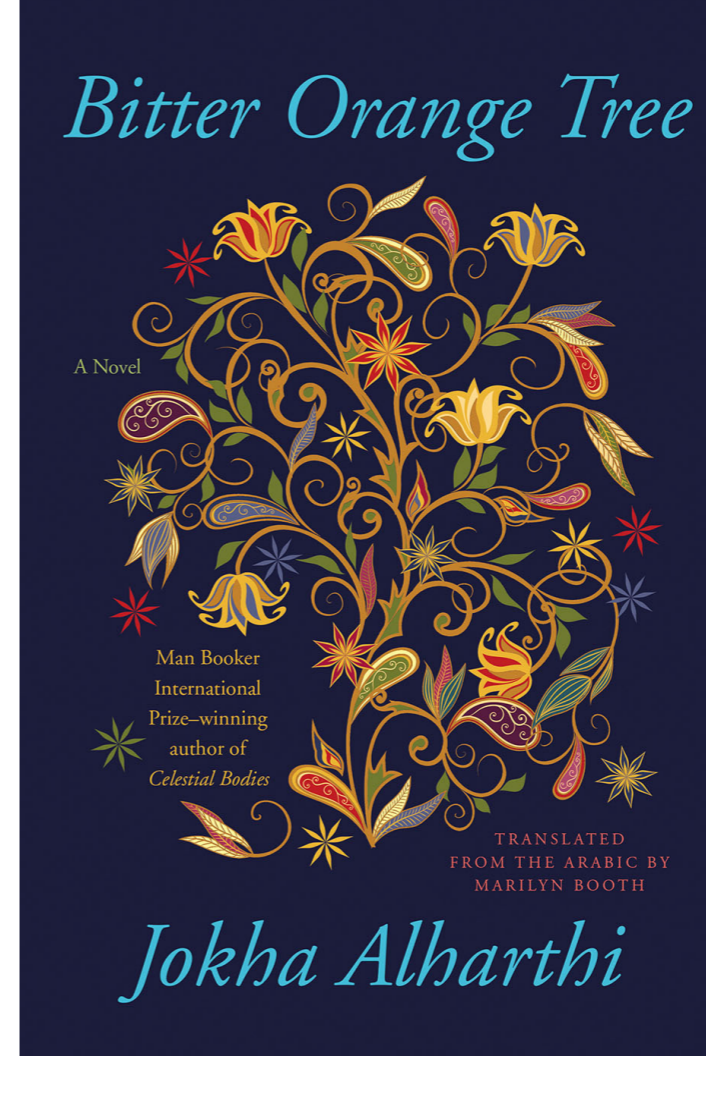


LITERATURE

## THE POWER OF LOVE

In *Bitter Orange Tree*, award-winning Omani author Jokha Alharthi returns to the themes of family and identity.

By Catherine Bolgar



Who is a mother? The one who carried a child in her womb? Or the one who nurtured a helpless baby through the years into adulthood?

The purity of a child's love answers that: it can be both. Children can easily love two mothers. They can easily accept and adore a "grandmother" to whom they have but a distant blood tie. The definitions and rules that cause so much heartbreak are constructs of adults, not children.

*Bitter Orange Tree*, by Jokha Alharthi, is a tale of love and grief. One main character is Zuhour, a university student in London who is mourning the death of her grandmother—who is not technically her grandmother—and who is struggling to find her place in the world. The other central character is this grandmother, cast out by her father as a child, never married, always working hard, nameless. She is called many things—Maah by the grandchildren, Bint Aamir after the father who expelled her and her brother. The father's horse is named, the mean neighbour children who torment Zuhour are named, the Western doctor who cannot save Maah's eye is named, but the beloved grandmother who never had children remains nameless.

