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Narrating Nawal El Saadawi's Thoughts in *Women at Point Zero*: Psychology of Women Perspective

Anas Ahmadi

Pendidikan Bahasa Indonesia, Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Indonesia
Alamat surel: anasahmadi@unesa.ac.id

Abstract

Keywords:

Women;
Literature;
Sex;
Death;
Psychology.

This research aims to explore Nawal El Saadawi's thoughts on *Women at Point Zero* through psychology of women perspective which is integrated with psychoanalysis. The focus of this research refers to three things, especially in a psychological context, namely sex, crime, and death which refers to women. The research method used is qualitative-interpretive using fictional data sources. The research results show the following. Firstly, women are depicted as experiencing disclosure and sexual violence perpetrated by men (family, friends, security forces, boyfriends, pimps. The men initially communicated very well with the female character. However, in the end, they revealed sexual violence and even made Firdaus a prostitute. Second, the prostitute experiences sexual harassment and violence from her clients. Third, when a woman experiences sexual understanding, sexual violence, and making love, she takes action to resist. In this case, Firdaus kills the man who shackles her life. As a result, Firdaus received the death penalty. The death that appears in this fiction cannot be separated from the desire for death that appears in the human subconscious, whether the desire to kill other people or the desire to kill oneself. In the context of global literature, this research offers an alternative for understanding women concerning sex, crime, and death seen from a psychological perspective through literary documents.

Abstrak:

Kata Kunci:

Perempuan;
Sastra;
Seks;
Kematian;
Psikologi.

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi pemikiran Nawal El Saadawi tentang *Perempuan di Titik Nol* melalui perspektif psikologi perempuan yang diinterseksikan dengan psikologi feminis. Fokus penelitian ini mengacu pada tiga hal yang berkaitan dengan konteks psikologi perempuan, yaitu seks, kejahatan, dan kematian. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah kualitatif-interpretatif dengan menggunakan sumber data fiktif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan hal-hal berikut. Pertama, perempuan digambarkan mengalami pengungkapan dan kekerasan seksual yang dilakukan oleh laki-laki (keluarga, sahabat, aparat, pacar, geromo. Para laki-laki tersebut pada awalnya berkomunikasi dengan sangat baik dengan tokoh perempuan tersebut. Namun, pada akhirnya mereka mengungkap kekerasan seksual dan bahkan menjadikan Firdaus sebagai pelacur. Kedua, pelacur tersebut mengalami pelecehan dan kekerasan seksual dari para kliennya. Ketiga, ketika seorang perempuan mengalami pemahaman seksual, kekerasan seksual, dan bercinta, ia melakukan tindakan untuk melawan. Dalam hal ini, Firdaus membunuh laki-laki yang membelenggu nyawanya. Akibatnya, Firdaus menerima hukuman mati. Kematian yang muncul dalam fiksi ini tidak lepas dari hasrat kematian yang muncul dalam alam bawah sadar manusia, entah hasrat untuk membunuh orang lain maupun

hasrat untuk membunuh diri sendiri. Dalam konteks sastra global, penelitian ini menawarkan alternatif untuk memahami perempuan terkait seks, kejahatan, dan kematian dilihat dari perspektif psikologis melalui dokumen sastra.

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Tadris Bahasa Indonesia

Institut Agama Islam Negeri Madura, Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

Studies on women in Egypt cannot be separated from the figure of Nawal El Saadawi (see Amireh, 2000; Hafez, 1988; Green, 2021, Malti-Duglas, 1995, Mekerta, 2006; Al-Matrafi, 2023). As a feminist and author, Saadawi is a controversial figure (Emenyonu, 2010; Keil-Sagawe, 1998; Ojiakor & Obika, 2018; Niu, 2022). Saadawi very radically justifies and criticizes men as figures of a "patriarchal cataract" (Saadawi, 1982a, 193) which causes men to oppress women (Saadawi, 1982a, 1982b, 1989) with all their strength, starting from religious, political, social and cultural. As a radical feminist, Saadawi was considered a woman who had apostatized from her religion (Saadawi, 2008), many of her works were banned (Saadawi, 2016, 2007, 1990), fired from the ministry and imprisoned for opposing the patriarchal government (Saadawi, 1983; Saadawi & Eber, 1985; Vinson, 2008) who were in power at that time. Saadawi stated, "my name has been on the death lists of the fundamentalists for years" (Saadawi, 2009, 42). Not only that, Saadawi, as a feminist and writer, emphasized "I have lost my fear of death, I have lost my fear of prison" (Karima, 2018). Because of her radicalism, Pardina (2006) and Ahmadi (2022) parallel Saadawi with de Beauvoir, a French radical feminist.

