

An Analysis of The Movie *Victoria & Abdul* (2017) Using Feminist Theory: The Representation of Power and Women Resistance

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Abstract

This research analyzes the representation of women's power and resistance in the movie *Victoria & Abdul* (2017) by Stephen Frears through a feminist theory approach. The movie depicts the dynamics of the relationship between Queen Victoria and Abdul Karim, an Indian servant, in the context of the British monarchy, which is fraught with colonial and patriarchal norms. Although this film has been widely discussed in the context of colonial history, but research that specifically highlights how powerful women characters faced male domination in the social structure of the monarchy is still limited. Therefore, the purpose this research is to fill the gap by analyzing how the character of Queen Victoria uses her authority as a woman to assert power, resist subordination, and challenge the patriarchal system in the monarchy. The research method used is descriptive qualitative, by collecting data from the movie as the primary data, and books, journals, articles, and online sources as secondary data. The data analysis is conducted using a thematic approach to identify the main patterns relevant to the function of language style in literary works. The results of the research show the Queen Victoria represents women's authority through statements and actions that affirm her identity as a leader, showing forms of gender resistance to male social control, and challenging institutional patriarchy through her brave personal decisions. The conclusion of this research is that the movie *Victoria & Abdul* not only presents a personal historical narrative but also offers a feminist narrative demonstrating that female authority can be realized through the courage to choose, maintain authority, and resistance against male dominance in both public and private spheres.

Keywords: Feminism, *Victoria & Abdul*, Feminist Theory, Queen Victoria, Literature

Introduction

The movie *Victoria & Abdul* (2017) is a historical film directed by Stephen Frears, adapted from Shrabani Basu's book with the same title. This movie tells the true story of an unconventional relationship between Queen Victoria of England and Abdul Karim, a young Indian servant who came to England to attend the celebration of the Queen's Golden Jubilee. In a short time, Abdul became one of Queen Victoria's trusted companions and was appointed as her "Munshi" or spiritual teacher. This relationship sparked controversy among the royal court, which considered it a violation for the social, racial, and political norms of that time. The movie not only highlights issues of colonialism and personal relationships that cross racial and class boundaries, but also shows the complexity of Queen Victoria's position as a woman in a monarchy and patriarchal society. Although the movie is set in historical times, a feminist theory approach can be used to analyze how a powerful woman like Queen Victoria experienced, responded to, and challenged the social constraints that restricted her. Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression (Hooks, 2000, p. 1).

The position of Queen Victoria, as the head of state in England at that time, is particularly fascinating to analyze. Despite her political power as Queen of England and Empress of India, she remained a subject of social control and expectations as a woman. In this context, feminist theory provides an important lens for reinterpreting the narrative of the movie. Feminist theory, as a critical theory, not only highlights gender inequality but also how women experience limitations in social, cultural, economic, and political spaces that are dominated by men. Feminist criticism examines the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women (Tyson, p. 83, 2006). Therefore, using the feminism theory approach allows for an in-depth analysis of the power, subordination, and resistance represented through the character of Queen Victoria.

The movie shows that Queen Victoria, who was already old and often seen as weak or irrelevant by the people around her, actually showed a kind of resistance that was gentle but strong. She didn't hesitate to show her authority, rejecting interference from the male advisors and

continuing her relationship with Abdul even though the royal family was really against them being together. This shows that, even though a woman is in the highest position, she still has to fight against male-dominated social control. Furthermore, this also shows that the representation of women in resisting social control doesn't always come in the form of an open rebellion, but also in the form of persistence in choosing and pursuing her desires. In the nineteenth century, for instance, it would seem true to say that bourgeois patriarchy's predilection for liberal humanism as a 'legitimizing ideology' lent ammunition and arguments to the growing bourgeois feminist movement (Moi, 1985, p. 64).

In this movie, Queen Victoria is not just a symbol of feminism, but also an elderly woman who feels lonely and is often underestimated for her personal decisions by her environment. She finds freedom and meaning in life through her friendship with Abdul, even though it is considered an inappropriate relationship that violates social norms. This friendship becomes a safe place for Queen Victoria in which she can form her own identity, resist the male dominance around her, and show another form of power that is personal and emotional. Queen Victoria performed "gender" through her resistance, she challenged gender norms without resorting to violence, but through choice, kindness, and trust in actions that were often seen as weak, which instead became a form of strength. Gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities (Butler, 1999, p. 6).

The purpose of this research is to analyze the movie *Victoria & Abdul* (2017) through a feminism theory approach, focusing on how the representation of women shows their power and resistance through the character of Queen Victoria. This study is expected to reveal that the movie *Victoria & Abdul* is not only a historical story but also a narrative about women who use their authority to challenge the patriarchal and colonial systems that restricted them at that time.

