Consequently, communication in such cultures tends to be straightforward, direct and analytical. On the other hand, in high- context cultures, such as in Japanese and Arabic cultures, meaning is more closely related to the context of an area than it is to the words. This knowledge is mostly implied in the text, drawing upon cultural memory, relational awareness and nonverbal signals. In such cultures people understand one another without uttering words, as the context of the moment and common ground of the people can determine meaning.

A high context addresser usually suggests rather than states meaning and relies on the listener's interpretation. The speaker does not have to be too particular, as the details they need to convey, in their proper context, are assumed to be known. High-context communication is characterized by the expectation of a receiver to understand meaning fully while in low context cultures, the speaker must give meaning explicitly and completely in verbal or written communication.

Indirectness is a characteristic of Arabic communication, which involves hiding the speaker's intentions, needs, or goals from others during interactions (Feghali, 1997). It is important to point out that most Arab societies fall under the category of high-context cultures, and that much of the meaning is not verbalized but suggested through context or shared understanding.

Politeness and tactfulness surpass what Western cultures consider direct truthfulness (Feghali, 1997). So, speakers may respond politely or appropriately, when an answer hurts or humiliates. Conversely, Western societies, especially American culture, are the lowest context; people value clarity, precision, and direct expression; even if they sound blunt or unpleasant (Feghali, 1997).

Language in this Anglo-American context aims mainly to transfer information (cf. for example in history record keeping and writing). Speakers emphasize precision, linearity, and clarity, and the responsibility is on them to convey direct, factual, and logical contents of a message (Feghali, 1997).

Unlike Anglo-American textual practice, Arabic discourse is indirect, requiring the audience to read between the lines of a communication. Furthermore, Arabic is considered an artistic, symbolic, and social tool that signals emotions and common experiences. As Zaharna (1995) argues, in Arabic cultures, poetry, religion, and nationalism profoundly shape the language, giving it a significance beyond mere content. Put differently, language serves not only to communicate, but also to consolidate collective identity, religious commitment and social cohesion (Zaharna, 1995).

Oman is an example of a high-context culture, where gestures and silences are laden with meaning. *Sayyidat al-Qamar* as a novel does not display a high-context world, it enacts one by associating links and using symbolic richness to make it necessary for readers to undertake a second, inferring interpretation. Characters emerge in the middle of thought, relationships imply rather than are pronounced, and central events (slavery's legacy, betrayals between spouses, mystical visions) are shown indirectly to the reader by means of things, smells or half-remembered proverbs. As Rasheed (2018) notes, in contemporary Arabic rhetoric, meaning is often transferred through the language of indirection, allusion and intertextuality. Implicit references, she argues, are often a highly effective form of social communication and are often appreciated for their capacity to tap into the addressee's mental state and convey information with more potency than direct talk. They rely on a shared cultural and linguistic background between the speaker and audience that often uses a "reusable" repertoire of known language and ideas (Rasheed, 2018). As this high-context storytelling is in play, the text presumes a reader who is prepared, or culturally trained, to fill the gaps.

Marilyn Booth's highly esteemed English translation necessarily moves this high-context material into a low-context target system, in which Anglo-American literary norms and ordinary reading practices emphasize explicitness, internal exploration, and chronological coherence (Booth, 2019). In her preface to the novel, Booth emphasizes the challenge: "The novel's resistance to linear narrative and its use of cultural allusion created specific problems." But only a few academic efforts have been made to systematically apply Hall's high-low-context framework and analyze exactly what is gained, lost and transformed in this attempt.

2.3 The Ethics and Aesthetics of Foreignizing Representation

Translating Arabic literature, like in other languages, is not an easy task as it may involve linguistic complexities and cultural differences. Scholars such as Susan Bassnett (2019) argue that translation is susceptible to the danger of "untranslatability" if the cultural setting is firmly established. As Fähndrich (2016) argues, Arabic literature translators are especially torn between authors, publishers, languages, and cultural norms; that is, they must be inventive, devoted, and sensitive to their cultures. Their efforts, he maintains, are crucial in bringing Arabic literature to a worldwide audience and as world literature. In an interview with Carole Alberoni, Booth identifies the problems of the translation of Arabic literature in the Anglophone market. She notes the pressure of

"clarity" that undermines a work's very rhythm and point of view. There is a feeling that publishers and readers are less willing to accept complexity and ambiguity of material from outside their own cultural sphere. They want to learn about other cultures with a simplified understanding of them, reducing novels to vehicles of socio-political information. Drawing on literary theory, cultural prejudice, and translation philosophy, Booth argues that as a translator of Arabic novels, she prefers a style that is resistant to this social push since she prefers to remain close to the language of the original and maintains the usages of Arabic to bring the readers into the text's rich and tangled world, and trusts that they can handle the expected difficulties.

