



A Psychological Problem in Nawal El Saadawi's *Zeina*

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Abstract

This study is about the main character undergoing a psychological problem due to her past life experience in Nawal El Saadawi's *Zeina*. As a wife, she is marginalized because the community there interpret the Islamic teaching in a wrong way that a woman has no important roles in society. Accordingly, she has a mental disorder. Using psychology of literature supported by qualitative method in the analysis, the study finds that Bodour, the main character, possesses a mental disorder, a psychosis through facing the devil shadow as well as the imaginary figure she creates to amuse herself.

Keywords: psychology of literature, psychology, psychosis

INTRODUCTION

Everyone cannot escape from a psychological problem in their life (Hadju, 2018), like stress (Puspito, et. al, 2020) because such problem lies in the human's subconscious (Halifah, 2017). A psychological problem confronts a person when he/she is not able to solve their social problems or lack of self-confidence (Agustina, et. al, 2024), some of whose examples are worry, panic, fear and unhappiness (Larasati, et. al, 2022), feelings, emotions, logic and human behavior (Andriana, et. al, 2020). Though not easy, the person can solve their psychological problem (Umam, 2020).

The psychological problem discussed in this study is within a character in a literary work. Nurgiyantoro states that a psychological problem is confronted by a person or a character in a fictitious work (Chichi, et. al, 2021) as well as by a character in a movie (Yestanti, et. al., 2023). Then, the novel goes to *Zeina* by Nawal El Saadawi.

The novel tells about the main character, Bodour. She often gets conflicts with men surrounding in her live, especially her husband. Bodour often feels that

she always gets bad treatment or injustice from her husband, her father, and also from the government, which has the rule adopted from the Quran and Hadith (*Syariah*). She thinks that all men who stand and obey to government and religion may hurt and disturb the existence of women. She also feels that she always gets bad treatment by her husband as bad as her father. Such bad treatment leads the main character to have psychological problems. Since this study is psychological study in a literary work, the researcher, then, refers to psychology of literature.

Psychology of literature refers to the theory of the study of human's psyche in a literary work (Purwo, et. al, 2022). Mujihadi (2016) elaborates psychology of literature as the interdisciplinary science of psychology and literature as well as a branch of literature that views literature from psychology. Such a psychological view of literature can be focused on the author, the reader, or the characters within the literary work itself.

Psychological approach on literature means analyzing a literary work through psychological aspects within the literary work (Utari, e. al., 2023). The psychological aspects, then, refer to human behavior, includes feelings, emotions, thoughts, and desires (Khoirunisa, et. al, 2020). It can be done because there is a link between a fictitious work and psychanalysis (Monica, et. al, 2020). The psychological aspects within the literature can be found in Nawal El Saadawi's *Zeina*.

To get the gap of the study, the researcher refers to the following previous studies. Firstly, Saraswati, in her article, analyzes a psychological problem called anxiety. Using Freud's psychological analysis, the study finds that Hannah, the main character, undergoes anxiety pictured by her ego and superego. Secondly, Purwo, et.al, (2022) in their article analyzes another psychological problem called defense mechanism. Using defense mechanism theory, the study shows that the main character undergoes such defense mechanism as repression, denial, projection, displacement, and sublimation. Thirdly, Dewinta (2019) in her article analyzes psychological conflicts between father and son. Using psychoanalysis,

the study shows that ego and superego play important roles in making the main character undergo psychological conflicts.

From the previous studies above, it is clear that the researcher's study has the gap since none above uses psychology of literature as a theory. Thus, this is the reason why the researcher raises the topic of psychological problems in Nawal El Saadawi's *Zeina*. Therefore, the researcher's focus of study is in line with the objective as what symptoms of psychological problem and the causes of the psychological problem undergone by the main character, that become the novelty of the study through its psychology of literature theory.

METHODS

Research Approach

The method of the study is qualitative method referring to the meaningful social reality (Sugiyono, 2010). Besides, in qualitative method, words are worth application instead of numbers (Bogdan, 1982). Accordingly, the researcher is able to elaborate the social fact holistically through words though the social fact found is in a literary work.

Kind of Research

The researcher's study refers to literary study with Nawal El Saadawi's *Zeina* as the main resources for the analysis. The word quoted are related to the psychological problems undergone by the main character. It means that not all the things in the novel are worthy of quotation here.

Data Collection Technique

The researcher collects the data in a table in a note with two columns; the first column is with the data of the symptoms of the psychological problems and the second one is the causes of the psychological problems. Accordingly, the researcher is made easy by this kind of collection technique to analyze the issue.

