

**Navigating the Labyrinth: Womanhood and Agency in
Jokha Alharthi's *Celestial Bodies***

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Preface

Gender has long been a foundational axis of identity, shaping how individuals experience power, freedom, and social belonging. Across cultures and generations, women have often navigated expectations, silences, and limitations imposed upon them by patriarchal systems. “Navigating the Labyrinth: Womanhood and Agency in Jokha Alharthi's *Celestial Bodies*” is a critical inquiry into how womanhood and agency are represented in Jokha Alharthi’s groundbreaking novel *Celestial Bodies*. Set against the backdrop of a rapidly transforming Omani society, the novel offers a rare and nuanced portrayal of female lives shaped by tradition, family, class, and history.

This dissertation is structured across four chapters. The first chapter, titled “Introduction”, offers a contextual overview of Omani society and the literary significance of *Celestial Bodies*, situating the novel within broader traditions of Arab and feminist literature. The second chapter, “Womanhood and Agency”, explores the theoretical frameworks that inform the study including feminist, postcolonial, and intersectional perspectives on gender. The third chapter, “Threads of Agency in *Celestial Bodies*”, presents a detailed literary analysis of the novel, focusing on key characters and the various forms of resistance and selfhood they embody. The final chapter, “Conclusion”, reflects on the findings and contributions of the study, emphasizing how *Celestial Bodies* invites a deeper understanding of gender, tradition, and transformation.

Chapter One

Introduction

Writing fiction is the act of weaving a series of lies to arrive at a greater truth.

— Khaled Hosseini

Literature is a collection of written works that express ideas, emotions, and stories through creative and imaginative language. It traditionally includes poetry, prose, and drama. However, the definition has expanded to include many different types of text that enhance cultural and intellectual life. It showcases the creativity of people and cultures, expressing complex emotions, questions, and experiences. Literature preserves and shares the legacies, beliefs, and values of different groups throughout history. By using storytelling, figurative language, and dialogue, it challenges traditional ideas, sparks reflection, and prompts readers to look at their surroundings. Literature immerses readers in new worlds, fostering empathy by allowing them to see life through the perspectives of characters and stories.

The novel is a genre of fiction, and fiction may be defined as the art or craft of contriving, through the written word, representations of human life that instruct, divert or both. The novel is propelled through its hundred or thousand pages by a device known as the story or plot. The novel plays a key role in humanity's journey toward self-understanding. Its breadth allows for complex stories and a deep exploration of individual and social dynamics. As this form of literature changes, its capacity to represent, challenge, and imagine the world also evolves. Novels often reflect and examine the culture and time when they are written. They explore social structures, traditions, and people's personal

experiences. Using satire, social commentary, or hopeful views, novels can inspire thought and possibly lead to social or political change. The novel remains essential to humanity's search for self-understanding.

The Omani novel saga is a fresh and lively addition to the Arabic and Gulf region literature. Oman's oral traditions, poetry, and folklore have been present for centuries. Development of the modern Omani novel began almost simultaneously with the late 20th century. The country's literary revival gained momentum in the 1970s due to significant social, educational, and economic changes that occurred after Sultan Qaboos' rule. The reforms, particularly those related to increasing literacy and cultural diversity, created an environment that was conducive to the development of novelist genres and voices. The speciality of Omani novels is their connection with local histories, oral traditions, and the complex social system in Oman. Oman's extensive history of seafaring, trade relations, and the enduring effects of events such as the slave trade and colonialism are extensively covered in works. They frequently reflect on the difficulties of balancing traditional and modern life, generational disparities, and maintaining a balance between individual identities and national identity in revolving society. Many internationally recognized works have recently delved into the topic of women's experiences and challenges, leading to increased interest in these stories. The subjects of class, heritage, and marginalized populations are also prevalent. The dissimilarities between isolated villages and bustling cities demonstrate evolving customs and cultural traditions.

Abdullah al- 'Ayari and Huda Hamed are known as some of the first Omani writers who helped establish the genre. Jokha Alharthi's *Celestial Bodies*

(originally published in Arabic as *Sayyidat al-Qamar* in 2010 and translated into English by Marilyn Booth in 2018) is viewed as the landmark Omani novel worldwide. It won the Man Booker International Prize in 2019 and attracted global attention to Omani literature. Other notable novelists include Bushra Khalfan, Zahran Alqasmi, and Hussain al-Abri. Their works show the increasing variety of themes and styles within the genre.

Jokha Alharthi (born in 1978) is a well-known Omani writer recognized for her novels, short stories, and academic work. She has received international praise for her significant influence on Arabic and global literature. Her body of work includes four novels: *Manamat* (2004), *Sayyidat al-Qamar* (2010; called *Celestial Bodies* in English), *Narinjah* (2016; known as *Bitter Orange Tree* in English), and *Harir al-Ghazala* (2021). She also has several short story collections, children's books, and scholarly writing. Alharthi's fiction often explores the rapid social changes in Omani society, the relationships between generations, and the complex themes of memory, gender, and identity. By blending multi-generational stories with deep character studies, she uncovers lives and viewpoints that are frequently ignored, especially those of women and marginalized groups. *Celestial Bodies* has been translated into several languages and is celebrated for its rich depiction of Omani family life, the effects of colonialism, and the everyday challenges related to gender and power. Through her academic work and storytelling, Jokha Alharthi has expanded the reach of Omani and Arab fiction while establishing herself as a key figure in contemporary global literature. This work rejects traditional feminism and its idea that all women experience the same struggles.

Celestial Bodies is told in a non-linear fashion from the perspectives of different characters. It focuses on a family with three daughters dealing with their experiences of love and loss. The book captures the spirit of Omani culture from the 1960s to today. The family members' desire for change creates significant tensions across generations. Older family members seem to struggle with the major shifts happening in society. Alharthi's honest portrayal of the difficult moments many Omani women face shows a range of injustices they endure. It is important to move beyond traditional feminism and view the story through the lens of intersectionality to truly understand this work filled with female characters. The book shows, from different perspectives, how social and political identities can combine to create unique forms of inequality.

Celestial Bodies is a sweeping chronicle that unfolds over several decades and generations in the Omani village of al-Awafi. The narrative is polyphonic and fragmented, deftly alternating between characters, time periods, and perspectives to create a mosaic of interwoven stories. Through its innovative structure, the novel probes the shifting landscapes of Omani society from the lingering legacies of servitude and social hierarchy to the emerging currents of modernity, education, and female aspiration. Alharthi's masterful storytelling illuminates not simply the private lives of its characters, but the evolving collective memory and identity of a nation in transition.

Mayya, the eldest daughter, is quiet by nature but rich in creative spirit. Her story begins with heartbreak, the man she loves marries someone else, leaving her not only bereft but also disconnected from her own emotions. In the wake of this silent grief, her parents arrange her marriage to her cousin, Abdallah. Mayya agrees, not out of hope, but out of duty. After the wedding,

she retreats into herself, finding solace in silence and sewing acts that become her quiet rebellion and source of inner strength. When she gives birth to a daughter, she names her London, a name that holds more than just the dream of a distant city. It becomes a symbol of Mayya's longing for change, her unspoken hope that her child might live a freer life than hers a life shaped not by silence, but by choice.

Asma, the second sister, is thoughtful and deeply devoted to learning. She marries Khalid, a gentle and bookish man who lives by reason and tradition rather than emotion. "He had already decided on marriage to a woman who would somehow stand out from all the others, with some quality of note. He chose accordingly, looking for a woman who would fall instantly into the orbit he had marked out, who would always be there but would also always stay just outside, yet without wanting to create her own celestial sphere, her own orbit" (Alharthi 177). In her marriage, Asma tries to strike a careful balance between her thirst for knowledge, her faith, and the demands of caring for a growing family. Her life becomes a quiet act of negotiation between what she wants and what is expected of her. Through reflection and restraint, she navigates her responsibilities with grace, embodying both the strengths and the silent sacrifices of women in her world.

Khawla, the youngest of the sisters, is headstrong and full of romantic idealism. Unlike Mayya and Asma, she boldly rejects every suitor who comes her way, holding fast to the hope that her cousin Nasir, her first love will return from Canada and choose her. Her life becomes a quiet testament to waiting, each year stretching her patience and testing the strength of her dreams. As time passes, Khawla clings to her youthful promises, but when Nasir finally returns,

she is confronted with the difficult truth: the future she imagined may not match the reality before her. In that moment, Khawla must face the tender and painful task of growing up redefining love, loyalty, and what it means to move forward. While the three sisters shape the emotional heart of *Celestial Bodies*, the novel reaches far beyond them, painting a rich and layered portrait of Omani society. It opens up to include parents, extended family, former slaves, and villagers revealing the deep-rooted hierarchies, cultural shifts, and collective memory that define their world.

Abdallah, Mayya's husband, emerges as one of the novel's most intimate narrators. His chapters flow with raw, introspective thoughts, offering a window into the scars left by his abusive, domineering father, Sulayman. Raised in a household marked by fear and emotional manipulation, Abdallah carries these wounds into adulthood grappling with insecurity, longing, and a quiet desperation for closeness. His marriage to Mayya is emotionally cold, shadowed by the trauma of his past and a deep fear of replicating the harm he witnessed as a child. Through Abdallah, Alharthi delves into the complexities of masculinity and inheritance the emotional weight men carry, and too often, pass on.

