



## Sexual Harassment Experienced By The Women In Novel “Women Talking” By Miriam Toews

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### Abstract

This research was conducted to figure out the sexual harassment, causes and effect experienced by the women in the novel women talking by Miriam Toews. This study used feminist approach with theory by Rosemarie Tong. Sexual harassment was behavior that approaches related to unwanted sex, including the demand for sex, and other behaviors being verbally or physically refer to sex more. This study aimed to find out the cause and effect of the sexual harassment experienced by the women in the Molotschna colony as seen in women talking novel. This study used descriptive qualitative to analyze the social problems that found in the novel. The result of the study, there were two causes and effects of the sexual harassment in the novel of women talking. The first cause of the sexual harassment in the novel of women talking was the gender gap. Gender gap made people considered that the position of women and men was very different. Men were superior and strong while women were the opposite. The second cause was the male domination. Patriarchy construction placed women as a weak creature that can be control by the men. The effects of sexual harassment that received by the women in the novel physically and psychologically. They were injured physically and their health was disturbed psychologically.

**Keywords:** feminism, sexual harassment, self-abuse

### Introduction

Over the centuries women have lived with a variety of issues related to sexual harassment. This has become one of the most concerned things for women in various aspects of their lives. Women from various circles and various regions of the world have become the target to satisfy the sexual desires of people who are not responsible. Sexual harassment is an issue that has attracted much attention in both children and adults due to the victims choose often to be silent on the matter for several reasons, even though it may have long term effects on them. Sexual harassment is something that encourages men to behave in a way that is sexually harmful (Tong, 2013). This detrimental behavior includes verbal abuse of victims to satisfy sexual desires. The perpetrator's sexual desire will usually be satisfied when he has committed sexual harassment. Soponyono (2019) stated sexual harassment is behavior that approaches related to unwanted sex, including the demand for sex, and other behaviors being verbally or physically refer to sex. The most worrying thing about sexual harassment is that it can happen anywhere, either public places such as bus, market, school, office, or in a private place like home. The case of sexual harassment that recently occurred was the case of Harun Yahya. Reported from the original web CNN Indonesia, it is said that Harun Yahya is an educated and religious person. He is a Turkish and he was a religious cult leader, creationist and conspiracy theorist. In 2007, he sent thousands of unsolicited copies of his book. He was found guilty of sexual violence at gunpoint with many people; sexual abuse of minors; using weapons to threaten people; personal data; depriving people of their right to education; espionage; forgery; fraud; torture; as well as running a criminal organization.

As a result of all his actions he had to bear a prison sentence of one thousand years in 2020. Based on the phenomena above, it is clear that sexual harassment can be done by anyone and from any group of people. Whether educated or not. Either from the upper, middle or lower class. One thing that became very clear was that situations involving sexual harassment almost always come as a surprise. All the activity happened after the fact. It is as if someone was walking down the street, doing what he or she does everyday then suddenly wakes up in a nightmare with confusion. Many women suffer sexually harassing situations in silence, unaware of their rights and unprepared to deal with the situation (Gerdes, 2009).

The most feared of sexual harassment is if it occurs in an environment that

should be safe for students. As explained that sexual harassment can occur anywhere and anytime, this is of course vulnerable to students. Students from elementary, middle or upper levels may experience sexual harassment during or after they carry out teaching and learning activities. Bondestam & Lundqvist (2020) stated nine out of ten of the world's countries have laws against sexual harassment in working life today, but almost six out of ten lack adequate laws against sexual harassment in higher education and schools. This lack of adequate laws makes people worry about the rise of victims of sexual harassment for students. This is clear that even in places where many people are educated, sexual harassment could still occur. Apart from in the real world, in literature there are also many stories about cases of sexual harassment. One of them is based on what happened to the woman in their colony, named Molotschna colony in the novel *Women Talking* (2018) by Miriam Toews. The main characters in the novel were the women in a colony called Molotschna who wake up every morning with a body covered in bruises, excessive headaches and signs of scars on the genitals. When they reported what they had experienced to the bishop there, they even got an unpleasant act in the form of accusations that they only made up stories to cover up their lecherous behavior with a man who was not their husband. Not long after the many complaints about sexual violence that women experienced at night, there were cases of assault by a woman against a man who was suspected of raping her. As a result of this incident, the police conducted an investigation and it was found that there was indeed sexual violence and rape. In the end, the men who were alleged to have sexually harassed were given prison sentences. Bishop asked the women to forgive the perpetrators and not prolong the problem. Bishop did this out of fear that this incident would spread and make their colony's name bad in the eyes of society. The bishop who was supposed to be the wisest person in the colony instead declared an insistence on the women that they would be expelled from if they didn't obey his words. A more serious problem than bishop says is that even though men have been sent to prison, similar cases of sexual harassment still occur in the colony. What happened to the women in the colony in the novel was that even those closest to us or people who are in the same group as us can commit sexual harassment because sexual harassment does not know the place and situation.

