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**African Women's Fight for Self-actualization under the Rule
of Patriarchy in M. Mokeddem's *L'Interdite*, T.
Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, D. Lessing's *The Grass
Is Singing* and N. El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*.**

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Abstract

This work aims to inquire into the struggles that women have to go through in order to reach self-actualization under the rule of patriarchy in the four African novels *L'interdite* (1993) by Algerian writer Malika Mokeddem, *Nervous Conditions* (1988) by the Zimbabwean Tsitsi Dangarembga, *The Grass Is Singing* (1950) by Nobel Prize winner Doris Lessing, and *Woman at Point Zero* (1977) by Egyptian writer and activist Nawel El Saadawi. The thesis endeavors to: study the oppression that the female characters experience, to analyze the state of alienation that results from it, and to explore the strategies of resistance that women use in their attempts to reach fulfillment. Thus, through the use of feminist literary criticism, the work seeks first to look at the functioning of patriarchy, its suppressive treatment of women and the violence and abuse that women are subjected to in patriarchal societies. Then, it intends to probe into the different feelings of estrangement that ensue from abuses that women have to endure. By approaching the works from the perspective of social-psychology which views alienation as a social process, it will look at women's socialization, their quest for identity, and their silencing by society. Finally, it undertakes to examine the various forms of negotiation and rebellion that female characters adopt in order to face oppression and eventually reach a stage of self-realization which might take various forms for the different female characters. By the end of their fight, some of them manage to find a form of balance that bring them fulfillment while others experience liberating deaths.

Key words: oppression, alienation, self-actualization, female characters, African Literature.

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Introduction

During the late 1950's and early 1960's, when modern African literature was at its earliest stage, authors, the great majority of whom were male, paid very little attention to the situation of women in the patriarchal African societies. In fact, the first generation of African male writers sought to rehabilitate the image of Africa that had been distorted by the prejudices about the continent which had spread during colonial years and which presented it as dark and uncivilized. In their attempt to create an idyllic image of pre-colonial Africa, they idealized the past and glorified life before the coming of the white man thereby reinforcing the idea that patriarchy is an efficient social structure. Yet, they failed to point the inferior position of women and their deprivation of voice and agency. A clear example of this can be found in the early works of writers like Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, and Elechi Amadi, *The Great Ponds*, whose female characters are depicted as passive and submissive individuals. Another example can be found in the attitude of the writers of the Negritude movement; most of them glorified the image of the fertile and nurturing Africa which they represented with the body of the African woman and her main function of mother. This representation confines women to their biology and to their ability to give birth and nurture children only.

This reductive image was a rather suffocating one for women. It was seen, by many female writers, as one more form of pressure that women were subjected to. Many African women writers attempted to give a different image of African women, one which they considered as more representative of the lives of women in patriarchal society. In early post-colonial years, the main discourse in African literature was

nationalist. In their novels, authors focused issues related to the development of their countries and relegated the condition of women to a secondary level. When they started to be published in the 1960's, female authors like Flora Nwapa contributed to the main discourse, but they also tried to show the difficulties that women had to face in their everyday lives; the problems and the sufferings which resulted from their position as secondary members of society were reflected in the works of many African women writers. These authors give a more positive image of the roles that are performed by women in society; they show that, if given the opportunity, women can contribute to the development of their countries and to their evolution. Authors like Grace Ogot and Ama Ata Aidoo create alternative paths for women to follow because they show, through their main female characters, that women can survive and thrive outside the prescribed roles of wives and mothers. In a sense, they write back to their male counterparts regarding the status of women in patriarchal society.

Other women writers like Buchi Emecheta attempted to establish the fact that most stereotyped images that can be found in male-authored texts were prejudicial to women in society. In fact, the image of the passive and submissive female deprives women of any form of free will as it encloses them in characteristic traits that do not reflect the reality of what women are and what they actually experience in their everyday life. In their writings, African female authors focused on portraying women in a more representative way as they wanted to reflect the day to day life in African societies as faithfully as possible. They relied on their observations and on their own experiences and the life stories of their mothers and grandmothers to create female characters who really resemble the African women that they saw around them. They

put forward qualities of strength and agency that characterized African women during both pre-colonial and colonial periods; they demonstrated that the African patriarchal society relied heavily on women, and not only in the domestic sphere. Women contributed to the economic and to the social life of their communities; they even fought against the forces of colonialism as it was the case in Nigeria in 1929 when women organized anti-colonial revolts. Thus, female authors brought a more positive image of women in Africa; one in which women could recognize themselves.

