

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

A. Background of the Research

Woman at Point Zero was first published in Beirut in 1973, originally in Arabic, written by an Egypt psychiatrist and novelist, Nawal El Saadawi. She was one of nine children in the family and was born in October 27, 1931 at Kafr Tahla. Her father was a civil servant, and her mother came from an upper-class Egyptian family that made unusual decision to send all of their children, boys and girls to school. El Saadawi excelled in school, and in 1949 she entered medical school at the University of Cairo. There, she met Ahmed Helmi and eventually married him and had a daughter but they divorced in the following year. In her educational achievement, El Saadawi became a doctor in 1955.

After her first divorce, she got pressure from her family to marry dr. Rashad Bey who disapproved of El Saadawi's writing and her feminist viewpoints. Rashad Bey gave her option to choose him as a husband or her writing and finally she chose her writing so they divorced. She then moved to New York to attend Columbia University, where she obtained

her master's degree in public health in 1966. By this time, El Saadawi had married her third husband, Sherif Hetata, a doctor and novelist too who supported her feminist view. He is the one who translated El Saadawi's books into English, *Imra'atun 'Inda Nuqtati Al-Sifri* included, was translated in 1983 then entitled *Woman at Point Zero* which is consist of three chapters and 108 pages, published by Zed Book Ltd, London.

Returned to Egypt, El Saadawi rose to become Egypt's Director of Public Health. She also worked as the editor-in-chief of *Health* magazine and assistant general secretary for Egypt's Medical Association. El Saadawi researched women and neuroses at the Medical School of Ain Shams University. During this time, she did extensive research on women in prisons, traveling often to *Qanatir Women's Prison*.

Working as a rural Egypt doctor, she experienced numerous problems both physically and psychologically faced by countryside people especially women. This is awaking her to write the unreading patriarchal practices for over decades that are deemed as taboo in the society. Her first book *Woman and Sex* published in 1972-invited confrontation because in some chapter of the books she wrote against Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and linked to

sexual problems to economic and political oppression. As a result, she is nearly in dispute with the authorities because of her fiction and scientific writing but she keeps fighting against Female Genital Mutilation for more than fifty years and tries to reexamine the social values, which is used to interpret from patriarchy point of view.

This book finally banned in Egypt. In addition, she lost her job in the Egyptian Ministry of Health in 1972. These obstacles did not quit her to keep writing and vice versa, the following year was the birth of her phenomenal novel entitled *Woman at Point Zero*, which is made based on the true story. The major character of the novel executed at the end of 1974. The novel soon accepts sharp critics and the author was in dispute with Egypt government even she was imprison, at the prostitute ward exactly, under the decree issued by Sadat on 5 September 1981. From 1988 to 1993, her name figured on death lists issued by Islamic fundamentalist groups who objected to her outspoken feminism and her unapologetic criticism of some aspects of Islam and political organizations. This is one of the consequences of the path she had chosen as a feminist author whose view was in the opposite side to the

authorities. She released at the end of November 1981 after two months' Sadat assassination.

El Saadawi however internationally acclaimed, she had been rewarded several national and international literary prizes, lectured in many universities, and participated in national and international conferences. On May 3 2009, she presented the Arthur Miller Lecture at the Pen International Literary Festival in New York. Her works has been translated into more than thirty languages and some of them are taught in a number of universities in different countries.

El Saadawi writes more than forty books fiction and non-fiction. The following are her chronological novels; *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* (Cairo, 1958), *The Absent One* (Cairo, 1969), *Two Women in One* (Cairo, 1971), *Woman at Point Zero* (Beirut, 1973), *The Death of the Only Man on Earth* (Beirut, 1975), *The Children's Circling Song* (Beirut, 1976), *The Fall of the Imam* (Cairo,1987) ,*Ganat and the Devil* (Beirut,1991), *Love in the Kingdom of Oil* (Cairo, 1993), *The Novel*, Dar El Hilal Publishers Cairo 2004, *Zeina* , Novel , *Dar Al Saqi* (Beirut, 2009). Her non fiction books are *Women and Sex* (Cairo, 1972), *Men and Sex* (Cairo, 1973). *The Naked Face of Arab Women* (Cairo, 1974), *Women and Neurosis* (Cairo, 1975), *On Women* (Cairo, 1986), *A New*

Battle in Arab Women Liberation (Cairo, 1992), Collection of Essays (Cairo, 1998), Collection of Essays (Cairo, 2001), Breaking Down Barriers (Cairo, 2004). All originals in Arabic. Many have been translated into English, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Italian, Dutch, Finnish, Indonesian, Japanese, Iranian, Turkish, Urdu, and other 30 languages.

