

NEGOTIATING GENDER, SILENCE, AND SYMBOLISM IN JOKHA ALHARTHI'S CELESTIAL BODIES: A CULTURAL MATERIALIST AND INTERSECTIONAL FEMINIST ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This study discusses gender and social post-slavery structures in *Celestial Bodies* by Jokha Alharthi with regards to symbolic significance of domesticity in a stratified Omani society. It states that household practices, silence, naming, literacy, ornamentation and ritual, are culturally enshrined negotiations of authority that are not passive indexations of tradition. Based on the concept of cultural materialism and intersectional feminism, the paper illustrates the manner in which gender interacts with class, descent, and post-slavery status to generate varied versions of agency and constraint. It is explained that silence as compliance and as a strategy, naming as an act of emergent reorientation, material culture as a means of partial embodied self-assertion, and fragmentation of the story as a representation of incomplete divisions in history and affect. The redefinition of the domestic interior as a place of cultural production is used to bring out in the study how resistance in the novel is achieved by means of the mundane gestures instead of the open opposition.

Keywords: gender and memory, postcolonial Oman, *Celestial Bodies*, intersectional feminism, cultural materialism

INTRODUCTION

The winner of the Man Booker International Prize, *Celestial Bodies* by Jokha Alharthi, has been depicting the life in the village of al-Awafi over the span of decades of the twentieth century Oman, where patriarchy, modernization, and the legacies of historical hierarchies still persist (Manshi & Mishra, 2020). The novel follows the responses of three sisters, Mayya, Asma, and Khawla, to the gendered expectations, which shows how silence, compliance, and longing can be perceived as the subtle forms of agency at home (Alharthi, 2024, pp. 4-9).

This paper identifies the state of women, and examines home symbolism as an essential space of gendered resistance, with the male view only going as far as it has an influence on the emotive, cultural and domestic environment in which women bargain their agency. Even though slavery officially ended in Oman in 1970, the existence of social hierarchies based on slavery, tribal descent, and social status remained a dominant theme in the lives of the people. Placing the novel in this context of the post-abolition context situates the representations of silence, and ritual as well as domestic space in particular historical conditions instead of them being pure aesthetic technologies. Locating the novel within this post-abolition and socially stratified setting assists in embedding the symbolic descriptions of quiet, ritual and home location of the novel within particular historical conditions as opposed to seeming as a mere literary instrument.

The narrative structure of the novel and gendered representations have been discussed by scholars. Yusoff and Raihanah (2022) focus on the fragmented narration of the novel and the idea of

motherhood. Bansal (2022) interprets the three sisters as expressions of various reactions to patriarchy, which are silence, conformity, and resistance. Gender roles and domestic expectations in the Omani cultural systems are preempted in these readings.

Although *Celestial Bodies* has had its share of criticisms, most of the studies have mainly focused on motherhood, post-slavery trauma, and the role of the home gender roles. Joseph (2023) and Veettil (2019) discuss the symbolic role of silence, ritual, naming, and objects in the Omani culture and show how the household practices encode the resistance and compliance (Joseph, 2023; Veettil, 2019). This paper contends that silence, naming, ritual, material culture and story fragmentation in *Celestial Bodies* should be seen as culturally constituted negotiation of the gendered power. The analysis presents the mediation of dominant, residual, and emergent formations in post-slavery Oman by bringing concepts of cultural materialism and intersectional feminism together.

Celestial Bodies forms a symbolic order in which the most prosaic formations, rituals, silences and interpersonal relations are turned into ethnically charged words, not just an epitome of the female duties. The dualistic perspective of oppression and liberation is not supported by the novel, but it is the play of meaning with symbolic landscape (Alharthi, 2024). The theoretical assumption underlying this paper is the cultural theory of Raymond Williams, which is supplemented by the intersectional feminist theory to discuss the practical features of the symbolic images applied in the story. Cultural materialism examines material practices, rituals and symbolic structures as dominant, residual and emergent cultural formations and how gender is negotiated with race, class and post-slavery status to form differentiated modes of women oppression and agency through intersectional feminism in examining these problems. The theory on trauma is largely applied to narrative fragmentation and memory and postcolonial theory is selectively applied so as to provide answers to the questions of hybridity and cultural translation. Thus, it attempts to describe how the individual characters in Alharthi develop independence through the use of socially constructed signs of domesticity, which are memory and ritual (Williams, 1977).

