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**BREAKING THE SILENCE : RECLAIMING FEMALE
SUBJECTIVITY IN THE AFRICAN MUSLIM CULTURE.
A STUDY OF MARIAMA BA 'SO LONG A LETTER AND
NAWAL EL SAADAWI'S *WOMAN AT POINT ZERO*.**

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, we will explore the disempowerment of Muslim women in Africa as being intrinsically linked to distorted cultural beliefs, which sustain patriarchal logic of gender inequality. The culture under examination, in this thesis, does not only exploit long embedded traditional norms to emphasize man supremacy, but it also manipulates the tenets of religion to reinforce and legitimize the status quo. We try to exemplify this culture of gender oppression through the analysis of Mariama Ba' *So Long a Letter* (1981) and Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (1983). The two novels give us a realistic account of Muslim women's oppression under various repressive institutions and practices like: polygamy, widowhood, prostitution, female circumcision, and male violence, most of them receive social approbation either through traditional or religious justifications. We will examine then how female characters are forced to internalize their oppression by being socialized into following a repressive code of conduct which is wickedly produced by the law of patriarchy, but pretended to be divinely proclaimed and ordained.

The study goes on to demonstrate that discrimination against Muslim women in the selected novels is not only maintained through corrupted societal code of righteousness, but it tends to be officially sanctioned when the prevailing economic and political systems become inclined to reproduce patriarchal agendas. The way patriarchy intersects with religion, politics, economy, and other historical circumstances will give rise to a multifaceted system of gender oppression. This multifaceted oppression will define the scope and positionality of postcolonial feminists whose concern for improving women's conditions led them in a twofold battle: on the one hand, they are engaged in unveiling and decoding the mechanisms of gender oppression, and thus identifying the cause of women's disempowerment; on the other hand, they aim at creating sites of female survival and empowerment out of restricting spaces of patriarchal authority.

In this dissertation, we will show that the critical engagement of postcolonial feminists like Mariama Ba and Nawal El Saadawi is not limited to identifying instances of female's oppression in their narratives, but also to demonstrate that resistance and struggle are also parts of their protagonists' experiences.

Correspondingly, one of the pivotal points of this dissertation is to highlight the female's coming to voice in order to disrupt both patriarchal and western essentialist discourses about the disenfranchised and muted Muslim women. While the local discourse of patriarchy constructs an archetypical Muslim woman whose passivity and submission to oppressive dictates are approached as virtues, acclaimed both by religion and tradition; the discourse of cultural essentialism produces an inflexible category of woman, defined purely through western stereotypical signifiers. In both cases, Muslim women are denied to develop their identities because they have not been given the opportunity to name themselves. In *So Long a Letter* and *Woman at Point Zero*, Mariama Ba and Nawal El Saadawi will give the opportunity to their heroines to name themselves and their realities, and thus reclaim their subjectivities by giving them control over language. In these novels, we will see that these strategies for self-definition include assertive acts of writing and narration which allow Ramatoulaye and Firdaus to assert themselves within the repressive discourses of polygamy and prostitution.

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

The issue of women's victimization under oppressive cultural constraints has seriously been raised in Africa by many female writers and critics. For most of these scholars, gender discrimination is ingrained within the socio-cultural reality of African societies, where elements of culture like tradition and religion are used to perpetrate discrimination against women. The Nigerian critic Molara Ogundipe-Leslie identifies traditions as one of the most glaring constraints to women's empowerment in Africa. Within these traditions, the African woman has always been defined according to her traditional roles of wife and mother, which also seem the only ways by which her self-worth and self-esteem are measured in society. In marriage, she is respected and appreciated only if she fulfills her marital and maternal missions, that is to be a dutiful wife to her husband, and a self-sacrificing mother to his preferably male children. Correspondingly, the woman who is unable to honor these engagements is not seen as a misfortunate woman; she is rather regarded as an evil, an unsuccessful, and a wicked woman because she has failed to contribute in the continuity of the African offspring .

Despite the importance given to motherhood, women are not treated as equal beings with men. While this motherhood has been highly celebrated in Negritude's literary aesthetics and even equated with paradise in the religious discourse of Muslim Africa, woman's docility and passivity towards her husband has been constantly required by culture. This disparity between theory and practice emphasizes in fact the influential role of traditions to direct behaviors and define positions in society. In contemporary Africa, this cultural influence of traditions has been so strong that it significantly impacted people's understanding and interpretation of their religious knowledge. The infusion between traditions and religious interpretations becomes a social instrument through which patriarchal prescriptions are maintained, and discriminatory practices against women are reinforced. The Egyptian feminist and Nawal El Saadawi contends that "conservative interpretations of religion and cultural indoctrination in patriarchal contexts account for the female subordination to men"¹.

¹ Nawal El Saadawi, "Women, Creativity and Dissidence", In. *The Essential Nawal El Saadawi*, ed., Adele Newson-Horst (London and New York : Zed Books, 1988) 70.

This reference to religion, as being one of the factors that have shaped the fate of women draws attention to the reality of African Muslim women, where men's manipulation of religious tenets has inevitably reinvented, reinforced, and legitimized beliefs about male authority and female docility. Not surprisingly, in Africa, outdated practices like female circumcision and polygamy which precede the advent of Islam are cynically made to mirror the teachings of religion, forming in this sense a rigid and conservative version of Islam that is very often hostile to women. The archetypal Muslim woman constructed from this blending is that of submissive and dutiful wife who unquestionably submits under what El Saadawi terms the philosophy of "God above, husband below"². According to culture, the wife's devoutness to Allah is dependent upon her obedience to her husband, even if this entails her abuse and mistreatment. The woman who goes against the status quo is a cursed woman because she has upset Allah's orders and disrupted the Muslim code of righteousness .

In the midst of these cultural complexities, the Muslim woman is torn by her attempts to reconcile communal expectations with individual aspirations. Because religion is understood within the discourse of fear and societal retribution, the quest for identity and the quest for self-fulfillment become conditioned and problematized under these cultural constraints. Yet, Muslim gender scholars insist upon the need to reclaim women's voices through participating in a discursive production that would explain how women are discriminated against , why they are powerless to affront their subordination , but more importantly, what measures one can take to overcome the status quo. Basically, their feminist perspective is to redefine the question of female subjectivity by creating possibilities of recovery and empowerment out of traumatic experiences of oppression.

Women writers, like Mariama Ba and Nawal El Saadawi, have shown a strong commitment to reconstruct the question of gender in Muslim Africa. While their narratives may deliver at the surface, a gloomy and pessimistic image of the African woman, the portrait of the pitiful victim in need of some philanthropic aid becomes soon juxtaposed with that of an assertive woman, capable of action. Thus, the woman in their narratives is both the object and the subject; the other and the self ; and the

² Nawal El Saadawi , "God above, husband Below", In. Adele Newson –Horst, ed., *op.cit.*, 90.

victim who has lost her voice under the weight of submission, and the subversive woman who decides to reclaim this voice under the same circumstances of subjugation. According to Khadidiatou Guèye, “this interconnection of resistance and oppression indicates how women’s liberatory practices are inseparable from the patriarchal realm”³, and how sites of denunciation and enunciation can be articulated out of restricting spaces of suppression and repression.

Exploring these sites of oppression and resistance, mainly in our selected novels Mariama Ba’ *So Long a Letter* and Nawal El Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero* is the central concern of this dissertation. Their novels offer a good illustration of Muslim women’s subjugation under distorted cultural norms, which ensure male authority and female submission to this authority . They both condemn the use of fallacious religious interpretations to justify traditional practices that are detrimental to women. Although these interpretations may be variably manipulated between the Senegalese milieu of Mariama Ba and the Egyptian context of Nawal El Saadawi , they often bring frustration and sufferings to women, who do not dare to contest them publically . Due to fallacious interpretations of religion , Ramatoulaye ’s husband , in *So Long a Letter*, manages to contract a polygamous marriage and abandon his responsibilities towards his wife and children . Due also to the same manipulation of religion, Firdaus’ physical abuse and sexual exploitation under the Egyptian system of patriarchy is permitted and legitimized in *Woman at point Zero*.

Mariama Ba and Nawal El Saadawi reveal on multiple accounts how these cultural constraints cause hardships to their protagonists who struggle to negotiate a space between their desire for self –fulfillment, and their cautiousness of their societies’ restrictions. In *So Long a Letter*, Mariama Ba is “able to capture accurately the dilemma facing contemporary African women caught in a society straddled between a tenacious past and an indeterminate present, a society absolutely uncertain about the role it wants to ascribe to its womenfolk”⁴ . We see then how Ramatoulaye is

³ Khadidiatou Guèye , “Tyrannical Femininity in Nawal El Saadawi’s *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*” , Research in African Literatures 41.2 (2010): 160. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/ral.2010.41.2.160>.

⁴ Omofolabo Ajayi-Soyinka, “Negritude, Feminism, and The Quest for Identity : Re-reading Mariama Ba’ s *So Long a Letter*” , In . Emerging Perspectives on Mariama Ba. Postcolonialism, Feminism , and Postmodernism , ed., Ada Uzomaka Azodo (Asmara : Africa World Press, 2003) 167 .

torn by a sense of ambivalence ;whether she complies with the dictates of culture which encourage her into accepting Modou's polygamous marriage , or responds to her inner voice which calls her to take an emancipatory choice to leave her husband. While Ba's narrative reveals a negotiation process between the rigors of being a single mother and the promising aspirations of being an independent woman, El Saadawi's novel exposes the heavy price her protagonist was forced to pay when deciding to liberate herself from a society which manipulates concepts of religion, honor , and patriotism to serve patriarchal desires. The narrative then follows Firdaus' journey into awareness that in a society where there exist a male master and a female slave, any possibility for liberation would include liberation from the cultural constraints which foster this male supremacy and female inferiority.

It becomes important, at this juncture, to highlight the dimension and the role of cultural standards to support a complex patriarchal logic of gender inequality, and its impact on the configuration of women's identities. Therefore, the question that we may ask here is how traditions and the misconstruction of religion can breed a disordered and distorted culture which is oppressive to women; and how these women can reclaim their subjectivities out of repressive spaces of male authority.

Our research is an attempt to provide possible answers to these questions through the analysis of Mariama Ba and Nawal El Saadawi 'selected novels. In *So Long a Letter*, Ba condemns women's unfair treatment under polygamy, a system which is traditionally and religiously accepted in Muslim Senegal. Through the voice of Ramatoulaye, Ba questions the cultural norms that sanction flagrant injustices, like infidelity and abandonment. She depicts then, how the "betrayals of the flesh " (34) is simply regarded as a fatalistic act , a divine destiny which Ramatoulaye should accept unquestioningly. This would imply that in the Senegalese society, frustration and emotional trauma are also fatalistic acts which the wife must also accept automatically, as Mawdo' statement to Ramatoulaye suggests : "she (the wife) must not worry herself about 'betrayals of the flesh' " (34). According to culture, the wife must not bother herself about the trauma of infidelity because God has designed her husband as a man in traditional marriage to acquire more than one wife .

The subjugation of women fortified by religion and traditions is also treated in *Woman at Point Zero*. Here, the burden of Egyptian womanhood is much heavier than the one depicted in the Senegalese society. Having a male child is a blessing, whereas a female birth is a curse. Female circumcision, women docility, and domestic violence, represented by wife battery or marital rape, are traditionally and religiously accepted. The woman cannot stand power to oppose all these constraints because she has been taught that docility and submission to man are virtues, recommended both by religion and traditions. In *Woman at Point Zero*, the Egyptian model of patriarchy goes beyond sanctioning husband's betrayal, it goes into allowing women's sexual exploitation under the humiliating system of prostitution. A manifestation of this patriarchal power is evident when the prostitute Firdaus started losing control over her own body, giving it as a male property, exchanged and negotiated under greedy patriarchal and capitalistic dictates.

In order to explore our protagonists' victimization under the institutions of polygamy and prostitution, we intend to approach Mariama Ba and Nawal El Saadawi's novels from a post-colonial feminist perspective. The post-colonial feminist approach will provide the necessary tools to examine the role of religion and traditions in shaping up the conditions of women in post-colonial societies. This kind of feminist epistemology not only focuses on patriarchy as the sole source of women's oppression, but it also examines how gender inequality in Third World countries is intrinsically linked to historical, political and cultural circumstances. For postcolonial feminists, there can be no global model of patriarchy because the cultural differences sustaining gender inequality are variant from one context to another. What Third world women like Firdaus and Ramatoulaye experience under the system of polygamy and female circumcision is completely different from what western women undergo as a sign of oppression under the system of pornography, for instance. The different historical and societal circumstances that exist between these women give rise to a multifaceted form of patriarchy which is contingent upon the issue of specificity. For postcolonial feminists, this interrelatedness of patriarchy and cultural specificity is often misunderstood and exploited by western feminists to create a monolithic category of gender which regroups Muslim women like Firdaus and Ramatoulaye under

stereotypical signifiers. This in fact echoes the postcolonial feminist Uma Narayan who views that the “ project to attending to differences among women across a variety of national and cultural contexts then becomes a project that endorses and replicates problematic and colonist assumptions about the cultural difference between ‘western culture’ and ‘non western cultures’ and the women who inhabit them ”⁵. This means that because women like Firdaus and Ramatoulaye share some circumstances of oppression, that is the manipulation of religion to enforce gender hierarchy, they will be inevitably identified under a generic category of gender that manifests racist and hegemonic notions of cultural differences. For the Indian feminist Chandra Talpade Mohanty, the focus of western feminists “is not on uncovering the material and ideological specificities that constitute a particular group of women as "powerless" in a particular context. It is rather on finding a variety of cases of "powerless" groups of women to prove the general point that women as a group are powerless.”⁶ Viewed from this perspective, the concern of western feminists in reading narratives like *So Long a Letter* and *Woman at Point Zero* is not to explore the mechanisms of cultural norms to reinforce husbands’ infidelity and violence towards their wives . Rather , the attention will be directed at identifying Ramatoulaye and Firdaus as victims of both polygamy and domestic violence. Correspondingly, Ramatoulaye who did not go through Firdaus’ bitter experience, may be approached as a victim of male violence simply because she, like El Saadawi’s protagonist, lives in a Muslim male dominated culture.

Within these confusions, postcolonial feminists are careful to single out that the issue of specificity regarding cultural differences should not overrule the diversity characterizing these women’ experiences. Their narratives, in this regard, should be read as divergent and complex stories of women’s encounters with culture specific façade of patriarchy. This means that within the same culture, there exist heterogeneous social practices which sustain variable and complex instances of

⁵ Uma Narayan, “Essence of Culture and a Sense of History : A feminist Critique of Cultural Essentialism ”, In. *Decentering the Center: Philosophy for a Multicultural, Postcolonial, and Feminist World* , eds., Uma Narayan, and Sandra Harding (Bloomington and Indianapolis : Indiana University Press , 2000) 81.

⁶ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses”, *On Humanism and the University I: The Discourse of Humanism* 12.3 (1984): 338.
<http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>.

oppression. Although Ramatoulaye and Firdaus are born into a Muslim culture that supports a patriarchal mentality of gender subordination, the two women did not experience similar stories of oppression. The educated and middle class Ramatoulaye did not experience the same socio-economic hardships and religious hypocrisy witnessed by the lower-class Firdaus who had experienced physical abuse and perpetual sexual molestation. El Saadawi is extremely interested in “the psychosexual states of being in Egyptian womanhood”⁷. For her, there is an intimate association between identity and sexuality. In the same way social constructs significantly determine gender roles and shape female identity, sexual politics influence women’s behaviors and their sense of selfhood . In Mariama Ba’s novel , on the other hand, the issue of sexuality is not highlighted as being part of the cultural constraints maintained against women. Gender asymmetry, in addition to be linked to common factors of religion and traditions, is also symbolized by other issues like tradition /modernity tensions. Ba depicts then how the clash between tradition and modernity has, to some extent, intensified gender discrimination when the claim for women’s rights in Senegal becomes seen as a manifestation of western cultural hegemony that must be contained by controlling women and confining them into their traditional roles .

Accordingly, both Mariama Ba and Nawal El Saadawi show that the discrimination exercised against their protagonists came as a result of the intersection of historical, societal , sexual, and even political factors , as we are going to demonstrate in the following chapters . By providing this variable and multifaceted account, the two writers aim to de-homogenize the model of generic oppression , and emphasize instead the complexity and diversity of post-colonial women’s lives . For postcolonial feminists, the model of monolithic Third World woman does not only deny diversity and specificity, but it also problematizes the very notion of resistance, one of the main ideals of feminist project. In this regard, the belief in a homogeneous model of subalternity generally parallels the belief in a homogeneous model of female identity, which in return denies these women subjectivity. For these writers, restricting post-

⁷ Peter Hitchcock, “The Eye and The Other . The Gaze and The Look in Egyptian Feminist Fiction” , In. The Politics of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity and Resistance in African Literature , ed., Obioma Nnaemeka (London and New York : Routledge, 1997) 76.

colonial women' stories only in a discourse of subalternity would undermine the validity of feminism as a transformative and emancipatory movement . In this regard, female characters defined by the discourse of Otherness should be given voice to transcend the gender binary of oppressor and oppressed.

Both Nawal El Saadawi and Mariama seemingly respond to this feminist call by highlighting the paradoxical and dual roles that their heroines assume during the course of their narratives. On the one hand, they are victims of repressive institutions and practices like polygamy, prostitution , and male violence . On the other hand, they are self-assertive agents who succeed to overcome their passivity and marginality in order to carve their own spaces of empowerment. In *So Long a Letter*, Mariama Ba did not only criticize traditional and societal norms that are detrimental to women, but she also projected a positive image of single mother who abruptly decides to come to voice in order to question the restrictive space and repressive conditions to which she has been subjected. Ba, through the characters of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, reconstituted active female subjects by revising the conventional definitions of womanhood which reductively set wifehood as being an important measurer of women's self-worth. The contestable image of single mother becomes positively portrayed when the widow Ramatoulaye and the divorced Aissatou manage to overcome their crisis and raise their children alone, while leading successful professional careers. A new category of women emerges and serves to castigate the Negritude model of self-sacrificing mother. This category brings into play the contradictory and dual roles assumed in the dichotomizing paradigms of oppression / resistance .

While Ramatoulaye fulfills the Negritude's metaphor of motherhood by remaining bound to marriage despite its trauma, she at a critical moment decides to abandon patriarchal values which would place her again under oppressive practices like leviratical and polygamous marriages. While Mariama Ba's novel contributes to redefining the archetypical African woman , Nawal El Saadawi's narrative serves to subvert the Master/Slave dialectic which forces women like Firdaus to slavishly submit under the authority of their male masters. Firdaus 'subversive discourse of

violence thwarts the allocated gender power relationships which make the prostitute's body a male property, or a colonized territory for male sexual transgressions. The helpless and powerless female slave who passively surrenders under the commands of her master's sexual dictates is now the one who reversibly exercises authority over this master. So, despite the gloomy picture of victimization given in the novel, Firdaus succeeded to acquire a sense of dignity and power even over her oppressor. The preface of the novel stressed this self-acquiring power which, according to the psychiatrist, established her uniqueness. For her, "Firdaus remained a woman apart. She stood out amongst the others, vibrated within (her), or sometimes lay quiet, until the day when (she) put her down in ink on paper"(iii).

Our work will be divided into three chapters. The first chapter introduces the theoretical and methodological perspectives of this thesis. Its main focus is to revise the western politics of representation and location by defining new positionalities within which gender realities in postcolonial contexts can be explained. We try to highlight feminist debates which have helped develop an academic understanding of the question of women in Muslim Africa. The chapter sets also a critical study of cultural essentialism which fails to read the varied modes of representing female oppression and resistance. The dissertation takes an anti-essentialist stance against the reductive reading of postcolonial feminist narratives like the ones under study in this thesis. This could be achieved by giving a background material which helps theorize differences and contextualize the complex issues structuring Muslim women's lived experiences, according to their historical, societal, and political circumstances. The chapter ends with reexamining the politics of identity by highlighting possibilities of agency and empowerment for the female subaltern, an effort that comes as a response to the monolithic descriptions of Muslim women's identities as victims without agency.

Chapter two deals with Mariama Ba's novel *So long a Letter*. It examines the different forms of oppression exercised against women: polygamy and its social and economic ramifications, widow inheritance, Mirasse, matriarchal authority; all of them are traditionally or religiously accepted through impotent cultural justifications.

The chapter also explores the choices made by female characters like Ramatoulaye and Aissatou to overcome their oppression. We will investigate then the different strategies of empowerment made by these women which include: female writing, friendship, and divorce.

Chapter three which deals with Nawal El Saadawi's novel *Woman at Point Zero* offers a polemical account of women's victimization under the multifarious system of Egyptian patriarchy . It examines Firdaus' physical abuse and sexual molestation from childhood to womanhood, as being exemplified by female excision, marital violence , and prostitution. Nonetheless, the chapter explores the protagonist's journey into self-fulfillment and the measures she takes to liberate herself from the shackles of patriarchy. We will examine how the acts of murder and enunciation help Firdaus reclaim her subjectivity and decolonize her body from male sexual transgressions .

CHAPTER ONE

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1.1 Introduction

Many African women writers who were concerned with the issue of improving African women's conditions have expressed their cautiousness and sometimes their refusal to declare their adherence to feminist movement. They relate the controversy surrounding this movement to matters of naming and sociocultural relevance. For them, the term *feminism* is itself problematic and controversial because it is seen by the local discourse as a cultural form of foreign intervention and imperialism, which comes to destroy traditional norms and replace them by alien western values. Accordingly, it becomes difficult for the African woman to define herself as a feminist, a designation that would inappropriately associate her with western values and alienate her from her culture.

Such a radical mode of approaching feminism is reflected in the way the narratives produced by African female writers are judged within their local critical discourse. The Nigerian critic Femi Ojo-Ade, for instance, views Mariama Ba as a feminist of the French school who is promoting western feminist ideals to African women. Ojo disapproves of Ba's feminist consciousness by expressing his discomfort with the novel's denunciation of male attitudes. For him, "two camps are precisely delineated in *Mariama Ba*: the victimizer, the slave-master, the ruler of this hell on earth, is Man; the victimized, the slave driven at times to the point of mental exhaustion, is Woman"¹. He regards Ba's portrayal of her female characters' struggle as anti-African, and thus as a form of western feminist articulation which constitutes woman's alienation from man as a means of her liberation and empowerment. It becomes clear that Ojo's misreading of the novel stems from his rejection of feminism, which in his eyes, is an accidental phenomenon that promises illusory freedom to African women.

¹ Quoted in Laurie Edson, "Mariama Ba and The Politics of The Family", *Studies in 20th Century Literature*. Special Issue on *Contemporary Feminist Writing in French : A Multicultural perspective*, San Diego University Press. 17.1 (1993): 11. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1309>.

Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, particularly, has received much criticism which describes El Saadawi's denunciation of Firdaus' victimization as an attack on Islam and a confirmation of western stereotypes concerning women's treatment under their culture. For many critics, the novel celebrates female sexual liberation and calls for an antagonistic relationship between men and women. The Syrian critic Georges Tarabishi, for instance, sees that Firdaus' coming to voice and growing hatred towards men as the response of a neurotic prostitute who "wants to challenge the biological laws of nature... Her slogan is that, far from completing each other, the sexes actually repel each other, like the Manichean principles of good and evil"².

It becomes clear, then, that to avoid such reproaches, African women writers have to prove that their concern for improving women's rights cannot be grounded in western feminist thought. Rather, they show that their activism is more culture-based, focusing on the contestation of particular oppressive practices and institutions. This means that their struggle is not based on rejecting their indigenous values, but rather on questioning those traditional dictates which are detrimental to women. In this chapter, we will show that the inclusion of culture in feminist theory as an important element in shaping up the conditions of women will shed light on the historical and social specificities within which the conditions of African women are being located. Exploring the experiences of these women will demonstrate that there is no global model of feminine experience because oppression varies according to the socio-historical conditions. Accordingly, this chapter aims to give the novels under study a postcolonial feminist interpretation which will explain different stories of femininity with great cultural contextualization. We will then explore the politics of difference that have long produced what we will see as essentialist pictures about Third World women. The study of essentialism in this thesis will serve to provide the novels under examination with a feminist reading, which would not homogenize the different experiences of the female characters into unified categories of labels. Accordingly, we examine the post-colonial feminist project to unravel these essentialist claims about Third World women in general and Muslim women in particular.

²Georges Tarabishi, *Woman Against her Sex* (London: Saqi Books, 1988) 17.

1.2 Theorizing the African Muslim woman question within the post-colonialfeminist discourse

Postcolonial feminists' awareness about the role of cultural practices in enforcing gender inequality pushes them to argue that the subordinated position allocated to Third World women cannot be tackled without analyzing the deep rooted beliefs and assumptions that underlie and structure this position. This echoes the view of Uma Narayan who claims that “ the scope of feminist struggles needs to include not only contestations of particular practices and institutions detrimental to women, but additionally to include challenges to the larger pictures of nation , national history , and cultural traditions that serve to sustain and justify these practices and institutions”³. This is undoubtedly true, since many oppressive practices and institutions like circumcision, polygamy, and widow inheritance are maintained and reinforced through longstanding cultural norms that went unquestionable for a long time .

In our selected novel, *Woman at Point Zero*, the practice of circumcision, for instance, does not exist in a vacuum . It is rather related to the concern of coping with the tradition of controlling female sexuality, so that the honor of the family can be maintained. Accordingly, blame has not to fall on practitioners, or on Firdaus' mother who accepts her daughter being circumcised , or more exactly on the practice itself , but rather on the uncontestable and indisputable cultural beliefs that support such an act . Nawal El Saadawi, the Moroccan feminist Fatima Mernissi ,and others seem to join this feminist call by directing their critiques simultaneously on the issue of female circumcision and on the cultural norms that motivate and reinforce the perpetuation of this practice. Issues like Active Female Sexuality, The Territoriality of Muslim Sexuality, honor, and purity will be discussed at length in this chapter to show the role of cultural beliefs in enforcing patriarchal practices and institutions .

³ Uma Narayan ,*Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism* (Routledge: New York, 1997) 20-21.

From another perspective, the African Nationalist discourse which is firmly embedded in African traditional norms is often guilty of maintaining some patriarchal practices and beliefs. A study that focuses on the Negritude movement shows that the nostalgic praise to the African Mother can work to perpetuate patriarchal oppression. The Negritude model of *Femme noire* seems to confirm women's status as being confined in the domestic sphere. Omofolabo Ajayi-Soyinka, in her article *Negritude, Feminism, and The Quest for Identity: Re-reading Mariama Ba's So Long a Letter*, stresses that an unbalanced representation in Negritude aesthetics occurs when the male identity becomes more privileged, compared to that of the female. For her: "He (man) emerges as the soldier liberating mother Africa ...and the natural spokesperson for the new times unfolding in his culture. He becomes the referential "I" of power who names others"⁴. By contrast, the women remain always defined by men; they emerge in a disempowering figure, lacking the strength to defend or free themselves. Mariama Ba in *So Long a Letter*, through her protagonist Ramatoulaye, highlights how the model of African motherhood can sometimes impede women from seeking alternative liberating spaces. So, before subverting the Negritude model, she posits Ramatoulaye as the archetypal Negritude mother who, despite her husband's betrayal and abandonment, is still unable to renounce her own negative self-image that a woman cannot find happiness beyond marriage. Ramatoulaye, in this regard, fulfills the metaphor of the self-sacrificing mother by deciding to remain in marriage and raise her twelve children, despite all the humiliations she faced.

For many postcolonial feminists, oppressive institutions and practices, like the ones discussed above, could not be maintained without what Uma Narayan refers to as *venerability* in culture. For her, some cultural norms not only function to subjugate the female sex, but they tend to "reinforce powerfully the idea of venerability, making people susceptible to the suggestion that practices and institutions are valuable merely in virtue of the fact that they are of long-standing, and tied to the spiritual place and respect for women in their cultures"⁵. By "venerability", oppressive customs are not only accepted and normalized, but are also taken as being part of the valuable

⁴ Omofolabo Ajayi-Soyinka, *op.cit.*, 158.

⁵ Uma Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism*, *op.cit.*, 21-22.

traditional heritage that must be properly preserved. It is indeed this idea of venerability which makes some detrimental practices difficult to be resisted and questioned openly, because any critique or deviation from what is culturally established can lead to marginality and otherness.

Such pictures of venerability are vividly portrayed in our selected novels. In *So Long a Letter*, Mariama Ba depicts how the restricted mourning rituals are imposed on the widow Ramatoulaye as being something important and valuable to her deceased husband and his family. According to cultural dictates, the widow must sacrifice her belongings to her in-laws as an act of recognition to her husband. The woman who does not follow such a dictate is likely threatened to be cursed because she has failed to show respect to the spirit of her dead husband. The fact that these rituals are practiced with an unquestionable loyalty renders them not only immune to change, but also venerable in the eyes of their followers. Accordingly, a reversal of vision occurs at this point: instead of seeing such rituals as disempowering to the widow Ramatoulaye who deserves material and financial assistance, they are rather regarded as constitutive to the social framework.

Like Mariama Ba, Nawal El Saadawi in *Woman at Point Zero* emphasizes that some oppressive acts start to undergo this venerability even within the female folk because the beliefs underlying these acts are so embedded, that society is unable to question their validity. A salient example is to be found when Firdaus returned to her uncle's house, complaining of her husband's domestic abuse. Firdaus is made to believe that it is especially well-versed Sheikhs who beat their wives. There is a tendency here, to normalize the act and accept it as normally performed, even by the religious people who should abhor it. The fact that abuse is thought to be acceptable within these influential men can make it not only admissible within common people, but a process of venerability might appear to the fore. In other words, the manipulation of religion, coupled with the patriarchal belief about the authority of the husband over his wife, have made wife beating a recommended act for men to conduct their homes.

The examples discussed above pose really a pressing problem to the feminist project, given the fact that the generalization of these pictures and the construction of traditionally established norms, as being integral to society's cultural identity result

in what is known in feminist postcolonial theory as cultural essentialism. According to Uma Narayan, Essentialism in culture “equates the values, world views, and practices of some socially dominant groups with those of all members of culture.....The individuation of a culture proceeds precisely by casting certain values and practices as constitutive and central element of the culture in order to distinguish it from other cultures”⁶. Essentialism proceeds then by taking some beliefs and practices as cultural symbols that come to not only define the national culture, but also to distinguish it from other cultures. The Negritude’s model of *Femme Noire*, for instance, emphasizes essentialist constructions by depicting cultural specific norms as a constitutive feature under which African culture and African woman become identified and differentiated against their western counterparts. Uma Narayan warns that cultural essentialism, like gender essentialism, can produce discriminatory agendas. While gender essentialism employs particular feminine and masculine differences to construct and reinforce hierarchical relations between men and women, cultural essentialism reinforces controversial cultural differences between western and Third world cultures. Under the influence of essentialism, non western women become identified as a homogeneous group suffering from heterogeneous set of cultural norms. Viewed from this perspective, the practices of polygamy and circumcision discussed in our selected novels can engender essentialist views about African Muslim culture. Such views may stress that all Muslim men are polygamous, and all African women are victims of circumcision.