Saadawi as a radical collides with women throughout the world to unite against international patriarchy which still occurs against women in the international context (Saadawi, 2020, 2006; Saadawi & Beall, 1989; Saadawi & Wilmuth, 1995) through seminars, discussions, or academic writing and creative/literary. Regarding the context of creative work, the literary works written by Saadawi have a major theme related to the oppression of women (Gallagher, 1998; Fwangyil, 2012), "in all of these works the dominant theme is sexual harassment" (Farah, 1997, 58), women's rebellion (Tarabishi & Saadawi, 1988; Royer, 2001). Apart from these themes, the literature written by Saadawi is also related to women and psychology, for example relating to oppression, aggressiveness, and sexual violence (Guèye, 2010; Saadawi, 1983, 2010; Faulkner, 2008; Tag-El-Din, 2009) towards women.

The psychological aesthetics in literary works written by Saadawi cannot be separated from Saadawi's recognition that he is a doctor/psychiatrist (see Saadawi, 2000, 1989; Baytiyeh, 2019) who also carries out research related to psychoanalysis

(Hitchcock, Saadawi, & Hetata, 1993). This is reinforced by research conducted by Saadawi in 1973-1976 on women and neurosis at the Faculty of Medicine, Ain Shams University, which inspired the novel he wrote (Saadawi, 2016, 156) when he was in the process or post-conducting research on women and neurosis.

Several researchers, Hiddleston (2010) and Valassopolous (2004) revealed that Saadawi used literature as a medium to voice and fight for women against patriarchal culture. One of his works that has received a lot of attention from literary observers is *Women at Point Zero*. The novel was written by Saadawi quickly, "she wrote *Woman at Point Zero* in a week" (Cooke, 2015, 227), and the novel was translated into several languages around the world.

In the last ten years, research on the novel *Women at Point Zero* has been carried out by the following researchers. Khanna (2022) examines *Women at Point Zero* through a narrative perspective. Khanna shows that Saadawi is an author, feminist, and critic who voices the ethics of truth through the paradigm of women. Addison (2020) examines *Women at Point Zero* from the perspective of radical feminism. The results of his research show that Nawal as an author warns men that women can also kill men. Lionnet (2018) examines *Women at Point Zero* through aspects of female subjects who experience physical and verbal understanding by men. In a decision, a woman can stand up and fight against a man. Mohammed (2015) examined *Women at Point Zero* from the perspective of women's life journeys who were initially oppressed by men. However, in subsequent developments, women rose up and implemented new strategies to fight back against men. Palmer (2013) examines *Women at Point Zero* from the perspective of women's life difficulties. Female figures (children, wives, singles) experience brutality perpetrated by men, from fathers, and uncles, to the men they love. Sazzad (2012) examined *Women at Point Zero*, the women's rebellion movement represented by Firdaus, and the character's psychological problems.

Unfortunately, this research focuses more on violence against women and women's rebellion against men. The psychological aspects of the female characters in the novel are interesting to study if viewed from a psychoanalytic perspective. In this regard, this research aims to explore the female characters in the novel *Women at Point Zero* from a psychoanalytic perspective. In this context, research focuses more on the concepts of sex and death that appear in the novel. Regarding sex, Saadawi mostly shows that women are oppressed by men. Regarding death, Saadawi as a woman stated loudly "We will not die without a revolution! (Saadawi, 1986, 36). Saadawi's statement also appears in the literary works he wrote. This research is urgently carried out with the following

rationalization. First, from a psychological perspective, it is still very rare for researchers to explore sex and death in literature by Nawal El Saadawi. It is hoped that the results of this research can provide scientific contributions in the field of literature related to psychological studies in literature, especially sex and death. Second, it is hoped that the results of this research can become an alternative document for understanding the urge for sex and death in a person through a literary context.

