

## The Exercise of Patriarchal Power and the Women's Negotiation of Power in "The Arabian Nights"

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### ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the four tales that are taken from *The Arabian Nights*, namely *The Tale of King Shahryār and His Brother*, *The Tale of the Porter and The Three Young Girls of Baghdad*, *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, and *Ali Shar and Zumurrud*. The goal is to find the forms of patriarchal power as the causes of the women characters' negotiation of power and also the forms of the women characters' negotiation of power in *The Arabian Nights*. The theories that are used for this study are the theory of power relation, the concept of docile bodies, and the concept of negotiation of power/power strategies. From the analysis, it is found that in the patriarchal society of *The Arabian Nights*, power is fluid and not fixed. Thus, in the society of *The Arabian Nights*, the women can still show reactions against men's exercise of patriarchal power.

**Key words:** Power, Negotiation, Women, Patriarchy, Resistance, Rebellion.

### INTRODUCTION

Folktales are present in the childhood of almost all people all around the world. Folktales have been present as an oral tradition in every culture in the world, and there are new folktales that emerged from time to time. They are stories that are passed down from generation to generation, told through the word of mouth from person to person. *Alf Layla wa-layla*, also known as *One Thousand and One Nights* or simply as *The Arabian Nights* (also known as *Seribu Satu Malam* in Indonesia), is one of the most influential literary work that have captured the culture of an era and have influenced traditions of many societies for generations.

The tales are told in Arabia during the 12<sup>th</sup> century and it gives the reader an insight into the culture of that period (Marzolph, 2007). The tales are set during the Golden Age of Islam, during which patriarchy is at its peak, thus many critics argue that *The Arabian Nights* degrade women throughout the collection of tales (Saleh, 2010). Throughout the tales, polygamy and lecherous actions are encouraged in men, along with the notion that women are to submit to ruthless oppression by men. This kind of social control by the patriarchal society was more or less supported in Islam (Zaki, 2016). It may seem that women do not have any rights in these stories, as seen as in the stories where women are held in harems and the husbands may divorce or take another wife at any time wherever they please (Helal, 2017). Furthermore, the society in which the women live in seems to support this kind of system, justifying the actions as proper in a patriarchal society that places men as the designated more powerful party.

Yet, despite the position of women as the less powerful party in the patriarchal society depicted in the compilation, some women characters in some of the tales in *The Arabian Nights* do not show complete submission to the existing patriarchal rules and norms in the patriarchal society they live in. This unique perspective on women can be seen in the form of their reactions towards the patriarchal rules and norms that are imposed upon them. It is a fact that in a patriarchal society, women are expected to submit to men and place themselves as the less powerful party in the society. However, these particular women characters, albeit living in such society, do not always display acts of total docility in the face of the men characters' exercise of power.

Considering the noteworthy relation between the exercise of power that comes from men as the more powerful party and the reactions of women as the less powerful party in a patriarchal society, I decide to take this subject as the topic of my thesis. The women, as the group that is subjected to and played by the dominant power in the society, do not just accept the fate and the conditions created by the dominant power. Some of the women also play with the power, taking

advantage of its nature and fluidity. In order to find the answers to my statements, I use the theory of Power Relation by Michel Foucault, Foucault's concept of docile bodies, and the concept of the negotiation of power by Ribut Basuki.

In his theory of power relation, Foucault states that power is present in all aspects of society, not because it embraces everything in the society, but because, according to Foucault, power is 'everywhere and it comes from everywhere' (Foucault 1998:63). According to Foucault, power is a multiplicity of force relations that exist within the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization. For Foucault, power is in a constant flux and negotiation, constantly needing to maintain and stabilize itself in a society (Foucault, 1976, p. 92-93). The vital distinct characteristic of Foucauldian power is its fluidity, which means that power can come from and wielded by everyone in the society and that power possession is in constant change based on certain situations and conditions (Foucault, 1982, p. 339). Thus, for Foucault, power is not only a top-down or bottom-up relationship, and that power is exercised everywhere and comes from everywhere. Aside from power, in 1976, through *History of Sexuality*, Foucault takes up the concept of resistance as well. Foucault believes that resistance is something that cannot be separated from power. Resistance is the act of fighting against something that is attacking one party or more, or refusing to accept something. Foucault defines power as a "relation," "not something that is acquired, seized, or shared" (Foucault, 1976). He states that in a society, power and resistance are always related to and always exist alongside each other, as seen in his statement that "where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault, 1978: 95-96). Any power in a society is bound to give rise to a resistance and that resistance cannot exist without power. This theory can be used to analyze the power relation between the women characters and the men characters in a patriarchal society in *The Arabian Nights* and how the female main characters play with the power granted to them by the use of power strategies.