Raj, Freund, McDonald, & Carr, (2020) in the journal entitled "effects of sexual harassment on advancement of women in academic medicine: a multi institutional longitudinal study" stated sexual harassment of women in academic medicine may impede advancement and productivity. Meanwhile, in the educational institutions

Bondestam & Lundqvist (2020) stated Students, younger women, women with insecure employment conditions and certain minorities (ethnicity and sexuality) are more exposed to sexual harassment than other groups. Based on the all explanation above, the researcher criticized the sexual harassment experienced by the women through the literary work which was "women talking" by Miriam Toews. One of the reasons the researcher used literary work because was the literary work was the right media to be analyzed by using the theory. Additionally, the literary work was the best tool to criticize real and implicit social life. The literary work which was novel that had been criticized which was "women talking" by Miriam Toews that published in 2018. As a new novel, it was the best seller the Brooklyn Public Library Literary Prize for Fiction Shortlisted. As told in the previous page that the women in the colony experienced sexual harassment which done by the men by making them unconscious.

The sexual harassment that men committed in their colony based on the story in the novel itself mostly was committed against women with whom they were related. What the perpetrators did was an action that openly caused harm both to the women they raped and to themselves. The harm to the women of course they would be physically suffered. The harm for the men itself was they would cause a commotion resulting in physical violence against the perpetrators by women who were their victim. As the evidence was there was an attack by one of the women in the colony against one of the perpetrators which led to the police coming to the colony to investigate. The results of the investigation put the perpetrators in prison but unfortunately similar incidents still occurred in the colony itself. From a little summary about the novel above, it can be concluded that sexual harassment experienced by women in colony itself was due to the lack of strong application of the law. Not many people understand the application of law in overcoming sexual harassment problems, especially to the people that live in remote places such as associations or colony whose residents are categorized as working people. Gerdes (2009) stated Most working people, no matter how successful, intelligent, or well intentioned, do not understand the law of sexual harassment. lack of understanding of the law by leaders in a small area or colony can cause injustice in society.

This clearly stated that the "women talking" novel was related to the theory of feminist approach that described about how women in the society did not be treated well and how the patriarchal construction still affect the existence of women in their lives.

## **Method**

As the research method, this study used qualitative descriptive as the research method. Qualitative descriptive method is the method that explained the

data in words descriptively rather than in numbers or table. Since the data itself was a novel, the qualitative descriptive method is the most suitable method to use. That is why the researcher used this method. (Creswell, 2009) in his book entitled *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* stated research methods involve the forms of data collection, analysis, and interpretation that researchers propose for their studies. The researcher used "women talking" novel by Miriam Toews as data source. Researcher used the library research method as the method of collecting data. In the library research method there are primary data and secondary data. The primary data is the novel itself and the secondary data is the sources that taken from the journals that related to the topic of research. In analyzing the data, the researcher applied theory from Tong's theory. The researcher used some steps in analyzing data. First, the researcher analyzed the intrinsic element of novel which is the elements of fiction which are plot, characters, theme, settings and point of view of the novel "Women talking" by Miriam Toews. The researcher then analyzed the extrinsic elements by applying the theory of women struggles, women's oppression and sexual harassment by Rose Mary Tong theory to the novel.

## **Result**

Based on the analysis that had been done by the researcher, it was found that there were sexual harassment in the novel "women talking" by Miriam Toews. The researcher had elaborated the sexual harassment in the novel "women talking" to the causes and the effect.

### **1. Causes of The Sexual Harassment**

As explained in the previous section that one of the causes of sexual harassment was the gender gap. Gender gap creates social disparities between women and men. This gap sometimes results in a man feeling that he has power that he can use to oppress and dominate women. In the novel, one example of a gender gap is when women were ultimatum by the men at the colony to want to forgive the men who raped them. If the women disobeyed, they would be kicked out of the colony. Additionally, in the colony the presence of women was never considered important. Even the women questioned or doubt about their position between and the animals in the colony. In the meeting of the women in the colony Maricha said:

"the more important question to ask is not whether the women are animals, but rather, should the women avenge the harm perpetrated against them? Or should they instead forgive the men and by doing so be allowed to enter the gates of

heaven”(Toews,2018,P.25)

The above statement stated how they experienced injustice and oppression because of the gender gap that existed in the colony. They were never considered as the important parts of the colony even though they had been in the colony and did many things for decades.

