

## **Changing The Largest Forces of Inequality by Ruqayya in Radwa Ashour's *The Woman From Tantoura***

**Bella Cintya Nur Halizza<sup>1</sup>, Suci Suryani, S.S., M.Pd<sup>2</sup>**

*English Study Program, University of Trunojoyo Madura*

*e-mail address: cintyabella916@gmail.com, suci.suryani@trunojoyo.ac.id*

*DOI : 10.21107/prosodi.v16i2.13116*

*Received 20 January 2022; Received in revised form 26 January 2022; Accepted 11 March 2022; Published 17 October 2022.*

### **ABSTRACT**

Women as victims of sexist oppression become a global issues up to now. One of the causes that lead to women being victims of sexist oppression is a patriarchy system that is still developing. This study aims to analyse Ruqayya's strength in dealing with various kinds of pressure as a Palestinian woman in Radwa Ashour's *The Woman from Tantoura*. Furthermore, three issues will be investigated in this study, those are; kinds of sexist oppression experienced by Ruqayya, how solidarity is formed by sharing sources and how solidarity forms a unity front for the emergence of Ruqayya's power practices to stop sexist oppression. This study is qualitative design because the data are collected in the form of words. The data of this study are the narrator's explanations and the character's utterances related to the three issues above. The results of the analysis show that Ruqayya experiences kinds of sexist oppression such as arranged marriages, violence, and sexual abuse. Ruqayya forms a bond of solidarity built on empathy and sharing sources. Ruqayya obtains power from the bond so that the action is formed by Ruqayya as her resistance to end sexist oppression.

**Keywords:** personal basic power, sexist oppression, solidarity

## INTRODUCTION

This study is women's studies including three important points closely related to women's issues more specifically women as victims of sexist oppression. The three points are sexist oppression, solidarity and power. Those three points are required to evaluate the social status of the main female character and her basic personal power in Radwa Ashour's novel entitled *The Woman from Tantoura*. In this study the sexist oppression experienced by the main female character, the bond of solidarity obtained by the main female character, and basic personal power practiced by the main female character are analysed. This study is conducted to identify how the main female character moves from the margin to the centre of the social hierarchy. The main female character, who practices basic personal power, demonstrates that she can resist the largest force of inequality namely sexist oppression, and thus proves that women are powerful. As a result, this study must elaborate on the main female character that lives in inequality and injustice.

Women's issues, more specifically women as victims of sexist oppression become an exciting topic since it is a global issue. Sexist oppression is a form of oppression based on gender. hooks (1984) states that women are the ones that suffer the most from sexist oppression. Women are marginalized and considered as powerless as a result of the patriarchy system that is still developing. According to Ademiluka, patriarchy is a system in which men have dominance over women (Ademiluka, 2018). According to Dubois & Ordabayeva (2015), individuals or groups who are considered superior have a high social position in a social hierarchy. In a patriarchal society, men always take precedence in all parts of life while women are often positioned in the minority in the social structure. As a result of their marginalized status, women are more likely to become victims of sexist oppression.

Sexist oppression is a crisis condition experienced by women which invite feminists to fight against it. hooks claims that feminism is not simply a fight for equality between women and men, but it is a movement to end sexist oppression (hooks, 1984). Sexist oppression is one of the factors that women cannot be liberal. hooks (2000) further states that feminism is not a movement that considers men are the enemy of women. The main problem is about the sexist thinking and action itself. According to UNICEF Ireland, Sexist thinking or sexism can take the form of stereotype or discrimination against individuals based on their gender, while sexist action is actions that indicate sexism, such as daily pressure, physical or psychological violence, and sexual abuse.

Furthermore, those forms of oppression make women in difficult situation. That condition leads women to bond each other to share sources. In addition to the feminist movement, women's solidarity is an influential in fighting sexism. hooks (1984) argues that women bonding based on sharing sources can strengthen solidarity. Women, who share a similar fate, are more likely to understand each other. However, this does not imply that they deserve as the people who are oppressed. Nevertheless, the point to fight oppression is to share and develop women's potential. By sharing and developing this potential, women may have a strong bonding and solidarity. hooks (1984) adds that in the feminist movement, men who actively fight sexism are called comrades. Not all men support sexism, men who are aware of the problematic situation experienced by women can form bonds and strengthen solidarity. Moreover, the bonding gives positive impact to the arising of energy, action and effective interactions towards women.

