

Moulding Lives, Shaping Destinies: Motherhood and Nation in *Celestial Bodies* by Jokha Alharthi and *A Golden Age* by Tahmima Anam

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ABSTRACT

Female narratives hold an important place in literature as they tell stories from women's perspectives, spatially and temporally. In *Celestial Bodies* by Jokha Alharthi and *A Golden Age* by Tahmima Anam, the female characters play a significant role in determining the outcome of the story as their personal narratives run parallel to the history of Oman and Bangladesh in the 1970s, respectively. The paper examines the intersectionality of gendered narratives through the lens of motherhood and individual lives within a nation in both texts with the aim of uncovering its manifestation in both Omani and Bangladeshi societies. The methodology adopts the theory of parenting as a lens to examine the textual depiction of mothering within the two socio-cultural contexts of Oman and Bangladesh with a specific focus on Diana Baumrind's categorisation of parenting styles. The findings suggest that the mothering styles portrayed in the two novels, namely authoritarian and permissive, are present in two distinct yet overlapping manners: one, within mother-daughter relationships grounded in cultural engagement, and two, through participation in nationhood. In addition, mothers in *Celestial Bodies* serve as witnesses to the cultural changes in Oman, creating intra-gender generational conflicts. In contrast, the mother figure in *A Golden Age* functions as the backbone of the youth's participation in Bangladeshi liberation. Many of the choices made by the mothers in the two novels implicate the lives of the youth, society, and consequently the nation-states. The implication of this comparative reading shows that the mothering roles in women's fiction are rich and multi-faceted as they partake in the pursuit of nationhood within and without the family institution.

Keywords: mothering styles; gendered narratives; motherhood; *Celestial Bodies*; *A Golden Age*

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INTRODUCTION

Stories revolving around female characters are important as they provide the platform for women to reclaim their space in an ‘anticolonialist’ struggle and be part of ‘history’ (Mohanty, 2003, p. 129). In *Celestial Bodies* by Jokha Alharthi and *A Golden Age* by Tahmima Anam, the mother characters experience the lows and downs in their lives, affected by familial, societal, and national tensions. The female characters play a significant role in determining the outcome of the story as they undergo monumental changes in the two respective landscapes. Despite the different spatial contexts in *Celestial Bodies* and *A Golden Age*—one set in Oman, the other in Bangladesh—both narratives share similar temporality (Miah, 2020; Madhu, 2020). Where the 1970s witnessed Oman’s massive societal transformation, the Bangladeshi society similarly was experiencing the Liberation War to free itself from Pakistan (Miah, 2020; Madhu, 2020). The portrayal of the citizens’ lives in both novels is a direct reflection of the historical narratives of the two nations. Furthermore, there exist additional gendered perspectives as the narratives capture the distinct female voices of their central characters. Through this, how war and social transformation affect women in a manner that differs from male-dominated narratives can be understood (Biswas & Tripathy, 2017; Lauret-Taft, 2020). Albeit, both novels converge in their representations of motherhood, the tales diverge in the differences found in their respective society and the implications on women (Biswas & Tripathy, 2017, p. 526; Manshi & Mishra, 2020). The differences are mainly highlighted in how motherhood is manifested. Using the premise that ‘the stories I recall, the ones that I retell and claim as my own, determine the choices and decisions I make in the present and the future’ (ibid.), this paper problematises the role women’s fiction partake in their nations’ history, as seen in *Celestial Bodies* and *A Golden Age*, through the mothering roles played by female characters.

DIVERSITY IN MOTHERHOOD LITERATURE

Within women’s fiction, the state of being a mother is portrayed either as a personal experience or as a social, and cultural construction. To begin with, the definition of motherhood is also couched within individual and institutional markers, as Adrienne Rich (1976, p. 13) states, ‘the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children, and the institution—which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control’ acknowledges the patriarchal undertones of the concept perceived in society. Being a mother may also expose a woman to vulnerability due to the ‘social construction’ of motherhood which implies ‘terms and conditions under which it is allowed to express itself’ (Krishanraj 2010, p. 7). In the South Asian context, for instance, motherhood is influenced by ‘the historical emphasis on the sanctimoniousness of family life within’ the culture itself (Sangha & Gansalves 2014, p. 414). The expectations on how they should behave are imposed by their ‘immediate family, extended family and the wider South Asian community’ (Sangha & Gansalves 2014, pp. 414-415). In other words, the fluidity of mothering practices depends on the mothers’ interpretation of culture. For this reason, motherhood should not be perceived as a ‘static and non-negotiated process’ (Millman 2013, p. 73).

Seen from another perspective, a woman can be victimised or empowered by the maternal role she plays in her life, which is not only shaped by the familial or private context but also by the public one in the societal sense. Thus, the dimensions of motherhood a woman faces can be categorised into motherhood as an institution, motherhood as experience, and motherhood as

identity or subjectivity (O'Reilly, 2010; Rich, 1976). Fundamentally, motherhood can function as an instrument of empowerment and political activism (Green, 2004). In becoming mothers, women are empowered to decide for the sake of their children, making it a 'socially-engaged enterprise', which impacts domestic and political spaces (O'Reilly, 2004, p. 2).

The study into the portrayal of motherhood and its implication has been largely western-centric. In her comparative exercise, Min Jiao (2019, p. 543) studied three novels detailing the experience of mothers comprising people of colour and noted how it is 'expected that a comparison of motherhood across cultures would explicate the perplexities of mothering against the motherhood ideologies of idealization or pathologization'. In addition, Jiao (2019, p. 542) emphasised the need for a diverse discourse on motherhood for it remains 'predominantly about Anglo-Saxon or white, middle-class mothering.' Mothers elsewhere in the world, particularly women of colour and the working class, must be recognised.

