

## Liberal Feminism in Nawal El Saadawi's *Memoirs of A Woman Doctor* (2000)

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**Abstract:** This article is entitled Liberal Feminism in Nawal El Saadawi's *Memoirs of A Woman Doctor* (2000). It aims to reveal the struggles of the nameless character to fight against patriarchal practices portrayed in the novel. This exploration used a qualitative descriptive method in analyzing data. The data of this study were obtained from narratives and conversations from the novel *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* by Nawal El Sadaawi. Taking Rosemary Tong's three aspects of liberal feminism as the lens, this study found that the nameless main character achieves equality in education by becoming a doctor, equality in economy by having her own income, and equality in civil liberties by speaking her mind freely.

**Keywords:** equality in education, equality in economy, equality in civil liberties, liberal feminism, patriarchy

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### INTRODUCTION

Women in some parts of the world still experience difficulties in obtaining their rights and expressing themselves in society. Different treatment toward men and women due to their gender difference frequently causes issues in social interactions. It is impossible to deny how society treats men and women differently since the practice has deeply ingrained in our daily life. The unfairness of treatment between men and women is considered a result of the patriarchal system that controls society. An ideology and social system known as patriarchy considers men to be the major decision-makers and views women as his property (Walby, 1990). Because patriarchy is rooted in culture and affects many aspects of it, men and women are treated differently in society. The possibility of both public and private violence exists for women, along with oppression and subordination. To support, Haque (2019) argues that because women face gender inequality in interpersonal interactions as well as in social positions like economics and politics, activists insist on protecting women's rights to be treated equally with men at home and at work, and as a result, society pays more attention to women's roles (Sunikka-Blank et al., 2019). In a similar vein, Sultana (2011) describes patriarchy as a set of social conventions and behaviors in which men oppress, control, and take advantage of women (Sultana, 2011). According to Allan Johnson (2014), people in society are trapped inside a patriarchal tradition that promotes male privilege, such as being male dominated, male identified, male centered, and obsessed with control. He reveals how patriarchy gave privileges to men in *The Gender Knot: Unravelling Our Patriarchal Legacy* (Johnson, 2014).



However, there is a pervasive belief that patriarchal traditions and female oppression may be eliminated once women have fought for their freedom in society. What is deeply established in the minds of the public will have a significant impact on how successfully the fight against this oppression is carried out. In order to prevent men from underestimating women, women must work hard to elevate their status. Feminist movement is a sort of self-liberation from all types of unfair treatment in all sectors. The goal of feminism is to defend the rights of women in society. Feminism's core idea is women's struggle against gender inequality, which they see as a lower-class problem. In today's society, males are still seen as the dominant ones and women as the weak ones, which gives rise to feminism. Feminism is a movement or the emancipation of women who demand equal rights and treatment to men (Martiwati et al., 2017). According to the feminism declaration described above, women want equality with males in terms of status, justice, and the private and public realms. Women also want to be treated equally to men in all industries.

Feminism as a movement has some branches that share the same emphasis on women's equality. There are eight major styles of feminism, according to Rosemarie Tong (2009): postmodern, liberal, radical, marxist, psychoanalytic, care-focused, multicultural, ecofeminist, and psychoanalytic. Since liberal feminism will be used to analyze this research, more research will be done on it. Liberal feminism was the first form of feminism to be based on liberalism, which encourages individual autonomy. Liberal feminism is founded on liberalism. Liberalism holds that both sexes were formed equally and have the same capacity for reason. In *A (Qualified) Defense of Liberal Feminism*, Tong quotes Wendell as saying that liberal feminism's major goal is to make society fair and respect the freedom for self-improvement so that both men and women can become better versions of themselves (Tong, 2009). One aspect of liberalism that promoted the growth of liberal feminism was its emphasis on personal autonomy and freedom. Women have the right to equal civic, educational, and economic rights with men since they have access to the same opportunities as males in the public sector, according to Rosemarie Tong in *Feminist Thought: A More Complete Approach* (Tong, 2009). According to Tong (2009), liberal feminism advances numerous benefits for women, including the preservation of their civil rights, access to education, and career. which is the public domain that is claimed as men's territory.

