Resistance From Within: Power and Defiance in Montesquieu’s Persian Letters

Jennifer Epley Sanders

Abstract
Montesquieu reflects on the intricacies of government, social customs, and identity in his epistolary novel titled Persian Letters (1721). For many of these topics, Montesquieu addresses the themes of power and agency, mainly in the context of despotism as symbolized by a seraglio in the book. This article uses the explanatory research method through a case analysis of “power” in the Persian Letters to facilitate a nuanced, gendered understanding of “power” as a concept. The case analysis incorporates and applies feminist perspectives on power, as well as a theoretical framework and empirical observations from Scott’s Weapons of the Weak (1985), to define and operationalize “despotic power” and “defiant power.”

Keywords
Montesquieu, agency, gender, power, despotism

The political philosopher Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu (1689–1755) reflects on the intricacies of government, social customs, and identity in his epistolary novel titled Persian Letters (1721/2008). The collection of fictional letters from 1711 to 1720 recount the experiences of two Persian noblemen, Usbek and Rica, while they travel from their homes in Ispahan, Iran, to Europe and during their stay in Paris, France. The original edition contained 150 letters and a revised edition in 1754 added 11 letters, all documenting exchanges between and among the noblemen, their friends, mullahs (Muslim scholars, clergy, or mosque leaders), and the wives and eunuchs living in Usbek’s seraglio. A “seraglio” is commonly known as a “harem” and refers to the private domestic living quarters and sequestered spaces in an Ottoman or Muslim household that are part of a much larger property, residence, or palace. A seraglio is ordinarily reserved for wives, concubines, and servants. Throughout the Persian Letters, the seraglio serves as a setting for presenting Montesquieu’s views on power and agency. He uses the politics of the seraglio to symbolize despotism. His characters’ interactions with one another demonstrate the reach and limits of governmental authority, constraints imposed by social customs, and identity politics based on class, gender, religion, race, ethnicity, and nationality.

Usbek is the primary political authority figure in the seraglio system with absolute power and control as “master” and “head” of his family and servants. Acting as a despot, Usbek creates and encourages a culture of fear, force, jealousy, and suspicion. Without such a culture, Montesquieu (1748/1989) surmises, “People capable of much self-esteem would be in a position to cause revolutions. Therefore, fear must beat down everyone’s courage and extinguish even the slightest feeling of ambition” (p. 28). Numerous letters in Montesquieu’s book focus on the ways in which power operates in the relationships between Usbek, his eunuchs, and his wives. In the web of relationships, Usbek embodies a despot, his eunuchs sacrifice part of their manhood so they can execute his wishes and maintain order much like ministers or viziers do in an administration, and his wives resemble dominated subjects living in terror (Wiener, 1973, p. 9). Usbek’s marriages, in particular, though personal, have a political dimension to them because they mirror the severe struggles for power between a despot and his subjects. Ranum (1969) writes, “This tension between the overt expression of love which is forced on everyone in the seraglio and the covert mechanism of fear of punishment and death is the dynamic of the society that is the seraglio” (p. 617). Kettler (1964) explains that “. . . for Montesquieu, the theme of love is intimately tied to the problems of society, and specifically, to the problem of dehumanization” (p. 658). In the Persian Letters, Montesquieu shows how the dehumanization that stems from patriarchy in a despotic system can permeate society at all levels, even down to a seraglio and the private interactions between a husband and wife. Society’s existing power structures continuously reinforce Usbek’s patriarchal status, authority, and control over others, and in turn, his ongoing oppressive and exploitative behavior toward his wives strengthens the larger despotic system. The power structures and dynamics found

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in the Persian Letters have parallels to real-world contemporary politics, where, for example, Rao (2015) observes, “Women’s bodies, sexuality, and reproductive choices are linked to the ideological hegemony of the caste–gender nexus in India, with marriage and sexual relations playing crucial roles in maintaining caste boundaries” (p. 410).

According to Wiener (1973), Montesquieu strongly condemns despotism along with “slavery and all other forms of total domination as incompatible with human nature, natural law, and the interests of all parties linked in such relationships” (pp. 9–10). Montesquieu treats the politics of the seraglio as a case study into the processes, problems, and consequences of despotism, leading readers to eventually agree that they, too, should condemn such governments and systems. It is not enough for Montesquieu to simply critique those despotism governments and systems, though. The Persian Letters points to cracks in despotism and tangible ways in which it can be actively challenged by the very people who suffer at the hands of a despot.

In the Persian Letters, it is the wives—Fatmé, Roxane, Zachi, Zelis, and Zephis—who exercise their agency by confronting and defying the seraglio’s culture of fear, force, jealousy, and suspicion, and in so doing, challenge despotism rule. By repeatedly resisting the authority of their husband and his eunuchs, fighting for independence, and making their own choices despite the terrible consequences, the wives become visionary feminists taking political action. The wives determine for themselves what “love” is and how to put it in practice. As hooks (2000) asserts,

Feminist thinking and practice emphasize the value of mutual growth and self-actualization in partnerships and in parenting. This vision of relationships where everyone’s needs are respected, where everyone has rights, where no one need fear subordination or abuse, runs counter to everything patriarchy upholds about the structure of relationships. (p. 103)

Kettler (1964) concludes, “Seraglio love fails, despite its guarantee of gratification and at least external fidelity, because the seraglio rests on the principle of terror, force and general denial of individual dignity” (p. 659), or as hooks (2000) puts it, “there can be no love when there is domination” (p. 103).