In addition, stories of motherhood should also be explored for their portrayal of the social, cultural, and political context of the nation at a particular time in history. Socio-cultural contexts hold a profound influence on how motherhood is presented in fiction as 'social ideologies' often affect how individuals [including mothers] perform their 'occupations' (Asaba, Fallahpour & Farias, 2020, p. 6). Furthermore, the presence of expectations imposed by culture and society should be taken into consideration in studying mothering images in narratives. There exists interest in how 'cultures convey ideas about motherhood through a variety of media and how the discourses of motherhood change over time, and how they vary by race, class, and religion' (Jiao, 2019, p. 542). Besides that, it is important to explore motherhood beyond homogenous expectations as it allows for 'integrated mothering' seen from differing cultural ways and habits (Dow, 2016, p. 181). The novels in this study are set respectively in Oman, part of the Middle East, and Bangladesh, part of South Asia, which means their context of motherhood should also be taken into consideration. Motherhood in the Middle East, as Mahdi Tarabeih and Ya'arit Bokek-Cohen (2021) assert may entail the need for the maternal figure to commit sacrifices for the betterment of their families. In addition, navigating life in an Arab society can be challenging due to its strictness and normative values (Almutairi et al 2019). Furthermore, womanhood, as the study by Michele Harway and Marsha B. Liss (2013) illustrates, is at times tied to the limited control over one's life, leading Middle Eastern mothers, for instance, to shift their full attention to their children. However, Tatjana Takševa's (2018) study indicates that within certain South Asian contexts, motherhood can empower the South Asian women amid pressures of patriarchy by expanding the woman's decision-making within the realm of raising her children.

Moreover, an aspect that needs to be underscored within the study of motherhood in fiction is the risk of falling into the trap of relegating 'female voice and agency' to the background (Jiao 2019, p. 547) if it is not given equal importance as the masculine lens. Male point-of-views often come with the assumption that they represent the universal human experience, enforcing patriarchal beliefs (Johnson 1997). Therefore, it is warranted that further research pertaining to narratives on motherhood written by female writers from diverse backgrounds should be conducted.

The women in both novels are mothers who witnessed the monumental changes in their countries, namely, Oman and Bangladesh (Miah, 2020; Madhu, 2020). Manshi Yadav and Sunil Kumar Mishra (2020, p. 48) opined that *Celestial Bodies* 'sharply contrasts the condition of women before 1970 and after 1970'. Sabine Lauret-Taft (2020) stated that the author of *A Golden Age* successfully highlights the tale of war in Bangladesh by telling the story from the perspective of a mother and her relationship with her daughter. The narrative, according to Mohammad

Moniruzzaman Miah (2020, p. 74), juxtaposes the protagonist's gender and national identity 'against the background of masculine hegemony and nationalistic movement'. In a reversal process, the mothers in both novels were shaped by their maternal roles as their functions and responsibilities revolve predominantly around their family (Biswas & Tripathy, 2017; Manshi & Mishra, 2020). Echoing the abovementioned need for diversity and the findings from previous studies, a comparative analysis of *Celestial Bodies* and *A Golden Age* can add to the exploration of motherhood in the Asian continent. Through the lens of intersectionality this paper deconstructs and reconstructs the different factors that play a role in determining 'the female destiny' (Hooks 2014, p. 13) in both novels.

INTERSECTIONALITY AND MEASURING MOTHERING: A METHODOLOGY

The contribution of intersectionality in understanding the experience of women of colour is immense and can serve as a useful analytical instrument, for it allows the understanding that women of colour face multi-faceted discrimination and oppression beyond gender (Montoya, 2021). Breaking away from the narrative dominance of white feminism, the theory allows us to explore and discover layers of factors that affect the life of an individual, which may include race, religion, culture, and other factors (Montoya, 2021).

Aligned with Jiao's (2019) emphasis on the need to consider factors of race, religion, and class in narratives of motherhood, intersectionality places women of colour at the forefront by identifying the junction of race and gender in discrimination encounters. Resultantly, the debate on discrimination vis-à-vis gender 'highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed' (Crenshaw, 1991 p. 1245). In addition, within the scope of discussion, 'women of colour are differently situated in the economic, social and political worlds' (Crenshaw, 1991 p. 1250). In looking at both novels studied in this paper, we explore how lives were perceived from the viewpoint of Arab and Bangladeshi women in the second half of the 20th century.

The concept of motherhood is closely interlinked with nationhood. Heavy weights are placed upon mothers in a patriarchal society, in which their equal status to men is being contested (Hassan, 1998). This paper expands the sociological perspective of connecting 'women's roles as biological reproducers of the nation and their right as women and as citizens' (Yuval-Davis, 1996 p. 17). Hence, literary interpretation must be a platform on which stories about mothers, told from the female lens, can be centred and given adequate attention as there exists a need to include gendered perspectives in nation building, given that historically, a nation is considered 'a male-constructed space' (Boehmer, 2005 p. 30).

Within the lens of parenting styles, Diana Baumrind's (2001) research indicates three categories – authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive. Authoritarian parents are described as disciplinarians and almost tyrannical in their approach. Permissive parents are the opposite of authoritarian parents, evading the disciplinarian approach and preferring to be warm companions to their children whereas the authoritative parenting style is considered to be the in-between of the two categories (Reizai Niaraki & Rahimi, 2013). Furthermore, Elizabeth G. Akpama (2013) indicates that parenting styles have a direct correlation to the way children are moulded by their caregivers. The children's upbringing includes the emotional aspect of their bond and the quality of contact between the parent and child which have lasting consequences throughout the latter's life (Moradian, Alipour & Shahani-Yeylagh, 2014). Fundamentally, every caregiver is different.