Liberating women from oppressive gender roles is the goal of liberal feminism. a perspective of view that limits women's access to economic, educational, and other systems and provides society with an excuse to regard them less favorably than men. Liberal feminism acknowledges the fact that women are the ones who conceive and give birth.

These biological characteristics have a negative impact on how women behave in public. Tong (1998) claims that being a mother is distinct from holding the positions of office assistant, scientist, or airman. Becoming a mother is delicate, conflicted, enjoyable, biological, natural, social, symbolic, and emotional undertaking (Tong, 2009).

Rosemarie Tong (2009) in her book *Feminist Thought* states that there are three aspects that become the focus for the women's struggle namely equality in education, equality in economy and equality in civil. In order for society to attain gender justice or sexual equality, women must have equal access to political possibilities, privileges, and educational opportunities as men, claims Rosemarie Tong (2009). Making sure that everyone, especially women, has the chance to participate in or play a role in all aspects of social life is one of liberal feminism's major goals. Liberal feminism also supports women's right to education, particularly formal education from elementary school through college, in order to improve and elevate women's status and position within society. The second is economic equality. Taylor claims that the Enfranchisement of Women underlines that it is everyone's responsibility to protect life (1998). Women should look for opportunities outside of only reading literature and voting in elections. They must also look for opportunities to associate with males in the business, earnings, risks, and incomes of productive enterprises. This is necessary in order to take advantage of the available economic opportunities and achieve equality. In order to achieve gender equality, women must be given the chance to work in the economy as well. Third, equal access to civil liberties. Around the middle of the 1960s, liberal feminists began forming organizations that promoted gender equality, such as Betty Friedan's National Organization for Women (NOW). The group's major goal is to raise the position of women by putting pressure on the legal system from the legal, social, and other spheres. NOW seeks to promote equality between the rights of men and women. Civil liberties including freedom of choice, freedom of association, freedom of opinion, and freedom of religion are to be protected by the state and society (Tong, 2009).

A study of liberal feminism has been conducted by Eka Mualim (2020). Her thesis is entitled *Kedudukan Perempuan Dalam Keluarga Menurut Feminis Liberal (Studi Pemikiran Siti Musdah Mulia)* This study used Siti Musdah Mulia's thought of liberal feminism as the approach of the study. Musdah Mulia's ideas on how to define the role of women in the family are revealed in this study, including: a) There is no single distinction between men and women. The fact that all human beings are equal, regardless of race, class, or social background is one of God's blessings. b) Islamic teachings must be regarded as natural because their core message is to humanize people and support their right to self-

determination, and c) Religious main goal is to humanize people and teach them to respect and honor one another.

Meanwhile, the previous study about novel *Memoirs of A Woman Doctors* was written by Citra Gandhini Putri in 2016 entitled *Ketidakadilan Gender dan Citra Perempuan Dalam Novel Memoar Seorang Dokter Perempuan dan Perempuan di Titik Nol Karya Nawal El Saadawi*. She examined gender inequality by employing Marxist feminism theory. She found that there are five gender inequality aspects in the novel *Memoirs of A Woman Doctor* and *Woman At Point Zero* by Nawal El Saadawi namely marginalization, subordination, stereotypes, violence and workload.

What distinguishes my study from aforementioned previous study is in the use of theory. In the previous study, classism was discussed as the primary cause of women's oppression according to the Marxist feminism theory. Meanwhile, my study uses liberal feminism theory to depict the struggle of the main character in obtaining her independence and rights.

*Memoirs of A Woman Doctor* illustrates the life of the nameless main character, who experiences injustice and oppression as a result of societal traditions at the time. Because she is a woman, she suffers a lot of injustice and oppression; society restricts her mobility, space and behavior, and even her own family engages in the practice of difference. The various forms of injustice and oppression that happens in her life motivates her to convince her family that she, as a woman, refuses to be oppressed and treated unfairness and she as a woman is entitled to equal opportunities in all aspects of life. Until the main female character enrolls in medical school and dissects a male cadaver for the first time, she is certain that women are equal to men.