Celestial Bodies has since attracted scholarly interest on both ends of the critical spectrum since its fame in the international community. Yusoff and Raihanah (2022) examined the discussion of Muslim characters and the process of construction of motherhood through the lens of how the authors such as Alharthi define the concept of motherhood in a culturally understood sense by the two characters Salima and Zarifa. These characters show how the dominant norms are infiltrated in domestic, personal contexts. Interestingly, Salima was inapplicable in the broader fields because of her ability to use culture in the home-based context. This brings out the role of mothers behind closed door (Yusoff & Raihanah, 2022).

New hierarchies in the novel are also observed, as formerly enslaved women like Zarifa become even more marginalized than socially privileged women (Saraswathy, 2020). Yusoff and Raihanah (2022) also delve into how Salima and Zarifa invoke motherhood to reinforce gender expectations in the home by demonstrating the idea that mothers maintain social order and separate their roles within cultural limits (Yusoff & Raihanah, 2022). Generational oppression and intercultural tensions also shape Mayya's silent disobedience, particularly symbolized when she names her daughter London (Manshi & Mishra, 2020). However, existing scholarship has not fully integrated cultural materialism with intersectional feminist analysis to examine how domestic symbolism operates within post-slavery social formations.

To guide this investigation, the study poses three central research questions:

1. How does *Celestial Bodies* reflect tensions between tradition and modern life in post-slavery Oman?
2. How do household symbols show both obedience and defiance through objects and space?
3. How does the story's style reflect a divided culture and memory wounds?

The structure of this paper follows the order of these research questions. The first analytical section

examines tensions between tradition and modernity in post-slavery Oman, addressing the first research question. The second group of sections focuses on domestic symbolism, silence, ritual, and material culture, responding to the second research question concerning obedience and resistance in household spaces. The final analytical section investigates narrative fragmentation and memory, directly engaging the third research question on cultural division and memory wounds.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The paper is based on the cultural materialism of Raymond Williams, intersectional feminist theory, and the theory of trauma as its main conceptual frameworks (Carastathis, 2014; Caruth, 2016; Williams, 1977). Cultural materialism offers a perspective of conceiving culture as a dynamic domain that is influenced by dominant, residual and emergent formations. The dominant is defined as the existing social values and practices that structure daily life, the residual are the inherited cultural pieces of the past that are carried with them through the historical periods, and the emergent is the new meaning and practices that disrupt the structures of the past (Williams, 1977). The key concept in this framework is that of hegemony whereby power is maintained not just by coercion but also by cultural consent and normalization. The material and symbolic practices that are in operation in this post-slavery Omani society include ritual, naming practices, domestic labor, and silence. As Figure 1 demonstrates schematically, the connection between these cultural processes and symbolic practices is the following:

Intersectional feminist theory, especially in the words of Carastathis (2014), who also stresses that power systems like gender, race, and class do not operate independently but in a complex and evolutionary manner, informs the analysis. Intersectionality allows to analyze the way that the experiences of women in *Celestial Bodies* are conditioned by the structural meeting of gender, racialized slave descent, class status, and social hierarchies of the post-slavery societies. Women in the novel are not oppressed in a homogenous way: freeborn women like Mayya face the restrictions of the patriarchy system by being trapped in the marital institution and the burden of domestic expectations, whereas women formerly enslaved like Zarifa face a higher level of marginalization that is created by gender, race, and class. Intersectionality thus explains the emergence of differentiated ways of agency and constraint as a result of the overlapping structures of power as opposed to gender alone. The paper selectively applies the theory of trauma developed by Cathy Caruth (2016), which posits that trauma disrupts linear narration and presents itself through fragmentation, repetition, and memory gaps to answer the questions of narrative form and memory. The application of trauma theory here is specifically to explain narrative discontinuity and the depiction of historical rupture. It serves as a narrow interpretative resource towards comprehending the role of memory and fragmentation to demonstrate unresolved histories of the post-slavery cultures.