Back to her career as a doctor and psychiatric, she was astonished by women's numerous problems both physically or psychologically. As a psychiatrist, she is really concern about it and writes a non-fiction book in order to tell the society about the oppression of women in which became the central theme of her books. Her profession leads her to make a research about woman and neurosis in *Qanatir* prison where she met Firdaus, who inspired the major character in *Woman at Point Zero*, a prostitute condemned to death for killing the man who would have been her pimp. Firdaus is the major character in which function as second narrator as well after El Saadawi, the first narrator opens the story. Firdaus then continued the story and narrated her own story and El Saadawi took part to close the story at last. It is about a young woman who flees her abusive husband and becomes a prostitute, then an office worker, and then finally decided as a prostitute again based on her free will.

She finally kills a man who forces her to accept him as her pimp. Note that when El Saadawi meets Firdaus, she is awaiting for death row in Qanatir prison, Cairo.

The next character is Firdaus's Uncle; the man who takes Firdaus in after her parents death and arranges her married to a sixty year-old man. Bayoumi; the coffee shop owner. Firdaus meets him after she flees her husband's beatings. Bayoumi is kind to Firdaus at first, but then he begins to beat her. Eventually, he locks her in the apartment and allows his friends to have their way with her. Di'aa; the journalist and onetime client of Firdaus. This person plays significant role in changing Firdaus' mind. The one who tells her she is not respectable and prompting Firdaus to give up prostitution and begin working at an office. Fatheya; Firdaus's friend from work. Fatheya suspects that Firdaus is in love with Ibrahim. Fawzy; a male friend of Sharifa's. Fawzy wants to take Firdaus with him and become her pimp, but Sharifa is already making money off of Firdaus and won't let him. She runs away from Sharifa's house and sets up her own prostitution business. Hala; a toddler. Hala is the youngest of Firdaus's uncle's children, and the only one who is kind to Firdaus. Ibrahim; one of Firdaus's colleagues at her office, and a "revolutionary." Firdaus falls in love with him, and they have intimate relationship but ends when she

overhears that he is engaged to be married. She is definitely disappointed and begins to run in prostitution business again. Iqbal; Firdaus's teacher at secondary school. Mohammadain; the little boy from Firdaus's childhood, with whom she used to play "bride and bridegroom." This is the first time that Mohammadain and Firdaus experience sexual pleasure. The Prison Doctor; the doctor at Firdaus's prison. The doctor filled out an appeal for Firdaus (to commute her sentence from death to life imprisonment), but she refused to sign it. Saadia; Firdaus's uncle's servant girl. Sharifa Salah el Dine; a high-class prostitute who takes Firdaus in and turns her into a prostitute. Sheikh Mahmoud; Firdaus's husband for a brief period of time. And the last character is Wafeya; Firdaus's friend at school.

The story of *Woman at Point Zero* starts with the major conflicts when Nawal attempts to get Firdaus to relate her life story, and Firdaus struggles to attain some sort of dignity as she grows up. Firdaus finally agree to meet El Saadawi then begin to tell her story of life. It begins from Firdaus extremely poor life as a peasant family in the countryside. She experienced Female Genital Mutilation as a tradition in the countryside. After her parents' death, she is sent to her uncle in Cairo. Her humble life in the countryside soon changes to city life. Everything is running well and she is

allowed to go to school. There is a little bit changing after her uncle's marriage. Firdaus is sent to a boarding house. She loves books and often spends the time reading many kinds of book. Firdaus is recognized as a smart student in the boarding house moreover she gets an award at the end of her graduation but unfortunately, her uncle does not come so her teacher, Miss Iqbal receives it for her.

She is back to live to her uncle's house just for a while. One day she heard her uncle's and aunt's plan to marry her to a sixty-year-old uncle, Sheikh Mahmoud. One night, she tries to run away but returns home after terrified by a strange man who approaches her in the street. She is forced to marry Sheikh Mahmoud finally. During her marriage, she feels the oppression indeed. She cannot stand anymore and after one bad beating, she runs away. The story goes on about the escape journey of Firdaus started from Sheikh Mahmoud's house. She becomes a prostitute at first then Di'aa, a journalist *wakes her up* to be a respectable woman. She leaves prostitution and learns to be respectable woman by working in an office. There she falls in love with Ibrahim, a young revolutionary and is unfortunately abandoned which makes her upset and disappointed then consequently contributes significant changing in her life for she decides become a prostitute again.

