



## **Pesantren, Women's Agency and Arranged Marriages in Indonesia**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is a case study based on the research of the process of arranged marriages in Pesantren. Arranged marriages have basically been a tradition in the world for a long time. In the process, the women involved in arranged marriages are often put in the position of an object and are considered to have no voice. Women have been seen as passive agents that do not contribute anything in the process of arranged marriages, whereas those who have full power in the process of arranged marriages in Pesantren are the *Kyai* or other male family members. This study took place in the five major Pesantren in East Java. One female informant, the daughter of a *Kyai*, was taken from each Pesantren so there were five informants. This research was conducted through in-depth interviews using the capital theory by Pierre Bourdieu, power relation by Michel Foucault, and women's agency by Sherry B. Ortner. This study reveals that *Kyai's* daughters and wives, *Nyai*, are active agents, as well. Using the capital they have, women played their agencies in different ways to achieve certain goals. They engage in critiques on the habitus practice of arranged marriages. They also negotiate and resist when the arranged marriage process runs. This study confirms that doing research focused on women's voice can expose additional aspects of women's agency that have been widely ignored.

### **Keywords:**

Pesantren, Women's agency, Arranged marriages

### **Introduction**

The practice of arranged marriages is actually not a new practice. It occurs not only in Indonesia but also in European and Asian countries

(Jones, 2010). In Indonesia, the issue of marriage has actually become one of the important agendas in the women's movement in Indonesia since the Congress of Women (women's congress organization) in 1938 and an outstanding issue of arranged marriages in Indonesia is Raden Ajeng Kartini's marriage (Blackburn, 2004); (Martyn, 2005); (Suryochondro, 1984); (Vreede-De Stuers, 1960).

All marriages are actually arranged in one way or another. Arrangement in marriage includes the wedding date, the way the wedding is conducted, how much dowry for the marriage, and etc. This paper is focused on arranged marriages based on choosing a candidate for either husband or wife.

This paper is a case study based on research of the process of arranged marriages in Pesantren. Arranged marriages have basically been a tradition in the world for a long time. The women's empowerment movement that occurs in almost all over the world does not necessarily eliminate the practice of arranged marriages because until now, the practice still continues. One of the examples occurs in Pesantren in Indonesia. It is important to examine the process of arranged marriages in Pesantren because Pesantren is an Islamic educational institution that has a great influence on society (Abdullah, 2014); (Isbah, 2016); (Umiarso 2017).

In the process, the women involved in arranged marriages are often put in the position as an object and are considered to have no voice. Women have been seen as passive agents that do not contribute anything in the process of arranged marriages, whereas those who have full power in the process of arranged marriages in Pesantren are the *Kyai* or other male family members. This study took place in five major Pesantren in East Java. One female informant, the daughter of a *Kyai*, was selected from each Pesantren so there were five informants. This research was conducted through in-depth interviews.

Using the capital theory by Pierre Bourdieu, power relations by Michel Foucault, and women's agency by Sherry B. Ortner, this study reveals that *Kyai's* daughters and wives, *Nyai*, are active agents, as well. Using the capital they have, women played their agencies in different ways to achieve certain goals. They engaged in critiques on the habitus practice of arranged marriages. They also negotiated and resisted when the arranged marriage process run.

