

Dialogic Retrospect in Jokha Al-Harhi's Polyphonic Novel Celestial Bodies

Ren Jianing¹, Pabiyah Hajimaming@ Pabiyah Toklubok², Nik
Farhan Binti Mustapha³

^{1,2,3}Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication,
Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia, ¹School of
Foreign Languages, Linyi University, 276005, the Middle Part of Shuangling Road, Lanshan
District of Linyi, Shandong Province, China

Corresponding Author Email: pabiyah@upm.edu.my

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Abstract

This paper reviews the dialogism in Jokha Al-Harhi's novel Celestial Bodies, highlighting its narrative complexity and polyphonic structure. The purpose of this study is to investigate how dialogism operates in the novel through macro and micro levels of dialogue.

Keywords: Celestial Bodies, Jokha Al-Harhi, Dialogism, Polyphonic Nove

Introduction: Research Background

The novel is regarded as one of the most significant literary genres, with polyphonic novels, in particular, holding an important position in modern and contemporary literature. The Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin applied the principle of dialogism in his works, a concept that reflects the tone of human speech and the overall existence of humanity (Amal Bin Jamea & Othman Rawaq, 2021).

Dialogue constitutes a crucial component of the narrative discourse structure in novels. It is one of the primary expressive tools employed by writers and serves as a key element in novel construction. Through dialogue, authors articulate their visions, emotions, and aesthetic experiences. Additionally, dialogue plays an effective role in the construction, development, and deepening of novelistic events. It establishes close and solid connections between various narrative elements, such as setting, time, and events, ultimately revealing the novel's meaning and clarifying its purpose (Abdul Rahim Hamdan Hamdan, 2021). Furthermore, the manifestation of dialogue is closely linked to the principle of dialogism and its social and cultural context. As Bakhtin asserts: "Human life itself is dialogic" (Bakhtin, M. (2013). Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics). All communication must occur through dialogue, which is inseparable from language, society, and culture (1998).

"Dostoevsky is the creator of the polyphonic novel; he introduced an entirely new novelistic genre."

(Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, 1973), Bakhtin was the first scholar to define and establish the polyphonic novel as a distinct literary genre through his studies of Dostoevsky's works. In Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle (Vol. 13), Tzvetan Todorov (1984) emphasizes that Bakhtin considered dialogue to be the foundation of all things, particularly in novels and narratives.

As Bakhtin scholar Zhi Chao Zhu (2021) notes, Bakhtin's concept of dialogism possesses a cultural-philosophical orientation, an ethical dimension, and an interpretative flexibility that bridges literary texts and cultural reality. Moreover, the presence of dialogue in novels serves to express different consciousnesses and themes through multiple characters' perspectives. This characteristic is particularly evident in Jokha Al-Harhi's works, which exhibit the traits of a polyphonic novel (Harhi, 2019).

Bakhtin's concept of polyphony is evident in his literary criticism, offering novelists a fresh perspective on their craft. Novelists are widely regarded as prominent figures in contemporary narrative creation, and the novel itself revolves around the use of dialogic language, which requires at least two interlocutors to engage in conversation. The concept of voice emerges as a mechanism derived from dialogue and expression within human society (Manar Tabib & Buthaina Maryan, 2022). Similarly, Jokha Al-Harhi's novels present a distinctive approach to dialogue and voice, enriching the narrative by broadening perspectives and deepening the reader's understanding of the characters and core themes. Mikhail Bakhtin also emphasizes the importance of dialogue between conflicting approaches and differing ideologies, highlighting the presence of diverse opinions and viewpoints in interactions with others. It is upon this foundation that novels are constructed (Hamid Lahmidani).

Jokha Al-Harhi is one of the most significant contemporary Omani female writers, having published four novels to date. Her novel *Celestial Bodies* won the 2019 Man Booker International Prize, making her the first Arab author to receive this prestigious literary award. The Man Booker International Prize is considered one of the highest honors in contemporary English-language fiction and remains among the most influential literary awards worldwide. Jokha Al-Harhi became the first Omani woman novelist to receive this award after her work was translated into English, marking a historic moment as she also became the first Arab author to win the prize. This achievement brought unprecedented attention to Oman—a small Gulf nation that had long remained on the periphery of the global literary stage. The country's rich historical heritage and profound cultural atmosphere distinguish it within the Arab world, positioning it as a unique literary presence.