Data Analysis

First of all, the researcher elaborates the former objective that is about the main character's psychological problem and second of all, the researcher

elaborates the causes of the psychological problems. Therefore, the researcher strongly believes that the main character, Bodour, undergoes psychological problems.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Psychosis Symptoms

It begins from the childhood of Bodour. When she was a child, she often gets the story of devil by her surrounding friend. As time goes by, her mind was filled with the curiousness of devil.

“At eleven, she saw the Devil’s face for the first time. As a child, she was always afraid of opening her eyes while asleep. When she was a little older, she became more curious and wished to see the features of the Devil: his nose, head, forehead, ears, and mouth. She sometimes felt the Devil’s breath on the nape of her neck while she lay prostrate. But she never had the courage to open her eyes to see him (...) She fell into a state of drowsiness as Satan tickled the sole of her foot. She feigned sleep so as to allow him to continue his flirtatious act. But by keeping this event a closely guarded secret from her parents, she became Satan’s partner in sin. She would bury her head in the pillow, stop her breath and pretend to be dead, thus encouraging him with her feigned death to continue, reaching the focal point buried in the folds of the flesh, deepinside the womb of existence.” (Saadawi, 2011, p.10)

The quotes above shows that Bodour occurs the horror experience in the first time. At that time Bodour is not definitely aware that the devil faced her is the real devil or only her illusion from her fear. She is very fear with the horror story from her friends. During that time Bodour often be alone herself in her room because to avoid the oppression rule from her father. With the loneliness causes she often imagine something that feared by her.

This occurrence is often repeated in Bodour’s life until she becomes an adult and gets married to Zakaria. She still does not believe that the guy is a devil who has the real essence. Bodour ever feel that the existence of devil has the real essence that can be felt by her senses of touch. Bodour is disturbed by the devil physically in her bedroom when she is sleeping.

“A mysterious force often woke Bodour in the middle of the night. She would feel a sharp-pointed finger stabbing her shoulder blade, a foot kicking her in the belly, a razor blade moving over her wrist, or a fist rising high and falling to give her a powerful slap. She would get up from her sleep, her eyes wide open, imagining it was her husband, Zakariah al-Khartiti, who was slapping her, or Badreya rising from the heap of pages near the bed to punch her hard. Bodour wanted to raise her hand to deal an equally powerful blow, but her white hand was too heavy to lift. Her short, fat arms were glued to her sides, her heart incarcerated within the cage of her ribs, and her liver removed through the long gash on her right side.” (Saadawi, 2011,p.20)

When she is sleeping in her bed with her husband, she feels her body is touched by devil. Bodour feels there is someone who kicks and slaps her with a powerful strength until she wakes up. Bodour supposes that this occurrence is done by her husband, but her husband is still asleep in the bed. At that time, Bodour tries to make sure that the devil is real or not by raising the devil's hand and removes it way from her body. But she cannot do that because she feels her body such has no power enough to remove the devil's Body.

The other physical touch which also mentioned in this novel as quotation bellow

“At night, Badreya touched her belly under the covers. She could feel the little heartbeats, the kicks of the tiny feet against the walls of her womb. She pressed with her hands to stop the sound and wrapped her fingers around the little neck to strangle it, wishing it were dead but at the same time hoping it might live to see the light of day. ... Bodour walked in the dark alleyways, dragged by Badreya like a cow being driven by a farmer. Her eyes didn't see the road ahead of her, because she was either blindfolded or fast asleep. Or because she had left her destiny in the hands of Badreya, who urged her to rebel.” (Saadawi, 2011, p.21)

In the quotation above, it shows that Bodour seems to feel the touch of the devil's hand in her womb when she has a non marital pregnant with Nessim. Her natural mind shows her that it is not her real fetus, but that case is caused by the hand of the devil. And she ever unconsciously walks alone in the wall street, she

feels that it is the devil who controlled her body to walk in the street. It is impossible for her if she walked without the consciousness of her mind.

Besides, another psychosis symptom undergone by Bodour is to make the imagenry figure (Badreya). Based on the researcher's analysis, the psychosis symptoms described above is the first wave of Bodour getting a disorder with her emotion and behavior. This case also can be said schizophrenia. In the condition of having pressure in her alive causes Bodour appearing the hallucination in her mind. Bodour's hallucination seems like a reality for Bodour. Bodour's hallucination is formed like a woman who is admired by Bodour. This hallucination becomes the imaginary figure for Bodour's life. The wide explanation of imaginary figure is going to discuss bellow

"Longer, doctor. Each day I ask myself why I still live with him. I can't make a serious decision, doctor. My friend Safi is much more courageous, for she got rid of her husband and is now free. Badreya is also more courageous ..."