The process of fighting sexism and changing the most significant forces of inequalities are also illustrated in the novel entitled *The Women from Tantoura* by Radwa Ashour. This novel covers a succession of gender inequalities faced by the main character, Ruqayya. In addition to stories about massacres, refugee camps, terrorist attacks, wars, and death and destruction cycles. Little Ruqayya, like other children, is ecstatic. Things begin to change once she is a teenager and their village is attacked by Israeli Zionists. When she is 14 years old, she gets betrothed to a guy named Yahya. Ruqayya has to marry her cousin Amin in the end because her mother does not allow that she has to marry Yahya and live far away from her daughter. Ruqayya's life is turned upside down when Israel assaults her village. She and her family are subjected to many forms of violence, sexual abuse, and even murder.

Based on the description above, the writer is interested in conducting three research questions, those are: what kinds of sexist oppression does Ruqayya experience, how is solidarity built from sharing sources of Ruqayya on sexist oppression, and how does solidarity form a unity front for the emergence of Ruqayya's power practices to stop sexist oppression. In this study, sexist oppression, solidarity and basic personal power are analysed because in these aspects, there is a strong connection between them. In this novel, the most significant forces of inequality experienced by Ruqayya are depicted with various forms of violence, sexual abuse, and pressure by her families. Furthermore, due to the influence of solidarity and bonding that formed, Ruqayya dares to speak up about what she has experienced. This bond creates a mutualistic relationship that generates support and energy to fight sexism so that an action is formed by Ruqayya who finally dares to take the decision to leave Palestine and dares to speak up about her experience of sexist oppression.

Previously, there are several previous researchers who raise the issue of sexist oppression and use the novel *The Woman from Tantoura* as a data source. The first researchers who raise the issue of sexist oppression are Radiani Umi Kulsum and R.A.J. Atrinawati (2016), their article is entitled *Marlene And Joan's Struggle Against Patriarchal Society In The Caryl Churchill's Play Top Girls*. They analyse Marlene and Joan's struggle against patriarchal society in *Caryl Churchill's play Top Girls* (1982). Furthermore, previous researchers that use the novel *The Woman from Tantoura* are Hania A. M. Nashef (2021) her article is entitled *Suppressed Nakba Memories in Palestinian female narratives Susan Abulhaw's The Blue between Sky and Water and Radwa Ashour's The Woman from Tantoura*. The second is Ali Hussein Najm and Dr.Md Sajidul Islam (2020), Their article is entitled *The Impact of Traumatic Experiences on Identity formation in Radwa Ashour's Novel The Woman from Tantoura*. The last one is Riham Elsayed Abdel Maksoud Debian (2020) his article is entitled *Translating Palestinian Women: Re-memory and the Subaltern Geopolitics of S/Place*.

Based on the previous studies, it gives the information that this present study is different from others. The difference lies in the theory used but uses the same data source, which is Ashour's novel, entitled *The Woman from Tantoura*. Another difference lies in the data sources used but using the same theory, which is the approach to feminism by bell hooks (1984). In addition, all of the previous studies that are provided show that this present study is not plagiarism and there is a novelty in this research, additionally the novelty is indicated through the three research questions that are formulated in this study. Those are the sexist oppression experienced, solidarity obtained and built, and power practiced by Ruqayya.