Montesquieu literary use of seraglio politics as despotic politics offers a unique opportunity for researchers to integrate and leverage ideas and approaches from political theory, comparative politics, and research methodology. Combining the two political science subfields with research methods in a study of the relationship dynamics between Usbek and his wives in the Persian Letters provides insights into how a popular concept like “power” can be stretched to be more gender-inclusive and how that concept might be operationalized for empirical studies. This article uses the explanatory research method through a case analysis of “power” in the Persian Letters to facilitate a nuanced, gendered understanding of “power” as a concept. The case analysis incorporates and applies feminist perspectives on power, as well as a theoretical framework and empirical observations from Scott’s Weapons of the Weak (1985), to define and operationalize “despotic power” and “defiant power.” This type of approach blends “old” and “new” aspects of political theory, comparative politics, and research methodology to help researchers uncover critical areas in need of clarification or correction during the initial research design steps of concept formation and operationalization in their own studies, in evaluations of others’ research during the peer review process, and in assessments of existing studies. This article’s pursuit of and contribution to conceptual precision is similar to Bardall et al. (2019) who connect comparative politics scholarship from gender and politics with the literature on political violence from international relations and argue that “a gender perspective reveals how discrete incidences of political violence can be gendered in their motive, form, and impact” (p. 16).

“Power” in the Persian Letters

Developing clear definitions for concepts in tandem with precise measures is important for the completeness, validity, reliability, and generalizability of a research project’s theories, design, methods, and conclusions. For social science research, clear concepts enable scholars to have a shared, effective, and efficient understanding of what exactly is being investigated, evaluated, and potentially resolved. Besides benefiting scholars, reducing the ambiguity of concepts and their related measures assists those who want to apply the concepts and measures outside of academia in politics or public policy.

During concept formation and the stages of identifying differences in kind (e.g., typologies or classifications) and differences in degree, one must be mindful of “conceptual stretching.” Creating a broad definition and including too many cases diminishes a concept’s practical use and substantive relevance. However, not enough conceptual stretching makes for limited views and analysis, bias problems, and decreased generalizability. “Fuzzy concepts” that are susceptible to conceptual stretching such as “power” can vary considerably in meaning and application. A case analysis of the concept of “power” in Montesquieu’s Persian Letters can serve to lessen the “fuzziness,” however, and enhance the concept’s ability to “travel” and its “fit” for other research agendas in political theory and comparative politics.

There are typically three methodological challenges when defining the concept of “power.” The first challenge is that “power” is a contested concept with a multitude of general descriptions, types, and levels of intensity. Although political scientists deeply debate about how to define the concept of “power,” they typically label definitions as being either “power-to,” meaning the ability or capacity to act, or “power-over,” which refers to getting someone to do something that
you want them to do. Hobbes (1651/1994) formulates “power-to” as “The power of a man (to take it universally) is his present means to obtain some future apparent good, and is either original or instrumental” (p. 50). Similarly, Pitkin (1972) suggests, “Power is capacity, potential, ability, or wherewithal” (p. 276). In contrast, Weber (1921/1978) articulates “power-over” in his definition: “‘Power’ (Macht) is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests” (p. 53). In trying to capture the “intuitive idea” underlying the concept of “power,” Dahl (1957) also emphasizes “power-over” by observing that “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do,” thus pointing to how “power is a relation, and that it is a relation among people” (pp. 202–203). The variety of “power-to” and “power-over” is illustrated by Morriss’s (2002) use of definitions from the Oxford English Dictionary (OED):

**Power** (noun)

1. Ability to do or effect something or anything, or to act upon a person or thing.
2. Ability to act or affect something strongly; physical or mental strength; might; vigour, energy; force of character; telling force, effect.
3. Of inanimate things: Active property; capacity of producing some effect; the active principle of a herb, etc.
4. Possession of control or command over others; domain, rule; government, domination, sway, command; control, influence, authority. Often followed by over.
5. Legal ability, capacity, or authority to act; especially delegated authority; authorization, commission, faculty; specifically legal authority vested in a person or persons in a particular capacity.
6. One who or that which is possessed of or exercises power, influence, or government; an influential or governing person, body or thing; in early use, one in authority, a ruler, governor. (p. 10)

The first, second, third, and fifth definitions typify “power-to,” while the fourth definition conveys “power-over.”

Even more formal typologies of “power” can still face issues with multiple, contested descriptions and types. For instance, French and Raven (1959) categorize five bases of power in a relationship between O and P:

1. **Reward power**, based on P’s perception that O has the ability to mediate rewards for him;
2. **Coercive power**, based on P’s perception that O has the ability to mediate punishments for him;
3. **Legitimate power**, based on the perception by P that O has a legitimate right to prescribe behavior for him;
4. **Referent power**, based on P’s identification with O; and
5. **Expert power**, based on the perception that O has some special knowledge or expertise. (pp. 155–156)

Raven attached another base of power—**information** communicated by an agent—to their typology in 1965 (p. 372). Although these six types of power are narrower in scope than the OED definitions, they are still broad enough to contain extra subcategories and can overlap with each other.

A second methodological challenge is that defining “power” necessitates considering the unit of analysis (e.g., individual, group, state/polity, institution, or structure) and how power can be relational. When specifying the actors in a power relationship, Dahl (1957) proposes that researchers reference the source, domain, or base of the power; the means or instruments used to exert power; the amount or extent of power; and the range or scope of power (p. 203). In the Persian Letters, Usbek’s base of power is derived from the authority that despotism and patriarchy provide to him, which in turn influences his means, amount, and range of power. An understanding of “power” that is relational, though, implies that all political actors involved have some element of authority, whether or not it is derived from the same base. Kaufman and Raphael (1991) clarify this relational component:

Power which is rooted in a position of authority is its more obvious manifestation, but power stretches further into the human experience than we have understood . . . At another level of manifestation power becomes an inevitable undercurrent, if not entirely explicit, within each human relationship. Every relationship between individuals, whether adult or child, is a power relationship. (p. 13)

“Power” is then a dynamic force operating on several levels and manifesting itself in a competing, often dualistic, fashion because each person in a relationship may be said to retain authority over the other person. Depending on the number of political actors involved, an interaction matrix could be small or large. The more actors involved, the more complicated it can be to detect who has authority over whom and under what circumstances. In addition, an increase in actors has the potential to increase the types of authority existing in the structure, thereby complicating analysis. Yet another consideration is that mixing or confusing units of analysis and authority positions can negatively influence a study’s findings concerning correlations or causal claims.

