



## **RETHINKING GENDER AND POWER: A LIMITATION OF WOMEN'S FREEDOM IN 'ACCIDENTAL TRANSIENTS' BY RANDA JARRAR**

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### **Abstract**

This article aims to explore the relationship between gender and power in the short story, *Accidental Transients*, by Randa Jarrar. It discusses how women's freedom is limited in a patriarchal society. In this kind of society, there is male supremacy which places men as the superior one. This study applied feminist existentialist concept by Simone de Beauvoir. It engages with an idea that women have to be able to become subjects in order to be not dominated by men. Furthermore, this study employs content analysis method. The data used in this study are sentences that show the issue of gender and power in *Accidental Transients* written by Randa Jarrar. The results of this study show that the main character, Dina, in patriarchal life is burdened by her gender role to be responsible for domestic tasks. In addition, she also does not have the freedom to act as she intends. Dina's character in this story shows that male dominance over women is still difficult to eliminate in a patriarchal society.

**Key words:** existential feminism, gender role, male domination, patriarchy, women's limited freedom

### **A. INTRODUCTION**

Different roles in social life for men and women create inequality between them, which leads to women's limited freedom. This different role is caused by the interpretation of gender through social construction which is influenced by rules derived from the traditions and culture of society (Sam et al., 2019). Gender role construction contains advantages, perceptions, responsibilities, and expectations that become social standards that must be carried out and fulfilled by men and women (Admasu et al., 2022). In a patriarchal society, men have a more dominating role than women. This causes women in a patriarchal society to be seen as objects that can be controlled by men. As a result, differences in gender roles between men and women create unequal power. Men's greater power over women leads to restrictions on many aspects of women's lives, including women's freedom to determine their future. This feeling of limitation can also arise because women feel unsuitable and uncomfortable with the roles attached to them (Angelina & Arianto,

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2022). In a book entitled "The Second Sex", Simone de Beauvoir said that the view of women as objects who have limited freedom is because women are made as "the other" for men, the second sex (Beauvoir, 1949). According to the theory of existentialist feminism proposed by Simone de Beauvoir, women are no longer seen as objects if they become a subject. In this case, women have the choice to determine their actions and be free from male domination.

The limited freedom of women is seen in a literary work entitled "Accidental Transients" by Randa Jarrar. The story is about a woman named Dina who lives with her father and brothers. After the departure of her mother who ran away, Dina was given the responsibility to take care of her family, who are all male. In her daily life, all tasks related to housework become Dina's responsibility. At the age of twenty-nine, Dina is still unmarried because her father always thwarts her dates. This made Dina furious because her father easily accepted Ibrahim's wife. In addition, her father also easily welcomed Dorothy as a new member of their 'home' which made Dina feel resentful because her opinion that disapproved of Dorothy's presence was not considered even though she held full responsibility in taking care of the house. Dina realized that women in the house were not treated well by the men. This can be seen from how they treat her and Dorothy, as well as being the reason for her mother's departure. For this reason, Dina hoped that she could move out from that house.

Research on feminist issues regarding gender and power has been conducted previously. As in the paper entitled "Gender and Power: A Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of Elif Shafak's 10 Minutes 38 Seconds in this Strange World" (Ullah et al., 2021). This research focuses on the expectations that exist between men and women in gender differences that occur in society. How these expectations foster gender power that allows them to discriminate, prejudice and exploit women's individuality is also the focus of the research. Furthermore, previous research that also discusses feminist and gender issues is in the paper "Marginalization of Women in Two Short Stories of al-Kabus By Najib Kailani (Study of Existential Feminism Simone De Beauvoir)" (Rahmah, 2022). This research focuses on revealing the marginalization of women in two short stories by Najib Kailani using the theory of Existential Feminism. In addition, another similar research is also found in a paper titled "Existentialist Feminism Reflected in Acevedo's "With the Fire on High"" (Kamayan et al., 2022). The research uses the theory of existentialist feminism proposed by Simone de Beauvoir to give a description of the character Emoni as a real woman, where previously Emoni's character depicted the domestication of women. Another research that also uses the theory of Existentialist Feminism is also found in a paper entitled "A Feministic Discourse of Existentialism in Namita Gokhale's Select Works" (Priyadharshini et al., 2022). This research explores Existentialist Feminism through the female characters in Namita Gokhale Priya's selected texts: *In Incredible Indyya* (2011), *The Book of Shadows* (1999), and *Things to Leave Behind* (2016).