Another central issue in the texts of African women authors is the denunciation of the injustices perpetrated against women in patriarchal societies; they focused on deconstructing the functioning of the social order to show how it oppressed women and deprived them of their individuality and of their freedom. They point out the pressure that women have to endure when they are required to strictly follow the demands that society makes on them. They also show the different forms of violence that women can be subjected to in society. The purpose is to help women identify the oppressive forces that operate against them and to help them challenge a system that works against their interests. By shedding light on the injustices that women were subjected to, female authors helped bring to the fore issues that had been ignored by male authors who saw them as secondary and relegated them to the margins. Issues related to women's living conditions under patriarchal rule were the main topic dealt with by different African women writers including the four authors dealt with in this work, namely Zimbabwean writer and activist Tsitsi Dangarembga, Egyptian feminist author Nawel El Saadawi, Algerian nephrologist and novelist Malika Mokeddem, and British Nobel prize winner Doris Lessing. In the case of Lessing, despite the fact that

she is not African in nationality, the fact that she lived in South Africa for twenty five years, from the age of five to the age of thirty, allowed her to acquire a cultural African identity that enabled her to write her first novel, set in South Africa, and in which she describes the society that she grew up in and that she knows from the inside. These authors describe the fight that women had to lead in order to obtain their most basic rights. They describe female characters who are victims of oppression of the patriarchal system and who have to assert themselves in order to reach self-actualization.

To best explore the main topic of this work, it seemed important to deal with works from different parts of the continent in order to show that the status of women is similar despite the geographical differences. In this regard, it was appropriate to select works from both North and Sub-Saharan Africa to show that in spite of the diversity of the culture, the situation of the female characters is very similar in patriarchal society. Another element that helps show the shared experiences of these women is the fact that the four novels dealt with here were published and set in four different decades over a period of fifty years which clearly indicates that there have been very few changes regarding the situation of women over the half century that these books cover. The fact that the female characters go through very similar ordeals emphasizes the idea that to the functioning of the patriarchal social order which puts these women in a position of inferiority and which deprives them of their basic rights as human beings.

The four authors, despite their different backgrounds and nationalities, deal with similar issues regarding women's condition. They focus on central and secondary female characters around which they build plots that concentrate on telling stories

from the side of women; the side that had been neglected for too long in a world made and ruled by men to suit the needs and desires of men. Their novels revolve around similar issues and themes that are the concern of most female writers. They attempt to identify the prejudices that work against women and to challenge the privileges that are granted to men in order to show that women need to be included at all levels of society's functioning and treated as men's partners. Yet, the four writers also rely on some specificities that are proper to their country, culture, and to the era in which they set their stories. For instance, Mokeddem and Saadawi include elements of religion and show that Islamism has an impact on the lives of women in society. As for Dangarembga and Lessing, they both deal with the issues related to race which plague the societies that they describe. The similarities and the specificities regarding the situations of the female characters in the four novels will help highlight the shared experiences of women in different societies. In fact, the comparison and contrast will permit a deeper understanding of women's different quests. It seems also important to stress the fact that the novels which will be dealt with contain some autobiographical aspects that are interesting in the sense that they show a parallel between the life experiences of the female authors and the experiences of their characters. This shows that the works of fiction are based on elements of reality which makes gives the novels a sociological dimension.

Malika Mokeddem is an Algerian author born in 1949 in Kénadsa, Saoura, in the west of the country. She was the first born of a family of thirteen children. Her father had been a nomad who had had to settle in order to support his family. In a society that privileged boys over girls, Mokeddem had to struggle in order to finish

high school, in a class in which she was the only girl. She became a doctor and then left for France in order to specialize in nephrology. She settled and lived in the city of Montpellier. Starting with her first novel in 1990, the plot of which is centered around the life of nomads, the horrors of colonialism, and the war for liberation, she published several works in which she deals with the realities of the Algerian society; she focuses on the hardships that women have to struggle with on a daily basis. She deals with different periods of Algerian history and how they affected the lives of women. She, for instance, sets different novels in the 1990's, including the one dealt with here. *L'interdite*, which was first published in 1993¹, is set at a time during which Algeria experiences a civil war that came to be known as 'the black decade' during which religious fundamentalist groups were in an open armed conflict with the government of the time which eventually turned into a civil war.

Many of Mokeddem's novels contain elements that can be considered autobiographic as she seems to use her own life experiences to create characters and situations that reflect a reality she is trying to denounce. *L'interdite*, which can be translated as 'the forbidden woman,' tells the story of Sultana, a young Algerian doctor who comes back from Montpellier, where she had been living for years, to her native village of Ain Nekhla to attend the funeral of her friend, and former lover, doctor Yacine Meziane. As the story of the main character unfolds, it becomes clear that "... Mokeddem's writings echo her awareness, from childhood on, of Algeria's injustices towards girls as well as her determination to find a way around them" (Evans 36). Besides, the novel also with themes of exile, identity, and alienation

¹ A translation into English is available with the title *The Forbidden Woman* translated by K. Melissa Marcus and published in 1998 by the University of Nebraska Press.

through the experience of Sultana and also that of the other main character, Vincent, a French man who comes to Algeria in an attempt to find a connection with the Algerian woman whose kidney was transplanted to him.

Zimbabwean writer Tsitsi Dangarembga was born in 1959 in Mutaka, colonial Rhodesia. When she was two, she had to follow her parents who went to pursue graduate studies in England; they came back home when she was seven. Her education was in English until she reached high school and she had to re-learn her mother tongue, Shona. When she finished high school, she started studying medicine at Cambridge, but she left before graduating and she enrolled at the University of Harare in Zimbabwe to study psychology. There, she joined the Students' Drama Club in which she participated in the writing and production of several plays. Her first novel, *Nervous Conditions*, was published in 1988. Similarly to Mokeddem's novel, Dangarembga's work shows many parallels with her own life. As the title which is taken from Sartre's introduction to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) suggests, the novel deals with issues of identity related to colonialism and the impact it had on the people of Africa in general and Zimbabwe in particular. The character of Nyasha, a young woman who had been raised in England as her parents studied there, struggles to reconnect with her culture, language, and traditions when she comes back home. The female character seems to reflect Dangarembga's own experience.

