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DISCURSIVE STRUGGLES OF MARGINALIZED WOMEN IN THE POLYPHONIC NOVEL “BITTER ORANGE TREE” THROUGH BAKHTIN’S DIALOGUE THEORY

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Abstract:

The novel “bitter Orange Tree” by Omani novelist Jokha al-harhi is characterized by polyphony; the polyphonic structure of the novel allows for a more comprehensive portrayal of its dialogic nature and the characters’ independent voices. Drawing upon “feminist dialogics”, a feminist reconstruction of Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogic theory, this study conducts a systematic narrative and textual analysis of the novel to explore female discourse power. Specifically, it aims to examine how marginalized women achieve discursive resistance at both micro- and macro-dialogic levels within a polyphonic narrative space. The findings reveal that Al-harhi employs Bakhtinian polyphonic strategies to unfold discursive resistance across three interrelated dimensions. First, at the macro-level, the novel constructs a “chronotope” spanning the diasporic spaces of London and the rural landscapes of Oman, revealing the spiritual diaspora and spatial breakthroughs of female subjects amid historical fragmentation. Second, at the micro-discursive level, marginalized women implicitly resist patriarchal discipline through character dialogues, strategically embedded silences, psychological dislocations, and polyphony. Finally, the “unfinalized” presented at the novel’s conclusion shatters the enclosure of historical determinism, reshaping a continuous and creative subjectivity for marginalized

women. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of gender politics and narrative innovations in modern Arabic fiction.

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Keyword:

Arabic Literature; *Bitter Orange Tree*; Feminist Dialogics; Narrative Resistance; Jokha Al-harhi; Polyphony



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Introduction

We are pleased to submit our manuscript, entitled “Discursive Struggles of Marginalized Women: A Polyphonic Reading of *Bitter Orange Tree* through Bakhtin’s Dialogic Theory” for consideration for publication in your journal.

Following Jokha Alharhi’s international recognition as the first Arabic-language writer to win the Man Booker International Prize, her works have attracted increasing scholarly attention within contemporary Arabic literary studies. This article examines *Bitter Orange Tree* through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism and the polyphonic novel. Focusing on the novel’s complex narrative structure and multiple perspectives, the study explores how marginalized women negotiate and reconstruct discursive agency within the constraints of patriarchal society.

Drawing on qualitative textual analysis, including close reading, narrative analysis, and dialogic analysis, the article investigates both macro-level spatiotemporal configurations and micro-level dialogic interactions. It demonstrates how the novel’s polyphonic form functions not only as an aesthetic strategy but also as a mode of resistance that challenges dominant social narratives and reimagines the discursive space available to women in contemporary Arabic literature.

Literature Review

There are three points will be discussed in Literature Review.

Review the development of Arab women's literature, pointing out the concepts formed by Bakhtin's theory and the development of feminism, and review the development of “feminist dialogic”.

Research Progress of The Development of Feminist Narratology.

The narrative transformation in contemporary Arab women's fiction reflects a paradigm shift from social realism to polyphonic writing. The development of 20th-century Arab women's literature can be divided into three phases: first, the Enlightenment phase; second, the period influenced by the women's liberation movement, during which female writers often emulated the models established by male writers; and third, the period in which women's demands for liberation and independence were suppressed by state authorities. As Yu Yuping (2020) points out, in the 1960s, driven by the rise and development of the Western feminist movement, women writers' thinking evolved, and they began to continuously raise their self-awareness. This was primarily reflected in their works during this phase, which increasingly exposed the darkness of the patriarchal social system and the oppression of women, while advocating for women's liberation and the advancement of civil rights.

Within this context, women's writing in the Arab Gulf region can be traced back to approximately 1950. Scholar Ishaq Tijani (2005) examined five novels selected from the period between 1953 and 2000, analyzing how each author constructed the subjectivity of the women in their narratives to resist, escape, or subvert patriarchal authority. She also argued that even before Kuwait's oil era, women actively resisted male domination and worked to drive social change.