Reading Mariama Ba’s novel from essentialist lens would likely reinforce western stereotypes about African culture as being oppressive to women, favoring male interests over female well-being. An example of such a western reading is suggested by John Champagne, an assistant professor of English in Penn State University, who stresses the difficulties of teaching postcolonial literary texts such as Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter* to a western audience. According to him, much of this difficulty stems from the students’ inability to distance their comprehension of the text from the existing stereotypical images about Islam and Africa. Through his observations of the

⁶ Uma Narayan, “Essence of Culture and a Sense of History : A feminist Critique of Cultural Essentialism”, *op.cit.*, 87.

students' oral reports about the novel, Champagne points to a "gross manifestations of racist Eurocentric ideology"⁷, underlying their vision of Ramatoulaye's misfortune under her culture :

"Students seemed uniformly horrified at Ramatoulaye's plight, and, in particular, at the role assigned to women by Islam. A particularly bright student remarked that the Islamic religion seemed to sexualize women excessively. Another wanted to know why Ramatoulaye remained faithful to her religion, given Islam's negative influence on her life. Why she didn't just convert to some other religion, he wondered"⁸.

The students' responses are examples of essentialist claims about feminine experience in Muslim Africa. Instead of employing their historical analysis of the Senegalese culture to give a contextualized reading of novel, they posit Islam as the sole source of Ramatoulaye's misfortune.

Like Champagne, Amel Amireh, a major critic of El Saadawi's works, is also interested in revealing essentialist interpretations of postcolonial female writings. She observes that "several instructors who teach *Woman at Point Zero*, the most popular of El Saadawi's books, indicate that they have to work hard to prevent their students from using it to confirm their stereotypes"⁹. The students that Amireh points to are western, who regard El Saadawi's depiction of Firdaus' victimization as representative to all women living under Muslim culture. To exemplify such claims, I find very useful what the academic feminist Amal Al Ayoubi mentions in her PhD dissertation concerning the Guardian's commentaries about the novel. For the Guardian, Firdaus' story is "a symbolized version of female revolt against the norms of the Arab world"¹⁰. Firdaus' bitter experience with patriarchy in Egypt is then homogenized, suggesting that all women living in Arab or Middle Eastern countries are discriminated against under their Muslim culture. This view would emphasize also that all religious men whether belonging to El Azhar University or other institutions are corrupted, and all

⁷ John Champagne, "A feminist just like us? Teaching Mariama Ba' *So Long a Letter*", College English..National Council of Teachers of English 58.1 (1996): 26 .<http://www.jstor.org/stable/378532>.

⁸Ibid. , 26.

⁹Amel Amireh , "Framing Nawal El Saadawi : Arab Feminism in a Transnational World" , In. Intersections: Gender, Nation, and Community in Arab Women's Novels, eds., Lisa Suhair Majaj, et al , (New York : Syracuse University Press, 2002) 65.

¹⁰ Quoted in Amal Al Ayoubi, The Reception of Arab Women Writers in The West, (a PhD thesis submitted to the University of Edinburgh , 2006), 170. <https://www.era.lib.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/7405>.

Muslim fathers are cruel and tyrannical. Like Ba's novel, much of this confusion is due to the fact that religion, like culture or race, has been understood in western discourse with great essentialist conceptions. This occurs when individual comportments, similar to Modou's and Firdaus' uncle, become wrongly attributed to Islam or merely explained with reference to its teachings.

Essentialism then focuses only on Islam and its stereotypical representations, but overlooks the notion of Muslim individuals and their variant behaviors. A noticeable manifestation of essentialist constructions is seen in the way the term "Muslim woman" has been represented in western discourse. All women living under Muslim culture become homogenized into a single signifier, known as "Muslim Woman" which generally carries stereotypical prescriptions about Islam's treatment of women. For postcolonial feminists, positioning women within an essentialist discourse deprives them of a sense of individuality and constructs them as an inflexible and subaltern entity. To highlight this lack of individuality, the American feminist Miriam Cooke has linked Muslim and woman in one word to create the neologism, *Muslimwoman*. For Cook, "*Muslimwoman* is both a noun and an adjective that refers to an imposed identification the individual may or may not choose for herself. The *Muslimwoman* is not a description of a reality; it is the ascription of a label that reduces all diversity to a single image"¹¹.

Aiming to show how essentialist descriptions are constructed to produce this label, Cook gives the example of the veiled woman. Western discourse often associates the veil with women's 'Muslimness' and backwardness by assuming that Muslim women are all covered and secluded. Such a fixed construction provides limited ways of understanding the complexity of the rubric Muslim woman by ignoring the varied lived experiences of women subsuming under it. The actual social classification of *Muslimwoman* would reveal, however, that there are many Muslim women who are not veiled, but express a high devotion to the teachings of Islam, and there exist on the other hand, women who are veiled and do not follow the teachings of their religion. This view echoes Marnia Lazreg, an Algerian feminist and sociologist, who

¹¹Miriam Cooke, "The Muslimwoman" *Springer Science and Business Media, Cont Islam* 1 (2007): 140. <https://miriamcooke.apostrophenow.com>.

sees that Muslim women are “made to conform to the configuration of meanings associated with the concept of Islam. The label affirms what ought to be seen as problematical: whether the “Islamic women” are truly devout or whether the societies in which they live are theocracies are questions that the label glosses over”¹². This is a valid point to make, as it will seem inappropriate to identify non-Muslim women living in locations of Arab Muslim majority as Muslim women. These women are necessarily made to have the same characteristics and experience of femininity to that of Muslim women, ignoring the fact that there are many ethnicities, classes and religions among women even within similar geographical locations and historical circumstances.

It becomes clear from this discussion that the misreading of Mariama Ba and Nawal El Saadawi’s novels, as has been exemplified through Champagne and the Guardian newspaper, is justified with reference to the signifier Muslim woman. The way the novels have been misinterpreted brings to the fore Chandra Mohanty’s claim that “The existence of Third World women’s narratives in itself is not evidence of decentering hegemonic histories and subjectivities. It is the way in which they are read, understood, and located institutionally which is of paramount importance”¹³. For Mohanty, presenting narratives on Third World women with reductionist readings can further the marginalization of these women because the struggle, in this case, will be double fold: on the one hand, fighting against the local patriarchal norms that undermine women’s advancement; on the other hand, resisting the receptive western discourse that misreads their narratives. To cope with this situation, Mohanty proposes a reading which tolerates difference, a reading which acknowledges different forms of patriarchy, and finally and more importantly a reading which distinguishes between Third World woman as a metaphor and as a reality.

Mohanty’s arguments combined with the postcolonial feminist background developed earlier help reviewing the claims of Champagne’s students and the Guardian about the experiences of Ramatoulaye and Firdaus respectively. An anti-essentialist reading of Mariama Ba’s novel would detach Modou’s unfair treatment of his wife from Islam, and would stress indeed the heterogeneity of Muslims’ practices. Islam, in this regard,

¹²Marnia Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 7.

¹³Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003) 77-78.

should not be defined or related to the behaviors of its adherents, for each behavior reflects the individual's own perception of his religion, and not the tenets of religion itself. Some oppressive practices which are portrayed in the novel are purely Senegalese as they reflect the Senegalese way of adhering to religion. This can be noticed from the funeral ceremonies following Modou's death, which are not necessarily practiced in other parts of Islamic regions like North Africa, for example. Ramatoulaye tells us that in Senegal, the widow is required during her mourning period to undergo purifying baths, where she is allowed to change her clothes only on Mondays and Fridays. As a Muslim woman living in a North African country, I have never witnessed the practice of such rituals in my society. The way these funeral ceremonies are practiced in North Africa may introduce a different Islam, which may be approached by western readers as oppressive and hostile not only to women inhabiting this region, but to all Muslim women whatever their traditions and ethnicities may be. Thus, a reading which essentializes Islam in Mariama Ba's narrative would likely homogenize, in return, the heterogeneous set of religious practices found in other Muslim locations.

In the same manner, Nawal El Saadawi's portrayal of the complexity of female experience in *Woman at Point Zero* diverts the Guardian's claims about the homogeneity of women's oppression. The fact that both Firdaus and her uncle's wife live under the same cultural circumstances does not necessarily make them having the same degree of oppression. Not only do Firdaus and her aunt have dissimilar stories, but seemingly contradictory feminine experiences as well. The aunt did not experience the same marital abuse that Firdaus witnessed in her father's and husband's houses. Unlike his brother and his fellow Sheikh Mahmoud, the uncle never made his wife "bite the dust each night" (12) or "leapt on (her) like a mad dog" (45). Despite some instances where he expressed a sort of sexual greediness towards his wife, we never notice a kind of maltreatment and abuse. Moreover, unlike Firdaus, the uncle's wife comes from a high social class (daughter of a respected Sheikh), and this prevents her from getting trapped in the viciousness of Firdaus' exploitation.

Reading El Saadawi's novel from an anti-essentialist lens would also stress that the portrayal of the uncle and the father's abuse does not mirror all religious men, or

religion itself. Abuse, whether sexual, mental or verbal does not symbolize the teachings of religion, but rather the individual's own comportment which can be found similarly among non Muslim societies. What is particular in the case of Firdaus is the male manipulation of religion to legitimize violence against her. Therefore, instead of homogenizing female experience and male behavior, it makes more sense to see the novel as presenting a valuable opportunity to understand the problems of a peasant woman within a conservative society, or more exactly, a society which manipulates religious norms to justify the restraint and the victimization of its womenfolk. A reductionist reading of the novel would fail to consider that ElSaadawi's portrayal of gender inequality is not an attack on Islam as a religion, but rather on the way it has been employed by corrupted men to promote patriarchal interests.

The way Islam is practiced differently by its adherents reflects the problematically complex nature of the African Muslim culture. Islam in Africa is not only a religious faith or a set of divinely prescribed teachings, but also a social system that defines and regulates relationships between people. Within this system, pre-Islamic beliefs and practices are very often taken as part of Islamic teachings, forming parallel but sometimes deviant and aberrant forms of religious prescriptions. What has been traditionally taken for granted is wickedly accommodated with religious norms to favor and serve patriarchal dictates. As a result, traditional and repressive acts like polygamy and wife beating, discussed in our selected novels, tend to gain a public relevance as they come to be justified with reference to Islam.

Alongside this subjective understanding of the influence of religion on women's status, most Muslim feminists are careful to single out that women's victimization lies in the patriarchal system, consolidated by the falsification or manipulation of religious texts. They recognize that their concern for improving women's conditions should be negotiated within religious paradigms, and that women's victimization cannot be overcome if the prevalent religious assumptions are not seriously questioned and openly debated. According to Fatima Mernissi, Muslim women have to write back; they have to employ the same instruments that have been used against them to deny them agency. Mernissi and other Muslim scholars have called for a feminist counter discourse, which will be based on a historical study of the relationship between

gender and religion in order to articulate instances where God given rights for gender justice are clearly proclaimed. Their investigations led them to conclude that the problem does not exist within the religious text itself, but rather in the context from which this text has been wrongly interpreted by Muslim communities. In particular, the Egyptian feminist Leila Ahmed was interested in revealing these God made justice and man made injustice. For for, some passages in the Quran “make a clear statement about the absolute identity of the human moral condition, and the common and identical spiritual and moral obligations placed on all individuals regardless of sex”¹⁴.

These emerging feminist voices have the claim to overcome the dichotomy between Islam and feminism, which has become a feature of gender politics among Post-colonial feminists. The compatibility of Islam with feminism or the legitimacy of the so called *Islamic Feminism* to bring gender equality was questioned by many feminists. The opposition of Islamic feminism is based on the argument that Islam and feminism cannot be accommodated to found a framework in which gender equality and women’s advancement can be articulated. One of the main scholars who reject Islamic feminism is the Iranian feminist Haideh Moghissi who views that the question of woman has long been framed within secular discourse, and Islam is a religion that is based on gender hierarchy ; therefore, it will be useless to address women’s rights within Islamic paradigms. Moghissi states unequivocally that “no amount of twisting and bending can reconcile the Quranic injunctions and instructions about women’s rights and obligations with the idea of gender equality”¹⁵.

The incompatibility of Islam with feminism lies on the very basic idea on which each of them stands. Islam is a religion which promotes gender complementarity and not the feminist ideal of gender equality. Men and women are not created to be equal, but to complete each other through the different roles assigned to them. The public- private dichotomy which is an important point in feminist protest is not dismantled in Islam. Unlike feminism, Islamic teachings permit sexual-social divisions between the two sexes by emphasizing the family as a feminine sphere, while men are entitled to occupy the public sphere. Yet, this division does not entail the superiority of one sex

¹⁴Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven and London : Yale University Press , 1992) 65.

¹⁵Quoted in Sheila Jeffreys, *Man's Dominion: The Rise of Religion and the Eclipse of Women's Rights* (New York: Routledge, 2012) 186.

over the other. Justice is gender neutral in terms of rewards and punishment, or duties and responsibilities towards God. Accordingly, the divinely ordained equality as claimed by Islamic feminists is purely spiritual and not related to women's roles and responsibilities in society.

This contestation over Islamic feminism becomes even more valid when the over emphasis on religion or the fetishism of Islam, as Marnia Lazreg went to explain "obscures the living reality of the women and men subsumed under it"¹⁶. For her: "Religion cannot be detached from the socioeconomic and political context within which it unfolds"¹⁷. To trace an exhaustive feminist representation which could highlight the heterogeneity and complexity of feminine experience, Lazreg argues in favor of what she calls a *phenomenology of women's lived experience*, which explores the way women's interaction with men is structured and organized. A phenomenological study of women's lived experience would allow a postcolonial reading in which rather than relying on essentialist stereotypes, differences are acknowledged, theorized, and relativized according to their socio-cultural context. This means that differences will not be explained only within their religious context, but also within social and political paradigms like ethnicity, race, and history. In the Muslim context, sexual difference is one of the several differences which must not be explained only within its religious framework, but rather with great cultural and societal contextualization.

Feminists like Fatima Mernissi, Nawal El Saadawi, Assia Djebar, and others argue in favor of the specificity of Muslim sexuality, whose underlying traditional beliefs make it different from its western counterpart. Uncovering the truth about Muslim sexuality would reveal how the idea formulating Muslim woman's body as the embodiment of the family's honor has justified the seclusion and confinement of women. For Haideh Moghissi, in Muslim societies, sexuality "the site of love, desire, sexual fulfillment and physical procreation is, at the same time, for women, the site of shame, confinement, anxiety, compulsion. With the first drop of her menstrual

¹⁶Marnia Lazreg, "Feminism and Difference: The Perils of Writing as a Woman on Women in Algeria", *Feminist Studies* 14. 1 (1988) : 81. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3178000>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

blood, every Muslim girl becomes a temple of her family's honor"¹⁸. The discourse of sexuality is built on patriarchal assumptions which allocate the communal honor only to the purity and virtue of women. This discrimination is pushed further, resulting in what Fatima Mernissi referred to as *The Territoriality of Muslim Sexuality*, "whose regulatory mechanisms consist primarily in a strict allocation of space to each sex"¹⁹.

The notion of territoriality in Muslim Sexuality serves to reinforce the public/ private division by confining women in the world of domesticity, while men are charged to occupy the public sphere. Mernissi argues that these limitations are deliberately established to emphasize power relationship between the two spheres. The world of man is the world of power and authority, whereas the female's world is purely related to submission and obedience. Transgression of the allocated spaces is prohibited and dangerous because interaction between men and women is regarded as a threat to the social order. But transgression is made dangerous only to women who have no right to use the male space of power. If woman transgresses this space, she will upset "the male's order and his peace of mind. She is actually committing an act of aggression against him, inciting (him) to commit *zina*"²⁰. For Mernissi, one element which underlines this belief is the Muslim concept of *Active Female Sexuality*, which suggests that women possess an enormous amount of active sexual power. According to culture, women must be controlled and confined indoors in order to prevent men from being seduced by their potentially disruptive and transgressive sexuality. Moreover, it is generally assumed that a man who is attracted by a beautiful woman can easily be diverted from his social and religious duties by falling in illicit relationship with her. As a result of these perceptions of the female sexuality and its destructive power, patriarchal mechanisms, such as the seclusion of women, polygamy, and female circumcision have to be established in order to contain women's power and maintain the social order.

¹⁸ Haideh Moghissi, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis* (London: Zed Books, 1999) 20.

¹⁹ Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond The Veil* (London: Saqi Books, 1985) 137.

²⁰ *ibid.*, 144.

The way Muslim sexuality and gender relations are socially constructed is vividly portrayed in our selected novel *Woman at Point Zero*. Like Mernissi, El Saadawi argues that what underlies Islamic patriarchy is not the idea that women are inferior. It is rather related to the assumption that “woman is powerful and not weak, positive and not passive, capable of destroying but not easily destroyable, and that if anyone needs protection, it is the man rather the woman”²¹. Firdaus’ excision is an illustration of the regulatory mechanisms imposed on women’s sexuality. By positioning the clitoris as the site of this sexual pleasure, circumcision comes to be understood simultaneously as a means of reducing woman’s disruptive lust and purifying her body from being involved in illicit relationships. Accordingly, circumcision is a way of protecting the female’s virginity and the honor of her male relatives. This honor cannot be maintained without repressing Firdaus’ sexuality, or more exactly without making it territorial. Firdaus’ circumcised body, in this regard, becomes a socialized body whose commitment to its assigned social responsibilities is ensured. Following her circumcision, Firdaus bitterly remembers no longer being allowed to go to the fields, where she used to play “bride and bridegroom” (14) with Mohammadain. By removing her clitoris, Firdaus’ sexuality is rendered territorial; she is not allowed to transgress Mohammadain’s space. Instead, she is forced to stay at home performing women’s works because according to culture, the transition to womanhood is already marked on her body.

A phenomenological study of women’s conditions would stress the multi-faceted nature of the factors behind Firdaus’ circumcision, and how they interact with religion and tradition to perpetuate oppression against women. As mentioned earlier, for many feminists, the situation and problems of Muslim women must be contextualized within the socio-economic and political realities of contemporary Muslim countries. This echoes Chandra Mohanty who, in *Feminism Without Borders*, revisits the founding essay *Under Western Eyes*, by shifting her focus from a critique of western feminist essentialist perspectives to a concentration of transnational feminist practice against capitalism. For Mohanty, “the hegemony of neoliberalism, alongside the naturalization of capitalist values, influences the ability to make choices on one’s own behalf in the

²¹Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve* (Zed Books: London, 1980) 100.

daily lives of economically marginalized as well as economically privileged communities around the globe²². The ownership of capital has intensified poverty by bringing forth class inequality and class divisions. People who hold capital are people who hold power and thus, an ability to exploit and oppress the less privileged classes. As such, class inequality is also gender inequality when capitalist agendas proved to be built on patriarchal assumptions, which stress the legitimacy of men to objectify women, simply because they have power or more exactly money over them.

Although these relations may not seem explicitly addressed in *So Long a Letter* and *Woman at Point Zero*, we find that part of the protagonists' plight is being inscribed within these relations. In Mariama Ba's novel, Binetou's arranged marriage to Modou illustrates the way women have been relegated to commodities, exchanged to serve patriarchal and material interests. For Binetou's mother who comes from a poor social background, giving her daughter as a second wife to an old wealthy man is a route to financial survival. For Modou, on the other hand, marrying the young girl is a matter of sexual survival. Patriarchal and material interests intersect to render this marriage a business contract with both financial and sexual rewards. It is worth mentioning that Modou's marriage to Binetou, which is sanctioned both by religion and traditions, is even reinforced by his privileged social class. Modou takes advantage of his financial power and shamelessly exploits the poverty of Binetou's family in order to fulfill his selfish sexual interests.

In the same vein, El Saadawi's depiction of Firdaus' reality in *Woman at Point Zero* seems to reinforce feminist view about the role of the political and economic structures to perpetuate discrimination against women in Third World countries. The presence of Firdaus as a prostitute who sells her body to earn her living reflects the failure of the dominating political system to protect its underprivileged female folk. For Marxist feminism, prostitutes are oppressed sex workers whose bodies are sold and bought in the market of greedy capitalist agendas. Similar to the commercial transactions characterizing the capitalist system, the prostitute's body is relegated to a commodity or a machine whose primary task is to produce sexual pleasure for its

²² Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, *op. cit.*, 229.

owner. The owner, in this case, is not necessarily the man visiting the prostitute, but it is more precisely the pimp who regulates the sexual transaction between her and her client. In the case of Firdaus, it is the pimp Marzouk who runs this business by taking a larger part of her earnings, and even beating her if she refuses to share her money with him. Accordingly, Firdaus is a body machine from which Marzouk and her clients accumulate their financial and sexual interests respectively.

El Saadawi suggests that this exploitation becomes further reinforced when it proves to be practiced by politically influential men like heads of states and princes. In the novel, perhaps the strongest example of this social and political hypocrisy is to be found when Firdaus is scolded for knowing nothing about patriotism because she refused to sleep with a head of a state: “I told the man from the police that I knew nothing about patriotism, that my country had not only given me nothing, but had also taken away anything I might have had, including my honor and my dignity” (90). El Saadawi’s post-colonial feminism places Firdaus at the end of the novel, in a position to become a critical observer of these corrupt leaders. Through her several encounters, she developed a lack of trust towards them, maintaining that “in their heart of hearts they feared not Allah, and that at the back of their minds, patriotism meant that the poor should die to defend the land of the rich, their land, for I knew that the poor had no land” (28). Such statement reflects El Saadawi’s concern to not detach her political activism from her feminist agendas in improving women’s conditions in her country. Firdaus’ agential statement is a form of feminist articulation different from that espoused by Western feminists, and it can be read as a critique of their shallowness and limitation in reading and cultivating feminine words of deliverance.

In spite of their different cultural specificities, postcolonial feminists employ similar writings that aim at deconstructing the disempowered image of Third World woman and creating instead an active feminine subject. The present dissertation stresses that it is relevant to highlight this feminist postcolonial project in Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter* and Nawal El Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero* by investigating how the two writers are going to carve out spaces of agency in which their protagonists’ subjectivities can be articulated. The following part then explores this postcolonial

feminist project and its strategies to debunk essentialist claims about Third World female subjectivity.

1.3 Women's identities and postcolonial discourse

Post-colonial feminist intervention has not only been concerned with exploring women's subjugation under oppressive cultural dictates, but also with highlighting their struggle to negotiate their identities. In this part, we will show that feminist engagement with the politics of location and representation, as developed earlier, has inevitably resulted into a discourse firmly tied to identity politics. Discussing the way women respond to their constraints and assert their identities implies a deep consideration of the cultural norms that sustain and produce these identities. For Chandra Mohanty, identities are always linked with locations; they reflect the politics of location in which experience occurs. Yet, theorizing identity by reference to the social and cultural norms should not reproduce essentialist claims about gender identity. The western assumption that there exists a shared oppression among Muslim women was often accompanied by a shared conception about these women's identities.

Postcolonial feminists have expressed their concern to revise the question of identity politics formulated by contemporary western discourse. For these writers, identities as being formulated and constituted by cultural and social factors need to be theorized within a discourse that acknowledges and identifies these factors, but never essentializes them under inflexible signifiers. This, according to Allison Weir, involves a change from a "model of identity as sameness to a model of identity that focuses on what matters, what is meaningful for us- our desires, relationships, commitments, idealsa model that can take account of change: a model of transformative identity politics"²³. These scholars problematize the notion of common gender identity by highlighting the variable, dynamic and negotiable character of identity. Identities, in this regard, are not essences, but rather in the words of Stuart Hall, a prominent

²³ Allison Weir, Identities and Freedom: Feminist Theory Between Power and Connection (Oxford and New York : Oxford University Press, 2013) 63.

scholar of cultural studies, “the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical naturally –constituted unity”²⁴.

The present dissertation explores these questions of identity and experience through the analysis of Mariama Ba’ *So Long a Letter* and Nawal El Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero*. In both novels, the writers deconstruct the image of common and fixed gender identity by highlighting the developmental character of their protagonists. In *So Long a Letter*, Mariama Ba portrays Ramatoulaye with an evolving and changing self. The strong Ramatoulaye who decides to challenge her oppressors at the end of the letter is not the young woman who fell in love with Modou Fall, nor is she the same person who accepts staying in her marriage after her husband betrayed her. If we accept saying that there occurs a noticeable change in Ramatoulaye’s character, we must then acknowledge that there exist in parallel different circumstances which sustain and accompany this change. Ramatoulaye’s coming to voice is not a spontaneous or innocent act that comes separately from her bitter experience with her husband’s betrayal. In other words, her pronouncement against her objectification at the end of the novel came as a result of her growing awareness of her oppression under the system of polygamy.

Likewise, Nawal El Saadawi highlights how experience and personal empowerment are intrinsically linked, by constantly portraying Firdaus’ continuous developing identity. Throughout the novel, El Saadawi makes use of sentences like “I became another woman” (73), “I was being born a second time” (20), and “Now I was aware of the reality, of the truth” (86). All these sentences reflect not only Firdaus’ changing perception of the dynamics of power relationships in her society, but also her gradually constructed subjectivity. This link between Firdaus’ self-understanding and self-development stresses the flexible and evolving aspect of identity, and foregrounds that her final pronouncement against her oppression is the outcome of her continuous interaction with the social hypocrisy that characterizes her society. Firdaus, in this regard, is not born as a prostitute with an innate hatred towards men, but her

²⁴ Stuart Hall, and Pau du Gay, eds., *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London: Sage Publications, 1996) 4.

transformation into an active foe of men has occurred as a result of the oppressive circumstances that she has experienced.

Since identities are changeable and variable according to the social circumstances, postcolonial theorists problematize possibilities where women have agency in articulating their identities. The Indian feminist Gayatri Spivak has already problematized the ability of the female subaltern to speak up and challenge the dominating discourse that objectifies her. Her inquiry has stimulated feminist post-colonial theorists to reconsider this question of agency in order to look for possibilities of resistance for the marginalized female. These scholars call for narrative modes that do not only attend to some specificities of the indigenous cultural practices, but also that must be developmental leading to voicing the female subjectivity. A notion of resistance related to postcolonial female subject entails then a redefinition and reconstruction of the female identity that has been misrepresented in colonial and patriarchal discourses. For them, giving a voice to the female subject has been regarded as the elimination of the concept of “oppressed Third World woman” as an undifferentiated category. This means that Third World women, despite being variably and doubly oppressed, are able to challenge their situation and map out new spaces of empowerment. These writers very often resort to biographical narratives rather than other literary genres to highlight female subjectivity, and challenge the prevailing assumptions about their oppression.

Given the way Third World women have been misrepresented by colonial and patriarchal discourses, there will be left no framework in which postcolonial feminists theorize the situations of these women without resorting to them as the tellers of their own stories. They employ then autobiography as a privileged site to write back, to exercise authority over the politics of representation, and to give a credible account to Third world feminine experience. In reclaiming authority over their own stories, Third World women become indeed the speaking subject of their conditions. It becomes clear at this juncture that these writers, in their attempt to shatter all orientalist assumptions about their conditions, confront the concept of truth and how it is related to power relationships. Postcolonial feminists were extremely influenced by Michel

Foucault's model of truth and power. According to this model, relations of power function within a discourse of truth in which knowledge is not something absolute that can be discovered and accepted, but rather validated by the prevailing positions of power. Foucault states unequivocally that "We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth"²⁵. So, in the Foucauldian model, knowledge and power are intrinsically related : it is power which makes knowledge appear as being true , and it is also the same power which directs our behaviors and shapes our perceptions of reality .

Foucault did not evaluate the effects of power negatively. Power is no longer understood only within its traditional and conventional meaning: as something possessed by people to exert authority over others. Power, rather, is not possessed but exercised or employed , diffused more than concentrated, and productive rather than repressive. More importantly, power for Foucault, is "coextensive with resistance, meaning it shares the same site, scope and boundaries as resistance"²⁶. It is a motivating force which leads the subject to rethink, question, resist, and finally liberate himself from the discourses that repress his identity . The exercised power results in moments of self-awareness about the regulations that direct the subject , and helps him then (the subject) develop his own knowledge which inevitably resists the prevailing truth being imposed by the dominating power .

In our dissertation, we employ Foucault's analysis of truth and power to critique the essentialist claims about Third World women's experiences. The model of the Muslim woman developed earlier can be seen as an example of Foucault's model of truth. Postcolonial feminists use self-writing to develop their self-truth about what it stands to be a Muslim woman , African woman , or more generally Third World woman . Patricia Zanski, an academic feminist , argues that one of the ways in which self-truth and resistance are articulated is through the confessional act. She states : "While we tell our secrets to the other, usually an authority figure such as a priest, doctor, teacher

²⁵Quoted in Michael Kelly, ed., *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate* (Cambridge , Massachusetts ,and London : The MIT Press, 1994) 31.

²⁶ Quoted in Patricia Zanski, " Foucault, Feminism and Critical Autobiographical Documentary: Self-Reinvention as Resistance in Jonathan Caouette's *Tarnation* ", *UW-L Journal of Undergraduate Research* IX (2006) : 1. <https://www.uwlax.edu/urc/JUR-online/.../zanskit.pdf>.

or parent, we believe that in freeing our desires, we liberate ourselves....confessional act works to situate one in a submissive and subjugated position at the same time that it enforces the idea of an authentic subject that possesses self-truth"²⁷ . For her ,self-narration is a form of Foucauldian interplay between truth, power , and resistance . It helps theorizing the question of who am I ? and contributes to the subject's identity formation. The female autobiographer throughout her narration attempts to develop her own discourse, where she is simultaneously the object and the subject of her self-knowledge. No longer is she objectified by the hegemonic discourse of truth that denied her a sense of individuality and portrays her in a state of permanent victimization. Rather, a voicing of the inner self is envisaged and an authentic image of the subaltern female is approached.