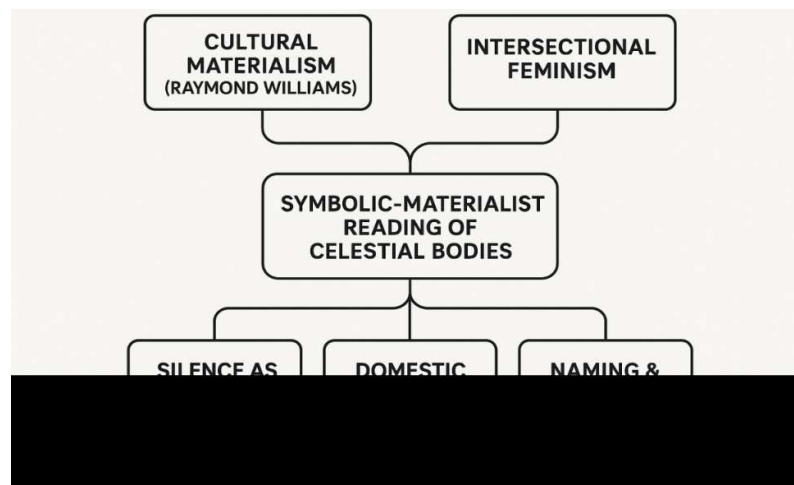


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework Linking Culture and Symbolism in *Celestial Bodies*

METHODOLOGY

Thematic close reading is the methodological approach that is used in this study. This analysis aims at defining patterns of recurrence in regard to silence, ritual, naming, domestic work, love, and fragmentation of narratives in *Celestial Bodies*. The analysis source that will be used is the English translation by Marilyn Booth. Since the research is based on the translated text, it will consider translation as a subset of the interpretive framework, focusing on the ways linguistic options construct a symbolic meaning.

The qualitative coding was performed with the use of the close reading. Passages were divided into categories based on character point of view, symbolic object and theme. Repeating motifs were traced through the chapters and put together in a coding matrix. These themes were subsequently overlaid onto larger cultural formations so as to analyze the continuity, tension and change patterns.

The analysis was conducted in the form of theoretical triangulation, where textual patterns as identified were related to the conceptual approaches discussed in the prior section. It allowed the systematic interpretation of symbolic practices without the use of software to analyze them digitally. The coding and all the categorization were performed manually so as to remain in close touch with the narrative structure and language.

RESULTS

Symbolism of Silence and Submission

In *Celestial Bodies*, silence is a powerful cultural structure that shapes women speech, movement and their feelings. In a cultural-materialist context, silence does not simply exist as nothingness when it is part of a normal social process whereby power is sustained and reproduced (Williams, 1977). Women are silent as a part of the hegemonic order, and such a silence is a method of assent and instilled discipline in the domestic realm.

The continuity of practices of unpaid household work even after the documents were officially abolished speaks to the remainder forms of slavery in the daily lives. Despite the legal abolition of slavery, ex-slaved women like Zarifa are still kept as housewives, doing free work in the same houses that used to enslave them (Joseph, 2023). This continuity is an illustration of cultural residual formations that remain in the current. Cultural power as Williams opines, is usually successful when it is normalized as opposed to when it is coerced. The ongoing servitude of Zarifa shows the way in which hegemonic relations are maintained by the habits, expectations and the social conditioning.

Intersectional analysis explains the fact that not all women are equal in silence. Freeborn women like Mayya and Asma are faced with patriarchal restrictions in the form of marriage and family duty as the main. However, Zarifa feels even more subordinated as both gender and the racialized slave heritage are combined with her position in the classes. Her silence does not just imply patriarchy but the post-slavery slavery in the domestic space. Basing the arguments on the story of post-emancipation circumstances described by Hartman, this kind of persistence demonstrates how the domination systems might survive the legal abolition by means of emotional discipline, social ritual, and limited mobility (Hartman, 2022). Zarifa has not been marginalized based on her gender hence this is not a universally gendered marginalization.

This hierarchy is also reinforced by the naming practices. Dehumanization of other women such as Ankabuta (Spider-Girl) and the recurrent usage of derogatory or subordinate words and pronouns put some women in confined social situations (Alharthi, 2024). Naming is a cultural script: when it is applied as a position of inferiority, it aids to stabilize the order, whereas in the case of reappropriation, it can be one of the potential areas of negotiation. These language activities merge silent and naming, to create symbolic boundaries that dominate belonging and status.

Negotiating Gender, Silence, and Symbolism in Jokha Alharthi's *Celestial Bodies*: A Cultural Materialist and Intersectional Feminist Analysis

The silence in the novel can therefore be seen as the symbol of submission, survival and historical memory. It solidifies prevailing norms and at the same time gives minimal room to negotiation. An opposition in the form of calculated silence, tacit speech, or figurative retreat is not rebellious, but it can be very powerful. In silence, Alharthi portrays the ways in which women negotiate power in an internalized regime of gender, class, and a post-slavery history.