This study aims to examine the liberal feminism in the novel *Memoirs of A Woman Doctor*. To examine this issue, the researcher used the liberal feminism theory by Rosemarie Tong which focuses on three aspects of equality explained previously. This study hopes to give more information and understanding related to the three aspects of equality in liberal feminism which emphasizes that women are equal to men. It means that women have full access to education, civil and economic sphere and also have the right to freedom and to decide their own opinions.

## **METHOD**

This section explains how the study was conducted. I used a descriptive qualitative research method that is suitable with the aim of the research. Qualitative method is suitable for researching many of the why and how questions of human experience (Given, 2008). The

data source of this research is mainly from the words, phrases, and sentences from novel *Memoirs Of A Woman Doctor* using Rosemary Tong's liberal feminism which focuses on three aspects of equality, this study explores the main character's efforts to achieve those three aspects.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

In this section, I present the result of the research which is how liberal feminism is portrayed in *Memoirs of A Woman Doctor*. According to Rosemarie Tong, liberal feminism is primarily concerned with the freedom that women can obtain. It emphasizes individual freedom, including the right of women to pursue their own interests (Tong, 2009). Further, she mentions that there are some aspects that become the focus for women to seek for, namely equal opportunities in economy, equal opportunities in civil liberties, and equal opportunities in education (Tong, 2009). Thus, the discussion follows Tong's three aspects of liberal feminism which focuses on the main character's experience in having equal opportunity in education, equal opportunity in economy and equal opportunity in civil liberties.

### 1. Equal Opportunity in Education

Women being able to access education is a component of liberal feminism because it belongs to the public sector, which is usually regarded as a field for men in society. Liberal feminism places a strong emphasis on the idea that everyone should have access to educational opportunities. Humans are rational creatures with minds that are clearly different from those of animals. Therefore, women have to be given the same chance to pursue education as men. Both women and men are human beings with developing minds and morals who possess the capacity for reason. This skill will enable women to make independent decisions and meet their own needs (Tong, 2009a), including the right to achieve the same opportunity of education.

In *Memoirs of A Woman Doctor* (2000) the nameless main character is a doctor. Aspects of liberal feminism that she fought for, namely equality in education was achieved by her succeeding in becoming a doctor.

The telephone shrilled next to my bed and I half opened an eye to look at the time. It was two in the morning. Sluggishly I picked up the receiver and an urgent voice said to me: 'Doctor! My mother's very ill. Please come and save her. (El-Saadawi, 2000).

The quote above shows that the nameless main character has finally succeeded in becoming a doctor. The nameless main character is willing to accept calls and help her patients in the middle of the night. This shows her quality as a professional female doctor.

Therefore, the nameless main character's journey to become a doctor is not easy. One of the obstacles when the nameless main character was going to continue her study, to become a doctor, she needed to pursue a higher education in the faculty of medicine. When the nameless main character was standing in the medical faculty's courtyard, many pairs of eyes looked at her questioningly (El-Saadawi, 2000). However, instead of feeling intimidated, the nameless main character looks at them confidently, it is described in the following narration:

I looked squarely back at them. Why should I lower my eyes when they looked at me, bow my head while they were lifting theirs, stumble along while they walked with a proud and confident step? I was the same as them, or better. (El-Saadawi, 2000).

Based on the narration above, the action of the nameless main character who does not feel intimidated and instead strengthens her determination to prove that she can be an equal with them by becoming a doctor shows her struggle against patriarchal practices in education. According to Wollstonecraft (2004), she emphasizes that women can obtain independence through education (Wollstonecraft, 2004). It means that if women can get opportunities for education, women can achieve things that increase their status, which go far beyond the traditional role of women as wives and mothers. By seeing what the nameless main character has struggled and that is finally paid off in making her a doctor, this shows that there is equal opportunity in education.