Beyond the central family, the novel gives voice to a chorus of other characters Khalid, the gentle and scholarly husband of Asma; Nasir, Khawla's long-absent cousin and romantic ideal; and a host of relatives, aunts, cousins, and household servants. Each character brings their own story, their own hopes and regrets, adding depth and richness to the shared narrative. Through them, Alharthi constructs a mosaic of village life, where every voice, no matter how quiet, becomes part of the larger story of change, memory, and survival. One of

the novel's most poignant and unsettling threads is the story of Zarifa, who once served as a slave in Salima's family. Her life is marked by quiet resilience and deeply buried sorrow. Though she becomes an essential presence in the household and a fiercely loving mother to her son, Sanjar, Zarifa remains on the fringes her past as a slave and the mystery surrounding Sanjar's father keep them both socially vulnerable and emotionally restrained.

Set during a time of sweeping change, *Celestial Bodies* captures Oman's journey from a tightly knit, tradition-bound village society to a world shaped by modernity and uncertainty. The arrival of oil wealth, access to education, exposure to foreign cultures, and the possibility of travel begin to ripple through the fabric of everyday life, altering relationships and reshaping aspirations. The older generation, firmly rooted in the values and rituals of the past, watches with a mix of pride, confusion, and quiet grief as their children chart new paths seeking love, work, and independence in ways their elders never imagined or approved of.

Mayya's daughter, London, stands as a symbol of this new era. Her dream of becoming a doctor reflects a world slowly opening up for women, where ambition and personal agency are more possible though not without resistance or lingering expectations to stay within traditional roles. With the spread of education, migration to cities, and the rise of new technologies, the pace and texture of life begin to shift. These changes unsettle long-standing social structures challenging old norms, even as they bring new kinds of pressure, uncertainty, and emotional distance. The village, once intimate and ordered, becomes a place of flux, mirroring the inner transformations of its people.

Celestial Bodies unfolds not through a linear plot, but as a rich tapestry woven from memory, reflection, and shifting timelines. Each chapter offers a new voice or fragment of family history, blurring the lines between past and present, self and other. The novel invites readers into an intricate world where stories overlap, echo, and sometimes contradict mirroring the complexity of life itself. Throughout the novel, characters wrestle with the tension between honouring their roots and reaching for something more personal and freer. Some hold tightly to the ways of the past, while others, with caution or courage, begin to step beyond inherited expectations. Marriage emerges as a central force sometimes a comfort, often a constraint. It becomes a space where love and longing collide with duty and disappointment, and where women in particular find quiet ways to assert themselves, even within limitations. Across generations, pain repeats itself abuse, loss, and the things left unsaid pass from parent to child. The novel suggests that no life is lived in isolation; each character carries the weight of their family's history, whether they choose to or not. Social status, lineage, and race shape whose stories are heard and whose dreams are stifled.

By the end of *Celestial Bodies*, no one path offers perfect clarity or closure. Some characters find quiet satisfaction, others accept what they cannot change, and a few like London look toward the future with cautious hope. Though their journeys differ, all three sisters have navigated a world full of unseen rules and silent burdens, carving out small spaces for autonomy, love, and meaning. Jokha Alharthi's true accomplishment lies in her careful, compassionate portrayal of lives caught in the tides of change. She shows us that in Oman as in much of the world the personal is never separate from the

political or the historical. The novel stands as a moving tribute to the resilience, complexity, and quiet power of Omani women and men making their way through a transforming society.

The metaphor of the labyrinth serves as a powerful lens through which to understand the emotional, social, and psychological journeys of the women in *Celestial Bodies*. Unlike a straight road that leads clearly from one point to another, a labyrinth is full of twists, turns, and moments of uncertainty. It symbolizes how the lives of Omani women like Mayya, Asma, Khawla, and Zarifa are shaped not by singular, defining acts of rebellion or freedom, but by a long and winding process of navigating constraint, expectation, and change. There is no universal path to liberation in the novel, each woman's route is shaped by her personal circumstances, cultural setting, and inner life. Some paths double back, some lead to dead ends, and some intersect in unexpected, even painful ways. Yet each path is meaningful, reflective of the nuanced and diverse realities women face.

This metaphor also aligns with the framework of intersectionality, which helps illuminate how various aspects of identity, gender, class, race, marital status, education, and generational position interact to create unique configurations of power and limitation. The labyrinth, in this sense is not a single structure but a dynamic, shifting terrain where obstacles and openings appear differently for each woman. Through this complexity, *Celestial Bodies* resists simplistic narratives of victimhood or empowerment, instead portraying agency as something negotiated sometimes hesitantly, sometimes boldly within a constantly changing social landscape.

Importantly, the labyrinth is not merely a symbol of entrapment or struggle. It also evokes persistence, adaptation, and creativity. Women in the novel are not portrayed as passive sufferers of tradition but as subtle strategists of their own lives. Each woman, in her own way, finds moments of resistance and redefinition, carving out space in a society that offers few certainties and limited freedoms. In this way, the labyrinth becomes a symbol of empowerment as well as entanglement. It honours the diversity of women's experiences and the multiple ways in which they navigate life under social and historical pressure. Every twist in the labyrinth, every decision, loss, act of care, or small assertion of will adds depth to a broader, collective story of survival and transformation. Moreover, the image invites a rethinking of what it means to resist or to thrive. Not all victories are loud; not all progress is linear. In the world of *Celestial Bodies*, growth often comes quietly through endurance, connection, memory, and small but significant acts of agency.

Chapter Two

Womanhood and Agency

Womanhood is the state of being a woman, often shaped by societal expectations, gender roles, and cultural norms; agency involves a woman's ability to define and act on her own sense of womanhood within or against those structures. Definitions of womanhood differ globally; what is expected or celebrated for women in one society might be discouraged or forbidden in another. Experiences of womanhood intersect with race, class, caste, religion, sexuality, and disability. For example, womanhood can be experienced very differently by a Black woman in the U.S. versus a Dalit woman in India. Agency refers to the capacity of women to make choices, take purposeful action, and pursue goals, free from coercion or violence. It is a core part of empowerment and is expressed through decision-making, leadership, and collective action. Agency is also diverse: for one woman, agency could mean early marriage and motherhood; for another, delaying marriage in favour of education or never marrying at all. The crucial factor is being able to make those choices and act on them freely.

Feminism is both a movement and a set of ideas aimed at achieving political, economic, and social equality for all genders. It is rooted in the fight against sexism and discrimination, seeking to empower women and challenge the systems that limit rights and opportunities. While its early focus was on advancing women's rights, modern feminism emphasizes the need to uplift all marginalized genders through concepts like intersectionality, which recognizes how race, class, sexuality, and other factors shape experiences of oppression. Central to feminism are principles such as bodily autonomy, which supports the

right to make decisions about one's own body; empowerment, which encourages individuals to reach their full potential; and opposition to structures where men dominate power and privilege. Despite legal advancements, gender inequality persists in areas like wages, leadership roles, healthcare, and safety. Feminism addresses ongoing issues including violence, reproductive rights, and underrepresentation, while evolving to include diverse voices that were often excluded from earlier movements.

Various feminist perspectives exist, including liberal feminism, which seeks reform within current systems; radical feminism, which calls for structural change; intersectional feminism, which focuses on overlapping forms of discrimination; and socialist or Marxist feminism, which critiques the combined impact of capitalism and patriarchy. Beyond individual rights, feminism has driven broader social change, such as securing voting rights, advancing reproductive freedom, dismantling gender norms, and inspiring wider justice movements. As a continually evolving force, feminism promotes equality, dignity, and opportunity for all people.

This dissertation, "Navigating the Labyrinth: Womanhood and Agency in Jokha Alharthi's *Celestial Bodies*" traces the evolving understandings of womanhood within feminist thought, focusing on how scholars have increasingly challenged traditional beliefs that tie female identity strictly to biology.

Over time, feminist theory has moved away from defining "woman" in purely anatomical or natural terms and toward recognizing gender as a socially constructed and culturally shaped experience. By drawing from different waves of feminism and intersecting critical theories, this discussion highlights the shift

from essentialist ideas of gender to more nuanced frameworks that consider history, culture, language, and power. In the early stages of feminist theory, a significant concern was the prevailing belief that biology alone determines a person's gender identity. Feminist thinkers began to question the notion that chromosomal makeup or reproductive roles could fully define what it means to be a woman. They warned that reducing womanhood to physical traits oversimplifies and silences the rich, lived experiences of women across time and place. Simone de Beauvoir's now-iconic assertion "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman"(de Beauvoir 283) perfectly encapsulates this shift. Her words highlight how femininity is not an innate state, but a role learned and shaped by social norms, language, and ongoing personal and collective experiences. In other words, being a woman is not a fixed biological fact, but a becoming formed through cultural participation and social expectations.

Building on these foundational critiques, second-wave feminists developed the idea of gender as something constructed by society rather than dictated by nature. Thinkers like Gayle Rubin emphasized how social systems, not biology assign roles and expectations to people based on their perceived gender. Rubin's concept of the "charmed circle" explains how society enforces standards around sexuality and behaviour, distinguishing what is considered "normal" from what is marginalized (Rubin 12). In this view, gender is not something we *are*, but something we *do*, a performance shaped by cultural codes and institutions. Womanhood, then, becomes a constantly shifting space where individuals must navigate, challenge, or conform to societal scripts. It is through this process of negotiation that gender identity is constructed and occasionally transformed.