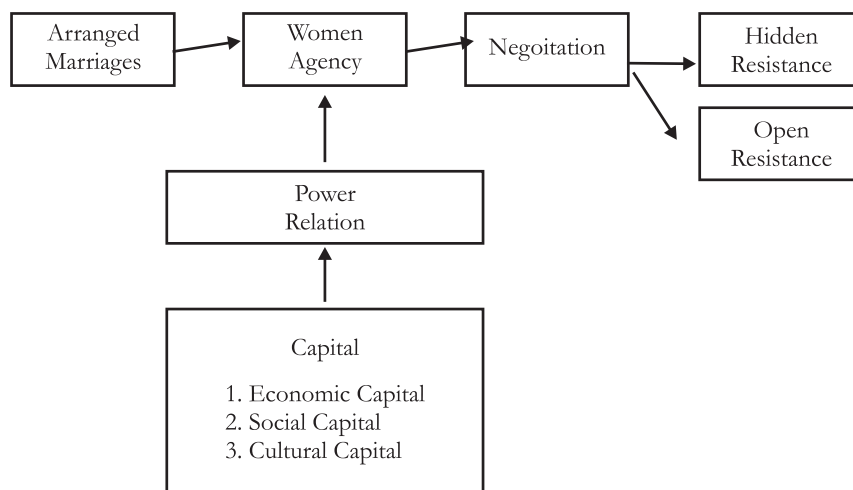


Figure (1): Model of running process of arranged marriage

The main point of this study confirms that doing research focused on the women's voice exposes additional aspects of female agency that have been widely ignored (Kusmana, 2015). The following research questions guide this study: First, what are the underlying factors and patterns that construct, maintain, and support the process of arranged marriages in Pesantren? Second, how do women play their capital in the field of Pesantren in dealing with arranged marriages? Third, how do women act in arranged marriages to accomplish their specific goals?

This study aims to apply the qualitative research methodology which enables me to excavate and explore women's experiences of arranged marriage in Pesantren. Among the initial steps and procedures considered

important are to carry out a library study in which the meticulous reading of books, papers, research reports, academic journals, scholarly thesis, and other documentary sources to obtain information about Pesantren, the women in pesantren, and other relevant information. This step is also a great use in mapping and deciding which Pesantren are considered relevant for this research.

There are some categories in designating and mapping out which Pesantren are appropriate for this study. First, the Pesantren have direct association and affiliation with the Muslim mass organization of *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU). Second, the Pesantren institutions chosen for this study are only those located in the province of East Java. Third, these Pesantren are classified as large pesantren indicated by the great number of students (*santri*) enrolled. The high number of students means that these Pesantren have a good reputation with the communities, so the tradition in *Pesantren* will be followed by more people. Fourth, the Pesantren institutions have been deeply influenced and colored by Javanese or Madurese culture. Both cultures are the dominant cultures in East Java.

Based on the categories concerning on the Pesantren institutions designated and chosen for this study, it was found that there were tens Pesantren which were relevant to be taken as sources in the research. However, since arranged marriage has often been believed to be a very sensitive and personal matter, only some Pesantren with which the researcher has personal and special acquaintances of the Pesantren leaders' families were chosen. Therefore, without these personal relationships and connections with the leaders of Pesantren institutions, it would be very difficult to conduct in-depth interviews with the informants. Based on the research steps, five women were chosen to be the informants. They came from five different Pesantren institutions.

Furthermore, age was also put into account as a criterion for the women in Pesantren to be interview participants. They were women whose

ages were about twenty to forty during the time the research was conducted. The age criterion was quite relevant to be taken into consideration for the research as someone in such an age had adequate maturity, so that she would be able to have good and smooth communication, as well as to decide whether she should accept to be an informant or not.

In collecting the data, personal interviews were carried out because for Javanese and Madurese people, arranged marriages are private matter, and therefore some people may not want to discuss it. In order to observe protocol, the interviewees' real names were hidden. Moreover, to be efficient and focused, indirect interviews with the interviewees were conducted, especially in relation to some questions concerning very personal matters, and of course, after getting their consent.

### **The Roles of Pesantren**

Pesantren, which is one of the oldest educational institutions in Indonesia, has a very strong root in society. The root developed in Pesantren places a *Kyai* not only as a reference in terms of religious education, but also in other community matters (Khitam, 2016). Since its establishment, Pesantren never makes a distance with society (Dhofier, 1999). The closeness of the society to Pesantren always makes it a reference for people to make important decisions, including marriage. The marriage tradition in Pesantren becomes a model in society. If the arranged marriage tradition is sustained through Pesantren, it can be said that the tradition also develops in society.

Secondly, in Pesantren tradition, which still firmly holds Islamic doctrines, there are some factors which make the arranged marriage tradition survive. *Ijbar* – forced and required to do something– is one of the reasons in the practice of arranged marriages. In the *ijbar* concept, a guardian representing the female can make a decision on his daughter's marriage when she is still single. It is frequently used as a reference by

people in matchmaking without involving their daughters or even not inviting their daughters to discuss their marriages. This circumstance was actually abrogated in the Prophet's story, which annulled the marriage of *al-Khansa* because her parents did not invite her to have a discussion about her marriage.