In the 21st century, women's literature in the Gulf region has flourished. Omer bin Musabah bin Jamil Saadi (2024) provides a systematic analysis of three Omani women's novels, demonstrating how contemporary Omani women writers integrate mythological elements into a polyphonic narrative context, achieving a "fusion of mythological narrative with multiple voices, languages, and ideologies." Accordingly, his study offers a valuable theoretical foundation for examining Omani women's literature—exemplified by the novels of Jokha Al-harhi—from the perspective of Bakhtin's dialogic theory.

From the vantage point of dialogic theory, Bakhtin's framework provides a rich methodological repertoire for analyzing the interplay of multiple voices—most notably through its claim that the author and the protagonist occupy equal positions and share equal rights to dialogue. However, this framework rarely engages with gender as a category of critical analysis. This theoretical gap has allowed feminist critics to build upon Bakhtin's work by developing a feminist dialogics.

From the late 1980s onward, feminist critics in Anglophone academic contexts have systematically examined the intersections between Bakhtinian thought and gender-related issues. The 1994 anthology *A Dialogue of Voices: Feminist Literary Theory and Bakhtin* contend that Bakhtin's theoretical framework, being rooted in sociohistorical contexts and centered on linguistic interaction and intertextuality, closely corresponds to feminism's

objective of dismantling gender-based oppression and exploring multiple forms of subjectivity. By integrating Bakhtin's concepts of "dialogism" and "heteroglossia" into feminist literary criticism, this volume equips women with potent theoretical resources. These resources enable women to assert their right to speak and to deconstruct patriarchal structures. As Hajar Hawish (2017) said, in modern times, women's social status has changed, and through feminist discourse, they are attempting to break free from the shackles of male-centered thinking.

Review previous scholars' research perspectives and conclusions on Jokha Al-Harhi's novel "Bitter Orange Tree".

Since the release of Jokha Al-Harhi's novel "Bitter Orange Tree", some scholars have approached it through a range of critical lenses, including existentialism, narratology, stylistics, feminism, and sociohistorical analysis. The existing body of research can be broadly organised around three principal themes.

1. Feminist and existentialist readings. Abdul Rahman Habib (2022, عبد الرحمن حبيب) investigates the portrayal of women in the novel from an existentialist angle. He observes that female characters are not restricted to domestic settings but also appear in public arenas such as government offices and corporate institutions. Through their particular ways of being, these women forge their identities both as individuals and within broader social frameworks. Ramallah (2018, رام الله) further highlights the forms of oppression experienced by women in the Sultanate of Oman. She pointed out that these novel employs narrative techniques that blend temporal and spatial dimensions. At the same time, the characters in the novel warrant a deeper analysis. Furthermore, John Domini (2022) argues that although both the novel "Bitter Orange Tree" and Al-Harhi's earlier work "Celestial Bodies" feature detailed descriptions, the former places a greater emphasis on feminist concerns. This is mainly reflected in the contrast between the social contexts and worldviews of the grandmother and granddaughter in the novel. At the same time, the novel features women from diverse backgrounds and social layers, collectively forming a rich and multifaceted discursive space.

At the same time, Dr. Abdul Ghaffar (2025) analyzes the novel within the context of cultural change and transformation in Oman. Building upon Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and identity, the study examines the identity of the female character Zuhour, reflecting the impact of sociocultural factors on her identity. Besides, from a postcolonial critical perspective, the researchers Dr. Mariam Albadi et al. (2025) analyze the Omani Arab "self" and the foreign "other" as depicted in "Bitter Orange Tree", revealing how Omani feminist narratives express the self and the other within Oman's complex cultural and historical context.

2. 2) Studies on narrative structure and subjectivity. Through a comparative analysis of three Omani novels, including "Bitter Orange Tree", Youssef Al-Maamari (يوسف المعمرى) (2018) argues that Omani fiction has reached a stage where it employs a narrative language that integrates the self and the other into a global literary framework, revealing the depth of narrative meaning and its implicit symbolism. Walid Abdellawi (وليد عبد اللاوي) (2025) examines subjectivity in the narrator's self-construction, arguing that subjectivity is manifested through specific linguistic indicators (pronouns, spatio-temporal markers) and evaluative devices. By adopting a linguistic-narrative approach, he enriches the discussion of how subjective expression operates in narrative discourse.