Psychoanalysis is a psychological study pioneered by Sigmund Freud. Psychoanalysis is psychology that focuses on the human unconscious. Humans in their lives are mostly driven by unconscious motivations (Freud, 1922, 1973, Schimmel, 2018a, 2018b; Jones, 1993). This is what causes psychoanalysis to be considered a reformer in the study of psychology which has so far relied more on and focused on human consciousness (Hall, Linzey, and Cambel, 1998; Feist & Fiest, 2006). In its development, psychoanalysis according to Schultz & Schultz (2020) is considered a controversial psychology because several theories put forward by Freud are based more on Freud's subjectivity and experience in treating his patients. Nevertheless, Freud tried to improve his theories to make them more universal (Hall, 2011). Likewise, its supporters, for example, Jung (see Jung, 1923, 1953) and Fromm (see Fromm, 1970, 1961), tried to strengthen and develop psychoanalysis in terms of theory and methodology.

Freud, as the founder of psychoanalysis, did a lot of experimentation with unconscious behavior, especially concerning patients experiencing mental problems (see Freud, 1962, 1964a, 1964b, 1964c, 1979). Psychoanalytic theories known from Freud's thinking, namely stages of personality development, dream psychology (Freud, 1950), sexual theory (Freud, 1949), personality structure, id, ego, superego (Freud, 1958), desire for life and desire for death (Schmidt-Hellerau, 2001; Carel, 2007), and the Oedipus complex (Rudnytsky, 1987). The theory put forward by Freud is not only used by psychologists, but also by anthropologists, sociologists, and even cultural studies researchers.

The life instinct is the instinct that makes humans survive, which Freud called Eros (Freud, 1961, 55). In contrast to the life instinct is the death instinct. The death instinct is a person's subconscious desire to want death (Eigen, 1995). Freud held the view that "the goal of all life is death" (Freud, 1961, 32). If traced historically, Freud's psychoanalytic view (Dufresne, 2006) regarding death was inspired by Nietzschean. The death instinct appears in humans "to follow their path to death" (Freud, 1920, 33). When someone feels uncomfortable with their life, death is the wisest thing.

Ragland (2013) explains that death energy is energy that supports the power to live so that the urge to die in a person is sometimes stronger than the urge to live. In Yalom's (2008) view, death is a central theme in the field of psychology. However, many people try to 'shut it up' because death is an abstractive thing. In facing death, a person will experience anxiety as a form of helplessness (Freud, 1936). When someone experiences death anxiety, they will use ego defense mechanisms as a form of resistance to death. However, some people psychologically face death calmly.

In a psychological context, "life eats death and death eats life" (Eigen, 1995, 281). Therefore, on the one hand, a person desires to live forever. Even though, he was diverting himself from going towards death temporarily. This diversion is channeled through ambition, wealth, position, and entertainment. However, in the end, death will still come.

METHODS

Researchers use qualitative methods because in this research the dominant use of verbal rather than statistical data presentation (Creswell & Creswell, 2020; Ahmadi, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023; Ahmadi et al., 2023, 2019) and interpretation (Saini & Shlonsky, 2012) in depth. Data collection was carried out using documentary literary text techniques. The data source used refers to the novel by Nawal El Saadawi, *Women at Point Zero*.