The secondary theory is Foucault's concept of docile bodies. In the concept, Michel Foucault argues that individuals are under constant surveillance and regulation in ways that are often subtle and thereby seemingly invisible, leading to normalization and acceptance of such systems (Foucault, 1975, p. 135). According to him, the notion of 'docility of the body' means that the body has come to the point at which it becomes a body that is analysable and manipulable. This is employed to illustrate how individuals within their bodies are subjected to institutional regulation (p. 136). Foucault defines a docile body as a body that "may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" to maintain "order and discipline." (p. 136). In his talks about the concept of docile bodies, Foucault used soldiers as representation. Foucault observes that soldiers are trained to obey and follow the rules, such a schedule for the whole day and a certain way they have to stand. If they do not follow these rules they then have to attend to the consequences (Crossman, 2017). The concept of docile bodies, represented with soldiers by Foucault, can also be applied to women in a patriarchal society. In her essay, Sandra Bartky argues that disciplinary practices that Foucault analyzed in *Discipline and Punish* are gendered and that, through such gendered discipline, women's bodies are rendered more docile than the bodies of men (Bartky, 1990, p. 65). The existence of patriarchal norms and rules are set in order for the women to obey and follow. If the women do not submit to these patriarchal rules, it results in many kinds of punishment. Thus, this is a form of disciplinary act set for women. In *The Arabian Nights*, the concept of docile bodies as a form of disciplinary act set for women is exercised in almost all the tales. This proves that Foucault's concept of docile bodies would be useful in analyzing the discipline of women as the purpose of the exercise of patriarchal power, the reason for the women characters' consent towards the exercise of patriarchal power, and the behaviours that are expected from women in a patriarchal society.

Ribut Basuki's concept of negotiation of power works best in revealing and categorizing the kinds of reaction that come from the women characters in the selected tales towards the exercise of patriarchal power that is done by the men characters. There are four possible results that comes from the existence of domination in a power relation: consent, negotiation, resistance, and rebellion. First, consent happens when the less powerful party willingly accept to be subjected to the power of the more powerful party (Basuki, 2010). The result of this successful domination is that the less powerful party would adhere to the demands of the more powerful party, therefore creating hegemony, or 'voluntary domination'. Secondly, according to Basuki, negotiation is different from consent. Whereas consent is when the less powerful party fully submits to the power and demands of the more

powerful party, negotiation happens when the less powerful party shows signs of trying to bargain with the more powerful party in order to find a common ground for their respective demands (Basuki, 2010). Third, resistance happens when the less powerful party decides to show signs of twisting or ignoring the more powerful party's demand while still existing within their position as the less powerful party who is under the power of the more powerful party (Basuki, 2010). Twisting the more powerful party's demands means that the less powerful party still fulfills the demand of the more powerful party; however, the demand is not fulfilled entirely to its full capacity with the main purpose of inciting a friction between both parties. Lastly, rebellion happens when the less powerful party openly refuses to be subjected under the power of the more powerful party and proceeds to forcefully exit their position as the less powerful party (Basuki, 2010). Rebellion is when the less powerful party openly disobeys and ignores the demand of the more powerful party. Rebellion is more than resistance in the way that the less powerful party forcefully exits their position as the less powerful party, openly showing their refusal to be subjected under the rule of the more powerful party by resorting to aggressive ways.

### **FORMS OF EXERCISE OF PATRIARCHAL POWER AS THE CAUSES**

The causes of the women's negotiation of power in *The Arabian Nights* come from many forms of exercise of patriarchal power. This exercise of patriarchal power takes many forms. First of all, this section discusses the many forms of patriarchal power that are exercised in the society of *The Arabian Nights*.