Third, the definition of “power” can change depending upon language and culture. For example, “power” has multiple meanings and associations in English, French, and
Arabic, as well as transforms over time within a culture or between cultures. Pye and Pye (1985) hold that “political power is extraordinarily sensitive to cultural nuances, and that, therefore, cultural variations are decisive in determining the course of political development” (p. vii). For them, diverse cultural and religious traditions influence conceptions of “power,” which in turn shape distinct political development trajectories. In their comparative coverage of countries in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia, Pye and Pye (1985) contend the following: “More particularly, Asian cultures have historically had a rich variety of concepts of power. They share, however, the common denominator of idealizing benevolent, paternalistic leadership and of legitimizing dependency” (p. vii). There has been much scholarly debate about Pye and Pye’s work, though, because of added cultural considerations at play. Selecting what paradigm, definitional approach, and research design to use for a study on “power” normally hinges on one’s “home” culture(s) and academic discipline(s). There are dominant forms of “accepted” ideas and processes, which can be supported or opposed over time subject to one’s positionality and status within and vis-à-vis those cultures and disciplines. Different theoretical, disciplinary, or political interests influence the concept formation process as well as evaluations of the accuracy and usefulness of one conception of “power” over another and related data or conclusions. For instance, Lomperis (1987) views Pye and Pye’s work as a “courageous and path-breaking venture” (p. 332), whereas Rudolph (1986) heavily critiques “Mr. Pye’s simplifications and distortions” (p. 34). Rudolph continues, “Humanists will be disappointed by his limited understanding of the texts and contexts of the great Asian civilizations and religions. Social scientists will be disappointed by his reduction of power, authority and political development to a psycho-cultural phenomenon” (p. 34). The divergence between Lomperis and Rudolph shows how even interpretations of an interpretation of “power” can be culturally constrained.

Complicating all three methodological challenges is how the concept and use of “power” is affected by ideas about gender (i.e., gender roles, gender identity, and/or biological sex). Taking a gendered approach to researching and defining “power” means acknowledging and addressing the wide-ranging ways in which gender politics intersects with political, economic, and sociocultural institutions and behaviors. Moreover, belief in patriarchy as an ideology and practicing patriarchy as a social system predominately places men in positions of power, thereby causing or contributing to gender inequality and women’s oppression. Patriarchy also interacts with and can amplify other existing divisions such as class, religion, race, ethnicity, and nationality. In this way, gender complicates discussions about and applications of “power” as a concept but ignoring gender altogether creates gaps in and increases errors for a research project. Analyzing how “power” is perceived and functions in the Persian Letters, however, gives us a chance to balance the need for a baseline definition of the concept with an interest in stretching the concept sufficiently to include some of the nuances of gender politics.

**Usbek and Despotic Power**

Although most of the aforementioned concepts, typologies, and definitions of “power” are depicted in the Persian Letters, using all of them at once would be too “fuzzy” for much theoretical or empirical value. Because the context of interest is seraglio politics as a symbolic case of despotism, the most applicable baseline definition of “power” for the Persian Letters is the fourth definition listed: “Possession of control or command over others; dominion, rule; government, domination, sway, command; control, influence, authority.” Working deductively and inductively, this definition is broad enough and sufficiently flexible to identify its attributes in the Persian Letters. This definition can then be delineated more precisely by specifying “kind” and “degree,” which allows one to record observations of “power.” In short, Usbek’s overall control, command, and domination over the seraglio is a basic example of “power,” his specific despotic characteristics and behavior are a kind of “power” (similar to French and Raven’s “coercive power”), and varying levels of severity are the degree of despotic power. It should be noted that “despotism,” like “power,” has been a contested concept over multiple centuries. Turchetti (2008) provides an in-depth analysis of how definitions and political interpretations of “despotism” changed over time and why. There are risks in and limitations to combining two fuzzy concepts, so this article is meant to be more of a starting point for conceptualizing and operationalizing “despotic power” and “defiant power” rather than dictating a single definitive method.

A selection of Usbek’s letters to his friends, servants, and wives articulate his despotic power and harshness in detail. Each letter confirms similarities between Usbek and real-life despots, who as Carlton (1995) asserts, tend

1. To be ruthlessly opportunist.
2. To be inordinately revengeful.
3. To be violently opposed to criticism.
4. To regard expediency as more important than morality.
5. To act in an arbitrary manner.
6. To be “conveniently” self-deceived.
7. To be most dangerous to their immediate subordinates.
8. To have keenly focused ambitions.
9. To generate contradictory re-evaluations. (pp. 21–25)

This sample list of characteristics and related behaviors is one way to operationalize or measure “despotic power” in the Persian Letters and other studies where applicable. Some of these measures are more apparent than others in the novel,
like the first, fourth, sixth, and seventh tendencies, so future comparative studies of similar cases would require a careful examination and use of comparable concepts, measures, models, and so on.