Ritual, Rationality, and Cultural Resistance

In *Celestial Bodies*, tradition and modernity are not presented as such contradictory entities, but as existing cultural entities. These tensions can be perceived through a cultural-materialist prism as between residual and emergent practices in the post-slavery Omani society (Williams, 1977). The remnants of forms of existence remain in ritual practices, patriarchal control, and inherited status, and new movements of education, reconsideration, and negotiation on an individual level emerge. The modernization in the novel is not a break but a slow evolution in an already established cultural set-up.

This emergent formation is most evident in Asma by the epistemic resistance. Instead of blatantly opposing tradition, she challenges seclusion during postpartum and inherited ideologies using religious literature and scientific arguments (Alharthi, 2024, p. 22). Her difficulty is not an denial of faith, but rather a re-interpretation. This form of resistance is acting inside the accepted cultural discourse, shaking the patriarchal authority but in order not to give up the tradition completely. To negotiate independence in the religion, Leila Ahmed (2000) maintains that Muslim women have always been involved in reinterpretative activities. The intellectual activity of Asma is therefore an indication of a new cultural formation that reinvents residual practices by rational reworking and not by confrontation.

Male experience of the novel gives the affective atmosphere in which women resistance is developed but not of the main analysis. The trauma that Abdullah experiences repeatedly, which is represented by the memory of being pushed into a well, is an aspect of the internalized form of discipline reflected by patriarchal authority (Alharthi, 2024, p. 46). His repression of emotions depicts how hegemonic structures control masculinity by controlling and silencing. Nevertheless, such analysis of male trauma is presented as evidence of a larger culture of repression that conditions domestic life, but is not an axis of interpretation in itself.

In the same way, the lack of success in his endeavors of modernization, either by material aspiration or by romantic transgression, depicts the constraint of communal rituals and inherited power in Azzan (Alharthi, 2024, p. 116). These episodes prove that residual formations still control social mobility and intimate relations in an environment where change is visible. In the novel, modernity is thus introduced as a form of negotiation as opposed to revolution: new practices are introduced as part of and not external to existing structures.

Collectively, these story fragments paint a picture of an overall in-between society, wherein cultural change is generated by reinterpretation, crisis, and re-configuration. Through foregrounding Asma as an epistemic resister, the novel shows how women restructure domestic power in knowledge form and redefine it through reinterpretation, making rational inquiry an emerging reaction to the remnant patriarchal standards.

Love, Resistance, and Post-Slavery Affect

In *Celestial Bodies*, love is not a retreat but a social construction that is arranged in order. Romantic love transpires through systems of class, race, kinship, and post-slavery hierarchy to show how intimacy is controlled by the inherited structures of power. Instead of portraying love as emancipatory, the novel describes it as a location where agency of women is negotiated through restrictions of genealogy, caste and gendered power. The way that romantic language empowers and limits female agency is exemplified by the relation between London and Ahmed. London disrupts

tribal and genealogical rankings by requiring a man of inferior socio-economic status to marry (Alharthi, 2024, p. 153). Her poetic self-construction takes the language of the classical Arabic discourse of love and thus lets her make the formulation of desire in ways that are culturally identifiable. But it is this very discourse which re-writes hierarchy. Love turns into a language of ownership when Ahmed tells her, you are my property... my inspiration. The romantic ideal falls into property. The refusal of marriage eventually by London (Alharthi, 2024, p. 184) hence is not a failure of the emotional but rather a structural opposition: the failure to accept affective systems in which women must be both sought and subordinated. One such love is here disclosed as hierarchically structured and not as freely decided.

The story of Khawla also shows that culture influences the development of affect through expectation. The ritualized waiting that is perpetuated by her lifelong devotion to Nasir transforms the virtue of patience into virtue (Alharthi, 2024, p. 203). This extended state of attachment is explainable according to the view of cruel optimism by Lauren Berlant wherein people are stuck on the fantasies that help them to be sustained emotionally but at the same time avoid any change (Berlant, 2011). The hope is maintained by Khawla and paralyzed her life through devotion. It is only upon divorce which she orders that she cuts off the dependency which has defined her. Her break reformulates the endurance as culturally constructed kind of constraint than fidelity. The thing that kept her going is hopefulness which turns out to be the adversary to independence.

The affective structure of the novel is even more sharply outlined in the example of Zarifa. Being a former enslaved woman, she is deprived not only of autonomy but of emotional recognition. She never gets paid her work even post manumission, and her death goes unmarked by the society. The literature on the post-slavery life of Saidiya Hartman helps to understand that emancipation can often be insufficient to recover complete personhood and that after that, former slaves remain socially and affectively marginalized (Hartman, 2022). This affective dispossession can be shown by the fact that Zarifa was erased out of the mourning ceremonies. Her affection, sorrow and affection are not registered in the kinship systems.