This novel is going to be analysed by using Feminism theory by perspective of Gloria Jean Watkins or as known as bell hooks and use qualitative descriptive method. Through the lens of bell hooks, Ruqayya as the main character of the novel *The Woman from Tantoura* that transforms herself from margin to centre by changing the largest forces of inequality will be clarified in this study. Biana (2020) argues that hooks proposes a new definition of feminism, in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, feminism does not simply fight for the equality of women and men, but a movement that seeks to remove sexist oppression and exploitation while also addressing racism, classism, imperialism, and other forms of oppression.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

This study is included into qualitative design, because this study fulfils the characteristics of qualitative research. It is related to Creswell who states that qualitative research is delving into and comprehending the significance that groups and individuals attach to a social or human issue (2014:22). In line with the quotation, this study analyses a novel which contains social or human issue that occur in society more specifically the issue of women, and focuses on sexist oppression, solidarity and power that is experienced by the main character, Ruqayya. Furthermore, the data are taken in the form of words rather than numbers in this study. The data in this study are the utterances of the characters and author narrations. The source of data of this study is a novel entitled *The Woman from Tantoura* that is written by Radwa Ashour. It is published in 2014 by The American University in Cairo Press.

According to Creswell (2014), this study comprises the phases in evaluating the data at the same time; initially, the data will be obtained by taking it from the book. Second, the data will be chosen by data reduction. At this step, the acquired data will be sorted in order to locate information relevant to the study topics. Following that, the data will be categorized to locate either the characters' utterances or the author's narrative that are relevant to the study topics. The data will then be shown. The data will then be interpreted in the next phase. Finally, a conclusion will be made.

## **DISCUSSIONS**

### **A. Kinds of Sexist Oppression Experienced by Ruqayya**

In the novel entitled *The Woman from Tantoura*, the main character who is Ruqayya experiences several kinds of sexist oppression. In the novel, the story begins when Ruqayya is 13 years old living in a village. The village is called Tantoura, a small village located in the south of Haifa, Palestine (Bustam, 2014). Ruqayya enjoys her adolescence and spends a lot of time at the beach. Ruqayya's life changes when the Zionists come to her village to take over the area when she is 14 years old. Ruqayya has a number of terrible situations, including being the subject of sexist oppression. One of the reasons for the emergence of sexist oppression or oppression of individuals or groups based on their gender is the growth of the patriarchal system. One of the main factors in Ruqayya's sexist oppression is the system of dominance that formed as a result of the patriarchal system's development. Ruqayya has been subjected to the following forms of sexist oppression:

### **A.1. Force to marry by her mother**

Ruqayya is 13 years old when the story begins, and she will be proposed to by a man she meets by chance somewhere. The man's name is Yahya, and Ruqayya has admired him since the first. Ruqayya's mother, however, refuses him on the day of the engagement because she knew Yahya is a college student who has to work outside the city. On the other hand, Ruqayya's mother asks her to marry her cousin, Amin. It is explained by the character through the following utterances:

[It's enough that the two boys are away in Haifa and that I don't see them more than a day and a half each week. If she's going to leave the village let her marry Amin.]  
(Ashour, 2014, p. 11)

In the dialogue above, Ruqayya is betrothed by her mother's desire and she has to accept it. This is such of pressure to her and a form of sexist oppression. In this case her mother has great power in the family to manage everything including Ruqayya's life. hooks states that sexist oppression can also occur within the family and eliminate the positive value of the meaning of the family itself (hooks, 1984). Patriarchal culture makes the system of domination a natural thing. Children have rights over themselves inside the family. Parents are responsible for their children, but compulsion that places the child in a position where she/he has no choice is a type of sexist oppression.

### **A.2. Ruqayya as a victim of violence**

Apart from being pressured by her family, after the arrival of the Zionist, Ruqayya, her family, and villagers are subjected to violence. They are driven from their homes, murder is everywhere, and their property is confiscated. Ruqayya is subjected to violence by a female soldier and it is shown by the narrator through the following narrations:

[The woman soldier didn't notice the goat but she noticed the rings in my ears as she was searching me. She yanked them out, and blood flowed from my ears.] (Ashour, 2014, p.50)

Through the narration above, Ruqayya gets violent from a female soldier who confiscates Ruqayya's jewellery. Kulsum & Atrinawati state that discrimination, exploitation, and oppression are all possible outcomes of sexist oppression (Kulsum & Atrinawati, 2016). According to hooks, women who have high social status and privilege can oppress other women in the lower social status (hooks, 1984). Even though they are fellow women, it does not stop them from acting as oppressors because they feel they have more power and dominate those in the lower social status. This statement in line with Hall's idea, she states that in the 1970s and 1980s, white middle and upper class women dominated feminist movements' support for abused women, which tended to focus on patriarchy as the root and often the only cause of violence against women (Hall, 2014).