While early feminist discourse made groundbreaking strides, it often centred on Western experiences and assumptions, overlooking the varied realities of women in non-Western societies. Postcolonial and intersectional feminist thinkers have since intervened to critique these limitations. Scholars like Chandra Talpade Mohanty have called attention to how Western feminism sometimes paints women from the Global South with a single brushstroke, portraying them as universally oppressed and voiceless (Mohanty 65). Such narratives fail to account for the specific cultural, political, and historical forces that shape different expressions of womanhood. Mohanty and others advocate for an intersectional lens, one that considers how race, class, religion, colonial histories, and local traditions intersect with gender. By embracing this complexity, feminist theory becomes more inclusive and better equipped to understand the multiplicity of women's experiences across the world.

Feminist thinking has undergone a profound transformation from viewing womanhood through a biological lens to recognizing it as a socially and culturally mediated identity. This shift has opened up space for understanding gender not as a universal truth, but as something deeply contextual, historically situated, and responsive to power dynamics. Today, feminist scholarship increasingly embraces intersectionality and decolonial perspectives, allowing for a broader and more inclusive conversation around gender and identity. By moving beyond fixed definitions and embracing the diverse realities of women's lives, feminism continues to evolve, challenging simplistic narratives and advocating for a richer, more empathetic understanding of womanhood in all its forms.

The concept of *agency* has over time, become somewhat overstretched often mistaken for basic ability or assumed to be a natural quality that all individuals possess by default. Early liberal feminist thinkers tended to equate agency with independence and rational decision-making, portraying women as autonomous individuals freely navigating choices, much like consumers in a marketplace of ideas. However, this perspective largely ignored the real-world barriers social, economic, political that can make certain choices unimaginable or even impossible for women who live within marginalized or oppressed contexts.

In contrast, second-wave feminist thinkers like Iris Marion Young offered a more grounded view of agency, one rooted in the realities of social power. Young argued that agency isn't only about dramatic acts of resistance or rebellion it also shows up in the everyday ways women navigate and subtly push back against oppressive systems. She emphasized that even seemingly small actions such as avoiding, adapting to, or partially complying with dominant expectations can carry powerful meaning. Her idea of “social connection” reframes agency as something that happens within networks of relationships and mutual influence, where individual actions can ripple outward contributing to gradual collective change (Young 43).

Contemporary feminist scholars have expanded the idea of agency even further to include how it is felt and lived in the body. For instance, Sara Ahmed's idea of *wilfulness* reimagines resistance as the refusal to conform to imposed identities. (Ahmed, *Wilful Subjects* 68) Wilfulness, in this sense, isn't just stubbornness it's expressed through persistent bodily acts and gestures that, over time, help shape a person's sense of self and their ability to act. This

approach sees agency not as a one-time decision or a clear-cut act of defiance, but as an ongoing process of becoming where women continuously create space for their desires and intentions, even when they lack the words or cultural support to fully express them. Ultimately, agency emerges not just in the obvious moments of protest or choice, but in the quieter, persistent efforts women make to assert their identities, challenge norms, and carve out their own paths within the constraints they face.

Intersectionality has become a vital lens in feminist thought, offering a much-needed alternative to approaches that focus on gender in isolation. Pioneered by Kimberlé Crenshaw, the concept highlights how different forms of power like race, class, and gender interact simultaneously to shape peoples lived experiences (Crenshaw 1245). This framework is especially important when trying to understand Arab womanhood, which is influenced not just by gender norms, but also by the legacies of colonialism, religious beliefs, tribal customs, and economic globalization. To grasp the full picture, one must look beyond gender alone and consider how Arab women are situated within complex structures like kinship systems, postcolonial states, and global markets.

Postcolonial feminist critics of Arab literature have pointed out how national discourses often use women as symbols either of progress and liberation or of tradition and cultural identity. Leila Ahmed's historical work, for example, shows how the veil has been interpreted in conflicting ways sometimes condemned as a marker of oppression, other times praised as a sign of cultural pride (Ahmed, *Women and Gender* 153). These shifting meanings reveal how women's bodies are often used to express broader political and cultural tensions. In this way, the Arab woman finds herself in a kind of in-

between space called upon to embody national honour, while also being shaped by the forces that define nationhood itself.

In recent years, Arab feminist scholars have moved away from seeing agency as a simple choice between resistance and submission. Instead, they propose the idea of “entangled agency,” which recognizes that women’s actions can be layered, complex, and sometimes even contradictory. For instance, a woman might draw on religious language or traditions to assert her authority within her community, even as she pushes back against patriarchal rules. These nuanced acts challenge the idea that empowerment always looks like rebellion or defiance. Instead, they show that agency often takes shape through careful, culturally informed negotiations, where women constantly weigh their options and navigate the spaces available to them.

In literature, a character’s agency often emerges through the dynamic interplay of voice, perspective, and narrative structure. In *Celestial Bodies*, agency isn’t granted to just one central heroine, instead it’s spread across a rich tapestry of voices, both male and female. Through shifting points of view, the novel captures how different characters experience the world, particularly at moments when women step outside expected roles whether by expressing forbidden desires, mourning personal losses, or building quiet bonds across generations. Yet, even in these moments of seeming independence, their choices are shaped and often constrained by the expectations of family and community.

This narrative approach mirrors what poet and thinker Adrienne Rich calls the “poetics of resistance,” where acts of defiance often appear not in loud proclamations, but in subtle, even hidden, gestures (Rich 35). In *Celestial Bodies*, women’s resistance is rarely overt it surfaces in the quiet details a

meaningful embroidery, a whispered prayer said in secret. These fleeting glimpses don't try to present a single, complete picture of what it means to be a woman. Instead, they map out a complex, winding path where agency is not straightforward or easily defined, but scattered, layered, and constantly shifting within the boundaries set by patriarchal culture.

Space itself plays a powerful role in shaping these women's lives and choices. The home, the family estate, and the local marketplace aren't just settings they're active sites where gender roles are played out and sometimes reimaged. These places carry deep emotional and cultural weight, influencing how women see themselves and how they act. The novel blurs the lines between what is considered public or private, old or new, showing how these binaries aren't fixed but constantly overlapping. By paying close attention to how women move through and interact with these spaces, we begin to see both the limitations placed upon them and the quiet, determined ways they carve out room to assert their identities and desires.

To truly understand womanhood and agency, we need to look at both the larger systems that shape women's lives and the smaller, everyday ways they move within and around those systems. Feminist theory provides a wide range of tools to help us do this ranging from Simone de Beauvoir's idea that one becomes a woman through lived experience, to Sara Ahmed's concept of wilfulness, which captures the bodily and emotional strength it takes to resist being shaped by others. When used together, these ideas show just how layered and complex agency really is. Postcolonial and intersectional approaches add even more depth, reminding us that Arab women's experiences are deeply tied to particular histories, cultures, and social structures.

There is a quiet courage in the daily lives of women who fight, often without attention or acknowledgment, to claim their right to feel, remember, and want. This struggle isn't dramatic or always visible. It unfolds in the quiet pauses of daily life, in unspoken words, and in dreams set aside for later. These women are not just ideas or unknown figures; they are mothers, daughters, sisters, and friends, each carrying a rich and complex inner world. For these women, silence is not emptiness; it is filled with thoughts, emotions, and the gentle ache of unexpressed desires. Imagine a woman pausing at the window during her busy day, momentarily longing for something more. Her silence isn't submission or indifference. It is a shield, a quiet resistance, sometimes a plea to be truly seen. Family and loved ones may walk past her without noticing that beneath her calm exterior lies a life constantly negotiating a balancing act between expectations and what she secretly longs for.

As days turn into years, many women find themselves standing on the edges of their own stories. Their roles - caretaker, supporter, nurturer are important, yet they can become a cover that obscures their dreams and individuality. The fabric of identity can wear thin under this ongoing pressure, as small, repeated sacrifices are made in the name of harmony and love. Yet within them, the desire for self-expression and recognition never completely fades; it quietly hums beneath the surface, reminding them of their humanity.

In these moments, a woman's true self can breathe, unravelling memories and piecing together forgotten dreams. Reclaiming this private space is a quiet act of defiance. Even if tinged with sadness for what remains undone, these moments lay the foundation for rebuilding identity, piece by piece, hope by hope. No one should have to fight this battle alone. When women connect

over shared experiences, something meaningful happens: silence turns into solidarity. Conversations with friends, knowing glances, stories shared in confidence these are the threads that create a tapestry of resilience and understanding. Through these connections, voices once muted find their strength, becoming part of a larger chorus that deserves to be heard.

With each connection and each truth spoken aloud, the unseen barriers begin to crumble. The stories of these women rooted in struggle but filled with hope serve as guiding lights for those who come next. By honouring and validating their feelings and dreams, society opens the door to a broader, more compassionate understanding of womanhood. The act of truly seeing and listening is itself a revolution, one that empowers women to step forward not as shadows of themselves, but as vibrant, whole individuals whose dreams matter.