While the novels under study may not be seen autobiographical, since they do not trace the two writers' personal experiences , we find that both Mariama Ba and Nawal El Saadawi present the technique of self-narration, with the female protagonist recounting her story to the reader , as well as to a female confidante in order to foreground the theme of self-truth. The Senegalese *Ramatoulaye* and the Egyptian *Firdaus* embark on a journey of reminiscence, presenting their stories either through one long, epistolary letter in the case of *Ramatoulaye*, or through a series of uninterrupted flashbacks, for *Firdaus*. Examining *Ramatoulaye* and *Firdaus*' confessions will provide readers with the opportunity to listen to differences spoken by Senegalese and Egyptian women who do not want to be defined by others. In *So Long a Letter*, Mariama Ba uses *Ramatoulaye*'s confession to provide a knowledge about women 'suffering under the Senegalese system of polygamy. This knowledge is not abstract, portraying women through fixed stereotypes , but rather concrete and experimental which highlights the protagonist's individual viewpoints and socialization with the practice within her local context. Exploring the issue of polygamy from the perspective of a woman who really experienced it would disrupt false constructions that assume that men in Muslim culture embark on polygamous marriages merely to conform with their religious dictates . *Ramatoulaye*'s confession

²⁷ Patricia Zanski ,*op.cit.*, 2.

exemplifies the Foucauldian 's model of truth ; it unveils men's selfish sexual motifs and unravels essentialist claims about Islam as being responsible for her misfortune . In similar manner, Firdaus' confession produces a self-truth that disrupts the assumed psychological discourse, whose epistemic structures seem to be incapable of explaining matters of sex and gender roles as have been experienced by her. For Sally Mc Williams, "the psychiatrist enters the prison chained to her own methodological and epistemological ideologies of subjugation. Her research framework subsumes the subject's tale into a larger tale to be retold from a position distanced from the speaker's experience and sustained by the class and education privilege of the researcher"²⁸. Nawal El Saadawi herself explains that she first wanted to know about Firdaus' story in order to include it in a sociological study , *Women and Neurosis in Egypt* , but the truth that Firdaus is recounting cannot be inclusive within her research. When the psychiatrist is silenced by Firdaus throughout her narrative, we recognize the interruption of the psychiatrist's discourse of psychological dominance. Instead of letting the psychologist direct her research through a set of prescribed questions, we get surprised by Firdaus' taking authority over the discourse by succeeding to impose her own truth , a truth that cannot be brought or explained by the psychologist 'structural framework .

Mariama Ba and Nawal El Saadawi , in their engagement to voice the subjectivity of the female other , have located their protagonists in the zero point , the point which indicates their subjugation and marginalization ,but also their departure from the status quo towards visibility , consciousness , and empowerment. This means that the zero point in feminist philosophy is no more a point of despair and destruction, but it can indicate a place of dissidence and transgression. Precisely, this zero point is generally referred to by postcolonial feminists with denotations like the margin , the border , or the edge, all of them become associated with sites of relative privilege . Many post-colonial feminists employ the margin to highlight female transgression towards self-fulfillment, and to subvert also the repressive discourse of the center and periphery .

²⁸ Sally Mc Williams, "Trajectories of Change : The Politics of Reading Postcolonial Women's texts in the Undergraduate classroom ", In *Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers*, eds., Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj (New York and London : Routledge , 2000) 258.

Here, we evoke the American feminist Bell Hooks and her description of the margins as a meeting place for all oppressed and colonized people. Hooks identifies the margin as “a site of creativity and power, (an) inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we meet in solidarity to erase the category colonized/colonizer. Marginality is the space of resistance. Enter that space. Let us meet there. Enter that space. We greet you as liberators”²⁹. For Hooks, the margin is a space of resistance because it is the space in which the colonized says no to the colonizer and develops his own counter discourse. Hooks seemingly echoes Foucault’s formulation that whenever there is power there is resistance. The margin which is imposed and born within the dynamics of power and difference, is a site of contestation, a site of saying no to the oppressor, and it is simultaneously the starting point of resistance and radical transformation for the oppressed. Like Homi Bhabha’s Third Space, the margin is a hybrid and ambivalent ground in which cultural meanings and identity constructions do not rely on fixed assumptions. The margin does not symbolize a lack of subjectivity, or more exactly the opposite of the center. It is rather the site of a many contingent points that deny the center’s impositions and dictates. The margin, in this case, can formulate its self-reference, or more exactly its own center in which the subaltern’s subjectivity is articulated.

This vision of the margin as a privileged site for voicing the subaltern’s subjectivity is bound up with the mechanisms of what the American feminist film theorist Ann Kaplan called the “Looking Relations”. For Kaplan, the looking relations are not simple or innocent relations of visual acts, but they rather imply relations of power politics in postcolonial context. They serve to subvert the subject/ object binary and undermine the colonial and male gaze. Kaplan draws a distinction between the look which is a process involving “a wanting to know”³⁰, and the gaze which “involves extreme anxiety—an attempt in a sense *not* to know, to deny”³¹. The look opens bridges for identification with the other, whereas the gaze effaces relationship with the other by denying knowledge about him. Accordingly, while the male gaze reduces the

²⁹ Bell Hooks, “Choosing the Margin as a Space for Radical Openness”, In Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy, eds., Ann Garry, and Marilyn Pearsall (New York : Routledge) 54.

³⁰ Ann Kaplan, Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film and the Imperial Gaze (New York and London : Routledge , 1997) xvii.

³¹ *ibid.*

female into an object, postcolonial female writers use the looking relation in order to return the gaze and question its ability to see. While Kaplan uses her study of the look/ gaze relations in feminist cinematic field, Peter Hitchcock, an American critic, expands this knowledge to literary criticism. For him, postcolonial narratives should be studied through relations of *the dialogical look* and beyond any restrictions of *the diabolical gaze*. Like Kaplan, Hitchcock identifies the gaze as a means of suppression and oppression, whereas the look undermines objectivity and sustains subjectivity. For Hitchcock, “Even when the subaltern subject cannot speak or is not speaking she is always looking”³² because she is in a state of perpetual questioning of the forces that confine her and deny her subjectivity.

Hitchcock’s arguments combined with Hooks’ formulation about the role of the margin are relevant to the female characters analyzed in this thesis. Both Mariama Ba and Nawal El Saadawi suggest a renegotiation between the center and the margin by positing their heroines in restricting spaces, then transforming these spaces into a source of self-empowerment. While the reader may be shocked by the complexity and the difficulty of life in the margin, she soon becomes aware that the protagonists’ resistance is bound up with the confusion of their lived experiences being located in this margin. Both *Ramatoulaye* and *Firdaus*, in this regard, use the margin to activate their looking relations and disrupt the patriarchal gaze. *Ramatoulaye* uses the restricting space of widow confinement to question her current situation and look back on how she has been objectified by the male gaze, who firmly ignored her victimization, while giving visibility only to men’s interests. The objectification of *Ramatoulaye* by the Imam and Tamsir’s gazes calls for an unconscious look that sheds light on her concerns as a wife, whose twenty five years of marriage commitment are suddenly broken by a polygamous relationship. The letter then becomes the mirror through which *Ramatoulaye* projects these concerns and her critical looking on the cultural norms that sanction her husband’s betrayal and abandonment. By unveiling her bitter experience to her audience, the widow seclusion is no more a space of enclosure and confinement for *Ramatoulaye*, but it turns to be

³² Peter Hitchcock, *op.cit.*, 71.

a site of enunciation that allows her to free herself at last from the distorted beliefs that have long silenced her .

In similar manner to Mariama Ba, Nawal El Saadawi portrays the prison as a hybrid space that connotes both exclusion and inclusion, objectivity and subjectivity, enclosure and disclosure. Unlike her unpleasant homes where she witnessed only suppression and assaults , the prison ironically gives Firdaus a space of privacy to expose the ugly face of her society . Throughout her life Firdaus has been denied this space even when she was enjoying her financial independence. Yet, the prison leads her for the first time in her life to look back on her souvenirs with the male gaze , and name what she sees. Right from her childhood, Firdaus was aware of the gaze that was always threatening her, but she never confronted it or named it. It is until she becomes imprisoned that she dares now to unveil it and expose its subjugating mechanisms. Nawal El Saadawi suggests that there is power in prison as well as in Firdaus oppositional look because both of them initiate enunciation and dialogue, which in return enable her protagonist to free herself at last from all shackles that used to restrain her .

By allocating voice to Ramatoulaye and Firdaus , both Mariama Ba and Nawal El Saadawi seemingly send a message that difference should not be approached as a sign of suppression and oppression ; it is no longer tenable to comprehend divergent stories about Third World women as a common situation of eternal subjugation. More importantly, we come to the conclusion that difference should not be employed as a tool to exert authority over Third world women by presenting it only as a metaphor for their backwardness and oppression . Marnia Lazreg has already argued that there is “ no generic “Muslim woman”, just as there is no generic “Christian woman ”-only concrete women, engaged in concrete actions”³³. Similarly, there exists no generic oppressed woman because what might be conceived as a state of oppression in one context cannot be approached so in another context .This occurs for instance when differences like the veil become seen as a matter of personal choice or a way for a woman to express her devotion to her religion. While many women in authoritarian

³³Marnia Lazreg, *Questioning The Veil : Open Letters to Muslim Women* (New Jersey and Oxford :Princeton University Press , 2009) 12-13.

states are forcefully veiled and even punished if they show rejection to wear it, others decide voluntarily to be veiled, as a result of their religious conviction. Marnia Lazreg acknowledges that the most powerful argument to justify the veil and unravel the metaphor of oppression associated with it is that of faith and conviction. She states plainly : “ I respect the woman who , after studying religious texts , concludes that it is incumbent upon her to veil herself , or that without a veil she would be living in a state of sin. I would , however, doubt her commitment to the veil if she has simply followed the opinions of others ”³⁴

Like the issue of the veil, female circumcision has long been a tool by which western feminists have emphasized their superiority over their Third World counterparts. El Saadawi insists, rather, that all women are similar in terms of subjugation ; they are all circumcised, whether physically, psychologically or educationally. For her, the oppression of women is not only relevant to Arab or Muslim societies, or countries of the Third World alone, but it exists in all political , economic and cultural systems , whether those systems are backward or modern .

By making women ’s oppression a universalist concern , Nawal El Saadawi seems to call for an effective feminist sisterhood where feminine solidarity can be articulated not necessarily by eradicating difference or sharing common oppression as Hooks went to suggest, but by appreciating this difference, and sharing a common goal to end patriarchy and sexism with all their different forms . This feminist commitment is rather referred to as *Transnational Feminism*, which transcends borders among women by promoting inclusive activism that would accommodate divergent issues and concerns . I finally argue that such feminist articulation has started to gain currency among many western , as well as Third World feminists in recent decades, especially with the rise of religious fundamentalism and the influential growth of capitalism.

³⁴ Marnia Lazreg, *Questioning The Veil : Open Letters to Muslim Women* , *op.cit.*, 11.

CHAPTER TWO

**LETTER WRITING, A PEACEFUL
WEAPON TO COMBAT POLYGAMY
AND WIDOWHOOD IN MARIAMA
*BA'SO LONG A LETTER***

2.1 Introduction

The theoretical perspective presented in the first chapter often provides a contextual basis for Muslim female writers to produce a literary discourse which portrays ways in which women are subjugated by oppressive cultural dictates. In this chapter, we will examine one heterogeneous form of the African Muslim culture, namely the Senegalese cultural milieu as depicted in Mariama Ba's novel *So Long a Letter*. We will problematize the subjugation of women under the institution of marriage as being traditionally based, reinforced by a set of religiously duplicitous norms that ensure women's inferior status. Accordingly, we will explore the culturally sanctioned disabilities that some female characters confront in a traditionally accepted and religiously approved polygamous union.

While polygamy is the chapter's main focus, the issue of widowhood emerges as another disturbing issue in *So Long a Letter*. The protagonist's testimony allows us to investigate the constraints imposed on her as a widow who, in addition of being hurt by her husband's infidelity, is still confronting further social and religious norms that hinder her growth as an individual.

It is interestingly ironic that the oppression of women in the novel is often maintained by old fellow-female characters who are the bearer of oppressive traditions. The power of the mother and the mother in law to enforce patriarchy and reinforce women's marginalization will be examined also in this chapter. Within this distorted version of culture, the chapter focuses on the choices the female characters make as single women and mothers to overcome their husbands' betrayal and society's complicity in enforcing gender hierarchy.

2.2 The Senegalese model of polygamy: sanctioning betrayal and men's lustful escapades under distorted religious and traditional norms

In this part, we will examine the issue of polygamy mainly by directing our focus at the complexity of the sociocultural structures which force women to unquestionably accept all their husbands' decisions, even if this entails their engagements in second conjugal relationships. The epistolary confession we are going to discuss throughout this chapter explores this culture of sacrifice and passivity through the voice of Ramatoulaye, a middle aged mother who, as an educated woman, had planned a conjugal life where mutual respect and bonds of affection could reign between her and her husband. Yet, after twenty five years of marriage, she finds herself heartbroken and disappointed by her beloved husband who decided abruptly to take a second wife. Modou Fall, the western educated husband, who has long presented a support to Ramatoulaye didn't give any justification for her and let religion and tradition defend his act.

The experience of Ramatoulaye in the novel shows that culture acts discriminatively against women by justifying men's betrayal, while calling them to remain docile and tolerant in front of their husbands' infidelity. The justification of Modou's infidelity is based on the Wolof view of fatalism which regards his commitment to Binetou as a fixed destiny, predetermined and chosen by God, and no person can stand power to annul this fatalistic act. Tamsir, Mawdo, and the Imam, who come to announce the marriage to Ramatoulaye, show complete indifference to her feelings as a woman. Rather, they present it as a "Fait Accompli", which she should accept unquestionably. For the Imam: "There is nothing one can do when Allah the Almighty puts two people side by side ... All he has done is to marry a second wife today. We have just come from the mosque in Grand Dakar where the marriage took place" (36-37). This sentence suggests that fate, rather than Modou's lecherous nature or Binetou's greed, is responsible for this polygamous union. The fait accompli, as it is manipulated by those men, deprives the human being of the freedom of choice. In this case, neither Modou nor Binetou has control over his actions because everything is dictated and decided by God.

The Senegalese discourse of fatalism, which is deeply embedded in Islamic religion, proves to be an efficient instrument by which discriminatory practices are maintained. For those men, Ramatoulaye should take Modou's marriage as a submission to the will of God, and a way of testifying her devoutness and piety towards Allah. According to Islamic principles, the faith of the Muslim and his closeness to Allah is contingent upon his acceptance and submission to the divinely proclaimed fate. Those who are good believers are the ones who accept unquestionably what Allah has planned for them. Yet, the Senegalese version of fatalism abuses this principle by attributing the individual's misbehavior and his willingness to cheat to a divine destiny, which others must accept just to prove their devoutness to their creator. A submission to this divine destiny in the case of Ramatoulaye would entail rather her acceptance of her husband's sudden death, as being Allah's decree that must be handled with patience and faith. In other words, it is death over which Modou surely has no control and freedom of choice, rather than his willing betrayal of his wife. Instead of contesting such abuses, Ramatoulaye accepts her husband's betrayal by passively "force (ing) (her) self to check (her) inner agitation" (38). Her inexpressive agitation is not only suggestive of her powerlessness to confront the presumed "choice of Allah", but also her inability to react against a marriage which is sanctioned by religion but detrimental to her as a woman.

Polygamy is a sensitive issue among Muslims, and most of this sensitivity is due to its religious sanction. Islam, unlike Christianity, permits a man to marry more than one woman, and the Senegalese tradition requiring the submission of the wife to her husband forces her to accept and respect his choice for another marriage. Accordingly, by opposing Modou's second marriage, Ramatoulaye would be going against what is divinely sanctioned and traditionally accepted. The role of Tamsir, Mawdo, and the Imam is not only to announce Modou's marriage, but also to invite Ramatoulaye to react as a Senegalese Muslim woman who submits under God's and husband's choices. The presence of the Imam, particularly, is to give a spiritual validity to Modou's polygamous marriage, and to discredit any opposition that Ramatoulaye may express.

It becomes understandable that the presence of this religious figure will further encourage Ramatoulaye to maintain her self-control. In traditional Muslim societies, religious figures, like Imams exercise authority and influence among people. They are not only the transmitters and interpreters of religious scriptures but are also the ones who are destined to settle any socially controversial matter. Polygamy is, then, one of these quarreled issues which divides people into two categories: its proponents who see it as a man's divinely given right, and its opponents who regard it as an insult to senior wives. The Imam by validating Modou's marriage has settled the matter and obliged Ramatoulaye to follow and respect his approval. While Ramatoulaye showed respect to the Imam by controlling her agitation in front of him, the latter showed no consideration whether to Ramatoulaye or to his position as an influential man. The respected man callously uses religion to approve a traditional practice that works purely for the male interest, while undermining the female self-esteem.

It is interesting to note that polygamy is a pre-Islamic practice, and its sanction by religion has provided men with the legitimizing instrument to betray their wives. The interest in religion is the interest in a merely justifying power for male selfish benefits. The respect for the religious principles regarding the institutionalization of polygamy becomes then ignored. In *So Long a Letter*, the Imam did not only justify betrayal as a manifestation of a divine will, but he also avoided to argue whether Modou's full abandonment of his family is a divine or human choice. In other words, whether Modou fulfills his religious duties in terms of equality between his two wives seems to be out of the Imam's interests. In chapter one, we have seen that the duplicity guiding the interpretation of religious texts has pushed Muslim feminists to revise Islamic jurisprudence in order to disrupt male misogynistic readings.

Islamic feminists have explored the assumption that polygamy is a man's divine right which is explicitly revealed in the religious text; therefore, it is unreasonable to oppose its practice. In particular, the African American feminist Amina Wadud argues that a contextualized study of the verses allowing polygamy would reveal that the latter is not a privilege given to men, but rather a responsibility accorded to them towards underprivileged women. For her, "the verse is about treatment of orphans. Some male guardians, responsible for managing the wealth of orphaned female children, were

unable to refrain from unjust management of that wealth . One solution suggested to prevent mismanagement was marriage to the female orphans”¹. Being sanctioned under specific circumstances of war which left many widows and orphans in need for male protection, polygamy is destined then to solve a social problem , that is to ensure justice among a disadvantaged class .

Yet, polygamy in *So Long a Letter* ironically provokes a social problem. Modou’ second marriage has resulted in his disregard of his family who still deserves his attention and care. Ramatoulaye who, according to Islamic law must be treated equally whether in terms of affection or material support with the second wife, is left to face all the responsibilities alone. Interestingly, polygamy which is destined to bring support to unassisted and unaccompanied widows, put later on the widow Ramatoulaye and her twelve orphans in a critical economic situation. By his departure, Modou has committed a sacrilege against religion by taking selectively Islamic tenets that sanction his polygamous marriage, while ignoring other principles that speak about equality between the two wives. But, the Imam did not remind Modou that a selective adherence to religion contradicts with the Muslim’s devoutness to Allah. Like the religious men in *Woman at Point Zero* who invoke Allah’s name in Friday prayer ,while showing unjust acts towards their wives, the Imam in *So Long a Letter* obviously delivers his short timed sermon to Ramatoulaye about polygamy being permitted , but he ignored to discuss it within the context of just treatment towards orphans and widows.

It becomes clear that Modou has no religious motivation for marrying Binetou. We have no indication from the novel that he embarked on a polygamous marriage because he sympathizes with the poor Binetou. Rather, Ramatoulaye tells us that the young woman is physically appealing, and the sympathy in this case seems to be purely sexual. Ba describes Binetou as “Really beautiful in her adolescent period, in her faded but clean clothes! Her beauty shone, pure. Her shapely contours could not pass unnoticed”(35). Binetou’s physical appearance became then irresistible to Modou’s wandering eyes and cheating heart which soon fell prey to her beauty, forgetting his

¹Amina Wadud , *Quran and Woman : Reading The Sacred from a Woman ’s Perspective* (Oxford and New York : Oxford University Press , 1999) 83.

twenty five years of marriage to Ramatoulaye. Like Firdaus' husband in *Woman at Point Zero* who wants to reassert his manhood with a young woman, Modou finds that his marriage to the young Binetou is sexually more interesting than his commitment to the fifty years old Ramatoulaye, who is probably now experiencing her midlife crisis. Ramatoulaye's menopause, marked by declining physical features and age, has pushed her lecherous husband to contract a polygamous marriage. The mirror image has revealed to Ramatoulaye perhaps what her husband did not tell her upon his departure:

“I looked at myself in the mirror. My eye took in the mirror's eloquence. I had lost my slim figure, as well as ease and quickness of movement. My stomach protruded from beneath the wrapper that hid the calves developed by the impressive number of kilometers walked since the beginning of my existence. Suckling had robbed my breasts of their round firmness. I could not delude myself: youth was deserting my body. Whereas a woman draws from the passing years the force of her devotion, despite the ageing of her companion, a man, on the other hand, restricts the field of tenderness. His egoistic eye looks over his partner's shoulder. He compares what he had with what he no longer has, what he has with what he could have” (41).

The mirror then tells Ramatoulaye that she is a sexual object that ceased to be desirable by her husband, and it is recommendable now for him to get another woman with whom his uncontrolled sexual urge can be satisfied with greater ease. A menopausal woman like Ramatoulaye, who is probably suffering from physical and emotional disabilities, is now after twenty five years of commitment incapable to accompany and serve Modou.

Ramatoulaye's situation with Modou is also relevant to numerous women in her society. Like his friend Modou, Mawdo, the husband of her friend Aissatou, contracted a polygamous marriage because he is powerless to resist his selfish, but uncontrolled sexual dictates. While Modou's betrayal is explained through the discourse of fatalism, Mawdo tries to justify his marriage to young Nabou as an inevitable response to his proximity and arising attraction to her: “Look here, don't be an idiot, how you can expect a man to remain a stone when he is constantly in contact with the woman who runs his house?” (33). Ironically, it is not only fatalism which deprives these men of the freedom of choice, but also of their own hormones whose biological dictates control, in this case, their sexual behaviors. Even worse, Mawdo went to

compare male sexual urge with his innate nurturing needs that must be normally and legitimately fulfilled to ensure his survival: “You can’t resist the imperious laws that demand food and clothing for man. These same laws compel the ‘male’ in other respects. I say ‘male’ to emphasize the bestiality of instincts” (34). This association between biological and sexual needs is vividly portrayed in *Woman at Point Zero*. Like Mawdo, Sheikh Mahmoud reduced Firdaus to a morsel of food by which his limitless appetite is fulfilled: “at night, he would wrap his arms and legs around me. I would let his sweaty hand violate all of my body, not leaving anything. Like the hand of a hungry man who has not seen food for years” (43). Here, the husband’s aggressiveness in sex accords with his greediness in eating. This once again, reinforces the view that sex for those men is compulsory like food; it has innate biological motives that must be urgently satisfied to guarantee their survival.

In *So Long a Letter*, Ramatoulaye was not so much puzzled by Mawdo’s infidelity than by the cultural assumptions given to justify this betrayal. She tried to come to terms with the justifications advanced by those men, but she seemed powerless to surmount the confusion and duplicity surrounding these excuses. Early in her letter, she asked herself what forces pushed Modou to seek another wife: “Madness or weakness? Heartlessness or irresistible love? What inner torment led Modou Fall to marry Binetou?” (12). In hearing Mawdo’s audacious confession, Ramatoulaye understood that it is “the supremacy of instinct”, “the right to betray”, and “the justification of the desire for variety” (34) which has similarly provoked her husband’s polygamous marriage. Ramatoulaye rejected this overwhelming power of the instincts which reduces women to a sexual object, or quoting her words “a plate of food” (ibid) by which men’s greedy desires are satisfied. Like her protagonist, Mariama Ba sees that men have naturally a strong inclination to polygamy because the latter legalizes alternative sexual partners. In an interview with Barbara Harrell-Bond, Ba states that “a man can be faithful in thought, love, affection, everything, but not in sex. I believe in the fidelity of women as strongly as I

am skeptical about the fidelity of men ...there is this polygamous desire , which is not specific to the black race , which inhabits all men-black or white”² .

This role of polygamy as a justification for men’s presumably uncontrolled lust has also been criticized by feminists, who come to classify polygamy as one of the manifestations of gender inequality. For Fatima Mernissi, polygamy “ is a way for the man to humiliate the woman as a sexual being ; it expresses her inability to satisfy him ... It enhances men’s perception of themselves as primarily sexual beings and emphasizes the sexual nature of the conjugal unit ”³.The assumption underlying this idea is the belief that man’s sexual urge is so urgent and important, that it frequently requires fulfillment by more than one woman . Having more than one sexual partner helpshim relieve his body from sexual tension, emanating mainly from the disruptive female sexuality. According to cultural assumptions, the institution of polygamy maintains the social order and avoids divine retribution by preventing men from resorting to illegitimate sexual relationships.

The duplicity of this cultural construction in a patriarchal society is seen in Nawal El Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero*, where we see the fulfillment of men’ sexual urge being ensured through illegal sexual activities, instead of legal polygamous relationships. The prostitute, like Firdaus, has no right for a conjugal space, as her experience with her beloved Ibrahim has shown. Ibrahim does not follow the cultural dictates, discussed earlier, by contracting a polygamous marriage both with Firdaus and the chairman’s daughter. Instead, he prefers to satisfy his material interests in a legal marital space, while his sexual needs remained fulfilled in an illegal relationship with the prostitute, Firdaus .This shows that Firdaus is regarded as a substitute sexual partner , a mere body that complements the wife but never takes her role. As a result of these duplicitous cultural constructions, two spaces are created: a legal polygamous space where procreation and material interests precede pleasure, and an illegal polygamous space in which pleasure and sexual interests reign over commitment. In

² Barbara Harrell –Bond ’s interview with Mariama Ba in Dakar, July 9, 1979. Quoted in Ada Uzoamaka Azodo, *op.cit.*, 391.

³ Fatima Mernissi, *op.cit.*, 48.

both of these spaces, male selfish interests take precedence over fidelity of sentiments and the respect for the dignity of woman, whether a wife or a prostitute.

The presentation of men as sexually unfaithful, as depicted in *Woman at Point Zero*, underrates the idea that polygamy resolves men's unbridled lust. This will suggest that Modou and Mawdo's commitments to Binetou and young Nabou respectively will not civilize their disrupted desires, because they are naturally predisposed to betray and cheat. Significantly, polygamy in a corrupted society cannot annul or avoid prostitution because the latter, as it is going to be shown in the next chapter, is an institution which is integral to the political and economic systems, where women are exposed as sexual commodities owned by capitalist patriarchs. For Mariama Ba, "Polygamy does not resolve anything. To have three or four wives, even if he has four, it will not be enough. Even if there are four, it is like having none. He has not got enough"⁴. Like prostitution in *Woman at Point Zero*, polygamy, as it is practiced in the Senegalese society, reflects the politics of class and gender hierarchy maintained by the political and economic systems. As has been argued in chapter one, it is the social disparity existing between the rich Modou and the poor Binetou which contributes to their union. The unfair distribution of wealth among members of the Egyptian and the Senegalese societies results in unfair treatment of their female folk. In *So Long a Letter*, the capital of money destroyed what Ramatoulaye terms "the capital of youth" (35) in the same way it will destroy the capital of bodily dignity in *Woman at Point Zero*. While this destruction with Binetou is officially contracted and presumed to be religiously sanctioned, in the case of Firdaus, it is socio-religiously condemned but quasi officially practiced when it becomes allowed by the political system. The politics of multiplicity and duplicity guiding the sanction and the prohibition of some practices result, then, in a chaotic culture that is detrimental to women.

The experience of Ramatoulaye with polygamy shows that the chaotic culture does not only act discriminatively against women by justifying husbands' betrayal, but it also extends to validate their disavowal and disregard of their senior wives. We get no

⁴ Barbara Harrell-Bond's interview with Mariama Ba, *op.cit.*, 391.

indication from the text of any sort of psychological support brought to the heartbroken Ramatoulaye, neither from her family in law nor from her husband's friends. The men who came to announce the marriage to Ramatoulaye showed no consideration to her sentiments as a wife, whose twenty five years of commitment to her husband are suddenly destroyed by an irresponsible and immature act. The sense of being rejected, of being unworthy of interest even by the close relatives is devastating for the woman. Ramatoulaye describes herself as "a fluttering leaf that no hand dares to pick up" (52). While Ramatoulaye tries to repress her frustrations in front of her relatives, the situation with Jacqueline, another female victim of the system of polygamy, is traumatic when she began suffering from a nervous breakdown. Ramatoulaye tells us that "Jacqueline's thoughts turned to death. She waited for it, frightened and tormented, her hand on her chest, where the tenacious, invisible lump foiled all the ruses, scoffed maliciously at all tranquillizers" (43). In the next chapter, we will see that sentiments of loneliness can lead to more than a nervous breakdown; it can lead to hellish destinations and self-destruction when the protagonist starts losing trust in her relatives, and resorts desperately to alternatives like prostitution as a means of escape and survival.

The initial isolation of these female characters denies them any means of self-healing process. Ramatoulaye, for instance, instead of confronting her husband with his act of betrayal, she avoids dialogue with him. Before deciding to write a letter to Aissatou, she resorts to silence as a way to cope with her stressful situation. Silence, in this case, does not bring any solace and relief to her. Contrarily, it serves to deepen her injury because it prevents her inner frustration to be released. Ramatoulaye, at this point of the narrative, did not yet recognize the therapeutic effect of speaking. By internalizing her oppression, she becomes imprisoned to her self-defeating memories of her twenty five years of commitment with Modou. At night, the ghost of Modou and the sentiment of loneliness are barely resistible: "Our common habit sprang up at their usual times. I missed dreadfully our nighty conversation; I missed our bursts of refreshing or understanding laughter" (52).

Modou's loss of intention towards his wife is emotionally and materially devastating for her. Ramatoulaye explains how her husband abandoned her and left her alone to provide materially for her single-parent family, while he was wastefully spending on Binetou and her parents. The young girl and her mother were provided with a well-furnished villa and a chic Alfa Romeo car, at the time Ramatoulaye was struggling to buy a Fiat car. Other problems that Ramatoulaye confronted, as a result of her husband's departure include the difficulties of transgressing, as a single woman, some male-allocated public spaces. Being responsible for a single-parent family, Ramatoulaye finds herself overnight obliged to secure many traditionally male activities, like standing with men in the payment windows to pay the electricity bill. Even entertainment places like the cinema should not be frequented by women who are without the company of their male relatives. Ramatoulaye desperately observes: "I overcame my shyness at going alone to cinemas; I would take a seat with less and less embarrassment as the months went by. People stared at the middle-aged lady without a partner. I would feign indifference, while anger hammered against my nerves and the tears I held back welled up behind my eyes" (51). This statement shows that discrimination against women seems to permeate all domains of the Senegalese society. Surprisingly, public spaces in such a society are not only gendered, but are also classified according to the familial status of the woman. This means that women are allowed for moments of delight outside their domestic sphere only when they are accompanied by their husbands. A single woman is not supposed to enter a public space like the cinema, where she may be in a direct interaction with men. Much like the university, in the following chapter, which is prohibited to Firdaus on the grounds that a respected Sheikh like her uncle should not allow his niece to mix with men, the cinema is not a recommended place for a middle-aged and single mother like Ramatoulaye. In a similar vein, according to culture, a respected husband is not supposed to let his wife mix with men in the cinema and thus, share with them moments of joy during his absence.