#### **A Male Ruler's Tyranny over Women**

The first form of the exercise of patriarchal power in *The Arabian Nights* is the tyranny of a male ruler. According to Aristotle, tyranny occurs when absolute power is granted to a ruler. He further states tyranny as a kind of monarchy which takes into consideration only the interests of the monarch. This can be seen in *The Tale of King Shahryār and His Brother*, where the sultan becomes a tyrant and exercises his power over one group only, which is women.

As a sultan, Shahryār is granted absolute power over his domain. To be a sultan with an absolute power of rulership in a Muslim kingdom is to be the paragon of patriarchy who is doing a divine work. Yet in a society, when a ruler is granted absolute power, it can result in tyranny. This can be seen when Shahryār, the sultan of the Muslim kingdom in the first tale, resorts to tyranny and enforces his absolute power over one group in a society, which is women. His exercise of power comes in the form of a law that victimize women, proceeding to take a virgin woman each night and have her killed the next morning (Mathers, *The Book of The Thousand Nights and One Night Volume I*, p. 5). Thus, Shahryār uses his limitless power as a sultan to discriminate, dominate, punish, and oppress women in his kingdom, particularly virgin women. This shows that Shahryār exercises a form of patriarchal power by exercising his absolute power as a sultan to prove that everyone, especially women, a particular group in his kingdom, are under the rule of men, which in turn under the rule of his.

#### **Men's Disrespect against Women**

The second form of the exercise of patriarchal power in *The Arabian Nights* is the men's disrespect against women. A society with a patriarchal system has a set of rules and norms that restrict women in many aspects. This leads to men into thinking that men are superior to women and that women have to submit to men. This can be seen in the *The Tale of the Porter and The Three Young Girls of Baghdad*, where men disrespect women by seeing women as men's objects and disregarding the very rules in the women's house.

The first form of men's disrespect against women in *The Arabian Nights* is men seeing women as men's objects. This means that men do not see women as individuals with dignity and personalities, but as objects that exist only as tools for men to satisfy themselves with. This can be seen in the first half of *The Tale of the Porter and The Three Young Girls of Baghdad*, where the porter sees the three young girls and insists on staying with them to appease himself (Mathers, 1986, p. 52-53). The porter also makes a statement that "women cannot be truly happy without men" (p.

52). This statement can be interpreted that, according to the porter, women always need men to make their lives complete and happy.

The second form of men's disrespect against women in *The Arabian Nights* is men's disregard of the rules in the women's house. This can be seen in *The Tale of the Porter and The Three Young Girls of Baghdad*, where the seven male guests of the young girls show disrespect by ignoring the only rule that are set in the young girls' house even after the young girls specifically tell them to follow it (Mathers, 1986, p. 63-64). The seven male guests, who at first give their agreement to follow the rule in the young girls' house (p. 58), turn on their own words without any hint of regret and simply choose to break the rule (p. 64). By doing this, the seven male guests try to enforce this very belief that men are superior to women in every way and that men are above any rule made by women.

### **Men's Slavery of Women**

The third form of the exercise of patriarchal power in *The Arabian Nights* is men's slavery of women. With slavery practiced in the society of *The Arabian Nights*, combined with the men's position as the more powerful party in its society, the men are conditioned to think that female slaves are lower than women in general. This leads to men exploiting female slaves more often than the men do women in *The Arabian Nights*. This can be seen in *Ali Shar and Zumurrud*, where the lust-driven men see Zumurrud as an object and make several attempts to make her submit to them so that they can use Zumurrud as a means to appease their needs.

The most common motive for the purchase of female slaves in the society of *The Arabian Nights* is sexual intercourse. Throughout the tales in *The Arabian Nights*, female slaves are seen as licit sexual partners for their male owners. This is supported, even encouraged, by the teachings of the religion of *The Arabian Nights*'s society, which is Islam. The support of this notion regarding female slaves comes from their holy scriptures, the Quran, which grants masters access to the bodies of their female slaves (Zilfi, 2010). This leads to a general acceptance of women as sexual commodities in *The Arabian Nights*. This can be seen during the slave auction in which Zumurrud is presented to the crowd of merchants, which is dominated by men. In introducing Zumurrud, the chief broker uses words that allude to the physical appearance of the slave girl (Mathers, *The Book of The Thousand Nights and One Night Volume II*, p. 238). This way of introducing female slaves is done to appeal to men's sexual desires which in turn decides if the men will buy the female slaves or not.