Ruqayya is subjected to both physical and psychological violence in the form of foul words and beating. In the novel, Ruqayya is subjected to physical and psychological violence by female Israeli soldiers. The narrator explains it in the following narration:

[Abed said he was thirsty, and his mother told him to put up with it. I said to the soldier, "The boy's thirsty," and she answered me with a foul word, pushing my shoulder with the butt of her rifle.] (Ashour, 2014, p.50-51)

In the narration above, the narrator explains that Ruqayya gets physical and psychological violence by a female Israeli soldier just because she asks for a drink for thirsty Abed. The female soldier utters obscenities and pushes Ruqayya's body with her gun. hooks (2000) states that in the dominant culture, violence is a form of social control that is considered natural and the power holder does not hesitate to carry out physical or psychological violence. They usually do this as a form of threat to oppressed minority groups if they feel disturbed and consider it is a normal thing. Therefore, hooks states that as a feminist, she also wants to eliminate the negative system of domination because the domination system is the root of sexist oppression (hooks, 1984).

### **A.3. Ruqayya as a victim of sexual abuse**

Ruqayya has three sons from her marriage to Amin. Ruqayya's uncle gives them the names Sadiq, Hasan, and Abd. Al-Rahman. After her marriage, Ruqayya's life does not go easily; one by one, her relatives die as a result of the escalating riots. Despite her unhappiness, Ruqayya is reunited with Abed, a childhood friend she had when she is still living in Tantoura. They come back together as a family. Ruqayya is initially pleased, but Abed's behaviour of her is inexcusable. Abed does not admit he likes Ruqayya, but when no one is around, he kisses her. It is explained by the narrator through the following narration:

[She runs from the question, from herself, from Abed who had suddenly appeared to her in the form of a man, as if he were one of her brothers come back from the dead. And does a brother kiss his sister like this, on the lips? She was shaking like someone with a fever.] (Ashour, 2014, p.111)

[He leaned down a little and kissed my head, and went down the stairs with rapid steps. He did not look back.] (Ashour, 2014, p.113)

Ruqayya is sexually abused by her childhood friend, whom she regards to be her own brother, in the above story. Abed not only kisses her once, but it happens twice. Abed is unconcerned about his acts, but Ruqayya is unable to tell anyone about what Abed has done to her. According to hooks (1984), being oppressed means having no choice. Women who are oppressed do not have the option of fighting back as a means of self-defence unless they accept it.

### **B. Solidarity built from sharing sources of Ruqayya on sexist oppression**

Ruqayya noticed that the Palestinian people have been suffering from education crisis since the war began. Because many children are forced to drop out of school due to unforeseen situations, Ruqayya develops empathy. Ruqayya enthusiastically participates in a literacy campaign for camp residents in order to ensure that they are aware of their rights. It is explained by the narrator through the following narration:

[Years later when we moved to Beirut and I participated in the campaign for literacy among women in Shatila, and I had to visit the women of the camp to convince them of the importance of literacy, I discovered that what I had inherited from my mother was common.] (Ashour, 2014, p.77-78)

The narrator relates that after Ruqayya moves to Beirut she participates in a literacy campaign for women living in refugee camps. This is a form of bond that is built by Ruqayya from her empathy. hooks (1984) argues that when women bond with each other in terms of developing their potential, their solidarity will be built. Women who have the same situation and conditions tend to empathize. A bond that is formed on the basis of empathy and in the form of developing self-potential will help women to struggle against sexist oppression. The bond between women that Ruqayya builds is to strengthen each other and develop their potential. hooks (1984) states that the term Sisterhood is actually a bond between women regardless of their background and the goal is to share strengths and resources. When solidarity is formed from bonds on the basis of sharing potential and strengthening each other, action will be formed to fight sexist oppression. This form of bonding must be encouraged by the feminist movement.

