

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In the introduction, five sub-chapters are discussed, including the background of the study, research questions, objectives of the study, significance of the study, and scope and limitations of the study. These five things need to be explained because they can provide important information about this study.

1.1 Background of the Study

The issue of women in literature is an interesting topic to discuss because these works often reflect the social realities experienced by women in various cultural and historical contexts (Wellek & Warren, 1949, p. 89). Literature serves as a mirror, depiction, or reflection of societal life, where the experiences, struggles, and injustices faced by women can be deeply illustrated through literary works. (Shalini & Samundeswari, 2017, p. 170).

One of the literary works that becomes the focus of this study is *Woman at Point Zero* by Nawal El Saadawi, a novel that offers a powerful perspective on women's struggle against social injustice, particularly the gender stereotypes that restrict Firdaus's freedom in navigating her life. To gain a deeper understanding of how these stereotypes are formed and operate within society, Hentschel et al. (2019, p. 2) explain that gender stereotypes are generalizations about men and women, including the characteristics attributed to them based on socially constructed notions of masculinity and femininity. These generalizations create specific social expectations that often reinforce traditional gender roles and hinder women from accessing positions or life choices beyond the boundaries set by societal norms.

This view is reinforced by the ideas of Swim and Hyers (2009, p. 411), who state that stereotypes are essentially beliefs or expectations about the traits and behaviors associated with certain social groups, including men and women. These stereotypes not only limit individual identity but also uphold the social systems that maintain gender inequality.

This novel is analyzed using the sexism theory from Swim and Hyers (2009) to identify various forms of gender-based injustices experienced by the main character, as well as to demonstrate how sexist practices are reflected in social structures that oppress women. To understand how gender stereotypes not only emerge as social views but also as part of a broader structure, Swim and Hyers (2009, p. 407) emphasize that sexism encompasses individual attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, as well as practices carried out within organizations, institutions, and cultures, which reflect negative judgments of a person based on their gender or support status inequalities between men and women. This definition shows that sexism is not merely a matter of personal attitudes but is also systemic, embedded in various aspects of social and cultural life that unconsciously shape how society treats women.

According to bell hooks in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984, p. 5), sexism is a system of domination and oppression that is institutionalized and operates through patriarchal social and cultural structures. However, hooks prefer to use the terms "exploitation" and "discrimination" to describe the general condition of women in a society. Sexism does not operate alone but collaborates with other social forces like capitalism, resulting in various forms of oppression against women. Consequently, the experience of women with sexism is highly varied, depending on factors such as class, race, religion, and sexual orientation.

Patriarchy is a social system that positions men as the primary holders of power, leading to the subordination of women. Sexism, in this context, encompasses the attitudes, beliefs, and actions that uphold this inequality. Kate Manne explains that sexism is a branch of patriarchal ideology that justifies and rationalizes the patriarchal social order (Manne, 2017, p. 79). In other words, sexism reinforces patriarchy by instilling the belief that men are superior to women. This system continues through both overt discrimination and cultural norms that maintain traditional gender roles. In line with this, Pleck (1974, p. 82) states that within a patriarchal system, men are often positioned as dominant

figures, while women are frequently subordinate to roles with limited rights and freedoms.

This situation reflects how the main character, Firdaus, in the novel *Woman at Point Zero* by Nawal El Saadawi, directly experiences the impact of gender stereotypes and gender inequality deeply rooted in a patriarchal society. Based on the true story of an Egyptian woman sentenced to death for killing a pimp, the novel portrays how Firdaus, from a young age, lives in a male-dominated environment, starting from the violence inflicted by her father to the harassment by other men around her.

When forced to marry a cruel old man, Firdaus not only endured physical and sexual violence but also lost control over her own life, reflecting how gender norms and stereotypes place women in a weak and submissive position. Gender inequality becomes evident when Firdaus has no choice but to leave her marriage and enter the world of prostitution in order to survive. Although looked down upon by society, this profession gave her space to reclaim control over her body and life.

Nevertheless, despite having more freedom, Firdaus still lives within a male-dominated social structure that treats women as objects. Firdaus's ultimate act of resistance occurs when she kills the pimp who exploited her, a symbolic action rejecting submission to male power. Although sentenced to death, Firdaus feels free because she finally makes decisions based on her own will. This story demonstrates how gender stereotypes and inequalities not only socially limit women but also structurally oppress them.

The writer found several previous studies that utilized Nawal El Saadawi's novel *Woman at Point Zero*. The first study, titled "*Women's Resistance and Empowerment in Nawal El Saadawi's Woman at Point Zero (1975) and Alice Walker's The Color Purple (1982)*" by Araoudiou Anissa and Dadoun Mokrane (2022), employed a feminist approach with the theoretical framework of Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. This study analyzed the sexual experiences and the oppression faced by women in both works. The second study, titled "*Narrating Resistance Against Gender Violence In Nawal El Saadawi's Woman*

at Point Zero" by Dr. Shradha Gupta (2022), also used a feminist approach. It analyzed the oppression and victimization of women within a patriarchal Muslim cultural context.