Lawrence Venuti's (1995) critique of domestication (the adaptation of the source text to a target culture), his notion of the "invisible translator" in English-speaking cultures, and his advocacy for foreignizing strategies are key to this debate. Domestication in Anglo-American translation is pervasive, he argues, where the goals of writing the target text are to render it with the same fluency as the original text and to do so in a way that reduces the foreign aspects of the original (Venuti 1998: 241). By contrast, foreignization purposefully maintains linguistic and cultural differences, rendering the translator visible and exposing the foreign content of the source text. Scholars regard it as a translational intervention strategy for challenging dominant cultural values. Foreignizing translations, like Venuti's own work on Iginio Ugo Tarchetti, elevate marginal voices and include elements that indicate the text's foreignness (Venuti 1998: 15–20, 242).

However, with deep HC-to-LC translations, the foreignization that preserves aspects of the source culture — its style, symbolism, indirectness, or cultural references —does not just make the text hard to read or opaque. A plain literal translation of an HC text would only render it incomprehensible or obscure, but not foreign. Booth's translation reconciles these strategies, making use of "scandalous" literalisms to preserve "foreign" Omani elements (Booth, 2019). Leaving many Arabic words and phrases, like interjections and religious invocations, untranslated in the English text is a multi-faceted decision. In writing that relies heavily on dialogue to push forward the plot as well as character building, maintaining Arabic expressions like *bismillahima sha' allah, allahumma salli ala n-nabi, allahumma salli ala l-habib, Ayy wAllahi*, keeps the vibrant sound and the cultural immensity of their world. On the other hand, she seeks to promote and teach Anglophone readers. They should learn to enjoy and accept Arabic in the written word, she concludes, just like they learn to value words from other languages. She will not "dumb down" the text for the sake of what she perceives to be comforting readers. Instead of glossaries, she carefully interweaves Arabic words into the rest of the text so that the translation is clear from the context (Booth 2019).

Likewise, preserving Omani poetry and songs to *Celestial Bodies* is not just adding local color; it introduces a new dimension of HC discourse, embedding elements of lyricism that evoke emotional and cultural impact even if specific allusions may be hidden. Neglecting the verses suggests to Booth (2019) a failure to translate the full artistic value of the text, as they serve to unpack generations of silent histories and changing Omani society that the novel brings together. She translates these for poetic and emotional depth and a certain level of faith in the forcefulne effect they convey, just like translators do by adapting implicit proverbs, or metaphors to have significance in the target language.

Booth (2019) therefore suggests a broader and more serious purpose. She skillfully preserves the foreignness of the text so that the English reader shares their sense of critical reading and cultural negotiating experienced by the original Arabic reader. She contends that anything that seems uncomfortable is often "unfamiliar," and as such, this unfamiliarity is required to realize genuinely the otherness and specificity of the source culture. Her process therefore entails choosing strategies which retain the text's inherent nuance whilst providing sufficient instruction to prevent the reader from becoming confused. An obvious manifestation of this is her choice to introduce chapter titles, though they are not in Arabic source. This device is a textual reworking, and re-interpretation because it actively directs the reader's anticipation of actions and meaning and affects how the narrative is understood. Whereas the original text unfolds smoothly, endowing a sense of continuity and vagueness, the translation undercuts this flow and inserts clear narrative breakdown.

In *Celestial Bodies* most of the chapter titles are by characters' first names, thus suggesting the narrative is oriented toward females. Even some of the chapters described as "Abdulla" that were narrated in the first person, segregating the male voice and suggesting that they fall second. Other titles like Motherhood, Husbands, and The Bridal Procession address gender relations and women's experiences — indicating a certain emphasis that might appeal to Western readers' preference for oriental femininity. Male character names are only alluded to at the end of the novel (e.g., Khalid, Cousin Marwan, Suleyman), while the recurring title *Azzan and Qamar* foregrounds dynamics of relationships. In the end, these titles bring a focus on some characters whose narratives are key to the novel.