Originally published in 2010, *Celestial Bodies* consists of 57 chapters. In the Arabic version, the chapters are untitled, while the English translation introduces chapter titles based on the perspective of different characters. The novel covers a wide range of themes, centering around a small Omani village and narrating the multi-generational story of a single family. The backdrop of the novel transitions from Oman's earlier social underdevelopment to the abolition of slavery and eventually to modern economic growth. The novel explores diverse themes, addressing Oman's historical evolution, societal transformations, and cultural traditions, as well as the shifting consciousness of men and women across different time periods. It highlights the marginalization of male discourse power and the construction of

female discursive authority. These themes are all presented through dialogue, underscoring the novel's multi-voiced narrative structure and its polyphonic essence.

The novel presents a diversity of voices by depicting the perspectives and inner thoughts of multiple characters. No longer does a single, dominant voice—whether that of the author or a central protagonist—prevail. As Jokha Al-Harhi stated in an interview, the novel is intended to express multiple voices and themes, thus constructing its polyphonic nature (Al-Harhi, 2020). This polyphony is conveyed through dialogue, where the voices of different characters shape the novel's various dialogues, allowing readers to witness both character development and broader societal transformations through the lens of dialogue.

Research Objectives

- 1.To provide a comprehensive overview of the existing research on *Celestial Bodies* across different academic fields and to identify relevant literature analyzing the text through the lens of Bakhtin's theories, particularly polyphony, heteroglossia, and dialogism.
- 2.To identify inconsistencies in research findings, explore their causes, and analyze the rationale and significance of dialogue within the novel.
- 3.To describe the current state of research on *Celestial Bodies*, highlight gaps in the scholarship, and propose areas for further study.

Research Questions

In recent years, young Arab writers have begun to emerge on the global literary stage, with increasing attention given to Gulf writers. Among them, Omani author Jokha Al-Harhi has gained international recognition with her acclaimed novel *Celestial Bodies*, the first Arabic-language novel to win the Man Booker International Prize. This achievement has drawn global literary interest to Oman.

Celestial Bodies delves into Oman's history, politics, economy, and societal evolution, employing a polyphonic narrative technique to convey multiple themes and perspectives. This offers researchers a broader analytical framework. Scholars have approached the novel from various perspectives: some focus on narrative analysis, others examine it through cultural, linguistic, and translation studies, and some explore its polyphonic qualities. These diverse academic approaches have enriched the body of research on the novel and provided insights for both my study and future research. As Bakhtin (1981, p. 39) argues, the novel as a whole is a heteroglot, multi-voiced phenomenon, characterized by a complex interplay of linguistic and dialogic elements.

Bakhtin emphasizes the fundamental role of dialogue in literary analysis. In Dostoevsky's *Poetics* (Bakhtin, M. 1984, trans. Bai Chunren), he asserts that the polyphonic novel is entirely permeated with dialogism (1998, p. 55). Bakhtin's dialogic theory is widely regarded as the core of his intellectual contributions. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, he introduces the concept of dialogism (1998) and identifies in Dostoevsky's work a new novelistic form—the polyphonic or dialogic novel (Bakhtin, M. 1984, trans. Bai Chunren, p. 52). Bakhtin argues that dialogism pervades every aspect of the polyphonic novel. He describes how all structural elements of a novel are engaged in dialogic relationships, much like contrapuntal melodies that exist in opposition to one another (Bakhtin, M. 1984, trans. Bai Chunren, p. 76). This means that both internal and external elements of the novel exhibit dialogic properties. The entire novel, therefore, can be viewed as a "grand dialogue," where characters' interactions

are structurally reflected through dialogic engagement. Dialogue extends beyond surface-level conversations, penetrating the inner language of the novel and giving rise to double-voiced discourse. It even manifests in gestures and facial expressions, creating a heightened sense of emotional tension. Bakhtin refers to these intricate verbal and nonverbal exchanges as “micro-dialogues” (Bakhtin, M. 1984, trans. Bai Chunren, p. 77).

Previous studies on the polyphony of *Celestial Bodies* have largely neglected in-depth analyses of its dialogism. Existing research has mainly focused on the dialogic relationships between narrators or provided brief discussions on dialogism. However, there is a lack of studies that systematically examine the novel’s polyphony through the lenses of both “macro-dialogues” and “micro-dialogues.” Exploring macro-dialogues and micro-dialogues in polyphonic novels can help scholars gain deeper insights into the identity conflicts, cultural clashes, diversity of character consciousness, class struggles, and tensions between religion and secularism—all of which are key themes expressed in literary works.