The novel which is narrated by the main character Tambudzai, who is often called Tambu, is set in a village in the Rhodesia of the 1960's. As Tambu tells the story of her family and her community, Dangarembga analyses and deconstructs the way in which patriarchy functions. Through her main character, her mother Mainin,

her aunts Maiguru and Lucia, and her cousin Nyasha, the author reflects the experiences of women in their patriarchal society; she shows the challenges that they have to face in order to live as independent individuals. The author also tells the story of several men: Tambu's uncle Babamukuru, her father Jeremiah, her cousin Chido, and even her brother Nhamo who dies early in the novel; she shows how these men who are subjected to the injustices of the colonial system struggle to keep their dignity, but at the same time exercise the same oppression on women in society.

Doris Lessing, whose maiden name is Tayler, was born in Persia in 1919, of British parents. In 1925, her father took his family to South Africa where he had bought a farm from which he, later on, made a very meager living. She stopped her studies at the age of fourteen and continued to self-educate through reading. Later on, she started working in Salisbury at a telephone company first and then as a legal secretary. "In Salisbury Doris Tayler led the lively social life of a young, unmarried white girl in the 1930's" (Whittaker 1). She got married twice and divorced both times. She has lived in London since 1949, where she published her first novel, *The Grass Is Singing*, in 1950. It was an immediate success. "In this first novel Doris Lessing rehearses themes which recur in her later works. These include the relationship between the dominated races, the taboos which operate and the methods by which the *status quo* is maintained" (Whittaker 22). Lessing's novel also seems to include some autobiographical aspects as the setting of the novel is an isolated farm in South Africa which was probably inspired by the one she was raised on as a child. The time that the main character of the novel spends in the city working as a secretary also seems to refer to Doris Lessing's own experience.

The work tells the story of Mary Turner, whose murder is announced in the first paragraph of the novel. In spite of a difficult childhood, Mary manages to get educated and find a job in the city; she lives quite happily until her early thirties when she marries Dick and moves to live on his farm. Yet, Mary cannot find any satisfaction in her husband's company or in her new life. She slowly drifts into a mental breakdown that leaves her barely capable of maintaining human contact. At the lowest point of her depression, the only person with whom she can communicate is her black servant, Moses, to whom she is attracted. Moses murders her, out of jealousy it seems, when their relationship takes a turn that he does not like. Similarly to the other female writers dealt with in this work Doris Lessing tries to analyze the situation of women in society. "... Lessing looks at female sexuality, and at the ways in which the balance of power is achieved between the sexes in her first close analysis of the dynamics of marriage. She also looks at the breakdown and fragmentation of an individual personality" (Whittaker 22). Her novel provides a very good insight into what a woman could go through because of the demands and pressures of society.

Nawel el Saadawi is not only a writer; she is also a doctor in psychiatry and a feminist activist. She was born in Egypt, in the village of Kafr Talha, in 1931. She was raised in an educated family and her father encouraged her to study at the Faculty of Medicine at Cairo, from which she graduated in 1955. Mainly thanks to her field practice and her work expertise, Saadawi soon became familiar with the different forms of pain that women experienced in her country. She used this experience to denounce the practice of female genital mutilation or FMG to which she herself had been subjected to as a little girl. She pointed to the injustices of her society and

challenged the patriarchal, religious and even political authorities. “Her outspoken views regarding FGM and her criticism of the government’s handling of the issue, plus her first book, *Women and Sex*, published in 1972, thrust into a headlong confrontation with political and religious authorities that would continue throughout her life”(Sadiqi 285). Her work led her to have access to the lives of different categories of women in both the rural and urban areas of Egypt.

She also worked on the mental aspect of women’s health in hospitals and in prisons. It was this experience that allowed her to write *Woman at Point Zero*, first published in 1975 in Arabic under the title *Emra’a enda noktāt el sifr* (Sadiqi 284). In fact, the first narrator in the novel is a doctor who works in the Qanatir prison and who reports the story of the main character Firdaus. The reader hears the story from Firdaus’ own mouth as she narrates it to the doctor right before she is executed. The terrible life story of this woman sheds light on the different forms of abuse that women in Egypt were subjected to and on the terrible effects and consequences that they have on the lives of women. Throughout this work, Saadawi exposes the injustice of patriarchy as well as the hypocrisy of the political and religious forces working in the country.

Due to the important place that they hold in their respective national literatures, and to the influence that they have in African and in world literature in general, the four authors and their works received quite an important amount of critical attention. Yet, this is the first time that they are approached in the same work and from a feminist perspective. The four novels will be analyzed with the purpose of focusing on

the major themes related to women's struggle with patriarchy and to their quest for self-actualization.