Intersectionality explains that such exclusion cannot be reduced to gender only. Women like Mayya or Khawla are free born women, who are constrained by patriarchy, but are legible in family and lineage. The racist background of slaves and caste status of Zarifa add to her marginalization. Her emotional invisibility shows that even after the abolition of the slave trade hierarchy, the guidelines of who is allowed to express emotion remain. Love in her instance is not merely confined, it is structurally ineligible to be acknowledged.

The very symbolic gesture of Mayya giving her daughter the name London (Alharthi, 2024, p. 8) demonstrates a less noticeable type of affective negotiation. In the context of marriage, she resists not openly but rather through household choices that restructure the desire and aspiration. Identifying is a writing of alternative possibility in a stratified emotional order. Although she is still under the patriarchal demand, her gestures redesign the maternal love as the territory of symbolic agency.

Throughout these stories, love appears as a politicalized cultural form and not as an emotion. It has maintained an order, and is also the source of resistance. In case of free women, romantic attachment generates a negotiation situation in patriarchy; in the case of Zarifa, the post-slavery status makes the affect precarious. With the revelation of the way ownership, waiting, and emotional erasure are inculcated within intimacy, *Celestial Bodies* provides a revelation that love in post-slavery Oman is not dissociated with the history but it is historically shaped. Emotional life turns to be one of the main places of domination and where domination is sometimes more or less silently denied.

Material Culture and the Feminine Interior

Material objects in the domestic space in *Celestial Bodies* serve as the location of power negotiation as opposed to its display. A cultural-materialist approach to domestic practices, e.g., naming, reading, dressing, space organization, exposes the mutual stresses of dominant cultural formations and new

directions of resistance (Williams, 1977). Since women have limited access to the public power, symbolic agency is frequently performed in the material interior of the home.

Naming is one of the most evident emergent activities. She breaks the continuity of genealogy and tribal rootedness with a cosmopolitan signifier when Mayya gives her daughter a name, London (Alharthi, 2024, p. 8). The act does not directly challenge patriarchal domination but it brings in a new horizon of mobility and education into a socially stratified setting. Naming is therefore an inscription of aspiration which is materialized through a structure of dominance that values lineage and tradition. Being a new formation it is an indication of change without breaking the continuity.

A second location of symbolic opposition is literacy. The way Asma deals with religious and scientific literature turns the domesticists bookshelf into the platform of epistemic compromise. It is by reading that she is able to remake rather than recreate inherited norms. The interior is a parallel field of knowledge production, a recompense of the wont of women, the exclusion of women in the formal authority of intellect. Literacy in this case is not ornamental it re-contextualizes the subject in the structures that exist by making it reinterpreted instead of obedient.

The practices of re-signification are clothing and perfume. It is a repossession of bodily presence when Mayya starts dressing and adorning herself beyond the logic of male approval in order to engage in material self-fashioning. Perfume and clothing are semiotic gestures whereby women reaffirm their presence in an area that was created to restrain them. They do not destroy hierarchy, but change the position of the feminine body in it. Self-presentation with material becomes a delicate bargain of the dignity and power.

Such symbolic agency is uneven, however, access to such agency. Zarifa experience shows the unequal allocation of material autonomy. Being a former slave, she is still left out of literacy, ornamentation, and aesthetic self-fashioning. Her household work is an uncompensated one, and her interior existence is one that is repressed materially and symbolically. Intersectionality makes it clear that this exclusion is not limited only to gender but race, class and post-slavery position worsen her marginalizing. As freeborn women have partial agency in the interior, Zarifa has a structural limitation in her material self-expression.

Stratified forms of resistance are thus manifested in material culture in the novel. Naming, reading, and adornment come out as the delicate processes of negotiation in the dominant formations, but such possibilities are not equally accessible to all women. *Celestial Bodies* redefines the domestic interior by predetermining the unequal distribution of symbolic agency, thus making the domestic interior an already problematic cultural site but, as it were, silently re-arranged.

Layered Voices: Language, Memory, and Structure

Celestial Bodies has a purposely discontinuous narrative structure. Instead of following a chronological sequence, the novel switches between disjunctive voices, inverted attitudes and interruptions in time. This structural disintegration is reflected in the lack of stability in memory and in the unresolved existence of trauma in post-slavery Omani society. Cathy Caruth believes that trauma disturbs the coherence of narration, which is manifested instead of linear testimony through repetition, delay, and fragmented recollection (Caruth, 2016). In this respect, the fragmented structure of the novel is formalized as rupture in history and psychology.