"Badreya?"

"She was with me in primary school. We called her a child of sin and wrote her name on toilet walls."

Bodour struggled to open her eyes. The images and names were confused in her mind. She couldn't distinguish between reality and fiction. She lay on the couch, and the psychiatrist looked at her with sympathy." (Saadawi, 2011, p.69)

The quotation above shows that Bodour realizes she gets the mental disorder until she decides to have consultation in psychiatry. During the process of therapy doctor uses the questions to identify the psychological condition of Bodour. The doctor tries to get the information about Bodour's bad past time. During the therapy Bodour tells about the strange thing in her child. Bodour used to meet the hallucination creature. Therefore, Bodour feels something that follows her mind. Yet, when Bodour is child, she does not understand who is the follower of her mind. Bodour only let it flow in her life until adult. That illusion figure is imagined as the woman who has the courageous and strong character. That figure shows her courageousness to shake the world. At the beginning, Bodour was afraid with the existence of her illusion figure, but as the time is

running Bodour can adapt for her condition. Even more Bodour has admired her illusion figure.

When Bodour becomes adult, she has a writing hobby, then she becomes a writer of literary work. Bodour is a literary critic also. Bodour often writes the novel and short story. She writes the novel with the title "The Stolen Novel". Bodour writes a woman figure whose characteristic of her novel is the same as the illusion figure in her mind that Bodour gives the name "Badreya" in her novel. The interest thing from this case is the acknowledgement of Bodour claims that Badreya is the figure in her reality mind. Unfortunately, Bodour has lost her novel. Therefore, Bodour feels missing the valuable thing in her life.

"Badreya was only one of the characters in *The Stolen Novel*, but she lived in Bodour al-Damhiri's world as though she were a woman of flesh and blood. Bodour felt her lying next to her in bed or sitting with her in her study, gazing at her in silence as she read or wrote. They often exchanged words, fought together, and made up exactly as Bodour and her husband, Zakariah al-Khartiti, would. Badreya sometimes crossed out a few sentences she didn't like from the novel, at times even deleting or adding whole chapters. Sometimes she condemned herself to death by firing squad under the wheels of a train." (Saadawi, 2011,p.18)

The quotation above shows that Badreya is the Character of The Stolen Novel which is created by Bodour. She imagines that Badreya not only has a role in The Stolen novel, but Badreya looks like woman who has a physical essence in Bodour's reality. Badreya can contribute to Bodour's life. The portrait of reality essence is shown in the quotation above that when she is sleeping then is accompanied by Badreya who lies in her bed. Other case is proved when she is studying accompanied by Badreya who sits beside her. Even more, Badreya can correct and criticizes her writing of a novel project.

The existence of Badreya can be realized that she is not a human being. Badreya is the illusion that is like the ghost who has no physical body. Badreya only appears in Bodour's mind and dream.

"The reason was perhaps that Badreya was an ethereal presence, without a body, like the spirit of God or the Devil or the other

unseen entities. Badreya was an idea in the head of the sleeping Bodour, and she came to her during sleep. But when the light was on, she vanished." (Saadawi, 2011, p.73)

The quotation above shows that Badreya is the kind of the real presence, but she has a soul that can be felt by Bodour. In common sense, the term of Ghost is a creature that cannot be seen by a human being, but she has their own realm outside of this real world. That quotation also explains that Badreya always appears in her dream when she is sleeping.

The psychosis symptom of Bodour not only tends to the existence of illusion figure named Badreya, but there is either figure who appears in Bodour's mind.

"Badreya, the heroine of her novel, and Nessim might have left her alone and stopped chasing her. Those two ghosts lived on top of her bed. She saw them in the flesh lying next to her in bed, and when they left it, she saw them walking like shadows on the wall, going to and fro. They didn't leave the bedroom when she slept or the study when she sat at her desk spreading the papers in front of her." (Saadawi, 2011, p.67)

In the paragraph above shows that the other illusion figure is Nessim. He is her first love in college students. He becomes a person who gets admired by Bodour greatly because of his perfect physically and his critical attitude toward the political situation in Egypt. He has died when he commits the critical demonstration of government in Egypt. Bodour's love is too much. Nessim is always present in Bodour's mind and becomes an illusion figure. Therefore from paragraph above tells that the existence of Nessim is like the existence of Badreya. They have a similar feature in their essence. But the appearance of Nessim is as not much as Badreya in this novel. They always stay in her bedroom and always present before she wants to sleep. Both of illusion figures are the product of Bodour's admired remembrance. Badreya is the best and favorite character of her novel, which is stolen ago, while Nessim is her first love, which cannot be

forgotten by Bodour. Something which can make her admired in her life will always be remembered and being unforgettable. This memory will turn into something tangible in her life.