Early in the novel, Letter 24 highlights the first despotic tendency to be ruthlessly opportunistic. Usbek recollects the first few months of marriage to Roxane and his struggles with her (pp. 33–35). He claims that Roxane defended her “dying virginity” to the last of her commitment to virtue, chastity, and modesty. Usbek remarks that Roxane did not surrender even after she was “vanquished.” He is quick to ignore and violate Roxane’s rights to freedom, dignity, and respect. As Montesquieu (1748/1989) maintains, “Honor is not the principle of despotic states”; “the despot is strong only because he can take life away”; and “the despot has no rule, and his caprices destroy all the others” (p. 27). Operating in a system of fear and lacking honor, Usbek exploits his marriage, gender hierarchies, and patriarchy for his own purposes of pleasure and domination.

Letter 24 on its own and Letters 140, 142, 145, and 158 collectively draw attention to the fourth tendency of despotic power to regard expediency as more important than morality. In Letter 24, Usbek concentrates on his own immediate interests and pleasures while completely ignoring the moral and ethical dilemma and consequences of raping his wife Roxane. As a despot, Usbek is self-serving and uncurling of his subjects’ needs and preferences. The set of correspondence at the end of the novel corroborates that Usbek considers expediency to be above morality. By the time Usbek composes Letter 140 to the head eunuch at the seraglio, he knows about the problems with his wives and disorder at the seraglio. He responds with anger and cruelty, writing

> With this letter I grant you unlimited power over the entire seraglio; command there with all the authority that I myself would wield; may fear, may terror be your companions; hasten from room to room bearing punishment and retribution; . . . (pp. 205–206)

The head eunuch does not read the letter’s instructions because he dies before opening it, so the orders transfer to Narsit, another of Usbek’s slaves, in Letter 142 (pp. 206–207). When Narsit does not appear to receive the latest letter nor seem to have much control over the seraglio, Usbek entrusts a slave named Solim to exact his revenge in Letter 145: “Take up your new role, but bring to it neither magnanimity nor pity . . .” (pp. 208–209). Because Usbek is far away and unable to enforce his rules and punishment in person, he grants increased power and authority to his eunuchs and slaves. Usbek’s directives, though expedient, lack morality. He does not care that his punishments may be meted out too harshly or on the wrong person. Letter 158/Supplementary Letter 10 from Usbek’s wife Zelis has a questioning and critical tone that speaks to this point: “At a thousand leagues away from me, you judge me guilty; at a thousand leagues away from me, you punish me” (p. 224). Such concerns connote the problems that arise from a lack of “checks and balances” and “separation of powers” in a despotic state.

The sixth common tendency of despots to be “conveniently” self-deceived is visible throughout the Persian Letters and rather noticeably in Letter 24. Usbek convinces himself that Roxane is a loving wife who dresses up, dances, sings, and flatters him and therefore is ostensibly happy and willing, when, in fact, she strongly resists him (pp. 33–35). Usbek fails to understand that “in despotic families and governments even physical attraction is destroyed” (Ranum, 1969, p. 624). Usbek further claims in Letter 24 that his wives’ imprisonment is for their benefit and by extension presumably for the benefit of society as well:

> Therefore, when we keep you so carefully shut away, and have you guarded by so many slaves; when we so severely frustrate your desires if they are excessive: it is not because we fear the ultimate infidelity, but because we know that purity cannot be too great, and the smallest stain can corrupt it. (p. 35)

Usbek seems to think that he is a “good” husband and that his focus on his wives’ moral and physical purity and health justifies his behavior, incorrectly assuming that despotism has benevolent and benign features. Usbek regards himself as a leader and protector of his household and all that is “good,” but his wives believe the opposite to be true because his version of love only serves to secure and enhance his power, not theirs. From the wives’ perspectives and positions, their freedom poses a threat to Usbek’s power, so he constructs an argument that appears altruistic to hide the reality of the cruelty that takes place. Usbek conveniently deceives himself, but not the wives, especially Roxane. Another reading is that his self-deception is an attempt to claim both morality and expediency because he is, in his own view, a moral man.

The seventh tendency, which is to be most dangerous to one’s immediate subordinates, is present at the end of the Persian Letters. Usbek addresses his wives in Letter 146:

> May this letter fall upon you like a thunderbolt that strikes amid lightning and tempestuous rain! Solim is now your head eunuch, not to guard, but to punish you . . . he will ensure that you live under so rigid a yoke that you will mourn your lost freedom, even if you do not mourn your lost virtue. (p. 209)

Letter 148 exposes the extent and degree of Usbek’s vengeance through Solim’s punishments and retaliations. Roxane tells Usbek, “Horror, darkness, and terror hold sway in the seraglio, which is shrouded in ghastly mourning; at every moment a tiger gives vent in it to all his rage . . .” (p. 211). Roxane’s letter reports that the new head eunuch tortured two subordinate eunuchs, sold several of the wives’ slaves, changed each of the wives’ slaves, confined the women separately to their rooms, insisted the women are veiled at all times, forbade the women to talk to or write each
other, and “did not shrink from laying his foul hands upon them” (p. 211). Letter 157/Supplementary Letter 9 from the wife named Zachi verifies the mistreatment:

God in Heaven! A brute has insulted me even with the style of punishment he visited on me! He dared inflict on me that punishment which first shocks a woman’s modesty, then humiliates her to the uttermost degree, then reduces her, as it were, to childhood. (p. 223)

Zachi’s statement that “The beast dares to tell me that you are the author of all this cruelty” (p. 224) confirms just how dangerous Usbek is to his subjects via his long-distance orders. Another wife, Zelis, goes on to name Usbek as the original source of danger in Letter 158/Supplementary Letter 10: “If a cruel eunuch lays his base hands upon me, he is acting upon your orders; it is the tyrant who commits the outrage, and not he that is the instrument of tyranny” (p. 224). Although Usbek’s power over the wives operates indirectly through his eunuchs and slaves, the enormity and cruelty of that power is still evident and has real consequences.