Crucially, though, Booth's intention is not to alienate readers. Instead, she strives to bring them along and broaden their literary horizons. Her work exists as a deliberate act of cultural and linguistic mediation, a moral perspective that privileges the reader's intellect over passive consumption of the text with the refusal to domesticate the text's essential uniqueness.

3. Analytical Extensions: The Texture of Translation

3.1 Temporal Disorientation as a Narrative Principle

Among the key traits of *Sayyidat al-Qamar* is the temporal disorientation. The story is not so much about coming back to memories, but organizing it to be on another parallel, in which past pain (the history of slavery as it appears in Zarifa's plot) and future-bound events coincide with the present. According to Zaydu (2019), the novel is a collection of loosely related short stories which are ultimately linked by the village of al-Awafi. The opening sewing scene is a typical example of the narrative technique characterized by switching voices and a varying temporal and spatial scope. This structural complexity, extending from local to Western sites, indicates the narrative continuity along with the wide-scale culture transformation. This is in keeping with an appreciation of identity as detailed, layered ancestral and community history. A more domesticated translation may have prescribed a clear chronology, perhaps in the form of explicitly temporal markers. Nevertheless, this would have stripped down the texture, the layered nature of identity, into a regular and more linear story that would have easier access for the reader but at the cost of some cultural aspect of the original. Booth, however, is precise in crafting the novel's disorienting flow. Her main intervention is adding the paratextual family tree. This is not a failure of foreignization

but a creative solution, a low-context cultural map to enable her readers to navigate across the historical and ancestral landscape of the novel.

3.2 The Metaphoric Code: From Lexical Equivalence to Cultural Tone

The novel's symbolic system is a major problem. Objects and natural phenomena function, in the original, as almost autonomous carriers of meaning — moon, camels, wells, dates. Sayyidat al-Qamar, the original title, literally means "the ladies of the moon." According to Booth (2021), an it could not be translated directly into English. The word "ladies" has multilayered meaning in Arabic which no English equivalent can meet. In Arabic it conveys power and prestige. It also stands for service and responsibility. The English word "moon," would not play as significant a role as it does in the Arabic language. In the novel, there is a rich symbolism of the moon, and the English title merely containing "moon" seemed relatively flat and ineffective. In Arabic literary and cultural tradition, it means different things—beauty, femininity, sublimity, divine creation, and gloom. This act is easily intelligible to a reader versed in the Arabic cultural framework, dense with poetic and cultural symbolism. "Celestial Bodies" itself is not a direct translation but an imaginative one, alluding to cosmic objects in space (stars, planets, moons, etc.) and to human bodies. This opposition resonates perceptively with the novel's preoccupation with the fates, stories and social standings of its characters, particularly women.

Booth's tactic works on several levels. She keeps the symbols in most cases, but at times deepens them with adjectival explanation ("bitter taste of unripe dates") that softly guides the English text toward more specificity. For culturally sensitive words, like *dishdasha* (a long robe worn by men), the *majlis* (a communal sitting space) and the *muezzin's* wife, or supernatural beings like *jinn*, she preserves the Arabic word, forcing the reader to recognize the gap and read it from its context. She uses a combination of careful description and rhythmic repetition when it comes to repeating symbols, such as the moon or *zar* (ritual of exorcism). The symbol recurs in the text, and she accumulates its associative power as it recurs over time in the English narrative (as it does in the Arabic). She does not explain the symbol but lets the reader feel its weight through deep engagement. An example of this is the folktale, to which bride Asma refers on the night of her wedding to Khalid, that people's souls had been united when the world began and then sliced in half: "He laughed. Asma, it's only an ancient legend. That people were all the same, all one sex, male and female both, all children of the moon. Every being had four hands, four feet and two heads, that's what they said. And then, the gods were afraid that creatures with all of this would be too strong, so they split them in two. Only the belly button remained as a reminder of that original wholeness. People became either one sex or the other. Each half has to search for its other half " (p. 197).

The stylistic simplicity of the passage moderates its metaphysical heft, anchoring the story structure in collective memory and oral storytelling, both of which, a salient element of *Celestial Bodies*, in which traditional myths exist side by side with the daily lives. The legend of the initial genderless human, as a symbolic image of loss, schism, and yearning is an idyllic picture. The split in the original whole into two sexes implies an ultimate separation that can be read on several levels emotionally, socially and existentially. The belly button, which is identified as the last remnant of this original union, symbolizes unattainable perfection.