When Ruqayya's children grow up, they realize that her mother has a high fear of losing her husband or children. They also realize that his mother is getting more and more introverted. This makes Amin and his children empathize with Ruqayya and suggested that she continue her education at the University. It is explained by the character and narrator through the following utterance:

[...perhaps because I was embarrassed at the thought of going back to school when I had had three children, the oldest of whom was in the university. What if I failed, what would the children say? Amin urged me, and then Sadiq and Hasan took his side. "Why not?" they said, "Try, you have nothing to lose, and besides, you can quit if you find it's hard."] (Ashour, 2014, p.116)

In the narration and dialogue above, it can be seen that Amin and Ruqayya's children empathize with her. They realize that they cannot allow Ruqayya to feel so much fear that it will affect her personality. They suggest Ruqayya to continue her education to the University as a form of their support. In another situation, when Ruqayya is 70 years old, Hasan asks Ruqayya to write down all the events that she remembers as a form of Hasan's empathy and concern for her mother and other Palestinians so that they can receive justice. It is explained by Hasan character through the following utterance:

["Tell the story, write what you have seen and lived and heard, and what you think about. If it's hard to write, then tell it orally and record what you say, and afterward we'll put it on paper. This is important, Mother, more important than you imagine."] (Ashour, 2014, p.167)

hooks (1984) argues that in the feminist movement it is not pioneered that men are the enemy of women. hooks further states that in the feminist movement, men who support women against sexist oppression are referred to as comrades (hooks, 1984). It is not true that all men support sexist oppression, there are men who understand how women are and empathize with how women feel. Solidarity is not only obtained by fellow women who feel the same way, but solidarity can also be obtained from the bond between men and women who have the same goal of ending sexist oppression. hooks, further states that without a united front, there can be no mass-based feminist movement to fight sexist oppression—women must take the initiative and demonstrate the power of solidarity (hooks, 1984). It means that by uniting women in a strong bond of solidarity, the feminist movement will be able to speak out against sexist oppression.

### **C. Solidarity form a unity front for the emergence of Ruqayya’s power practices to stop sexist oppression**

Ruqayya continues to fight for the rights of Palestinians in refugee camps, particularly women and children. Despite the fact that she has the option to attend university, she is more concerned with the rights of others. Ruqayya exercises her basic personal powers to make decisions because she has the right to make her own decisions. She is determined in her desire to share her expertise with other children and women in the camp as a form of her concern. It is explained by the narrator through the following narration:

[I did not take the baccalaureate exam as Amin and the boys wanted, nor did I enroll in the university. I learned in the camp.] (Ashour, 2014, p.122)

Ruqayya decides not to go to college as Amin and her children suggested. She prefers to study together with the refugees and do the best as she can for them. Ruqayya exercises her basic personal power by making decisions on her own. hooks (1984) asserts that even the most oppressed women have the ability to exercise power. Women can exercise their power despite being oppressed. Women who survive and fight for their liberation show that they are not powerless.

Apart from deciding not to go to university and choosing to study in a camp with other Palestinian women, Ruqayya is also active in social activities at the camp such as supporting women whose husbands die in war, reading news to illiterate women, contributing to school construction, free the imprisoned youth, and so much more. Within her limitations Ruqayya do the best she can to exercise her power to strengthen one another. It is explained by the narrator through the following narration:



[I go back and forth to the camp. I encourage someone's mother, or one of her neighbors, because her son has disappeared or because the army has arrested her husband. I read the Safir newspaper to the elderly ladies who can't read. I help to prepare the list of those kidnapped, I take part in small parades of women (the time of large demonstrations has passed), organized by the Women's Union for the Families of the Kidnapped. I take part in helping someone's mother and her eight children, when she has no one to support her and no work and her house has been destroyed. I look for some connection or I arrange the necessary sum to free one of the young men. I contribute to reopening the nursery schools that have been destroyed, to help the women who go to work because they have been widowed in the war or the massacre or because their husband left with the fighters. I take care of the children of one of my acquaintances who has gone to Ain al-Helwa to check on her family, or to take a message, or to bring her sisters' embroidery to sell in Beirut, so she can send them the money to help them through financial difficulties.] (Ashour, 2014, p.218-219)