Kidnappings and mistreatment are two of the most common occurrences that befall female slaves in the society of *The Arabian Nights*. In *The Arabian Nights*, these kidnappings by men towards female slaves are done with the purpose of using the female slaves to appease the men's sexual demands. Aside from kidnappings, mistreatment such as rape and beatings also happen often to female slaves in *The Arabian Nights*. These treatments towards female slaves can be seen in the tale *Ali Shar and Zumurrud* when the men who desire Zumurrud but failed to purchase her at the slave auction proceed to kidnap Zumurrud. This kidnapping happens twice throughout the course of the tale (p. 248-252) and they are done with the purpose of using Zumurrud, a female slave, as a tool to satisfy the male kidnapers' sexual demands.

### **FORMS OF THE WOMEN'S NEGOTIATION OF POWER**

The power relation in *The Arabian Nights*' society is done because of the domination of the patriarchal society over women, which in turn affects the women characters in the selected tales. In the following discussion, the power relation that comes from the patriarchal society's domination over women in *The Arabian Nights* results in consent, negotiation, resistance, and rebellion.

#### **From Consent to Negotiation against a Male Ruler's Tyranny**

This section consists of the reactions of the female characters in the face of the male's tyrannical rule over women as seen in *The Tale of King Shahryār and His Brother*. I find that the reaction of the women as the less powerful party in the patriarchal society of *The Arabian Nights* can change from consent to negotiation.

Consent is the first reaction of the women characters towards a male ruler's tyrannical rule which is a form of the exercise of patriarchal power. The display of consent in *The Tale of King*

*Shahryār and His Brother* is when the women characters, as the less powerful party, willingly accept to be subjected to the rule of the more powerful party, which is the patriarchal society ruled by a patriarchal sultan called Shahryār. The women's consent is supported by the way the women, particularly the virgin women, act when Shahryār exercises his sovereign power over them in the form of a very disadvantageous law. The women's consent is also supported by the way Shahrazad acts in the face of the sultan's absolute power at first. Besides silence and acceptance to the exercise of the tyrannical rule of the sultan, Shahrazad's act of voluntarily marrying the sultan is another act of consent.

Negotiation is the second reaction of the women characters, namely Shahrazad, towards the sultan's unfair law. The negotiation can be seen when Shahrazad settles for storytelling to escape her fate. One of the main crucial points in Shahrazad's storytelling as a way of negotiating the exercised power of the sultan is the method that is called a 'frame story'. A frame story is a literary technique that incorporates a story within a story with the purpose of leading the audience from a story into another, smaller one within it. The additional suspense of the frame story method works more efficiently with Shahrazad using yet another technique of storytelling that is as equally important, which is cliffhanger, which is another type of narrative or a plot device in which the end is very abrupt, usually with the one where the main characters of the story are left in a difficult situation without offering any resolution of conflicts. This is a method of negotiation because she secretly negotiates the exercise of the existing power with the aim of escaping her own death and change the sultan's mind, thus achieving her personal goals without having to display any act of aggressive resistance.

#### **From Consent to Rebellion against Men's Disrespect against Women**

This section consists of the reactions of women characters in the face of the men's disrespect against women as seen in *The Tale of the Porter and The Three Young Girls of Baghdad*. I find that the reaction of the women as the less powerful party in the patriarchal society of *The Arabian Nights* can change directly from consent to rebellion.

Consent is the first reaction of the women characters, namely the three young girls of Baghdad, towards men seeing women as men's objects, which is a form of the exercise of patriarchal power. The display of consent in *The Tale of the Porter and The Three Young Girls of Baghdad* is when the young girls willingly accept to be subjected to the porter's demands by letting the porter do as he pleases, even when they do not completely trust him because he is a stranger. By giving in to a man's demands, in this case the demands of the porter who wants to enter the young girls' personal space, the young girls consent to the exercise of the patriarchal rule that comes from the porter. The first example of the young girls consenting to the demands of the porter is when the young girls let the porter enter their house as a guest for the night, even though the porter is a complete stranger (Mathers, *The Book of The Thousand Nights and One Night Volume I*, p. 53).