A Pesantren which firmly holds Islamic teaching sees the relationship between a male and a female who do not have familial relationship as a taboo. A marriage is the only way for women and men to have relationship. This doctrine makes communication with the opposite gender unacceptable in Pesantren and finally, it is the parents or teachers who decide the marriage process. As a result, the Pesantren tradition which prohibits relationships with the opposite gender perpetuates the arranged marriage practice. Therefore, arranged marriages are still practiced in Pesantren.

In the process of arranged marriages, women are perceived as the victims who fully submit to the decision of their family. *Nyai* is the other group of women whose role is also rarely seen. This point of view emerges because studies on this issue often cut off the voice of women. Women's voice, view, and experience are often considered obsolete. As a consequence, women are perceived as passive agents. However, this study shows the opposite, which means that women are active agents.

The dynamics is rarely highlighted because Pesantren family still upholds the concept of "perfect marriage" which means that every business outside of domestic affairs lies in the men's hand. Therefore, women are often invisible no matter how significant their roles are. *Kyai* is the only one seen and acknowledged by the society as he plays the most significant role. In reality, women are active agent. They play their agency in various ways. Even, *Nyai* often gives freedom of choice to her daughter(s).

Arranged marriage has become a habit in Pesantren. It even has become common sense. One of the factors is the concept of *birrul walidain* or devotion to parents. Failure to do so will lead to social punishment.

Arranged marriages also continue due to *sami'na wa atho'na* concept which means full submission to *Kyai*. This makes the *Kyai's* order to set their daughters to marry a certain man very difficult to resist.

However, the habit that has become a doctrine is not taken entirely by women. Women as the active agent propose criticism against this consensus. One informant said that the consensus denies the women's right. Another form of criticism is the active agency of women. They never follow the habitus without engaging their agency.

Another habit is the concept of *kafa'ah*. An Islamic religious leader has different perspectives on *kafa'ah* but the main points include husband and wife should come from similar background in terms of wealth and heredity. This study discovers that each *Pesantren* family has their own standard in interpreting the concept of *Kafa'ah*. Indeed, the standard is not applied as strictly as in the past. One of the informants married a man who does not have *Pesantren*. The most important thing today is the quality of the men instead of his wealth, status, or family. This concept was also criticized by one of the informants. She said, following *kafa'ah* is not always the best option because the most important thing is the quality of the husband to-be. This criticism shows that women are active agents.

The concept of *kafa'ah* growing in *Pesantren* serves as a comparison to the theory proposed by Dhofier that marriage in *Pesantren* is an endogamous one which means women from *Pesantren* family only marries men from *Pesantren* family (Dhofier 1999). However, due to the change in interpreting the concept of *kafa'ah*, one of the informants married a man outside of *Pesantren* community but he remains as a *Pesantren* educated man. I referred to such marriage as a closed exogamous.

The capital owned by women plays important role in negotiating their way to be involved in the process. Women with high capital have more chance to be involved in the process. Women who are coming from a higher rank in society are entitled to informally send a proposal

to men. In the meantime, the formal proposal (*khitbah*) is still part of the responsibility of the man and his family. Patriarchy dominating Java and Madura forces women to be in a passive position when it comes to marriage. Therefore, although the informal proposal was sent by the bride's family, it is the responsibility of the groom to actively and formally propose to the bride's family especially when the process involves other members of society and extended family.

Women with both social and cultural capital will have different bargaining position in the process of arranged marriages. Capital allows women to be more courageous in using her agency and her position will be acknowledged by their parents. Women in high capital will be involved in the process of arranged marriages and if they are not involved they will conduct negotiation and action to push the family to involve her in the process of arranged marriages. This is evidence that women must increase their capital to get a position in the family. It shows that women are an active agents.