## **2. Equal Opportunity in Economy**

Equal opportunity in the economy means that there is no gender distinction on the side of the economy between men and women. According to Rosemarie Tong (2009) liberal feminism's main goals are the respectable ones of creating a fair and caring society where freedom lives (Tong, 2009). This shows that there are equal opportunities for men and women to achieve economic equality in society. According to Rosemarie Tong, liberal feminism's overarching objectives are just and compassionate society creation and the flourishing of freedom (Tong, 2009). This indicates that men and women have an equal opportunity to achieve economic equality in society. Humans basically need to work and earn money in order to meet their basic necessities. Women deserve the right to work and pursue a career in the public sector just as much as males do. In order for women to achieve full liberation, economic opportunities must be provided (Tong, 2009).

In *Memoirs of A Woman Doctor* (2000), the nameless main character is a successful doctor. Her success in fighting for liberal feminism is proven by her becoming a doctor, having her own income and being able to provide her own needs. The practice of the

nameless main character as a doctor is always fulfilled by children and adults. Her storage was also filled with a lot of money and gold (El-Saadawi, 2000). It can be seen that the nameless main character is finally able to make her own money as a doctor. Furthermore, the nameless main character also has her own clinic, and there is also a nurse who helps her to do the practice (El-Saadawi, 2000). The nameless main character's success in becoming a doctor, has her own clinic and makes her own money is a result of equal opportunity in the economy. Despite being a doctor, successfully established her own practice, and earning her own income did not necessarily liberate the nameless main character from the patriarchal practices that remain in her environment. Her husband believed that once he made the decision to marry, everything in the home, including his wife, was under his control (El-Saadawi, 2000). The nameless main character was forced to stay at home by her husband, who did not like seeing his wife at work. It is described in the dialogues below:

'We do not need the income from the practice,' he insisted  
 'I do not work for money. I love my work'  
 'You need to be free for your husband and your home'  
 'What do you mean?'  
 'Close the practice' (El-Saadawi, 2000).

Due to the nameless main character's capacity to earn money on her own, her husband feels inferior as evidenced by his actions, which force the nameless main character to stay at home and not to work. The nameless main character is confused by her husband's behavior. How can she live with her husband, give everything she has and give up her status as a doctor after all the struggles she has been through (El-Saadawi, 2000). Finally, the nameless main character made a decision, which is leaving her husband. It can be seen on the narration below:

What should I do now? Accept responsibility for my mistake and put up with living with him for ever? But how could I live with him, talk to him, look into his eyes, give him my lips, degrade my body and soul with him? No, no. The wrong I'd done didn't deserve all this punishment; it didn't. (El-Saadawi, 2000).

What the nameless main character has done so far shows how much she strives to be a better person who understands her own worth. Her choice to continue pursuing her career as a doctor, which implies that she should divorce her spouse, is a reflection of liberal feminism, which allows women to express themselves by engaging in any activity they desire (Tong, 2009). Therefore, with her efforts to become a doctor, and succeed in opening her own practice so that the nameless main character can earn her own money and be able to maintain everything shows that there is equal opportunity in the economy.

### 3. Equal Opportunity in Civil Liberties

In the equal opportunity in civil, liberal feminism believed that women should have the same freedom to work in government as men. Liberal feminism believed that civil freedoms should be incorporated in order to free women from gender discrimination because a high level of intelligence or education is insufficient to compete with men in the public sector. Tong (2009) argues that for women to experience true liberation, they must have access to civil liberties. In order to be liberated from gender discrimination, where their status is not equal to that of men, it is explained that women must have access to chances in civil rights. Thus, they require civil rights so that men will respect their position more, demonstrating the equality of men's and women's situations (Tong, 2009)

One of the civil rights is freedom of choice. Tong (2009) argues that in order to meet their own needs, women are free to make their own decisions. It indicates that women have the freedom to choose—which could be in the form of rejecting or accepting the choice—in accordance with their preferences, free from outside pressure to satisfy their own needs.

