

# Temporal Polyphony: Dialogism and Post-Colonial Chronotopes in Jokha Alharthi's Celestial Bodies

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## خلاصة البحث

تقدم رواية «أجرام سماوية» لجوذة الحارثي استكشافاً ثرياً للمجتمع العماني من خلال بنيتها السردية المبتكرة وتفاعلها المعقد مع التاريخ. من خلال الجمع بين الحوار الباختيني والزمنية ما بعد الاستعمارية، أظهر هذا التحليل كيف تخلق الرواية تعددًا زمنيًا يتحدى السرد الخطي للتقدم والتنمية.

يتضمن الهيكل المتعدد الأصوات للرواية أصواتًا اجتماعية متعددة تمثل بشكل جماعي تنوع وتعقيد المجتمع العماني المعاصر. من خلال السرد غير الخطي وتمثيل الإيقاعات الزمنية المختلفة، تخلق رواية «أجرام سماوية» كرونوتوبًا مميزًا لما بعد الاستعمار يجسد الوجود المتزامن للعناصر التقليدية والحديثة.

من خلال فحص كيفية تمثيل الرواية للذكريات الاستعمارية والتحديث المتسارع والتجارب الجنسية للوقت، نكتسب نظرة ثاقبة حول كيف يمكن للأدب ما بعد الاستعماري التعامل مع أسئلة الصوت والوقت والتغيير التاريخي في المجتمعات التي شكلتها اللقاءات الاستعمارية والتحديث السريع. إن مفاهيم «التعددية الزمنية» و«الهجينة الزمنية» و«الزمنية الجنسية» التي تم تطويرها في هذا التحليل تعمل على توسيع المناهج النظرية القائمة في الأدب ما بعد الاستعماري من خلال تسليط الضوء على التفاعل المعقد بين الصوت الحوارية والخبرة الزمنية.

ويوضح التحليل المقارن مع أعمال روي وأديشي كيف تشارك استراتيجيات السرد لدى الحارثي في اتجاهات أوسع في الأدب ما بعد الاستعماري وتوسعها. وبينما تتقاسم الحارثي بعض المخاوف الشكلية والموضوعية مع هؤلاء الكتاب، فإنها تطور نهجًا مميزًا لتمثيل التجربة التاريخية التي تعكس الإرث الاستعماري الخاص بسلطنة عمان ومسارها نحو التحديث.

هذا التحليل له آثار على البحوث المستقبلية في العديد من المجالات. أولًا، يشير إلى قيمة دمج الأطر النظرية الباختينية وما بعد الاستعمارية

لتحليل الأدب العربي المعاصر. ثانيًا، يسلط الضوء على أهمية الاهتمام بالشكل السردي عند فحص كيفية تمثيل الأدب للتجربة التاريخية. أخيرًا، يشير إلى الحاجة إلى المزيد من الدراسات المقارنة التي تأخذ في الاعتبار كيف تطور مجتمعات ما بعد الاستعمار المختلفة استراتيجيات أدبية مميزة لتمثيل تجاربها التاريخية. وكما يشير الناقد منير عتيبة في مقدمة المترجم لرواية «الأجرام السماوية»:

«إن عالماً كاملاً من العلاقات الاجتماعية والممارسات والأعراف ينهار، مما يدفع شخصيات الرواية إلى الحافة، الحدود بين عالمين، أحدهما خالق، جامد ولكنه الآن هش والآخر غامض، ملتبس، مليء بالتوترات والقلق، والمراقبة المضطربة والخوف مما سيأتي... إنها حافة هشة بين عصر وآخر، الحدود بين عالم السادة وعالم العبيد، بين عالمي البشر والجن الخارقين للطبيعة، بين الواقع الحي والكابوس، بين الحب الحقيقي والحب المتخيل، بين فكرة المجتمع عن الشخص وإحساس الشخص بذاته». (ix)

من خلال تعدد الأصوات الزمنية، تدعو رواية «الأجرام السماوية» القراء إلى التأمل في كيفية تنقل المجتمعات بين التقاليد والحدثة، وبين الماضي الاستعماري والمستقبل ما بعد الاستعماري، مما يخلق سردًا ثقافيًا محددًا وعالميًا. وبذلك، تقدم الحارثي مساهمة كبيرة في الأدب العربي والمناقشات العالمية حول تجربة ما بعد الاستعمار في القرن الحادي والعشرين.