The topic dealt with in the present work revolves around probing into the different experiences that African women go through in patriarchal society. The purpose is to analyze the situation of different female characters, who, from birth to death, have to live under the rule of a system that gives them a secondary position. The situation of these women will be discussed in an attempt to understand their experiences and to expose the injustices that they are subjected to at the hands of patriarchy in the form of pressures and intimidations, verbal abuse, and even physical violence. Another main goal is to look into the consequences that these injustices have on the lives of women. One of the main consequences which will be considered is the alienation of women within society. It will be shown that the emotional and mental distress experienced by many female characters is the result of a social process of alienation by which they find themselves ostracized and estranged from society and, sometimes, even from themselves.

Some of these female characters eventually come to view their situation in society as unfair and they understand that the structure of the social system in which they live works against them. They sometimes attempt to escape their the status quo by following their own needs and desires instead of accepting the restrictive gender roles attributed to them. They try to carve a space for themselves outside the margins in which society expects them to exist. These female characters desperately seek for what has been called by scholars and critics self-actualization. The term was first coined by German neurologist and psychologist Kurt Goldstein in his 1934 work *The Organism*.

In his 1943 paper “A Theory of Human Motivation,” American psychologist Abraham Harold Maslow gives the first definition to the concept of self-actualization. For him, “It refers to the desire for self-fulfillment, namely, to the tendency for [humans] to become actualized in what [they are] potentially. This tendency might be phrased as the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming” (29-30). Maslow places self-actualization at the highest level of his hierarchy of needs as for him it is the ultimate goal that motivates humans and which they all aspire to reach.

In this sense, it will be argued that female characters want to reach a stage of their lives in which they could really be who they wanted to be as fulfilled and independent individuals. Although they follow different paths and have different attitudes, these women have the same objective of reaching self-realization through the possibility of living a life that would be satisfactory to them regardless of the demands of society. Despite their differences, they seem to all long for the same thing, namely finding their own purpose in life and proving that their value should be attached to what they are able to achieve as individuals rather than to their ability and willingness to conform and follow the social rules. Yet, these women do not want to completely and blindly sever their ties in society in an attempt to liberate themselves from patriarchal oppression. On the contrary, many of these characters deeply aspire to contribute to their respective societies. They want an opportunity to evolve within the scope of the family and the community rather than selfishly think about their personal freedoms and achievements. However, it is not always possible for them to reach a satisfactory balance between the strict demands of society and their own personal

ambitions. More often than not, the reconciliation between the two is quite unattainable for women despite their committed efforts.

In order to best deal with the topic at hand, it seems appropriate to formulate a few questions regarding the situation of African women in patriarchal society. The first set of questions that will be asked will help establish the initial situation of women, the one from which their quest starts. First, how does patriarchy function? And how do the discriminations on which it is founded impact the lives of women? The purpose here is to establish that the very nature of patriarchy works against women and that they are oppressed and discriminated against on the basis of their gender. They are also subjected to different forms of abuse which have pernicious effects on the lives of women.

The second major question is related to the consequences of patriarchy's oppression of women. How do the pressures and intimidations that the female characters experience affect their perception of their own identity? The argument that will be proposed is that they are alienated in society as a result of the discrepancy that exists between what society imposes on them and their own perception of their needs and desires. The roles that they are required to perform are restrictive to the point of suppressing the free will and the individuality of these characters. The only way for them to try and liberate themselves seems to be through resistance. But how can they face the established status quo? And do they all have the same reactions in the face of patriarchal oppression? An attempt will be made at identifying and analyzing the means by which African women attempt to resist as a first step towards self-actualization.

Since one important purpose of this work is to see things from the point of view of women, to tell their stories, and to create space for women and their experiences, the most appropriate approach seems to read the texts dealt with from a feminist perspective. In fact, the principal goal of feminism has always been to fight for women's rights in society. Despite the different views of the various writings about feminism and its history, there seems to be a consensus among scholars to say that throughout history different instances can be found of women attempting to improve their lives by challenging the social order which is precisely the main argument of the present research.

Feminism is considered to have started, in its modern² form, with what has been called first wave feminism which is said to have been initiated in the late eighteenth century by women like Mary Wollstonecraft who published her book *Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792. Most women of this generation were concerned with the status of women in society and the fact that they were subjected to rules that made of them second class citizens. At its early stages this wave was influenced by different socio-political changes that had been happening at that time, like the French Revolution. Some of the main claims were related to the right to vote and the right to own property. At a time when women were considered to belong to their fathers and were passed on as property to their husbands, these seemed to be the most important aspects of the law to be challenged. Later on, women started to fight for the right to

² The word 'modern' is important since there are earlier texts that can be considered "feminist" in the sense that they dealt with women's place in society. One author that can be mentioned is Italian-born French poet and philosopher Christine de Pizan whose works *The Treasure of the City of Ladies* and *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405), that focus on the education of women, made her reputation as a precursor when it comes to the defense of women's rights.

have access to education and employment. Yet, most women belonging to this wave wanted to remain moderate in their demands and emphasized the necessity for women to take care of their homes and families.