Firdaus is a free woman until one day a man namely Marzouk insist her to be her pimp. She cannot stand anymore and wants to run away but Marzouk tries to stop her and threat her with a knife. They are in quarrel for awhile then ended by the knife. After killing him, she was taking a walk when a luxury car approached her then made a deal. He claims as Arab prince and offers her three thousand bugs. After Firdaus sleeps with a prince, she gets the money but tears them up. The prince frightened and cried for help and police come to arrest her, not him. The authority sentenced her to death for murdering. Later on, Firdaus meets with Nawal and tells her life story.

El Saadawi's style of story telling however corresponds directly to one particular significant trend. It is flashback style. She begins the story with a scene, introducing to the readers that something is happening. She is so curious with this female prisoner who denies all visitors and will not speak to anyone. She tries to persuade her for she is definitely sure that there must be something happened. Unfortunately, it is true because Firdaus finally agrees to see her just before the authority executes her by morning. Then the author goes on to relate the preceding social and historical facts and later on, the book resume the tale.

This phenomenal novel however accepts various responses in Egypt and outside. One of the public responses comes from *New York Times Book Review* who states, "Nawal El Saadawi writes with directness and passion, transforming the systematic brutalization of peasants and of women into powerful allegory." Another response comes from *Labour Herald* who says, "A powerful indictment of the treatment of women in many parts of the Middle East." *New Internationalist* makes one statement about it, "Scorching." *The Guardian* states, "A dramatic symbolized version of female revolt against the norms of the Arab world." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* says, "El Saadawi has a flair for melodrama and mystery" and *Middle East International* states, "Woman at Point Zero ... should begin the long march toward a realistic and sympathetic portrayal of Arab women and Arab women writers."

Whereas audience responses are also various about *Woman at Point Zero*. Karim Alrawi Afkar says, "... a highly readable book, it should also be said that as long as the principles of honesty, justice, freedom and love are not the qualities that guide and inform all relationship between men and women, it will remain a potent reminder of the suffering that many have had to endure." While the other response

comes from male reformers like Qasim Amin who visited France and returned to Egypt with a clear objection against women's reform, believing it was indirect violation of the laws of the Quran, or ordinations by the shariah.

There are some factors affected the various responses of the novel publication. It is closely related to the type of society, the economic level of life, the social class of the community, literary tradition and some sort. Thus, it concerned to the social background of the author before and after become a novelist. El Saadawi in this case is an educated person for having college education as a psychiatrist. Regarded to the publication of the novel, it is undeniable that the author and publisher are complementing each other. Publisher will considerate a literary work based on the market taste sometimes. *Woman at Point Zero* deemed a marketable novel for it is in the right time to publish, hand in hand to second wave feminist movement.

The rise of second-wave feminism, associated with Nawal El Saadawi, whose writings took feminism in a new direction. Her feminism, calling for a social, economic, and cultural revolution, was not initially articulated within an Islamic frameworks, although she drew on certain Islamic argument (Badran, 2009: 150).

Woman at Point Zero surely gets sharp response from the government as well. In the beginning of 1970s, El Saadawi took lead in bringing the issue of Female Genital Mutilation onto public agenda and becomes a long debate between her and the authorities. The authorities claims that her fiction and scientific writing calls instability for there is a need to keep close her mouth by banning her books and quit her career from Egyptian Ministry of Health and also closes down her magazine and her social organization. Above all, she is aware of all the jeopardy as a feminist author. Badran (2009: 150) says, "Because she enters an area of taboo she also evoked intense popular criticism. Often misunderstood, her feminism was associated with encouraging the immorality of women and violating religion." *Woman at Point Zero* is once again also acclaimed as her most powerful novel. Her critical writing both literary work and scientific work however invite different responses and interpretations.

Above all, what makes *Woman at Point Zero* interesting is in the rebellious sense through the major character against dominated culture. It is fixed on the major character's decision to say firmly that she only kills criminal and she believed that the authorities do not fear her knife but the truth she possessed. She will never give up searching something that would fill her with pride, and makes her

superior to anyone else, including kings, princes and rulers. In so doing, she refused to kneel down under patriarchy's authorities for she denies signing for an appeal to the President because she believes that death is the only way she can finally be free. She says, "I have triumph over both life and death because I no longer desire to live, nor do I any longer fear to die. I want nothing. I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. Therefore I am free" (El Saadawi, 1983: 101).