As with her acclaimed novel *Celestial Bodies*, Alharthi probes family relationships and picks at the frayed edges where the heart and society want different things. In the earlier book, nearly all the characters are damaged, hurting and often hurtful. *Bitter Orange Tree* allows for a somewhat happier world. The grandmother may have been cast out by her father—for a heart-breaking reason we learn later—but she is taken in elsewhere and becomes revered by generations of her adoptive family, where she is the engine that keeps everyone else's lives humming along. She never knows romantic love, which in any case seems to fulfil nobody in Alharthi's worlds, but she is well loved. She has friends. Alharthi beautifully describes it: "Shayka used to come by late in the morning, every day, to drink coffee with my grandmother. She didn't have a piece of mending in her hand, or a kumma ready to embroider, as the neighbour women always did. She came with empty hands, which were always ready to come to my grandmother's aid." Has an uninvited, empty-handed guest ever been as beautiful and generous?

The story is almost equally devoted to Zuhour, who seems to sadly watch the world from the sidelines. Her best friend's sister is engaged to someone the friend considers unworthy—Alharthi gradually slips in information to show just how prejudiced the friend is, redrawing the ancient rules about love and marriage with the modern colours of money. Zuhour has left her family compound in Oman to study in London, and although she makes friends, she remains adrift. She feels stirrings for the friend's sister's boyfriend, but holds them inside. Must happiness always depend on romantic love? Her never-married grandmother would seem to indicate otherwise. The systematic destruction of Zuhour's sister, once nicknamed "Dynamo," depicts even more vividly that one's heart is best kept away from romantic suitors.

Zuhour sees a counsellor about her depression but fails to connect, and Alharthi deftly describes the frustration of being between two cultures. Zuhour reflects on what she calls "the language trap": "He would not have detected this trap. He didn't see me as disabled, bound to a wheelchair that was language's incapacity to fully express me."

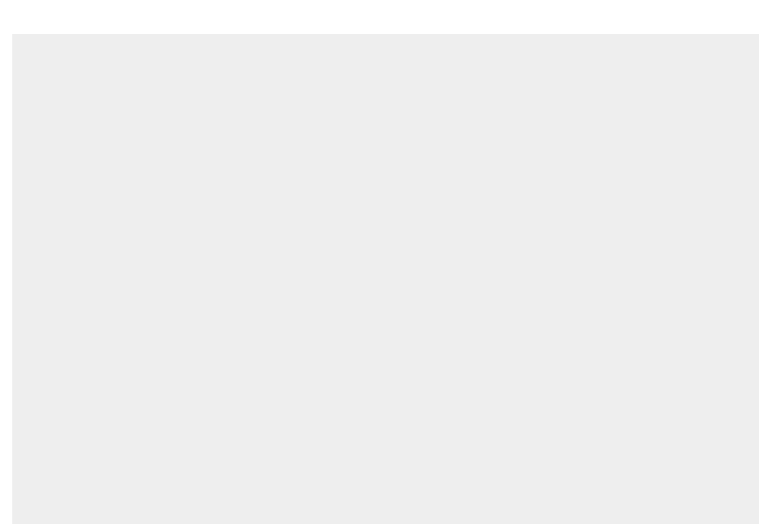
Marilyn Booth, who also translated *Celestial Bodies*, clearly doesn't suffer from the language trap. She calls no attention to her interpretation of Alharthi's prose. She sprinkles in Arabic terms while discreetly weaving in their meaning for readers too gripped by the story to stop to look them up.

Alharthi describes the Omani community and the family compound with sharp details, but her best renderings are of the characters' interior lives. The fearless sister-cum-victim. The status-obsessed friend. The responsibility-laden boyfriend. The grieving, unmoored granddaughter. And the one-eyed, illiterate grandmother whose superpowers were hard work and devoted love.