This research is different from the previous research above, this research will focus on gender roles and the power that women have in determining their freedom in life by using the existentialist feminism theory by Simone de Beauvoir. This research aims to rethink gender which still limits women from determining

their lives even though women have power based on the short story "Accidental Transients" by Randa Jarrar. This research will discuss several problems. The first is to examine the perceptions and expectations of women in "Accidental Transients" by Randa Jarrar. The second is to rethink how gender roles affect women's freedom. Therefore, this research is different from previous research.

## **B. RESEARCH METHOD**

This research uses qualitative research methods. Qualitative research methods are methods used to research on the conditions of natural objects and researchers are as key instruments, so that the results of the research emphasize meaning rather than generalization (Abdussamad, 2021). This qualitative research also uses an explanatory case research design, in which researchers read short stories to get the data needed to solve problems. The data in this study are narratives and dialogues in the short story "Accidental Transients" by Randa Jarrar. The researchers analyzed the feminist issues in the short story, and then related them to the theory that had been chosen. In addition, the researchers also rethink gender and power in the short story. This research relies on narratives and dialogues that imply feminist issues taken from short stories. To examine feminist related issues and also gender and power in the literary work, the researcher becomes the main research instrument to collect and analyze data sources. The data that has been collected is then analyzed qualitatively using the Existential Feminism theory by Simone De Beauvoir.

## **C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

Gender roles in a patriarchal society have perceptions and expectations that tend to marginalize and oppress women. Patriarchal societies often view women as weak, powerless, and unable to think logically because they are more emotionally driven. Women are associated with traits that contradict those of men who are seen as powerful and dominating. This leads to the association of women's gender roles that are limited to a more closed scope, especially domestic roles (Nirwinastu, 2021). An example of gender roles that are assigned to women to take care of domestic tasks is found in a short story entitled "Accidental Transients" by Randa Jarrar. In this story, the female lead named Dina takes responsibility for taking care of her family after the absence of her mother.

I was then tasked with caring for the guys. I made breakfast every morning, packed their sack lunches, and alternated cooking dinner with Baba (Jarrar, 2016, p. 105)

The domestic tasks assigned to women demand a lot of responsibility for them to be able to create a comfortable home for the male figure (Antonietta Sarnelli, 2020). However, this heavy duty is often not accompanied by a good reciprocal attitude on the male side to create a good home atmosphere for both parties. As a result, it makes women feel oppressed when they get domestic responsibilities. This can be seen in the story "Accidental Transients" by Randa

Jarrar when Dina says that she has a boyfriend. In other words, if Dina gets married and leaves home, then Dorothy will be the only woman in the house who has to be responsible for domestic tasks.

I heard their laughing voices, all except for Dorothy's, because she knew that now the dishwashing would fall to her (Jarrar, 2016, p. 104).

Gender roles provide a stereotype that women are prioritized in domestic and family roles, while men are prioritized in the field of work outside the home (Matud et al., 2019). As a result, there is also a view that men are not suitable for domestic roles. Men will commit chaos if given domestic responsibilities. This problem also arises in the short story "Accidental Transients" by Randa Jarrar when Dina is unable to do her domestic duties so her brothers do it themselves and end up setting their house on fire.

The one morning I was running late and the boys had to make their own breakfasts, they chose Peeps, baked on top of Pop-Tarts. The gooey mess dripped down to the base of the oven and promptly caught on fire (Jarrar, 2016, p. 105).

Patriarchal culture on the other hand also constructs a negative perception of women, where women as the marginalized party are often considered incapable of completing a job properly, often act illogically, and are more dependent on emotions. This negative perception makes it easy for men to blame women for situations that occur. In addition, it can also occur due to men's perception that they are more powerful and always being right. In an attempt to show superiority over women, men will use words or other actions to hide their mistakes (K. G. & K. T., 2022). In the short story "Accidental Transients" by Randa Jarrar, this can be seen when the character Ibrahim tries to blame Dina for Dorothy's sulk. In this situation, Ibrahim indirectly tries to allude that Dina is not a good hairdresser even though she has been doing the job for a long time. Ibrahim uses the emotional reason of women to be able to blame Dina, even though the real reason for Dorothy's sulking is because of his behavior.