When reading *Celestial Bodies*, it's important not to fall into simplistic interpretations that see its female characters as either helpless victims or fully liberated heroines. The novel's real strength lies in how it portrays the quiet strength and everyday resilience of women how they claim their voices, express their desires, and build bonds with others, often in subtle or unexpected ways. The "labyrinth" in the novel shouldn't be seen only as a symbol of being trapped; it also represents the complexity and possibility of agency itself. It's through this intricate maze of constraints, choices, and relationships that the rich, evolving nature of women's selfhood comes into view.

Looking ahead, there's rich potential in examining how non-linear storytelling connects with the ways women experience time, especially when it comes to longing, memory, and loss. By paying close attention to the novel's poetic language and the emotional rhythms that shape memory, we might

uncover forms of agency that don't always fit within traditional narrative structures. Exploring *Celestial Bodies* alongside the work of other contemporary Omani or Gulf women writers could also bring to light how feminist ideas are being shaped and expressed within specific cultural and regional contexts. Additionally, incorporating archival research into the everyday lives and practices of Omani women could add a valuable ethnographic layer to the literary analysis. This kind of approach would deepen our understanding of how concepts of womanhood and agency are continually being negotiated and redefined in postcolonial societies.

Chapter Three

Unseen, Unheard, Unbound: Female Resistance in *Celestial Bodies*

The portrayal of patriarchal systems and the organization of domestic life in Oman presents a complex story that explores gender roles, social expectations, and individual freedom. By examining characters like Mayya within their cultural context, the novel reveals the subtle links between tradition, family duties, and personal goals. Mayya's acceptance of her family's choice for her marriage shows how deeply patriarchal norms influence women's lives. Her quiet submission and lack of outcry reflect the limited agency women have in this system. However, her inner world, revealed through her intricate embroidery, suggests a rich inner life that contradicts the external restrictions imposed on her. "*Mayya, forever immersed in her Singer sewing machine, seemed lost to the outside world*" (Alharthi 13). This contrast highlights the complexity of women's lives in patriarchal societies, where outward conformity often hides inner turmoil and resistance.

The domestic setting is depicted as calm yet emotionally isolating, symbolizing the confinement and emotional demands faced by women in traditional communities. The structure of domestic life, characterized by seclusion and supervision, mirrors society's emphasis on controlling women's actions and social interactions. Mayya's experiences in this setting capture the tension between the outer appearance of peace and the hidden emotional struggles women face while dealing with strict gender expectations. Beyond exploring gender relations, the novel also examines the intersections of identity within patriarchal systems. The mix of tribal traditions, religious beliefs, and

cultural practices further complicates women's experiences, highlighting the various layers of oppression and responsibilities they must navigate. Therefore, Mayya's story reflects broader issues women encounter as they try to balance different aspects of their identities within rigid social frameworks.

While patriarchal practices seek to enforce obedience and silence, the novel subtly underscores moments of strength and defiance among its female characters. Through small acts of rebellion or quiet acts of resistance, women like Mayya challenge the uniform expectations placed on them. By giving everyday actions meaning and importance, the novel shows how personal agency can quietly contest established social norms. Through its insightful look at patriarchy and domestic life, the work encourages readers to reflect on the impacts of longstanding gender norms and how they shape individual experiences. By focusing on women's perspectives and emphasizing the complexities of their struggles, it calls for a fairer society that recognizes the autonomy, freedom, and dignity of all its members. This call for social change resonates within the story and extends beyond the text, urging readers to think critically about and challenge oppressive systems wherever they arise.

Alharthi's portrayal of Asma's character highlights how important education is for independence and empowerment in Omani culture. Asma chooses shared values over traditional expectations when selecting a partner. This choice shows how education can change personal agency. By questioning established norms and pushing for individual satisfaction, Asma symbolizes a new kind of freedom among Omani women, with education as a key factor in self-determination. Moreover, the novel presents a nuanced view of Asma's approach to societal limits. It shows the complexities of change within a

traditional culture that is becoming modern. Rather than openly defying norms, Asma exercises her agency through subtle negotiation and compromise. This illustrates the delicate balance between cultural customs and evolving values. The depiction reflects broader trends in Omani society, where progress often happens slowly and quietly, showcasing the intricate relationship between tradition and change. The story also emphasizes the significance of educational reforms that began during Sultan Qaboos's rule in Oman. The increasing access to schooling for girls and the gradual reduction of tribal authority show how society is changing. They also highlight education's potential to empower individuals beyond academic success. Asma's desire for knowledge and ethical understanding illustrate how education equips people to challenge existing norms, make informed choices, and shape their own futures.

In *Celestial Bodies*, the depiction of women's stories across generations highlights the complex relationship between tradition and modern life in Omani culture. The narrative shows how women's power changes with different age groups, shaped by unique contexts and varying levels of empowerment. Older characters like Salima are portrayed as the bearers of tradition throughout the novel. Their experiences reflect a strong attachment to established norms and customs. Challenging male authority is rare, and wisdom often comes through submission. Through Salima and similar figures, Alharthi shows that the perspectives of older generations are closely tied to their acceptance of patriarchal systems. The depiction of middle-aged women like Mayya and her sisters reveals their struggle between desire and societal limits. Their unspoken wishes come through expressions of creativity such as silence, memory, and rituals. Alharthi skilfully illustrates how these women navigate societal

expectations while finding ways to express themselves within their traditional roles.

In contrast, younger women like Asma and Khawla represent a shift towards open defiance in the story. Important themes such as divorce, philosophical thoughts, and romantic hopes stand out, signalling a departure from the passive acceptance seen in older generations. These characters show a growing tendency to challenge traditional norms, reflecting a broader societal change in Oman. Through the varied experiences of women from different generations, Alharthi creates a rich portrayal of womanhood in Oman. This depiction is not static but shows a dynamic interplay of social, cultural, and spiritual factors that shape women's identities. The novel presents womanhood as a complex idea that evolves, fractures, and transforms in response to changing societal forces.

Despite Oman's rapid urban development and modernization, the idea of domesticity remains a key area where gender norms are both set and challenged. The houses in the novel are not just backdrops; they actively shape relationships and significantly influence power dynamics. Consider these examples: Mayya's confinement within her marital home shows the emotional effects of a patriarchal system that often views marriage as an inevitable fate for women. This isolation limits her freedom and reflects broader societal norms that tie women to traditional roles. On the other hand, Zarifa's control over her household stands out, especially given her history of enslavement. Her power, while informal, is clear; it shows that marginalized women can have significant influence and control over their surroundings through their knowledge, skills, and care for their families. Khawla's daring choice to leave her marriage marks

another important moment. It changes the domestic space from one of mere survival to one of empowerment, decision-making, and freedom. This act of rebellion rejects traditional constraints and demonstrates that women can redefine their own stories. In this context, domestic life becomes more than just a retreat from the public sphere; it turns into a place where power is often exercised quietly and unnoticed. Through rituals, conversations, and acts of defiance, the women in *Celestial Bodies* take control of their surroundings, challenging established norms and reshaping their identities beyond their homes. Their journeys highlight the complex issues of gender, power, and agency in a society that is rapidly changing.

Alharthi shows a complex society where religious beliefs closely interact with cultural norms in layered and detailed ways. While Islam offers a solid spiritual framework that includes key rights for women, like inheritance and divorce, cultural interpretations often weaken and complicate these rights. This connection often leads to a situation where religion mixes with tradition, creating a system of beliefs and practices that resists quick or thorough change. For example, Asma's spirituality greatly shapes her moral values and influences her choices. However, her decisions must still navigate a culture that often doubts overt independence and self-assertion, which can lead to social backlash. On the other hand, Khawla, who may not be very spiritual, challenges strict cultural norms through her personal choices, such as deciding to divorce. This act of defiance shows that rebellion against societal restrictions doesn't always come from religious beliefs or motives; instead, it can stem from a deep desire for personal freedom and self-determination. Therefore, Alharthi emphasizes

the complex struggles women face as they try to assert their identities in a system that often limits their freedoms.

In the story, marriage serves as the main rite of passage for women. It is a social expectation that marks their entry into adulthood and affirms their role in the larger community. However, instead of being the romantic peak of love and desire, these marriages are often arranged. Asma longs for marriage as an *“identity document, her passport to a world wider than home”* (Alharthi 156). They represent transactions that prioritize family connections over personal satisfaction. Mayya quietly accepts an arranged marriage with Abdallah, even though she still has feelings for a former lover. This highlights how personal choices often take a back seat to family honour and societal expectations. Similarly, Khawla decides to marry her distant cousin. While this may seem like a claim to independence, it reflects the romantic ideals that traditional culture imposes. Asma views marriage realistically. She chooses a partner based on shared values and intellectual compatibility, showing a shift in how women see relationships. Still, even her decision, which seems progressive, is limited by social rules that define what is acceptable. Ultimately, marriage is seen not as a joyful celebration of love but as a means of control. It is a way to maintain social order and ensure the continuation of lineage. Women's bodies become tools for this continuity, often lacking emotional ownership and personal agency. This situation reveals the complex relationship between societal demands and women's personal dreams.