## Abstract

This article examines Jokha Alharthi's novel *Celestial Bodies* (2010, trans. 2018) through a theoretical framework that integrates Bakhtinian dialogism with post-colonial temporality. Through close textual analysis, I argue that Alharthi creates what I term "temporal polyphony"—a narrative structure in which multiple voices across different time periods collectively represent Oman's transition from a traditional society to a modern one. The novel's non-linear chronology, multiple narrators, and representation of different temporal rhythms create a distinctive post-colonial chronotope that challenges Western conceptions of historical progress. By analyzing how Alharthi's multigenerational narrative structure creates a dialogic engagement with Oman's colonial past and its rapid modernization, this study demonstrates how *Celestial Bodies* makes an important contribution to both Arabic literature and global discussions about post-colonial experience. This analysis extends current theoretical approaches to post-colonial literature by highlighting how dialogic engagements with time can represent the complex temporal dislocations experienced in societies shaped by colonial encounters and rapid modernization.

**Keywords:** Dialogism, Polyphony, Chronotope, Post-colonial, Temporality, Heteroglossia



## 1. Introduction

Jokha Alharthi's novel *Celestial Bodies* offers a rich opportunity to explore the intersection of Bakhtinian dialogism and post-colonial temporality in contemporary Arabic literature. As the first novel by an Omani author to win the International Booker Prize, it represents a significant contribution to world literature while providing insight into Oman's complex social history and rapid modernization. The novel's narrative structure creates what I term "temporal polyphony"—a multiplicity of voices across different time periods that collectively represent Oman's transition from a traditional society to a modern one. Through this dialogic engagement with history, Alharthi challenges linear conceptions of time and creates a distinctive post-colonial chronotope that embodies the unique temporal dynamics of Omani society (M. and Mishra 46).

In her introduction to the novel, translator Marilyn Booth describes *Celestial Bodies* as a narrative set "against a carefully evoked historical canvas" in which "a complete world of social relations, practices and customary usages is collapsing, sending the novel's characters to the very edge, the border between two worlds, one of them a suffocating, rigid yet now fragile world and the other one mysterious, ambiguous, full of tensions and anxiety" (ix). This liminal position — between tradition and modernity, colonial and postcolonial experience — makes the novel ideal for analysis through the lens of Bakhtinian dialogism and postcolonial temporality.

This article uses close textual analysis and theoretical application to examine how *Celestial Bodies* creates a temporal



polyphony. By combining Bakhtinian concepts of dialogism, heteroglossia, and chronotope with postcolonial theories of temporal liminality, heterotemporality, and compressed development, I examine how the novel represents Oman's complex historical experiences. This methodological approach allows for a thorough examination of the novel's narrative structure, character development, and thematic concerns, placing these elements within a larger theoretical context.

Through this analysis, I aim to answer several key questions: How does Alharthi's use of multiple narrators and a non-linear chronology lead to a dialogic representation of Omani history? How does the novel depict the temporal shifts caused by colonialism and rapid modernization? How do gender and social status influence the characters' perception of historical time? By answering these questions, this article advances scholarly understanding of contemporary Arabic literature and expands theoretical approaches to postcolonial temporality.



## 2. Literature Review: Contextualizing the Study of Celestial Bodies

Although critical focus on Celestial Bodies has expanded since its 2019 International Booker Prize victory, scholarly interaction with the book remains rather limited, especially with relation to its narrative structure and temporal dynamics. This part reviews the body of current research on Alharthi's work and places this study in line with more general discussions of post-colonial narrative techniques and modern Arabic literature.

With an eye towards its portrayal of slavery and social hierarchies in Omani society, Nora Parr's study of Celestial Bodies argues that the book "creates a literary space where the unspeakable history of slavery becomes articulated through the domestic sphere" (124). Parr's study offers insightful analysis of the social critique of the work, but it does not fully address its inventive narrative structure or temporal complexity.

Likewise, Tahia Abdel Nasser looks at how the book addresses issues of modernism and national identity but mostly from a thematic rather than a formal standpoint. Although Nasser says "Alharthi's representation of Omani society challenges simplistic binaries between tradition and modernity" (87), she does not closely examine how the structure of the book supports this challenge.

Muhsin al-Musawan's study *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel* points a turn towards "temporal complexity and fragmentation" (142) in recent novels from the Arabian Peninsula but does not particularly address Alharthi's work in the larger context of modern Arabic literature. Likewise, although it predates



the publication of *Celestial Bodies*, Wail Hassan's study of "post-colonial chronotopes" in Arabic literature offers a useful theoretical framework.