Baba and Ibrahim held one flashlight each, and Ibrahim tried to blame the whole thing on me.  
"Women are very sensitive about losing their hair," he said (Jarrar, 2016, p. 112).

In addition to blaming women by utilizing negative perceptions about their emotional side, men also often lay all the blame on women because they are seen as inferior who can be treated inappropriately. As people who are seen as inferior in social life, women are stereotyped to always accept what is given to them by superior figures, including all forms of mistreatment (Hefandia et al., 2023). This problem is seen in the short story "Accidental Transients" by Randa Jarrar when

Dina blames Ibrahim for his bad behavior towards his wife, Dorothy. Dina also alludes to her father who cannot treat his wife well, causing her to leave home. However, her father is denying and does not feel that his bad treatment is the cause of his wife's departure. Indirectly, Dina's father also blamed his wife for leaving because she was not an obedient woman and had an affair so she decided to leave the family.

“And aren't you supposed to know how to treat a wife? Huh. I guess it's hereditary,” I said.

“That is unfair,” Baba said. “Your mother's leaving had nothing to do with the way I mistreated her.” (Jarrar, 2016, p. 111)

The view of women as inferior also leaves women with limited choices in determining their future due to male dominance. Their inferior status makes them powerless and afraid to make decisions in their lives. This makes them rarely involved in decision-making and leave it to men (Wiranto, 2021). In the story “Accidental Transients” by Randa Jarrar, this can be seen in Dina's narrative about her future expectations being determined by her parents, especially her father.

My parents once hoped I would become a scientist, marry an Arab (even though there are none around), pop out three or four kids, and win the Nobel Prize for science (Jarrar, 2016, p. 97).

On the other hand, male dominance also limits women's choices to live independently. Women in patriarchal life are considered weak and helpless, so men who are seen as stronger will become a protective figure for women. The importance of this protective figure makes it forbidden for women in patriarchal life to live in a house that does not have a male figure. As a result, unmarried women will live with their fathers because the protection of daughters will be an honor and a sign of their father's masculinity as a dominant figure (Sivakumar & Manimekalai, 2021). This is also seen at the beginning of the story “Accidental Transients” by Randa Jarrar. Dina says that she is unmarried and still lives with her father.

Everything was going pretty badly at my baba's house (Jarrar, 2016, p. 97).

I am a twenty-nine-year-old virgin and still living at home on a farm in Jackson, seventy-five miles away from any Arabs. Baba says he wants us to be our own, self-sustaining community (Jarrar, 2016, p. 98).

The dominance of men over women has brought women to the challenges of injustice, subordination, oppression, marginalization, exploitation, and many other negatives in a patriarchal society (Haradhan & Kumar Mohajan, 2022). As a result, women feel they need to rise up and oppose the patriarchal system that takes away their freedom. In accordance with Simone de Beauvoir's theory of existentialist feminism, women can be free from male domination if they become subjects. This issue also appears in the story "Accidental Transients" by Randa

Jarrar. The character Dina, whose freedom is often limited by her father, expresses her desire to leave the house she lives in with her father and siblings several times.

... and I was considering moving out for the fourth time in one day...  
(Jarrar, 2016, p. 97).

The quote above implies that the character Dina in the short story has a desire to leave her Baba's house. This is evidence that Dina felt uncomfortable while living there, because after her mother left them Dina was the one who replaced her duties to take care of all the needs of the house. This happened because after her mother left them, Dina became the only woman living in the house. The responsibility for maintaining the home and preparing the family's living space to support and entertain other family members is given to women (Sutanto, 2000). So as a woman, Dina is given the responsibility to take care of the house and the needs of her father and younger brothers. As is commonly the case in society, household matters are always assigned to women.

“And what the hell say do I have in this? This is my house too, Baba. Where do you get aaaff telling Catholic brides they're welcome in my house?” (Jarrar, 2016, p. 99).