The hypothesis of this research are that the movie *Victoria & Abdul*, through its portrayal of Queen Victoria as a representation of women who are able to maintain their authority in the midst of a male-dominated power system, and the decisions made by Queen Victoria, shows women's resistance to social and political domination based on gender.

Method

Research Design

This study uses a descriptive qualitative method with a feminist theory approach to analyze the representation of power and resistance of women in the movie *Victoria & Abdul* (2017). This method was chosen because it allows researchers to analyze the dynamics of gender, power, and resistance as portrayed through the character of Queen Victoria. Qualitative research focuses on theoretical, epistemological, and conceptual issues when using ethnography, auto-ethnography, and narrative and performative approaches (Flick, 2014). The overall purposes of qualitative research are to achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15).

Data Collection

The data in this study consists of two main sources, namely primary data and secondary data. Primary data consists of the movie *Victoria & Abdul*, which is the main source of analysis. Secondary data includes books, journals, articles, and relevant online sources. In qualitative research, the data is collected from various sources, by using various data collection techniques (triangulation), and carried out continuously until the data is saturated (Sugiyono, 2016, p. 243; translated from the original Indonesian work by author).

In technique of collection data the author uses five steps, as follow: 1) Watching the movie *Victoria & Abdul* (2017) thoroughly and repeatedly through the official platform; 2) Taking notes on relevant scenes or dialogues; 3) Classifying quotes based on topics of feminism such as female authority, gender resistance, and institutional patriarchy; 4) Researching feminist theory to strengthen the conceptual interpretation of the quotes from the movie.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, a method for identifying, classifying, and interpreting important themes in qualitative research data. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 6). These relevant dialogues in the film will be noted and then analyzed based on the context of the

scene, the position of female characters in the social structure, and their ideological meaning according to feminist theory.

The results of this analysis are expected to reveal how the movie *Victoria & Abdul*, through a feminist theoretical approach, represents feminism through the character of Queen Victoria, who uses her authority as a woman to challenges male social dominance in the royal and colonial systems, and demonstrates that female power can be manifested in the form of gentleness, compassion, and resilience in making choices.

Findings and Discussion

In the movie *Victoria & Abdul* (2017), the Queen Victoria is depicted as a woman with great power. She became Queen of England and also Empress of India. Even though she was a woman and was already old, she was still capable of showing her authority and her courage in making decisions, even though many people around her were against her.

Women Authority

Subtitle: *"Well, I'm Empress of India, so have one sent"* (YouTube Movies, 2017, minute 28:18). The statement was made when Queen Victoria wanted to taste a mango. She immediately instructed her male advisor to send her a mango. The statement shows that Queen Victoria was fully aware of her title and authority as Empress of India. Literally, the request seems simple, which is to ask for a mango. However, the statement is a symbolic statement of the legitimacy of women's power in a world dominated by men and colonialism. In the context of feminism, the statement shows that a woman can express her desires without having to lower herself or ask for permission.

Subtitle: *"I am the Queen of England"* (YouTube Movies, 2017, minute 31:18). These brief statements carry great power. The Queen Victoria speaks them with authority when confronted with disrespect from her staff. These statements reinforce the authority of women in a system that attempts to silence or marginalize them. Furthermore, the statement affirms that Queen Victoria had power and deserved respect. Despite her elderly age and the pressure from the men around her, Queen Victoria continued to demonstrate her authority not merely as a formality but as a tangible reality. This also shows that women can take the lead and have the courage to stand up for their own convictions.

Subtitle: *"I will have whatever help I require with the boxes"* (YouTube Movies, 2017, minute 31:19 - 31:21). This statement shows that Queen Victoria has the authority to choose anyone to help her. It also reflects her assertion of her authority. Even though the people around her try to restrict what she can and cannot do, the Queen Victoria immediately asserts her authority to determine her own needs. This shows that although Queen Victoria is a leader, there are still attempts by others to control her choices. This statement shows that women's control over their bodies and private space is not always given freely, but is a struggle within a power system that always discriminates against women.

Subtitle: *"Would you get some gloves for the Hindus?"* (YouTube Movies, 2017, minute 31:33). This statement shows Queen Victoria's empathy towards Indian servants who were often underestimated. In feminist theory, this action can be considered a form of recognition of marginalized racial and cultural identities. As a Queen, Victoria not only regulated, but also paid attention to and cared for her people, especially those who were usually overlooked.

Subtitle: *"I want you to teach me Indian"* (YouTube Movies, 2017, minute 31:50). This statement shows Queen Victoria's desire to learn from someone who is considered "lower" in social class. This is a form of hierarchy reversal, where a leader demonstrates humility and openness. In feminism, this action signifies resistance to Western cultural and epistemological domination over the East. Queen Victoria proved that learning from someone lower than her was not a sign of weakness, but rather a strength that helped her.

