

## Power Relations in Perpustakaan Ajaib Bibbi Bokken by Jostein Gaarder and Klaus Hagerup

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### ABSTRACT

Young Adult (YA) literature is a relatively new genre in Indonesia. However, the development of YA literature in USA demonstrates that this popular genre is not merely entertaining but also possesses aesthetic value and the potential to address relevant sociocultural issues. One notable work reflecting the development of YA literature is *Bibbi Bokken's Magic Library* by Jostein Gaarder and Klaus Hagerup which was translated into Indonesian in 2016. The story is set in the world of libraries and not only entertains but also raises power dynamics through the interactions between two cousins, namely Nils and Berit. Therefore, this study aims to illustrate how power relations are depicted in the story and how the characters respond when confronted with these power relations. As the results, there are three types of power relations in the book using Michel Foucault's theory: power relations over discourse, thought, and discipline through literary culture.

**Keywords:** Culture, Power Relations, Young Adult Literature

### INTRODUCTION

Young Adult (YA) literature is a relatively new genre in Indonesia. According to Russell as cited in Wells (2003), the category of "young adult" refers to individuals between the ages of 12 and 18. During this transitional period, readers begin to develop their thinking and explore emotions, spirituality, and opportunities that were not occurrent to them as children during this era of transition (Sturm and Michel, 2009). However, it has been widely discussed in the United States of America by literary critics and education practitioners since its development in the early 20th Century (Pramesti, 2015).

The development of the YA genre accelerated significantly after the publication of *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton in 1967. Prior to this, literary works featuring adolescent protagonists were more often intended for adult readers. Hinton, however, paved the way for stories that genuinely resonated with teenagers. In the following decades, the themes covered in YA grew more varied, ranging from investigations of relationships and identity to social challenges like drug abuse and divorce. Beginning in the 1990s, with the emergence of "middle school literature," YA literature expanded further. Authors also became more courageous in addressing various issues and presenting more complex characters (Cart as cited in Wells, 2003). Crowe even argues that some YA literary works can be considered classics (Pramesti, 2015). This indicates that YA literature is not merely entertaining but also possesses aesthetic value and the potential to address relevant sociocultural issues.

One notable work that reflects the development of trends of YA literature in the 1990s is *Bibbi Bokken's Magic Library* which was translated into Indonesian as *The Magic Library: Perpustakaan Ajaib Bibbi Bokken* in 2016. Combining the mystery and fantasy genres, this novel is written by

Jostein Gaarder (the bestselling author of *Sophie's World*) and Klaus Hagerup. It was published first in 1993 to commemorate the "Norwegian Year of the Book."

The story is set in the world of libraries and not only entertains but also raises complex issues through the interactions between two cousins, Nils (a 12-year-old boy) and Berit (a 13-year-old girl) communicated through correspondence in a shared letter-book exchanged between Oslo and Fjærland. They spend the summer together and accidentally encounter a mysterious woman at their lodging. Initially, they ignored this encounter and focused on their plan as suggested by one of Berit's acquaintances. But neither Nils nor Berit anticipated that the mysterious woman would reappear in their respective locations within a short period of time. From that moment on, they regularly write letters to unravel the enigma surrounding the identity of the woman involved in an odd riddle. Gradually, they discover her name (Bibbi Bokken), her occupation as a librarian, her secret plan involving a "magical library" and a book that will be released the following year. At one point, Nils and Berit even feel Bibbi Bokken is targeting their letter-book and secretly manipulating them because they have learned too much. Their search ultimately reaches a resolution when they meet Bibbi Bokken directly and discover that they are, in fact, being prepared to become children's book authors as part of the celebration of the "Norwegian Year of the Book."

The adventure of Nils and Berit in uncovering the mystery of this magical library presents intriguing power dynamics worthy of analysis. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to show how power relations are depicted in the story and how the characters Nils and Berit respond when confronted with these power relations.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Michel Foucault, a French philosopher, offers a complex understanding of the concept of power. According to him, power belongs to no one, exists everywhere, and operates as a strategy (Foucault, 1980). Rather than defining power statically, Foucault is more interested in how power operates and produces subjects. He characterizes power as something that is dispersed; not repressive but productive; not measurable; structuring activities; not something that can be acquired, shared, or seized; and something that only exists where there is imbalance. As a result, power relations can occur within families, schools, communities, workplaces, and even at the level of the state (Foucault, 1975). Foucault, as cited in Synnot and Santoso (2007), further argues that power conveyed implicitly can operate within education and knowledge systems.