By abandoning his family, letting his wife transgress gendered spaces in order to fulfill his unaccomplished tasks, Modou loses his traditional role as the provider and protector of the family. According to the Wolof traditional belief, a man who strips himself from

this role is a man who shamefully misses control over his family and consequently, deserves no respect in his society. Man's identity as the family provider entails his acting as the household patriarch, who has full awareness and control over his wife's movements. It becomes clear then that according to culture, Modou's departure will emphasize a decline of his marital authority, but a rise of his wife's freedom and power. This presumed new found freedom is suggested through the embarrassing eyes staring at Ramatoulaye when she is alone at the cinema. Accordingly, a sense of shame is likely to fall on Modou, as a result of his disregard of his responsibilities. Aunty Nabou, Aissatou's mother in law, tells us that according to the Senegalese traditions "shame kills faster than disease"(30) . The discourse of shame and the fear of societal retaliation direct individual behavior in the Senegalese society and very often inhibit people from seeking their legitimate rights. We will see later that the shame of divorcing her husband and the fear of upsetting Allah have pushed Ramatoulaye to stay in marriage , despite all the psychological injuries she has experienced after Modou's betrayal.

Yet, while Ramatoulaye accords importance to the discourse of shame, Modou does not show any regard to it , because he thinks that religion and tradition are always on his side to justify all his actions. Indeed, we have seen previously that neither the Imam nor his friends reminded Modou of the religious tenets regarding the conditions of contracting his polygamous marriage . For Obioma Nnaemeka, Modou did not only commit a sacrilege against religion but also against tradition . His behavior is "the foolish act of an irresponsible, wayward spouse , and sugar daddy that has absolutely nothing to do with the institution of polygamy , as inscribed both in Islamic laws and African culture"⁵. In her analysis of polygamy in Africa, Nnaemeka sees that within the African polygamous marriage, peace and equality between co-wives are ensured both materially and sexually. A traditional African man never abandons his duties and responsibilities towards his family because doing so will be an insult to his manhood among his male fellows. He, in this regard, gains respect in his clan not only because he honors his duties towards his family , but also because he contributes to maintain the institution of polygamy , one of the main symbols of the African society .

⁵Obioma Nnaemeka ,op.cit., 178.

By violating the principle of equity, the newly form of polygamy has brought further oppression to women. For Nnaemeka, in *So Long a Letter*, “a critique of the institution, say polygamy, serves also as a critique of its subversion and recoding”⁶. For Ramatoulaye, this modern perversion of the system of polygamy puts under question the efficiency of the political and economic systems to ensure the wellbeing of its female citizens. To explore how this wellbeing is intrinsically related to the degree of the country’s progress, Laurie Edson, in her article *Mariama Ba and The Politics of The Family*, reads the novel under the lens of particular events, like the institutionalization of the Family Code and the resurgence of Islamic Fundamentalism in Senegal during 1970s. Edson explains that the Family Code, a legislative achievement of Léopold Sédar Senghor during his presidency from 1960 to 1980, “gave women equal rights, protected them against arbitrary repudiation, and reinstated women’s traditionally recognized rights as wives and mothers. However, religious leaders in Senegal strongly opposed the Code, which they quickly denounced as a synthesis of tradition, Islamic law, and the needs of modern life, claiming that the code opposed the principles of the Quran”⁷. It becomes clear then that the non application of the Family Code has encouraged men like Modou to abandon their wives. For these men, not only tradition and religion are on their side to justify their abuse, but also the political system, whose failure to maintain protective law like the family code has furthered the marginalization of women.

The emergence of Islamic Fundamentalism symbolizes the use of religion as a political tool to repress women’s rights. The manipulation of religion in the Senegalese society, much like in the Egyptian society, seems to permeate all domains, even the political system. In *Woman at Point Zero*, this violation is highlighted in the Fridays sermons which claim that “love of the ruler and love of Allah were one and indivisible. Allah protect our ruler for many long years and may he remain a source of inspiration and strength to our country, the Arab Nation and all Mankind” (12). As a result, Firdaus on hearing this corrupted discourse, cannot go against her dishonest ruler because doing so will be interpreted as an act of disregard to Allah. Ramatoulaye on the other

⁶Obioma Nnaemeka, op.cit., 169.

⁷ Laurie Edson, op.cit., 15-16.

hand, emphasizes that the authority of Islamic Fundamentalism is manifested through stripping women their rights to vote and receive education. For Edson, Ramatoulaye “alludes to the troubling resurgence of Islamic Fundamentalism, which threatens to undo all the gains made by women”⁸. In her conversation with Daouda Dieng, Ramatoulaye highlights how discrimination against women is being maintained through the lack of political measures to protect them :

“We have a right, just as you have, to education, which we ought to be able to pursue to the furthest limits of our intellectual capacities. We have a right to equal employment opportunities and to equal pay. The right to vote is an important weapon. And now the Family Code has been passed, restoring to the most humble of women the dignity that has so often been trampled upon. But Daouda, the constraints remain; but Daouda, old beliefs are revived. But Daouda, egoism emerges, skepticism rears its head in the political field”(61).

These words mirror the situation of numerous women in many traditional societies worldwide. The right to vote is the right to improve one’s conditions and to disrupt the oppression being exercised against him. By stripping women this influential right, restrictions and discriminations still reign both in the private and public spheres. The unequal representation of women in the National Assembly was materialized in their unequal access to education, employment, and other opportunities with men. If a dissident voice was allocated to women in the National Assembly, maybe Modou wouldn’t dare to leave his wife struggling alone to raise her children .

The complicity of the political system in enforcing gender inequality and the social disabilities arising from the non-application of the family code is deeply explored in Ba’s novel. The next part will discuss this outcome on widows who find themselves in a state of destitution due to impotent cultural dictates and lack of legal measures to protect them.

⁸ Laurie Edson ,*op.cit.*, 15.

2.3 The heavy burden of the Senegalese womanhood: a womanhood under the triple oppression of polygamy, widowhood, and matriarchal authority

The previous part has explored the issue of betrayal and abandonment that arises from Modou's polygamous marriage. Despite her deep awareness of society's oppressive constraints, Ramatoulaye was obliged to repress her inner agitation, pretending her bitter acceptance of her husband's fatalistic marriage. Ramatoulaye's unreleased agitation is further accentuated during the mourning period, a period "dreaded by every Senegalese woman" (4). In this part, we will examine the Senegalese funeral rituals which force Ramatoulaye to submit to a deceased man who has betrayed and treated her callously. Surprisingly, this submission is often reinforced by fellow women whose unquestionable compliance to their culture's dictates pushes them into exercising a matriarchal power over young women. So, in this part also, we will examine through Aissatou's mother in law and Binetou's mother this culture of feminine victimization, and how far victims of long embedded traditions are oppressing other victims of the same cultural background .

To understand these abuses , we need first to explain Ramatoulaye's victimization during the mourning period by examining the Senegalese law of inheritance. The law, as it is depicted in the novel, involves an unequal division of Modou's material properties among his heirs . According to cultural dictates, the financial contributions collected from the friends and relatives paying condolences to Ramatoulaye are all transferred to Modou's family. Ramatoulaye, the wife of twenty five years of commitment, is excluded from any sort of material recognition. She recalls: "our family-in-law takes away with them a wad of notes, painstakingly topped, and leave us utterly destitute, we who will need material support" (7). Accordingly, even in her husband's death, Ramatoulaye is still experiencing sentiments of frustration and loss .She bitterly observes how these rituals have reduced her to "a thing in the service of the man who has married her , his grandfather, his grandmother, his father, his mother, his brother , his sister, his uncle , his aunt , his male and female cousins , his friends" (4). Modou's funeral which is supposed to be an event of commemoration and recognition turned to be an occasion for accumulating material gain for the in

laws. Moreover, Ramatoulaye tells us that some people attend the funeral just to show off, exchange gossip, and develop friendships built on mutual interests. Seemingly, the donors have no benevolent intention, but rather they want to compete between each other to give the biggest amount of money. Their banknotes which must be secretly given to prove their devotion to Allah are recorded because they are “a debt to be repaid in similar circumstances” (6). Accordingly, the ceremony is also an occasion for celebrating wealth and material success among people. By giving these examples, Ramatoulaye shows that the inconsistency of such practices with Islamic teachings is revelatory of the hypocrisy and duplicity guiding these people’s adherence to religion. While “divine words, divine instructions, impressive promises of punishment or joy, exhortations to virtue, warnings against evil” (5) filled the air during the funeral ceremony, the in laws did not show any sense of guilt or remorse regarding their deceiving attitude towards Ramatoulaye and her children.

The way Ramatoulaye is treated by her in laws discredits the popular view that a woman can attain dignity and respect only when she is married. The truth is that the woman whether a widow, senior or second wife is never treated equally with her husband. Molar Ogundipe Leslie believes that “the woman loses status by being married because in the indigenous systems, which are still at the base of the society, the woman as daughter or sister has greater status and more rights within her birth lineage. With marriage, she becomes a client or possession; she is voiceless and often rightless in her husband’s family”⁹. Concomitantly, Ramatoulaye, who as a single woman has long enjoyed a privileged position in her parents’ household, becomes now disadvantaged and rightless in her marital life. Her disadvantaged position is due partly to impotent traditional norms, but also to the failure of the political and religious institutions to ensure assistance to widows. As suggested earlier, no legal measures were instituted to accompany widows or at least protect them against acts of violation.

Likewise the religious institution seems to follow patriarchal dictates when the Imam, who is supposed to instill fair distribution of Modou’s wealth, is completely

⁹Molar Ogundipe-Leslie, *Re-creating Ourselves: African Women & Critical Transformations* (Trenton: Africa world Press, 1994) 75.

indifferent to the laws' unjust attitude. Rabiata Ammah, a Ghanaian scholar in Islamic studies, gives us a religious account regarding women's right for inheritance. In *Paradise Lies at The Feet of Muslim Women*, Ammah argues that "The Quran grants the woman a share in inheritance and warns men against depriving her of her inheritance"¹⁰. She argues that the introduction of Islam to pre-Islamic Africa has improved the conditions of women by giving them a share of inheritance, at a time they were denied this right. Yet, in *So Long a Letter*, it is not only Ramatoulaye who is left destitute but also her twelve orphans. According to Islamic teachings, it is considered a sinful and abhorrent act to strip orphans their material possessions. The laws ignore this violation, and try instead to impose their own discourse of righteousness by inciting Ramatoulaye to be tolerant and hospitable to them. Ramatoulaye reveals that the woman who reacts against such injustices will be publicly ashamed because according to culture, she has committed an act of disrespect towards her deceased husband: "The woman's behavior is conditioned : no sister in law will touch the head of any wife who has been stingy, unfaithful or inhospitable" (4). Ramatoulaye confesses that she "tolerated his sisters" (19) because she has no choice, but to submit under these oppressive dictates. Her tolerance, thus, functions as a means of defense against patriarchal authority.

Ramatoulaye, at this point of the narrative, feels trapped and powerless to resist authority because she is in a state of alienation and enclosure, where she is deprived of any sort of assistance. Even the female fellows who are supposed to comprehend her plight show total indifference to her plight. Even worse, some of them are gathered to enforce patriarchal power by preparing her to go through a series of frustrating mourning rituals. The dictates of culture require that Ramatoulaye must mourn for Modou three months and ten days by living in a state of seclusion and alienation from the outside world. This seclusion is also accompanied by other confining measures that oblige her to undergo purifying baths and change her mourning clothes only on Mondays and Fridays. The poor widow is denied freedom of choice, even on the simplest things like her clothes. Even though such rituals are traditionally based and

¹⁰Rabiata Ammah, "Paradise Lies at The Feet of Muslim Women", In *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*, eds., Mercy A. Oduyoye, and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005) 76.

have no religious inclination, they turn to be a sacred duty .Ramatoulaye declares :“I hope to carry out my duties fully. My heart concurs with the demands of religion. Reared since childhood on their strict precepts.I expect not to fail” (8).It becomes clear that even Ramatoulaye has been instilled into believing that such rituals are religiously ordained by persuading herself to follow their mandates, despite her deep awareness of their psychological injuries. The truth is that the mourning period which is mandated by religion and required to Ramatoulaye entails neither purifying baths nor any restrictions on changing clothes. The patriarchal logic,in order to enforce these rituals, gives them a religious connotation. This means once again that the enforcement of such oppressive traditions is better achieved through the discourse of religion. Ramatoulaye’s deep respect for her religion prevents her from showing any opposition during her mourning period. Her in laws, on the other hand, enjoy this privilege by maintaining their power over her .

The way women are betrayed by their relatives who invoke Muslim laws and social taboos to pressure them into abandoning their rights is similarly portrayed in Nawal El Saadawi’s narrative. The idea that a woman must be protected by her male guardians is wickedly used to strip her from her rights. In *Woman at Point Zero*, both the husband and the uncle, with whom Firdaus expected to find love and assistance ,used their position as her male guardians to mistreat her. Firdaus has internalized her oppression simply because according to culture , a good woman is not supposed to openly contest the comportment of her male guardians .Because the patriarchal order puts men’s interests above women ’s well-being , the widow Ramatoulaye is forced to relinquish her right of inheritance , and the orphaned Firdaus failed to accomplish her dream to become a well-educated woman and eventually ended up in sex slavery. In this regard, both heroines suffer economic, social and psychological deprivation, as a result of their societies’ duplicitous norms. According to Ginette Curry: “What is particularly damaging to Ramatoulaye is not only the economic deprivation she undergoes, and the manner her husband’s estate is divided, but the exposition of Modou’s weakness and the disclosure of intimate secrets of her married

life”¹¹. Ramatoulaye shows that “The Mirasse commanded by the Koran requires that a dead person be stripped of his intimate secrets ; thus is exposed to others what was carefully concealed ”(9). This is indeed a Senegalese version of the Mirasse that is different from the one recommended by Islam. Islamic Mirasse does not involve any revelation of intimate secrets; it rather focuses only on exposing the deceased’s material possessions among his relatives in order to prepare them for inheritance .

In *So Long a Letter*, Ramatoulaye is not only denied material assistance, but she is also stripped of the privacy of her marriage which becomes exposed publicly without any consideration to her. This means that betrayal and abandonment are publically recollected during the audience of the Mirasse . Feeling humiliated by such an insolent exposure, Ramatoulaye reaches a state of mental exhaustion and tries to express her trauma to Aissatou when she says : “You know that I am excessively sentimental. I was not at all pleased by this display on either side”. (11). The session of the Mirasse allows her also to discover that she has been materially exploited by Modou who took their mutual savings to buy a magnificent villa to Binetou. Ramatoulaye, on the other hand, stands no power to show that part of what is going to be divided now among the heirs is purely her earnings. Thus, she finds herself doubly injured: Binetou has not only taken her husband, but also her savings . She confesses that the presence of her co-wife in front of her adds further frustration because it reminds her of Modou’s betrayal : “The presence of my co-wife beside me irritates me. She has been installed in my house for the funeral, in accordance with tradition” (3).

The way Ramatoulaye reveals her discomfort at her co-wife’s presence suggests that polygamy undermines feminine solidarity against the shackles of patriarchy by projecting hatred and antipathy among co-wives. According to the feminist writer Nasimiyyu-Wasike, “polygamy is a source of enmity of women against other women in which the women remain powerless together trapped in the dynamics of patriarchy that

¹¹Ginette Curry, *Awakening African Women: The Dynamics of Change* (London : Cambridge Scholars Press Ltd , 2004) 51.

divide and rule”¹². In *So Long a Letter*, Modou’s polygamous marriage breeds a model of colonizer/ colonized among the two wives. Binetou, the victim who has been “slaughtered on the altar of affluence” (39), is ostensibly exerting authority over Ramatoulaye, the victim of “polygamic instinct” (34). In this sense, victims are paradoxically victimizers who hold authority over other victims. Women like Binetou and young Nabou are likely identified in African literature as “home –wreckers” who illuminate senior wives and destroy their marriages in order to get personal advantages. But, Binetou is “worse than Mawdo’s second wife, because at least the young Nabou never expected anything other than to serve a man, having been taught this from the cradle”¹³. Binetou tries to boost her self-worth and empower herself by disempowering other women. In exerting her manipulative power over her husband in order to divert his attention from his first wife, Binetou is contributing into enforcing patriarchy, the same system which oppresses and objectifies her under polygamy.

While young women use their youth and appealing physical appearance to practice their seductive power, old women invest their influence as mothers and respect in society to exert their matriarchal power. A salient example of this feminine authority in the novel involves Aunt Nabou and Lady Mother in law. Both women try to persuade their children into forced and arranged marriages just to attain a certain position of power in society. Being unsatisfied with her son’s choice for Aissatou, the daughter of a goldsmith, Aunt Nabou decides to bring her niece as a second wife to Mawdo. As a descendant of a line of princes, Aunt Nabou sees Mawdo’s marriage to a lower class woman as an insult to her noble lineage; therefore, she “swore that (her) existence, Aissatou, would never tarnish her noble descent” (28). It becomes clear that the old woman reacts in accordance with the traditional dictates of the caste system which require that people should properly marry according to their familial background. Abdoulaye Bara Diop, a Senegalese scholar in African studies, explains that: “In the domain of secondary social stratification, the castes constitute, in the Wolof society, an important system from ancient times, but which is maintained with

¹² Quoted in Simone Lindorfer, *Sharing the Pain of the Bitter Hearts: Liberation Psychology and Gender* (Berlin: Transaction Publishers, 2007) 127.

¹³ Laura Charlotte Kempen, *Mariama Ba, Rigoberta Menchu, and Post-Colonial Feminism* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc, 2001) 34.

remarkable persistence. It continues to order groups, to determine their status, their functions and their comportment in reference to a social order-of old repute”¹⁴. Viewed from this perspective, the griots and the smiths ,who are classified at the bottom of the social hierarchy are not allowed to marry people from royal social rank . Aunty Nabou describes this mixture as “a shame (which) kills faster than disease ” (30). According to Sylvester Mutunda,Aunty Nabou’ shame “is derived not from the fact that men of her caste will think less of her but because of the way other women will judge her. Although her other children are “properly” married, they are girls and therefore cannot give her the status of a royal female patriarch that she so much desires”¹⁵.

The way the mother in law interferes in the private life of her son is a recurrent issue in traditional societies. Fatima Mernissi in her book *Beyond the Veil* argues that the mother’s insistence upon her right to choose her daughter in law often contradicts with her son’s claim to select his life partner out of love .Very often, the son stands no power to go against the will of his mother because doing so will be seen as an act of disregard towards his mother.According to Islamic teachings, the Muslim’s devoutness to his creator is contingent upon his obedience to his parents.In many cases, tyrannical parents abuse this divine privilege to exert their power over their children . Mernissi argues that “the main weapon parents use against children seems to be the curse, parents being invested with Allah’s power to curse or bless their children.Persons cursed by their parents are likely to fail in whatever they attempt”¹⁶. Similarly, in *So Long a Letter*, in order to succeed to return blood to its source, Aunty Nabou warns that any objection by Mawdo to marry her niece would kill her: “I will never get over it if you don’t take her as your wife.” (30).Fearing that the curse of his mother will threaten him throughout his life ,Mawdo surrenders under this matriarchal power, stating : “My mother is old. The knocks and disappointments of life have weakened her heart. If I spurn this child, she will die . . . Think of it, her brother’s daughter,

¹⁴Quoted in Siga Fatima Jagne, “The Gathering of Women in Mariama Ba’s Fictional World”, *Wagadu* 1(2004) :3. http://web/cortland/educ/wagadu/volume_201%/articles/mariama.html.

¹⁵ Sylvester Mutunda, “Women Subjugating Women: Re-Reading Mariama Ba' *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song*”, *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* 33(2-3) (2007): 102.<http://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/4j47346d>

¹⁶Fatima Mernissi, *op.cit.*, 106.

brought up by her, rejected by her son. What shame before society!” (30). The fear of societal retaliation, combined with his lustful inclinations pushed Mawdo to contract a polygamous marriage. Therefore, Aissatou is doubly oppressed: on the one hand, she is a victim of the system of polygamy and her husband’s lecherous behavior. On the other hand, she is a victim also of the caste system and her tyrannical mother-in-law.

In traditional societies, the mother-in-law claims not only authority over the choice of her son’s life partner, but also over his intimate marital life once her will for the chosen daughter-in-law is pursued. The young wife, in this regard, is required to submit under the authority of both her husband and her mother-in-law. She is expected to respect, serve her husband’s mother, and even tolerate her tyranny just to please and not disobey her husband. In *So Long a Letter*, young Nabou exemplifies the dutiful daughter-in-law whose respect and obedience to her husband and his mother precede her rights and aspirations as a young woman. Her aunt persuades her into repressing her ambitions for a good professional life and teaches her how to comply with traditional norms of wifehood. Ramatoulaye tells us that the poor young Nabou “learns the secret of making delicious sauces, of using an iron and wielding a pestle. Her aunt never missed an opportunity to remind her of her royal origin, and taught her that the first quality in a woman is docility” (29). For Aunt Nabou, women should not lead professional careers because they are born necessarily to fulfill their roles as wives and mothers: “To tell the truth, a woman does not need too much education. In fact, I wonder how a woman can earn her living by talking from morning to night” (30). To convince her niece, the old woman tries to give spiritual validity to her arguments by telling her that “the profession (she) will learn there is a beautiful one; (she) will earn (her) living and (she) will acquire grace for (her) entry into paradise by helping at the birth of new followers of Mohammed, the prophet” (ibid). Surprisingly, even paradise is conditioned upon the woman’s capacity to fulfill her procreating mission. This suggests that the burden of motherhood in patriarchal societies is carried out during the woman’s lifetime and hereafter.

Aunt Nabou’s manipulative power is quite similar to Firdaus’ uncle, as it is going to be shown in the next chapter. The Azharite uncle uses religious arguments to deprive her niece of education by telling her that university is a place that allows illegitimate

mixture of men and women. For the poor Firdaus, avoiding sinful interaction with men takes precedence over her dreams to become a successful and educated woman. It becomes clear that both Aunty Nabou and the uncle resort to tradition and religion to silence young women ,because they know that education is a peaceful arm which can be used by these women to repress tyrannical authority . Attaining some professional skills might enable Firdaus to understand that it is not education which will corrupt her, but rather her uncle' sexual harassment. Similarly, if young Nabou is allowed to enjoy the success of professional life , she will learn that it is not education which kills virtue in a woman , but rather her silence and passivity. According to Laura Charlotte Kempen, by influencing her niece to accept her prescribed code of femininity , “young Nabou is programmed not to have a voice of her own , but to be simply relegated to the role of man's helper , a mere extension of his own identity”¹⁷. This means that the young girl is rendered disempowered because she has been denied the right to develop a sense of identity . She is reduced to a tool by which Mawdo gratifies his sexual appetites ,and Aunty Nabou exercises her royal and matriarchal power .

Like Aunty Nabou, Binetou's mother uses her parental authority to push her young daughter into an unloving marriage with a man old enough to be her father. While Aissatou's mother in law exerts her authority to maintain her social prestige ,Binetou's mother wants to attain a higher socioeconomic status by offering her daughter as a second wife to the wealthy Modou. Once again, denying these young women their right for education proved to be an efficient strategy to render them armless to fight the shackles of patriarchy. Ramatoulaye recalls that “the young girl, who was very gifted, wanted to continue her studies, to sit for her baccalaureate. So as to establish his rule, Modou, wickedly, determined to remove her from the critical and unsparing world of the young” (10). The western educated Modou, who succeeded to lead a brilliant professional career is now the one who strips younger generation their educational success. This is indicative of the corruption of the Senegalese elites, whose intellectual background completely contradicts with their deceiving attitudes .

Lady mother in law, instead of reacting against this abuse, colludes with the forces of patriarchy to sell her poor daughter to the “sugar daddy” (35). She, in this sense,

¹⁷Laura Charlotte Kempen ,*op.cit.*, 33.

wants to exchange her daughter's educational success for her own material success. Ramatoulaye tells us that the mother "begged her daughter to give her life a happy end, in a proper house, as the man has promised them. So she accepted" (36). Binetou, in this regard, accepts her transfer from the material greediness of the mother to the sexual greediness of the husband. Ramatoulaye rightly observes that "Binetou, like many others, was a lamb slaughtered on the altar of affluence" (39). Indeed, in the next chapter, we will see that women like Binetou and Firdaus are lambs slaughtered on the altar of sex also. When they have been sold to their old husbands, both Binetou and Firdaus lacked the physical and mental maturity to confront the challenges of marriage. In terms of sexual compatibility, we observe that the age difference that exists between the two women and their old husbands (over forty years between Firdaus and Sheikh Mahmoud and over thirty years between Binetou and Modou) is to be reflected in their disability to enjoy their intimate lives.

In *Woman at Point Zero*, this incompatibility has resulted in sexual abuse or more exactly in marital rape. Firdaus finds sex with Sheikh Mahmoud not only disgusting, but also offensive to her sense of dignity. The absence of marital chastity and harmony between them led the old husband to get his younger wife into forced sex. While Mariama Ba does not go through these details, we get the impression, as readers, that Binetou and Modou lack mutual understanding and love. The age difference existing between them reflects their different perspectives and lifestyles. Modou tries to gain Binetou's affection by forcing himself to comply with her youthful aspirations. Ramatoulaye then describes his fruitless attempts as follows: "He was afraid of disappointing, and so that there would be no time for close scrutiny of him, he would create daily celebrations during which the bright young thing would move" (48).

Despite these attempts, Binetou unconsciously could not show affection towards Modou, because she regards him as a financial source which deserves no sentiments or beating of the heart. Ramatoulaye comprehends Binetou and even pities her because she knows that after all she is like her, a victim of the system of polygamy. While Ramatoulaye, the woman who has been callously betrayed and abandoned by her husband, sympathizes with her co-wife, Farmata, the griot woman, sees that polygamy is a system that women like Ramatoulaye should accept. Farmata did not

see women as individual beings like men , who can lead independently their lives .The woman according to her,“ is like a ball; once a ball is thrown, no one can predict where it will bounce. You have no control over where it rolls, and even less over who gets it. Often it is grabbed by an unexpected hand”(40). Her definition suggests that the woman is created to be owned, then passed from hand to hand .She lacks choice and self-control over her actions because her destiny is determined by the ones who throw and grasp this ball . The person who throws the ball is obviously man and the one who grabs it is also man. The sentence “You have no control over where it rolls” suggests that the two men are ,in almost every sense of the word, two ball players in the field of the woman ’s destiny. The trajectory that is traced by these men is the path of marriage , the chosen destiny from which she is powerless to escape . Farmata tries to persuade Ramatoulaye to follow this life trajectory by encouraging her into a polygamous marriage with Daouda Dieng . Having realized that Ramatoulaye decided to deviate from this chosen path by turning down Daouda’s proposal, Farmata is frustrated : “Bissimilai! Bissimilai!... you want to choose a husband like an eighteen-year old girl... You have refused greatness! You shall live in mud .I wish you another Modou to make you shed tears of blood” (69).For Farmata , marriage to Daouda symbolizes greatness and by rejecting this greatness , Ramatoulaye has sinned against religion . Ramatoulaye,in this sense, can be recalled as an ungrateful and unbelieving woman who refuses a divinely sanctioned proposal .

For Ramatoulaye, by accepting to marry Daouda, she will assume the role of Binetou , the role of the home-wrecker and the female oppressor who empowers herself at the expense of other women.Although she knows that the man is wealthy and can help her materially to raise her twelve orphans , she refuses to marry him because she has already experienced the frustration brought by polygamy . She writes: “Abandoned yesterday because of a woman, I cannot lightly bring myself between you and your family” (68). These words invoke not only a simple declaration to refuse a marriage proposal , but they mark at last Ramatoulaye’s released agitation against the system of polygamy .Moreover,her words illustrate a significant character growth in the course of the text. Following her husband’s departure, she stated that “with all the force I had, I called eagerly to another man to replace Modou”(53). Now the fluttering leaf that no

one dares to pick up refuses the state of being taken up by men like Daouda. The next part will explore this character growth, and the measures the protagonist is going to take to overcome her trauma and challenge the forces of polygamy.

2.4 Letter writing as a mode of empowerment and reclaiming the inner voice

Ba's novel includes a critique of the cultural norms that justify women's oppression, while simultaneously projecting the developmental character of her protagonist who, at a critical point in the narrative, decides to release all her inner agitations. This means that Mariama Ba, as a postcolonial writer, aims to juxtapose the initial image of the submissive wife with that of an assertive woman, whose experience of betrayal and abandonment gives her inner strength to resist other subsequent forms of oppression. In this part, we will discuss mainly Ramatoulaye's journey towards self-assertion. We will examine the value of personal writing as a means of self-discovery and self-definition, as a vehicle of protest, and as a way to develop the inner voice.

This journey towards self-assertion departs initially from a point of ambivalence, a point in which the protagonist is struggling in an inner conflict between her desires for self-fulfillment and her deep awareness of her society's constraints. According to Adele King: "this problem of how to reconcile the family with the individual rights of the woman is, Ba suggests, particularly that of a contemporary transitional generation, those who came to maturity at the time of political independence"¹⁸. Indeed, Ramatoulaye's dilemma is revelatory of the social uneasiness that characterizes post-colonial Africa in general and postcolonial Senegal in particular:

"There was unrest in North Africa. Did these interminable discussions, during which points of view concurred or clashed, complemented each other or were vanquished, determine the aspects of new Africa? The assimilationist dream of the colonist drew into its crucible our mode of thought and way of life...Historically marched on, inexorably. The debate over the right path to take shook West Africa...it was the privilege of our generation to be the link between two periods in our history, one of domination, the other of independence. We remained young and efficient, for we were the messengers of a new design" (24-25).

¹⁸ Adele King, "The Personal and The Political in The Work of Mariama Ba", Studies in 20th Century Literature 18.2 (1994): 181. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1348>.

This political transition is also manifested at the sociocultural level, where issues of marriage and women's status are negotiated under the pressures of a society torn between modern and traditional values. Ba reveals how her protagonist struggled to achieve a balance between her attempts to pursue her desires for emancipation, as she has been taught by the French headmistress, and the societal expectations that call her to behave according to the traditional ideals of Senegalese women. On the one hand, Ramatoulaye strongly opposes traditional practices like polygamy and arranged marriage, and calls instead for monogamous union and the right of young people to choose their life partners out of love. On the other hand, she is inclined to stay in her polygamous marriage, despite all the injustices that are inscribed therein. She tries to respond to her daughter's persuasion for divorce, so she poses herself the question: "Leave? Start again at zero"(39). But her increasing yearning for those twenty five years tells her that she lacks the self-confidence to stand alone and make "a clean line through the past" (40). Part of this lack stems from her self-defeating tenderness she feels towards Modou. Although the latter drew a clean line with those twenty five years and moved forwards with Binetou, Ramatoulaye remains captured by her souvenirs of the past. Her enclosure during the mourning period allows her to relive these moments of joy with her husband. Her love for him overrules any attempts for revenge, or at least resistance to his act of betrayal. She even tries to give pretexts by persuading herself to believe that she cannot afford to bear all the material responsibilities for raising her children: "Did I have enough energy to bear alone the weight of this responsibility, which was both moral and material?" (39-40). The truth is that even in her staying in marriage, she surely will bear these responsibilities because Modou is gone and will never return to her. Although her education and financial independence place her at a privileged position to seek divorce and overcome her trauma, she is powerless to make the break because she has "never conceived of happiness outside marriage" (56).