A comparison between *Celestial Bodies* and *A Golden Age* may indicate how the mothers' decisions implicate their children's life journey. Thus, various types of mothering must be explored in accordance with Baumrind's categorisation. The authoritarian mothers are usually strict and tend to 'shape, control and evaluate the behaviour and attitude' of their daughters to comply with what is acceptable in the community (Akpama, 2013, p. 30). The daughters would be rewarded with affection if they abide by their mother's wishes. The authoritative mothers are instructive and act as a guide in their children's behaviours. They do not prefer to use force for fear of negative consequences. Ultimately, the children's point of view is considered (Akpama, 2013). Authoritative parents also influence their child's creativity in a positive manner, in contrast with authoritative parents who negatively affect their child's creativity (Mehrinejad & Tarsafi, 2015). Permissive mothers 'have no restriction towards' their daughters. Few sub-types of permissive mothers exist, namely, permissive indifferent mothers that 'show no interest in their' daughter's lifestyle and exercise no control' over them and permissive indulgent mothers who are 'involved in their daughters' behaviour' but are 'tolerant and permissive in nature'. (Akpama, 2013, p. 31). Parents' attitudes towards their children can influence the child's 'psychological growth' and affect their future as individuals (Mehrinejad & Tarsafi, 2015, p. 59).

The consequences of these parenting styles have been discussed by researchers. For example, children of authoritative parents have a higher sense of achievement and are socially adjusted (Ng, 2003). Meanwhile, children with 'rigid mothers' are inclined to submit yet feel resentful due to their limited freedom (Horne, 2000). Generally, the authoritative style of parenting is considered the most effective as it leads to 'positive self-worth, assertiveness, advanced moral reasoning' and independence (Timpano et al., 2015, p. 97). The authoritarian and permissive styles of parents, despite being distinct from each other, lead to children suffering negative consequences growing up – 'lower self-worth' and 'less active coping' for the former and 'low self-control and low self-reliance' for the latter (Timpano et al., 2015, p. 97). By identifying the styles of mothering portrayed in *Celestial Bodies* and *A Golden Age*, we can further investigate thoroughly how their nurture and care have affected their children's lives and how they function and move in society, affecting their culture and nation. History is weaved into the stories as they depict aspects of society relevant to their times, intermingled with the lives of the mother characters (Rafseena & Kumar, 2022; Choudhury, 2022). Despite being written originally in two different languages – *Celestial Bodies* in Arabic and *A Golden Age* in English – novelists Jokha Alharthi and Tahmima Anam are contemporary women writers who wish to shed light on the uncomfortable truths that have shaped Omani and Bangladeshi family dynamics and consequently, society (Armitstead, 2016; Edemariam, 2019). The comparative reading of the two novels focuses on two thematic concerns that measure mothering as determinants of culture and the daughters' worth and as keepers of the nations.

MOTHERS AS DETERMINANTS OF CULTURE AND THE DAUGHTERS' WORTH

Celestial Bodies and *A Golden Age* share a similarity in the roles played by the main female characters as mothers to daughters who are inclined to be strong-willed and independent. The tension caused by the constant struggle of power dynamics between the mothers and their daughters may reveal the roles played by the former in shaping the latter's perceptions of themselves. Consequently, the daughters' self-esteem, values and attitudes may be affected. In a male-dominated society like Oman and Bangladesh, the overwhelming presence of patriarchy victimizes daughters as the expectation is for a mother to value sons (Sultana, 2010). This signifies

that it is of particular importance for the bond between mothers and daughters to be strengthened as it highlights the ‘great unwritten story’ of the ‘cathexis’ that is ‘essential, distorted, misused’ (Rich, 1976, p. 225). Therefore, examining the ways in which the mothers choose to parent their daughters would allow for a nuanced understanding of their impacts on their children’s lives.

According to Mikhail (2004, p. 12), the ‘fiction and poetry, the films and soap operas, the popular rituals and customs, the political philosophy, the law – all together shape the social, cultural and political realities of Arab women’. Hence, we explore the experience of Arab women through *Celestial Bodies* as literature is, though not as a whole, a reflection of the society it portrays. In *Celestial Bodies*, the reader is treated to a tale of Omani families encompassing three generations. There exists a multitude of noteworthy characters with the women having strong maternal roles to play. It reflects the position Arab women hold in their community. The mother in *Celestial Bodies* is domineering and towers over her daughters, the perfect example of an authoritarian mother. Arab mothers have the ability to anchor their daughter’s destiny in a robust manner as their lives ‘unfold largely within the domestic domain’ due to their maternal and marital roles (Abudi, 2011, p. 50). Such a norm would explain Salima’s influence as a mother over her daughters as she commands the domestic spaces in the family. As a nomadic tribal woman, she prides herself in sustaining the traditional approaches in her mothering style. She imposes on her daughters a strict code of conduct pertaining to their household boundaries in accordance with the traditional beliefs she was brought up with. Asma, as an unmarried woman, is not allowed to sit with the married ladies in the compound for fear of her listening to inappropriate talks, something Asma complains about the irony that similar ‘taboo’ knowledge could easily be obtained ‘from books’ (Alharthi, 2019, p. 24). Salima partitioned the spaces in the house to keep the daughters away from the main spaces of conversation once they ‘had reached a certain age’ (Alharthi, 2019, p. 33). The domestic space is where Salima, as a mother, attempts to reign supreme. In creating and navigating the ‘socio-spatial boundaries’ at home, the novelist creates opportunities for Salima to exercise agency without having to be ‘politically engaged’ in public (Sniekers, 2018, p. 18). This analysis indicates Salima's authoritarian parenting style.