The data analysis technique is carried out using the following stages. First, researchers identified things related to sex and death in literary texts. Second, researchers classified data originating from identifying literary texts related to sex and death. Third, the research carried out data reduction so that the main data was selected to be used as research data. Fourth, the researcher interpreted the data using a psychoanalytic perspective. Fifth, researchers present data based on interpretation. Sixth, verification of research results is carried out. Fifth, researchers carried out triangulation so that the research results were more in-depth. For triangulation, researchers referred to Flick's views (2018a, 2018b, 2018c), holding discussions with professionals who have expertise in the field of literature, especially those related to theory and methodology.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Women, Prostitutes, and Sexual Exploitation

Women in *Women at Point Zero* are narrated as sex objects. This can be seen in the figure of Firdaus, a woman who experienced sexual abuse from when she was little

until she was an adult. First, when he was a child, he was sexually harassed by his male friend named Mohammadain (Saadawi, 2008, 12). Second, when he was growing up, Firdaus was abused by his uncle. Firdaus was touched, fondled, and she was also fucked by her uncle (Saadawi, 2008, 13). When she married Sheikh Mahmoud, Firdaus felt that the sexual relationship she had with her husband was like oppression and sexual exploitation (Saadawi, 2008, 45). He felt no sexual pleasure at all. While running away from her husband, Firdaus met a man who seemed to be kind to her and helped her from evil men. However, this did not match what Firdaus thought. These men are all bastards, bastards, and only think about sexual desires. A man named Bayoumi helped provide a place for Firdaus to stay. However, it turns out that Firdaus was made into a sex slave and she was sold to another man. Not only that, but he was also held captive in a small room and physically tortured by Bayoumi (Saadawi, 2008, 53) which made Firdaus feel like a prisoner.

Likewise, a man named Syarifa, at first he was kind, helped Firdaus who was stranded. He dressed Firdaus as a beautiful woman, but Syarifa also made Firdaus a prostitute. "He gave a short laugh and kissed me on the lips. 'Sharifa's fooling you, and making money out of you, while all you get out of it is the pain" (Saadawi, 2008, 62). In such conditions, Ibrahim comes, a man who is idealistic and intends to free Firdaus from the trap of prostitution. It turned out that Ibrahim was worse than the other men, he just wanted to have sexual relations with Firdaus for free. This can be seen in the quote "His hand started to tremble again as he extracted another ten-pound note from the wallet. I realized that he had not been in love with me, but came to me every night only because he didn't have to pay" (Saadawi, 2008, 96). The figure of the police who are considered to be public servants is not the case. When he met Firdaus, the police wanted to have sexual relations with him. He didn't pay it and even said "Why. I haven't done anything (Saadawi, 2008, 67). Not only that, the police revealed that they were ready to arrest Firdaus because she was a prostitute. In the next narrative, Firdaus becomes a successful prostitute. However, suddenly he was visited by a pimp, his name was Marzouk. He was a cruel pimp. Over time, Firdaus felt pressured by the pimp, and finally, he killed Marzouk (Saadawi, 2008, 104). She doesn't want her life to always be in the shadow of a pimp.

Concerning being a woman, Firdaus experienced a lot of sexual harassment from men. This can be seen from the treatment of Firdaus by her childhood friend, uncle, husband, pimp, and police. Sexual harassment and violence often occur among women (Bellizzi & Molek, 2021). Sexual harassment and violence often occur in societies that

strongly adhere to patriarchal culture (Applin, Simpson, & Curtis, 2023; Walker, 1999), eastern culture (Dasgupta, 2021; Macleod, Reynolds, & Delate, 2024), and culture lower/poor class society (Eralp & Gokmen, 2023; Anderson, 2010; Solomon et al., 2009). This fact shows that women are the ones who experience the most harassment compared to men.

Referring to the views of Dikmen & Cankaya (2021), 37% of married women experience sexual harassment and violence. They, married women, do not want to divorce their husbands, even though they experience sexual harassment and violence. This is because women do not want to be widowed or do not want their children to grow up without a father. This shows that sexual harassment and violence against women often occur in marriage (see Yüksel-Kaptanoğlu, Türkyılmaz, & Heise, 2012; Boy & Kulczycki, 2008). Through this marriage, a husband can carry out arbitrary actions, continuous harassment, and sexual violence against his wife.