According to Florence Stratton, Ramatoulaye gives more importance to the family than to her professional life. She "treats her home as an expression of her personality, as a work of art that she has created She also endeavours to make housework seem essential, an end, and not merely a means, in itself, and to transform the repetitive,

unremunerated drudgery of daily domestic tasks into rewarding work”¹⁹. Accordingly, Ramatoulaye is not only a victim of her self-defeating love for Modou, but she is also a victim of the traditional idea that constructs women’s self-worth and esteem as being strictly tied to marriage. Although Ramatoulaye is educated, she is seemingly unable to abandon some traditional norms that strengthen the dependence of women on men. Ramatoulaye explains that the white headmistress wanted to lift her and other women “out of the bug of tradition , superstition and customto raise (their) vision of the world , cultivate (their) personalities , to make up for (their) inadequacies , to develop universal moral values in (them)”(15) .Despite these aspirations, Ramatoulaye still links happiness to marriage. This means that there are some cultural beliefs that are so embedded in society that they cannot be easily lifted out by the modern ideals she received from the French headmistress.

By deciding to remain within the confining walls of marriage, Ramatoulaye problematizes Mariama Ba’s project to unravel western essentialist claims about African Muslim women as being submissive and silent. Ramatoulaye, it goes without saying, by controlling her inner agitation in front of the Imam has ,in part, reinforced western stereotypes of the muted African woman, whose commitment to respect her culture’s dictates overrules any attempt for self-assertion .Yet, the contextual approach presented in the first chapter can help us frame Ramatoulaye’s attitude within a sociocultural context that bears a special attention to the cultural constraints which influence her decision. A study of these cultural constraints reveals, according to Eustace Palmer , that “the African feminist, while being aware of her disadvantageous position and the need for change , might also realize that she has invested too much in her marriage to give up too easily”²⁰. As already mentioned, marriage and procreation are determinant to the woman’s self-regard in her society. A single or a divorced woman is not much appreciated in her society because her position contradicts with the African ideals which see marriage as a means to ensure the continuation of the African offspring. In this sense, the Kenyan philosopher John Mbiti writes :

¹⁹Florence Stratton ,*Contemporary African Literature and The Politics of Gender* (London and New York : Routledge , 1994) 141.

²⁰ Eustace Palmer, *Of War and Women , Oppression and Optimism .New Essays on The African Novel* (Asmara: Africa World Press, 2008) 140.

“It is a religious obligation by means of which the individual contributes the seeds of life towards man’s struggle towards the loss of original morality. A person who, therefore, has no descendants in effect quenches the fire of life, and becomes forever dead since his line of psychological continuation is blocked if he does not get married and bear children”²¹ .

Divorce is then seen as a disruption to these ideals and a threat to the African moral fabric. Moreover, a divorce initiated by the wife is rarely to occur in traditional societies. Although marriage is said to be a partnership that can be equally dissolved either by the husband or the wife, the right of the latter to seek separation is often ignored .Even though this right has been clearly cited in Islamicreligious text, it is generally assumed that a divorce sought by a woman is an insult to her husband. The husband has the privilege to abuse and oppress his spouse, but can never be illuminated by her. It is then the existence of such constraining dictates which underminesRamatoulaye’s efforts to make the break with Modou.

Viewed from this perspective,the novel should be regarded as what the feminist critic Elaine Neil Orrrefers to as“a fiction that invites a feminist negotiating criticism”²². For Orr, feminist criticism should go beyond what she terms ‘oppositional politics’, and embraces rather a strategy ofnegotiation that is not meant to “replace separatist and subversive feminist modes of reading ,but to recast them within a larger frame”²³.Thisstrategy would accommodate cultural context with feminist practice in order to envision possibilities for female subjectivity.Reading *So Long a Letter* from a feminist negotiating criticism would sympathize with Ramatoulaye’s conservative attitude ,as well as her progressive aspirations for women’s emancipation.This means that Ramatoulaye’s space of resistance will be carved within the African social structure . While having been influenced by the European headmistress’ exhortation for emancipation, Ramatoulaye cautiously ensures that this emancipation should remain within the context of her African society.She states: “We were true sisters, destined for the same mission of emancipation. To lift us out of the bug of tradition,

²¹John S. Mbiti ,African Religions and Philosophy (Oxford : Heinemann ,1990) 130.

²²Elaine Neil Orr,Subject to Negotiation: Reading Feminist Criticism and American Women’s Fiction (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1997) xiii.

²³Ibid., 2.

superstition and custom, to make us appreciate a multitude of civilization without renouncing our own”(15). The use of the word emancipation is very important in this context; it discredits views which see Ramatoulaye as a conservative who lacks willingness to introduce change. The change that is referred to in this sentence cannot be abruptly introduced, but it is rather a process of negotiation between old and new values.

To understand Ramatoulaye’s power of vision, Shari Coulis in her article *The Impossibility of Choice: Gender and Genre in Mariama Ba’s So Long a Letter*,²⁴ asserts that the novel should be read under what the postcolonial theorist Bill Ashcroft refers to as “abrogation” and “appropriation”. Abrogation and appropriation are two strategies that can be employed by the postcolonial subject in order to disrupt the otherness being imposed on him by the colonial power. In *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft defines “abrogation” as a process by which the subject refuses “the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or correct usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning, inscribed in the words”²⁵. This means that abrogation in postcolonial writings is a decolonizing discourse by which the postcolonial subject aims to shake off the legitimacy of the colonial power, and impose instead his identity and indigenous values. “Appropriation” on the other hand, is the “process by which the language is taken and made to ‘bear the burden’ of one’s own cultural experience”²⁶. As the words may suggest, it is a cultural mode of coping with certain hegemonic powers, where the colonized subject uses the language of the colonizer and appropriates it to his own discourse in order to give visibility to his situation.

Viewed against this background, it becomes clear that Ramatoulaye, by staying in the oppressive space of polygamy, is not going to use abrogation as a strategy to reclaim her subjectivity. Unlike Aissatou who expressed her refusal and direct confrontation to

²⁴ Shari Coulis, “The Impossibility of Choice: Gender and Genre in Mariama Ba’s So Long a Letter”, In. Ada Uzoamaka Azodo, ed., *op.cit.*, 19.

²⁵ Bill Ashcroft, et al, eds, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London and New York : Routledge, 2002) 37.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

the system of polygamy, Ramatoulaye's decision to not initiate divorce can be taken as an act of appropriation in which she uses the language of the oppressor, that is confinement and seclusion, as a route for enunciation and communication. In other words, Ramatoulaye appropriates the restrictions being imposed on her by the mourning period into her feminist discourse in order to reveal forms of inequality and discrimination that she has experienced under the system of polygamy. Ramatoulaye, in this sense, makes use of the ritual of the Mirasse which symbolizes the revelation of her husband's intimate secrets to create in turn her own space of revelation. She appropriates the Mirasse by re-experiencing it not as an event of sorrow and grief, but also as a moment of self-reflection. In knowing how her savings have been wickedly used by Modou to boost his sexual gratification, the 'Mirasse', therefore, becomes the motivating force which ordains the reluctant Ramatoulaye to release her frustration to her friend Aissatou.

The exposure of issues like polygamy and widowhood and the appropriation of Mirasse in feminist discourse will take the form of letter writing. Ramatoulaye's feminist writing is retrospective, moving outward through memory across the events which cause her trauma. For Eustace Palmer, the novel is "more like a memoir than a letter"²⁷ because it marks the use of variant calls to memory: "do you remember" (22), "let's us recall" (15). Recalling past events does not signify an awakening of her yearning for the beloved Modou, where her deliberate attempts to recapture those unreturning moments of love allow her to escape the bitter reality of the present. Her memories serve now to confront the present by the past in a way to understand herself better, and cope with her current situation that demands great strength and self-awareness. Annis Pratt, a professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, states that "women's escape through imagination is not escapist but strategic, a withdrawal into the unconscious for the purpose of personal transformation"²⁸.

This role of memory to raise the subject's self-awareness about his situation will be examined also in *Woman at Point Zero*. El Saadawi depicts how Firdaus' haunting

²⁷ Eustace Palmer, *op.cit*, 146.

²⁸ Annis Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981) 177.

memories of the constant violation of her body allow her to understand her objectification under the Egyptian system of patriarchy, and thus pave the way later on to recapture her bodily integrity. Both El Saadawi and Mariama Ba share a feminist perspective, that is to initiate their protagonists' coming to voice through their past memories. This means that for Ramatoulaye and Firdausto to reclaim their subjectivities, they have first to rethink and question through a series of flashbacks the cultural dictates and oppressive practices that make them subservient to men. Early at the beginning of the letter, Ramatoulaye invokes that the memory of the past is going to be the dictating voice in her written enunciation: "I conjure you up. The past is reborn, along with its procession of emotions. I close my eyes" (1). Initially her memories appear as fragmented chunks, "an ebb and tide of feelings ... an ebb tide of images" (ibid). Yet, according to Shaun Irlam, "it will be the letter's function to organize, narrativize, and lend coherence to these recollections, and knit them into a cultural umbilical cord" ²⁹.

The healing power of memory then colludes with the equally therapeutic function of writing in the novel to help Ramatoulaye reclaim her subjectivity. The very acts of remembering and writing allow Ramatoulaye to hear the voice of her inner self, to expose freely her ideas and juxtapose them against the backdrop of the male discourse that usually places her at the receiving end. Writing to her confidante, Aissatou, enables her at last to lift the veil of silence, and express her contestation and disapproval of her husband's polygamous marriage. Thus, the voice of the other who has been muted by the discourse of fatalism is engaged now in acts of self-analysis and self-definition, through which new interpretations and explications of traditional codes are advanced. Keith L. Walker in her article *Postscripts: Mariama Ba, Menopause, Epistolarity, and Post-colonialism* has rightly pointed that "the epistolary form allows Ramtoulaye to place herself on trial – dialoguing with herself, quarreling with herself as judge and

²⁹Shaun Irlam, "Mariama Ba' So Long a Letter: The vocation of Memory and The Space of Writing", *Research in African Literature* 29. 2(1998): 78. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3820723>.

defendant”³⁰. In this trial, “is constituted the I who speaks with her/herself , and who hears her true voice for the first time”³¹.

This function of self -narration to restore the subjectivity of the female other will be also explored in chapterthree .After killing the pimp,Firdaus refuses to cope with the trial imposed on her by the Egyptian system .She instead , like Ramatoulaye, wants to sit in on a trial only with her inner self , where she is determined to defend herself and her body against the Egyptian system of patriarchy . Her decision to not sign the appeal for clemency and defend herself within any formal institutions is suggestive of her refusal of any reconciliation with the patriarchal system .In engaging in the act of self-narration ,Firdaus aims at finding an arrangement only between her inner self and her detached body. Likewise, it is obvious that Ramatoulaye in writing to Aissatou, seeks no compromise with the forces of her oppression , whether her husband , her co-wife, or her in laws . She knows that Modou is no more, and her survival now is contingent upon her willingness to recover herself from the trauma of his betrayal . This recovery can be envisaged through her epistolary writing, whose therapeutic effects help her overcome her isolation, transcend her pain ,and reconstruct her injured self. Letter writing offers Ramatoulayecompany and consolation, at a time she was suffering from a terrible alienation. The letterthen transcendsthe confining walls of the mourning period , and opens bridges for communication with the external word . Yet, “there is, of course, a change in register: epistolary normally associated with the privacy of the I is here socialized, politicized, nationalized, and even internationalized by Aissatou’s location”³². In recollecting the trauma of other women and casting judgment upon the status of contemporary Senegal, Ramatoulaye’s letter contributes to feminist post-colonial project , that is to not separate feminist agendas from political activism . As suggested earlier, the deplorable situation of women is inseparable from the political immaturity of the Senegalese leaders who use their prestige to boost their material interests .The letter then opens a space for this newly acquired political

³⁰ Keith L. Walker , *Postscripts : Mariama Ba , Menopause , Epistolarity, and Post-colonialism , In., Ada UzoamakaAzodo, ed., op.cit., 266.*

³¹*Ibid.*, 267.

³² Keith L. Walker, *op.cit.*, 267.

consciousness by highlighting the protagonist's metamorphosis from a pitiful victim to an assertive woman.

The scene which reflects this significant character change occurs when Tamsir, Modou's brother, proposes to marry Ramatoulaye as a second wife. Tamsir selfishly declares : "You suit me as a wife, you will continue to live here, just as if Modou were not dead... you are my good luck. I shall marry you. I prefer you to the other one, too frivolous, too young" (57). For Eustace Palmer, his statement " is not even a proposal; it is a statement of intent , of intention to marry Ramatoulaye. It is almost as though he is giving commands ..., as though Ramatoulaye had no choice, and could not possibly have any choice, in the matter " ³³. Tamsir's commanding sentence calls attention to another form of women's objectification, that is the practice of widow inheritance by her husband's brother. In Africa, it is very common to oblige the widow to marry generally the younger brother of her deceased husband, who becomes in this case the provider of his dead brother's family. But, Mariama Ba, in an interview with Barbara Harrell- Bond , tells that Tamsir has no good intentions towards the widow Ramatoulaye and her twelve orphans:

" ..Instead of wanting to assume the moral responsibilities of the dead man, he wants to marry her for his own selfish purposes. She, the widow, has grown children who are working and have financial means. Then there is the fact that the widow has some money. He already has three wives for whom he cannot provide financial support. One of them has to sell fruit to support the house, another does some sewing, etc. To make up for the money, how can he come to this widow ,Ramatoulaye, to offer help , he does not come to offer help, he only comes for his own selfish interests, for his own benefit"³⁴.

Tamsir's behavior emphasizes not only the objectification of women to obtain material gain, but it also calls for Ramatoulaye's complicity in enforcing polygamy, the major source of her misfortune . Ramatoulaye at this point, is reminded of the moment when the same Tamsir came to announce the news of her husband's marriage. She feels now that her inner agitation cannot be controllable and manageable , so she raises her voice to express her categorical refusal to marry her husband's brother: "My voice has known silence for thirty years of harassment... you forgot that I have a heart, a mind ,

³³ Eustace Palmer ,*op.cit.* , 141-142.

³⁴Quoted in Ada Uzoamaka Azodo, ed.,*op.cit.* , 394.

that I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand” (58). Ramatoulaye’s coming to voice is more than an act of revenge ; it is an agential act which enables her to impose herself against the forces of oppression . Her dissident voice will make reference to Firdaus’ similar assertive voice in chapter three. Both heroines’ subjectivities lie not only in their spoken words , but also in the voices with which their new found strengths are spoken. In *Woman at Point Zero*, the psychiatrist was more impressed by Firdaus’ commanding voice rather than her coming to language. In *So Long a Letter*, Mariama Ba emphasizes the complementarity that arises between voice and words when Ramatoulaye decides to deliver her dissidence against her oppressors. After her discussion with Daouda about political matters and women’s rights, Ramatoulaye concludes that it was “More than (her) ideas, it was (her) voice that captivated him” (61). Like words, the voice has an assertive power that disrupts the authoritarian discourse. While the words manifest the reasoning behind the subject’s articulated dissidence, the voice reflects the emotions that motivate this subject to stand against his oppression. Like Firdaus whose assertive voice reverses the power relationship between her , as a case study in a scientific research and Nawal El Saadawi as psychiatrist , the voice with which Ramatoulaye’s political consciousness is expressed undermines the power relationship that exists between her as a woman and Daouda as a political man. The man who was ambivalent over women’s participation in political affairs is now resentful about their mediocre representation in the National Assembly .

Ramatoulaye seems to enjoy her influential conversation with Daouda : “I was bolting like a horse that has been tethered and is now free and revealing in space. Ah, the joy of having an interlocutor before you, especially an admirer. I had remained the same Ramatoulayea bit of rebel” (61). According to Rebecca Wilcox, “Mariama Ba makes a provocative narrative move at this point in the text: here, for the first time, Ramatoulaye names herself. It is the first encounter the reader has with the narrator’s name”³⁵. By naming herself, Ramatoulaye once again proves that she is an agent of her own destiny and the psychological empowerment arising from this achievement allows

³⁵Rebecca Wilcox, “Women and Power in Mariama Ba’s Novels” , In., Ada Uzoamaka Azodo, ed., *op.cit.*, 132.

her to move forward in life with a very optimistic perspective of the future :“Despite everything-disappointments and humiliations-hope still lives on within me. It is from the dirty and nauseating humus that the green plant sprouts into life, and I can feel new buds springing up in me” (89). Glimpses of hopes seem to gain significant dominance in the rest of the letter, pushing Ramatoulaye to end her epistolary narrative by marking her signature.“Most letters are closed so, but in Ramatoulaye’s case the act seems particularly symbolic; it seems to confirm the sense of identity she has established by the end of the text –an identity that has blossomed from miserable and tenuous to optimistic and self-assured”³⁶.

While Ramatoulaye carves her space of empowerment within her traditionally based beliefs on the inevitable complementarity of man and woman, her friend Aissatou refuses to appropriate the language of patriarchy and takes a liberal path by taking the initiative to divorce her husband. In similar manner to Firdaus who, in killing the pimp, reverses the traditional social roles by proving that women too can abuse, Aissatou by leaving her husband assumes the role generally reserved for men. Aissatou’s liberal choice is suggestive of her refusal to draw any form of accommodation with the cultural codes that privilegemen’ selfish interests over women’s dignity and self-worth . To overcome her subjugation, Aissatou, like Nawal El Saadawi’s heroine, uses the abrogation of culture by refusing categorically to submit under the language of polygamy : “I am stripping myself of your love, your name. Clothed in my dignity, the only worthy garment, I go my way” (32). By deciding to leave the confining space of marriage and “burn the tree which bears the fruit” (31), Aissatou succeeded to disrupt the deep rooted language of servitude which places the woman ’self-esteem only with her husband. In this regard, Aissatou’s space of empowerment lies in transcending and deconstructing the structures of gender power relationships that have been imposed on women like her .This means that her act of defiance could not be attained without the process of self –denial,which is an important part in the formation of the subjectivity of the female other .Here, “the female subject cannot change her status of subjectivity, if she is not willing to destroy

³⁶Rebecca Wilcox, *op.cit.*,133.

both the image and persona that she is made to be”³⁷. It is interesting to note that Aissatou’ self-denial of her society’s cultural constructions is reinforced by her exposure to western values. In moving to live in America with her children, she distances herself from the societal constraints that may arise from her position as a divorced and single mother. The western world, notably through its values of individualism and freedom of choice, provides a comprehensive ground for her new found agency. Therefore, the space within which the female subjectivity is being articulated plays a vital role in the process of making this subjectivity. Ramatoulaye cannot embrace a radical attitude like her friend because, as suggested earlier, her empowerment still operates within her African context.

By creating two different spaces of empowerment for her female characters, Mariama Ba castigates the homogenized and unified category attributed to African Muslim women. Ba has purposely included different female voices in her novel in order to highlight diverse female subjectivities. While most of the female characters are similarly victims of the institution of polygamy, it would be wrong to essentialize their stories under a single and inflexible signifier. This means that every female character speaks for herself, and the individual experience she is recounting is the sole reliable account of her condition. Thus, Mariama Ba claims no authority over their stories; she is like Nawal El Saadawi, as it is going to be explained in the next chapter, an interlocutor and recorder whose main role is to bring these female testimonies to a larger audience. In their attempt to reach this broader audience, both writers are preoccupied to highlight female solidarity as a strategy to defy oppression and deconstruct the image of the muted and passive African women. In *So Long a Letter*, despite their different attitudes in coping with the system of polygamy, the westernized Aissatou and the traditional Ramatoulaye succeeded to maintain a strong friendship. Polygamy, the major source of their misfortunes, ironically allows moral and material support to be forged between them. We have seen how Aissatou offers Ramatoulaye financial assistance, at a time she was left completely destitute by her husband and her

³⁷ Cherif Ayoub Corrae, Representations of Islam and the Question of Identity in the Postcolonial Context: Mariama Ba’s *Une Si Longue Lettre*, Ousmane Sembene’s *Ceddo* and Guelwaar, and Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s *L’Aventure Ambigüe*, (USA : ProQuest LLC, 2009), 128.

in laws . Similarly, Ramatoulaye takes a defensive stance towards her friend against Mawdo. She at several instances showed her disregard to his attitude towards her friend : “ I had no pity for Mawdo.... I did not listen to Mawdo I did not answer Mawdo”(33). The shared experience of polygamy implicates a collective commitment to challenge this system and develop a sort of feminine solidarity.

The way women develop mutual understanding out of their shared oppression will be similarly explored in the next chapter. NawalEl Saadawi’s traumatic experience with the practice of circumcision allows her to understand Firdaus’ plight and all the psychological disabilities that arise hereafter. In *So Long a Letter*, this feminine solidarity emphasizes another strategy for female survival and empowerment in the face of the confining circumstances. The inclusion of other women’s experiences extends Ramatoulaye’ s awareness about the complications of the system of polygamy, and provides her with enough strength to meet the challenges facing her as a single mother .In other words, Ramatoulaye could not reach a comprehensive account of male polygamous instinct without Aissatou’s experience. For Mary Jane Androne: “Ba’s narrative deconstructs the paradigms of western autobiography which plots the linear destinies of their subjects as single trajectories that consists of overcoming a series of obstacles by themselves”³⁸. There is a communal rather than an individual commitment to surmount the shackles of patriarchy. Ramatoulaye emphasizes this collective spirit: “we were true sisters, destined to the same mission of emancipation”(15). Ramatoulaye, in this regard, “chooses sisterhood as a way of expressing her concept of feminism Her assurance that knowledge , femininity , and power would gain her the freedom she desires is her own brand of feminism in a country full of women like her , who may have only a slight difference in their own definitions of feminism”³⁹.

Ramatoulaye’s feminism, which is also a projection of MariamaBa’ s own feminist ideals, embraces no exclusionary practices against men .Ramatoulaye even went to suggest in her conversation with Daouda the inclusion of men in this feminine

³⁸Mary Jane Androne, “The collective Spirit in Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter*”, In. Ada UzoamakaAzodo, ed., *op.cit.*, 46-47.

³⁹ Brandy Hayslett , “Sisterhood : Knowledge , Feminism , and Power in Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter*” , In. Ada UzoamakaAzodo, ed., *op.cit.*, 149.

solidarity. Accordingly, Ba, the writer who denied being a feminist ,creates a uniquely feminist flexible format which gives an authentic account of African female emancipation. For Laura Charlotte Kempen, Mariama Ba's denial of the label 'feminist' was before the articulation of African feminism. For her: "had Ba still been alive and familiar with the definitions of an African feminism, (as described in the first chapter), she would undoubtedly have defined herself differently. She has since frequently been demarcated as a great African feminist, one striving to formulate a more positive image of women in the African literary canon"⁴⁰. She probably would be identified as a fierce campaigner against the system of polygamy; in a similar way her Egyptian counterpart Nawal El Saadawi has been famously known for her activism against the system of Female Genital Mutilation. While Mariama Ba highlights a moderate mode of female behavior that is still operable in the African environment ,Nawal El Saadawi's narrative will show the impossibility of compromise and accommodation in the selected Egyptian system of patriarchy . In the next chapter, the degree of oppression maintained against women is accentuated and in return, the scope of emancipation will also be accentuated . El Saadawi's novel will explore further manifestations of this Third World difference, analyzed in the first chapter , and another heterogeneous, but radical articulation of female subjectivity .

⁴⁰ Laura Charlotte Kempen ,*op. cit*, 40.

CHAPTER THREE

**UNVEILING THE FEARFUL TRUTH:
THE NARRATIVE VOICE AS A SITE
OF AGENCY IN NAWAL EL
SAADAWI'S *WOMAN AT POINT ZERO***

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter has conveyed a post-colonial feminist reading of Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* which highlights female writing as a way to reclaim identity and defy polygamy and widowhood, two repressive systems under which women's oppression in the Senegalese traditional milieu is underwritten. Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* paints a more perplexing picture of women's victimization under distorted cultural norms. The latter are overarching factors in the private and public violence inscribed on Firdaus' body. To defy cultural constraints, El Saadawi like Ba, develops a postcolonial discourse of identity politics which carves a space for female agency, and allows thus her protagonist to reclaim her identity and her objectified body. Firdaus' final pronouncement against her oppressors, much like that of Ramatoulaye discussed in the previous chapter, is socially initiated by her environment rather than predetermined.

In order to explore this identity process-making, we will explore the deep rooted traditional beliefs and cultural constraints which forced Firdaus to become a prostitute and an active foe of men. In the first two parts, we will trace Firdaus' victimization from childhood to womanhood: from her offensive father, child molesting uncle, and greedy older husband, to the male rapists who led her to the destructive cycle of sexual slavery. The last part of the chapter will be devoted to the exploration of Firdaus' space of resistance and the measures she took to challenge her objectification. We will then examine Firdaus' acts of murder and speaking against her oppressors, as a means to liberate herself finally from the shackles that have long confined her.

3.2 Bitter childhood,oppressive homes: the first stage leading to an unknown future

In the previous chapter, Mariama Ba highlights culture's burdens in a voice of an amateur middle-aged woman who has experienced life and decided to narrate her story. Nawal El Saadawi's narrative shows that in a chaotic culture, discrimination does not take into account age, and does not differentiate between innocent and rural young women like Firdaus and educated old women like Ramatoulaye or Aissatou. The narrative mainly follows the disempowerment of Firdaus, who had already begun right from her childhood to recognize and question the current social and moral codes to which many women at her age are subjected to by their society. In this part, we will shed light on Firdaus' childhood and exploitation at home as being an important phase in her victimization. We will explore the motif of oppressive homes, whether in the father's or the husband's house, as symbol for containment and confinement to show how distorted cultural norms can make the female feel disempowered, even with the intimate persons with whom she is supposed to find tenderness and warmth.

In an attempt to unveil these sufferings, Firdaus decides to meet Nawal El Saadawi and narrate her story. The first link to oppression occurs in the description of her rural father's home. Firdaus grows up in a family where the name of father is approached with that of the master who exerts an unquestionable authority over his slaves, in this case, his family members. The father enslaves his wife by making "her bite the dust each night" (12) and beating her when a male child dies, while showing indifference with the loss of a female child. The father's comportment suggests that he can be a father only to male children, but a master over his female children like Firdaus. The little Firdaus is taught to accept washing her master's legs and watching him eat food, at the time she went to bed alone with an empty stomach, leaving her mother by his side to serve him. It becomes clear that Firdaus' mother fulfills the metaphor of the passive wife who slavishly submits to the authority of her husband. The mother, according to Eustace Palmer, has been "brainwashed into believing that everything must be done for the husband's/father's satisfaction, even if this means

subjecting her children to deprivations”¹. According to the prevailing cultural assumptions, the wife must be dutiful and obedient to her husband, even if he mistreats her because any contravention of his authority is regarded as a defiance of the presumed traditionally and divinely code of behavior. In El Saadawi’s narrative, the father enjoys his apparent rightful privileges, seeing no contradiction between kneeling down in Friday prayers and abusing his wife and his daughter.

Firdaus exposes her father’s deceitful adherence to his religion by showing his pretended conviction of the Imam’s sermon that “stealing was a sin, and killing was a sin, and defaming the honor of a woman was a sin, and injustice was a sin, and beating another human being was a sin” (12), while at the same time, he is free to unmercifully abuse his female family members. For him, stripping his wife and his daughter from their rights to live peacefully is not an act of injustice, and domestic violence is not considered as a sinful act. This religious hypocrisy allows El Saadawi to present, with great economy, the forces behind women’s oppression in Muslim societies. The behavior of the father exemplifies her view which she exposed in *The Hidden Face of Eve*: “religion cannot be understood properly, if it is looked upon as a series of isolated principles, teachings, and directives sent by God, without attempting to see them in their interconnections with specific situations, each of which is characterized by its own social, economic and cultural setting.”². Men like Firdaus’ father have a selective adherence to religion; they fail to draw a connection between what they preach and what they practice because they look at religion as a series of detached principles that can be applied only in contexts outlining male interests.

The father’s sarcastic religious inclination becomes juxtaposed with Firdaus’ growing questioning of his parenthood. It is the confusion of the father with other similarly repressive religious men that pushed Firdaus to ask her mother: “how was it that she had given birth to (her) without a father” (13). Firdaus’ provocative question is an expression of her inquisitiveness over sexuality that many females at her age express. Unlike Ramatoulaye who is educated enough to instruct her daughter about sexual matters, Firdaus’ mother disapproves of her daughter’s enquiry and avoids

¹Eustace Palmer, *op.cit.*, 155.

²Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, *op.cit.*, 65.

any meaningful discussion over the matter. Fearing that her daughter is sexually active which would imply, according to culture, her probably engagement in illegal sexual relationships, the dismissive mother reacts by beating Firdaus, then subjecting her to the ritual of circumcision. In this sense, Firdaus' enquiry about sexuality echoes what the British anthropologist Mary Douglas refers to as *Danger Beliefs*. For Douglas, *Danger beliefs* are a set of convictions and cultural norms whose expressive function is to enforce a particular code of behavior constituting the established social order. They represent "a strong language of mutual exhortation. (They) are as much threats which one man uses to coerce another as dangers which he himself fears to incur by his own lapses from righteousness"³. Firdaus' mother considers the enquiry of her daughter as a threat which will bring impurity to the social order. As far as this social order is concerned, the *Danger Beliefs*, according to Douglas, are better interpreted "as symbols of relations between parts of society, as mirroring designs of hierarchy or symmetry which are applied in the larger social system"⁴. In this sense, anyone who threatens to question these beliefs or deviate from their established order would promptly be re-ordered with physical force.

In *Woman at Point Zero*, this physical force is represented by the practice of female circumcision. The circumcision, according to Firdaus' mother, purifies her daughter's body by making it no longer threatened by its destructive *Danger Beliefs*. Firdaus recalls that her mother brought a woman who was carrying a small knife or maybe a razor blade, and they "cut off a piece of flesh from between (her) thighs" (13). Firdaus' description of her circumcision is brief and passing, but Nawal El Saadawi's extensive writings about the practice are more expressive. According to El Saadawi, Female Genital Mutilation was one of the prescriptions inscribed on the woman's body in order to differentiate it and make it marriageable to fulfill its duties. As already mentioned in chapter one, according to culture, the practice aims to protect the female's virginity and the honor of her family, by keeping her out of the male sexual

³ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Routledge: London, 2003) 3.

⁴Ibid., 4.

realm. The ritual, thus, creates gendered identities which would accommodate with the public/private spheres dichotomy and the sexual roles inscribed therein.