Subtitle: *"I would like to go with Abdul to Glassalt Shiel"* (YouTube Movies, 2017, minute 35:16). This statement of request shows an expression of personal freedom. In the context of the monarchy, Queen Victoria's desire to accompany Abdul on her travels was seen as damaging to her honor and considered a violation of social norms. However, Queen Victoria chose not to hide her relationship with Abdul. This shows that women not only have public authority, but also have the same rights to have personal relationships.

Gender Resistance

In this movie, Queen Victoria is not only a symbol of authority, but also a woman who actively fights against male domination and patriarchal social structures within her own royal court. Even though she officially holds power, she still has to fight against social pressure from male

aristocrats and royal advisors who try to limit her freedom. Victoria's resistance is demonstrated through her strong statements, her uncompromising attitude, and her unconventional decisions.

Subtitle: *"Now, I want you to repeat after me, 'I will be courteous to the Munshi'"* (YouTube Movies, 2017, minute 1:16:08–1:16:10). This statement was a response to the discrimination experienced by Abdul Karim from the royal court, especially from male aristocrats. In this situation, Victoria emphasized her position as a leader and directly "educated" her staff to be respectful to someone who had been considered unworthy because of his race and social class. From a feminist perspective, this statement carries a deep symbolic meaning. It is a form of resistance against the masculine power structure that systematically undermines women's voices and choices. Queen Victoria not only forced the men around her to obeying her, but also required them to change their attitudes toward her choices as a form of feminist resistance that forced the patriarchal environment to adapt to female leadership.

Subtitle: *"Now get out of my sight, all of you!"* (YouTube Movies, 2017, minute 1:17:21). This quick statement is the climax of Queen Victoria's anger toward the men in her household who kept underestimating her choice to be close to Abdul. In this context, she's fighting against the symbolic and emotional control that's trying to isolate her from her own desires. She's not just asking them to leave, but kicking them out as a way to take back her authority. Women are often constructed as gentle, patient, and non-confrontational beings. However, when Queen Victoria expresses her anger directly, she breaks these gender expectations. This is a form of resistance against the gender norms, where women's emotional expressions are used as a tool to fight against structural injustice.

Subtitle: *"If the Household wish to disobey me, so be it."* (YouTube Movies, 2017, minute 1:23:58). *"Let them do it to my face"* (YouTube Movies, 2017, minute 1:24:03). Both statements are expressions of courage from a woman who has chosen to face her opponents directly. She is aware that her decisions are being rejected behind her back, but Queen Victoria is not afraid to confront them face to face. She desires honesty, transparency, and loyalty. In a patriarchal structure, female leaders are often faced with silent betrayal or hidden sabotage. Queen Victoria doesn't avoid this, but challenges the system on the front lines. This is a form of feminist resistance, where women no more want to be accepted merely symbolically, as they want to be respected for their decisions.

Subtitle: *"I will see everyone in the Durbar Room at once"* (YouTube Movies, 2017, minute 1:24:06). This statement was made when Victoria called all her staff to gather in the official room. This showed that Queen Victoria was reasserting who held the authority of power. The Durbar Room was historically a place for formal royal ceremonies dominated by masculine symbolism and politics. However, in this movie, Victoria takes over the room to speak as a woman. In feminism, the space is always a field of struggle, who speaks, where, and by what authority. The Queen Victoria not only presents herself as the highest authority but also takes control of the symbolic space that is usually controlled by men.

Institutional Patriarchy

The movie *Victoria & Abdul* not only shows her personal power and gender resistance, but also shows how the royal system as an institution is really influenced by patriarchal norms that control how women act, even a queen has to accept criticism and advice first before she's allowed to act. Although Queen Victoria is officially the head of the monarchy, the movie shows how the social and political structures run by men often attempt to control her choices.

Subtitle: *"The Munshi and his family are integral parts of the Royal Household"* (YouTube Movies, 2017, minute 1:07:36). This statement confirmed that Queen Victoria had officially integrated Abdul and his family into a system that was typically closed to lower social classes and non-European citizens. This disrupted the social order dominated by colonial values, elitism, as well as British aristocratic masculinity. The Queen's decision, from an intersectional feminist perspective, demonstrates her commitment to those marginalized based on race, class, and culture. She used her authority to expand the definition of who was worthy of a place in the power system. This shows that women in positions of power can be agents of change, even in a highly conservative system.