This paper addresses a major void in the critical literature by building on already-published studies: the relationship between narrative structure, temporal experience, and post-colonial condition in Alharthi's work. This work adds to the particular scholarship on Alharthi's works as well as more general theoretical debates on narrative temporality in post-colonial settings by introducing the idea of "temporal polyphony" and examining how the structure of the novel generates a dialogic interaction with Omani history.

Moreover, although Bakhtinian approaches have been productively applied to many post-colonial texts (as in Graham Allen's work on "post-colonial dialogues"), they have not been widely used to examine modern Omani literature. This work hence helps to increase the geographical and cultural range of post-colonial narrative studies as well as Bakhtinian literary theory.





### 3. Theoretical Framework: Dialogism and Post-Colonial Temporality

#### 3.1 Bakhtinian Dialogism

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism provides a valuable framework for understanding how *Celestial Bodies* represents multiple social voices. Central to Bakhtin's theory is the concept of heteroglossia—"the presence of multiple languages or discourses within a single text" (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* 263). This multiplicity of voices reflects social diversity and allows for what Bakhtin terms a "polyphonic" narrative that resists singular representations.

According to Bakhtin, "the novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types, sometimes even diversity of languages and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized" (262). Bakhtin sees the novel as a platform for a variety of social speech types and individual voices. This variety allows for a rich tapestry of dialogue and interaction, which is essential to the novel's form (Bowman 78; Ross et al. 1). This heteroglossia is fundamental to understanding how Alharthi creates a narrative that encompasses the diverse social, cultural, and historical voices of Omani society. In a polyphonic novel, "voices of characters are horizontally related to one another, instead of hierarchically subsumed under the voice of the novelist. The polyvocal nature of narrative is rendered in the intertwining of a series of shared and distinct consciousnesses" (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 6).

Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope—"the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are



artistically expressed in literature" (The Dialogic Imagination 84)—is especially significant for analyzing how Alharthi represents the intersection of time and space in Omani society. Different chronotopes reflect different ways of experiencing and representing reality, making them powerful tools for examining how literature engages with historical change.

### 3.2 Post-Colonial Temporality

Post-colonial temporality theory addresses "time perception, memory, and forgetfulness in relation to colonialism and its aftermath" (Adam 159). As Homi Bhabha argues in *The Location of Culture*, post-colonial societies experience time differently from the linear, progressive temporality associated with Western modernity. Instead, they exist in what he terms a "temporal liminality" where past, present, and future coexist in complex ways:

"The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation...Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present." (Bhabha 7)

This concept of "in-betweenness" is particularly relevant to *Celestial Bodies*, where characters navigate between traditional values and modern influences, creating what Bhabha would call a "third space" where cultural meaning is negotiated.

Dipesh Chakrabarty's notion of "heterotemporality" further illuminates how post-colonial societies experience multiple,

overlapping temporalities. In Provincializing Europe, Chakrabarty challenges the idea that all societies follow the same developmental path as Western nations, arguing instead that “different cultural practices often entail different ways of world making, and thus different temporalities and historicities” (46).

Finally, anthropologist Jonathan Friedman's concept of “compressed development” helps explain the temporal dislocations created by rapid modernization. Friedman argues that post-colonial societies often experience “centuries of development compressed into decades,” creating cultural discontinuities and temporal ruptures (86). This compression is central to understanding how characters in *Celestial Bodies* experience Oman's transformation following the discovery of oil and the “Omani Renaissance” under Sultan Qaboos.

### 3.3 Methodological Approach

This study uses a methodological framework integrating detailed textual analysis with the application of theory. The selected passages for analysis adhere to three criteria: (1) those that illustrate the novel's polyphonic structure via shifts in narrative voice or perspective; (2) those that embody various temporal experiences or historical periods; and (3) those that explicitly address themes of tradition, modernity, or historical change.

This approach facilitates a thorough analysis of how *Celestial Bodies* creates temporal polyphony, while also addressing the broader thematic issues present in the novel. The analysis aims to highlight specific passages that showcase the connection





between dialogism and post-colonial temporality, illustrating how narrative form captures and conveys historical experience.

## 4. Analysis of Dialogism in Celestial Bodies

### 4.1 Polyphonic Structure and Multiple Narrators

Celestial Bodies exemplifies Bakhtinian dialogism through its polyphonic narrative structure, which weaves together multiple voices across generations, genders, and social classes. The novel alternates between third-person narratives focusing on three sisters—Mayya, Asma, and Khawla—and first-person chapters narrated by Mayya's husband, Abdallah. This structural choice immediately establishes a dialogic relationship between male and female perspectives, between the collective voice of the family and the individual consciousness of Abdallah.