Power relations are typically described as involving two sides: the dominating party and the dominated party. Foucault identifies several forms of power relations, namely power over the body, discourse, thought, and discipline. He argues that the body is shaped to function within global industry and religion and to signify the social identity of its owner. Power relations in the form of discourse were articulated by Foucault in *Power/Knowledge* (1980). According to him, power is always embedded within knowledge; there is no knowledge without power and no power without knowledge. Consequently, power is always inserted into discourses.

Beyond discourse, Foucault, as cited in Jones (2004), explains that knowledge is transmitted into human thought through various mechanisms that shape societal ways of thinking, causing people to adopt perspectives aligned with dominant forms of knowledge. Unconsciously, this becomes a form of social control and domination by those in power to ensure compliance with their interests. Power relations over the thought are disseminated through four main media: religion, culture, the

state, and institutions. The spread of power through thought can occur via stigmatization, mind control, manipulation, and domination.

Foucault also analyzes how power operates in the form of discipline. In *Surveiller et Punir* (1979), he explains that disciplinary power is implemented through control over the body, which is regarded as a vehicle of power. Authorities indoctrinate subjects with rules and laws through surveillance. This mechanism was first applied in the Panopticon prison system, designed by philosopher Jeremy Bentham in the eighteenth century. The circular structure allowed guards to observe prisoners from a central tower, creating a constant sense of being watched. This sense of surveillance made prisoners cautious about their actions and functioned as a form of social control. Discipline thus operates smoothly, with subjects unaware that they are conforming to the will of those in power. At the same time, this process is expected to produce positive values by conditioning bodies to be useful both for themselves and for broader social interests. Foucault emphasizes that discipline is only one of many strategies through which power is exercised.

## ANALYSIS

### **Bibbi Bokken: Power Relations and Knowledge**

In accordance with Foucault's theory, power and knowledge are closely intertwined. To become a figure of authority, one must possess knowledge. This is evident in the character of Bibbi Bokken, a librarian who is part of the organizing committee for the preparation of the "Norwegian Year of the Book."

In the novel, Nils and Berit function as both narrators and focalizers who drive the narrative forward, causing the plot to unfold in line with the events they experience. However, nearly every letter they write contains information they have obtained about Bibbi Bokken. Both characters are made to feel afraid, confused, and curious about this woman with an eccentric appearance—especially when Berit accidentally reads a mysterious letter addressed to Bibbi Bokken that appears suspicious. Gradually, the two begin to seek information based on the riddles constructed by Bibbi Bokken. The narrative progression can be illustrated using Freytag's triangle as follows:

1. **Exposition:** Introduction of the characters Nils and Berit, along with their confusion about what they should write in the letter-book.
2. **Inciting Incident:** The main characters' encounter with Bibbi Bokken and the secret surrounding her library, as well as the book to be published the following year.
3. **Rising Action:** Nils and Berit's search for information regarding the mystery of Bibbi Bokken and the people around her (the Bruun couple, Mr. Smiley, and Mr. Bresani).
4. **Climax:** The revelation of Bibbi Bokken's secret by Bibbi herself, along with Mr. Smiley (Marcus), who harbors hostility toward Nils and Berit.
5. **Falling Action:** Nils and Berit's agreement to appoint Bibbi Bokken as their editor.
6. **Resolution:** Their book will be published and distributed throughout Norway.
7. **Denouement:** The growth of Nils's inspiration to write following the writing process.

In the story, Nils and Berit, who were initially confused about what to write in their letters, ultimately write about the history and world of literacy, in accordance with Bibbi Bokken's wishes. Discourse concerning the importance of literacy is indirectly instilled in them, as Nils and Berit are compelled to seek information related to the words contained in their letters.

*“But what exactly does a ‘bibliographer’ do? And what does ‘incunabula’ mean?” (Berit, p. 18)*

*“But what exactly is ‘decimal classification’? And who on earth is ‘Dewey?’” (Berit, p. 49)*

*“The shop Siri visited mysteriously [...] and I can stand here now because I followed the clues from a mysterious letter.” (Nils, p. 104)*

From these passages, power relations over discourse operating through language and systems of knowledge become apparent. Their thinking grows increasingly structured and constrained by a dominant cognitive framework, namely, the pursuit of information to be written in the letters. Through controlling access to information, Bibbi Bokken regulates how Nils and Berit search for truth based on fragments of information she provides. This power over the thought emerges through the successful cultivation of literary culture (reading and writing) within Nils and Berit. The riddles Bibbi Bokken creates—embedded in language and speech—unconsciously stimulate their curiosity and control the production of their knowledge, particularly in determining what they write in the letters (thematic direction).