Although Usbek’s version of power can be operationalized or measured by having certain despotic characteristics and behaviors, it must be noted that it is the seraglio structure (i.e., despotism) with patriarchy as an ideology and practice that by and large frames and supports those characteristics and behaviors. As Cudd (2006) concludes, “Amidst the competing theories, examples, and explanations of oppression, a consensus has been forged on the idea that oppression comes out of unjust social and political institutions” (p. 20). For Cudd (2006), there are four jointly necessary and sufficient conditions for oppression:

1. **The harm condition**: There is a harm that comes out of an institutional practice.
2. **The social group condition**: The harm is perpetrated through a social institution or practice on a social group whose identity exists apart from the oppressive harm in (1).
3. **The privilege condition**: There is another social group that benefits from the institutional practice in (1).
4. **The coercion condition**: There is unjustified coercion or force that brings about the harm. (p. 25)

These four conditions of oppression are met in the Persian Letters whenever Usbek uses despotic power to harm Fatmé, Roxane, Zachi, Zelis, and Zephis. With their specific statuses as women and wives, they are not privileged in the seraglio system, but are instead subjected to unjust coercion.

The four conditions of oppression and the role of institutions and social groups in that oppression show a need for a system-level remedy. Instead of blaming a single person or merely advocating for the overthrow of an individual leader, Montesquieu (1748/1989) endorses a structural solution to protect liberty and avoid tyranny. He recommends, so that one cannot abuse power, power must check power by the arrangement of things. A constitution can be such that no one will be constrained to do the things the law does not oblige him to do or be kept from doing the things the law permits him to do. (1748/1989, pp. 155–156)

Montesquieu (1748/1989) then advises a separation of powers in government to facilitate that process of checks and balances:

When legislative power is united with executive power in a single person or in a single body of the magistracy, there is no liberty, because one can fear that the same monarch or senate that makes tyrannical laws will execute them tyrannically. Nor is there liberty if the power of judging is not separate from legislative power and from executive power. If it were joined to legislative power, the power over the life and liberty of the citizens would be arbitrary, for the judge would be the legislator. If it were joined to executive power, the judge could have the force of an oppressor. (p. 157)

Without structural safeguards preventing concentrated power in place, individuals and society can and do suffer, particularly in the case of marginalized and underrepresented groups like women.

**Women and Defiant Power**

A feminist or gendered perspective of and approach to power in the Persian Letters can still start with the baseline definition of “power” being “Possession of control or command over others; dominion, rule; government, domination, sway, command; control, influence, authority” and then take two more steps. First, the definition would not automatically default to men as the only political actors with exclusive access to power. There would be a shift whereby “power” and its patriarchal characteristics are no longer the primary focus or analytical lens. This does not mean that oppression does not exist, but rather there is more to be considered than just a simplified narrative of men having power over women. In this way, we avoid the problematic tendencies of viewing humanity as only male and the consequences of “Othering” women that de Beauvoir (1949/1989) identifies:

she is not regarded as an autonomous being . . . She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other. (p. xxii)

Second, the baseline definition would factor in power relations. A power relational approach would examine multiple actors who have control or command over others along with when, how, and why. Taking this approach means that despotism is treated as a system or setting that can influence power relations, but power itself is now available to any
number of political actors, albeit with different types, kinds, and degrees of power depending on who is involved. Stretching the concept of “power” to be inclusive of power relations between men and women centers narratives and reframes analyses from being one-sided and one-dimensional to multisided and multidimensional.

Having authority over another is not uniform or absolute in a relationship, as evidenced in the Persian Letters. Usbek has control and command over others, but his wives have their version of control and command over others as well. Their power is in the form of resistance or opposition to Usbek and his eunuchs and slaves. While a despot has the capacity to control his subjects, the subjects are not without some capacity, agency, and choice to control themselves and the despot to a certain degree. This is partially due to the nature of dependency between those involved in the relationships. Although there is a necessary dependent relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed, as soon as one party rejects their role, the relationship changes and sometimes can even dissolve. This is because, as Foucault (1980) posits, power is not just about one person’s “consolidated and homogenous domination over others,” but rather power relations permeate all levels of social existence, and therefore, every interaction between people involves power of some kind:

Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localised here or there, never in anybody’s hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation. (p. 98)

For Foucault, power is multidimensional, cannot be fully possessed or owned by someone, and multidirectional because individuals are “simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power.” In the context of the Persian Letters, this means that every actor involved in the politics of the seraglio has power. This multidirectional agent-based interpretation of power better describes the complex relationships among Usbek, the wives, eunuchs, and other servants when compared with a one-sided interpretation of despotic power.

Foucault’s approach to power points to another important nuance, one that Squires (1999) expresses as the idea that “power is not only repressive, prohibitive and preventative, but also productive, in that it generates effects” (pp. 35–36). As such, repression is just one form of power relations. Productive power can constrain, enable, or do both (Squires, 1999, pp. 35–36). In the Persian Letters, resistance can be interpreted as another form of power relations or productive power existing and interacting with despotic power. As a result of this interpretation, the baseline definition of “power” can be conceptually stretched to be more gender-inclusive because “power” is now no longer understood as being simply limited to one male political actor acting upon another female political actor like a despot controlling a subject or a patriarch commanding authority over a family and household. Instead, “power” as a concept more deeply understood is about power relations and can involve agency and productive power on the part of any political actors engaged in a relationship.