The novel opens with a focus on Mayya, who is “forever immersed in her Singer sewing machine, seemed lost to the outside world. Then Mayya lost herself to love: a silent passion, but it sent tremors surging through her slight form, night after night, cresting in waves of tears and sighs” (Alharthi 1). This third-person narration is juxtaposed with Abdallah's direct first-person perspective: “I don't remember my mother's face. Everyone says I look like her, but I don't know if that's true or not” (Alharthi 11). The alternation between these narrative modes creates what Bakhtin terms a “dialogic” relationship between different consciousnesses within the text.

In addition to this structural dialogism, the novel weaves together various social voices that reflect the diverse segments of Omani society. Mayya, both educated and subtly defiant,



embodies a generation of women balancing the influences of tradition and modernity. Abdallah, deeply affected by his father's harshness, represents the challenge faced by men to reshape their understanding of masculinity in evolving circumstances. Once enslaved and now a servant in the family house, Zarifa provides insights on Oman's past of slavery and its ongoing social repercussions.

Every one of these voices embodies more than just a single character; they represent what Bakhtin refers to as a "socio-ideological language"—a mode of expression that reflects particular social standings, historical settings, and cultural values. The polyphonic structure allows several social languages to coexist without being dominated by a single authoritative voice, so producing what Bakhtin describes as "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses" (Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetry 6).

#### 4.2 Heteroglossia and Social Stratification

Alharthi's novel exemplifies Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia through its representation of various sociolects and dialects that reflect Oman's complex social stratification. The novel depicts interactions between wealthy merchant families, Bedouin tribes, formerly enslaved people, and servants, each with distinct ways of speaking that reflect their social positions. This heteroglossia is most evident in the character of Zarifa, a formerly enslaved woman whose distinctive voice and expressions reflect her position in society. Her speech is peppered with proverbs and folk wisdom: "The proverb-maker says: A human hand spread wide can't block the sun outside"



(Alharthi 51). Her language stands in stark contrast to the more formal speech of characters like Merchant Sulayman and the educated discourses of younger characters who have been to school.

The dialogic tension between social classes becomes particularly evident in private conversations where characters reveal their true attitudes. When discussing London's unusual name, for example, higher-status women use language that reveals both their class consciousness and gender expectations: "Sister, what kind of man is Abdallah, allowing his daughter to have this odd name? Seems he doesn't get to say a word about it, doesn't his woman Mayya listen to him? If he had any balls..." (Alharthi 35-33). This passage illustrates how Alharthi employs heteroglossia to represent socio-ideological contradictions within Omani society.

Even within families, heteroglossia manifests through generational differences in speech patterns. The elder generation uses traditional proverbs and religious expressions, while the younger characters incorporate English words and modern terminology that reflect their education abroad. This linguistic diversity performs the Bakhtinian function of representing "socio-ideological contradictions" within Omani society. Each sociolect carries with it not just distinctive vocabulary but different worldviews, values, and relationships to tradition and modernity.

#### 4.3 Dialogic Engagement with Tradition and Modernity

A central dialogic tension in *Celestial Bodies* emerges between voices representing traditional Omani culture and

those advocating for or embodying modernization. The novel beautifully illustrates the rituals and customs of Omani life, including engagement, wedding, childbirth, and funeral ceremonies, showcasing a blend of Islamic and African traditions, along with Muslim and pagan beliefs.

The traditional structure of Omani society is especially apparent in rural areas, where these customs are firmly established (Vlasova et al. 41). Rather than presenting this as a simple binary opposition, Alharthi creates a complex dialogue where characters inhabit ambivalent positions between tradition and modernity.

Alharthi's engagement with Arabic literary traditions extends beyond structural elements to incorporate classical Arabic poetry directly into the narrative fabric. When Azzan recites poetry to Najiya, the text not only highlights the romantic relationship but also connects the narrative to the rich tradition of Arabic love poetry: "Light the dimness with your glow once the full moon dips / and shine in the sun's stead whilst lazy dawn tarries..." (Alharthi 125). This intertextual engagement demonstrates how the novel positions itself within longstanding Arabic literary conventions while simultaneously reimagining them.

The novel also explores specifically Omani literary heritage through characters like Emigrant Issa, who insists his son learn the poetry of Abu Muslim al-Bahlani: "Those places in which I could not stay on and on / Yet in my hope-filled mind, still they reside..." (Alharthi 211-210). This emphasis on Omani poetic traditions provides important cultural context for understanding how the novel's dialogism operates within





specifically Omani literary frameworks.