Women in *Celestial Bodies* are mostly shown in their homes, involved in everyday routines and rituals that shape their lives. This space, often seen as private and safe, turns out to be a place of emotional suppression and unnoticed

work that often goes unrecognized. Mayya, for example, is confined to her marital chamber, representing her isolation and silence. Within these walls, her embroidery becomes her only outlet, a detailed craft that allows her to express her deepest feelings, desires, and frustrations in a world that often silences her. Zarifa, once enslaved, now rules her household as a caregiver. She shows how marginalized women can assert their quiet authority through domestic skills. Yet, even in her position of power, her dominance is still restricted by societal limitations, revealing the complexities of female agency in oppressive situations. Older women, like Salima, play essential roles in upholding traditions. They pass down long-standing expectations and behaviours that maintain stability within their families and communities. While their contributions support continuity, they also limit the potential for change and growth, creating a cycle that confines these women and hinders liberation. As a result, the home becomes a complex space of both empowerment and restriction.

Outside the household, a patriarchal society constantly monitors and controls women's actions. In this setting, visibility and freedom are linked to honour. Modesty and silence are seen as important qualities that reinforce traditional gender roles. When women speak out or dress in ways that stray from societal norms, they often face an avalanche of gossip, criticism, and shame from their communities. This creates an environment where female expression is stifled, and individuality is sacrificed for a perceived shared honour. Men play a key role in shaping women's decisions about various aspects of life, such as education, marriage, mobility, and even emotional expression. Women often find their choices influenced by the expectations and judgments of the men

around them. A woman's reputation frequently overshadows her identity, meaning her worth is shaped more by others' opinions than by her own self-image or goals.

"All of it, Khawla carried on her back, and the load grew heavier every day, and her back began to break." (Alharthi 240). Khawla's eventual divorce and pursuit of independence challenge this pervasive culture of oversight. However, her actions are often seen as acts of rebellion rather than signs of personal growth or empowerment. The societal gaze remains constant, critical, and harsh, maintaining a cycle where women navigate their lives under heavy external standards and strict scrutiny. This complex relationship between societal norms and personal freedom significantly impacts women's experiences. Even with these limitations, *Celestial Bodies* does not show its female characters as merely victims. Instead, it investigates the complex ways women deal with their life's challenges, looking at how they find ways to assert themselves, whether through silence, knowledge, or defiance. Each character represents a different response to the barriers they face in a patriarchal world.

Mayya's withdrawal from emotional connections is a significant act of refusal. Although she struggles to express her feelings, she deliberately steers clear of societal expectations. Her silence becomes a strong statement of her independence. In contrast, Asma manages her beliefs within societal limits. She chooses to create change from inside rather than resorting to outright rebellion. Her journey highlights the struggle many women face when trying to balance personal values with societal pressures. Khawla reclaims her narrative through acts of romantic defiance and her eventual divorce, but she carries the scars from her experiences. The novel reveals an important truth: tradition is not a single

experience. Each woman experiences and interprets it in her own way. Even within the strictest roles, moments of independence arise, showcasing the resilience and strength of female identity. Through these nuanced portrayals, the story emphasizes that women can carve their own paths, even when faced with significant challenges.

The discovery of oil and the rise of Sultan Qaboos brought major changes to Oman, signalling a shift towards modernization. This period introduced policies that provided universal education, making learning available for both boys and girls. This novel reflects this change, highlighting education as one of the few ways for women to challenge their roles in society. The rapid urban development and better connections in today's Omani society expose women to a wide range of lifestyles. They see different models of romantic relationships, pursue ambitious career goals, and experience fascinating cultural mixes. This dynamic environment urges them to rethink and redefine what it means to be a woman in their lives. As these global ideas spread, they spark personal change. Rather than completely embracing Western ideals, these characters choose to incorporate concepts that resonate with their growing sense of self.

Education is a key tool for developing emotional intelligence and self-expression. In *Celestial Bodies* educated women show a remarkable ability to express their thoughts clearly and confidently. This stands in sharp contrast to the silence and limited experiences of older generations. For instance, Asma's skill in reasoning and handling complex moral issues sets her apart from her mother's quiet endurance and her sister Mayya's subtle yet rich artistry. This gap between generations shows how education can empower individuals,

particularly women, to connect with their feelings and share their experiences. Even enslaved women like Zarifa have a strong narrative voice. They achieve this not through formal education but through storytelling, a natural way of sharing knowledge and resisting oppression. Zarifa's tales demonstrate her strength and creativity, showing how women can reclaim their stories despite systemic challenges.

The novel suggests that access to language whether academic, emotional, or spiritual is crucial for women to shape and assert their inner realities. Education thus changes not only how individuals understand the world around them but also how they actively shape and express their inner selves. Through the link between education and emotional expression, *Celestial Bodies* emphasizes the transformative power of literacy in helping women navigate and redefine their identities. The school represents freedom. It stands for a break from the cycle of domestic confinement that has long limited women. It creates a space where women can escape traditional roles, explore new identities, and develop independence. This setting highlights how education can promote personal agency and self-determination.

Through self-reflection, characters like Asma begin to see themselves beyond their usual roles as mothers or wives. Education sparks a journey of self-awareness, helping these women to regard themselves as thinkers and agents of change. This internal growth connects with feminist ideas about empowerment through knowledge and self-examination, echoing theorists like Bell Hooks, who view education as a path to freedom and resistance. *Celestial Bodies* subtly promotes feminist ideas by illustrating how education enables women to go beyond societal boundaries, confront patriarchal standards, and recognize

themselves as active participants in societal change. The novel emphasizes that changes in perspective must happen before legal reforms, highlighting that educating women is key to achieving broader social change.

The novel features educated women who, in their quest for knowledge, gradually challenge the belief that intellectual authority and expertise belong only to men. Their participation in educational settings shows that women can gain and use knowledge. This involvement allows them to engage more fully in societal discussions and decision-making. The youngest female figures, Asma and Khawla, show the blend of tradition and modernity. They are at the forefront of cultural changes and reflect new views on love, autonomy, and self-identity. Their stories highlight how modern women navigate societal norms while standing by their personal choices. Asma and Khawla are well-educated and aware of philosophical ideas, which improves their understanding of life and individual choice. Their experiences with different stories about love, freedom, and self-discovery shape their views and decisions. Education helps them challenge traditional norms and seek new ways to express themselves. These women represent a shift in how autonomy is seen within their community. Asma decides to marry for mutual respect, not societal expectations or romantic fantasies. *“Marriage was her identity document, her passport to a world wider than home”* (Alharthi 144). This shows a move toward relationships based on equality and understanding. In contrast, Khawla insists on marrying her long-lost cousin. Her choice to divorce him when he disappoints her shows a brave claim to independence, an act once unimaginable for women in her society.

The current generation of women skilfully navigates the limits of tradition. They do not seek to tear down societal structures but instead practice

“selective resistance.” They push boundaries where they can while respecting core cultural values. Their actions reveal a thoughtful way of bringing change: keeping connections to tradition while subtly redefining roles and expectations. The design of homes reflects cultural efforts to control women’s lives. Many domestic spaces are intentionally built to enforce gender separation, seclusion, and limits. For example, Mayya’s isolation in her room after marriage illustrates this forced seclusion. Her room symbolizes emotional confinement, hiding her struggles behind decorative fabrics. The way these homes are arranged keeps women out of sight. They perform important tasks like cooking and cleaning but often go unnoticed and unacknowledged. This layout shows the psychological constraints placed on women, reinforcing social norms that limit their roles and visibility.

This topic aligns with feminist geographic theories that argue that space is influenced by social constructs rather than being neutral. In patriarchal societies like Oman, home design often serves to undermine women’s independence by turning physical barriers into tools of control. These spatial arrangements support gender hierarchies, subtly restricting women’s movement and agency while maintaining the illusion of privacy and virtue. One of the novel's most significant instances of personal agency is Khawla's audacious choice to break up with her long-awaited fiancé. This crucial decision demonstrates her dedication to self-empowerment as well as her rejection of a traditional marriage characterized by romantic ideals and social expectations. Khawla's position is both novel and refreshing in a culture where many women feel pressured to put duty before desire. Her voluntary and unapologetic departure from the confines of her home signals a powerful repudiation of the

domestic norms that seek to define and restrict her. This act of walking away becomes a profound symbol of rebirth; it marks her refusal to be contained within the boundaries of prescribed roles. By choosing her own path, Khawla steps beyond the traditional confines of marriage, demonstrating that autonomy isn't merely about endurance it's about having the courage to seek out something greater. In reclaiming the domestic space, Khawla's journey shines a light on the often-unspoken struggles women face against generational expectations. Her actions serve as an inspiring testament to the potential for personal choice to reshape established traditions. Through her narrative, we witness a broader critique of societal norms, where the audacity to prioritize one's happiness can indeed resonate across generations. Khawla emerges not just as an individual; she represents a collective yearning for liberation in the face of cultural constraints. In this way, her story transcends the personal, touching on the universal quest for identity and fulfilment amidst the often-overwhelming expectations of tradition.