He further notes that subjectivity in narrative discourse is not merely a narrative strategy of the self, but also a literary marker and a form of self-affirmation and narrative celebration. Dr Vidya Merlin Varghese (2023) discusses the role of personal memories of Zuhair, Grandmother, and Suroor in helping them explore their cultural identities, while also depicting their experiences of living in a different place.

3. Linguistic features and sociocultural representation. Hamoud Al-Saadi حمود السعدي (2017) highlights the novel's linguistic features and its depiction of pre-Renaissance Omani society, though he criticizes the lack of coherence in the relationships between events and characters, which may detract from the reader's experience. Zahir bin Marhoon Al-Dawudi زاهر بن مرهون الداودي (2024) focuses on the linguistic structure of "Bitter Orange Tree", employing methods and criteria of imagery analysis to reveal the semantic connections among the title, the events, and the character portrayals, thereby foregrounding the author's creative strategies. Interpreting the text from linguistic and intentionalist perspectives, he argues that this approach contributes positively to exploring ideological issues within Omani society. Ramallah (رام الله, 2018) also offers a detailed analysis of the novel's content, examining Omani cultural characteristics across different eras through textual analysis. John Domini (2022) further observes that the novel explores the legacy of slavery as well as themes of freedom and secularization following Oman's independence. The researcher Shousha, Muhammad Salim Muhammad Abd al-Samad (2024). employed narrative discourse analysis within the framework of cognitive literary criticism to analyze mimesis and representation in the novel. These two approaches analyze the narrative discourse of the text, thereby transforming narrative concepts into narrative elements embodied in myths, legends, folk heritage, and cultural heritage.

Identify Research Gaps and Research Objectives Of This Paper.

Research Gap:

It should be noted that the majority of the aforementioned studies rely on the Arabic edition of "Bitter Orange Tree". In comparison with the work that brought Al-Harthi international acclaim, "Celestial Bodies", the scholarly attention paid to "Bitter Orange Tree" remains considerably narrower in both scope and depth. Existing research has largely been confined to comparative analyses between the two novels, with a predominant focus on stylistic features, character portrayal, and narrative devices. What remains missing is a systematic examination of the novel's internal coherence, its polyphonic qualities, and its overall comprehensiveness. Based on the above literature review, existing studies tend to force the text's multiple and contradictory voices into a unified authorial intent centered on "oppression and loss," while the novel's polyphonic narrative and women's right to speak under the principle of dialogue have received little attention.

Research Objectives:

Accordingly, the present study adopts "feminist dialogic" as its theoretical framework. It analyzes "Bitter Orange Tree" through three dimensions: (1) revealing the evolution of female subjects' discursive rights in Omani society through the macro-level narrative dimensions of time, space, and the body; (2) depicting the transformative process of marginalized women

within a power structure dominated by patriarchal monologue through micro-level discourse—specifically, dialogues between the self and the other, as well as paratactic speech acts; (3) arguing for the existence of female subjectivity and discursive power within the text through the unfinished, open aesthetic structure of the novel. These three levels build upon one another—from macro-level narrative space to micro-level speech acts, and finally to the aesthetic design of the entire narrative framework—collectively constituting a comprehensive dissection of the novel’s polyphonic narrative.

Conclusion

In this paper, the researcher examines the novel through three key dimensions: extensive dialogues, micro-dialogues, and incompleteness. By conducting a close textual reading and analysis, the marginalized female voices in Omani literature are made visible. The different ways in which these voices appear are closely tied to Oman’s historical and cultural development.

The novel “Bitter Orange Tree” is not only a feminist narrative but also exhibits a distinctly polyphonic textual organization. The discursive consciousness of marginalized women repeatedly surfaces through dialogue in the text, forming the novel’s most central contribution to Arab women’s literature.

This study has further advanced academic understanding of women’s voice and autonomy in contemporary Arab fiction. Future research and scholarly discussion may expand into areas such as cultural integration, transnational narratives, and the construction of subjectivity. By pursuing these lines of inquiry, Arab women’s literature in Oman and across the broader region will receive a more varied and deeper interpretive framework.

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