As a personality, Salima has a strong sense of self vis-à-vis being a mother. She recognises her abilities and proudly declares, ‘I don’t need any of your medicine books or those fancy dukhtoor teaching me what to make for my daughter. I brought up five living healthy souls, I did, and no one had to teach me how to do it’ (Alharthi, 2019, p. 22). However, such a characteristic may cause conflict in interpersonal relations, as can be seen in Salima’s relationship with her family. The refusal to change things from the way they were – encapsulated in her criticism of Mayya’s choice to give birth in the hospital and rely on doctors – is stark and present in Salima throughout the whole novel, causing conflicts in the family, particularly with her daughters.

With regards to her daughters’ well-being, Salima is shown to ignore communicating with them in making pertinent decisions about their future without considering their wishes. The reader is treated to a stark glimpse of it in the following extract seen from the third-person narrative below.

Her mother hadn’t given the matter of love any particular thought, since it never would have occurred to her that pale Mayya, so silent and still, would think about anything in this mundane world beyond her threads and the selvages of her fabrics, or that she would hear anything other than the clatter of her sewing machine. (Alharthi, 2019, p. 1)

The passage sets the scene of how Salima, mother to Mayya, Asma, and Khawla held the power to direct the trajectory of her daughters' lives, as per Arab tradition. As an authoritarian mother, Salima makes full use of the control she has over her daughters. Women in Arab communities perform their 'traditional female role' based on 'prevailing religious and cultural values' (Abudi, 2011, p. 54). It can be said that Salima's action is what she deemed as acceptable and expected in her role as a mother within her familiar cultural context. She is portrayed to focus primarily on how her daughters fit into society upon marriage, rather than on the daughters' personal desires and needs. As expected, Salima and her husband arrange the marriages of Mayya and their second daughter, Asma, to men they deem worthy and eligible. Culture and tradition, then, play a role in determining the daughters' path in life.

Contrastingly, the mother in *A Golden Age* represents another kind of dynamics presented by Rehana's permissive mothering. She has two children—a son and daughter—and devotion remains her core value. It is implicitly hinted that Rehana's mind is mostly occupied by the thoughts of her son who was a freedom fighter. Hence, her daughter, Maya (not to be confused with Mayya from *Celestial Bodies*), is often left isolated and ignored. The novelist presents a mother-daughter relationship that is silent yet volatile, as shown in the following passage -

Maya was still angry at Rehana. The silence banged around between them. They batted it back and forth. Sometimes, while she waited for Maya to return from the university, Rehana would resolve to say something, to make up; she could feel the tender words bubbling in her mouth. I'm sorry I hit you. But she couldn't utter them; as soon as the girl came home, as soon as Rehana saw her scowling face, the way she slammed the bolt through the door, the irritation flooded back. Why couldn't she smile, give a hint she might relent? But she didn't, and Rehana too was frozen, the words stuck somewhere between her heart and her mouth. (Anam, 2007, p. 244)

Unlike in *Celestial Bodies* in which the mother character does not appear to reflect on her choices and actions, in *A Golden Age*, Anam paints a picture of a Bangladeshi mother of the 1970s who is constantly questioning her actions as she seeks 'relent' in her daughter. As shown in the excerpt above, Rehana regrets hitting her daughter, Maya, yet is unable to 'utter' the words 'I'm sorry I hit you'. Anam's representation of a mother is one who is reflective of her actions while remaining true to her communal upbringing. In most communal cultures including South Asia, it is expected of the young to 'show face' to the elder when a misunderstanding between them occurs. In this scene, Rehana questions Maya's 'scowling face' and silently asks, 'Why couldn't [Maya] smile, give a hint she might relent?' Maya's strong resistance to the expectations of the communal culture, as shown in the way she carries herself in the home following the altercations indicates two key findings vis-à-vis Anam's portrayal of the two female characters. The first is in the stance taken by the daughter in this patriarchal culture. She is given the agency to express her emotions without fear. Maya knows she will be accepted for the way she chooses to exhibit her emotions towards her mother. And the second, is Maya's ability to be herself in her home illustrates the space she has been given by her mother to exercise her individualism and personal choice. Despite the communal cultural setting of Bangladesh, Rehana's permissiveness mothering style is evident in this context.

In addition, the novelist appears to emphasise the theme of education for women in this narrative. The mother character Rehana is portrayed as a woman who wants her daughter to receive formal education to the highest level. Rehana's approach in parenting her daughter enables the latter to take part in activism and participate in the struggle for Bangladeshi's separation from Pakistan. Concurrently, Anam creates a 'permissive' mother in Rehana—sometimes indifferent, sometimes indulgent—allowing Maya the space to explore and realise her individuality.

The parenting styles of Salima and Rehana led to resolutions that are not quite the same. Mayya aims to challenge cultural norms dictated by her authoritarian mother, Salima, as part of her breaking away from the chain of tradition and resulting in her creation of new cultures for her family. As a result of Salima's prescriptive tendencies, Mayya is portrayed as a daughter who seeks to break away from her mother's dictation of her life. Mayya's husband says this about his wife, 'she would not live forever, her whole and entire life, under the sway of her mother, in the way that I lived completely cowed by my father's every word' (Alharthi, 2019, p. 206). Mayya, the eldest daughter and first to be married, is represented by the novelist as having a prominent sense of individuality and personal agency especially seen in her refusal to be subservient to her mother, as illustrated in the following passage: "When Mayya had Muhammad, she said, I will not go to my family's house to rest up. I'm staying here. I'll have a maid to help." (Alharthi, 2019, p. 28) In the passage, Mayya refuses to abide by her mother's expectations to undergo her confinement in her familial home, exercising her choice to experience motherhood on her own terms. Alharthi in narrating the tense mother-daughter relationship appears to suggest that the daughter's determination to break free is an inadvertent repercussion of the mother's treatment of her.