In the narrative above, it can be seen that Ruqayya practices her power by actively participating in various social activities and proving that she and other Palestinian women are not powerless. Together they fight for their freedom from discrimination, exploitation and sexist oppression. hooks argues that even women who are poor, exploited and oppressed can exercise their basic personal power (hooks, 1984). hooks adds that women should know that by practicing their basic personal power, it is an action to resist sexist oppression.

Ruqayya has grown accustomed to bullets, violence, and death throughout her life. Ruqayya is 70 years old in the story, and in her old age she reminisces and writes down the events she remembers in a notebook at Hasan's request. She cannot even remember every detail of the occurrence at first since it makes her chest tight, but the notebook is eventually filled, and she begins by narrating a story about a young man on the beach. It is explained by the narrator through the following narration:

[One morning I picked up the pen and here I was writing about the young man the sea cast ashore for me. A passing adventure under the heading of love, awakening the senses, preparing them.] (Ashour, 2014, p.169)

Ruqayya, as described by the narrator, finally decides to write down the events she has witnessed as a Tantoura woman. Ruqayya demonstrates her basic personal authority by speaking up about every detail of the events she witnesses. She has never told anyone about the incident, including herself as a victim of sexist oppression. According to hooks, the power exercised by women can advance the feminist struggle (hooks, 1984). By sharing her story, she has shown that she is powerful and as an action to fight sexist oppression. hooks also adds that this power can be used by women as a step towards liberation (hooks, 1984).

## CONCLUSION

In the novel *The Woman from Tantoura* by Radwa Ashour, Ruqayya as the main female character struggles for freedom over the largest force of inequality she experiences, namely sexist oppression. Three important aspects of the main character's struggle form the writer's main focus, particularly the sexist oppression the main female character faces, the solidarity main female character builds, and the basic personal power main female character exercises. Ruqayya as a victim of sexist oppression in several forms, those are: 1) Being forced to marry her cousin named Amin. In this case, Ruqayya lives in a patriarchal society where the domination system is still developing. Within the scope of the family Ruqayya's mother dominates by taking Ruqayya's right to be able to choose her own husband. 2) Ruqayya is subjected to physical and psychological abuse by female Israeli soldiers. In this case Ruqayya became a victim of sexist oppression by fellow women but because of social hierarchy, female Israeli soldiers who have a higher class oppress Ruqayya who is a commoner or lower class. 3) Ruqayya is sexually abused by Abed, her childhood friend. In this case, Ruqayya becomes a victim of sexist oppression by men. In a patriarchal system, men hold the highest position in society while women are marginalized. As a result, men oppress women because they think that women are powerless and women as victims have no choice.

Furthermore, Ruqayya as a victim of sexist oppression builds solidarity based on empathy and sharing sources. Ruqayya builds solidarity with fellow Palestinian women in the refugee camp by participating in literacy campaigns for women and children in the camp. Ruqayya also gains empathy from her husband and children and supports her to continue her education and enter University. In addition, one of his children named Hasan also supports Ruqayya to dare to speak up and write her story into a notebook as a form of his empathy. The bond that exists between Ruqayya and Palestinian women and families builds a unity front to fight against sexist oppression.

From the bonds of solidarity that have been built, Ruqayya exercises her basic personal power as a unity front to fight against sexist oppression. Ruqayya dares to take the decision not to continue her education to University and prefer to study together at the camp showing that Ruqayya is not powerless because she is able to stand on her own choices, Ruqayya shares the potential she has in the camp to study together and support each other to strengthen their bond. Ruqayya finally dared to speak up by writing down her experiences in a note book according to Hasan's request as a woman from Tantoura.

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