In *Memoirs of A Woman Doctor* (2000), the nameless main character decided to leave her husband. Her choice to leave was a form of herself against patriarchal practices carried out by her husband, which her husband forbids the nameless main character to work. With the nameless main character being able to divorce her husband, this shows her freedom of choice. When the nameless main character decides to leave her husband, the public was shocked and protested. They wonder how a woman can leave her husband (El-Saadawi, 2000). It demonstrates that the nameless main character has the freedom to determine whether to divorce her marriage. No one could change her choice, despite the mocking of others around her. Her choice to divorce her husband is another example of how empowered women are. Women are encouraged to challenge the patriarchal system by focusing on acquiring authority as experienced by the oppressed women (Chandra Mandal, 2013). However, instead of feeling guilty for her choice to leave her husband, the nameless main character feels very confident with her choice. It is described in the following narration:

My mother had ruined my childhood, learning had swallowed up my adolescence and early womanhood and the years left to me of my youth could be counted on the fingers of one hand. I wasn't going to waste them and no one was going to make me. (El-Saadawi, 2000).

She decided to make her own life choices and no one else could influence her choices so that her life would not be in vain again. With the nameless main character finally being able to make her own choices, this shows the freedom of choice.

Tong (2009) claims that women had the right to speak freely in public and share their



opinions on current issues. Women have the freedom to express their opinions, including the right to do so in public. In the manner of that freedom, women will become human beings who are more developed and useful to society as well as men.

In *Memoirs of A Woman Doctor* (2000) the nameless main character succeed in fighting for liberal feminism when the opinion and existence of the nameless main character in society has been recognized by society. Her name became famous as the movie star and all her words were obeyed by the public (El-Saadawi, 2000). It shows that the nameless main character is finally recognized by society and her opinion is heard by society. After she became a doctor, people began to respect the nameless main character. Society began to view her as a person who plays an important role in society with her status as a woman doctor. However, there are still some people who do not consider the nameless main character, as in narration below:

The old man with a large white turban looked at him profound respect and listened to everything he said, but he did not see or hear me. I seemed to vanish before his eyes. (El-Saadawi, 2000).

The narration above illustrates the situation in which the old man solely reacts to the words of the nameless main character's fiancé and does not consider the nameless main character to exist. The elderly man demonstrates the patriarchal behavior of a culture where women are solely seen as subordinates, have a limited role, and are viewed as inferior to men by dismissing the existence of the nameless main character.

However, the disrespect treatment of the old man did not necessarily make the nameless main character feel discouraged, when the old man questioned how much the future husband would pay to marry the nameless main character (El-Saadawi, 2000), the nameless main character felt challenged to prove that their existence and opinion are equal to men. It can be seen on the narration below:

I looked at the shaikh with a superior expression and said, 'Write "nothing".'  
He looked back at me disapprovingly: how dare a woman speak in the presence of men! 'The contract then becomes invalid,' he pronounced in a legalistic tone.  
'Why?'  
'The law tells us so.'  
'Then you don't know the law.'  
He jumped up from his chair and his turban bounced off his head. He caught it in both hands, shouting, 'God have mercy! God have mercy!' (El-Saadawi, 2000).

The old man's shocked expression indicated that he had no idea that a woman would dare to disagree with him. Nonetheless, it demonstrates that there is a freedom of opinion with the answer of the nameless main character who dares to speak for herself and share her opinion. With her existence recognized by society and her opinions being heard and obeyed

by society, this demonstrates the presence of liberal feminism, specifically freedom of opinion.

## CONCLUSION

The discussion in the previous section has demonstrated the nameless main character's efforts to fight against the patriarchal practices. Using the lens of liberal feminism, the novel illustrates three demands for achieving gender equality, namely equality in education, equality in economy, and equality in civil liberties. In this case, the nameless character successfully achieves equality in education by becoming a doctor, achieves equality in economy by having her own income, achieves equality in civil liberties by being recognized by society and being able to make her own choices as a woman. This shows that she has successfully challenged patriarchal practices by achieving the three aspects of women's struggle in liberal feminism.

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