Using this multidirectional agent-based interpretation of power that incorporates power relations facilitates an analysis of specific kinds of women’s resistance, or what may be referred to “defiant power,” in the Persian Letters. “Resistance” and “defiance” as concepts have overlapping definitions and synonyms such as disobedience, opposition, nonconformity, confrontation, disregard, and contempt. Both concepts can refer to attitudes or behaviors, take formal or informal modes, involve legal/“regular” or illegal/“irregular” acts, and occur in private or public spaces. In the context of this article, the use of “defiant power” is a way to build on the baseline definition of “power” noted earlier, capture elements of power relations, and acknowledge the overlapping features of “resistance” and “defiance” while simultaneously emphasizing the agency of individuals. “Defiant power” can be a useful construct on its own or when discussing “despotic power” as both are kinds of power that can exist concurrently in a shared context or setting.

The wives’ defiant power does not originate from patriarchy or despotism, but rather from their individual-level agency. Messer-Davidow (1995) writes, “In individualist models, when agency is attached to a ‘self’ and conceived as an element of psychological being, it is said to be an individual’s capacity for self-determination realized through decision and action” (p. 25). Sahu et al. (2016) build on work by Ahearn (2001), Avishai (2008), and Mahmood (2001) to conceptualize three kinds of “agency” to avoid the dichotomous categories of “victimization” and “acceptance,” which potentially exclude the varieties of actions that can occur between them (p. 2). In their qualitative study of the relationships between women’s educational attainments and women’s exercise of agency in spousal selection and the timing of marriage in Karnataka, India, Sahu et al. (2016) differentiate between convinced agency (where the actor agrees with a choice/decision, whether taken by the self or by others, is in control of the situation and is aware that he or she can take befitting action to direct the situation toward to his or her desired outcome); resistance agency (acts that challenge hegemonic forces and play an active role in realizing that choice); and complicit agency (acts that conform to hegemonic forces, even if the actor does not agree). (pp. 1–2)

In deciding to revolt and acting against Usbek’s oppression, the wives are primarily exercising their resistance
agency. Agency can be also understood in a plural sense and conceived as an element of social being, which means a capacity for social influence and intervention (Messer-Davidow, 1995, p. 25). The women in the Persian Letters are socially constrained from acting as group agents, however, and left to their individual devices in resisting Usbek’s despotic power. Montesquieu hints that the women might have conspired together because it looks like all the wives lied in their letters and some amount of cooperation must have been needed to undermine Usbek’s rules and the eunuchs’ or slaves’ authority and control. That said, the letters are clearer regarding the women acting as individual agents.

The catalyst for the women to exercise defiant power in the Persian Letters is Usbek’s efforts to constrain their freedom, where “freedom” is understood as a set of meaningful choices or options in life: “You are free to do something if there are no demeaning restraints on your power to do it; you lack freedom in so far as restraints which are inappropriate to your status are imposed on you” (Morriss, 2002, p. 122). The women lack freedom and choice because Usbek places restraints on their sexuality, appearance, and behavior. Usbek essentially politicizes the women’s bodies and ties notions of morality and purity (or honor and shame) to their bodies. Schaub (1995) points to the “inherently self-contradictory enterprise” of the harem: It is designed to protect female virtue and a husband’s pleasure, but the very confinement of women and denial of sexual choice prevents such goals from being realized (p. 43).

In writing about the condition of women in despotical states, Montesquieu (1748/1989) notices that women are “an object of luxury,” “kept in extreme slavery,” and subject to laws that are “severe and executed on the spot” (p. 104). Despotism requires this orientation and set of restraints and severities to maintain and justify the despot’s position but is inappropriate to the women’s status as human beings or the ideal position of equal partnerships in the family structure. Kaufman and Raphael (1991) stress how the desire for freedom and choice can encourage resistance:

The experience of powerlessness is as imbedded in the human condition as the need for power. Each of us thrives on feeling we are somehow in charge of our own lives . . . A sense of inner control is the felt experience of power, and having choice over matters which affect us is its wellspring. We must feel able to affect our environment, to feel consulted, to feel we have an impact, to feel heard by those with whom we are in a relationship. To experience choice is to know power.” (p. ix)

The wives want freedom for their own self-determination and freedom from Usbek, the despot, so they employ their autonomy and agency by resisting him with defiant actions like conspiracy, subversive behavior, and breaking barriers. These latter actions can be understood as measures of “defiant power.”

Traditional notions of resistance commonly use four criteria: (a) it must be collective and organized instead of private and unorganized, (b) it must be principled and selfless rather than opportunist and selfish, (c) it must have revolutionary consequences, and (d) it must negate rather than accept the basis of domination (Yee, 1994, para. 6). Scott (1985) argues with this conception of resistance in Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance by drawing on theoretical and comparative material from peasant communities in Malaysia and Southeast Asia to establish that resistance does not always consist of large-scale, open, collective, or violent rebellions. His study includes fieldwork research in a village that he gives the pseudonym of Sedaka. Scott (1985) observes that it is rare for peasants to openly revolt there:

Resistance in Sedaka has virtually nothing that one expects to find in the typical history of rural conflict. There are no riots, no demonstrations, no arson, no organized social banditry, no open violence. The resistance I have discovered is not linked to any larger outside political movements, ideologies, or revolutionary cadres, although it is clear that similar struggles have been occurring in virtually every village in the region. (p. 273)

Most of the time, peasants “stop well short of collective outright defiance” and instead resist the hegemony of the state and the rich through “the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth” (p. 29). Scott (1985) stresses the importance of placing individual human agents, in their particular contexts, at the center of an analysis (pp. 42–43 and Yee, 1994, para. 2), hence his focus on peasants’ everyday forms of resistance and their symbolic and ideological underpinnings.