Beyond information control, Bibbi Bokken also demonstrates her dominance through her social networks. For instance, Nils and Berit initially believe that Billie Holiday helped them develop the idea of creating a letter-book, but it later becomes clear that the idea originated with Bibbi Bokken. Knowing that Berit frequently discusses ideas with Billie Holiday, Bibbi Bokken anticipates that Billie would pass the idea along to Berit, whom Bibbi believes would seriously consider it. Moreover, upon learning that Nils is traveling to Italy, Bibbi Bokken directs him to visit Mario Bresani, a book cover artist who also owns a small, ancient library. There, Bibbi Bokken is confident that Nils will write about what he sees, resulting in a discussion with Berit in their letter-book about a magical library.

*“So she knows that you’re in Rome. I repeat: BIBBI BOKKEN KNOWS YOU ARE IN ROME! Be careful, Nils!” (Berit to Nils, p. 97)*

During their search for information, Nils and Berit experience disciplinary power relations designed by Bibbi Bokken. The feeling of being constantly watched compels them to continue reading, investigating what is happening, and writing about it in their letter-book. Bibbi Bokken ultimately succeeds in disciplining them without their awareness, leading them to produce the desired positive outcome: a compiled letter-book documenting developments in literacy and libraries.

### **Nils and Berit’s Responses to Power Relations: Resistance and Negotiation**

As previously discussed, Bibbi Bokken attempts to dominate Nils and Berit, particularly by exercising power over discourse, thought, and discipline. However, as the story progresses, Nils and Berit no longer remain confined within the boundaries established by Bibbi Bokken. Instead, they attempt to transcend them by seeking information beyond the riddles she provides.

*“But Berit—how do you know about that?” [...]*

*“I think she doesn’t like it when I know more than she expects.” (pp. 220–221)*

In this passage, Bibbi Bokken is surprised to discover that Nils and Berit know about Walter Mondiale—a figure who intends to build a library in Fjærland—and the Year of the Book event, despite her never having provided clues about them. By leveraging social networks, Nils meets the

Bruun couple, acquaintances of Bibbi Bokken, while Berit meets Marit Orhem Amuritzen (p. 135). Through these encounters, both characters acquire more information than Bibbi Bokken anticipates.

Their fear and confusion regarding Bibbi Bokken and the magical library prompt them to resist by challenging the dominant mode of thinking. Although their access to information remains limited, they generate alternative discourses through imagination in their search for truth. Conspiracies involving murder, book-smuggling syndicates, and even religious sects emerge, signaling resistance to the dominant narrative imposed by Bibbi Bokken. Thus, they do not merely function as objects of Bibbi Bokken's literacy project but become active subjects who shape their own reality. Their resistance ceases once they uncover Bibbi Bokken's reality and intentions.

*"Moreover, Bibbi is an excellent editor. An editor's role is to critique, guide, and pose complex questions to the author." (Nils, p. 260)*

Initially, Nils and Berit are skeptical when informed that Bibbi Bokken intends to make them writers. However, her subsequent proof changes their perspective, leading them to allow her to become the editor of the letter-book they have been working on. Bibbi Bokken is perceived as possessing superior knowledge and a more refined intellectual framework than Nils and Berit. As authors, Nils and Berit retain authority over their ideas and narratives; nevertheless, they relinquish part of that authority to Bibbi as editor—granting her the power to edit their writing and determine what may be published. This creates an unequal power relation, positioning Bibbi Bokken as the dominant figure in determining the final form of the work. Yet, throughout this process, Nils and Berit continue to negotiate to preserve traces of their individual identities within the text. This dynamic demonstrates ongoing negotiation and highlights how power continuously shifts and is reconstituted within the production of knowledge.

## CONCLUSION

Power relations in the novel are manifested in three forms: power over discourse, thought, and discipline. The medium through which this power operates is culture, specifically literary culture. Knowledge is employed by Bibbi Bokken as a source of power over Nils and Berit to regulate both the themes and the writing process of their work. Nevertheless, the characters' thoughts cannot be fully controlled. The dominated party is also able to use knowledge as a form of resistance by engaging in critique and continuously seeking additional information from the knowledge they receive. Through this process, they can construct alternative discourses that challenge domination and move beyond the boundaries imposed by those in power. However, power relations are not always repressive or inherently negative. Through negotiation, both the dominating and the dominated parties can create a shared discourse that is acceptable to all parties.

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