Research Objectives

- 1.To provide a comprehensive overview of the current research on Jokha Alharthi’s novels across various academic fields and identify relevant literature that applies Bakhtin’s theories of polyphony, multi-voicedness, and dialogism to literary analysis.
- 2.To conduct a systematic review of existing studies on Jokha Alharthi’s novel *Celestial Bodies*, including an analysis of research areas, themes, methodologies, and conclusions.
- 3.To assess the current state of research on Alharthi’s four novels, highlight existing research gaps, and propose new directions for future studies.

Research Methodology

This paper primarily adopts a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research is one of the commonly used research methods, and in this study, it mainly includes textual analysis and content analysis. As its definition states: “Content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use.” (Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology, p. 18)

Content analysis has evolved into a systematic research method, allowing conclusions to be drawn from various linguistic, visual, symbolic, and communicative datasets (Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology, p. 17). It can be said that content analysis, as a research technique, provides new perspectives, enhances researchers’ understanding of specific phenomena, and serves as an effective scientific tool. Specific Research Methodology

Literature Identification

- ⑩ Identifying literature relevant to the research topic. The keywords for this paper include: Jokha Alharthi, novel titles, dialogism, Bakhtin’s theory of dialogue, and polyphonic novel.
- ⑩ Selecting WOS, Google Scholar, CNKI, Scopus, and university library resources as literature databases.
- ⑩ Searching for and downloading relevant literature from these databases.

Literature Selection

The literature is filtered based on author name (Jokha Alharthi), novel title (Celestial Bodies), Bakhtin, and dialogism-related keywords. The selected works are then categorized and ranked according to their relevance to the research topic. Finally, the literature is classified into four thematic categories: cultural themes, narratological themes, polyphonic themes, and dialogic theory themes, ensuring a systematic approach to analyzing existing studies.

Findings

Researchers have conducted a literature review on both Jokha Al-Harthi as an author and her novel *Celestial Bodies*, aiming to assess the current state of research. This study highlights the existing gap in research regarding the analysis of the novel through the lens of Bakhtin's "dialogic principle."