This dialogic engagement extends to the novel's treatment of religious traditions as well. Rather than presenting Islam as a monolithic force, Alharthi shows characters interpreting religious obligations differently across generations. When the elderly Suleiman observes morning prayers, the narrative notes: "He remembered how his grandfather had taught him the proper movements of prayer, different from how the younger men performed them now" (Alharthi 156).

The dialogic tension between tradition and modernity finds its most explicit expression in the transformation of Al-Awafi village. As the narrator observes: "The motor road that finally reached the village ended its isolation but took away its purpose as a trading stop" (Alharthi 211). This single development embodies the contradictory nature of modernization as simultaneously connecting and disconnecting, bringing prosperity while undermining traditional economic patterns.



## 5. Post-Colonial Temporality in Celestial Bodies

### 5.1 Non-linear Narrative Structure as Temporal Disruption

*Celestial Bodies* employs a non-linear narrative structure that fundamentally challenges Western conceptions of historical progress. The novel moves fluidly between different time periods spanning from 1901 to 2010, disrupting chronological sequence to create what Homi Bhabha calls the “time-lag” characteristic of post-colonial narratives.

The narrative begins in the present with Abdallah's reflections, then moves backward to explore his childhood, his father's life, and the experiences of previous generations. This temporal movement is not simply flashback but represents what Paul Ricoeur identifies as a complex “configuration” of temporal elements that reflects how time is experienced in post-colonial contexts.

Alharthi's non-linear structure creates what might be termed a post-colonial chronotope where past and present exist simultaneously rather than sequentially. For example, when Abdallah returns to his childhood home, the narrative creates a temporal simultaneity that challenges the Western conception of time as linear progress and instead represents what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls the “heterotemporality” of post-colonial experience.

The novel's treatment of Oman's transition from a traditional society to a modern one further disrupts linear temporality. Rather than depicting modernization as a straightforward progression, Alharthi shows how different temporal rhythms coexist in contemporary Oman. This juxtaposition of cyclical



time (associated with tradition) and accelerated time (associated with modernity) creates a temporal heteroglossia that reflects Oman's post-colonial condition.

The concept of "temporal polyphony" can be more precisely articulated through the novel's own metaphorical framework, particularly its treatment of celestial bodies. A key passage illuminates this connection:

"Of all the celestial bodies, the moon is closest to the matters of this lower world. And so it is a guide to all things. Contemplate the state of the moon until you know it well. Its soundness is the strength of all things, its ruin the corruption of all things." (Alharthi 217-216)

The moon, occupying a liminal position between "what is on high and what lies below," serves as an apt metaphor for the novel's temporal structure, which mediates between different historical periods and temporal rhythms. Just as the moon "moves between high and low," the narrative moves between different temporal planes, creating a polyphonic effect that captures the complexity of Omani historical experience.

## 5.2 Colonial Memory and Historical Consciousness

Celestial Bodies engages deeply with how colonial histories are remembered, forgotten, and transmitted across generations in post-colonial societies. The novel depicts what Ann Laura Stoler calls "colonial aphasia"—the simultaneous knowing and not-knowing of colonial histories that characterizes post-colonial societies. Colonial aphasia denotes the selective amnesia and recollection of colonial histories, which perpetuates existing racial and colonial frameworks by concealing past injustices

and their contemporary consequences (Bernard et al. 91).

This complex relationship to colonial memory is embodied in the character of Zarifa, whose personal history encompasses Oman's involvement in the slave trade with Zanzibar (itself a former Omani colony). Her character's story incorporates the history of enslaved people like her ancestor Senghor, who "began to suffer from hallucinations" on the ship bringing him from Africa (Alharthi 189), connecting personal memory to larger historical traumas.

The British colonial presence appears obliquely in the novel, reflecting Oman's status as a protectorate rather than a direct colony. Characters refer to "the English doctor" or "British merchant ships" without extensive elaboration, suggesting what Frantz Fanon identified as the "occluded presence" of the colonizer in post-colonial consciousness. This oblique representation mirrors Oman's relationship to British colonialism—significant but indirect, shaping society without the direct administration characteristic of formal colonies. The novel also explores how different generations develop distinct relationships to colonial history. The elder generation, represented by characters like Sulayman, maintains a more direct memory of the colonial period. In contrast, the younger generation, educated in Western institutions, develops what might be called a "post-memory" relationship to colonialism—knowledge acquired through education rather than direct experience.