Rebellion is the second reaction of the women characters towards men's disregard of the rules in the women's house. The display of rebellion in *The Tale of the Porter and The Three Young Girls of Baghdad* can be seen when the young girls issue death threats against the seven male guests when the seven male guests break the only rule in the young girls' house (p. 64). Issuing death threats against the men is a form of rebellion because in doing so, the women do not submit to the men's demands, thus not giving the men the satisfaction of having their demands fulfilled. Furthermore, issuing death threats against men as a reaction to the men's demands is a reaction that is not expected from women, who are expected to show complete submission in the face of the patriarchal power.

#### **From Resistance to Consent to Rebellion against Men's Threat of Death against Women**

This section consists of the reactions of Marjanah, the main female character, in the face of the men's threat of death against women as seen in *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*. In this particular tale, the men's threat of death comes from the forty thieves, who seek to kill Marjanah after the thieves' spy finds out that there is a girl who might find out about the forty thieves' secret (Mathers, *The Book of The Thousand Nights and One Night Volume IV*, p. 117). I find that the reaction of the women as the less powerful party in the patriarchal society of *The Arabian Nights* can first start with resistance before changing to consent and change drastically into rebellion.

Resistance is the first reaction of the main female character, Marjanah, towards men's threat of death against women which is a form of the exercise of power. The display of resistance in *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* is when Marjanah outsmarts her enemies who try to exercise their power over Marjanah and her household. As a woman in a patriarchal society, Marjanah knows that she cannot display open, aggressive acts in retaliation against the forty thieves who want to kill her and her household. Thus, she needs to find a way to protect herself and her household without having to expose herself to the forty thieves. She then resorts to using her enemies' method against them by marking every door in the street with the exact mark that the thieves use to mark her house's door (Mathers, *The Book of The Thousand Nights and One Night Volume IV*, p. 118). In doing so, she can accomplish her goal of protecting herself and her household without having to draw her enemies' attention. Later on I find that the woman character's resistance can change to consent.

Consent is the second reaction of Marjanah towards men's threat of death against her. The display of consent in *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* is when Marjanah gives hospitality to the leader of the forty thieves (p. 119-120). Marjanah chooses to submit to the robber chief's demands as a guest because Marjanah knows the consequences if she does not pretend to continue to be clueless about the man's true identity. She also knows that she cannot afford to show any act that is bound to result in the robber chief's anger. Marjanah's hospitality can be considered as an act of consent because in doing so, Marjanah gives in to the demands of men, in this case the demands of the robber chief who wants to enter the Marjanah's master's household. Later on I find that the woman character's consent can change directly to rebellion.

Rebellion is the third reaction of Marjanah towards men's threat of death against her. The display of rebellion in *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* is when Marjanah kills both the forty thieves and their leader. In carrying out her act of rebellion, Marjanah incorporates seemingly harmless values that in reality contributes the most to the success of her rebellion. Those values are patience and level-headedness. Marjanah understands that in order to save her household, she must be able to make and execute her plans without anyone knowing about it. She knows that in order for the plans to work, she must keep the forty thieves in a false sense of security. This can be seen during when she traps the thieves in their own hiding place and uses the hiding place to kill the thieves without losing her calm and without anyone noticing (p. 121). Another important aspect in Marjanah's efforts to kill her enemies is the use of distraction so that her enemies lower their guard around her. In dealing with men who can use their physical strength to their advantage, Marjanah uses distraction that may seem harmless in the men's eyes. Marjanah's distraction comes in the form of pleasing antics that can be considered as entertainment in the presence of men, thus making it easier for Marjanah to slip into the men's defences. This can be seen when Marjana uses dance in order to distract the leader of the forty thieves, who is disguised as a guest for the second time (p. 122). Marjanah's acts are considered as an act of rebellion, because in doing so, Marjanah, as a woman, openly defy the patriarchal rule that believes in the complete submission of women and choose to fight back through aggressive means.