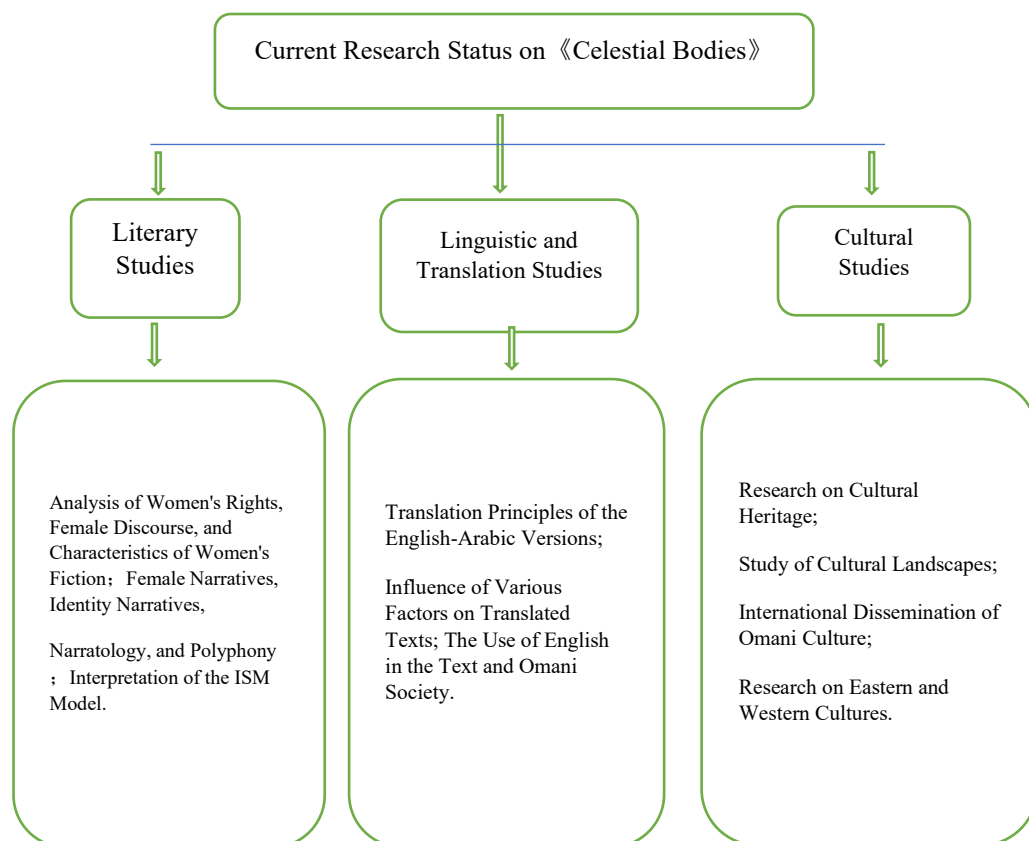
Introduction to Jokha Al-Harthi

Since Jokha Al-Harthi won the Man Booker International Prize, scholars from both the East and West have increasingly focused on her work and literary contributions. Since 2019, the number of articles discussing Jokha Al-Harthi's award has grown across various news media. Additionally, numerous press conferences and video interviews featuring Al-Harthi have provided valuable insights into her background and literary journey. Examining these materials allows for a deeper understanding of her upbringing and personal experiences, as well as their influence on her fiction. Such insights are crucial for developing a more profound appreciation of her novels.

Several articles discuss Jokha Al-Harthi's biography and her achievement in winning the Man Booker International Prize for her novel *Celestial Bodies*. Some media interviews have explored the structural background of her characters, her writing process, and the originality of dialogue in her novels (James Wood, 2019; Michael Cronin, 2019; Siona Jenkins, 2022). Since the 1990s, the status of female writers in the Arab world, including the Gulf region, has been on the rise, with an increasing number of literary works by Arab women gaining recognition. Zou Lanfang argues that Jokha Al-Harthi's novels are among the significant examples of contemporary Arab women's literature, which has evolved from being primarily personal narratives to becoming a major part of national literature. In an article by Louisa Ermelino (2019) discussing *Celestial Bodies*, she explains the timeframe of the novel's writing process. She quotes Jokha Al-Harthi, stating: "The Sultanate of Oman is changing rapidly, and this is exactly what happens when the events considered in the novel begin to shift."

Studies on Celestial Bodies

Currently, most scholars focus on Jokha Al-Harthi's novel *Celestial Bodies*. Since its English translation in 2019 and its subsequent Man Booker International Prize win, the novel has had a significant impact on both Arabic and global literature. It has also increased readers' interest in Omani literature, Gulf literature, and Arabic literature as a whole. Research on Jokha Al-Harthi's *Celestial Bodies* encompasses various academic discussions, including narratology, polyphony, linguistics, and translation studies. The specific research findings in these areas are outlined as follows:



1. Narratological perspective: researcher Hilal AlBai (2019) argues that the construction of the text through female narratives is expressed in various dialogic forms, with different female narrative voices effectively portraying the transition from traditional values to modern ideologies (Rafseena M and Ajit Kumar, 2023). Additionally, Zaher Aldawoodi (2019) suggests that the temporal narrative structure of the novel differs from that of traditional literary works, featuring a discontinuous and nonlinear style that uniquely links fragmented events. Moreover, scholar Mohamed Seif Al-Islam Bouflaka (2017) analyzes *Celestial Bodies* from five aspects—title symbolism, character symbolism, narrative function of characters, novel structure, and narrative techniques—and concludes that the novel demonstrates strong narrative craftsmanship.

2. Scholars have studied female consciousness and female representation in *Celestial Bodies* from various perspectives. Rabiatal Adawiyah Yusoff and Raihanah M.M (2022) argue that female narratives often construct stories from the perspective of women's space and time, emphasizing their significance in literature. Roy P. Veettil and Vijay Singh Thakur analyze dialogues between mothers and daughters, lovers, and women, examining the impact of education on female empowerment in a patriarchal society, and concluding that the awakening of female consciousness contributes to strengthening women's discourse power. Additionally, Rabiatal Adawiyah Yusoff and Raihanah M.M (2022) focus on the role of mothers, examining Omani societal transformations across generations and emphasizing how mothers shape their daughters' futures. Nandini and Dr. K. Balakrishnan (2020) study Omani women's life experiences, resilience, and social liberation, while Namshida Naseer (2020) analyzes *Celestial Bodies* through intersectional feminism, highlighting women's struggles for rights and empowerment. B.V. Saraswathy (2020) also applies intersectionality, arguing that women must challenge religion, tradition, and patriarchy to maintain individuality and shape