This narrative logic is reflected by the repeated recollection that Abdullah gets of being pushed into a well (Alharthi, 2024, pp. 1018). The fact that he is not sure, that it was a dream or reality, is an indication that trauma destabilizes time progression. The well theme is repeated throughout the parts and serves as an unresolved wound of the personal and cultural memory. However, whereas the interior monologue of Abdullah seems to be quite continuous, female characters are given less and more fragmented narrative space. Such imbalance makes the novel feminist intervention that more

acute: the life of women is shown in the form of gaps, silences and partial revelations, as the attempts of women to tell their own story traditionally have been suppressed.

Fragmentation therefore works on the political level. Such restricted entry into women interiority does not imply the lack of narrative, but rather replicates the structural silence in place in patriarchal and post-slavery conditions. Women including Mayya, Khawla and Zarifa are presented as vignettes, reported speech, as well as communal memory and not as sustained interior narration. Their narratives spread in bits, just as archived subjects of marginalization are incomplete.

The repetitive themes of the well, perfume, the veil, and bodily wounds, are the affective roots in this broken narrative space. These repetitions relate to the idea of structures of feeling introduced by Raymond Williams where lived emotionality is the initial stage before the formal (Williams, 1977). The scattered imagery of the novel embodies the subtext of fear, desire, repression, and survival that do not exist in mainstream discourse on its own. Fragmentation hence is a way of documenting emotional facts which go beyond official histories.

The broken shape of the *Celestial Bodies* is not decorative, but ideological. The narrative is in opposition to the illusion of historical closure by denying linear coherence. The trauma is not processed, the memory is not stable, and the voices of women are still partially rather vague. The novel produces the disequilibrium of narrative exposure in the post-slavery society through fragmentation and repetition. Silence and discontinuity are not connotations of absence: they are indicators of continuation of what is culturally hard to put into words.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has shown that *Celestial Bodies* creates domestic symbolism as a place of culture negotiation but not enclosure. Silences, naming, literacy, adornment, and fragmented narration are subtle processes through which women bargain power in patriarch systems and the post-slavery systems. The resistance in the novel is hardly manifested in the forms of overt defiance; rather it is manifested in daily gestures, which are part of the ritual, the work of the home, and the sphere of affection.

There is also the differentiated forms of oppression as indicated in the analysis. The women cannot be homogeneous: freeborn women like Mayya and Asma have rather limited symbolic agency in the interior of houses, whereas the racialized and post-slavery position of Zarifa does not allow her to receive recognition, whether material or affective. Gender, class, lineage and remnant hierarchies of slavery comprise oppression in the novel in the interaction of these factors. Despite the history of shift in the formal abolition, the inherited structures still influence the labor, intimacy, mourning, and the narrative visibility. These unfinished layers of history are reflected in the discontinuous structure of the novel, which reveals the persistence of the afterlife of slavery in the domestic and emotional sphere of life.

This study has value to the field of literature because it combines the cultural materialist and intersectional approaches into a permanently reading approach to domestic symbolism. The study also focuses on domestic space as a dynamic site of cultural production where dominant norms are reproduced, negotiated, and reconfigured quietly, instead of the household being the backdrop of all activities. The analysis is able to show how symbolic gestures operate within the stratified social formations by foregrounding material practices and differentiated affective experience. Domestic interior does not turn out to be the realm of retreat but a battleground where identity, memory, and power are constructed on a constant basis.

In this work, a persistent examination of masculinities is not given. Male subjectivity is manifested both as contextual climate and not as the main object of study, but as a decision made by choice in order to ensure a focused feminist analysis of domestic resistance of women. Moreover, the study is

restricted to one novel only. Although it can be used to engage in close textual interactions, it limits generalization in a wider view of the literature production in Oman or the Gulf.

Future studies can expand this paradigm by carrying out comparative studies of post-slavery experiences in the Gulf region, North Africa or the African diaspora by placing Omani experience in broader transnational frames of memory and ranking. Translation as a place of cultural negotiation can also be the topic of further investigation, which will experiment with the way linguistic mediation influences the way the novel is internationally received through its symbolic structures. The interdisciplinary approach to Islamic feminist hermeneutics can enhance the study of ritual, faith, and epistemic resistance especially the re-interpretative female agency in the discourse on religion.

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