Circumcision means not only a denial of transgressing the allocated male spaces, but also a deprivation from developing a sense of identity and feeling one's femininity. As a practicing psychiatrist, El Saadawi is well aware of the psychosexual complications of such barbaric ritual. For her:

“No doubt, the physical ablation of the clitoris appears a much more savage and cruel procedure than its psychological removal.....Psychological surgery might even be more malicious and harmful because it tends to produce the illusion of being complete, whereas in actual fact the body may have lost an essential organ, like a child born an idiot yet provided with brain substance . It can create the illusion of being free , whereas in actual fact freedom has been lost ”⁵.

For El Saadawi, to live in an illusion, not to know the truth is the most dangerous trauma. Circumcision, which according to cultural norms aims to protect femininity, symbolizes in fact the loss of this femininity, the loss of the body, and the most distressing of them all the loss of subjectivity. When Firdaus looks at herself in the mirror, she feels lonely and no longer able to identify herself as the person who once held that name : “I stood in front of the mirror staring at my face . Who am I? Firdaus that is how they call me” (20). Firdaus' disability to feel sexual sensation resulting from the removal of her clitoris pushed her into a state of identity crisis . The presence of this sexual disempowerment and its effect on Firdaus' identity is provocatively depicted in the novel. Throughout the narrative, Firdaus speaks about sentiments of loss and alienation which she seems powerless to resist. She recalls following her circumcision that she no longer feels the “sensation of sharp pleasure”(14) that she used to experience with Mohammadain because according to her, “ a part of (her), of (her) being, was gone and would never return” (15). In particular, this imagery of irretrievable loss becomes a recurring motif in the description of Firdaus' subsequent sexual relationships, where her longings for sexual satisfaction as a prostitute become increasingly emphasized : “yet it seems to go back even further to my life , to some day , before I was born, like a thing arising of ancient

⁵Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve* ,*op.cit.*, xv.

wound , in an organ which had ceased to be mine , on the body of a woman who was no longer me”(56). This imagery of “ancient wound” shows that the experience of circumcision triggers moments of frustration and alienation for Firdaus, who struggles to remain a woman and recapture this elusive sensation .Firdaus, whose interests and needs as a young girl are scarified under distorted norms, becomes imprisoned by her memories of circumcision, and this echoes Judith Butler’s view that :

“What is refused and repudiated in the formation of the subject continues to determine that subject. What remains outside this subject, set aside by the act of foreclosure which founds the subject, persists as a kind of defining negativity . The subject, as a result, is never coherent and never self-identical precisely because it is founded and, indeed, continually re-founded, through a set of defining foreclosures and repressions that constitute the discontinuity and incompleteness of the subject”⁶.

Butler’s words suggest that Firdaus’ growth into womanhood will never be soundly valid in psychological terms, due to the deep injury left by her circumcision. The painful memories of sex which are always troubling her have strong implications for her deepest expressions of selfhood. The image of the body in pain extends simultaneously to become that of the self in pain, signifying that the mental and the physical entities are both bearers of an equilibrium subject. The pain of unbelonging, of losing control over the body, and the feeling of not knowing about oneself emphasizes that self-memory and identity stand in reciprocal liaisons. Like the body who cannot transcend the absence of its organ, the self cannot endure the detachment of the body and the traumatic memories associated with its ailing. The body is then integral to the person’s self-awareness: the loss of bodily emission is a loss of bodily awareness, which in return means the beginning of a troublesome relationship with the inner self .

This interplay between body, memory, and self-awareness is vividly highlighted through the protagonist’s language. In recounting her experience with the journalist Daa, Firdaus describes his accusations to her of being not respectable as: “the sharp tip of a plunging dagger ... The words continue to echo my ears, took refuge in their innermost depths, buried themselves in my head, like some palpable material objects,

⁶Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 190.

like a body as sharp as the edge of a knife which had cut its way through my ears”(70-71). Firdaus cannot bear Diaa’s accusations and the words he uttered, according to Eustace Palmer, seem to have a sexual connotation. Although these words do not make any direct reference to sex, but their injury is similar to the hurt of the sharp knife with which her body was mutilated. Accordingly, “the male Diaa and all other males are thus linked with the woman who committed the actual act in the process of dehumanization and brutalization”⁷. The way Firdaus linked Diaa and his act of speech with the woman circumciser and her act of cutting reveals that every injury she may confront subsequently will have a sexual connotation and thus, triggers in her moments of frustration similar to those she had experienced in circumcision. This, in fact, reveals the deep trauma left by circumcision and highlights Firdaus’ failure to resist what the knife had inscribed on her body and self.

Firdaus’ excision is not only related to her incapacity to experience pleasure or to develop a coherent self, but also to what she considers her mother’s betrayal and complicity in her torture and victimization. For Firdaus, the woman who subjected her to the ritual of circumcision is no longer her mother. She feels that her mother’s eyes are no longer “two rings of pure white surrounding two circles of intense black” (18). The glowing eyes now have lost their brilliance, and they rather become hollow because they are no longer the supporting eyes who “held (her) up each time (she) was on the point of falling (18). Firdaus’ growing discomfort with her mother’s eyes is brought to the extent, making her unable to identify her after circumcision:

“My mother was no longer there, but instead there was another woman who hit me on my hand and took the mug away from me. My father told me she was my mother. In fact, she looked exactly like my mother, the same long garments, the same face and the same way of moving. But when I used to look into her eyes, I could feel she was not my mother” (18).

It is important to argue that Firdaus’ mother does not betray her child by subjugating her to this ritual, but she reacts under the pressure of repressive traditional norms of femininity. The psychiatrist understands that women are socialized to be both the

⁷ Eustace Palmer, *op.cit.*, 155.

bearers and the victims of these norms. They have been brainwashed into believing that the preservation of morality and ethics goes hand in hand with their conformity to such disruptive and patriarchal practices. Thus, Firdaus' mother undeniably is trapped in a restricting tradition that promotes female circumcision as the only way to preserve honor and self-respect. El Saadawi argues that the creation of this false consciousness among women "makes them more amenable to submission and enslavement, more prone to become the tools of propagating male desire.... When women submit, they cease to rebel against patriarchal domination, and they lose their ability to question, think independently and be creative"⁸.

Accordingly, the mother's inability to question and think independently is reflected in her repressive attitude concerning her daughter's growing up into womanhood. The way Firdaus views her mother's eyes reflects the dissolution of the mother-daughter bonds, and calls instead of a mutual alienation based on the lack of trust –the lack of empathy and affection from either side. In her seminal book, *The Second Sex*, Simone De Beauvoir highlights the complexity of the mother –daughter relationship. Beauvoir sees that the woman in her role as a mother is symbolically obsessed with timeless feminine wisdom, which very often becomes deeply constraining: "The daughter is for the mother at once her double and another person, the mother is at once overwhelmingly affectionate and hostile towards her daughter; she saddles her child with her own destiny: a way of proudly laying claim to her own femininity and also a way of revenging herself for it"⁹. In line with Beauvoir's view, it becomes clear that the patriarchal order, by brainwashing Firdaus' mother into accepting the practice of circumcision, pushes her to make her daughter only her double, a substitute for herself.

In a bid to achieve this doubling, Firdaus is married off to an old, deformed, and cruel husband for a hundred pound dowry without even seeking her consent. Like the fate of Binetou in the previous chapter, who has been sold by her greedy mother in order to gain social prestige within the Senegalese society, Firdaus is also seen as a valuable commodity and an income-generating property owned by her uncle and his wife to make their lives easier. This suggests that marriage in patriarchal societies is

⁸Nawal El Saadawi, "Women, Creativity and Dissidence", In Adele Newson –Horst, ed., *op.cit.*, 69.

⁹ Quoted in Ruth Evans, ed. *Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex: New Interdisciplinary Essays* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1998) 108.

meant to be a contract determined by two families , rather than a lifelong commitment drawn voluntarily between a man and a woman . In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus' arranged marriage becomes a forced marriage, where she is transferred from the supremacy of her father to the supremacy of her husband .Mernissi tells us that in patriarchal families what the wife “expects to get from her husband are orders, and what she is expected to give is obedience”¹⁰. Like her mother's destiny, in Sheikh Mahmoud's house, Firdaus learns that she must slavishly and blindly obey her husband, and her marital duties should always precede her rights not only as a wife, but also as an individual . This role seems to torture Firdaus: “But no sooner did I stretch out my body on it to rest from the fatigue of cooking, and washing and cleansing the large house with its rooms full of furniture, then Sheikh Mahmoud would appear by my side”(43).

Firdaus' experience with Sheikh Mahmoud traces a picture of a marital life which is physically, sexually , and emotionally exhausting. At the intimate level, sex seems to be undesirable and unenjoyable for Firdaus because she feels no sentiments of love towards her husband :“ at night he would wind his legs and arms around me , and let his old, gnarled hand travel all over my body , like the claws of a starving man who has been deprived of real food from years”(43) . For the old husband, living with Firdaus is a matter of sexual servicing that can be accomplished beyond any bonds of mutual affection. According to him, he has bought this sexual survival with his own money , and this would inevitably justify any kind of abuse towards his wife .This shows that forced marriages are organized , that intimacy and bonds of affection which should characterize conjugal relations are completely absent. The husband, in this case, is encouraged by society to assume “The role of master instead of lover”¹¹. While Islamic jurisprudence set no restrictions on sexuality as long as it is expressed legitimately in conjugal life , love between a man and his wife remains perceived as something shameful and dangerous, suggested Fatima Mernissi. The underlying assumption is that love for a woman is thought as preventing man from performing his religious obligation or “the way to be rational and logical, not to admit to any

¹⁰ Fatima Mernissi, *op.cit.*, 110.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 113.

beating of the heart”¹², as Mariama Ba went to suggest. According to Ba, in traditional societies, people feel ashamed to express their emotions of love. In *So Long a Letter*, we have seen that even when modern educated men respond to the ‘beatings of their hearts’ and decide to make individual choices of marriage partners, their behaviors in marital life is displeasing and emotionally deceiving, as they failed to preserve their pre-conjugal love. The ideals of romantic love which existed before marriage fall in the face of repressive mother in laws and duplicitous cultural codes of polygamy.

If the loss of this love has resulted, in Ba’s novel, in betrayal and infidelity, in El Saadawi’s narrative, it is carried to the extreme making it acceptable for men to beat their wives. According to the prevailing cultural assumptions, a husband has a religious right to beat his wife in order to maintain his authority over her. Marriage to the repulsive Sheikh proved to be not only emotionally and physically exhausting but also humiliating. Firdaus describes how her husband mistreats her by heavily beating her to the extent of making her bleed, then pushing her forcefully to have sex with him. “He leapt on me like a mad dog . . . I surrendered . . . my body to his body . . . as though life had been drained out of it, like a piece of dead wood . . . or a pair of shoes forgotten under a chair” (45). It becomes clear from this description that the husband, in order to reassert his manhood, exercises marital rape over the young woman’s body. His assaulting sexual transgressions which are achieved by patterns of physical abuse are juxtaposed with Firdaus’ powerlessness to resist this abuse. The helpless Firdaus tells us that she did not express any act of self-defense; her use of the word “surrender” reflects her inability to resist her husband’s violence.

For feminist writers, Firdaus’ passivity is socially constructed by the discourse of patriarchy. Gender power relationships are a long process of historical socialization which associates men with connotations of power, while women are defined only through stereotypes of femininity, like weakness, passivity and inferiority. This view of the intrinsic power of patriarchy is evocative of Simone De Beauvoir’s famous formulation “One is not born, but rather one becomes a woman”. Like postcolonial feminists who question essentialist pictures about Third World women as historical

¹² Barbara Harrell-Bond’s interview with Mariama Ba, *op.cit.*, 389.

subjects, De Beauvoir's formulation deconstructs essentialist pictures about women as natural subjects whose status is predetermined by their biological differences. The notion of woman, in this regard, should be conceived as 'becoming' rather than 'being'. It is more exactly the product of patriarchal patterns which have pushed women unconsciously to internalize the idea that they are the second sex. The most pervasive form of patriarchy is found in the violence against women. Violence, whether symbolized by beating or rape, has patriarchal implications. It is considered to be "part of a system of controlling women, unlike then the conventional view which holds that rape and battering are isolated instances caused by psychological problems in a few men"¹³. It is then this embedded patriarchal belief that women are second sex that discourages Firdaus to fight back and protect herself. Although her husband is an old deformed Sheikh, Firdaus prefers to surrender; thus reinforcing the view that power relationships in patriarchy are stronger even in cases of physical superiority.

A significant difficulty in combating this violence occurs when the family shamefully supports the husband's mistreatment through fallacious religious arguments. Firdaus tells us that when she complains about Sheikh Mahmoud's abuse, she is advised by her uncle and his wife to remain passive and endure his violence: "All husbands beat their wives ... the precepts of religion permitted such punishment" (44). By persuading Firdaus to remain in marriage despite all its assaults, the uncle and his wife reveal how the denunciation of flagrant female oppression becomes silenced by corrupted religious norms. In similar manner to *So Long a Letter*, where we have seen husbands' infidelity being backed by the Imam, religion in *Woman at Point Zero* is also manipulated by a religious figure, but this time educated in El Azhar, the most esteemed seat of Islamic studies. The Azharite uncle's deceiving attitude towards his niece suggests that religion in a misogynistic society is a self-justifying power, used to produce a knowledge that oppresses women and refrains them from seeking alternative liberating spaces.

What is even thwarting is that the validity of this knowledge is often scored within women themselves. This is obvious from the reply of the uncle's wife: "A virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband . . . Her duty was perfect

¹³ Sylvia Walby, *Theorizing Patriarchy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990) 3.

obedience” (44). The wife’s reply reinforces Fedwa Malti Douglas’ definition of the religiously corrupted society as: “a male –oriented world in which women are pushed into the role of non-thinking servants”¹⁴. Women under this society are made to believe fallacious cultural norms without ever questioning their reliability. It becomes clear that Firdaus’ aunt is a “non-thinking servant” who has been encouraged by her husband to believe that domestic violence is religiously recommended. The wife did not decline her husband’s claims because, like Firdaus’ mother, she has been brainwashed into accepting the notion that a woman derives her social prestige only from her obedience to her husband. The uncle’s wife behavior is also reminiscent of other traditional women in Mariama Ba’s novel, like Farmata and Anty Nabou. These women do not only accept their oppression, but believe also that it is their duty to impose patriarchal norms and practices on younger women. Aunt Nabou denied Nabou formal education and trained her to be a submissive wife, whilst Farmata did not dismiss Modou’s polygamous marriage, and accused Ramatoulaye of deviating from religious path by turning down Daouda’s proposal. Accordingly, both Mariama Ba and Nawal El Saadawi highlight how women are discriminated against because of the domination of some corrupted men to interpret Islamic jurisprudence. In the first chapter, we have seen that the exclusion of women from access to forms of religious education has resulted in the use of this education to reinforce gender hierarchy by imposing misogynist readings of religion, which soon became part of the socially acceptable cultural heritage.

The manipulation of religious discourse to serve patriarchal interests is continuously apparent in the novel. When Firdaus wanted to attend university, the uncle rejected this desire because university is “a place where she will be sitting side by side with men” (36). Moreover, a respectable Sheikh and man of religion like her uncle is not supposed to send “his niece off to mix in the company of men” (36). Once again, the uncle uses religion to strip his niece from her rights. His words show that men are privileged to have good education, whereas women are denied this right because of their gender. El Saadawi exposes the religious hypocrisy and wickedness of the uncle

¹⁴Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Men, Women, and God(s): Nawal El Saadawi and Arab Feminist Poetics* (University of California Press, California, 1995) 101.

who, like his brother, sees no disconnection between invoking Allah's name, while showing the most disgusting and shameful attitudes towards his niece. Firdaus describes, then, how her uncle wickedly exploits his close kinship relation and his position as a religious man to sexually molest her: "During the cold winter nights, I curled up in my uncle's arms like a baby in its womb. We drew warmth from our closeness. My face buried in his arms, I wanted to tell him that I loved him, but the words would not come" (21-22).

El Saadawi, in *The Hidden Face of Eve*, has examined the issue of child sexual abuse by a close family member. She states: "Most people think that such incidents are rare or unusual. The truth of the matter is that they are frequent, but remain hidden, stored up in the secret recesses of the female child's self, since she dare not tell anyone of what has happened to her"¹⁵. It is clear that Firdaus was aware of her uncle's abuse, but did not dare to speak up because she has been taught that talking about sex is considered as a transgression of the boundaries of the *Danger Beliefs*. The fear of behaving against the social order and thus, being rejected by the community kept her silent. Pramod K Nayar, a professor of post-colonial studies, in his book *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*, states that the important mechanism of regulating women's sexuality is through discourses of morality. "Sexuality is coded as morality: to be moral is to be reticent about one's sexuality /sexual preferences or even being asexual"¹⁶. Indeed, in *Woman At Point Zero*, in addition to circumcision which alienated Firdaus from her body, the uncle used the discourse of decency and the politics of societal retaliation to keep her away from any knowledge about her body. For the uncle, "dancing was a sin, and that kissing a man, too, was a sin" (22), but kissing her in a sexual way and excessively rubbing against her body in a manner to make her uncomfortable cannot be considered as sinful acts. The uncle's behavior accentuates Firdaus's sexual vulnerability as it brings into play the sentiments of loss and alienation associated with the mutilation of her body.

In *Woman at Point Zero*, the patriarchal discourse of decency can only work to enforce discrimination against Firdaus and push her into an unknown destination. This

¹⁵Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, *op.cit.*, 14.

¹⁶Pramod K Nayar, *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*, (Pearson Longman : Delhi, 2008) 150.

unknown destination is the main focus of the following part. Here, the consequence of all the sufferings and harassment in her father's, husband's and uncle's household will be reflected in her trap into sexual slavery. Accordingly, the next part will shed light on Firdaus' womanhood as a metaphor for sexual slavery. The victimized body is not that of a young girl, or an enslaved wife, but it belongs to an unwilling prostitute.

3.3 Sexual slavery, the “nervous condition”¹⁷ of Firdaus' womanhood

In this section, we will show that the equation of female docility with male hegemony is not only valid in the private sphere, but also in the public sphere, when women manage to surmount their confinement. Unlike Mariama Ba's novel which focuses more on women's predicament within the private realm, in Nawal El Saadawi's narrative, the protagonist's victimization extends the domestic boundaries of home into the public sphere, revealing other sites where patriarchal logic can operate. Once again, this victimization seems to receive social approbation. Therefore, we will explore other impotent social norms involved in the objectification and commodification of Firdaus' body in the Egyptian society.

The perpetuated frustration and harassment experienced by Firdaus in her marriage with Sheikh Mahmoud pushed her to realize that all homes whether parental or matrimonial are not safe spaces for her, and the alternative choice to live in peace is to seek liberty on the streets. Firdaus thought that she has escaped oppression in her newly position as a homeless woman, but she soon began to recognize that even in the street women undergo sexual objectification. Early before her escape from her husband's household, she describes that harassment in the streets does not occur with “hand holding a knife or a razor, but only with two eyes” (42). Once again, the trauma of circumcision is brought to the fore and becomes juxtaposed with the image of the eyes. Like the knife with which she was circumcised, the eyes are an instrument of torture and penetration which threatens Firdaus. The growing sense of frustration brought by the presence of the eyes pushes her later onto realize that “anything (she)

¹⁷An expression I borrowed from Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel *Nervous Condition* (1988).

would have to face in the world had become less frightening than the vision of those two eyes” (42).

In her description of those two eyes ,Firdaus rather identifies men’s surveillance over women’s bodies as an act of gaze :

“In the dark I suddenly perceived two eyes, or rather felt them, moving towards me slowly, closer and closer. They dropped their *gaze* with slow intent down to my shoes, rested there for a moment, then gradually started to climb up my legs, to my thighs, my belly, my breasts, my neck and finally came to a stop, fastening themselves steadily in my eyes, with the same cold intent”(41) .

In the first chapter, we have seen that the gaze and the look in feminist discourse are functions of power based relationships,where men use their gaze to re-assert their authority over women . In the novel, the gaze becomes an important tool in the male – female sexual hierarchal politics.To see and be seen are respectively empowering and disempowering forms of sight,where men are established as the sexual subjects or the dictating force in gender sex politics , whereas women are perceived as the sexual objectsof this male gaze . RamziSaiti, a critic of Nawal El Saadawi, in his article *Paradise, Heaven, and Other Oppressive Spaces: A Critical Examination of the Life and Works of Nawal El-Saadawi*, identifies two kinds of visual acts in the novel. The first is described as caring and maternal, and can be related to Firdaus’earliest descriptions of her mother, as two eyes who “held (her) up each time (she) was on the point of falling” (18). The second, on the other hand, is “dangerous and threatening to (Firdaus’) survival”¹⁸, and is more associated with the malevolent male urge to objectify her body.

Based on Saiti’s identifications, we recognize the way Firdaus’ mother sees her daughter as an act of dialogical look which symbolizes safety, maternal warmth , and bonds of connection between the two women. The mother’s look emphasizes her concern to protect Firdaus’ body from falling.She, at least at that point in the narrative, does not see her daughter’s body as a metaphor for the family’s honor, or an object to be gazed upon and available only for male desire. On the other hand, we identify Firdaus’ reaction to turn her “face in another direction to avoid (her uncle’s) eyes”

¹⁸Saiti, Ramzi, “Paradise, Heaven, and Other Oppressive Spaces: A Critical Examination of the Life and Works of Nawal El Saadawi”, *Journal of Arabic Literature*25.2 (1994) :158. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4183334> >.

(39) as an expression of her discomfort to the presence of disempowering and diabolical male gaze, which once again brings into play the feeling of the body in pain, the body over which she lacks autonomy. When Firdaus was beaten by Bayoumi, she tried to protect herself by dropping “instinctively her hands to cover the part on which his gaze was fixed” (50). This means that it is Bayoumi’s gaze which hurts her rather than his physical violence. The gaze then recalls those moments of sexual disempowerment and identity crisis, and seems to paralyze the young girl in a way to suppress any subsequent reconciliation between the body and the self.

It becomes clear from the foregoing discussion that the gaze will give further dimension to Firdaus’ sexual harassment in the city. According to the Moroccan feminist scholar Fatima Sadiqi, this sexual harassment for women is no more than a “penalty on transgressing the frontiers of private spaces (even veiled) and a weapon in the hands of men who see the public space as solely theirs”¹⁹. Sexual abuse is then the consequence of the desegregation of women and the deregulation of their sexuality. Sadiqi further argues that male harassment is one of the instruments to re-confine women again in the private sphere and keep them out of the male dominated public realm. Interestingly, Firdaus describes how the presence of this threatening male gaze around her pushed her to return to her uncle’s household: “When I was sure the eyes had gone, I ran quickly down the pavement. Now I had but one thought in my mind. How to reach my uncle’s house in the shortest possible time” (42).

Firdaus’ sexual abuse by this male gaze in the city is first embodied by Bayoumi, a cafe owner who raped her first, then brought his friends to have sex with her forcefully. Like with her husband, Firdaus surrendered to Bayoumi’s assaults by offering him a dead body, “emptied of all desire, or pleasure, or even pain, feeling nothing” (50). The body’s passivity towards Bayoumi’s sexual attacks highlights the conflict Firdaus feels between the oppositional binary of pleasure and pain. Firdaus is not only incapable of attaining sexual sensation, but she seems to confuse pleasure with pain, good with evil, and happiness with frustration. This is not just a sexually-located contradiction, but it extends to be an emotionally situated contradiction

¹⁹Fatima Sadiqi, *Moroccan Feminist Discourses* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) 107.

which confirms the protagonist's continual alienation from her body and inner self. It is worth mentioning that this alienation is accentuated when Firdaus willingly started to withdraw her own body. Following her circumcision, Firdaus struggled to recapture her body and the elusive pleasure by trying to identify her bodily emissions. Now, the image of the body in pain, the body who struggles to regain its autonomy is stepped further to become that of the body in death, or the surrendering body who is now completely colonized. In other words, Firdaus seems no longer disturbed by her inability to recognize her body because she is defeated in her battle for self-discovery. The surrender is now both physical and emotional, and it is reflected in the way she started to disassociate herself from her body, imagining herself like "a piece of dead wood or old neglected furniture left to stand where it is, or a pair of shoes forgotten under a chair" (50).

Firdaus' profound dissociation from her body indicates that sex has become a destructive force upon her. This destructive force is being compared by the Lebanese feminist Evelyne Accad to the military weapon. For Accad, the importance accorded to the military weapon and to the sexual weapon is equal because they both play similar roles: "Man uses his penis in the same way he uses his gun: to conquer, control, and possess"²⁰. For her, sexual relations "are not built on pleasure, or love, but only on reproduction, the preservation of girl's virginity (so called 'honor' of the family), the confinement and control of women for the increase in male prestige, and the overestimation of the penis"²¹. In the same manner, men's use of their sexual weapons, in the novel, produces specific control mechanisms which result in the construction of Firdaus' body as merely a male possession. This construction suggests that men are regarded as active sexual players, who have the right to invade the prostitute's body just for the sake to serve their sexual urge. Firdaus, on the other hand, is excluded from this gratification because she is pushed into a relation of sexual slavery, where the female slave is asked to satisfy her male master's claimed right for her body.

²⁰Evelyne Accad, "Sexuality and Sexual Politics. Conflicts and Contradictions for Contemporary Women in The Middle East", In. Women and Islam: Social conditions, obstacles and prospects, ed., Haideh Moghissi (New York: Routledge, 2005) 11.

²¹Evelyne Accad, *op.cit.*, 11.

Being aware that sex is a destructive force upon her body, Firdaus decided to set a price for the continuous violation of her body and all the endured pains that accompanied this violation. Thus, she decides to resort to consensual, but paid sex by working as a self-employed prostitute. She grows into awareness that her body is not an object which can only be gazed upon, but can be also a potential source from which she can generate money. In other words, Firdaus now seems to suggest that she too can take profit from her body and the newly pleasure she attains now is purely material. To preserve this material pleasure, Firdaus resorts to abandon her sexual desires offering men an exquisite corpse, but preserving her heart and soul, as her words indicate :

“But when I was a prostitute I protected myself, fought back at every moment, was never off guard. To protect my deeper inner self from men, I offered them only an outer shell. I kept my heart and soul, and let my body play its role, its passive, inert, unfeeling role. I learnt to resist by being passive, to keep myself whole by offering nothing, to live by withdrawing to a world of my own. In other words, I was telling the man he could have my body” (85).

It becomes clear from this quotation that Firdaus uses this separation of the body and the self as a mode of resistance against male assaults. She gave men sexual gratification, but deprived them of emotional gratification. These men can claim authority over her body, merely a physical entity devoid of love, desire, and warmth, but can never claim her heart and soul, which in their depth lies a hatred towards them all. Firdaus also seems to deny men even authority over her pain. For her, she reduced them into a worthless object, unable to “make (her) react, or tremble, or feel either pleasure or pain” (86).

Firdaus' coming into awareness about her body allows her to consider the value of money. The ten pound note that she obtained from her first sexual encounter brings into the fore the sensation she has felt when holding money for the first time: “It was as if he had lifted a veil from my eyes, and I was seeing for the first time . . . (It) tore away the shroud that covered up a truth I had in fact experienced when still a child” (64). The state of being paid triggers in her the sentiment of financial independence that she first experienced when her father gave her a piastre. Firdaus explains: “the first piastre that was all mine, to put in the palm of my hand, and surround with my fingers, and

squeeze . It was not my father's and not my mother's , but mine ; mine to do with it what I wanted ”(65). It becomes clear from this quotation that the use of the word “mine”for three times, and the focus on the idea that the money does not belong to anybody else is suggestive of Firdaus 'growing sensation of self-autonomy and self-definition. At this moment, she realized that this opportunity for self-definitioncannot be attained by going back to the fields where she may not be remunerated, but rather by selling her body to men soliciting her sexual services .In other words,self-definitionis purely an economic value which can be obtained only through sex .Her slogan isthen money equals autonomy and autonomy equals sex . Thisconnection according to Fadwa Malti Douglas is logical, given the hypocrisy and the principles of double standard guiding Firdaus'society at that time. Douglas explains: “after all, did not Firdaus earn that money by selling her body? One bodily function, sex, thus permits the accomplishment of another, equally important bodily function:eating”²².

Firdaus has long experienced eating asa manifestation of gender hierarchy in her society. From her parents'household, she has learnt that food distribution follows patriarchal dictates: the father or the patriarch and his male relatives have to be served with large amountsof food. Thefemalemembers, who carry out the task of food provisioning,are expected to be satisfied with the little that remained after the male family members have eaten. Firdaus explains that not only her mother and her aunt hide food and give it to the father and the uncle , but she too seems to accept this philosophy of “food discrimination ” by giving to Bayoumi the biggest and best parts of nurtures, while forcing herself to go to bed with an unsatisfied stomach. For Firdaus,the distribution of food in the family is no more than a reflection of the distribution of power between men and women in society. Because women have limited access to power, food has to be associated purely with men, the ones who possess and exert this power. Firdaus explains that even within her acceptance of this unfair food distribution, she is still witnessing oppression by being constantly gazed upon by two eyes which control the quantity and the quality of food she consumes. Eating freely, in this regard, is something problematic because her husband used to keep “looking at (her) plate while (she) ate , and if (she) left anything over he picked it

²²FedwaMalti-Douglas ,*op.cit.*, 52.

up , put it in his mouth and after swallowing , quickly told (her) off for (her) wastefulness ”(43).

Now, it is only within her newly position as a self-employed prostitute that food becomes pleasurable, and at last she is able to fulfill her needs unhampered by the male gaze. This is clearly shown in her experience with the waiter who , unlike her former husband, did not fix his eyes upon her plate while she eats: “ this was the first time in my life I was eating without being watched by two eyes gazing into my plate to see how much food I took”(66). This quotation suggests that Firdaus can escape oppression only when she eats without being watched by those two eyes. The absence of male surveillance and authority equals the absence of two eyes oppressing Firdaus. For Palmer, “The money brings her freedom from hunger and deprivation but also from oppression, religious hypocrisy, and sexual exploitation”²³. The common denominator between these forms of oppression is the male gaze, which once again is occurring to haunt Firdaus. While the uncle’s gaze directed at her body reduces her to a sexual object, the husband’s eyes fixed upon her when she is eating reduces her to a morsel of food. The waiter’s reaction to turn his eyes away becomes juxtaposed with the religious hypocrisy of the husband who while kneeling in prayer, is still surveying her plate, and the sexual exploitation of the uncle who while reading his religious books, slips his hands to sexually molest her. Now she is able to realize that it is money which can keep the malevolent gaze away, and it is also the same money which makes her for the first time in her life free from male control. This is a true revelation that Firdaus makes at this point. According to Anastasia Valassopoulos , Firdaus starts to “think beyond the immediate physical relief that food provides.... Though it seems to be an individual and biologically necessary act, food and eating also function within the matrices of power and social values”²⁴. This idea is further reinforced with the waiter’s gesture to bow “over the table with a movement of respectful humility” (66). Firdaus becomes aware that the ten pound note brings her respect and self-esteem also. Now she no longer “bend(s) (her) head or look(s) away”(67-68) , but she is able to “walk

²³ Eustace Palmer , *op. cit.*, 166.