their identity, using a cross-sectional reading of the novel to reveal Omani gender dynamics and social transformations. Houda Bouhadjar (2022) discusses Omani women's fiction within Arabic literature, referencing genetic structuralism in the sociology of literature, analyzing how intellectual women with cultural awareness reflect Omani modernization and its societal impact, and emphasizing how the novel gives voice to marginalized groups by breaking the silence. Ji Wenyan (2022) applies feminist narratology, analyzing *Celestial Bodies* from three perspectives—narrative viewpoint, narrative voice, and discourse patterns—to explore how the author constructs female consciousness through unique narrative strategies, using fiction to reflect Omani societal realities. Nashihah, D (2021), employing Freudian psychoanalysis, examines the psychological and linguistic characteristics of the three sisters, asserting that women's perspectives are shaped by education, historical context, and family background. Mona Khamis Al Shamsi (2022) discusses women's rights and empowerment in the Middle East, focusing particularly on the Gulf region, while Jesna Joseph (2022) adopts a feminist linguistic approach, mapping the geographical trajectory of language use to highlight the struggles of marginalized groups, examining how language functions in power imbalances, and exploring women's efforts to gain equal spatial representation and overcome linguistic limitations.

Furthermore, Hajla Hawishi (2017) analyzes the male character Abdul through the lens of female representation, highlighting the diminishing status of male figures in the text. Meanwhile, ALTobi, O. K., & Met'eb, A. (2023) adopt a deconstructive reading to examine the objectification of men. By analyzing how Abdul's character is objectified to fulfill desires and needs, the novel also reflects on broader societal issues such as "self-objectification and commodification," expanding the discussion on these concerns. Additionally, scholars Chhabi Seth and Dr. Bani Dayal Dhir (2024) apply the Interpretive Structural Model (ISM) to the literary text *The Moon Woman*, arguing that the model simplifies complex literary systems, making them more accessible and easier to understand. They suggest that this approach helps bridge the gap between literature and science, ultimately facilitating interdisciplinary research.

3. Some scholars have approached the study from a cultural perspective. Researcher Hajar Al-Harathi (2019) argues that the novel incorporates a wealth of Omani cultural traditions, with a particular focus on postpartum customs and rituals. Through an analysis of the novel, the scholar suggests that Oman's political, economic, and social conflicts, along with its geographical boundaries, shape the country's cultural framework for social interaction. Moreover, the novel's use of polyphonic rhetorical techniques presents the voices of individuals from different genders and social classes, thereby revealing the historical transformations of Oman. Similarly, Aysar Mohammed Fadhil Al-Dbow and Jassm Mohammed Abbaes (2023) establish a network linking text and society through textual analysis, emphasizing three manifestations of ideology in the text, which further deepen the understanding of Omani culture. Tanseem (2020) asserts that analyzing *The Moon Woman* from the perspectives of living standards, social customs, and interpersonal relationships is essential to the study.

Likewise, Manshi and Sunil K. Mishra (2020) argue that *Celestial Bodies* is deeply connected to Oman's real historical narrative. Through the stories of three generations of an Omani family, the novel reflects the nation's social development, human experiences, and historical

transitions, while its characters highlight the dynamic evolution of Omani culture. Lemma Ana Crisostum analyzes the use of English in the novel, arguing that its incorporation facilitates multicultural dissemination, cross-cultural communication, and a broader understanding of Omani history. Meanwhile, Wadera Moatasem (2020) examines the representation of ancient poetic heritage in the novel, explaining its standards and usage. HANINA TABBICHE (2021) asserts that the integration of folklore in the text serves as a fundamental stylistic element, enhancing its aesthetic value. Additionally, scholar Samir Darwish (2019) explores the novel's feminist narrative perspective from a cultural standpoint. Yu Yuping (2023) contends that Al-Harthi integrates her cosmopolitan consciousness with local Omani rural elements, aiming to establish a link between Oman's history, geography, and cultural environment. This unique literary approach creates a landscape where nature and humanity coexist, offering new insights into the cultural dimensions of the text.