On the other hand, the tension between Rehana and Maya in *A Golden Age* is resolved when the former steps in to save her daughter from being assaulted by a Pakistani soldier. Deemed distant by Maya due to her favouritism, Rehana risks her life to prevent Maya from being violated by the military by speaking to the Pakistani soldiers in her native Urdu tongue (Anam, 2007, p. 260). Rehana's ability to speak Urdu, despite being a Bangladeshi, increased her standing in the eyes of the soldiers, defusing the situation. Her swift action proves that Maya is as precious as her son. The mother in Rehana rarely seeks to take up spaces where she does not belong—however, she does for the sake of her children. Her Urdu and linkage to East Pakistani become useful when it comes to her son and daughter. Therefore, there is a strong will in Rehana that surfaces the moment her children's lives are under threat.

Another aspect of the portrayal of mothers in *Celestial Bodies* is their expressions of love and care. Albeit Salima and Mayya are of two different generations, their methods of expressing care for their loved ones are similar yet distinct. True to her position as a wife and mother in a patriarchal Omani household in the 1970s, Salima dreams for her daughter to be appreciated for her 'talents as a seamstress' and be given 'a fine wedding procession after which he would take her home with all due ceremony and regard' (Alharthi, 2019, p. 1). What shapes Salima's motherhood is her submission towards patriarchal norms. Arab mothers seek to exercise control over their daughters, having to 'safeguard premarital chastity' and 'marital fidelity' in their daughters (Abudi, 2011, p. 67). Furthermore, arranging marriages is a norm that has risen out of 'necessity' due to the segregated upbringing of Arab children (Abudi, 2011, p. 73). Based on these considerations, the position of an Arab mother carries with it the pressure of guaranteeing a culturally acceptable life for her daughters. Alharthi echoes these socio-cultural markers of motherhood in her fiction. Salima expects her daughters to follow the values that have been set by the community, rewarding them for compliance. She discourages her daughters from pursuing their education and begins 'to worry' as 'Mayya and her sisters had reached a certain age' considered suitable for marriage, an indication of her authoritarian parenting (Alharthi, 2019, p. 33). For her, the only valid future is one with a husband who can provide an Omani woman with a comfortable and secure home. Ultimately, she succeeds in ensuring those privileges for her daughters.

Unfortunately, her daughter does not agree with her. Mayya, as the eldest, appears to begrudge Salima for the decisions the latter made on her behalf. One such example can be seen in the way Mayya reacts to the idea of marriage. Instead of viewing marriage as a source of security, she uses it to retaliate against everything the mother appears to represent and focuses on gaining her personal freedom away from her mother. In addition, Mayya is portrayed to seek retribution from her mother by disengaging with her talents as a seamstress. Perhaps given that her mother values her talent, Mayya's choice to stop sewing, subsequently creates a lacuna in her ties to her mother. In the excerpt below, the narrator observes the following:

And when we moved to our new house, Mayya moved the Farrasha into the storage room there. Why did she stop sewing? When did she stop? After Muhammad came along, surely. Right, he was born the same year I inherited Father's business and we moved to Muscat. Mayya was very happy about the move. She didn't want to remain under her mother's control for the rest of her life, she said. And when she had Muhammad she stopped sewing.

(Alharthi, 2019, p. 11)

After being under her mother's authority for almost two decades, Mayya's choices upon marriage are dictated by her need to go against her mother's expectations. Within Arabic literary tradition, the theme of mother-daughter dynamics results in the realisation of 'autonomy' in a daughter's life, and this often includes 'rejection of parental identifications and authority', resulting in 'conflict between mother and daughter' (Abudi, 2011, p. 57). However, Mayya's life story unfolds in a manner that does not differ much from that of her mother—she might have become an urban citizen—but her days are predominantly devoted to caring for her husband and children. Mayya, the daughter who gains her newfound voice as Abdallah's wife and uses it as an act of defiance, ended up living a modern version of her mother's life. Ironically, Salima's authoritarian parenting style especially in the limited freedom of choice bestowed upon her daughters, has inadvertently caused Mayya to replicate her mother's life. Nevertheless, it must also be pointed out that the novelist has successfully captured Salima's parenting style as a by-product of Arab customs and traditions that provide 'women' with the role of 'principal organizers of marriages' and societal players of 'a large network of relatives, friends and neighbours' (Abudi, 2011, p. 74).

Mayya also became defiant against the cultural practices imposed by the mother and caused an uproar. Mayya, opposing customs, asserted her right as a mother to give birth in the hospital. She is adamant on not having the baby 'in this place with those midwives crowding around' her with her husband objecting to not have his child 'slide out right into the hands of the Christians' (Alharthi, 2019, p. 7). To the horror of others, she decides to give the baby a western name, London. As London grows up, Mayya begins channelling her desires to break away from tradition into her daughter. She plants dreams to 'sew her daughter colourful frocks that no one had seen the like of on a little girl before' (Alharthi, 2019, p. 82). She wishes for the daughter to possess unique qualities, as unique as her name. Mayya's penchant for trying new things contradicts her mother's preference for a traditional way of life.