²⁴ Anastasia Valassopoulos, Contemporary Arab Women Writers: Cultural Expression in Context (New York and London: Routledge , 2007) 43-44.

through the streets with(her) head held high, and (her) eyes looking straight ahead” ((ibid).

This connection between money and self-respect is not a Firdaussian construction, or an illusion created by her individual circumstances, but seems to be revelatory for the Egyptian society at that time. This occurred when Firdaus grew into a famous prostitute. Ironically, it is her position as a prostitute, whose body’s dignity is constantly negotiated, which enables her to appear now in newspapers as an honorable and respectable woman. Like her body, honor and fame can be negotiated and attained simply by money because in her country they have a material value: “Now I had learnt that honour required large sums of money to protect it, but that large sums of money could not be obtained without losing one’s honour” (91). For Firdaus, honor as a moral and religious value is not possible because the religious uncle who teaches her decency, and the respectful lawyer who fights for justice in the courts are the ones who violate this honor. Accordingly, prostitution did not only enable her to fulfill her basic needs and secure luxurious clothes and housing, but it allows her also to name things surrounding her. Firdaus is no longer the “unthinking servant” who is made to believe that a virtuous woman should accept her husband’s abuse, and a respected man should not send his female relative to university. Rather, she is now able to subvert the male defined norms on respectability and unrespectability, by developing her own discourse of good and evil. Her position at this particular point in the narrative is not as an unrespectable prostitute, who sells her body to earn her living, but as a respectable employee, who tries to use her school certificate and her decent efforts to earn money.

Firdaus’ decision to leave prostitution comes as a response to the accusations of Diaa who tells her that she is not respectable because of her job. Yet, her new awareness about the unrespectability of her body is not long before she comes to confront again the social hypocrisy and principles of double standard that define this respectability. Indeed, Firdaus comes to realize that a “respectable employee”, like the “respectable wife”, is the woman who subjects herself to the authority of men. Confronted by one of them, Firdaus soon becomes alarmed by his malevolent gaze roaming over her body: “you are a poor miserable employee, unworthy of esteem, running after a bus to

catch it . I'll take you in my car because your female body has aroused me.....And who knows maybe some day in the future, I can help you to get a raise before the others ” (75). Firdaus now comes to the conclusion that even in the workplace prostitution still reigns ; and women cannot be respectable because they are always reduced to a sexual object. For her, a female employee “pays the price of her illusory fears with her life, her health, her body, and her mind. She pays the highest price for things of the lowest value”(76). Firdaus, at this point,comes to see that in a corrupted society a woman's body gives her power and influence better than her educational and professional skills. Maintaining that “prostitution as a principle, not a job, is a general form of contemporary women's experiences in Egyptian society”²⁵, Firdaus decided to return to prostitution, where at least , unlike those female employees, she will not live in anxiety to lose her work if she refuses to sleep with a client .

The truth of her discovery is pushed further to admit that even her life as a prostitute is much better than that of an enslaved wife, who is not respected too : “Men force women to sell their bodies at a price...the lowest paid body is that of a wife .All women are prostitutes of one kind or another”(91). Given the experiences of humiliation and sexual exploitation that she faced in marriage and prostitution,Firdaus admits that marital rape is much more humiliatingthan commercial rape because in the former the woman is reduced to a sex slave, whereas in the second she is a remunerated sex worker. The consensual sexual relations and the dignified life that should reign within the couple in marriage are, indeed, not what Firdaus had experiencedwithher husband .With Sheikh Mahmoud, she learnt that marital chastity has no place, and sex is purely an instrument to offend the wife's dignity. Therefore, a good or more exactly a well-respected Sheikh is not the one who beats his wife , but he is rather the man who regards his wife as an equal being deserving his love, respect, and attention ,even if she belongs to a lower social class . Yet, we have seen previously that lower class women like Firdaus and her mother are treated just like slaves by their husbands not only because of their gender, but also due to their social class. For Nawal El Saadawi, class oppression becomes integral to gender oppression

²⁵ Peter Hitchcock, *Dialogics of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) 41.

when women from the upper class, like the uncle's wife are treated much better than women from the lower class, like Firdaus and her mother. Firdaus in her uncle's household has learnt about the role of social class in ensuring women's well treatment by their husbands. In comparing her father's and uncle's attitudes towards their wives, Firdaus concedes :

“(Her aunt)never washed (her) uncle's feet , and he never beat her or spoke to her in a loud voice. He was extremely polite , but treated her with the peculiar kind of courtesy devoid of true respect which men preserve for women. I sensed that his feeling for her was more one of fear than of love , and that she came from a higher social class than his”(23).

Contrary to his former approval of his niece's abuse by her husband, the uncle does not play the role of the master over his wife. His comportment, ironically, seems to suggest that well versed Sheikhs can beat only their lower class wives, who stand no power to challenge their authority. It becomes clear that the uncle's good treatment of his wife has no religious motivations, but rather material implications. The wife is a daughter of his teacher at El Azhar, and this entitles her to exert power over him . In other words, the uncle cannot exercise his power as a patriarch because doing so might strip him his post in the Ministry of Wakfs .As a result, the class position of the wife can determine and shape the power relationships found in the marriage institution. The Egyptian model of class system is quite similar to the Senegalese one depicted in Mariama Ba's novel. Here, the wife, unlike Firdaus' aunt , does not belong to a higher social class . Aissatou , the gold' smith daughter, despite her educational skills , has been rejected by her mother in law because she belongs to an inferior class. Like Firdaus' uncle who seeks social prestige in his marriage to his teacher's daughter, Aunty Nabou wanted her son to get rid of Aissatou and marry a woman of his class only to get the title of a royal female patriarch among her similar high class women. Once again, marriage, in both novels, proved to be a business contract from which both the husband's and the wife's families can get privileges. Although the uncle's wife and young Nabou were not maltreated by their husbands, we cannot deny the fact that they too have been objectified because they are seen only as a route to social and material gains. Therefore, in patriarchal societies, women who are objectified are not

only lower class women like Binetou and Firdaus, but also women from the upper class .

Unlike those objectified women in the two novels ,Nawal El Saadawi's protagonist was aware how women are regarded as a symbol of sexual and material gratification But despite this awareness, Elizabeth Anker, an Associate Professor of English at Cornell university, tells us that Firdaus“recurrently hypostasizes her identity through financial self -valuation and consumer choice , allowing fiscal autonomy to furnish the impression of control over larger circumstances”²⁶. Firdaus believed falsely that she has escaped oppression and humiliation by demanding higher prices in exchange for her body, but was blind to see that what she considered, as the empowering money is in fact what is disempowering her now. It might seem ironic that prostitution gives her opportunities for self-definition and financial autonomy, but it is this financial success which places her again under male control.She never left the bedroom, but remains “crucified in bed”(57), waiting for a client to come in. Thus, Firdaus survives from the money of men who demand her crucifixion in bed, and consequently holds no power because she is still dependent on them .

For El Saadawi, this interplay between sex and money as a capital power conducts to prostituting women . Prostitution can be simply identified, according to her, as a “sexual intercourse between a man and a woman aimed at satisfying the man's sexual and the woman's economic needs”²⁷. She further continues that, “if we are once more to speak of honour, whom can we consider less ‘honorable’, a woman who hires out her body to a man for money with which to buy food, or a state that has bartered logic, reason and morals so that a handful of people with power and capital can continue to earn millions every year?”²⁸. These handful people with power and capital exercise control over her body because they have money and she does not. Early in her childhood, in her stingy father's household, Firdaus was conned into believing that money is “ a shameful thing, . . . an object of sin which was forbidden to (her) and yet permissible for others, as though it had been made legitimate only for them” (73).

²⁶ Elizabeth S. Anker, Fiction of Dignity, Embodying Human Rights in World Literature (New York ,Cornell University Press , 2012) 125.

²⁷Nawal El Saadawi ,The Hidden Face of Eve, *op.cit*, 86.

²⁸Ibid.,86.

Money, as a symbol for capitalist power unattained by women becomes typically associated with men who re-appropriate that power to add further exploitation of women. In other words, men use their financial privilege or their capitalist power to exercise their patriarchal power over women. In the novel, the princes and all the rich clients who visit Firdaus take advantage of their economic position to violate and claim authority over her body, which is transferred, in this case, into a private economic transaction. Instead of fighting against this dependency, Firdaus believes falsely that money equals power and the more sex she engages in, the greater prosperity she will enjoy. Elizabeth Anker blames liberal values for misleading and blinding Firdaus about her newly found independence, stating: "The self image that Firdaus devises over her narrative exposes not only the hollowness of the values prescribed for her by a misogynistic culture but also the pitfalls inherent in liberalism's descriptive arsenal"²⁹.

Interestingly, Firdaus was cautious about the private objectification that occurred within the family, but ignorant of the public objectification and commercialization of her body. In chapter one, we have seen that prostitution is an expression of both gender and class exploitation in which women are oppressed sex workers exploited by greedy capitalist patriarchs. For Marxist feminism, class exploitation and gender exploitation are compatible because they are both intrinsic to the capitalist system where every thing has a material value, even the body and its sexual emissions. The combination of capitalism with patriarchy breeds a form of capitalist patriarchy that is detrimental to women. According to the American sociologist Paula England, "Capitalist-patriarchy feminists accept that capitalism and patriarchy are separate but connected social formations; they are functionally interrelated in the sense that capitalism is useful for patriarchy and patriarchy is useful for capitalism"³⁰. This capitalist patriarchy is no more than a manifestation of the public form of patriarchy and an extension of the private one reigning in the domestic sphere. Sylvia Walby in *Theorizing Patriarchy* distinguishes two forms of patriarchy: private patriarchy and public patriarchy. For Walby, private patriarchy, as the name suggests, reigns in the

²⁹Elizabeth S Anker, *Fiction of Dignity*, *op.cit.*, 117.

³⁰Paula England, ed. *Theory on Gender: Feminism on Theory* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter 1993) 33.

private sphere, where man in his position as the husband, the father, or the brother exerts authority over woman. In public patriarchy, women are allowed access to public sphere, but they are collectively and often officially discriminated against under societal, political, and economic constructions.

Based on Walby's identification, it becomes clear that the objectification of Firdaus's body comes as a result of the combination of public and private patriarchy. While the former was inscribed through the ritual of circumcision which aims to define her body as a metaphor for her family's honor, the second was emphasized through prostitution which defines the body as a business transaction. The reciprocal working of public and private patriarchy in objectifying Firdaus's body calls inevitably for a struggle for a double liberation. The following part is destined to investigate how the social, religious, and economic manifestations of patriarchy being witnessed from childhood to womanhood are going to breed a rebellious Firdaus, who decides to no longer remain passive and victim to her society's sexist dictates.

3.4 Filling up the point zero: reconciling the self and the body through murder and narration

The previous parts have clearly shown that in a patriarchal society where gender inequality seems to permeate all societal domains, any possibility for the articulation of female subjectivity will be inevitably a matter of struggle against rigid cultural norms. Firdaus, it goes without saying, has long tried to give merit and significance to her life, but her attempts were always shattered by the claims of the patriarchal order which places her each time under male control. Perhaps the most extreme example of this control, which occurred at this particular point in the narrative, is the pimp Marzouk. As Firdaus grows into a well-known prostitute, she becomes persecuted by Marzouk who claims that she "cannot do without protection, otherwise the profession exercised by husbands and pimps would die out" (92). Firdaus has already learnt that in her society this so-called male protection is indeed no more than a justification for male control. Starting from her father, uncle, husband, till Bayoumi and Ibrahim, all these men seemed to take care of her, but they ended up deceiving and exploiting her.

Firdaus, whose yearnings for self-definition are expressed only in material terms, is threatened to be stripped of this relatively independent position by the pimp who claims a share of her earnings, in return for his presumed protection. The pimp, by resorting to violence to take her earnings, pushed Firdaus to realize that she is “nothing but a body machine working day and night, so that a number of men belonging to different professions could become immensely rich at her expense” (94). It is then until this point that Firdaus becomes aware that she has never reached autonomy and will never be free to assert herself because in her society “there are only two categories of people, Firdaus, masters and slaves ... a woman on her own cannot be a master, let alone a woman who is a prostitute” (95). By killing her master, Firdaus succeeded to break the master/slave bond imposed on her, and reverse the gender roles that have long associated abuse and power with men. For Firdaus, self-determination now has no material value, but is rather attained by expressing the same physical violence that has been used upon her. For Malti-Douglas, the way Firdaus plunges the knife into all parts of Marzouk’s body “is nothing short of a reversal of the repeated male acts of aggression that for years metaphorically killed (her)”³¹.

The act of murder symbolizes Firdaus’ success to destroy the male transgressive body that has long tortured her and denied her ownership over her own body. Yet, her ultimate liberation from her double exploitation, as a woman and as a sex worker, involves also the destruction of the male capital which has reduced her to an economic property. Firdaus’ awareness about this double liberation is articulated in her statement:

“It was as though I was destroying all the money I had ever held, my father’s piastre, my uncle’s piastre, all the piasters I had even known, and at the same time destroying all the men I had ever known ... removing every trace their piastres had left on my fingers, tearing away the very flesh of my fingers to leave nothing but bone, ensuring that not a single vestige of these men would remain at all” (98).

By destroying the money of her last client, Firdaus frees herself from the economic exploitation and dependency, revealing in this sense what she calls “the true enigma of (her) life” (98). Her new found enigma debunks her former slogan “money equals power”, and concedes instead that money is another form of patriarchal control over

³¹Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *op.cit.*, 59.

women. For Firdaus, she is not a prostitute, but her sexual and economic vulnerabilities have entrapped her into the humiliating world of prostitution. “I am not a prostitute”(99), she says irritably, “But right from my early days my father, my uncle, my husband, all of them, taught me to grow up as a prostitute” (ibid). It is from this vantage that Firdaus comes to discover the extent to which the illusionary economic fulfillment, she has long trusted, has colluded with patriarchy in furthering her victimization. The act of tearing up the three thousand pounds given to her by the prince is suggestive of her disapproval of the language of capitalist value, which has confined her and delayed her revolt against her male oppressors. This rejection, according to Stefan Meyer, “is based on her recognition that money underlies the entire oppressive, male dominated system. More importantly, in her utter rejection of money as power, she rejects power itself”³². She is now aware that agency cannot be attained through money or sex, but rather by confronting and challenging the forces of her oppression.

Firdaus now sits in judgment to confront her accusers not by the knife she killed Marzouk, but by the truth she claims to reveal about exploitive men like him. The truth is that all those men: “the fathers, the uncles, the husbands, the pimps, the lawyers, the doctors, the journalists, and all men of all professions”(100) are criminals who deserve to be killed. Even though she knows that she is going to be hanged, she feels neither fear nor remorse because she speaks from a position of truth where in her depth, she is convinced that she has exterminated a criminal whose life means the death of many poor women like her. Firdaus is not only unafraid to die, but she seems to prefer death over life because she knows that in her death she will be at last beyond male oppressive realm. Her determination to resist her oppressors is pushed further by her decision to tell the fearful truth with which she claims to have killed her oppressor:

“I only arrived at the savage, primitive truths of life after years of struggle . . . When I killed I did it with truth not with a knife . . . It is my truth which frightens them. This fearful truth gives me great strength. It protects me from fearing death, or life, or hunger, or nakedness,

³²Stefan G. Meyer, *The Experimental Arabic Novel: Postcolonial Literary Modernism in the Levant* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001) 143.

or destruction. It is this fearful truth which prevents me from fearing the brutality of rulers and policemen” (102).

Firdaus’ authoritarian statement recalls Ramatoulaye’s assertive sentence when she turned down Tamasir’s proposal for marriage. While Ramatoulaye’s sentence remains in its literal level and does not entail physical action, Firdaus’ final pronouncement against her oppressors sanctions the use of self-defense violence as a means to rupture male transgressions over her body. Her act of murder seems to liberate her from patterns of confinement and restraint, and initiate her de-alienation from her body and inner self for the first time in her life. Firdaus feels her body “light as a feather, as though its weight had been nothing more than the accumulation of fear over the years” (96). Now Firdaus understands that it is the fear of being circumcised, of being sexually molested, and physically abused which has silenced and paralyzed her during her life. The disappearance of this fear is reflected in her newly acquired self-confidence when she walks. Her footsteps are those “of a woman who believed in herself, knew where she was going, and could see her goal” (96). Firdaus’ violent act of murder highlights her transformation from a submissive lowerclass woman into a rebellious and subversive figure. It might seem ironic that murder which is an immoral act can stimulate sentiments of pride and dignity for Firdaus.

To understand this effect, we should locate the protagonist’s violence under Frantz Fanon’s theory. In his analysis of the psyche of oppressed natives, Fanon sees that violence is very often an indispensable means in the struggle for liberation. For him, “the colonized man finds his freedom in and through violence. This rule of conduct enlightens the agent because it indicates to him the means and the end”³³. Because the colonizer sanctions the use of violence against the colonized and ruptures any meaningful dialogue with him, violence emerges as the possible form of communication available for the colonized subject. In other words, violence used by the colonized stands in a reciprocal liaison with the violence exercised against him by the colonizer. Under Firdaus’ circumstances, it is clear that violence is the only available language that her oppressors seemingly speak. Firdaus, on the other hand, has shown an amazing patience that proved to be incomprehensible for those who

³³Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1990) 68.

speak only the language of violence .What is left for her is to respond hostilely in order to cope with her imposed situation . Early in her sexual encounters, she adopted a passive resistance where she kept her “self” and gave her clients a dead body, devoid of love and mutual pleasure. Now she understands that neither the body nor the self is complete without the other, and both should be involved to resist the patriarchal power. The self in this regard is the dictating voice, whereas the body is the executing force.

For Fanon, violence has a psychological effect on the psyche of the colonized: it destroys his alienation, and calls for the development of a political consciousness which disrupts the validation of the colonizer’s superiority and the colonized’s inferiority. Killing the pimp becomes then a revolutionary action, an act of decolonization that simultaneously emancipates the colonized body and affirms Firdaus’ transition into a conscious subject: “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”(101).

There are similarities between Fanon’s natives and Nawal El Saadawi’s protagonist. The anguish caused by the loss of the native’s land leads to similar revolutionary acts to the loss of the female bodily integrity. The body, in this regard, embodies the colonized territory, invaded by the agents of circumcision and prostitution who define it merely as a male property. Just like the native, who had been denied the opportunity to develop his identity by being stereotyped as savage in need for civilization, Firdaus has been made to believe that her body and her sexuality are polluted and mysterious territories which need to be purified and discovered by circumcision and male sexual transgression respectively. For the French feminist Helen Cixous, women have been taught that their bodies are a dark continent which can be explored only by men. “They can be taught that their territory is black : because you are Africa , you are black . Your continent is dark. Dark is dangerous.... Don’t move you might fall. Most of all don’t go into the forest. And so we have internalized this horror of the dark”³⁴.

³⁴Helen Cixous, “The Laugh of The Medusa”, *The University of Chicago Press* 1.4 (1976): 878.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173239>.

Firdaus has internalized her vulnerability because the access to language or action has been suppressed by circumcision, one of the instruments which made her body a dark and dangerous continent. The subsequent loss caused by the mutilation of her clitoris seems to pervade all aspects of her being, stripping her not only the ability to feel but also the capacity to speak. For Cixous, if one censors the female body, he or she ultimately “censor(s) breath and speech at the same time”³⁵. The removal of Firdaus’ clitoris is an attempt to censor words, repress language, and make her familiar only with the discourse of patriarchy. Throughout her life, Firdaus endured her feelings of pains alone, and never dared to share them with someone. Even when she is in front of Miss Iqbal, who seemingly can be her confidante at that point in the narrative, Firdaus is unable to voice her injuries: “My lips parted to say something which no sooner remembered was already forgotten. My heart beat with fear, or with an emotion resembling fear”(30). Firdaus’ illusionary love for Miss Iqbal is never actualized and expressed because she lives in a state of ambiguity, where her longings for affection and regard are confused with her desire for pleasure and intimacy. Her ambiguous yearnings grow to the extreme, pushing her to search pleasure in her teacher’s hands: “The feelings of our hands touching was strange, sudden. It was a feeling that made my body tremble with a deep distant pleasure”(29-30). Even when she is asked by her school friend Wafeya whether she is in love with Miss Iqbal, she denied: “how could I be in love with a woman”(31). For Firdaus, the term love itself is associated only with men, and can never be applied in the context of a friendly relationship with a female. She has been taught that love is a sin and the pleasure arising from this love is dangerous and fearful. As a result, every sentiment of love whether towards a man or a woman like Miss Iqbal, who seemingly plays the role of surrogate mother, will be juxtaposed with this sinful love and thus inevitably, will bring into play her yearnings for the elusive pleasure. Firdaus is speechless and powerless to identify her feelings towards her teacher, but her dreams tell her that the trauma of clitoridectomy is the explanation for her non articulation of those feelings. In clitoridectomy, everything becomes identifiable in terms of this indefinable pleasure, and everything will be suppressed and muted by this same pleasure.

³⁵Ibid., 880.

Firdaus' growing sexual and emotional disorientation is further accentuated when she loses connection with Miss Iqbal and later on get betrayed by Ibrahim, the man to whom she "gave her body and soul, her mind and all the effort (she) could muster, dropped all her weapons, lowered all her defenses, and bared her flesh" (85). Firdaus comes to realize that she has not only been deceived by Ibrahim and Miss Iqbal, but also by love itself which can never be attained by a lower class woman like her. Love then proved to follow capitalist class dictates, when women like the company chairman's daughter are likely to be loved by men simply because they are money generating, whereas poor women like Firdaus cannot claim love because they are regarded only as a route for sexual gratification. With this betrayal of the flesh as Mawdoin Ba's novel goes to call it, Firdaus realizes that happiness will never be her fate, and it is better for her now to isolate herself socially in order to avoid other heart breaking situations.

"I was like a woman walking through an enchanted world to which she did not belong. She is free to do what she wants, and free not to do it. She experiences the rare pleasure of having no ties with anyone, of having broken with everything, of having cut all relations with the world around her, of being completely independent and living her independence completely, of enjoying freedom from any subjection to a man, to marriage, or to love, of being divorced from all limitations, whether rooted in rules and laws in time or in the universe" (87).

Firdaus' subjectivity is then articulated through her non identification with men as a social group. For her, all men become subsumed under a single category which establishes their selfishness and brutality towards women: "I am saying that you are all criminals, all of you: the fathers, the uncles, the husbands, the pimps, the lawyers, the doctors, the journalists, and all men of all professions" (100). Men, thus, are the oppressing group who holds power to control women as the oppressed group. The male-female relationship that arises from this situation is that of antagonism and violence where man becomes identified as an enemy, who must be exterminated in order to ensure the survival of female social fabric.

Georges Tarabishi is shocked when Firdaus declared her disgust and repulsion for men. Instead of seeing her rebellion as an ultimate liberation from the patriarchal

forces that have long confined her, he interprets it as a challenge to the biological laws of nature: “Far from accepting the man-woman relationship as entirely natural, she sees it as the most hostile and belligerent relationship of all. Men and women are two tribes, two classes, two nations, separated by a yawning chasm of an abating strife. Any contact between them is only to create destruction, not life”³⁶. To perpetuate the war between the two sexes, Tarabishi sees that Firdaus has chosen prostitution and murder voluntarily. Yet, we have shown previously that Firdaus has been entrapped into prostitution, and her murder of the pimp was reasonably an act of self-defense. The fact that she responded to Diaa’s accusation by leaving prostitution shows that she is a well-intentioned young woman, who tries to use her school certificate in order to get a decent job. In her new job, she sought to develop a loving relationship with a man, where dignity and mutual respect would reign between them. Despite these attempts, Tarabishi insists on condemning Firdaus as a neurotic prostitute, while showing indifference to Ibrahim’s betrayal and infidelity. For El Saadawi, Tarabishi ignored those attempts because he based his arguments on Freudian principles which cannot humanize women. In her reply to Tarabishi’s critiques, she writes :

“The problem is not that Firdaus has failed to humanize the world but that Tarabishi has failed to humanize Firdaus. Humanity necessitates justice and justice demands that if someone points a gun at me, I do more than present him with a flower and my chest as a target. When the pimp brandishes a knife in her face, Firdaus behaves in a defense of her humanity and life. So what angers Tarabishi about this just reaction? Is it because the perpetrator is a female and femininity stipulates that the female should smile sweetly into the face of her killer and colonizer?”³⁷.

It seems to us that Tarabishi has failed to understand the forces that have pushed Firdaus to take the knife and plunge it into Marzouk’s body. They are not related to a mere psychological state, where the protagonist’s alleged penis envy pushes her to castrate men and strip them of their power and virility, as Tarabishi went to argue. It is rather the social, economic, and political systems, or what we have identified earlier as the combination of private and public patriarchy which pushed Firdaus into violence and murder. Fadwa Malti Douglas also advocates this view, stating that “patriarchy

³⁶ Georges Tarabishi, *op.cit.*, 17.

³⁷ Georges Tarabishi, *op.cit.*, 199.

represented by the abusive and exploitive figures of male authority , is responsible for making of Firdaus' life a hell , not the paradise that her name implies"³⁸ .Not surprisingly, after all, Firdaus' story is a series of deceitful encounters with many male characters where the combination of parental brutality, religious hypocrisy, and sexual harassment contributed to her downfall.

But still, Firdaus does not want to be defeated in her war against patriarchy; she wants to torn the mask away and expose the ugly face of her society in order to assert her identity. Firdaus decided then to narrate her story to the psychiatrist and bring her plight to a larger audience before her death. She realized that silence has to be broken not only by action but also by speech. In other words, she wanted to make her long internalized oppression speak ,as well as she had already made it act by murdering the pimp. Silence then is no more the language of her internalized oppression, but a dissident voice is now possible and appears as a real challenge to the forces of her oppression. Like Ramatoulaye in *So Long a Letter* who , after rejecting Tamsir's proposal, decided to break her silence by writing a letter to her confidante Aissatou, Firdaus' narrative voice gives visibility, for the first time in her life, to her exploitation under the Egyptian system of patriarchy . The speechless and voiceless Firdaus, who was paralyzed to speak about her personal emotion even in front of close persons like Miss Iqbal , is now able to cast judgment upon the whole society in front of outsiders like the psychiatrist. The act of murder seemingly released her from fear and initiated her taking control of language. Interestingly, the knife which censored language through circumcision reappears now to initiate this language through the act of murder. The knife then emerges as a recurrent motif which simultaneously symbolizes suppression and expression. In chapter one, we have seen that the margin as a site of subjugation and control can be a privileged place for liberation for the oppressed people. Similarly, the knife as an instrument of torture and harassment is ,at the same time, an instrument of liberation and enunciation.

³⁸Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *op.cit.*, 63.

Firdaus' act of speaking, just like that of Ramatoulaye, challenges the prevailing tradition requiring female silence as means to perpetuate oppression against her. It goes without saying that both protagonists were reluctant to speak out because an assertive female voice was rarely to be heard in a patriarchal society. Yet, while Ramatoulaye's silence was a sign of passivity and subjugation, Firdaus's silence was a strategy for negotiating survival in the face of the humiliating experiences that she went through. Given the variation of the degree of oppression that exists between the two protagonists, Firdaus was left with no means of survival: all the ways leading to her desegregation are intrinsically linked to male power. Silence then emerges as an inevitable solution to cope with the assaults that she underwent. On the other hand, Ramatoulaye's silence can be taken as a sign of disempowerment because although her education and financial independence place her in a privileged site to speak out against her oppressors, she prefers to remain in marriage and endure the pain of her husband's infidelity.

For Firdaus, silence as a means of negotiation is a transitory route leading to self-fulfillment. Her silence parallels moments of thought and reflection that later on pave the way for her ultimate reaction. When these moments of reflection about bodily desintegrity reach their climax, silence is broken finally by murdering the pimp. Firdaus after killing the pimp resorted once again to silence before she decided to narrate her story. The act of killing and the act of speaking are separated by a transitory phase, marked by silence and inaction. This suggests that silence for Firdaus is a motivating and regenerating force that predetermines action. For the feminist writer Saliba Therese, the silence of El Saadawi's protagonist is influential and significant: "The power of Firdaus' silence reverses the hierarchical relationship between the doctor and the prisoner, placing the doctor in a position of dis-ease, and compelling her to relinquish her authority in order to approach Firdaus' story"³⁹. Indeed, Firdaus' initial refusal to speak ironically places her in a position of authority and power, while destabilizing the doctor's self-confidence: "...her refusal to see me, the feeling that I was helpless, and of no significance grew on me . . . Since she had rejected me, did

³⁹Therese Saliba, "On the Bodies of Third World Women: Cultural Impurity, Prostitution, and Other Nervous Conditions", *College Literature* 22. 1 (1995) : 135. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25112169>.

that mean she was a better person than me?” (3). This authority lasted even when Firdaus finally agreed to speak, and this can be shown in her imposing and commanding words: “Let me speak. Do not interrupt me”(11). This sentence suggests that Firdaus will establish herself as the speaking subject of her story, rather than letting the psychiatrist intervene in the course of the narrative.

Firdaus’ metamorphosis into a speaking subject came as a result of her repossession of language, the means by which her dissident narrative voice is created. Her act of speaking frames Bell Hooks’ assertion that language is a place of struggle against the prevailing modes of national, racial, class, and gender domination. In her essay “*This is the oppressor’s language /yet I need it to talk to you*”: language, a place of struggle, Hooks asserts that “language like desire disrupts –refuses to be contained within boundaries. It speaks itself against our will, in words and thoughts, that intrude, violate even the innermost private spaces of mind and body”⁴⁰. Firdaus’ repossession of language then marks an urgent desire to impose herself within a discourse of power, marked by invisibility and inaccessibility. In chapter one, we have seen that the invisibility of the colonial subject is one of the mechanisms made to sustain and reproduce oppression against them. The autobiographical narratives serve to give visibility to his conditions, and thus disrupt the discourse of the colonial power. Similarly, Firdaus’ taking control of language will then subvert what has been discussed in chapter one as the dangerous Active Female Sexuality. Her contestatory narrative reveals that it is not the woman’s sexuality which is dangerous and transgressing, but rather the male gaze which undermines the male female relationship and the social order on the whole. Although Firdaus responded to her culture’s dictates by being confined in her father’s and uncle’s houses, she underwent sexual harassment by her close relative. In other words, even though her sexuality was repressed and regulated by procedures like circumcision and confinement, the acclaimed female chastity was not maintained. Accordingly, Firdaus succeeded to lift “the burden of shame from women as the possessors of sexual allure,

⁴⁰ Bell Hooks, “This is the oppressor’s language /yet I need it to talk to you”: language, a place of struggle, In. Between Languages and Cultures: Translation and Cross-Cultural Texts, eds., Anuradha Dingwaney, and Carol Maier (London : University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995) 295.

and placing it firmly back on those who abuse it, or others who remain inattentive to such injustices⁴¹.