The peasants in Weapons of the Weak use various strategies of resistance that are both concrete and symbolic. Even though they do not participate in armed resistance and their resistance mostly goes unacknowledged, they find ways to “fight back.” For example, in efforts to resist the unequal economic development in their region, Sedaka villagers threaten to boycott transplanting for farmers who are mechanizing their farms, reduce their labor by beating rice fewer times, delay going to work, and kill livestock. Scott (1985) observes petty theft as another form of resistance: “Fruit regularly disappears from trees and around the houses of wealthier farmers, and few expect to harvest more than half of their small crop of mangoes, papayas, fallen coconuts, or bananas” (p. 266). Villagers repeatedly steal plastic or metal water cans and occasionally take others’ bicycles, water buffaloes, and motorcycles, too (p. 266).

Scott (1985) witnesses peasants using their words as weapons as an additional mode of resistance. The latter includes accusing the rich of being stingy and arrogant (pp. 187–189) and slandering instead of praising the reputations of those whose conduct transgresses their values (pp. 234–235). Decades later, Tapsell (2018) continues to see similar defiant actions in the semirural areas of Malaysia’s “heartlands” during Malaysia’s 2018 elections where “the smartphone was used extensively to circumvent mainstream media
discourse, and as a subversive device for circulating anti-government messages” (p. 25). Tapsell (2018) explains how Facebook, instant-messenger platform WhatsApp, and other social media sites were used as tools in spreading information about the corruption and nepotism of Prime Minister Najib Razak and his wife, Rosmah Mansour (pp. 19–21). Using Scott’s (1985) framework as well, Tapsell (2018) notes, “In the digital era, weapons of the weak in Malaysia included gossip, rumour, conspiracy, feigning ignorance, generating uncertainty, casting doubt, and subverting state authorities—all predominantly done digitally, through smartphones, social media platforms, and chat applications” (p. 25). One of the key lessons from past and contemporary case studies of resistance in Malaysia is that although peasants are considered “weak” in certain ways compared with the rich or political elite, they are not entirely passive or powerless. While their experiences do not mimic or easily conform to major political movements in history, the peasants’ defiant actions still produce effects, even if such actions and results are considered “small” by elites and governments.

In a similar vein as the poor’s “continuous testing of limits” in Weapons of the Weak (p. 273), Usbek’s wives exhibit their agency and capacity for resistance in diverse ways, as recorded in several letters from the wives. As mentioned earlier, Letter 24 describes how Roxane did not surrender to Usbek in mind, body, or spirit even as she was raped (p. 34). Letter 62 from the head eunuch to Usbek speaks of chaos in the seraglio with the wives and eunuchs where there are “recriminations, complaints, and reproaches” and scorn for and disrespect of his orders and general position (p. 83). In Letter 3, Zachi declares her love, recalls her tears at Usbek’s departure, and mentions that the wives ordered the head eunuch to take them to the country during which there were no incidents of concern (pp. 6–7). Because Montesquieu does not put all the novel’s letters in precise chronological order, it is easy to miss that “within hours of Usbek’s departure the women had already managed to procure such entertainment (and release from confinement) for themselves” prior to getting formal permission from him (Schaub, 1995, pp. 44–45). By the end of the book, we learn that Zachi was likely lying about her love and faithfulness since the beginning because Letter 139 divulges how the head eunuch discovered Zachi in bed with one of her slaves, which is forbidden (p. 205). Her “defiant power” is measured by the act of sharing herself with another man, which “betrays” Usbek and their marriage personally and politically. Through words and deed, we see that Zachi is the one who is really in control of her own self, body, and sexuality. In that same letter from the head eunuch to Usbek, we read that another wife, Zelis, dropped her veil on the way to the mosque and appeared before everyone with her face almost exposed (p. 205). Here, we see another measure of “defiant power,” small in terms of active or direct noncompliance, but large in symbolism. She exposes her face and skin to those outside of the seraglio, which by Usbek’s laws is another seriously forbidden act. Furthermore, the head eunuch informs Usbek of a youth seen in the seraglio garden who escaped over the walls, presumably related to a wife’s indiscretions, and “To this must be added all that is hidden from me,” implying that there are probably more transgressions by the wives for which he has yet to obtain evidence (p. 205). Letter 143 from Solim, the slave to Usbek, reveals that the wives “no longer conduct themselves with any prudence,” joyfulness is on their faces, and a slave was somehow persuaded to permit two men to hide in the wall of the main bedchamber before the arrival of the wives in the country who then later emerged at night (pp. 207–208). The defiant actions carry on in Letters 148, 150, 157/Supplementary Letter 9, and 158/Supplementary Letter 10 by virtue of being written complaints to Usbek and when the wives outright blame him for their mistreatment by the eunuchs (pp. 211–213, 223–224).

In the final letter of the Persian Letters, Roxane chooses an extreme form of “defiant power” for an individual under despotic rule: suicide. Without better resources and coordination, the wives are unable to revolt against Usbek and the eunuchs on a larger collective scale. Because one person cannot change the entire despotic system alone, Roxane’s decision to commit suicide is a strong act of defiance and resistance to escape the mental, emotional, and physical oppression of Usbek and the seraglio. Although the range of decisions in inhumane settings is limited for people like Roxane, individuals can and do make certain choices on their own terms. In Frankl’s (1946/1985) real-life account of concentration camps during World War II, he talks about the concept of “choice”:

Man can preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, of independence of mind, even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress. We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way . . . He may retain his human dignity even in a concentration camp. (pp. 86–87)

Sahu et al. (2016) likewise hold that “subordination can never be total, and there is always some space—albeit maybe very limited—for maneuver” (p. 1). Roxane herself maneuvers in the ways that she can and writes from a place of power and agency in her final correspondence, Letter 150, to Usbek:

How could you suppose me so credulous as to believe that the sole purpose for my existence was to adore your caprices? That while you refused yourself nothing, you had the right to frustrate every desire of mine? No: I may have lived in servitude, but I have always been free: I have rewritten your laws to conform to those of nature, and my spirit has always remained independent. (p. 213)
In her defiance of Usbek and all that he represents with despotism and patriarchy, Roxane exemplifies how resistance from within can be powerful. Her disobedience and refusal to be subordinated begin with subtle acts but then increase in boldness and strength until her last act of defiance of suicide. Although readers may feel troubled about Roxane’s path and final end, they may at the same time be left with a sense of justice or freedom. The Persian Letters is ultimately a story about political power relations, and Roxane’s relationship with Usbek is just one of the many complex power struggles that take place in the book. Her “defiant power” looks atypical from the usual powers associated with the political elite, the military, the rich, or being a man, but should not be underestimated.