4. The Study of English Usage in *Celestial Bodies*, Research on *Celestial Bodies* has also explored the role of English in the text. ROY P. Veettil (2019) examines the rising status of English in Oman, arguing that it has effectively become the country's "second language." Similarly, Munir Al-Kanisi (2020) compares the narrative structures of the English and Arabic versions of *Celestial Bodies*, emphasizing the need for greater awareness in literary translation, particularly in rendering dialects and narrative construction. ROY P. Veettil (2019) also underscores how English as a second language enhances readers' comprehension of the novel. Meanwhile, Muslim Al-Maani and Areej (2021) argue that the English translation reinforces Western stereotypes about Oman. Alhadidiya (2020) explores how the translation of the novel is influenced by different textual theories, particularly in relation to themes of slavery, gender, and religion, while also reflecting the ideological perspectives of both the author and the translator. Additionally, Muhammad Abdal Sultani (2023) examines the novel from a translation studies perspective, analyzing how cultural references, linguistic nuances, religious allusions, and cultural expectations are preserved when transferring a literary work from one linguistic and cultural context to another. The researcher stresses the importance of translators possessing strong expertise in both English and Arabic, as well as a deep understanding of each language's unique features.

5. The Polyphony in *Celestial Bodies*, Scholars have also analyzed the polyphonic nature of *Celestial Bodies* from multiple perspectives. Farida Ibrahim (2019) argues that an identity-based narrative approach best highlights the novel's polyphonic characteristics. Naif Kariri (2019) suggests that both male and female narratives in the novel break away from traditional storytelling conventions, thereby enhancing its polyphony. Al-Ramady (2019) examines how the presence of multiple narrators results in temporal and spatial overlaps within the novel, further reinforcing its multi-voiced structure. The novel's dialogue also plays a crucial role in shaping character complexity. The interplay between literary and non-literary discourse, the use of diverse linguistic styles, and the presence of pastiche and multi-narrator heritage all contribute to its polyphonic structure (2019). Zhong Yujia (2021) analyzes the text through four dimensions—subjectivity, dialogism, counterpoint, and open-endedness—arguing that these elements foster an egalitarian, pluralistic dialogue and reflect the author's commitment to freedom and life. This analysis, based on Bakhtin's carnival theory, also connects the behaviors of different characters to the social transformations occurring in Oman during the novel's setting. Furthermore, Rafseena M. and Ajit Kumar (2022) assert that *Celestial Bodies* represents the voice of Arab women amid modernizing influences. They argue that the novel,

as a polyphonic narrative, employs multiple narrators to explore themes of femininity, gender relations, women's rights, and otherness, uncovering hidden suffering and silent joys within its text. Dr. Ahmed Farah (2018) identifies shifts in narrative perspective and depictions of evolving Omani female consciousness as key features of the novel's polyphony.

Conclusion

1. Research on Jokha Alharthi's novels has primarily focused on her award-winning work *Celestial Bodies*, leaving significant room for further exploration. However, studies on her other three novels remain at an early stage, mostly limited to basic content summaries and general critiques rather than in-depth academic analysis. Several factors contribute to this gap:

- ⑩ There is currently a lack of scholarly attention toward emerging writers from the Arab world, particularly from the Gulf region.
- ⑩ Language barriers pose a challenge, as the original texts were written in Arabic, and their English translations have only been completed in the past year, limiting their accessibility. However, as these translations gain wider circulation, the number of academic studies—especially those focusing on the English versions—is expected to increase in the coming months.
- ⑩ The promotion and dissemination of these novels remain limited. Many literary enthusiasts have yet to engage with or even become aware of these works. Therefore, greater efforts should be made to enhance the visibility and accessibility of Gulf literature on a global scale.

2. Previous research has primarily centered on Bakhtin's theory of carnivalization and its applications in pedagogy and linguistics. From a Bakhtinian perspective, dialogue serves as the foundation of all literary structures, reflecting the consciousness of different characters and revealing the underlying motivations behind their construction. Exploring these elements from the standpoint of historical and cultural contexts, as well as the author's personal experiences and the intellectual currents that influenced her writing, is essential for a deeper understanding of the role of dialogue and the objectivity of literature. While current studies predominantly apply dialogic theory to other literary works, there has been relatively little engagement with the novels of Jokha Alharthi in this regard. Existing analyses of her works tend to focus on narratology, cultural heritage, and feminist discourse. Although a few papers have examined her novels through the lenses of dialogism and polyphony, most are confined to *Celestial Bodies*. Furthermore, there is a notable lack of studies analyzing her works from the perspective of micro-dialogues and macro-dialogues. This paper aims to introduce a new approach that provides a more comprehensive interpretation of Alharthi's literary contributions.

Research Limitations

1. While this study strives to maintain objectivity in its literature analysis, it is inevitably influenced by the researcher's subjective perspective.
2. The literature review aims to complement existing studies rather than replace established scholarly overviews.
3. Due to temporal and geographical constraints, the researcher was only able to collect literature published up until December 2024.

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