On the book, the myth comes to resonate particularly with respect to gender, marriage, and emotional detachment. The notion that "each half must search for its other half" underlines the characters' battle against loose bonds, thwarted desires and societal taboos. Similarly, claiming that the tale is an "ancient legend" reduces the prospect of an idealized unified world. From a translational perspective, the myth is clear and memorable enough to be a powerful symbol accessible to an English reader. Hence, the passage serves simultaneously as a universal myth of human limitation and an in-built authorial commentary on the dissociated lives of the fictional characters, all of which enhance the novel's thematic preoccupation with distance, memory, and the search for meaning in shattered worlds.

3.3 The Poetics of Silence — The Unspoken

In cultures with high-context (HC) norms, as in the Middle East, silence is far more than a pause; it is a site saturated with connotations derived from communal knowledge, nonverbal cues, and context-specific understanding rather than spoken words. Silence can be symbolic of respect, defiance, grief, impotence, or complicity. It acts as a communication tool that differs from culture to culture. In some cultures, it represents thoughtfulness or agreement, in others, discomfort or disagreement. In Jokha Alharthi's *Sayyidat al-Qamar*, the unspoken dialogues between Mayya and her husband, Abdallah, or the controlled silence of Zarifa are as important as any conversation, providing expression or responses to the emotions and dynamics of people's exchanges and thus advancing the story. Mayya's faith in silence as the greatest of human acts, the sum of perfection reveals its importance to personal and family discipline in the changing social environment of Oman. Translation of this requires looking past the literal meanings of words to their intended message, letting the story have pace as well as ambiguity through interruptions that heighten the tension of the arguments or give room for the reader to interpret the story. Literary translation, as Solo (2023) argues, is primarily the act of negotiating and assimilating multiple aspects of silence—cultural, psychological, linguistic, metaphysical. The translator would reproduce these silences with a view to transmitting sociohistorical and cultural undertones. To be more than mere receiver and transmitter of words, the translator should also interpret and recreate these empty spaces and function as a cultural agent between source and target texts (Somló, 2023).

Booth's technique is a kind of narrative mediation, an interpreter of the implicit, or high-context signals that English readers would miss. She does not only retain silence, but she actively foregrounds it so that English readers can see, understand and value what it is. An instance of silence as narrative strategy appears when the young Abdallah got hurt after a hunting trip, and Zarifa attended to his wounds in the evening. Treating his injuries with salt and turmeric, Abdallah, heartbroken and curious, asks her to account for his mother's death. In this sensitive and volatile moment, Zarifa remains silent, providing no apparent answer. Zarifa's silence in the Arabic source text has the emotional and psychological heft of restraint as well as the strategic, protective mechanism, rooted in cultural habits of wisdom and humility. Her oblique reply, represented in a local saying, "*Affaty ma'rafaty, rahaty ma'aref shae*" (p.31), indicates her personal care. The silence remains in the English translation, but is reduced by the narrative, and the original proverb is translated to the familiar version in English: "Ignorance is bliss," which emphasizes Zarifa's mindful calm and submissive attitude. This change allows the reader, in a low-context frame, to interpret the meaning at the same time it illustrates how translation can maintain thematic and structural value despite the minor changes of emotional and cultural significance. In doing so, the translator serves to ennoble

the target text by navigating cultural silence and by encouraging readers to consider the unspoken a vital narrative force.

4. CONCLUSION: TRANSLATION AS AN INTERPRETIVE WORKSHOP

The reading of the parallel texts of *Celestial Bodies*, shows that Marilyn Booth's English translation is a supreme success. It goes beyond what is normally required of translation to be a sort of critical or creative act. By employing a mimetic foreignization strategy, Booth obtains the high-context texture of Alharthi's novel and renders it into English. But even her translation does not offer an overview of Omani society; instead, it demands a more vigorous type of readership: one that must traverse tangled timelines, unravel the mounting gravity of symbolic imagery, and resolve the unique meaning of silence. The English text of *Celestial Bodies* serves as an active site for cross-cultural textual analysis, one in which the reader must be willing to bring into effect the very skills of inference and contextual reading that the text demands.

This approach stresses that the ultimate fidelity of a literary translation does, after all, spring not from verbatim accuracy, but rather from the concerted reconstruction of a text's interpretive context. Booth's project demonstrates that the maximum significance of a high-context narrative resides in its specific form of implication. By reproducing this framework, she opens the way for *Celestial Bodies* to be experienced in English as a complex cultural phenomenon, rather than passively consumed as a narrative.

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