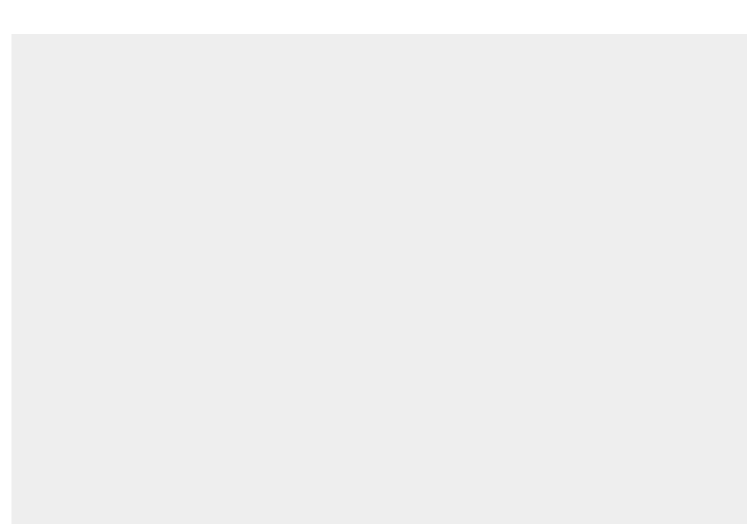
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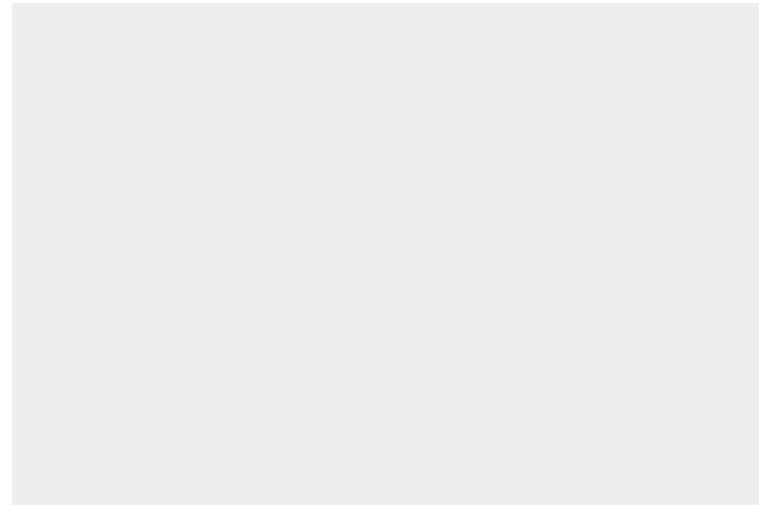
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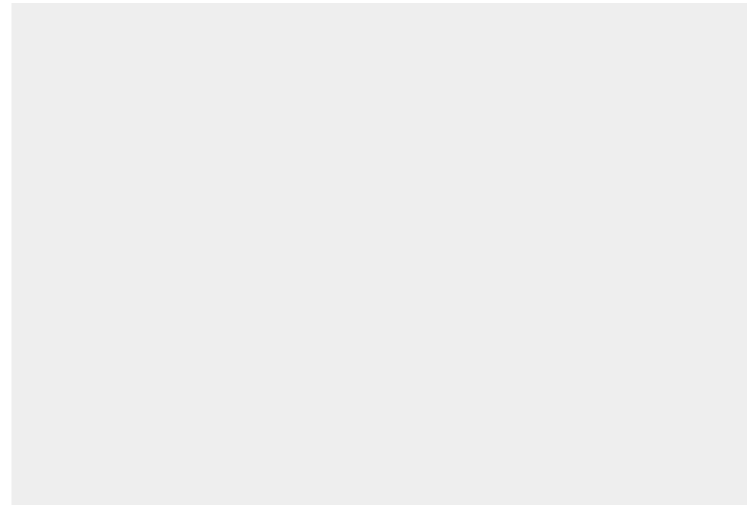
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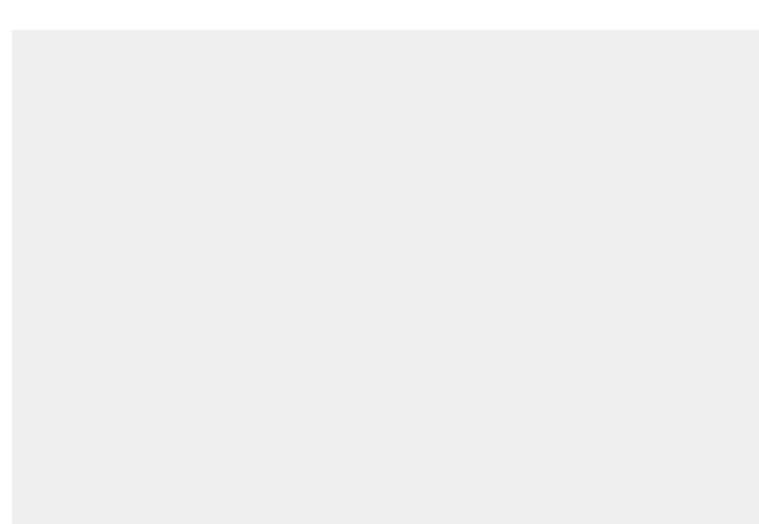