To sum up, El Saadawi tries to talk about her rebellion against Egypt patriarchal culture practices through Firdaus character. This novel however challenges reaction from the readers and leaves significant effect as well. By reading the novel, the readers encounter the political, societal, and emotional issues facing women in modern Egypt: female genital mutilation (FGM), violence against woman, education and economic constraint, womanhood in the Islamic world, prostitution, and much more. Though controversial, this novel however has become sources for many studies for over decades.

B. Literature Review

The researcher finds several literature reviews concerning with El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*. The first one is conducted by Rene Christine Gunardi (2005) entitled

“A Study on men's oppression and its effect toward Firdaus which leads to her search for self-esteem in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*.” Her research focuses on men’s oppression toward woman. Her finding is that the men in Firdaus’s life make her suffer in their own way, especially through their sexual desires. The suffer life leads her to the self esteem and finally it comes to the conclusion that the previous researcher finds out that women, especially in rural world like Egypt, have to go through a lot of oppressions. However, they should have courage to find their own dignity, overcome their fears in facing those oppressions, and defense their right as women.

The second one is conducted by Lidya Pega Simbolon (2010) entitled “Analisis Struktural dan Semiotik Dalam Novel *Perempuan di Titik Nol* karya Nawal El Saadawi. The focus of this study is the structural elements, which consist of theme, setting, plot and point of view. Whereas semiotic study covers icon, index, and symbol. The finding of the research is one quotation for the theme, five quotations from Firdaus’ speech, two quotations for Firdaus’ father, her uncle and Morzauk, one quotation for Firdaus’ mother, Sharifa and Fawji, four quotations for Syeikh Mahmoud, three quotations for Bayoumi and Ibrahim. There are seven quotations for the

setting of place, two quotations for setting of time, and three quotations for social setting. There are four quotations for the resolution, six quotations for exposition, and seven quotations for complication. The finding for Semiotic analysis is that there are four icons represented by four characters; Firdaus' father, Firdaus' uncle and Syeikh Mahmoud. The index covers four signs; Firdaus, Firdaus' father, Firdaus' uncle and Syeikh Mahmoud whereas symbol consists of three signs; Firdaus' father, Syeikh Mahmoud and Marzouk. For the setting of place, there is only one quotation for each sign. The writer does not find any quotation for setting of time and social setting. She also does not find semiotic sign such like icon, index and symbol for the theme.

The third one is conducted by Lina Azizah (2008) entitled "Perspektif Jender Dalam Novel *Perempuan di Titik Nol* Karya Nawal El Saadawi: Tinjauan Sastra Feminis." It focuses on the gender perspective, which underlined the life experience of the major character. Her finding is that there is violence physically or psychologically. It describes clearly in the story that Firdaus accepts minor stereotype since children in family and public space in her adulthood. She also has less right even for a simple matter and totality

obedient to her husband that reflects subordination position in the family.

From those previous studies, the researcher can summarize them as follow; the first research focuses on the men's oppression that leads the major character to reach self-esteem. The second research concerned with the structural element and signs. The third research focuses on gender perspective that explains the inequality in several aspects.

Concerning with those literature reviews, as far as the present researcher concerns, there is no research, which focuses on two perspectives; Reception Theory and Feminist Theory yet so the present researcher takes the same object that brings feminist issues and elaborate both theories to know the reaction of the readers toward the novel.

C. Research Questions

From the previous background, the present researcher proposes two questions:

1. How is the protest expressed in the novel?
2. What is the effect of the protest?

D. Objective of the Research

The objective of this descriptive qualitative research is to reveal the revolt against patriarchal culture in Modern Egypt and to get to know the response of the readers toward literary work.

E. Benefit of the Research

There are two benefits of this research.

1. Practical Benefit

This research is hopefully beneficial for the researcher to get more sensitive grasp about patriarchal culture practices in variety of ways. It is also beneficial to get to know the reader's creative role in giving the meaning of literary work based on different life experience from different reading mode on.

2. Theoretical Benefit

The importance of readers' role in literary theory has long been acknowledged. This research uses Reception Theory which emphasize on the reader's *power* to give meaning the literary work thus different interpretation arises naturally. Feminist Theory is used for analyses that scrutinize the rebellion against domineering culture within Egypt society. It is hopefully beneficial for the readers to reveal the horizon of knowledge

especially in feminist issues and also to learn social and cultural background from different country and to give a deep understanding toward Egypt culture, which is probably a little bit different or even similar to the reader's culture. It also gives description that literary works influenced society. From this finding, the present researcher recommends for reader who is interested in human right or woman right and invites the reader using discourse analysis in this literary work.