The third study, written by Istifadah and Wahyu Indah Mala Rohmana, titled "*Patriarchal Hegemony in the Novel Woman at Point Zero by Nawal El Saadawi: A Feminism Study and Its Correlation with Islam*" (2022), used literary criticism as its method of analysis. This study focused on sociological analysis and interpretation of the literary work, employing Sylvia Walby's six structures of patriarchy theory and Antonio Gramsci's theory to analyze how patriarchy and social power are depicted in the studied literary work. The fourth study, written by Arin Suryaningsih and Suminto A. Sayut, titled "*Representation of Female Characters in the Novel Woman at Point Zero by Nawal El Saadawi using the Sara Mills Perspective Approach*" (2023), used Sara Mills' perspective approach to describe the representation of female characters in the novel, focusing on subject-object positions. Additionally, it analyzed how readers position these female characters, particularly in the context of injustice, violence, and stereotypes experienced by the main character.

The writer also found previous studies using different sources of data but the same theory, namely the study titled "*Sexist Socialization Experienced by Female Protagonists in Anthology Short Story Translated by Dayla Cohen-Mor*" (2022) by Ulfatul Munawwaroh and Suci Suryani. The study focuses on identifying sexist socialization against women by examining the experiences of female protagonists in the anthology *Arab Women Writers*, translated by Dayla Cohen-Mor. The theory used for this study is feminist theory, specifically the concept of *from margin to center* by bell hooks (1984).

This study differs from previous studies in its approach to analyzing Nawal El Saadawi's novel *Woman at Point Zero*. While previous studies employed feminist approaches and focused on aspects such as women's resistance, empowerment, and oppression within patriarchal contexts, this study seeks to provide a more comprehensive analysis by integrating broader social and economic perspectives. Specifically, this study examines how societal attitudes,

social constructions, and institutional practices shape and sustain gender stereotypes that affect the life of Firdaus, the main character in the novel.

The analysis is conducted through the lens of sexism theory as described by Swim and Hyers (2009), which views sexism as attitudes, beliefs, and social practices that reflect negative evaluations of individuals based on gender and support unequal status between men and women. Additionally, this study draws on the ideas of bell hooks (1984), who sees sexism as a system of domination and oppression that is institutionalized and operates through patriarchal social and cultural structures. The novelty of this study lies in its in-depth analysis of how gender stereotypes are formed and function through patriarchy, as well as how Firdaus challenges these constructions through her struggle against a system that confines women's roles and identities.

The thesis statement of this study is to identify how gender stereotypes are experienced by the main character in *Woman at Point Zero* by Nawal El Saadawi. Using the lens of sexism theory as explained by Swim and Hyers (2009) and bell hooks (1984), this study analyzes how patriarchy plays a role in shaping and sustaining gender stereotypes that restrict women in various aspects of life. The aim of this study is to provide a deeper understanding of the experiences of women living in poverty and under socio-economic pressure, and how these factors reinforce the social constructions that place women in subordinate positions through gender stereotypes.

1.2 Research Questions

1. How is a woman stereotyped in *Woman at Point Zero*?
2. What role do economic and social factors play in *Woman at Point Zero*?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze how Nawal El Saadawi portrays gender stereotypes through the character of Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero*.
2. To examine the influence of economic and social factors in shaping and reinforcing gender stereotypes in the patriarchal society depicted in *Woman at Point Zero*.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study holds both theoretical and practical significance, contributing to the understanding of gender stereotypes within the context of patriarchal societies, particularly through the Nawal El Saadawi's novel *Woman at Point Zero*. Theoretically, it aims to advance feminist discourse by employing the frameworks of Swim and Hyers (2009) and bell hooks (1984), thereby deepening the analysis of sexism and gender-based discrimination. By exploring how these theories explain the construction and perpetuation of gender stereotypes within patriarchal and socio-economic systems, this study enhances the understanding of systemic gender inequality and its manifestations in women's lives, especially through the experiences of Firdaus. Furthermore, this study seeks to fill a gap in the existing literature by integrating economic and social factors into the analysis of gender stereotypes. While previous studies have often emphasized gender oppression and resistance, this study provides a more comprehensive perspective by examining how socio-economic conditions contribute to the creation and reinforcement of gender-based assumptions and expectations, enriching feminist literary criticism with a deeper insight into the intersections of gender, class, and cultural norms.

The practical significance of this study is to raise public awareness and understanding of the issues of sexism and gender stereotyping faced by women, particularly within broader social and economic contexts. This study can serve as an educational and advocacy tool, promoting further discussion on women's rights and the need for structural reform in systems that perpetuate gender inequality. By highlighting Firdaus's story as a representation of real-world experiences, this study may inspire readers to become more empathetic and proactive in supporting gender equality and empowering women in society.

1.5 Scope and Limitation

This study explores how gender stereotypes in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, focusing on the experiences of the main character, Firdaus. By applying the sexism theory as described by Swim and Hyers (2009) and bell hooks (1984), the study investigates how patriarchal systems construct and reinforce gender stereotypes that affect Firdaus's identity and life choices. The scope of this study is limited to the analysis of gender stereotypes and their relation to social and economic structures in the novel. The limitation of this study lies in the relatively limited number of literary studies that specifically address gender stereotypes through the lens of sexism theory. Most existing study tends to focus on general feminist perspectives without deeply examining how gender roles and expectations are socially and structurally constructed within patriarchal frameworks.