In *Celestial Bodies*, domestic responsibility is not limited to physical duties like cooking and cleaning; it extends into the emotional realm. Women are expected to maintain peace, be humble, avoid conflict, and constantly prioritize the needs of others. This emotional labour is rarely acknowledged, yet it is central to how womanhood is defined and passed down from one generation to the next. It becomes an unspoken inheritance deeply embedded in daily life and social expectation. Salima, the matriarch of the family, exemplifies how emotional labour becomes a legacy. She bears the weight of her family's wellbeing with patience and silence, performing her role without complaint. Her strength lies in her ability to endure rather than to question. By embodying these

ideals, she passes them on to her daughter Mayya, modelling a form of womanhood centred on sacrifice and emotional restraint. Salima's character reflects how tradition is often upheld not through force, but through quiet repetition and example. Mayya, however, does not fully inherit this emotional script. While she doesn't openly rebel, her emotional withdrawal from her husband, Abdallah, becomes a form of quiet defiance. Her silence is not passive it is a deliberate retreat, a refusal to perform the emotional care expected of her. By withholding emotional connection, Mayya carves out a subtle space for autonomy. Her choice to remain distant challenges the assumption that women must always give emotionally, especially in marriage. It reveals a powerful tension between conformity and self-preservation, and it speaks to the ways women can resist even within the confines of expectation.

The novel asks us to reconsider what emotional labour really costs. Is it an act of love and duty, or is it a form of quiet erasure? Alharthi does not offer easy answers. Instead, she invites readers to reflect on how traditional roles especially within the home can obscure women's needs and silence their voices. Through characters like Salima and Mayya, *Celestial Bodies* explores how emotional labour is both a tool of survival and a mechanism of control. It reminds us that within even the most ordinary domestic routines, power and resistance are always at play. Jokha Alharthi offers a layered and often unsettling portrayal of motherhood one that resists the idealized, almost sacred image traditionally upheld in many cultures. Rather than presenting motherhood as a natural or universally fulfilling role, Alharthi reveals it as a complex, deeply personal experience that can just as easily isolate as it can connect.

Mayya's experience of childbirth is not a moment of joy or transformation, but of trauma. Her pain is raw and visceral, and rather than drawing her closer to her new identity as a mother, it pushes her further inward. Already emotionally distant in her marriage, Mayya becomes even more withdrawn after giving birth. The act of becoming a mother does not offer her a new sense of purpose it deepens her solitude. Her relationship with her daughter, London, begins not with overwhelming love, but with a kind of muted detachment, complicating the cultural assumption that maternal instinct is immediate and natural. In doing so, Alharthi subtly but powerfully questions the long-held belief that motherhood is the ultimate fulfilment of a woman's life. For Mayya, becoming a mother does not "complete" her it does not heal old wounds or replace lost dreams. Instead, it becomes another layer of expectation placed upon her, one that further obscures her individual desires, thoughts, and emotional needs. Through Mayya, the novel confronts the idea that maternal identity often demands the erasure of personal identity, as women are expected to sacrifice their individuality at the altar of motherhood.

Ultimately, *Celestial Bodies* disrupts the romanticized image of the mother as selfless nurturer, revealing how tradition can use motherhood as a tool of control one that confines women to roles that deny them full emotional and intellectual lives. In place of idealization, Alharthi offers complexity: a vision of motherhood that is real, messy, painful, and deeply human. As a former slave and the central domestic caregiver in her employer's home, Zarifa's presence is an intricate blend of influence and vulnerability. In *Celestial Bodies*, Jokha Alharthi constructs Zarifa as a profoundly complex character who challenges conventional narratives of servitude and subordination. Despite her

origins as an enslaved woman, Zarifa carves out a significant, albeit informal, domain of influence within the domestic sphere. Through her roles as a caregiver, storyteller, and emotional anchor, she exerts quiet but potent authority in her household and beyond. Her presence is emblematic of what feminist theorists term “embodied agency” the assertion of influence and autonomy within structurally limiting environments (Ahmed). Zarifa’s character also exemplifies the layered complexity of intersectionality. Her experience as a Black woman, a former slave, and a domestic worker places her at the confluence of multiple axes of marginalization. Yet, Alharthi does not render her passive. Instead, Zarifa becomes a subversive figure whose capacity to nurture and maintain familial cohesion grants her a kind of social and emotional leadership. Within the deeply patriarchal fabric of Omani society, her caregiving becomes not only a mode of survival but a quiet act of resistance. She exists in tension with the systems that seek to erase her, embodying the paradox of being both dependent and indispensable (Crenshaw 1244).

On one hand, Zarifa holds deep, everyday authority: she orchestrates the rhythms of the household, ensures its smooth functioning, and becomes a guiding force in the upbringing of multiple generations of children including those for whom she is not a biological parent. Through her wisdom, resilience, and emotional intelligence, she becomes indispensable, earning respect from both children and adults. Despite her vital role, Zarifa’s position is fraught with limits. Her authority is informal and always at the mercy of the household’s true powerholders. She enjoys neither legal rights nor ownership over property or even her own narrative; her security and autonomy are contingent on the goodwill of those above her in the social hierarchy. While others may rely on

her experience and insight, she is constantly aware of the boundaries she cannot cross, and the precariousness that comes from being perpetually “other.”

Yet within these constraints, Zarifa discovers subtle ways to exert her will. Her power comes not from official titles or recognized status, but through the bonds she builds, the knowledge she accumulates about each family member, and the trust won over years of service and care. She is a confidante, an advisor, and, at times, the keeper of the household’s emotional equilibrium. Her influence is visible in the daily routines she manages and, in the values, and strengths she quietly imparts to the children. Zarifa’s story brings to light a paradox common to many marginalized caregivers: the very system that limits her freedom and voice is also where she carves out meaning, agency, and a subtle form of authority. The domestic sphere long associated with women’s work and sometimes with subjugation becomes, in her hands, a place of informal leadership, negotiation, and even narrative control. Despite being denied formal recognition, Zarifa shapes not only the day-to-day life of the household but also the stories, memories, and identities of those she helps raise. Her endurance, resourcefulness, and emotional labour are testaments to the complex and often invisible ways that marginalized women have sustained families and influenced history from behind the scenes.

Khawla’s decision to divorce her long-awaited fiancé, Nasir, stands out as one of the boldest expressions of female agency in *Celestial Bodies*. After years of waiting faithfully for his return from Canada anchored by romantic loyalty and the promise of love Khawla’s choice to end the marriage once it finally begins is startling, powerful, and deeply meaningful. This act is not rooted in anger or rebellion for its own sake. Rather, it reflects a clear and

deliberate refusal to remain in a relationship that no longer aligns with her values or needs. Khawla recognizes that duty, nostalgia, or the fulfilment of youthful dreams are not enough to sustain a marriage. Her decision reveals a mature understanding of love and self-worth an understanding that many women in her position might feel, but not dare to act upon.

Perhaps most striking is the manner of her departure. Khawla leaves voluntarily, without shame or explanation. She does not beg for understanding or linger in self-doubt. Her exit is purposeful and unapologetic a quiet revolution against the traditional belief that a woman's place is in the home, regardless of her happiness. In this moment, the domestic space so often depicted as a realm of endurance and compromise is not something she accepts or adapts to. It is something she walks away from entirely. In doing so, Khawla redefines what autonomy can look like. While many women in the novel find subtle ways to resist from within the walls of the home, Khawla's resistance lies in her decision to leave those walls behind altogether. Her act challenges deeply embedded cultural expectations about female sacrifice, marital duty, and the sanctity of domestic life. It also breaks with the emotional legacies passed down from women like Salima and Mayya women who stayed, endured, and bore the consequences in silence. Khawla's story does not offer easy closure, but it leaves a powerful impression: personal choice can be radical. In choosing herself, she reclaims not just her freedom but her voice signalling a shift in how tradition might be reimagined by a new generation of Omani women. Her act of leaving becomes more than a personal decision; it is a statement about the right to define one's own life; on one's own terms.

Celestial Bodies, refuses to reduce tradition to a flat, unyielding antagonist. Instead, it reveals many textures and the subtle spaces of possibility it can hold. Tradition in al-Awafi is not a solid wall but a living, evolving presence sometimes confining, at other times unexpectedly flexible. Alharthi's women do not simply accept tradition passively, nor do they always seek to overtly defy it. Rather, they engage with it skilfully and creatively, finding cracks through which to breathe, adapt, and sometimes gently reshape the rules. For these women, autonomy often emerges in quiet, deliberate choices. Some assert themselves through silence a silence that is strategic, withholding, or protective, rather than empty. Others safeguard pockets of independence through knowledge and education, by placing value on intellectual pursuits that tradition might not explicitly forbid but also does not wholly endorse. Domestic rituals cooking, embroidery, the handling of family gatherings becomes more than chores; they are opportunities for self-expression, forms of indirect negotiation, and sometimes small acts of resistance.

Crucially, the agency depicted in the novel is not always loud or disruptive. Instead, it often looks like curated participation: women take the roles assigned to them and engage selectively, shaping their involvement according to deeply personal boundaries. They invest meaning in some traditions, ignore or subvert others, and in doing so, subtly rewrite what it means to be a wife, mother, or daughter within their world. *Celestial Bodies* gently upends the simplistic notion that freedom must be dramatic or revolutionary. Instead, Alharthi shows us how freedom and selfhood can thrive in the softest moments through the simple act of making a choice, however small; in a daughter secretly reading a book; in a mother insisting on a family ritual done

her way. Sometimes freedom does not announce itself with a shout. More often, it whispers a pot stirred with intention, a conversation quietly deflected, a firm silence maintained. In celebrating these everyday acts, Alharthi honours the resilience, complexity, and creativity that women bring to their lives, making survival and selfhood acts of both endurance and artistry.