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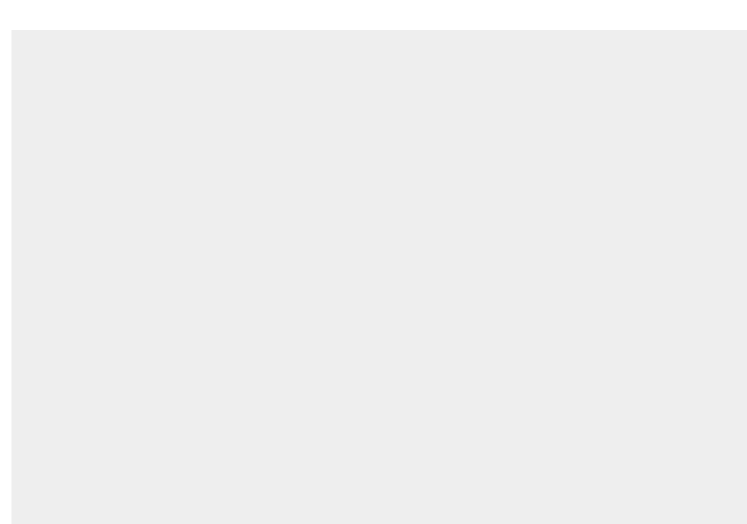
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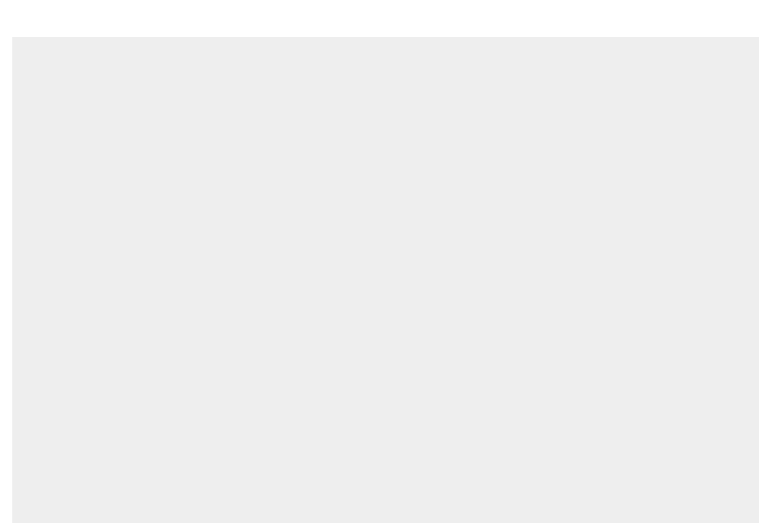
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
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