In connection with Firdaus' life journey as a prostitute, she experienced a lot of sexual/non-sexual violence and she was not even paid by her clients. Women as prostitutes experience more sexual and non-sexual violence (Zara et al., 2022; West et al., 2022; Armstrong, 2019; Benson, 1998) compared to non-prostitute women. This violence can even result in death/murder (Salfati, James, & Ferguson, 2008; Beech, Fisher & Ward, 2005). There are not many cases of sexual harassment, sexual/non-sexual violence, and even murder of prostitutes because these cases are rarely uncovered and reported to the police. Apart from that, cases of sexual/non-sexual violence against prostitutes are covered up because sometimes they involve the names of officers who are 'backing' in the prostitution complex. Apart from that, Firdaus, who became a prostitute, was also exploited by the man who was her pimp. Firdaus is required to work as a prostitute and cannot refuse orders from her pimp. If he refused orders from his pimp that Firdaus would serve customers, he would be beaten (Saadawi, 2008,62). This makes Firdaus unable to become a prostitute, even though she earns a lot of money from this job.

Women and the Death Desire

The desire for death in psychoanalysis is a desire that everyone has. In the psychoanalytic view, this desire is called Thanatos (Reshe, 2023; Geyskens & Haute, 2020; Valdrè, 2018). In a more macro context, a person's desire to commit suicide hurt themselves, or kill other people. Someone who believes/adheres to a certain religion sometimes commits suicide as a path to authenticity. They commit suicide not because

of sadness, trauma, or because they are not strong enough to live. However, they commit suicide happily because they carry out rituals related to their religion.

In *Women at Point Zero*, the character Firdaus, who becomes a prostitute, feels depressed when she is beaten by her pimp. Apart from that, as a prostitute, she wants to be free. Don't want to live in the shackles of a pimp who is always a parasite in his life. The pimp only asked Firdaus for money. It was Firdaus who worked hard as a prostitute and the pimp did not work. In this case, the pimp is like a blackmailer.

Firdaus, who was tired of the violence, extortion, and criminal acts committed by Marzouk (pimp), put up resistance. When he was beaten by the pimp, Firdaus put up a fight. When the pimp brought a knife that would be used to stab Firdaus. It turns out, Firdaus was able to defeat the pimp and Firdaus killed the pimp. This can be seen in the following quote.

"I raised the knife and buried it deep in his neck, pulled it out of his neck and then thrust it deep into his chest, pulled it out of his chest and plunged it deep into his belly (Saadawi, 2008, 104)."

This quote shows that Firdaus, as a prostitute, has a desire to kill. Although, at first he had no desire to kill Marzouk. However, in the end, Firdaus killed Marzouk. The fact of the murder committed by Firdaus, from a psychoanalytic perspective, is that the desire to kill arises when a person is in a state of urgency (Fromm, 2013, 2017). Apart from that, the desire to kill is carried out for self-defense.

Firdaus has killed the most hated person. She, as a woman, had channeled her death wish toward others. For killing, Firdaus received the death penalty. When he was asked to appeal to the president not to be sentenced to death, Firdaus did not want to (4). This shows that Firdaus as a woman would rather die than live. The desire for death that appears in Firdaus is the desire of someone who longs for death. He prefers death because death is the path of truth. Through death, one can be free from the shackles of the world.

CONCLUSION

The women in *Women at Point Zero* demonstrate the following. First, women experience sexual exposure and violence perpetrated by men. Not only that, many women discuss sex and sexual violence when they become wives. This is because a wife in the family is inferior to the power of a man as a husband. In this case, women must obey their husbands. This condition occurs in societies that support patriarchal culture, eastern societies, and religious societies. Second, female prostitutes experience a lot of sexual exposure, sexual violence, and sexual exploitation. Third, if viewed from the

aspect of the desire for death, Firdaus is a woman who murders a man who has been shackling her freedom. On the other hand, the guilty Firdaus must also be sentenced to death. In this context, Firdaus does not want to ask the president to be released or pardoned. He prefers death. This study globally shows that literature as fiction can also represent the lives of women who experience exposure, sexual violence, and at the final stage, resistance against the men who oppress them.

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