The Causes of Bodour's Psychosis

The occurrence of mental disease for Bodour has been certainly caused by several factors. Those factors certainly bring the traumatic thing for Bodour. Those factors can be the condition of Bodour when she gets the bad events who is denied by her. In this research, the researcher has analyzed some factors that potentially causes the psychosis to Bodour. It is discovered in the some paragraph in the novel that tells about Bodour consulting herself to the psychiatrist.

"The psychiatrist asked her about her childhood. "Anything bad happen to you when you were a child, Bodour?" "Nothing at all, doctor. I had a happy childhood." She lay on the couch in the psychiatrist's room and he kindly patted her white hands.

"Try to remember, Bodour!" ...

She whispered, "They stole her from me, doctor!"

"Who is she?"

"The novel, doctor ..." (Saadawi, 2011, p.35)

The quotation above is the conversation of Bodour with the psychiatrist that shows that Bodour consults herself to the doctor/psychiatry. It means that Bodour has a psychological problem in her life. Bodour feels oppressed with the condition, therefore, the consultation is the way to reduce her psychological problem. Further, the quotation above tells that the psychiatrist tries to dig the information about Bodour. Based on the doctor's experiences and his knowledge doctor gets the diagnosis about the causes of Bodour having psychosis. It is potentially caused by her past experiences. The doctor follows Bodour to tell her stories in the past. In the beginning, Bodour feels difficult to remember her past story, then Bodour can remember it.

"The doctor was at a loss concerning Bodour's case, for he couldn't get to the source of her pain, and was unable to decide whether it resided in her mind or her body. Her conscious mind was in control of her past memories and stopped them from surfacing. Her

unconscious mind was a chain of accumulated fears, one layered on top of another, one generation after another, starting from her mother and going back thousands of years to her ancestral grandmothers and the vilification of Eve and the original sin.” (Saadawi, 2011, p.36)

The quotation above tells about the doctor concluding his diagnosis that the unconscious mind of Bodour is influenced by her deep trauma in the past. The doctor explains that the trouble of her mind is the psychological trauma due to her motherhood. The interesting thing in that quote is that psychic symptoms that are experienced by Bodour is set as the common occurrence for women entirely for many years. It looks like a woman is created to get the great trauma in her life. Psychosis symptom of Bodour is caused by several traumatic things in her past. Something bad that occurred by her when she live together with her husband that gets violence in her household. This case is mentioned in the following paragraph.

“They would stand and talk on the marble staircase, laughing every now and then. Zakariahal-Khartiti could recognize his wife’s laugh from among a thousand, a soft elongated laugh that trailed into an intermittent gasp which sounded like suppressed sobs. He couldn’t bear that laugh and often slapped her on the face in bed to stop her laughing. And if she cried, he slapped her, for her tears were identical to her laughter as he lay on top of her. She never raised her hand to slap him back. She’d look down and suppress the tears or the laughter, stifling the urge to raise her hand and bring it down on his face. She wouldn’t slap him or hit him, and she wouldn’t tell him what she thought of him. If he told her that he loved her, her lips might open to produce the stifled words buried deep inside her, but only a stream of voiceless hot air would come out. (Saadawi, 2011, p.24)

He massaged her childhood memories and tried to awaken her lust during sleep or death, pulling her gently by the hair to wake her, or hitting her softly on the cheek. If her coldness upset him, he’d slap her on the face or whip her with his belt on her belly and thighs.” (Saadawi, 2011, p.31)

The quotation shows that the family violence experienced by Bodour. Bodour’s husband is being hard and selfish. Zakaria often slap Bodour even though it is caused by something trivial. The trivial thing is exemplified such when Bodour

laughs and cries. Zakaria does not like the laughing model on Bodour's. Zakaria also does not like when Bodour cries, Zakaria considers that crying is an attitude which can make the self-esteem dropped, for Zakaria this case must be thrown far away. But when Bodour is like that, she could not do anything. Bodour cannot do what is done by Zakaria such as slapping, hitting, mocking, etc. Bodour understands that condition will be worse if she responds. From the treatment of Zakaria to Bodour's self, it discovers that Zakaria is a very authoritarian husband. He can only accept the thing that he wants. Whereas when there is something disliked by him, he will absolutely reject it.