Furthermore, Mayya utilises culture and her role as a mother to bring about changes. Aware that she as a young woman lacks personal agency, Mayya manifests her desire to break away from cultural norms passed down by her mother through the choices made for her daughter. Each of her decision is carefully thought out, from her place of birth and what attire she should wear. For Mayya, being in between generations, she serves as a medium that opens the door for London to exist beyond the tribal Omani culture sheltering her mother, aunts and sisters. Her mothering is

proven to be impactful as London travels overseas and becomes financially independent with a respectable career, something her mother and grandmother would never dream about.

In *A Golden Age*, Anam paints a co-existing mother-daughter relationship as they each play a role in the liberation of Bangladesh. Rehana's mothering is affected much by her fears, worries, and agitation over her children's activities. The conflict during the liberation, in a way, brings them together: 'They sat. They waited for something to happen. Sohail paced the veranda, the garden, the roof. Maya fell asleep in the flag' (Anam, 2007, p. 45). However, cracks exist in their sense of togetherness throughout the story. Maya ends up moving away to Calcutta to work for liberation and, in a way, to find her own footing (Anam, 2007, p. 211) as her mother's existence is enveloped in her brother's lingering absence. Hence, Maya believes that it is vital for her to move out of the house, albeit temporarily. The choice of moving out of the house to find her way serves as a response to Rehana's wartime parenting. This serves as an indicator of Maya's dissimilarity from her mother—she is idealistic, decisive, and proactive, a far cry from her gentle mother who still abides by communal norms, at least on the surface. The contrast in their personalities is juxtaposed with the changing landscape of Bangladesh that seeks independence from Pakistan, which interestingly where Rehana is originally from. However, she uses her background to her advantage and displays her decisiveness in standing up for her daughter as mentioned in the previous paragraph. Rehana becomes more than just a witness to the liberation – she plays an important role in it, working to ensure the freedom of her children and, to a certain extent, the nascent nation that is Bangladesh.

Compared to Salima and Mayya who imposed their wills on their daughters as prescribed by the communal culture, Rehana deemed culture as a source of solace as it brought familiarity and predictability. In a world that was becoming increasingly chaotic, Rehana focused on restoring 'normalcy' in her 'domestic sphere' (Khan, 2020, p. 90). In *A Golden Age*, life in 1970s Bangladesh was unpredictable and volatile. Rehana, the mother of the story, manages her household whilst her children went out to fight for the cause. She turns to food—a significant marker of her cultural identity—to bring a sort of routine and regularity into her life and that of her neighbours, a tradition that has roots in history, as shown in the following passage.

Every year, Rehana held a party at Road 5 to mark the day she had returned to Dhaka with the children. She saved her meat rations and made biryani. She rented chairs and called the jilapiwallah to fry the hot, looping sweets in the garden. There was a red-and-yellow tent in case of rain, lemonade in case of heat, cucumber salad, spicy yoghurt. The guests were always the same: her neighbour Mrs Chowdhury and her daughter Silvi; her tenants, the Senguptas, and their son, Mithun; and Mrs Rahman and Mrs Akram, better known as the gin-rummy ladies.

(Anam, 2007, p. 15)

For Rehana, providing food for her family and neighbours strengthens a sense of home and community. Once the war started and people began to gather and conserve supplies, Rehana finds a way for her to be useful—she made sure that people around her had enough to eat. She 'checked the fridge', 'measured the level of the rice' and 'stacked up the onions, the pumpkin, the marrows' (Anam, 2007, p. 61). Food fills not only the stomach but also the heart. She learns since her youth to 'never finish anything' and 'kept behind a tiny bit—a finger of ginger, a stick of cinnamon, a handful of rice—in case the next time she went to buy these things they somehow eluded her, through poverty or the unreliability of the country's fortunes' (Anam, 2007, p. 90). Even in her own garden, away from the rest of the world, Rehana finds solace in gardening and planting 'pumpkin, the marrow, the hibiscus, the jasmine'—a habit she called 'pleasure' (Anam, 2007, p.

131). Most of the food she prepares during the war is meant to feed her family, neighbours and, later in the story, her children's friends and fellow freedom fighters. It reflects in how Rehana ensures that food is in constant supply in her compound. Such is the cultural norm she holds on to throughout the story—before, during, and after the war. Interestingly, culture in *A Golden Age* is represented through daily habits and worries. Questions that ran across Rehana's mind is about what her house guests would eat. Unlike Mayya in *Celestial Bodies* who seeks to break away, Rehana wishes to hold on to what is familiar and comforting. Salima and Mayya seek to weaponise culture for enforcement—a list of dos and do-nots—whereas Rehana seeks to provide comfort by keeping it alive amongst the people she loved. Both are mothers witnessing profound societal changes and making hard decisions for their respective families. Mayya, in doing so, introduces new cultural habits in her family, whereas Rehana affirms the cultural place of food in times of conflict and unpredictability.

Despite living in similar eras, the two novelists appear to portray different approaches to mothering namely Salima's authoritarian mothering style against Rehana's permissive mothering style. The two novels reveal how the approaches applied by Salima and Rehana – namely authoritarian mothering style by the former and permissive mothering style by the latter – led to their daughters going through different trajectories in life. What Salima and Rehana value as mothers are reflected in how they nurture their family. It can be concluded that mothers and the decisions they make in mothering reflect the daughters' choices and how they perceive themselves in the world. A bond of lasting influence between mothers and daughters can be seen in both novels. Throughout the plots, the daughters' actions often served as a reaction to how the mothers lived their lives. The mothers, in turn, are influenced by their mothers, resulting in a continuous cycle. The children, in their attempt to carve independent lives, may experience friction and conflict with their mothers as 'value dissimilarity creates severe relational tension between mothers and adult children leading to estrangement' (Jiao, 2019, p. 552). As such, their perception and sustenance of culture may differ, manifested in ways that are dissimilar from each other.