The second wave of feminism started after the Second World War and it really flourished in the 1960's, once again at a time of social and political unrest. Some women who considered that old (first wave) feminism was dead saw the necessity to bring back to the fore a movement that would fight for the improvement of women's condition in society. This wave, with major texts like Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), is considered to focus more on the idea of liberation for women. It emphasized the necessity for women to collectively organize in order make their demands. Yet, this movement which was supposed to work for the benefits of all women seemed mainly to focus on western white middle-class women. Thus, it was considered by many black women, who were active at that time within the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, as non-inclusive for them since it did not take into consideration the double oppression, of both race and gender, which they were subjected to. This led African American women to develop the social theory Womanism, their own vision of feminism, which was more representative of their needs and less radical in the formulation of its demands, and more importantly, which took into consideration their history as women of color. Womanism considered that black women needed to exist freely within their culture and as integral part of their community. Although the term was coined by Alice Walker in 1979, many other African American women contributed to the development of the movement.

In the 1990's came what is known as third wave feminism, which has also been called post-feminism. According to scholars, this wave's ideas and objectives are quite complicated to define. Third wave feminists wanted to move forward with new concerns as they considered that the previous wave was outdated since many of its demands had been met. Yet, they saw the need for the feminist movement to continue because a number of the achievements that had been taken for granted were being undermined by the media. For example, images and representations of women on television and in the movie industry were still very restrictive. One new claim was political representation for women as, in spite of women starting to access positions of power in governments, representation was still very limited in parliaments and governments.

Another important concern was sexual harassment. The debate revolved around women's freedom to wear whatever they wanted and the focus was on the fact that men had to respect the boundaries set by women. Another issue addressed by third wave feminists was that of women's body image. The way women were portrayed in the media constituted a real concern for feminists as the image can affect women in their perception of their own bodies and affect their self-worth. One example is the controversy that happened in the late 1990's and early 2000's around the weight of models on fashion runways and how the image of extremely thin women popularized by fashion magazines and fashion shows could affect young women, sometimes even leading to eating disorders like anorexia. The attitude of this wave has also been said to be more inclusive in the sense that it handles issues that may affect women from

different classes, different ethnicities, and even sexual orientations. It also believes that men can play a part in creating a more egalitarian society. (Osborne 33-35)

The main text which is said to have served as a foundation to many feminist theoretical works is Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. In fact, since it was first published in 1949 and that it covered several issues regarding the position of women in patriarchal society, it laid the foundation for many of the scholars that followed. According to Sue Thornham, "...it is De Beauvoir's account of the cultural construction of the woman as *Other* which laid the foundations for much of the theoretical work of the 1970's" (Gamble 29). It is through major feminist texts that the four novels dealt with in this work will be approached. The following works, which will serve as theoretical basis for the carrying out of the present research, are among the most prominent and they contain the most relevant concepts to this work.

The first concept which will be relied on in the analysis of African women's quest for self-actualization is the oppressive attitude of patriarchy as an institution. The simplest definition of patriarchy is that it is the power and authority of the father as head of the family and the power and authority of man as decision maker in society. With the feminist movement, patriarchy came to be seen more as an institution which is hierarchically organized and in which women are kept in a secondary position; they are objects upon which the power, authority, and agency of men are exercised. According to scholars, one of the first feminist intellectuals to deconstruct the structure of patriarchy and to denounce its practices against women in the Anglo-Saxon world is Kate Millett. According to Professor Sue Thornham, in her book *Sexual Politics*, first published in 1970, Millett contributes to "...the broadening of the term 'patriarchy'

beyond its original definition as the rule of a dominant elder male within a traditional kinship structure, to mean the institutionalized oppression of all women by all men” (Gamble 31). In her book, she argues that patriarchy is an institution with political implications and that sex is a status category to keep half of the population under the power of the other half (Millett 23-24). In the second chapter of the book entitled “Theory of Sexual Politics,” she explains that the power of patriarchy rests on and is maintained through the reinforcement and legitimization brought to it by ideology, biology and society, class, economy and education, force, anthropology, and psychology. The scholars in these different fields, almost exclusively male, attempt to justify the functioning of the system and they try to show the necessity to keep it in place regardless of how unfair it might be to women. Millett’s ideas are of a crucial importance in this work as they serve as a basis in developing the argument of the first chapter. In fact, her contestation of the hierarchy that exists between men and women in patriarchal societies will be relied upon.

Besides the institutionalized oppression exercised over women through patriarchy, Millett advances another important idea which will be relied upon in this work. She explains that in addition to being viewed as secondary members of society, women have not been given the opportunity to build any type of consciousness about how they view themselves or other women in society. For her, “The image of women as we know it is an image created by men and fashioned to suit their needs” (Millett 46). This is one of the reasons, as will be shown in the following chapters, which will lead women to feel the necessity to go on a journey to find their own selves. When they are deprived from even the possibility to construct their identity in accordance

with their aspirations and needs, women start to experience a sense of estrangement from their societies. In more ways than one, women are coerced into becoming the individuals that society expects them to be by conforming to the gender roles that they are expected to perform as women. This is one of the major issues that lead to their alienation.