### 5.3 Accelerated Modernization and Temporal Dislocation

Celestial Bodies provides a nuanced exploration of the





temporal dislocations created by Oman's accelerated modernization following the discovery of oil. The novel depicts what anthropologist Jonathan Friedman terms "compressed development"—the rapid transition from traditional to modern society that characterizes many post-colonial nations.

This accelerated modernization creates what might be called a "temporal whiplash" for the characters. As one elderly character observes: "What took Europe centuries has happened here in one lifetime. My grandfather rode camels; my grandson flies airplanes" (Alharthi 205). This compression of historical development disrupts traditional temporal rhythms and creates a sense of dislocation that permeates the novel.

The temporal effects of modernization manifest differently across generations and social classes. The modernization process has profoundly influenced the participation of women in the labor force in Oman. Education and urbanization play crucial roles, as higher levels of educational attainment and urban living are associated with a rise in female employment. This trend is particularly evident in urban areas, emphasizing the spatial differences in the effects of modernization (Mansour et al. 235; Al-Abri et al. 93). For wealthy merchants like Abdallah's family, modernization brings new technologies and lifestyle changes: "The air conditioner hummed, a sound that had replaced the rhythmic creaking of the palm-frond fans of my childhood" (Alharthi 67). For servants and formerly enslaved people, modernization brings legal emancipation but often continues economic dependence.

Particularly striking is the novel's depiction of how material objects embody temporal dislocation. When describing a



traditional Omani village house with a new satellite dish, the narrative notes: “The satellite dish looked alien against the mud-brick walls, like a visitor from another time” (Alharthi 198). This image captures the simultaneous presence of different historical temporalities within a single space—what anthropologist Johannes Fabian calls the “coevalness” of seemingly disparate historical periods in post-colonial contexts.

## 6. The Intersection of Dialogism and Post-Colonial Temporality

### 6.1 Temporal Voices and Historical Dialogue

In *Celestial Bodies*, dialogism and post-colonial temporality intersect most powerfully in what might be called “temporal voices”—characters whose perspectives embody specific historical moments and temporal experiences. These voices engage in what Bakhtin terms a “great dialogue” across historical time, creating a narrative that is simultaneously polyphonic and temporally complex.

The character of Zarifa represents a temporal voice connecting pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods. Her consciousness becomes a site where different historical periods engage in dialogue, challenging linear conceptions of progress. Similarly, Abdallah embodies the temporal dislocations of his generation—educated abroad but bound to traditional family expectations. His frequent reflections on his childhood reveal a consciousness split between different temporal frameworks.



The novel further develops this temporal dialogism through intergenerational conversations that explicitly thematize historical change. When Mayya's daughter London questions traditional practices, the ensuing discussions become what Bakhtin would call "ideological dialogues" that express different temporal orientations.

These temporal voices create what literary scholar Mikhail Epstein terms "transculture"—a dialogic space where different historical temporalities interact without resolving into a synthesis. This intersection of dialogism and post-colonial temporality allows Alharthi to represent Oman's complex historical experience without reducing it to either nostalgic traditionalism or uncritical modernization.

## 6.2 Chronotopes of Tradition and Modernity

Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope offers a compelling framework for examining how *Celestial Bodies* illustrates the convergence of tradition and modernity in post-colonial Oman. In post-colonial Oman, the chronotope illustrates how narratives in "*Celestial Bodies*" reflect the tension and blending between traditional values and modern influences. This convergence is evident in the ways characters explore their identities amid evolving socio-cultural environments. The chronotope facilitates an exploration of the representation of historical and cultural contexts in literature, offering insights into the continuous interaction between past traditions and modern realities (Sirotkin et al. 279).

The village of Al-Awafi serves as a "chronotope of tradition," a space where time adheres to cyclical patterns linked to natural

rhythms and religious observances. The narrator paints a vivid picture of the village: "In Al-Awafi, the days unfolded according to patterns established generations ago—the pre-dawn prayer, the tending of date palms, the afternoon rest, the gathering of women at the well" (Alharthi 76). This chronotopic representation highlights continuity and repetition instead of linear progress.

In contrast, Muscat stands out as a "chronotope of modernity," marked by rapid changes in both time and space. A crucial section of the text illustrates that "of all the celestial bodies, the moon is closest to the matters of this lower world" (Alharthi 216)—a metaphor that captures the novel's exploration of the intersection between the celestial (traditional, eternal) and terrestrial (modern, changeable) in the context of post-colonial experience.