MOTHERS AS KEEPERS OF THE NATION

Novels written by women, especially those of colour, reveal the 'previously unwritten history and culture' by exploring 'the voices of women from all sectors of the society' and linking and bridging 'the oral/literary mode and which frequently use a multiplicity of vision' (Nasta, 1992, p. 20). In writing stories featuring women of colour in a prominent manner, Jokha Alharthi and Tahmima Anam appear to foreground the women's participation within the context of motherhood in the pursuit of nationhood.

In *Celestial Bodies*, the mothers witness Oman's transformation from a country with legal practices of slavery to a modern nation that no longer allows such a practice. The connection between familial ongoing and the nation is a constant presence in Arab society, echoing struggles for stability and harmony (Rafseena & Ajit, 2022). A female character of an enslaved status, Zarifa, captures the dilemma of the nation's journey. She mothers her master's children, deeming them as her own and embracing them with maternal love. As a slave loyal to her master, Mayya's father-in-law, she retains a piece of her nation's past by refusing to escape him and remains attached to him all her life. Her master's house is described in the following passage –

The Big House is the place I inhabit with my father, where sometimes we are visited by my aunt – his sister – and with us, in one of its many added-on rooms, live Zarifa and Sanjar, and Habib before he fled. Outside the house, but not far away from it, in very small huts live Suwayd and his

brother Zaat, and Zayd – before he drowned in the flash flood – with his wife Masouda and their daughter Shanna, plus Hafiza and her mother Saada and her three daughters whose paternal lineage is not known. All of them slaves, or at least somehow my father’s inherited property.
(Alharthi, 2019, p. 50)

In the narrative, Zarifa identifies herself as a mother and a slave to her master. Hence, any children of his are cared for by her as well. Her manifestation of motherhood is displayed through her selfless acts of service for her master’s family. However, Zarifa’s way of living is a remnant of Oman’s past, which dies with the next generation. Zarifa’s position in the story also echoes the patriarchal legacy of the nation where women have to contend for space against the dominant ‘masculinities’ (Rafseena & Ajit, 2022, p. 35). Such a societal aspect is preceded by an expectation for female submission, deeming it a ‘natural act’ (Rafseena & Ajit, 2022, p. 38). Therefore, Zarifa’s journey in maintaining her version of the nation, albeit in her mind, serves as a reminder of what Oman used to be.

The women who lived after her – Mayya and those of her generation – cease to keep any slaves and live in tribes. Instead, Mayya’s family embraces modernity, urbanisation and capitalism as Oman moves towards the millennium. Progress and changes are expected to occur in a world of ‘globalisation’ and access on an international scale (Rafseena & Ajit, 2022, p. 38). The notion of owning slaves is not something that occurred in the mind of Mayya and her husband, representing the new generational thinking. Houses and property occupy their conversations. The following passage shows as such –

Mayya, on the other hand, seemed completely enamoured of riyals. Her dream, she told me, was that we acquire as many riyals as we possibly could so that we could leave al-Awafi and build a nice house in Muscat.
(Alharthi, 2019, p. 206)

A nation means completely different things for Zarifa and Mayya. Belonging to different generations, the versions of Oman in their heads exist simultaneously, signifying multiple identities a nation can hold. For Zarifa, a nation is a place where tradition is upheld, and the hierarchy of master and slaves is clear. For Mayya, a nation is where possibilities are abundant and where one can seek to improve oneself. We can also include the point of view of Mayya’s mother, Salima, whose nation is a realm where tribal cultures hold supremacy. Instead of contradicting one another, the female characters’ points of view reveal the transformation of Oman during the late 20th century. Their versions of Oman do not contradict and can stand in parallel. The author, in narrating the various experiences of the Omani women in the novel, successfully explores the complex representations a nation may hold in the imagination of their citizens.

The mother in *A Golden Age* witnesses the birth of a new nation, Bangladesh, during the early 1970s. The beginning of the journey is violent and chaotic, which intensifies Rehana’s protective maternal instincts. In describing what she hears on the radio, she discovers that –

...the violence that had been wrought upon the country. The deaths. The arrests. The children with no parents. The mothers with empty laps. The ones who simply vanished, leaving behind a comb or a pair of shoes.’
(Anam, 2007, p. 85)

In pursuit of nationhood, Rehana accumulates memories of death and losses of the lives of Bangladeshi youths. Even though her children are unharmed, the losses change Rehana’s perspective on being a mother. She sees her son and daughter in others, particularly when she is

separated from them. She wishes to mother even if her children are not around. In the following passage, she begins expressing the evolution of her maternal instincts.

You are a mother. How many times had she repeated this very phrase to herself? I'm a mother. Above all things, a mother. Not a widow, certainly not a wife. Not a thief. A mother. But now she was something else—a mother, yes, but not just of children. Mother of a different sort. This mother knew what it was to long for her children. But she also understood the dangers of such longing.
(Anam, 2007, p. 131)

This, accompanied by the fact that she also has been feeding her children's friends during the liberation fight, elevates her status as a mother to not just Sohail and Maya. Rehana's 'ambiguity pertaining her children's political stance' is transformed into her own invested involvement in the second half of the story (Khan, 2020, p. 91). Going beyond the notion of family, Rehana is also mothering other children, youths, and adults. Therefore, as Bangladesh finally gains independence, Rehana's survival is not merely the survival of an individual but that of a participant in the fight for liberation. It is a cause to be celebrated, as showcased in the following passage -

She knew she had only these few hours before the telephone started to ring and the neighbours began to pour in. People who would come to congratulate her and share their own stories of how they had managed to survive. They would fall on each other, as after a very long crossing.
(Anam, 2007, p. 269)

Rehana's role in the Liberation War was expanded, with or without her willingness.