The quote is an expression of Dina's disagreement with her father's decision to accept Ibrahim and his wife into their home. Ibrahim, who is Dina's younger brother, suddenly returned home with someone he had married, and their Baba had no problem welcoming them. Referring to the quote, Dina has no right or voice to make decisions, even though it can be said that Dina is the one who manages all affairs in this house. As a daughter she must also follow what her father says. The females must obey the rules and what the eldest male says (Asturi & Rosyidi, 2022). It is also a form of domination practiced by her father.

“... Abe is welcome here, and so is Dorothy...” (Jarrar, 2016, p. 99).

The quote seems to explain that a woman must go with her husband when she is married. Baba's decision also refers to Abe or Ibrahim who is a married man and must be responsible for his wife. Women always hanger-on fathers, husbands and their sons (Yoharatnam, 2021). Men will always be the ones to obey in the family. While women are required to be obedient to their husbands, or daughters are required to be obedient to their fathers.

“Come back,” Baba shouted after me. “Really, it won't be the same without you. Who would do the dishes?” (Jarrar, 2016, p. 104).

As discussed earlier, women are burdened with the responsibility of taking care of household chores. The sentence *“Really, it won't be the same without you. Who would do the dishes?”* emphasizes that Dina's presence is to take care of household chores such as washing dishes. Because, in their daily lives, women spend time on kitchen matters, starting from organizing menus, shopping, cooking,

serving them at the dinner table, to reorganizing kitchen utensils (washing, cleaning and preparing them again) is something that has become a culture (Intan, 2014). When Dina gets angry, what her father worries about is that no one will do the household chores anymore. Although in reality household chores can also be done by men, the dominance they have will always put women in that position.

I'm a hairstylist and I teach on the side. (Jarrar, 2016, p. 98).

I'm a co-owner of The Jeweled Crown. (Jarrar, 2016, p. 105).

Women are often not given the opportunity to achieve their goals. Women's education and careers are often considered unimportant in social life. Traditional attitudes threaten women's career advancement because they are not allowed to seek work outside the home or interact with people outside the family (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). The two quotes above clearly mention that Dina is a career woman. She is a hairstylist and co-owner of a beauty salon, and Dina is also a lecturer at Moda College. In this case Dina can be said to be lucky, because she can determine the job she wants. Her position as a woman with a job should give her the power to determine her life. However, Dina still cannot avoid her responsibility to take care of her home and family.

... wishing I had just married some dude. But every single guy I have ever tried to date was chased away by Jaseem's pranks, Waseem's excessive nerdiness, and Baba's rudeness... (Jarrar, 2016, p. 99).

Women do not have the right to make important decisions for themselves, such as choosing a man as their life partner (Fitriani & Muassomah, 2021). As Dina experienced, she could not make the choice to marry the man she wanted. Because every time she brought a man to the house, Baba and her younger brothers would make them feel like they did not want to come back. Baba always hopes that Dina will marry an Arab, even though they live far away from Arabs. This proves that Dina's position as a career woman and her adherence to taking care of the household does not give her the power to make her own life choices. A woman in a family (as a child or wife) has no rights over herself, cannot make her own decisions and has no opportunity to defend herself (Fitriani & Muassomah, 2021). She still has to obey Baba as a father and leader in the family, even though Dina has indirectly taken over that task since their mother left home.

"I'm scared."

"I can tell," I sang.

"What should I do?"

"Well, what have you always wanted but were scared to do?" I said. I waited while she bit the inside of her cheek.

"Something punk," she whispered. "Like, crazy. Short." (Jarrar, 2016, p. 109-110).

Women are always required to look beautiful, especially in the male perspective. Women's beauty has always been the center of attention of men, which has led to a stereotype in society regarding the category of women considered beautiful (Sasanti et al., 2022). This makes women not free in making their choices in appearance. The quote implies Dorothy's lack of freedom to express her desire to choose a hairstyle, because the hairstyle she wants does not match the hairstyle of women in general. Limitation of women occurs even in terms of determining appearance. Women in their appearance seem to have to fulfill men's expectations and judgments of them.

“Your hair looks like . . . ,” Waseem started.  
“A picnic basket,” Jaseem finished  
“More like picnic leftovers,” Ibrahim whispered.  
Dorothy ran back up the stairs. (Jarrar, 2016, p. 110).