Subtitle: *"But at least have the decency to do it to my face!"* (YouTube Movies, 2017, minute 1:25:22). *"Anyone wishing to resign, please step forward"* (YouTube Movies, 2017, minute 1:25:33). These two statements were made when Queen Victoria faced disobedience from the royal court regarding her closeness to Abdul Karim. Queen Victoria knew that many of her male subordinates had been quietly spreading their dissatisfaction. Instead of giving in to the pressure, she challenged them to express their dissatisfaction out in front of her. These actions were a form of confronting patriarchy. Queen Victoria realized that there was a system quietly working to get rid of the people she trusted, and that system was run by men in the formal structure of the royal family.

In the context of feminism, this moment reflects how women must challenge systems that reject their personal choices simply because they are women. She used her power not merely to govern, but to challenge the passive, aggressive, and fearful patriarchal cultural norms.

Subtitle: "*Instead, you'll be delighted to know that I have decided to make the munshi a commander of the Royal Victorian Order as a special token of my personal esteem for his service to the Empire*" (YouTube Movies, 2017, minute 1:26:16–1:26:27). This statement was not only a form of acknowledgment of Abdul, but also a symbol of resistance against the highly racist, patriarchal social and colonial hierarchy. Queen Victoria's decision was certainly against the values of the English aristocracy, who considered Abdul "unworthy." However, she remained determined to give Abdul that position. In feminism, this is called strategic disruption, which is a deliberate act to break discriminatory rules. Queen Victoria used her power as a woman to create uncomfortable situations in a system that was comfortable for men and the upper class. By offering the highest honor to a lower-class Indian man, Queen Victoria demonstrated that women's power can not only match the patriarchal system but also shift and disrupt it from the inside.

Subtitle: "*I want to talk to the Munshi alone*" (YouTube Movies, 2017, minute 1:31:43). This simple statement by Queen Victoria is full of meaning. In a patriarchal system, women, especially older women, are often seen as incapable of making their own decisions, especially about personal matters. Queen Victoria's request to speak privately with Abdul is a claim to her personal space, which is free from the supervision or control of the men around her. This is symbolic of autonomy, which is control over one's privacy, relationships, and self-authority. Feminism emphasizes that women's freedom is not only about public power but also about control over personal space. This statement reinforces the idea that women's power is not always demonstrated through major confrontations but through the control of space and meaningful small choices.

Conclusion

The movie *Victoria & Abdul* (2017), directed by Stephen Frears, shows that the representation of women in positions of power does not always take the form of harsh domination or explicit resistance. Through the character of Queen Victoria, the movie depicts a woman who, even in her old age and surrounded by a patriarchal social structure, still has the courage to make choices, maintain personal relationships, and assert her authority firmly. Using a feminist theory approach, an analysis of this movie reveals that female empowerment can take the form of a gentle however effective, and personal as well as political.

Issues such as female authority, gender resistance, and institutional patriarchy are clearly illustrated through Queen Victoria's decisive actions in challenging male dominance in the royal court. Statements such as "*I am the Queen of England*" and "*Let them do it to my face*" serve as symbolic declarations that she would not allow her authority to be underestimated simply because she was a woman or because of her age. She not only continued to have Abdul as her friend and spiritual teacher but also used their relationship as a form of resistance against social norms that constantly tried to restrict her decisions.

In the context of feminism, the movie successfully shows that women's resistance doesn't have to be done with violence or physical confrontation, but can be realized through the courage to take a stand, the firmness in making decisions, and the ability to show love as a strength, not a weakness. Queen Victoria remains a respected leader precisely because she is able to wield her power with honesty, sincerity, and loyalty to the values she believes in. Feminist values such as equality, independence, freedom of choice, and respect for women's identity and dignity are portrayed in a subtle but powerful way. The movie shows that women's power can disrupt the patriarchal order without having to be aggressive. Through her personal relationship with Abdul, Queen Victoria is able to find her humanity again, which is often buried by her institutional responsibilities. This shows that a woman can be strong and powerful without losing her empathy, compassion, or warmth.

The relevancy of the movie *Victoria & Abdul* is particularly appropriate in this modern era, where women continue to fight for equal standing in various aspects of life, one of which is in the professional sphere. This movie is not merely a historical narrative but also a social reflection on the importance of listening to women's voices in spaces traditionally controlled by men. Through a feminist theoretical approach, we can see how the movie delicately challenges patriarchal structures and elevates women's voices as agents of change that cannot be ignored. Thus, *Victoria & Abdul* is not just a story of cross-cultural, cross-generational, and cross-class friendship but also a story about the strength of women who can create their own space in the kingdom, in history, and in life. The

movie also serves as a reminder that the struggle for freedom, recognition, and the right to determine their own lives is a fundamental right for everyone, including women of all ages and backgrounds. Through the character of Queen Victoria, the movie successfully conveys the message that leadership and courage are not defined by gender, because true strength comes from belief and the steadfastness of the heart.

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