For Roxane, her choice of death over life can be understood as a choice of freedom over oppression. She wanted to maintain her human dignity and choose her own way. The suicide to her was a worthwhile, if not imperative, effort to oppose Usbek. Although Roxane’s action was not an unqualified free act because the despotic system still constrains or constructs the overall set of so-called “free” acts for the wives, submission to Usbek would not be total because she had the final say in her own life. Montesquieu’s political critique of despotism can then be interpreted as twofold: First, when the only supposed “free” act available is to commit suicide, one is living under an extremely unfree system. Second, even in the harshest of despotic systems, people can still exercise agency. In this case, Roxane is the one who decides what will and will not become of her, akin to what Frankl (1946/1985) calls the “defiant power of the human spirit” or a person’s capacity to find meaning in life and transcend negative experiences (pp. 170–172).

In Montesquieu’s Persian Letters, we discover that “We are continually faced with making essential choices in all spheres of life . . . Every choice brings us certain positive returns, while at the same time costing us others” (Kauffman & Raphael, 1991, p. 7). In the end, the wives chose to resist because of their perceived positive returns of choice or freedom. With limited resources, they risked and sacrificed their own physical and psychological health to triumph over their husband, and the “ultimate paradox is that the master is incapable of enforcing or enjoying his unlimited power; he cannot satisfy himself” (Wiener, 1973, p. 9).

Although behind closed doors and within the confines of the seraglio, the wives’ defiant actions expose the limitations or boundaries of despotism and the despotic power of Usbek:

Everyday forms of resistance make no headlines. Just as millions of anthozoan polyps create, willy-nilly, a coral reef, so do thousands upon thousands of individual acts of insubordination and evasion create a political or economic barrier reef of their own. (Scott, 1985, p. 36)

The so-called weak and oppressed can indeed fight back, even if theirs is a resistance that is imperfect, limited in nature, and unpublicized. Usbek may disagree with the use and content of the wives’ political voices, but the fact that he will and does react in some fashion validates that the wives’ defiant power has influence and impact. Thus, in exercising defiant power, the wives in the Persian Letters refute narratives that depict power as absolute, one-dimensional, unidirectional, and only for and by men.

**Conclusion**

In a rush to create and distribute “cutting edge” political science research, there can be a tendency to only use data or sources from the past 10 years. Limiting oneself to that timeframe, though, might result in missing important lessons for a research problem and study. This is why, for example, Turchetti (2008) reaches far back into the past to carefully distinguish between the concepts of “despotism” and “tyranny” by documenting their different historical trajectories, uses, and when exactly there has been confusion and why. Turchetti (2008) encourages people to reflect on the political terminology inherited from tradition, on the correct use of concepts and of their definitions, in order to reintegrate political vocabulary and render it more useful in decrypting contemporary reality, which remains often complex and even undecipherable. (p. 159)

The value-added then of exploring and analyzing “older” texts like the Persian Letters and publications from intermittent academic debates in later decades is that one can better understand how a certain concept is historically situated, has developed over time, and can be best adapted and applied in contemporary research studies.

This article’s case analysis of “power” in the Persian Letters goes back and forth in time and brings together political theory, comparative politics, and research methodology to facilitate a nuanced, gendered understanding of “power.” At the end of Dahl’s (1957) article titled “The Concept of Power,” he simulates a dialogue between a “conceptual” theoretician and a strict “operationalist.” In response to the operationalist’s remarks about dispensing with the concept of “power” entirely because it is not conceptually clear-cut or capable of having relatively unambiguous operational definitions, Dahl’s conceptual theoretician says the following:

. . . we cannot always make the observations we need in order to measure power; perhaps we can do so only infrequently. But the concept provides us with a standard against which to compare the operational alternatives we actually employ. In this way it helps us to specify the defects of the operational definitions as measures of power. To be sure, we may have to use defective measures; but at least we shall know that they are defective and in what ways. More than that, to explicate the concept of power and to pin-point the deficiencies of the operational concepts actually employed may often help us to invent alternative concepts and research
methods that produce a much closer approximation in practice to the theoretical concept itself. (p. 214)

Incorporating “power relations” and the role that women and other marginalized or underrepresented groups play in those relations vis-à-vis other political actors stretches the concept of “power” enough to avoid certain theoretical and empirical problems of concern and provides a chance to more adequately compare and contrast how “power” is understood and utilized within a research study or between studies. And in the spirit of Dahl’s idea that pinpointing deficiencies in an operational concept can be useful for inventing alternative concepts and methods, this article offers ways to define and operationalize “despotic power” and “defiant power” as kinds of “power” for current and future research projects. Consequently, this article contributes to the growing literature that is revisiting and at times revising “old” notions and measures of “resistance” to account for the gendered nuances of power and politics.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethical Statement
This study did not use animal or human subjects, and therefore, an ethics statement is not applicable.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD
Jennifer Epley Sanders https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7391-2057

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