Another feminist thinker who deals with patriarchy as an institution is Eva Figs. In *Patriarchal Attitudes*, also published in 1970, she argues, in the chapter she entitles 'A Man's World,' that every aspect of life is shaped by men in order to satisfy their needs and desires and also for the purpose of keeping control over women in order to make them perform activities that best serve men and patriarchy. Figs argues that "Man's vision of woman is not objective, but an uneasy combination of what he wishes her to be and what he fears her to be, and it is to this mirror image that woman has had to comply" (Figs 17). The main idea here is that under the rule of patriarchy, women are not free to be independent individuals; their identity is constructed for them rather than by them. This problematic situation can be considered as the starting point of the pressures that women experience regarding the limiting of their evolution in society and which results in the distress that they feel when confronted with the obligation to deny their needs in order to comply with the demands that patriarchy makes of them

Eva Figs also proposes the idea that the functioning of patriarchy is more or less the same throughout history and in different cultures. She emphasizes the fact that the principles of patriarchy are the same when it comes to its treatment of women. She writes that "...patriarchal attitudes can survive intellectual change; the attitudes are

transmuted, adapted, but remain fundamentally what they had been for generations” (Figes 111). In this sense, it seems appropriate to say that Figes’ ideas are still relevant today and will be useful in showing the similarities of the experiences shared by the female characters coming from different cultures in the four novels to be studied in this research since they are all confronted to similar injustices in their patriarchal societies.

Another important concept which will be used in the handling of the main topic of the work is the concept of gender and gender roles. Ever since Simone De Beauvoir stated in *The Second Sex* that “On ne naît pas femme, on le devient” (35), the notion of social construction of gender became central to feminist studies. For her, woman in society is positioned as the ‘other’ as opposed to the male self. De Beauvoir explains that as she is the opposite of the subject, the woman becomes the object; she is denied both agency and subjectivity. The author further explains that the woman’s biological, psychological, and economic situation has been used against her in society. Thus, what really imprisons the woman in a position of ‘other’ is the way she is constructed by patriarchy. She is also required to accept and perform specific roles and duties, like those of wife and mother, regardless of her own needs and desires. Eva Figes also addresses this idea when she writes: “...woman is taught to desire not what her mother desires for herself, but what her father and all men find desirable in a woman. Not what she *is*, but should be” (Figes 17). Here, it becomes clear that in a patriarchal society, women are attributed an identity which society assumes they should have and they are denied their own potential identity.

One example of the negative consequences of these extreme gender roles is the creation of stereotyped images of women in literature. These images contribute to further imprison women within the perception of men and patriarchy; they are quite reductive and deprive women of any realistic representation within society. As Eva Figs explains:

...since the standard of womanhood is set by men for men and not by women, no relaxation of standards is allowable, she is either an absolute woman or nothing at all, totally rejected. This is one of the reasons why the male image of the woman has a tendency to split into two, into black and white, Virgin Mary and Scarlet Woman, angel of mercy and prostitute, gentle companion and intolerable bluestocking. (17-18)

Thus, these distinct and Manichean images reinforce the idea that in order to be accepted and valued in society, the woman has to conform to its requirements. Otherwise she is viewed as a threat to the balance and well being of the social order; she is rejected and abandoned by society. She is only praised in her capacity to submit and to strictly follow the rules regardless of her own needs and interests, and she is criticized, cast aside, and sometimes even punished when she behaves in a way that challenges what society expects of her gender.

For instance, these stereotyped images are ubiquitous in male-authored African works during the 1960's and 1970's as, for a long time men were the main producers of literary texts. They created female characters that reflected the roles that patriarchy had imposed and which became, and remained for a long time, the sole representations of women in literature. This situation as well as its consequences on women is formulated and explained by feminist critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their work *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, first published in 1979. As the second part of their title suggests,

they focus on the work that needs to be done by women in the field of literature in order for them to create a space and a voice for women in a field that had always been almost exclusively masculine. They emphasize the need for women to write from their own perspective. Since, as they explain, "...because a writer "fathers" his text, his literary creations ... are his possessions, his property. Having defined them in language and thus generated them, he owns them, controls them, and encloses them on the printed page" (Gilbert and Gubar 12). For the two authors, as long as men are the only producers of literature, and consequently of images of women, they will be the only ones to define what a woman should or should not be. Therefore, women will only read about women who were molded by men according to the demands of patriarchy.

For Gilbert and Gubar, before women writers can create female characters from their own perspective, they need to challenge the existing ones. They see that "...a woman writer must examine, assimilate and transcend the extreme images of "angel" and "monster" which male authors have generated for her" (Gilbert and Gubar 17). This is one of the main challenges for Female authors, including the four novelists dealt with in this work; they had to depart from the restrictive images of the passive and submissive or that of the hysterical woman in order to be able to address the difficulties that women are confronted to under the rule of patriarchy and create more positive representations of assertive and strong-willed female characters.