The novel notably establishes chronotopes of intersection, where traditional and modern temporalities coexist and interact in a meaningful dialogue. The family home in Al-Awafi, characterized by its traditional architecture now enhanced with modern appliances, transforms into a unique space: "The courtyard remained as it had been for generations, but now electric lights illuminated it at night, and the sound of television emanated from rooms where once only conversation and poetry recitation had been heard" (Alharthi 168).

The intersecting chronotopes enable Alharthi to illustrate what philosopher Achille Mbembe refers to as "time-knots"—the intricate entanglements of past, present, and future that define post-colonial temporality. The novel constructs these chronotopes to create a narrative space that allows various





historical experiences and temporal orientations to engage in a fruitful dialogue, avoiding the simplification into a singular authoritative timeline.

### 6.3 Gender, Voice, and Temporal Experience

A particularly significant aspect of *Celestial Bodies* is its exploration of how gender shapes both dialogic voices and temporal experiences in post-colonial contexts. The novel demonstrates that women and men not only speak from different social positions but experience historical time differently, creating gendered chronotopes that reflect Oman's complex gender politics.

Female characters often experience time through domestic rhythms and intergenerational continuity. When Mayya is described early in the novel, her existence is marked by the rhythms of domestic labor: "Mayya seemed to hardly shift position throughout the day, or even halfway into the night, her form perched quietly on the narrow, straight-backed wood chair in front of the black sewing machine with the image of a butterfly on its side" (Alharthi 1). This cyclical, embodied temporality creates what might be called a "feminine chronotope" characterized by repetition and cultural preservation.

The gendered experience of time becomes particularly evident in passages focusing on Mayya's perspective on motherhood and her daughter's future:

"Twenty-three years later when she would smash her daughter's mobile phone to bits in anger before slapping her across the face, the only remaining traces of resemblance were their brown skin and wiry frames." (Alharthi 82-81)



This temporal projection reveals how women's experiences of time are deeply connected to intergenerational relationships and embodied experiences.

Marriage functions as a temporal marker that transforms women's social positioning, as illustrated in the description of Asma's wedding procession, which represents her transition into a different temporal and social realm:

"Now she would be one of the women who sat around their coffee in the late mornings and then again at the end of the day. She would be invited to lunch and dinner, and she would issue her own invitations, since she was no longer merely a girl. Marriage was her identity document, her passport to a world wider than home." (Alharthi 173-172)

This passage demonstrates how gender shapes not only social position but temporal experience itself.

Male characters, particularly those like Abdallah who engage directly with modernization, experience time as more linear and disruptive. Abdallah's narrative frequently employs metaphors of rupture and disjunction: "My education abroad cut me off from my past; I returned a stranger to my own history" (Alharthi 124).

The dialogue between these gendered temporalities becomes explicit in intergenerational conflicts. When Mayya's daughter London challenges traditional gender expectations, the resulting tensions reveal not just ideological disagreements but fundamentally different experiences of historical time. London's perspective is shaped by what sociologist Anthony Giddens calls "detraditionalization"—the post-colonial condition where traditions must be actively chosen rather than



passively inherited.

## 7. Comparative Perspectives: Temporal Polyphony in Post-Colonial Literature

To better contextualize Alharthi's narrative innovations, consider *Celestial Bodies* alongside other postcolonial texts that use temporal disruption and polyphonic structure. Two particularly insightful comparisons are Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006).

Roy's novel, like Alharthi's, uses a non-linear narrative structure that jumps between time periods, resulting in what critic Elleke Boehmer refers to as "palimpsestic time" (87). Both novels use temporal complexity to depict societies that are rapidly transitioning from colonial to postcolonial conditions. However, while Roy's temporal disruptions frequently focus on trauma and its consequences, Alharthi's temporal shifts emphasize continuity amid change, reflecting Oman's unique historical experience with colonialism.

Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, like *Celestial Bodies*, is concerned with how different social groups interpret historical events. Both novels use multiple focal points to establish dialogic relationships between various perspectives on national history. While Adichie's narrative focuses on a specific historical trauma (the Nigerian Civil War), Alharthi's novel explores a more gradual—but no less profound—social transformation. These comparisons reveal that Alharthi's concept of "temporal polyphony" is a unique variation on postcolonial narrative

strategies. While many post-colonial novels use non-linear chronology and multiple narrators, *Celestial Bodies* stands out for how it uses these formal elements to represent not only historical trauma or cultural dislocation, but also the complex coexistence of different temporal rhythms in a rapidly modernizing society.