Zakaria is the husband who has a high sexual desire. When he wants sexual relations with Bodour, then Bodour must obey him. Certainly, this case is a common thing for a husband and wife. But ironically, when Zakaria cannot get the biological need from Bodour, Zakaria does not hesitate to injure Bodour with a hand slapping or other forms of violence. Indeed, when this case is viewed from the perspective of Islamic law, women serving their husbands is an obligation. But the response of Zakaria is too worse if his desire is rejected by Bodour. Bodour prefers to be patient. The husband as the head of the household must manage her slowly and gently to avoid conflict in the household as much as possible.

Household violence can occur due to several things. An example is the lack of love between them. The violence case carried by Zakaria to Bodour can be caused from the lack of truly love towards Bodour. This can be found in the following paragraphs.

“He married Bodour without love and without sincerity, a marriage of convenience. From the moment he saw her father's picture in the paper alongside top government officials, and from the moment her father became head of the great cultural and literary establishment concerned with art and journalism, his subconscious mind told him to pay heed, for this was his last and only chance to achieve his dreams in journalism. (Saadawi, 2011, p.28)

He only married her because she was the daughter of the great al Damhiri, whose photograph appeared next to those of the eminent

personalities of the state and whose image flashed on television screens." (Saadawi, 2011, p.24)

The quotation above shows that Zakaria does not have the love desire to Bodour. Zakaria marries Bodour because he wants to take the advantage of Bodour's father authority. By marrying Bodour, Zakaria can potentially become a famous writer in Egypt. With the reason of the lack of love owned by Zakaria to Bodour, it can be concluded as the main cause of Bodour getting household violence by Zakaria. Their marriage is not based on love which potentially appear the emergence of household violence. If love is not owned by a husband, then the person who will be harmed is his wife.

In other case, Zakaria also has a principle which is generally owned by the ability of Middle East society. He considers that the husband has the right to reprimand and even beats his wife. His principle is noted bellow.

"No, a woman could not raise her eyes to meet those of her husband, just as a slave could not raise his eyes to meet those of his master. By the same token, a husband had the right to hit his wife, just as the master had the right to hit his slave. A woman had no such right. This was prohibited by religious and secular laws, by social customs, and by family ethics." (Saadawi, 2011, p.32)

The quotation above shows that the household violence that is committed by Zakaria to Bodour is considered as normal behavior. Otherwise, a woman or wife does not have this kind of right in the household. Because of this reason, this case can be said that the cause of Zakaria committing a household violence. But there is something interest about this quotation. It is about the statement of the husband who has the right to beat his wife covered in a religious context. This case shows that the statement above is set by the novel's author (Nawal El Saadawi) to be absolute. Because the statement in religion is the absolute law and cannot be denied anymore. Behind this discussion that statement potentially makes a controversy from various people, especially religious scholars. Because there is no law of religion imposing the household violence.

The household violence experienced by Bodour and Zakairia has been going for years from the beginning of the marriage to the end of their marriage separation. Their quarrel is witnessed by their daughter whose name is Mageeda.

“In bed, Mageeda trembled. Through the wall she heard the slaps and the smacks. She had no idea who was hitting whom. Was it her father hitting her mother, or the opposite? Since childhood, she had heard them quarrel at night. The fights continued year in year out, for twenty-four long years. In the morning, everything was back to normal. They drank tea, read the papers, exchanged smiles or glances of love or blame. But a word, a gesture, or a furtive glance sometimes escaped, carrying the full weight of their enmity and hate.” (32)

From the quotation above, it shows that the dispute experienced by Zakaria and Bodour is witnessed by his daughter named Mageeda. But after the quarrel has done, they return to normal again as the situation shows that Zakaria and Bodour have no problems. Their quarrel is committed continuously as it has become their daily routine.

From the explanation above, it is enough to prove that Bodour gets the bad treatment from Zakaria. From that violence, Bodour finally gets trauma in her mind. Then with that trauma turns her to be worse with the forms of psychosis.

CONCLUSION

From the findings and discussions above, the researcher comes to two conclusions; first of all, the psychological problem the main character, Bodour, undergoes is psychosis symptoms that she faces the shadow of devil as well as an imaginary person beside her. Second of all, the cause of the psychosis turns out to be her past experience either from her childhood (the story of devil) or her treatment of her husband towards her. The researcher also hopes so much that there are researchers conducting study on the same novel with different theory or the same theory with different novel to develop the study of literature.

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