Among the three sisters, Mayya stands out as the most mysterious. She rarely speaks, submits outwardly to social expectations, and moves through her domestic life with an eerie calm. Yet beneath this quiet exterior lies a rich and complicated inner world one shaped by silent rebellion, emotional detachment, and a refusal to conform in a society where a woman's autonomy is often tied to how visible or vocal she is. Mayya's quietness isn't just situational it begins long before her marriage and deepens over time. Her lack of protest when forced into an arranged marriage with Abdallah, despite having loved someone else, might be mistaken for submission. But in truth, her silence is strategic. By not resisting openly, she sidesteps confrontation and protects her inner world. Her silence becomes a kind of shield, allowing her to retreat into herself while maintaining a measure of control. After giving birth, a physically and emotionally painful experience Mayya turns further inward. Rather than forming the expected maternal bond, she detaches. This emotional withdrawal reflects her quiet rejection of the societal belief that motherhood is a woman's ultimate fulfilment. Though Mayya doesn't speak much, her silence is far from meaningless. Alharthi portrays her stillness as deliberate, even defiant. Her embroidery becomes a key symbol of this more than just a domestic task, it is her silent language, woven with emotional depth and creative purpose: Each stitch tells a story she cannot or chooses not to say out loud.

A practice typically tied to traditional feminine roles; embroidery becomes for Mayya an intimate act of self-expression. In her hands, it transforms into something powerful and quietly radical. It's how she asserts herself, not through words or public acts, but through colour, form, and patience. Rather than fully inhabiting the roles of wife and mother, Mayya remains emotionally distant. Her lack of intimacy with Abdallah unsettles him, creating emotional tension that pulses through his own chapters. Her coldness toward her daughter challenges cultural ideals of nurturing motherhood. She does not embrace these roles because they were never hers to choose. Mayya's quiet refusal to play the parts expected of her becomes a subtle form of resistance. She doesn't leave, argue, or fight. She simply withdraws, destabilizing the domestic norms from within. Alharthi reinforces this by giving Mayya limited narrative space her thoughts are rarely voiced directly. Instead, we see her mostly through Abdallah's eyes, which only deepens her sense of distance and mystery. This choice by the author isn't accidental it speaks volumes. Mayya's silence isn't emptiness; its power held close. Her story suggests that agency isn't always loud or outward. Sometimes, it lives in quiet decisions, emotional boundaries, and the refusal to perform.

Unlike the typical image of the bold feminist or the outspoken rebel, Mayya represents a different kind of defiance. She doesn't demand recognition. She doesn't explain herself. She simply withholds her emotional presence from the spaces and roles she never asked to occupy. In a world that often equates visibility with value, Mayya's quiet invisibility becomes its own radical statement a quiet, dignified refusal to be defined by expectations she never accepted. Unlike her sisters, Mayya and Khawla who each respond to societal

expectations in their own way Asma charts a quieter, more thoughtful path. Where Mayya chooses silence and Khawla embraces bold action, Asma turns inward. Her sense of agency doesn't come from defying tradition outright, but from asking the right questions and reshaping those norms to fit her values. In a culture where conformity is often expected of women, Asma shows us that real strength can lie in reflection. She's the most intellectually driven of the three. Books are her refuge a place where she can think freely and imagine a life guided by ideas rather than imposed roles. When it comes to marriage, she doesn't rush in or yield to family pressure. Instead, she seeks a partner who shares her beliefs and respects her independence. Her approach to life is measured, rooted in personal ethics and spiritual thoughtfulness.

Asma's commitment to education and learning acts as a quiet form of resistance. She doesn't break the rules; she bends them gently, choosing transformation over confrontation. She offers an alternative model of feminine autonomy one shaped by curiosity, conviction, and inner clarity. Still, Asma's journey isn't immune to challenges. She grapples with emotional uncertainty, questions the role of love in her life, and moves through familiar social constraints. Her independence isn't flashy or absolute but it's real. What makes her powerful isn't rebellion, but the ability to think deeply and live deliberately. In Asma's story, freedom doesn't shout it speaks through reason, quiet choices, and a mind that refuses to be confined.

Khawla, the youngest of the three sisters, stands out for her unshakable belief in love and her quiet refusal to conform. While her sisters Mayya and Asma navigate tradition with varying degrees of acceptance, Khawla chooses a different path. Her story is one of steadfast romantic idealism, personal

conviction, and quiet resistance that offers a deeply human and emotionally layered portrait of agency. At the heart of Khawla's identity is her devotion to Nasir, her cousin who leaves for Canada. "*Khawla held on fiercely to her dream*" (Alharthi 185). Despite his absence, she waits year after year turning away every suitor her family presents to her. For Khawla, love isn't something negotiable or convenient. It's an anchor, a belief rooted in loyalty and childhood memory. In a society where marriages are often arranged and love is considered secondary to duty, her commitment to Nasir is both a deeply personal act and a quiet challenge to the norms around her.

Khawla's idealism becomes her way of resisting a world that expects her to bend, compromise, and obey. She doesn't argue or rebel loudly, but her refusal to "move on" sends its own message. By insisting on choosing love for herself, she resists being handed over like property, and claims the right to feel, to wait, and to hope on her own terms. Her inner strength comes not from defiance in the traditional sense, but from her quiet endurance, her ability to hold onto her vision of what life should be, even when it isolates her. Khawla's rejections of marriage proposals are firm and repeated. It's not that the suitors aren't respectable some are even desirable by societal standards but Khawla simply isn't interested. Her determination frustrates her family, who begin to worry about her prospects and what people might say. Remaining unmarried for so long makes her an anomaly, a subject of whispers and disapproval in a culture where marriage is seen as a woman's destiny.

Her resistance isn't easy. She deeply respects her parents and understands the emotional burden her decisions place on them. Still, she holds her ground. This makes her story all the more complex she isn't rebelling for

the sake of it. She's balancing her own desires against the weight of family expectation, managing that tightrope with grace and resolve. But idealism doesn't come without consequences. When Nasir finally returns, the reunion is not the fairy tale she imagined. Years apart have changed them both, and the emotional gap between her dreams and reality is painful. Khawla is forced to confront the limitations of her long-held hopes and the truth that love, like people, can be fragile and unpredictable.

Alharthi doesn't judge Khawla for this. Instead, she shows the quiet courage it takes to hold onto a dream and then face its unravelling. Khawla's journey reminds us that strength can be found in vulnerability, and that disappointment doesn't erase the dignity of the path she chose. In the end, Khawla's story is about more than waiting for a man. It's about her right to choose for herself when and whom to love. Her resistance is not loud, but steady. *"Everyone thought she had gone insane. Or perhaps she was concealing some terrible set of secrets that had pushed her to this crazy decision"* (Alharthi 216). She exercises control by choosing when to act and when to hold back, challenging the idea that agency must always be visible or dramatic.

Her unwavering commitment to her own ideals makes her a powerful figure in Alharthi's narrative a woman who defines herself on her own terms, even when those terms go against everything expected of her. Through Khawla, *Celestial Bodies* offers a rich, emotionally resonant exploration of the quieter forms of rebellion that shape a woman's life.

"Khawla did not forget anything she had gone through, day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute, everything inside her sapping her spirit. Every day plunged another blade into the deep

earth inside of her, turning it over mercilessly, sowing it. At the lowest point, at Khawla's bedrock, there was no fresh soil fit for planting. There were words she wanted to say to him. Anything at all, that would have been enough for me, anything that would have watered the fields of my heart and made them flower. Anything to fill those baskets held out to you. Only to you. Anything. A letter. Just a single page with one single word, in your handwriting. The ring of a telephone after midnight, a snatched dream in which you didn't turn your back, a small step, a single slow turn to face me. Anything. Even an angry scolding! A sigh of exasperation. A cheap gift. Anything would have been a lot. But that anything never came. Nothing, ever. And now, everything is not enough. Everything is a lot less than a single bud, a single leaf unfolding in a field whipped by winter. But she didn't say any of it." (Alharthi 217-218).

Her journey marked by love, hope, disappointment, and inner strength adds depth to the novel's broader examination of what it means to be a woman in a changing Omani society.

In *Celestial Bodies*, women's bodies are often not their own. They're treated as carriers of legacy, honour, and tradition expected to uphold family reputation, satisfy cultural expectations, and validate male authority. Whether it's through chastity, motherhood, or fertility, a woman's body becomes a symbol but not one she controls. Take Mayya, for instance. Her body is expected to fulfil her role as a wife and mother, yet no one asks what she wants or feels. She moves through the motions of marriage and childbirth, but with a quiet,

aching detachment. Her inner world her thoughts, her desires is invisible to those around her. It's as if her body matters, but *she* doesn't.