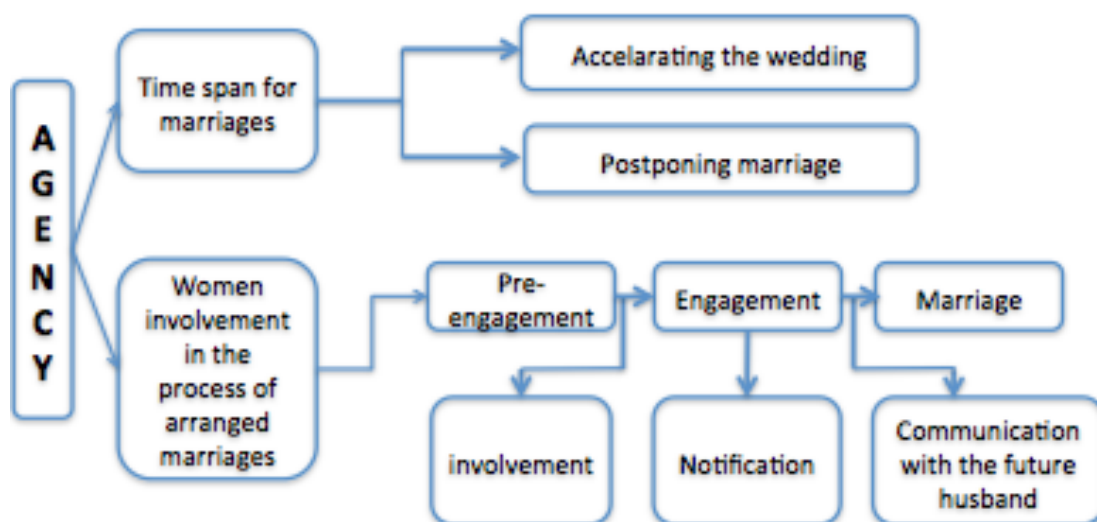


Figure (2): Role of woman as an active agent

As explained above, woman is an active agent. Women with their various roles in engaging their agencies do not always follow the rules, but



they sometimes break the rules when they perform resistance and also conduct a bargain.

With their capital, women do both hidden and open resistance. In a hidden resistance, the women strive against in a silent way. They finally accepted the arranged marriage process after doing their resistance. Women who choose to do it are those who have low capital, so they do not have a bargain position in the process of arranged marriages.

Meanwhile, women with their power do an open resistance. In open resistance, there are two types of actions: conditional acceptance and bargaining. For conditional acceptance, although the agents finally accept or reproduce the arranged marriage, they also ask for required agreement. Interestingly, in open resistance, the agents also do bargaining.

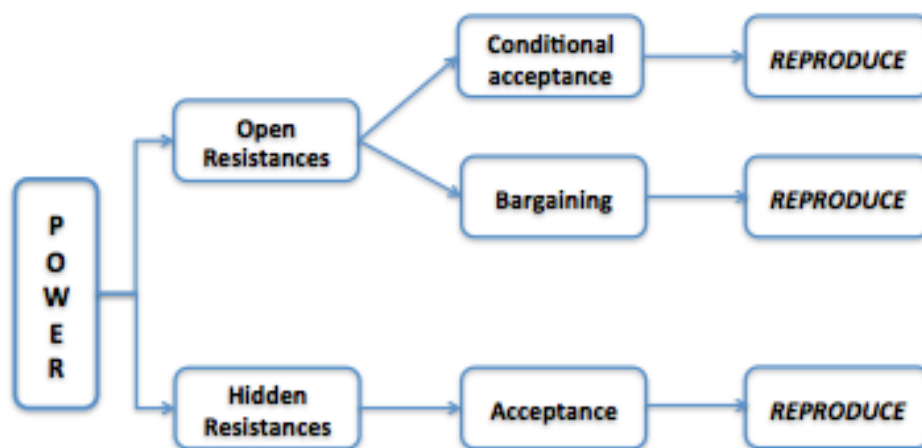


Figure (3): Women and the power open resistance

From the process of women's resistance, it can be concluded that there is a dynamics in the process of arranged marriages. Women do not just take it for granted, because there are negotiations and resistance. It shows that women using their agency well. Women are not passive agent. The dynamics raised by the women will give even a small effect on the pattern of the process of arranged marriages in Pesantren. This certainly

does not directly influence in a great scale but at least not in their close family.

The criticisms and dynamics which appear in *habitus*, field, and *doxa* do not seem to appear in Bourdieu's theory, because Bourdieu only focuses on the structure. Therefore, this study contributes significantly to view the position of women's agency in the process of arranged marriages.