Apart from not being considered as the important parts of the colony, the gender gap in the novel also led to injustice caused by the authoritarian nature of the bishop in the colony. The bishop in the colony considered all decisions on his side. The bishop also did not care whether his decision can be accepted by other members of the colony. It stated by Ona Friesen by saying:

“If it has been decided by the elders and the bishop of Molotschna that we women don’t require counselling following these attacks because we weren’t conscious when they happened, then what are we obliged, or even able, to forgive? Something that didn’t happen? Something that we are unable to understand? And what does that mean more broadly? If we don’t know “the world,” we won’t be corrupted by it? If we don’t know that we are imprisoned then we are free?” (Toews,2018,p.18)

The statement above implies how unfair treatment is received by women in the colony even after they experience a terrible thing, namely rape. The unfair nature and underestimating the existence of women there by men is one of the gender gaps that ultimately causes men to feel they can do anything to them. women, including sexual harassment

## 2. The effect of the sexual harassment

Sexual harassment of course has a negative impact on the victims. The negative impact can be in the form of physical injuries and psychological injuries. This is also experienced by women in the novel "women talking. They suffered psychologically and physically for the terrible events they had experienced. Negative impact physically experienced by the women in the colony because of the rape they went through. Based on the summary of the story at the beginning of the novel, it was told that:

“the next morning, they would wake up in pain, groggy and often bleeding, and not understand why” (Toews,2018,P.33)

The sentence above shows that the physical injuries suffered by women after rape were in pain, groggy and often bleeding. The physical wounds caused by the rape experienced by the women in the novel cannot respond because those who are raped while sleeping have absolutely nothing to happen because they are made unconscious by some kind of plant. When they were in a state of unconsciousness they could suffer very severe physical injuries, of course the physical injuries they would experience if they were aware were likely to be even worse because if they were conscious they would tend to fight and rebel. The point is, the women in the colony as depicted in the novel are totally treated inhumanely.

Receiving such severe physical injuries, the injuries they suffered psychologically were certainly even worse. Many people think that physical wounds are much easier to heal than psychological wounds. This is of course one of the correct opinions because it was also experienced by the women in the novel "women talking". Apart from all the suffering they have been through, the way to cure them is certainly not easy. Salome, as one of the victims of sexual harassment once said in the meeting:

"Fleeing! I'd rather stand my ground and shoot each man in the heart and bury them in a pit than flee, and I'll deal with God's wrath if I have to!"  
(Toews,2018,P.55)

Above statement from Salome indicated how sick he was psychologically after what he had experienced in the colony. Salome's words indicated that she was experiencing severe mental injuries so he was even willing to take revenge by killing. The word "murder" here indicated how the psychic Salome felt so hurt and broken that there was no other way but to kill.

After expressing her anger towards the rapists, Salome finally did her revenge. The psychological pain that he feels drives him to do things that should not be done. In the beginning of the story in the novel, it was told by August that Salome had attacked the perpetrator of rape with a scythe. August stated:

"Salome, attacked one of the men with a scythe; and another man was hanged by a group of drunk and angry colonists, male relatives of the victims, from a tree branch by his hands. He died there, forgotten apparently, when the drunk and angry men passed out in the sorghum field next to the tree".  
(Toews,2018,P.82)



The August's statement implied that the psychological wounds of a rape victim could even be fatal. Not only the anger of the women, some of the men who supported the victims also felt the impact. The results of the murder with the motive of revenge really happened in the novel. This states that the psychological condition of a person who has been a victim of rape by the giver should not be underestimated because the effect is not only disturbing the mental condition of the victim, but also detrimental to the people around her who could be the target of her anger and disappointment.

Another example of revenge that occurred in the novel was when Salome was caught doing the same thing that rapists had done to them to make them unconscious, which was spraying a liquid that comes from a plant. The one who knew that was August. August asked why Salome did that, and Salome answered:

"I had made them unconscious with the belladonna spray. I had instructed the girls, Autje and Neitje, to lure the Koop brothers to the loft with promises of intimacy, to make a considerable amount of noise so that she could enter the loft undetected. Now the Koop brothers would not be able to go to the city to inform on the women" (Toews,2018,P.102)

What Salome did based on the statement above was another example of how bad the impact of sexual harassment on the psychological of Salome. If most of the other victims just stay silent, surrender and accept their fate, Salome firmly wanted revenge. Nobody ever told Salome to do that even though the aim was so that no one told her that the women were leaving the colony. Because of Salome's actions, many teenagers and other men who were not perpetrators also had to accept what Salome did. Here it is clear that the psychological effects that occur because sexual violence does not only affect the victim, but also the perpetrator and even innocent people. The causes and effects of sexual harassment that had been described above were just a few of the causes and effects that occur in the real world. However, regardless of the cause and effect, justice, welfare and protection for women must still be improved.

## **Discussion**

## **Conclusion**

Women talking novel by Miriam Toews that published in 2018 indicates the women's struggle to pass through the sexual harassment they experienced in their

homeland called Molotschna colony. Ona, Salome and the other women characters in the novel indeed have suffered a lot because of injustice, helplessness and harsh treatment in the form of sexual harassment that they had to go through several years in colony. As a result of all the bad events they received, they did not even know what to do. Many of the victims consisted of children who were still under ages. The events experienced by the women in the novel were not something that only exists in the world of fiction. In fact, there are still many injustices committed by society against women. There are still many places in the world that consider women to be followers, not leaders. If only considered as followers may still be acceptable, but considered low is an injustice that must be addressed immediately. The recognition of equal degrees and rights between men and women is still widely denied. This is a struggle for feminists to prove that gender equality is very necessary in social life.

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