As it will be argued in the following chapters, the demands made by patriarchy on their sex as well as the restrictive representations made of them create within women a feeling of doubt regarding their own identity. A conflict arises between what

women experience, what they desire, and what they aspire to be and the roles that they are assigned by society. Feminist thinker Betty Friedan deals with this issue in her work *The Feminine Mystique*; she explains this idea in the preface to her book when she writes: “There was a discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform, the image that I came to call the feminine mystique” (Friedan i). Despite the fact that Friedan wrote the book to reflect the reality of the lives of white middle-class American women during the 1950’s and the 1960’s, her conclusions seem to be applicable to the situation of women all around the world as she simply points out the inconsistencies of the fact that women’s identity was not constructed by women but by patriarchy, an idea that Figes and Millet came to reinforce in the 1970’s.

What is even more interesting in Friedan’s work is that she analyses the results and consequences of this situation and how it affects the mental well being of women in society. She argues that despite the fact that American women were supposed to have everything a woman could desire, they still felt a deep dissatisfaction and a feeling of unease that she came to label ‘the problem that has no name’ because women were not able to identify or name the source of their anxiety. One of the women whom she interviews for her research tells her: “The tragedy was, nobody ever looked us in the eye and said you have to decide what you want to do with your life, besides being your husband’s wife and your children’s mother” (Friedan 53). Women are deprived of any possibility to decide for themselves and to express their needs, and this leads them to be at a loss when it comes to defining their own identity. For Friedan, “The feminine mystique permits, even encourages, women to ignore the

question of their identity” (Friedan 53). In fact, they are encouraged to follow a path which has already been drawn for them.

With time, this very often leads to a form of alienation within women as the more they try to conform to what society requires, the less fulfilled they feel. They are aware that the life they have is not the one they want, but they are often trapped within marriage and family life, or even before marriage, within restrictive family structures. Friedan argues that at the heart of the problem is the fact that women are not allowed to “fulfill their potentialities as human beings” ” (Friedan 58). She further explains that some women, even if they are aware of this identity crisis, manage to ignore it and continue to live according to the rules of society. For her, in doing so, they have “forfeited their own being” and have lost all hope of finding what she calls “completeness of self” ” (Friedan 340). She believes that women who have not completely surrendered are the ones who will be able to change their condition and improve their lives in society by focusing on their individuality, their needs and desires, and the possibility of achieving what they really want in their lives.

In order to deal with alienation and to analyze the state of mental and emotional distress that female characters experience, the research will rely on a social psychological perspective. The term alienation has been previously defined by different scholars. For example, Friedrich Hegel saw it as part of the process of self-creativity and self-discovery. Later on, Karl Marx perceived it as a consequence of the changes brought by capitalism, especially in the field of work. In the 1950’s the theory of social-psychology came to view that the individual reaches a state of alienation when they go through a process of separateness from society, thus, it considers

alienation as a social process. This serves the purpose of the work since one of the main objectives is to analyze how the structure and the rules of patriarchy oppress and ostracize women to the point of alienating them. It will be proposed that women's sense of estrangement is a direct result of the social pressure that they are subjected to. As James E. Twining writes in his article "Alienation as a Social Process:"

...it appears that alienation emerges in varying degrees in situations characterized by particular social structural conditions, such as those which subordinate individuals to segmented and routinized processes and rationalize such conditions as inevitable by the corresponding ideology. (Twining 427)

Thus, it can be said that the alienation of women within patriarchy is inherent to the social system and to its attitude towards women who are viewed as second class citizens. Since women cannot manage to attain their full potential as individuals and to achieve what would provide them with self-satisfaction under the rule of patriarchy, they are condemned to be estranged from society or to challenge its repressive authority. Before they are able to rebel and fight for self-actualization, they are very often trapped in an intermediary position in which they can identify their dissatisfaction, but they are not yet capable of questioning the authority of patriarchy.

This research is also going to rely on a number of important African feminist scholars and critics in order to carry out its objectives. In fact, a number of these scholars and critics have pointed to the fact that the African context is quite from the Western one, and thus, in order to best analyze works from African literature, one needs to understand them within the specificities of the African culture. The same has been said about feminism and feminist theory. In her book *Feminism and Gender Discourse: The African Experience*, Mobolanle E. Sotunsa writes: "Gender discourse evolves with the theory of feminism. However many African females feel uneasy

about using the term feminism to denote the African female experience in gender discourse” (30). It is understandable, regarding the history of the continent with colonialism and imperialism, that post-colonial writers would want to create a clear distinction between their works and Western texts. Yet, as will be proposed in this work, the experiences of women with patriarchy seem to be universal in the sense that all around the world this social structure seems to function in the exact same way despite the distinct cultural and historical contexts.

In his article “Fractured Feminism,” Nigerian professor of sociology ‘Lai Olorode proposes that “Feminism itself is concerned with women’s yearnings for freedom from oppression and from other forms of rights violation ... Women’s struggle to leverage their position vis-a-vis men is perhaps a universal phenomenon, but this leverage takes different forms” (11). In this sense, African authors are concerned with feminist issues within the context of their countries. They deal with women’s struggles in Africa. For Obioma Nnaemeka, “While claiming the feminist spirit and ideal – equity based on fairness and justice – in their respective traditional milieu and elsewhere, African women expand the horizon of feminist engagement by posing new questions and imposing new demands” (Arndt 10).