### **From Resistance to Rebellion against Men's Slavery of Women**

This section consists of the reactions of women in the face of the men's disrespect against women as seen in *Ali Shar and Zumurrud*. I find that the reaction of the women as the less powerful party in the patriarchal society of *The Arabian Nights* can change from resistance to rebellion. The following discussion shows the dynamic that happens as the women's reaction towards the patriarchal rule changes from resistance to rebellion.

Resistance is the first reaction of the main female character, Zumurrud, towards men's slavery of women which is a form of the exercise of patriarchal power. Zumurrud shows an act of resistance against the patriarchal power that comes in the form of men's slavery of women by choosing her own master, Ali Shar. In the society of *The Arabian Nights*, slaves are not given a freedom to choose their own masters. The same goes for female slaves, who have to content themselves with whoever places the highest bid on them during the slave auction. Zumurrud's resistance can be seen when she refuses to submit to the usual slave-purchasing system. By doing this, she also refuses to submit to the demands of the men who want to buy her solely to appease their own sexual desires. Furthermore, it is considered as a resistance because even though Zumurrud does not want to abide to the designated slave-purchasing system, she still maintains her status as a

slave. Zumurrud's act of choosing her own master can be seen when she publicly announces that she only wants Ali Shar as her master and no one else.

Zumurrud extends her resistance against men's slavery of women by escaping the men who kidnapped her. Zumurrud's kidnappers are rich, lustful, socially-influential men who see Zumurrud as a female slave that can be used as a tool to satisfy their sexual demands. Female slaves in *The Arabian Nights* are seen solely as a tool or a way to give pleasure to men, both the masters and men in general. Zumurrud, however, does not want to abide to the demands of her male kidnappers despite her status as a female slave. The act of Zumurrud escaping her kidnappers is considered as an act of resistance against men's slavery of women because without displaying any aggressive acts against the men, she still makes it clear that she does not want to abide to her kidnappers' unwanted advances. In the tale, Zumurrud's choice of resistance method is crossdressing as man in order to escape her kidnappers (Mathers, *The Book of The Thousand Nights and One Night Volume II*, p. 254).

Rebellion is the third reaction Zumurrud towards men's slavery of women. The display of rebellion in *Ali Shar and Zumurrud* is when Zumurrud settles for an aggressive way in retaliating against the wrongdoings that her lustful kidnappers had done to her, and Zumurrud's choice of rebellion method is carrying out death sentence against her kidnappers (Mathers, *The Book of The Thousand Nights and One Night Volume II*, p. 261). Death sentence as a form of revenge is considered as rebellion because in doing so, Zumurrud defies the expected behaviour of women in the patriarchal society, which is submissive and accepting whatever wrongdoings men do to them. Thus, Zumurrud's aggressive way in choosing to take revenge on her former male tormentors is considered as an act of rebellion against the patriarchal system itself, because in doing so, Zumurrud, as a woman, openly defies the patriarchal rule that believes in the complete submission of women.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the patriarchal society of *The Arabian Nights*, power is not always top-down. Top-down power means the power that is exercised from the more powerful party (top) over the less powerful party (down). The women characters, who are seen as the less powerful party in the patriarchal society and as objects of domination, could also display power in the four forms of negotiation of power; for example, when Shahrazad deals with the power of Shahryār's absolute rulership. This is considered as power that comes from bottom-up. Thus, the negotiation of power displayed by the women characters in *The Arabian Nights* is considered a form of power that comes from bottom-up because women, as the less powerful party, display reactions that are not entirely submissive against the power of men, the more powerful party.

Moreover, it is found that the women characters can still show negotiation of power in the face of the patriarchal power exercise despite the fact that women as a group is the designated less powerful party in the society. The non-submissive reactions are considered as forms of negotiation of power/power strategies. Women are expected to be submissive and docile in the presence of men. Thus, even though there are patriarchal society's constraints over women that condition women to think that they are the less powerful party, women can still show non-submissive reactions that serve as the negotiation of power against men's exercise of patriarchal power.

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