Like the colonial discourse which portrays the native as savage in need for civilization, the discourse of sexuality as depicted in *Woman at Point Zero* is also made to justify discrimination against women by inciting them to follow restrictive social norms, while letting men abuse and violate these norms. In exposing male sexual transgressions over her body, Firdaus would suggest instead the concept of Active Male Sexuality, as a counter discourse to the patriarchal logic of Active Female Sexuality. In the course of her narrative, she shows that all the clients soliciting her sexual services are active sexual beings who are ready to do anything in order to fulfill their sexual urge. Women like Firdaus, whose bodies are simultaneously reduced to sex machines and subordinate sex recipients, are sexually passive and frigid because sex is a frustrating force which undermines their sense of security. While her clients' sexuality is active both emotionally and physically, Firdaus' sexuality is emotionally passive, but physically responsive. The way men pursue aggressively their sexual urge made her body react only physically in order to ensure its financial survival. Accordingly, it is not the disruptive femininity or the female body as being inherently a *fitna*⁴² which can provoke chaos and disorder, but rather, as argued earlier, the social, economic and political systems which push this body to deviate from morality and decency.

Firdaus exclaims right after her confession that "(she) was the only woman who had torn the mask away, and exposed the face of their ugly reality" (110). The reality that Firdaus is speaking about cannot be approached neither by the psychiatrist whose scientific background failed to comprehend Firdaus' plight, nor by western writers who are unable to give a reliable account of her oppression. Firdaus, by producing her self-knowledge, did not allow others to define her after her death. Rather, she succeeded to name herself and her oppressors, to tell her audience that she is neither a prostitute nor a criminal, but a lower class woman who has been driven by the patriarchal

⁴¹Sorcha Gunne, and Zoe Brigley Thompson, eds., Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives: Violence and Violation (New York and London: Routledge, 2010) 81.

⁴²The word *fitna* means a state of provoked conflict which causes schism within the Muslim community.

system to marginality . Firdaus, in this regard, arrives at giving an answer to her former question :“Who am I? Firdaus, that is how they call me” (20) .The sense of alienation felt by El Saadawi ’s protagonist is so strong that she is unable to recognize herself in the mirror, and powerlessly resorts to others in order to name herself . The problem of identity crisis is now resolved by the act of enunciation. As already argued in chapter one, the confessional act explores the question “who am I ?” and contributes to the establishment of the autobiographer’s subjectivity . Firdaus, by narrating her story, releases herself from the unspeakable and unquestionable facts ,and thus presents herself as an assertive subject . Language then is not only the medium through which she voices her concerns, but becomes a means by which she achieves her agency and self-fulfillment.

Firdaus’act of narration does not only enable her to develop a sense of identity, but it also emphasizes her reclamation of her body,or more precisely the reconciliation between this body and the inner self. As has been demonstrated previously, throughout her life, Firdaus was alienated from her own body because the latter is considered to be a dark continent ,and talking about the suffering and exploitation of this continent is seen as a provoking expression of the *Danger Beliefs* .Now Firdaus echoes Helen Cixous that the dark continent is neither dark nor dangerous, but it is still unexplored by its proprietor. For Firdaus, this exploration is purely verbal because the physical one being achieved mischievously through prostitution has led her to sexual slavery. In other words, while prostitution placed her under male exploitation, the act of enunciation will set her in a significant feminine exploration of her body. The memory of her body’s ailing gives her strength to voice and unveil the cruel practices undermining its dignity and integrity .By speaking out against this violation , the body becomes a feminine mode of self-expression that disrupts phallogentric assumptions, like the ones discussed previously concerning its honor and dignity.

In her essay *The Laugh of the Medusa* , Helene Cixous proposes a mode of revolutionary writing called *Ecriture Feminine*, which allows women to write about their femininity and make their bodies speak against the masculine structures. For Cixous, it is up to women to define their femininity and not let men or other patriarchal

norms manipulate the discourse over their bodies. As a result, Cixous' *Ecriture Feminine* becomes a form of resistance "which will not only "realize" the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal"⁴³. Interestingly, in *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus' body becomes a Cixousian site of struggle which is integral to her agency. Speaking about the body in pain becomes a way of transcending the trauma associated with practices like circumcision and rape. Firdaus' coming to voice allows her to relearn her body and experience it anew as a physical entity inseparable from her mental entity. In other words, by being the speaking voice of her story, Firdaus succeeded to claim authority over her body, and recapture her bodily integrity and its reciprocal self-integrity. While Firdaus' testimony may be approached as a feminine confession, where the body constitutes a major part of this verbal expression, El Saadawi's recording of Firdaus' story emphasizes Cixous' *Ecriture Feminine* by creating a direct connection between the female body and writing .

By reclaiming her self and her body, the prison as a marginal space of confinement becomes not only, as argued in chapter one, a privileged site for resistance and defiance , but also a place where bonds of solidarity between oppressed women can be forged . Like Ramatoulaye whose period of confinement allows her to write a letter to her confidante, Aissatou , the once homeless and friendless Firdaus finds now a space of privacy and a confidante with whom she shares her sufferings. In fact, the solidarity that exists between Firdaus and Nawal El Saadawi is manifested in their strong determination and commitment to unveil the forces of oppression. After killing the pimp, Firdaus clarifies that she did not kill him with a knife , but with the truth that nobody dares to reveal . For her, it is not the knife which frightens those corrupted men, but rather the truth she knows against them. Like her protagonist, El Saadawi regards that "it was also that a small minority express their fear, or even panic , at words written by a pen sharp as a scalpel My pen will continue to lay bare the facts, clarify the issue , and identify what I believe is the truth "⁴⁴. El Saadawi uses her pen

⁴³Helen Cixous, *op.cit.*, 880.

⁴⁴Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, *op.cit.*, 03.

which she describes as ‘sharp as a scalpel’ in order to expose the truth. Accordingly, the El Saadawi pen and the Firdausi knife become tools by which spoken and written words about the Egyptian system of patriarchy are finally released and revealed. Françoise Lionnet in her article *Dissymmetry Embodied :Feminism, Universalism and the Practice of Excision* has explored the similarity between the act of killing and that of writing . For Lionnet, in El Saadawi’s novel, there is a symmetry between writing and killing because they are both considered as acts of defiance that must be repressed .She writes:

“ Her (Firdaus) fundamental transgression is that she reverses the traditional social roles on a symbolic as well as on real level: she trespasses on male sexual territory by using the knife as a means of penetration. Similarly, El Saadawi’s inscription of a woman’s text on the masculine fabric of Egyptian culture is a form of trespass that deserves punishment because it interferes with the culturally acceptable codes of femininity”⁴⁵ .

⁴⁵Françoise Lionnet, *Postcolonial Representations: Women, Literature, Identity* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995) 150.

El Saadawi's and Firdaus' acts of transgression are pushed further when the narrative voice becomes combined with the written word to produce a challenging literary work such as *Woman at Point Zero*. According to Barbara Harlow, Firdaus' decision to meet El Saadawi and have her story written down may be motivated by her desire to "allow her individual act of challenge and defiance to become part of the public record of social opposition to the authoritarian political structures and patriarchal hierarchies of Egyptian society"⁴⁶. By giving the oral testimony a written form, El Saadawi has pushed Firdaus' victory further. The novel gives the protagonist's story a public recognition and emotional validity. Moreover, it serves as a "means of using the colonizer's tools against him, of writing back against the oppressor"⁴⁷. Firdaus has talked back against her abusers, and it is the role of the psychiatrist to write back. But once again, writing is regarded as an act of transgression, which resulted in El Saadawi's imprisonment under El Sadat regime in 1981 in the same prison she met her protagonist.

Firdaus refused to still exist in a society that treats its women folk as slaves, but El Saadawi wants to fight and bear the consequences. While her activism was unwelcomed in her receptive local environment, great interest and consideration were accorded to El Saadawi's works by the West. As has been demonstrated in chapter one, her success was explained by her confirmation of western stereotypes about Muslim societies as being offensive to women. This is patently untrue. The theme of women's exploitation under the institution of prostitution is not only relevant to Arab Muslim societies, but proved to be more frequent among western societies. What may be particular for Firdaus is the social circumstances that led her to prostitution. These circumstances, as argued previously, are part of cultural specificities that must not be essentialized, but rather explained with great contextualized relevance. In this chapter, we tried to give a feminist postcolonial reading of Firdaus' story by constructively understanding differences like circumcision not as a continual state of paralysis, undermining the protagonist to develop a sense of individuality, but as a junction or a hybrid point out of which subjectivity can be constructed. Accordingly, the story of

⁴⁶Barbara Harlow, "From the Women's Prison: Third World Women's Narratives of Prison", *Feminist Studies* 12.3 (1986): 512. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3177910>.

⁴⁷Saiti, Ramzi, *op.cit.*, 156.

Firdaus is the story of dualities where suppression and expression ,restraint and defiance, disempowerment and empowerment become all possible and envisageable. The psychiatrist succeeded at decoding and reading such dualities by ignoring her scientific background and responding to Firdaus' demand to listen to her story. Similarly, western readers have to follow El Saadawi in listening to differences spoken by other women in order to decode the dualities found in their marginality.

CONCLUSION

Conclusion:

The novels analyzed in this study describe the ways African Muslim women are oppressed under distorted cultural beliefs, and the measures these women take to overcome their subjugation and reclaim their subjectivities. Mariama Ba and Nawal El Saadawi depict the forms of gender inequality that arise from a culture which manipulates religious tenets to instill man superiority and woman inferiority. In the Senegalese and Egyptian societies, as portrayed by the two writers, a man who is sexually dissatisfied with his wife is allowed to obtain a sexual substitute, either by contracting a polygamous marriage, or by invading the privacy of women.

In a patriarchal culture, we have seen that all justifications are advanced to boost such selfish interests. While in *So Long a Letter*, it is the law of fatalism which “puts two people side by side” (36), in *Woman at Point Zero*, it is the master/slave law which makes Firdaus’ body a sexual commodity owned by men to gratify their lustful needs. For the pimp, Marzouk, “there are only two categories of people .., masters and slaves. A woman on her own cannot be a master, let alone a woman who’s a prostitute” (95). This statement suggests that for these men, women are naturally born to be ruled by men; their rights should never be expressed because they are slaves under the mercy of their male masters. This also suggests for Firdaus, that gender for a woman is a chronic weakness that cannot be recovered by material success, as her experience in prostitution has clearly shown. Although this philosophy was not explicitly expressed in *So Long a Letter*, the arguments advanced by Mawdo to justify his polygamous marriage reinforce the view that women are not equal beings with men. For him “a wife must understand once and for all, and must forgive; she must not worry herself about “betrayals of the flesh”(34). The woman then must understand that she is born to be substitutable in the institution of polygamy; she must understand that her sentiments of loss and betrayal are insignificant in the face of her husband’ selfish sexual urge. She is, in a word, just a physical being, devoid of senses and sensibilities. She is more exactly a sexual object that can be substituted once it becomes less attractive under the eyes of its owner.

Therefore, women in *So Long a Letter* and *Woman at Point Zero* must not only endure the trauma of infidelity and the irretrievable loss of bodily integrity, but a sense of responsibility is imposed upon them to comply with men's insolent assertion of their lustful desires. Even the discourse of honor and morality which should abhor such abuses seems to follow patriarchal dictates. We have seen in El Saadawi's narrative that dishonor in the institution of prostitution falls exclusively upon women who are forced under oppressive conditions to sell their bodies. Diaa, the respectable journalist who accuses Firdaus for being unrespectable, ignores that he also by engaging in an illicit sex with a prostitute is not worthy of respect. In *So Long a Letter*, Mariama Ba tells us that the discourse of shame in the Senegalese society is similarly manipulated to serve patriarchal interests. We have seen how Modou and Mawdo violated traditional and religious codes of polygamy, but shame never fell upon their 'polygamistic instincts'; instead Aissatou's inappropriate marriage to Modou was considered as a "shame (which) kills faster than disease" (30).

Aunty Nabou fails to understand that it is not the goldsmith's daughter who kills faster than disease, but rather this male self-justifying power which brings chaos not only to her noble lineage, but to the whole society. This in fact occurs when patriarchal interests become the norms upon which the definitions of some values and virtues like honor and respectability are based. We have seen in both novels that the woman who slavishly and blindly complies to her husband's oppressive dictates is the one who is likely to be qualified as being virtuous and respectable. In this sense, the truth about good and evil is produced within the paradigms of gender power relationships. Because power lies within the patriarchal matrix, women have to follow the truth inscribed therein. In *So long a Letter*, the widow who lets her in laws strip her material possessions ironically tends to be defined by her culture as a respectable woman. In *Woman at Point Zero*, the manipulation of the discourse of respectability and unrespectability grows to the extreme, making paradoxically the unrespectable prostitute appear in newspapers as an honorable woman. This honorable appearance comes as a result of Firdaus' compliance with not only patriarchal dictates, but with capitalist prescriptions as well. Thus, patriarchy has been shown throughout this dissertation appears to permeate all aspects of society.

This multifaceted nature of patriarchy undermines the very notion of justice in society, and threatens the peaceful co-existence between men and women. The forms of gender hierarchy discussed in the two novels give rise to instances of gender injustice where discrimination against women proved to be quasi officially maintained by the political power. In regard to the question of justice in Muslim cultures, El Saadawi argues in *The Hidden Face of Eve* that in punitive terms “moral codes and standards in our societies very rarely apply to all people equally”¹. We learn from the experience of Firdaus with Marzouk that the rules are applied only on the weaker sex, who stands no power to challenge the authority of the corrupted state. Firdaus tells us that the unequal appropriation of the discourse of shame seems to be officially approved when pimps are never likely to be arrested by the police, but prostitutes are very often punished for their indecent activities. Likewise in *So Long a Letter*, the issue of gender injustice is maintained by the political power through enforcing women’s inaccessibility to equal opportunities with men. As argued in chapter two, the rise of Islamic Fundamentalism has restricted women’s advancement, and repressed their aspiration for progress by denying them the right to vote.

This dissertation has shown that even the religious institution fails to ensure its moral justice, when oppressive attitudes become sanctioned under fallacious and duplicitous religious norms. The representatives of religion in this thesis are unfortunately Imams who encourage husband’s infidelity, Azharite scholars who sexually molest their young female relatives, and other religious men who kneel to Allah in their prayers, while showing deceiving attitudes towards their wives and daughters. This lack of justice which seems to prevail all societal aspects, results inevitably in the female losing trust in her family, her surroundings, her political structure, and even her religious system. She grows into awareness that neither the father and the husband, nor the Imam and the ruler are on her side to protect her. In fact, we have seen in the first chapter, that such pessimistic view is similarly traced by western readers whose stereotypes and essentialist constructions about the muted Muslim woman become soon validated. But we have demonstrated that postcolonial feminists are adamant to stress that women’s oppression is a universalist issue, and what women like Firdaus and

¹Nawal El Saadwi, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, *op.cit.*, 27.

Ramatoulayehave experienced in their societies are manifestations of cultural differences that may find their parallel forms in another cultural context. While veiled women are seen by western discourse as disempowered women, women in western societies, according to Nawal El Saadawi, are forced to be “undressed according to the postmodern capitalists, or made to buy make-up and body conditioners”² in order to comply with male selfish demands. Thus, even the presumed liberal western woman is undergoing oppression by complying with the agendas of modern capitalism.

In their attempts to revise the politics of representation, postcolonial women writers have emphasized that the lack of trust does not mean a lack of agency. Although their female characters lost trust in their surroundings, they did not lose their self-confidence to reclaim their subjectivities. In other words, because the political and religious systems are unable to ensure gender justice by protecting women against male oppressive practices, these women decide to take their own measures to overcome their subjugation. While these measures involve in *Woman at Point Zero* murder as a self-defensive act against the male transgression over the female body, in *So Long a Letter*, they include divorce as a self-assertive act against polygamy. Both Firdaus and Aissatou lack any solution to get out of the injustices imposed on them by the social system, so they decide to isolate themselves from the culture that justifies men’s violence and betrayal. For these women, being a murderess sentenced to death, or a single mother living abroad is much better than to assume the role of the pitiful victim under the systems of prostitution and polygamy. Thus, in spite of the cultural differences that exist between the Arab Muslim context of Nawal El Saadawi and the Muslim sub-Saharan background of Mariama Ba, their novels share similar postcolonial feminist perspective, that is to highlight the female’s coming to voice as a strategy to disrupt patriarchal and essentialist feminist discourses. In chapter two we have seen how the silenced Ramatoulaye “finds salvation and refuge through writing: she does not speak out; rather she writes herself out of her passivity of dependence, self-abnegation, and paralysis of initiative, action, choice, and thought”³. In a similar

²Nawal El Saadawi, “Women and the Poor: The Challenge of Global Justice”, In. Adele Newson –Horst, ed., *op.cit.*, 86.

³Keith L. Walker *op.cit.*, 267

vein, Firdaus by refusing to sign the appeal for pardon, wants to unveil the brutality of the father, the hypocrisy of the uncle, and the corruption of the ruler who all contribute to making her a prostitute. Correspondingly, both Ramatoulaye and Firdaus are aware that in a patriarchal society, the dissident voice brings visibility to their plights, and if they keep silent the repressive power will speak for them.

As Ramatoulaye and Firdaus come to redefine themselves by disrupting the repressive discourses of polygamy and prostitution, they show that their agential acts can be sites of moderation and subversion; conciliation and rebellion; appropriation and abrogation. While Ramatoulaye's letter seems to be conciliatory, offering peaceful opportunities for the male-female co-existence, Firdaus' testimony tends to be confrontational and polemical, where she is engaged in a bloody war against men as a social group. Although Ramatoulaye decides to remain in the oppressive space of marriage, she observes that she is "indifferent to the irreversible currents of women's liberation that are lashing the world" (88). Her brand of feminism, according to Omofolabo Ajayi – Soyinka is embedded in the African context. "It is a feminism that combines the quest for African identity with personal independence, a responsible individualism committed to responsive collectivity. It supports self-fulfillment but not self-centeredness; celebrates motherhood, but not as the flag of identity"⁴. Firdaus on the other hand, embraces a radical mode of feminist articulation. In contrast to Ramatoulaye, she refuses the process of negotiation and appropriation as a strategy to comply with her bitter situation. We have seen that this refusal finds its roots in the series of exploitive experiences that she went through under the repressive system of Egyptian patriarchy. Firdaus, in this sense, celebrates her antagonism to men as the flag of her identity. Her dissident feminist politics do not combine the individual with the collective, but rather relate them in an oppositional liaison, as her sentence suggests: "My life means their death. My death means their life" (100). Thus, we argue that Ramatoulaye and Firdaus's testimonies highlight not only the complexity and diversity of their feminine experiences, but their different choices for action and agency as well.

⁴Omofolabo Ajayi-Soyinka, *op.cit.*, 168-169.

But irrespective of the different feminist articulations embraced by the protagonists, both Nawal El Saadawi and Mariama Ba succeed to create dissident female voices that disrupt the hegemonic patriarchal matrix. By highlighting the way their protagonists overcome their subjugation, both writers demonstrate that the process of reclaiming female subjectivity cannot necessarily be accomplished via western intervention. This means that both Ramatoulaye and Firdaus managed to give visibility to their plights without being mediated through western feminist narratives. We have seen in chapter one that western Feminists, very often, embrace colonial practice in regard to Third World women through producing orientalist representations of their conditions. For Amel Amireh, the west's interest in the conditions of these women "is part of its interest in and hostility to Islam. This hostility was central to the colonist project, which casts women as victims to be rescued from Muslim male violence"⁵.

One of the main objectives of this dissertation was to unravel this feminist colonial project which tends to portray Firdaus and Ramatoulaye as helpless victims in need to be rescued from the shackles of polygamy and male violence. Despite being exploited by the systems of polygamy and prostitution, both protagonists demonstrated that they can be agents of their own destinies. Firdaus, the peasant, homeless and helpless woman, who throughout her life tried to repress her tears and emotions, is now the rebellious and the revolutionary figure who frightens and exercises authority over men, princes, and even heads of states. In a similar vein, Ramatoulaye is not rescued by her French headmistress who pretends to prepare women like her for an emancipatory mission: "To lift us out of the bug of tradition, superstition and custom, to make us appreciate a multitude of civilization without renouncing our own" (15). The white woman failed to understand that frustrating practices like polygamy cannot be simply overcome by the liberal ideals she gave to these women. It is rather women's strong determination to reclaim their identities out of these traumatic practices, which can lift them from the burdens of traditions. This means that it is not only the western educated woman who can speak out and challenge the forces of oppression, even less

⁵Amal Amireh, "Publishing in The West : Problems and Prospects for Arab Women Writers" , *Al Jadid. A Review and Record of Arab Cultures and Arts* 2.10 (1996) .[http: www.aljadid.com/content/publishing-west](http://www.aljadid.com/content/publishing-west).

educated women like Firdaus who did not receive liberal ideals are concerned with this dissidence .

For Mariama Ba and Nawal El Saadawi, this concern involves for them as writers, agential acts of writing. El Saadawi sees that critical thinking and writing are means by which oppression and discrimination can be overcome. If Mariama Ba qualifies writing as a “pacific weapon”⁶ used to fight for women’s freedom, Nawal El Saadawi contends that “writing has the power to give life to the dead”⁷. For her, creative writers should no longer be afraid to touch the untouchable taboos ; they should not be reluctant to talk about religion, sex, and politics . Religious men are not the representatives of God on earth, they can be right, as well as they can be wrong, and even worse, they can commit a sacrilege against the very religion which they pretend to preach. Likewise, sex should not be understood within its discourse of shame, and politics should not be approached within its discourse of fear. “All dirty linen should be exposed to be cleansed in fresh air. We should do our own washing. We should cure our own defects, and not expect others to do this work for us”⁸.

These ills still according to Mariama Ba fuel the political revolt of African writers. For her, women’s writings should have a political commitment. The personal should not remain hidden in its private sphere; the personal is also political, and the private is also public. This means that the stories of *Ramatoulaye* and *Firdaus* should not be understood as separate instances of women’s oppression caused by isolated instances of men’s abuse. Their testimonies should be regarded as the story of every woman who refuses to share her husband with another woman; every woman who is forced to sell her body in order to survive; and every woman who is determined to reclaim voice after years of silence.

Our protagonists succeed to bring their plights into a larger audience and thus, give the personal experiences of polygamy and prostitution a public dimension. But, still, there are many *Ramatoulaye* and *Firdaus* who are reluctant to speak about their husbands’ infidelity and violence. There are notably many *Firdaus* who experience daily sexual

⁶Barbara Harrell-Bond ’s interview with Mariama Ba , In. Ada Uzoamaka , ed, *op.cit.*, 401.

⁷Nawal El Saadawi, “Writing and Freedom” , In. Adele Newson-Horst, ed , *op.cit.*, 131.

⁸Nawal El Saadawi, “Muslim Women in The Market”, In. Adele Newson-Horst, ed , *op.cit.*, 124.

molestation, but are afraid to speak about their harassment. These women as El Saadarwi's narrative suggests are reluctant to question the current regime of truth and its deep –embedded beliefs and tabooed codes of behaviors. In this sense, learning about one's sexuality should not be regarded as *Danger Beliefs*. We have seen that the *Danger Beliefs* are rather those self-destructing beliefs that prescribe barbaric practices like female circumcision as a way to maintain the female virginity and thus, preserve the acclaimed familiar honor. Firdaus' life would have turned out differently, if her inquisitiveness about these *Danger Beliefs* were properly fulfilled by her mother. In *So Long a Letter*, Mariama Ba shows how flexible explanations of some prevailing rigid cultural assumptions can contribute in improving women's conditions in their society. Ramatoulaye did not comply with the dictates of the *Danger Beliefs* which may prescribe punitive sanctions against her adulterous young daughter. She succeeded to manage her daughter's crisis by giving "a sinner so much attention" (83-84). Through her maternal support, Ramatoulaye rescued her teenage daughter from falling probably into the trap of Firdaus' sexual slavery. In *Woman at Point Zero*, the lack of this maternal support led Firdaus to embark on a troublesome journey for what she terms "the savage and dangerous truth" (100)

Firdaus' fearful truth, as has been shown in chapter three, serves not only to unveil the savagery of the patriarchal power, but it tends also to give a counter discourse to some prevailing cultural assumptions. In this regard, the novels convey a message that there is no Monolithic model of culture, just as there is no monolithic model of Muslim woman. The deep rooted beliefs constituting culture can be questioned, debated, and more importantly disrupted, if they undermine women's progress. This suggests that feminist dissident politics should evolve within cultural reformist politics. Based on the conclusions drawn from the two novels, it becomes clear that in order to re-address women's issues in their society, Muslim thought has to abandon what the Algerian progressive intellectual Mohamed Arkoun refers to as "The dogmatic Enclosure"⁹. For Arkoun, Islam is basically not a dogmatic religion, but the way it

⁹Quoted in Raja Rhouni, *Secular and Islamic Feminist Critiques in The Works of Fatima Mernissi* (Leiden and Boston : Brill, 2010) 18.

has been rigidly practiced or manipulated by its adherents has made Islamic though an inflexible discourse , which is very hostile to progress and change. It is indeed this Dogmatic Enclosure which makes university a forbidden place for Firdaus , and it is also the same rigid thinking which makes education appears as the destroyer of the female's virtue in *So Long a Letter*.

The conclusions drawn from the two novels point to a strong religious dogmatic thinking which restrains women's advancement in society. Correspondingly, the men who kneel in Friday prayers, the Azharite scholars who teach Allah's justice at universities, and the Imams who deliver their sermons at mosques, should all abandon their duplicitous beliefs, and revise their religious enclosure in accordance with the true teachings of Islam . Islam must be understood as a religion which promotes justice, peace, and love. There can be no true religion, as El Saadawi suggests, which sanctions the amputation of one of the body's organ, there exists no true Islam which encourages betrayal and abandonment , and finally there can be no Islam which places women as slaves of their male masters . If religion is understood as such, it will cease to be exploited and manipulated to serve ego-centric interests. Accordingly, the point zero in which women like Ramatoulaye and Firdaus are placed at the beginning of their narratives, will be a point of departure towards a promising future , a future where justice would reign over any traditional , class or political considerations . It is finally a point where at last women will be recognized as men's life partners, not their servants, or their sexual objects.

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كسر جدار الصمت: إثبات الذات لدى الأنثى في المجتمع الأفريقي المسلم

دراسة حالة: رسالة جد طويلة لمريامابا وءامرأة عند نقطة الصفر لنوال السعداوي

في هذا البحث ارتأينا لأن نبحث ونرافق صراع المرأة المسلمة في إثبات وجودها في مجتمع يستغل مفاهيم دينية خاطئة لكي يمارس أساليب تعسفية ضدها. هذه المفاهيم هي في أغلب الأحيان، حصيلة دمج أفكار دينية متعصبة مع التقاليد المحلية الممارسة في المنطقة . في مجتمع ذكوري يغرس ثقافة تبعية المرأة للرجل، كل أساليب الاضطهاد ضد المرأة يصبح لها مبررات فكرية، وحتى عقائدية. الدين في هذه الحالة يصبح أداة للتبرير والقبول، عكس ما هو منتظر منه: أي أداة لنبذ العنف والظلم.

الأعمال المتناولة في هذه الدراسة تقدم لنا رؤية واقعية للعديد من أساليب التفرقة الممارسة ضد النساء في مجتمع سينغالي ومصري يقوم بعض أفرادهم باستغلال الدين والثقافة المحلية لفرض مصالح أنانية معادية للمرأة . في هذا الإطار، تعزم هذه الأطروحة على بحث إلى مدى استغلال الدين والتقاليد قد يولد ثقافة معادية ومناهضة للمرأة في المجتمع.

مريامابا في رسالة جد طويلة، تصف لنا من خلال راماتولايبى الاضطهاد الذي غالبا ما تعانيه المرأة في مؤسسة الزواج، عندما خيانة الزوج وإهماله لواجباته يصبح لها قبول ومبرر لدى المجتمع.

في المجتمع السينغالي كما هو مبين في النص، الزوج له أحقية في استبدال زوجته بامرأة ثانية، في حالة ما أصبحت الأولى غير قادرة على تلبية غرائزه الأنانية. المبرر في هذه الحالة، هي تعدد الزوجات، القضية الشائكة التي يقرها الشرع ولكن تحت ظروف وشروط معينة.

في رسالة جد طويلة، بات من المؤكد أن الدافع لتعدد الزوجات ليس ديني، بل شخصي وأناني. المساواة بين الزوجات ووجوب إتزام الزوج بواجباتها خاصة اتجاه المرأة الأولى أصبح مهملا في ظل التزم خاطئ للدين. الدين في هذه الحالة يتم استعمله في حالة ما إذا تماشى مع المصالح الشخصية، ويتم إهماله من جهة أخرى، إذا تنافى مع تلك المصالح.

في امرأة عند نقطة الصفر، نوال السعداوي تصف لنا ظروف القهر والظلم التي عانت منها فردوس على يد الأب، العم، الزوج، والمجتمع ككل. في المجتمع المصري كما تبين لنا فردوس، ختان الأنثى والعنف

ضد المرأة هم ظواهر يقرها الشرع ويسمح بها المجتمع. هنا العنف قد يصل إلى درجة التعذيب، والختان قد يترتب عنه مشاكل صحية ونفسية.

في ظل هذه الأساليب التعسفية، نسعى من خلال هذه الأطروحة إلى بحث طرق من خلالها تستطيع المرأة المضطهدة أن تفرض وجودها . في رسالة **جد طويلة** راماتولايا لجأت إلى الكتابة كمعيار لفرض الشخصية وكسر جدار الصمت الذي طالما عرقلها على مواجهة قوى الظلم.

الرسالة إذن حررت البطلة من العجز والتبعية وأمكنتها فيما بعد على مواجهة عراقيل أخرى. في **امرأة عند نقطة الصفر**، استطاعت فردوس في الأخير على تحرير نفسها وجسدها من العبودية التي لازمتها طوال حياتها، هذا التحرير تم باستخدام نفس أساليب العنف التي مورست ضدها.

من جهة أخرى فرض الذات قابلتها محاولة ناجحة لكسر جدار الصمت من خلال قرار فردوس مقابلة الكاتبة وفضح جميع قوى الاضطهاد. إذن مثل راماتولايا في **رسالة جد طويلة**، قرار السرد وكسر الصمت أعطى لفردوس ثقة في النفس وتوازن نفسي جعلها مستعدة لمواجهة أصعب التحديات حتى الموت.