Rehana becomes a nurturer and safekeeper of many, such as her children, her neighbours, and their children, the youths engaged in liberating the nation, and those whom she could help. She provides them with basic necessities, such as food and shelter. She hides their weapons. She harbours them and makes her bungalow a safe haven. Once Bangladesh becomes officially independent, she joins in their joy and sorrow, breathing in the fresh air of freedom. Thus it can be said that Rehana, in her enclave, mothers the nation as it struggles for independence. Her parenting is 'informed' by the increasing 'political consciousness' which develops within the confines of domestic spaces yet impacts those around her (Khan, 2020, p. 92). Her remembrance of the lives saved and lost makes her a keeper of the nation's memories—she remembers how things were before, during and after the war.

Celestial Bodies and *A Golden Age* uncovered how mothers may act as agents of nationhood. Although their participation might have not been direct, the implications of their actions are immense and incessant. In *Celestial Bodies*, the mothers hold various narratives and beliefs about Oman in their minds, and this consequently affect how they groomed the future generations. In *A Golden Age*, the mothers function as keepers of the nation's memories, bearing witness to the transformation of their country. The common trait the mothers share is that their mothering—of their children or children of others—produces a particular effect on their societies.

The writings by female writers, particularly in a postcolonial world, shed a light on women's participation in moulding the culture in their surroundings. Great importance exists in the role of a 'post-colonial woman writer'—she is 'not only involved in making herself heard, in changing the architecture of male-centred ideologies and languages, or in discovering new forms and language to express her experience, she has also to subvert and demythologise indigenous male writings and traditions which seek to label her' (Nasta 1992: xv). Hence, as postcolonial writers, Alharthi and Anam successfully reveal the cultural aspects of female lives in their societies

– mothers, daughters, sisters, wives, and individuals – that have otherwise been drowned by male-centric narratives.

CONCLUSION

A mother's individual thoughts and choices bear tremendous power, which can influence her daughter's destiny in a nation. Based on the discussions above, the role of mothers in works of fiction about women of colour should not be confined to a one-dimensional trope. The spheres of a mother's manifestation are multi-faceted. Mothers should not be limited by their maternal role—they are also individuals with motivations that drive them in their decision-making process. Besides that, they are mothers not just to their biological children. As exhibited by Zarifa of *Celestial Bodies* and Rehana of *A Golden Age*, they can also serve as mothers to those around them, if necessary. Motherhood is a role that allows them to bring changes to their community, particularly during a crisis. Several stages are involved in materialising mothering and motherhood, namely, personal, familial, communal, and societal. Notions about mothers and daughters cannot be explored without positing the former within the context that they are in.

In *Celestial Bodies*, the mothers functioned as witnesses to the profound changes in Omani society, creating intra-gender generational conflicts. The mothering style applied by Salima and other characters is mostly authoritarian, rarely considering the wishes of their children due to prevailing customs in her community. Their lives are dominated by social expectations as mirrored in Salima's attitude towards a woman's behaviour and duties which are informed by her traditional upbringing. For Salima, preserving traditions is a source of pride. Similarly, Zarifa, the enslaved woman, holds on to the past to retain the nostalgic lifestyle yearned by her master. However, the choices made, particularly Salima's, backfire as her daughter chooses to not abide by the culture her mother so adamantly fought for. Mayya rebels against her mother after her marriage, doing everything her own way. However, Mayya's reactive decision-making processes do not help her discover her sense of identity. She quits sewing, a passion of her youth, after becoming a mother and finds herself devoting her time to her husband and children. However, her mothering allows for her daughter, London to lead a life in stark contrast to hers and her mother's. In a way, Mayya serves as the centre of intra-gender generational conflicts in Oman. *Celestial Bodies* showcases how mothers of different generations cope with the changes around them with varied results. Their priority is to secure a future for their daughters better than the one they had in their younger days.

Contrarily, in *A Golden Age*, the mothers function as the backbone of society. The mothering style applied by Rehana is permissive, fluctuating between indifference and indulgence. She does not care about every aspect of her children's dedication to the freedom movement but she allows their interest to breach every comfortable boundary she sets for herself, particularly in her home. With Rehana's steadfast devotion and lack of control over her children, they prosper and grow into courageous and idealistic freedom fighters. Neither does she dictate their choices nor force them to abide by traditions. Even though her daughter, Maya, was hurt due to Rehana's subtle favouritism, they mend their relationship before the war ended. Rehana's choice of mothering style enables Maya to participate meaningfully in the Liberation war, to the extent of moving to Calcutta to work on publications for the freedom fighters. The independence and courage of Rehana's children contest Baumrind's (1991) finding that a permissive parenting style leads to children having decreased self-reliance. Rehana's mothering showcases the complexities of lives lived during the war.

The mothers in both novels partake in the pursuit of their nationhood in their own ways. By looking at the various intersections of the mothers' lives—their roles as women, wives, parents, daughters and citizens—we have explored how their position in society is either privileged or marginalised. Their identities as mothers and women bear witness to the upheavals and transformations in their respective communities. They are survivors who adapt to confronting changes in time. Despite limitations, the mothers in *Celestial Bodies* and *A Golden Age* succeed in carving out their own space of existence in patriarchal societies and consequently exercising their citizenship within and without the family institution.

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