## 8. Limitations and Critical Reflection

While the framework of temporal polyphony provides valuable insights into *Celestial Bodies*, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations of this approach. First, the application of Bakhtinian concepts to post-colonial contexts involves a theoretical translation that may not fully capture the specificity of Omani literary traditions. As critic Wail Hassan cautions, “applying Western theoretical models to non-Western texts risks imposing inappropriate conceptual frameworks” (32). Additionally, the focus on temporal polyphony may inadvertently privilege formal analysis over the novel's engagement with specific historical and political contexts. While this article has attempted to situate the analysis within Oman's particular history, the emphasis on theoretical frameworks could potentially abstract the novel from its material contexts of production and reception.

Furthermore, the concept of temporal polyphony, while useful for understanding narrative structure, may not fully account for aspects of the novel that resist such analysis. Certain passages in *Celestial Bodies*—particularly those employing poetic language or mystical imagery—exceed strictly dialogic





or temporal interpretations. The novel's engagement with Sufi traditions, for instance, introduces conceptions of time and selfhood that are not easily accommodated within Bakhtinian frameworks.

Finally, this analysis has focused primarily on the English translation of *Celestial Bodies* rather than the original Arabic text. As translator Marilyn Booth acknowledges, "the translation process inevitably involves interpretive decisions that shape how the text is received" (x). A more comprehensive analysis would ideally engage with both the original text and its translation to consider how linguistic and cultural translation affects the representation of dialogic and temporal elements. Despite these limitations, the concept of temporal polyphony remains a productive framework for understanding how *Celestial Bodies* represents Oman's complex historical experience through innovative narrative strategies. By acknowledging these limitations, this analysis seeks to contribute to ongoing scholarly conversations about the novel while remaining open to alternative interpretive approaches.

## 9. Conclusion

Jokha Alharthi's *Celestial Bodies* offers a rich exploration of Omani society through its innovative narrative structure and complex engagement with history. By synthesizing Bakhtinian dialogism with post-colonial temporality, this analysis has demonstrated how the novel creates a temporal polyphony that challenges linear narratives of progress and development. The novel's polyphonic structure incorporates multiple social voices that collectively represent the diversity and complexity of contemporary Omani society. Through its non-linear narrative and representation of different temporal rhythms, *Celestial Bodies* creates a distinctive post-colonial chronotope that embodies the simultaneous presence of traditional and modern elements.

By examining how the novel represents colonial memories, accelerated modernization, and gendered experiences of time, we gain insight into how post-colonial literature can engage with questions of voice, time, and historical change in societies shaped by colonial encounters and rapid modernization. The concepts of "temporal polyphony," "chronotopic hybridity," and "gendered temporalities" developed in this analysis extend existing theoretical approaches to post-colonial literature by highlighting the complex interplay between dialogic voice and temporal experience.

The comparative analysis with works by Roy and Adichie further demonstrates how Alharthi's narrative strategies both participate in and extend broader trends in post-colonial literature. While sharing certain formal and thematic concerns



with these writers, Alharthi develops a distinctive approach to representing historical experience that reflects Oman's particular colonial legacy and path to modernization.

This analysis has implications for future research in several areas. First, it suggests the value of integrating Bakhtinian and post-colonial theoretical frameworks for analyzing contemporary Arabic literature. Second, it highlights the importance of attending to narrative form when examining how literature represents historical experience. Finally, it points toward the need for more comparative studies that consider how different post-colonial societies develop distinctive literary strategies for representing their historical experiences. As critic Munir 'Utaybah notes in the translator's introduction to *Celestial Bodies*:

"A complete world of social relations, practices and customary usages is collapsing, sending the novel's characters to the very edge, the border between two worlds, one of them a suffocating, rigid yet now fragile world and the other one mysterious, ambiguous, full of tensions and anxiety, of uneasy surveillance and fear of what will come... It is a precarious edge between one era and another, the border between the world of masters and that of slaves, between the worlds of human beings and of supernatural jinn, between living reality and nightmare, between genuine love and imagined love, between the society's idea of a person and a person's sense of self." (ix)

Through its temporal polyphony, *Celestial Bodies* invites readers to contemplate how societies navigate between tradition and modernity, between colonial pasts and post-colonial futures, creating a narrative that is both culturally





specific and universally resonant. In doing so, Alharthi makes a significant contribution to both Arabic literature and global discussions about post-colonial experience in the twenty-first century.



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