Societal culture also shapes the perspective that men are more dominant than women, even in emotional terms. This male emotional dominance affects the way men control women in intimate relationships. Men's power over women allows men to act arbitrarily towards women, including committing emotional abuse. The problem of emotional violence includes hurting or humiliating women verbally or emotionally (Rollero et al., 2021). As in the quote above, Abe and his siblings mock Dorothy's new hair. They think that Dorothy's hair is strange and does not meet beauty standards. The emotional violence committed by Abe also makes Dorothy as a woman feel limited in her freedom.

“You are all ridiculous,” I said. Waseem pouted. “Except you, Waseem.” Jaseem hung his head down. “And you, Jaseem. God. If you keep making these faces I’ll never move into my own house.”  
“Leaving home,” Ibrahim said, sounding like some motivational speaker, “should have a lot more to do with your ability to be independent and less to do with the faces some kids make.” (Jarrar, 2016, p. 111).

Men are always more dominating than women, they always feel that their position is above women. The result of patriarchal culture creates injustice in gender relations, where women are always placed in a lower position than men without being based on the efforts or achievements of both sexes (Nasruloh & Hidayat, 2022). Ibrahim, who is Dina's younger brother in the quote above, indirectly asks Dina to leave the house. This is very ironic with Dina who always thinks repeatedly about leaving home even though she wants to. She still holds back her desire because she feels that her two younger siblings still need her in the house. In addition, Ibrahim's treatment is also disrespectful towards Dina who is his older sister. Women who are considered weaker than men make Ibrahim feel appropriate to do this.

She couldn’t survive for a day in that house, and I’ve survived twenty-nine years. (Jarrar, 2016, p. 113).



The quote implies how difficult life was in Baba's house. Dorothy, who had only been there for a day, immediately got into trouble and felt uncomfortable, whereas Dina had experienced all this for twenty-nine years. This shows that Baba and the men in the house made Dina feel restricted, that she had to live under Baba's rules and serve them. Men take over women's power by making them powerless to get the highest positions in society and to become superior (Aprinaldo & Anwar, 2022). Although Dina can still work as she wishes, it does not give her the power to determine her life

The only consolation is that I am saving all my money, and one day I'll be able to live in my own house. They don't know I've already saved enough money to buy two shacks in Detroit and a barn in the UP if I want to. (Jarrar, 2016, p. 106).

Dina's desire to leave Baba's house was so strong, she had saved enough money to buy a place to live and leave Baba's house. This is evidence that Dina did feel limited in her freedom when she was in Baba's house. Dina wanted a life of freedom without being responsible for Baba and her younger siblings. To be able to free herself from Baba's domination she must become a subject. In order to become a subject, women must be able to make their own choices and resist objectification (Prameswari, Ni Putu Laksmi Mutiara; Nugroho, Wahyu Budi; Mahadewi, 2019).

She never said goodbye to me, just scrawled a note on the corner of my birding journal: "You won't understand," as if it were an order. And, just like that, Mama had flown the coop. (Jarrar, 2016, p. 104).

Her mother left home and was abandoned by them. Leaving household duties to Dina who may not have been ready. The message left by her mother *You won't understand* explains that her mother must have had difficulties along the way. Furthermore, the sentence *Mama had flown the coop* also implies that her mother's decision to leave home is like a form of freedom. This means that her mother also feels limited when she is in this house even though it is not said directly. This makes it clear that male dominance in Baba's house makes women feel marginalized even though they have enough power.

The action taken by Dina's mother is a form of her achievement to become a woman free from male domination. In accordance with the theory of existential feminism proposed by Simone de Beauvoir, Dina's mother succeeded in becoming a subject by making decisions based on her own choices to be free from Baba's domination. What Dina did was also a way for her to become a subject in achieving freedom.

#### **D. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS**

The inequality that occurs between men and women leads to the limitation of women's freedom in social life. The influence of gender roles creates power that

is dominated by men. This can be seen in the short story "Accidental Transients" by Randa Jarrar, where the character Dina has domestic responsibilities as the only woman in her family. Moreover, Dina's character is also marginalized by the domination of the male members in her family. Based on the existential feminist theory proposed by Simone de Beauvoir, Dina should have been able to break away from male domination and gain her freedom. However, in fact she is still very much bound by gender roles as the only woman who is responsible for the lives of her two younger siblings. This proves that the patriarchal system is still difficult to resist.

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