Khawla clings to her virginity, refusing to settle for anything less than her romantic ideal. On the surface, it seems like an act of choice. But even this choice is shaped by the pressure to remain "pure," to prove her worth through her body. Her sense of control, while powerful, still exists within a system that defines her value by what she has not done, rather than who she is. And then there's Zarifa the servant, the caregiver, the one whose body has worked the hardest and been seen the least. Her hands raise children that aren't hers, her labour keeps the household running, yet no one pauses to consider her dreams, her heartbreaks, or her exhaustion. Her body is useful, but her emotions are invisible.

Throughout the novel, women's bodies carry meaning for everyone *but* the women themselves. They are used, admired, monitored, even revered but rarely listened to. Their pain, their longing, their physical and emotional fatigue often go unnamed. When women give birth, as Mayya does, the experience is raw and gruelling, but the aftermath is silence. No one comforts her, asks how she feels, or sees the emotional toll. It's as though the moment she fulfils her role, her needs become irrelevant. Other deeply personal experiences such as menstruation, aging, physical changes are barely acknowledged, despite shaping how women see themselves and move through the world. These things exist, but they're tucked away, almost taboo. The silence around them isn't accidental it reflects a deeper truth: women's bodies are visible, but their experiences are not.

The novel gently but insistently asks: *Who gets to tell the story of a woman's body?* And what happens when that story is denied, rewritten, or silenced altogether? In this world, a woman's subjectivity, her right to feel, to remember, to want is not a given. It must be fought for, or quietly carved out in stolen moments. Even family members, those closest to these women, often fail to truly *see* them. The result is a silence that feels all too familiar not just on the page, but in real life too

Chapter Four

Conclusion

Jokha Alharthi's *Celestial Bodies* tells a compelling story about navigating limitations. These limitations are not just external circumstances but also an ingrained state of being. The novel spans multiple generations and portrays the complex dynamics of silence, defiance, customs, and change in the lives of Omani women. Alharthi combines personal insight with critical analysis in her narrative style. She weaves together a rich array of voices, including Mayya, Asma, Khawla, Zarifa, Salima, and others. This illustrates that womanhood is not a single identity but a fluid, contested, and evolving experience.

In exploring the evolution of womanhood across different times and settings, your dissertation has examined the cultural, historical, and emotional frameworks that define and restrict female agency in Oman. The conclusion should revisit the main argument: agency, as depicted in *Celestial Bodies*, is not a single, dramatic moment. It is a complex series of negotiations influenced by patriarchy, religion, history, and self-reflection. Each woman's journey through this complexity reveals important insights into how power is exercised, surrendered, challenged, and redefined in daily life.

The novel does not show tradition as just oppressive or outdated. Instead, it presents tradition as a dynamic force that can be both controlling and protective, sacred and stifling. For characters like Salima and Mayya, tradition is something passed down and deeply rooted. Salima's quiet endurance and her life centred around rituals create an image of the traditional matriarch someone who maintains family unity through emotional work and moral guidance. In

contrast, Mayya highlights the toll that such tradition can take. Her experiences in marriage, motherhood, and domestic solitude show how deep-rooted cultural stories can silence women without needing direct violence. Yet, even within these limitations, Alharthi points out subtle forms of resistance. Mayya's withdrawal from emotional expression, her silence, and her focus on embroidery become acts of defiance. These are not open rebellions but quiet claims of independence. Through her stillness, Mayya claims her right to be mysterious, resolute, and emotionally free in a society that expects submission.

Asma's story offers a fresh view on agency. Her commitment to education and self-reflection acts as a powerful form of resistance. Unlike Mayya, Asma does not retreat into silence or openly confront societal norms. Instead, she builds a sense of inner strength a mental and moral independence that allows her to make thoughtful choices about marriage, motherhood, and her identity. Through Asma, Alharthi shows how literacy and education can shift power dynamics. Education is shown not just as a way to gain jobs or status, but as a way to gain emotional insight and a critical viewpoint. The ability to read, think, and express one's experiences represents a quiet revolution in itself. *"Aah, the books! The thought of the enormous pleasure of books quickened Asma's pace. It was a good moment to lose herself in their joys"* (Alharthi 33). It reflects a type of agency based on reflection rather than direct action, and on dialogue rather than disruption. Asma's journey emphasizes how agency can arise within existing structures without giving in to them.

In contrast, Khawla's path is marked by strong decisions. Her unwavering commitment to Nasir, her estranged cousin, acts as both a source of strength and a limit. When their reunion falls short of her expectations, Khawla's

choice to divorce him becomes an act of resistance. In a society that ties a woman's worth to marriage, where patience and loyalty are valued, Khawla's departure clearly rejects those ideals. Khawla's act of defiance isn't loud or dramatic; it's deliberate and unapologetic. By choosing to let go of what was once her goal, she takes back control over her body, her story, and her future. Her decision challenges the idea that endurance is the highest virtue for women. Instead, Khawla creates a new narrative, one in which personal happiness, emotional honesty, and independence are not only valid but essential.

A key theme in the novel focuses on the idea of home not just as a physical place, but also as a symbol where womanhood is shaped and challenged. Alharthi's depiction of domestic spaces shows the contradiction of home as both a refuge and a trap. For characters like Mayya and Zarifa, home becomes a stage for unrecognized work, emotional repression, and power struggles based on gender. However, these environments also act as places for negotiation. Zarifa, despite her past as a former slave, takes on informal power within her home. Through caregiving, storytelling, and showing emotional insight, she becomes a crucial figure, her influence goes beyond formal recognition or social status. Her story serves as a strong reminder that agency often exists in relationships, in everyday life, and in the deeply personal act of nurturing others. By centering Zarifa's narrative, Alharthi broadens the novel's exploration of womanhood and agency, illustrating that empowerment does not always assume loud or revolutionary forms. Instead, it often unfolds in domestic, emotional, and relational contexts, areas traditionally feminized and thus overlooked by dominant power structures (Rich 212). Zarifa's journey complicates simplistic binaries between power and submission, dependence and

resistance. Through her, *Celestial Bodies* asserts that womanhood under patriarchy is not a fixed category but a lived, negotiated experience, where even those most oppressed can find ways to assert their subjectivity and meaningfully shape the world around them.

Zarifa's journey also highlights the idea of intersectionality. Her race, class, and position as a servant come together to define her role in society. Still, she shows what feminist scholars call "embodied agency", the ability to influence, adjust, and even lead within systems meant to limit her. Her story adds depth to the novel's exploration of power by showing that resistance can coexist with dependence and that caregiving can be a form of political resistance.

In *Celestial Bodies*, marriage is shown without romantic gloss. It acts as a social contract, often marked by silence, emotional distance, and specific gender roles. For Mayya, it feels like a prison. For Asma, it is a partnership based on shared values. For Khawla, it is an institution she decides to reject. These varied experiences show that marriage is not a one-size-fits-all situation. It is closely tied to context, power dynamics, and individual choice. Similarly, motherhood in the novel lacks sentimental glamour. "*Once branded by childbearing, a mother's embrace could no longer be a lover's embrace*" (Alharthi 179). Mayya's emotional detachment from her child, her experiences of postnatal trauma, and her numbness challenge the idea that motherhood is always fulfilling. Alharthi emphasizes the emotional burden of expected maternal roles. Women often have to abandon their identities to focus on caregiving. Motherhood then appears as both a heavy duty and a battleground. It is a place where societal pressures collide with personal grief, unexpressed

anger, and lost dreams. By exploring the unspoken realities of motherhood, Alharthi reclaims the maternal figure as complex, flawed, and profoundly human.

One of the key contributions of *Celestial Bodies* to feminist discussions is its claim that exercising agency does not always mean rebellion. It can also show itself through silence, routines, compromises, or acts of care. Alharthi introduces the idea of “everyday resistance”, the small, often unnoticed ways in which women assert their identity within limits. Mayya’s embroidery, Asma’s reading, Khawla’s patience, and Zarifa’s storytelling represent what theorists like Michel de Certeau call “tactics,” which are subtle, spontaneous moves within a power system. These actions are rarely seen as revolutionary; however, they reflect moments of choice, intention, and self-determination.

By avoiding clear heroes or villains, Alharthi captures the complexities of real life. Her characters are neither saints nor rebels; they include survivors, thinkers, lovers, and dreamers. They make mistakes, deal with contradictions, and find ways to express their agency from the tightest confines. This portrayal is not one of despair; instead, it is filled with hope. It shows that even in the most restrictive situations, individuals can find ways to live meaningfully, based on their own definitions. Through its detailed structure and multi-generational viewpoint, *Celestial Bodies* encourages readers to rethink the nature of womanhood. This perspective applies not only to Oman but to the entire world. The novel argues that womanhood is not a single idea, but a shared one shaped by history, social class, ethnicity, and personal memories. By portraying women as complex, adaptable, and emotionally rich, Alharthi challenges rigid views and emphasizes the dignity found in personal experiences.

This dissertation has explored the layers of that complexity, showing how *Celestial Bodies* takes on a feminist mission rooted in local context while connecting with global feminist discussions. Whether through quiet strength, thoughtful negotiation, or bold choices, the women in *Celestial Bodies* redefine resistance, survival, and living freely.

In the end, the novel teaches us that the complex journey of womanhood is not something to escape, but rather something to navigate with wisdom, courage, and hope. Within its complexities, we find not only challenges but also paths to self-discovery. In every moment of silence, every act of care, and every expression of defiance, we see not just struggle, but also the possibility for change.

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