

Social control and power-structure in the thousand and one nights essay



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The Thousand and One Nights is not just a series of tales told by Scheherazade, who keeps on spinning new yarn each night to the Sultan to stay alive for one more day! It is a serious document of the society of Arab in that era when women were looked down upon as inferior subalterns, who basically were unfaithful to their husbands, given the chance, and who were objects of lust only! In a male-dominated social structure, the tales of The Thousand and One Nights even carry the picture of ruthless torture on women.

Surprisingly enough, the society even sanctions the heinous practice like wife-beating. For example, in the Tale of the Bull and the Ass, the animated conversation between the Cock and the Dog give us a feel of the social control of men over women at that time: “ ‘ Then by Allah,’ quoth the Cock, ‘ is our master a lack-wit and a man scanty of sense; if he cannot manage matters with a single wife, his life is not worth prolonging. Now I have some fifty Dame Partlets; and I please this and provoke that and starve one and stuff another; and through my good governance they are all well under my control. This our master pretendeth to wit and wisdom and he hath but one wife and yet knoweth not how to manage her.

’ Asked the Dog, ‘ What then, O Cock, should the master do to win clear of his strait? ’ ‘ He should arise forthright,’ answered the Cock, ‘ and take some twigs from yon mulberry tree and give her a regular back-basting and rib-roasting till she cry:- ‘ I repent, O my lord! I will never ask thee a question as long as I live! Then let him beat her once more and soundly, and when he shall have done this he shall sleep free from care and enjoy life. But this master of ours owns neither sense nor judgment. ’” Thus, on the one hand

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polygamy and lechery are being encouraged in men and on the other , the men are being given the upper hand over women rather in a crude manner where the women are subject to ruthless oppression by men and her state of subaltern is being endorsed [cf. ' I will never ask thee a question as long as I live! '] However, the social control has a sanction of Islam.

From the 8th to the 15th century, Arab had a rich culture of its own . But it was patriarchal . However, some brave women have broken all shackles to come out in the open to prove their supremacy, to subjugate the men under their own will. But, such women are hand-picked and few!! So far as the question of social control is concerned, the male used to dominate over the female in such a way that it also crossed all limits of decency, for example, in a tale, a woman is brought forth to the market for sale and in another, the woman is ordered to roam naked in the arbor after losing a game to a man.

Is it not sheer injustice where social control turns into autocracy? Should the male be autocratic in their attitude to female? Then, it is better to call it a unbalanced society where men are not only privileged but oppressive, self-willed, dogmatic. Such a society cannot progress but fall on its face to get extinct with the passage of time!! Society calls for a balance between the rich and the poor, between the men and the women, between the justice and injustice, all of whose instances are present in different tales of The Thousand and One Nights . But, today, the West is witnessing a reconsideration of the power-structure, where women are sharing the same pedestal with the men, where lambasting a woman is as heinous a sin as murdering a woman. Today's women are not objects of lust only.

They have beauty as well as intellect and freedom of will unlike the women of that era. Read also about There is obviously a power-transfer, in present times, not the male but the female too know how to assert their rights. But we are to judge in which way the power-structure is similar or different from that of those days of *The Thousand and One Nights*. Arab tales did not come in print before 1705. In 1773, Anna Laetitia Barbauld in her remarkable poem, *The Rights of Woman* wrote, “ Yes, injured Woman! rise, assert thy right! Woman! too long degraded, scorned, oppressed; O born to rule in partial Law’s despite, Resume thy native empire o’er the breast! Go forth arrayed in panoply divine, That angel pureness which admits no stain ; Go, bid proud Man his boasted rule resign And kiss the golden scepter of thy reign.

”.... In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft published *Vindication for the Rights of Women*. Thus, the awareness of asserting themselves among the women started immediately after, in the Western society. Hence, the power-structure derived its sustenance from the concept of equality. Men and women are equal in all aspects of life—this became the watchword of the times.

Naturally, it was a gradual journey of transformation from the tortured, enslaved woman of the Arabian tales to the empowered, freedom-loving woman of the modern times. In Ibsen’s *The Doll’s House*, Nora Helmer tried to give a shape to the liberated woman of the modern times. The portrayal of oppression inflicted on the women of the tales of the Arabian Nights is surely a portrayal of subjugation of women by men; a record of shame. In recent times, the equal status of men and women in the Western culture is really a <https://assignbuster.com/social-control-power-structure-in-the-thousand-and-one-nights-essay/>

triumph over the sorrowful situations as etched in the Arabian tales. In a tale titled 'Alishyar and Jumuryad', a slave-girl is taken to the marketplace and the spiel runs in obscene diction, Listen all of you o rich and respectable gentlemen, this girl, looking like a fairy of Paradise is Jumuryad. She is virgin to the core.

Not even a single man could touch her till date. You can lie down with a sundry of damsels. But, I dare say, none of them can give you that pleasure which this girl can..." Can we imagine in the progressive, modern world of today such obnoxious advertisement of a dignified woman? Next to impossible! In a conversation titled "Sexual Choice, Sexual Act", Michel Foucault says in clear terms, "Women have always been seen by them[men] as their exclusive property. To preserve this image, a man had to prevent his woman from having too much contact with with other men...They think of themselves as existing in the minds of women as master....

Men think that women can only experience pleasure in recognizing men as masters. "[cf. Foucault, Michel: Ethics, Penguin, England, 2000, p-152] Much later, Simone du Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* has reiterated that women need liberation badly. Thus, the plight of power-structure in the-then Arab world got a severe jolt when such ideas of liberty and equality started renting through the air of the European continent. The feminists of those times cried themselves hoarse to put an end to the torture on women, to take women as the equal of men! However, the appeals did not fall on deaf ears. Brecht's *Mother Courage and her Children*, Henrik Ibsen's *The Doll's House*, Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*—all came to preach the message of women's waking consciousness.

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To see the points of similarity with the-then Arab power-structure is that women have to establish her worth to stand on the same pedestal with men, even today. However, that is not always derogatory. It has its positive side too. Women, at least, are trying to shrug off the tag 'second sex'. Again, the Emperors or the kings are not at the helms of affair today.

In lieu of that the rich and the well-to-do wield their unseen scepter over the society by controlling the economic graph of the times. Interestingly enough, Jumuryad , in the aforementioned tale, could not be sold out to any buyer of her dislike. She cried out, " I have got the man of my choice. I was looking for this man only.

.... His manly prowess, manly stature and charm have driven me mad. I want to be bought by him..." Was it really possible in that era when women were taken as slaves and looked down upon as subalterns, i. , creatures not to speak, let alone, protest.

Thus, in the days of a faulty power-structure, an upheaval, a breaking-and-making phenomenon was going on, on the sly, The ground was being paved for a new power-shift, a new era of power was taking birth from the womb of a powerless time. Hence, a new power-structure, a new social control were looming in the horizon and of course, for a welcome change!!! Even the ambience of sanguinary revenge, heinous conspiracy too veered to a sophisticated direction in the modern times. A sea change was brought forth , breaking old norms and creating a set of new ones.