## Conclusion

In this research, the author analyzed the arranged marriages processes in pesantren from women's perspectives as agents. There were five women informants from five Pesantren in East Java, four having a Javanese cultural background and one is from Madurese culture. There were three main questions in this research. Firstly, what are the underlying factors and patterns that construct, maintain, and support the process of arranged marriages in Pesantren. Secondly, how do women play their capital in the field of Pesantren in dealing with arranged marriages. Thirdly, how do women act in arranged marriages to accomplish their specific goals.

Pesantren, which are one of the oldest educational institutions in Indonesia, have a very strong root in society. Pesantren places a Kyai not only as a reference in terms of religious education, but also on other community matters. Since its establishment, Pesantren never make a distance with society. The attachment of society to the Pesantren always makes Pesantren a reference for people when they make important decisions, including marriage. The marriage tradition in Pesantren becomes a model in society. If the arranged marriage tradition is sustained through Pesantren, it can be said that the tradition also develops in society.

Out of the five informants interviewed, it can be interpreted that *Nyai* plays a significant role in the process of arranged marriages. One of the informants said the decision on whether to continue with the engagement or not lies not in the hand of the father but the mother

(*Nyai*). Other informant mentioned that the entire process of marriage from introduction, to engagement, to marriage fall under the power of the mother. There is also a mother (*Nyai*) encouraging her daughter to talk to their father and declare her agreement or disagreement towards the engagement.

Arranged marriage has become a habit in Pesantren. It even has become common sense criticized by one of the informants. She said, following *kafa'ah* is not always the best option because the most important thing is the quality of the husband to-be. This criticism again shows that women are active agent. The concept of *kafa'ah* growing in pesantren serves as comparison to the theory proposed by Dhofier that marriage in pesantren is an endogamous one which means women from Pesantren family only marries men from pesantren family (Dhofier, 1999).

However, due to the change in interpreting the concept of *kafa'ah*, one of the informants marries man outside of pesantren community but remain a pesantren educated man. This phenomenon refers as closed exogamous. Capital owned by women plays important role in negotiating their way to be involved in the process. Women with high capital have more chance to be involved in the process. Women who come from a higher rank in society are entitled to informally send proposal to men. In the meantime, the formal proposal (*khitbah*) is still part of the responsibility of the man and his family. Patriarchy dominating Java and Madura forces women to be in a passive position when it comes to marriage.

Therefore, although the informal proposal was sent by the bride's family, it is the responsibility of the groom to actively and formally propose to the bride's family especially when the process involves other members of society and extended family. Women with their capital both social and cultural capital will have different bargaining position in the process of arranged marriages. Capital allows women to be more courageous in using her agency and her position will be acknowledged by their parents.

Women in high capital will be involved in the process of arranged marriages and if they are not involved they will conduct negotiation and action to push the family to involve her in the process of arranged marriages. This as evidence that women must increase their capital to be in a position in the family. This shows that women are an active agent. As explained above, that woman is an active agent. Women with their various role playing their agencies do not always follow the rules, but also often times breaking the rules, as they perform resistance and also conducting a bargain. With the capital, women do resistance, both hidden and open resistance. In a hidden resistance, the women doing resistance in a silent way. They finally accepted arranged marriages process after doing their resistance.

Women who choose to do hidden resistance are women whose capital low, so they do not have bargain position in the process of arranged marriages. While women with their power do open resistance. In open resistance, there are two types of actions: Conditional acceptance and bargaining. For conditional acceptance, although finally agents accept or reproduce the arranged marriage, agents also ask for agreement required. Interestingly, in open resistance, the agents also do bargaining. From the process of resistant by women can be concluded that there are dynamics in the process of arranged marriages. Women do not just take it for granted, because there are negotiations and resistance. It showed that women using their agency well. Women are not passive agent. The dynamics raised by the woman would give even a small effect on the pattern of the process of arranged marriages in Pesantren. This certainly does not directly influence in a great scale but at least not in their immediate family. Criticism and the dynamics which appear in habitus, field, and doxa do not seem to appear in Bourdieu's theory, because Bourdieu only focuses on the structure. Therefore, this study has contributed significantly to view the position of women's agency in the process of arranged marriages.

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