One of the first authors who combined feminist thought with an African context in her writing is the Ghanaian Ama Ata Aidoo, a member of the first generation of modern African female authors who writes fiction but also articles, essays, and reviews. Unlike other African female writers of her generation like Flora Nwapa, who are sometimes reluctant to do so, Aidoo identifies as a feminist. She writes: “Feminism is an essential tool in women’s struggles everywhere, and that includes African

women. Every woman, as well as every man, should be a feminist” (Aidoo 164). She believes that everyone in society should try to contribute to improving the lives of women. For her, feminism is not simply the affair of writers, scholars, or activists; she associates it with the development of the whole African continent as she writes:

If Africa is to develop, then first African women must get the best of what the environment can offer for their well-being and development; in primary health care; shelter; adequate nourishment; accessibility to suitable career opportunities; freedom from sexual harassment in the workplace; freedom over their wombs, and the end to all other forms of marginalization and tokenism. For some of us, the demand from society of these fundamentals constitutes the most important element in *our* feminist thought. (Aidoo 164)

This idea will be relied on in the work in order to analyze how African women suffer and aspire to improve their living conditions in patriarchal societies. In fact, in order to reach wholeness and self-actualization, African women must go through a process of resistance in order to regain agency, control over their bodies, and economic independence.

Another African scholar who contributed immensely to African literary criticism is Nigerian author Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie. In her book *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations* published in 1994, the author tackles different issues related to women in African literature at the centre of which is the idea of development. For her, women in Africa are weighed down by what she calls the mountains that they have to carry on their backs and she proposes different ways for them to liberate themselves. Similarly to Aidoo, Ogundipe-Leslie sees that the evolution of women is closely related to the evolution of society in general; she believes that literature can contribute to this development as, for her, it is a reflection of society and at the same time one means by which society can be influenced. For her,

“...we can read back from literature to perceive the outlines of the society which produced it” (Ogundipe-Leslie 45). In this sense, the contexts in which a work is set and produced are essential to understanding the ins and outs of the said work. She explains the importance of taking this into consideration when she writes:

In considering the sociology of the author, it is necessary to pay attention to the artist herself and elicit information on how she situates herself in social and historical terms. We must note the contemporary attitude of society toward art, and the artist’s own attitude toward society and art – whether it be one of harmony and agreement, evasion or retreat, protest or rebellion. (Ogundipe-Leslie 45)

This idea will be used to analyze the attitudes and the positions of the four authors regarding the situation of women in their countries. Through their female characters, they portray the experiences of African women on the path to self-realization. The focus is mainly placed on the difficulties that they have to overcome and on the challenges that they are presented with. The lives of female characters reflect the situations of women who have to deal with daily struggles in the hope to eventually achieve the freedom that they strive for.

In order to approach the works within the context of African literary criticism, the works of two critics are very appropriate and pertinent: Florence Stratton and Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi. In fact, in her book *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* published in 1994, Stratton provides a very helpful context for the study and analysis for African works within a gender discourse. She deals with the idea that for a long time, women had been kept away from the African literary scene by the means of what she calls ‘exclusionary practices.’ She sees this as the main cause for the absence or for the stereotyped presentation of female characters in African literature. She also analyzes the works of pioneering authors like Grace Ogot

and Flora Nwapa and she shows how their texts constitute a turning point for women as they challenged the supremacy of men and patriarchy within the context of African culture and community. She also focuses on the creation of an African female literary tradition and the importance of using literature as a means to challenge the established social order and create a space for women through analyzing and valorizing works of African women authors like Buchi Emecheta and Mariama Bâ. Stratton finally deals with the idea that gender discourse can bring change as some male writers like Chinua Achebe and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o show an evolution in their works regarding the position of women in their societies. In fact, in their later works, both authors devote more space to female characters who are more dynamic and who actively participate in the evolution of the plots of the novels.

Similarly, in her work published in 1997 *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference*, Nfah-Abbenyi provides an interesting approach to tackle female African writers' texts. She focuses on how African women were able to reconstruct an identity and subjectivity through writing. She deals with authors like Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, and Tsitsi Dangarembga to show how their texts focus on telling the story from the perspective of women. She devotes a chapter to female writers from Cameroun: Delphine Zanga Tsogo, Calixthe Beyala, and Werewere Liking in which she explains how their works had been ignored in favor of those of their male counterparts. Nfah-Abbenyi also tackles texts by Miriama Bâ from Senegal, Mariam Tlali and Bessie Head from South Africa and she analyzes how these writers redefined women's difference within the African context. Thus, it is through relying on major concepts from feminist theoretical works and through African

criticism that the main research questions are going to be handled and the selected texts will be analyzed.

In order to properly carry out the research this thesis will be divided into four chapters; each of them will deal with one important step and aspect of women's lives. The first chapter mainly deals with patriarchal oppression; it aims to have a close look at how the hierarchic organization of this social order works against women to the advantage of men. In the first part, it will be argued that patriarchy's bias against women is expressed in the form of oppressive and restrictive rules that are formulated in order to keep women under control. The second part will also be devoted to the examination of violence as one of the means by which patriarchy attempts to keep the upper hand over women. It is the concrete expression of the pressure and intimidation that are exercised over women in society and by which the threat of reprisal transforms into a tangible administration of insults and beatings. The chapter will focus on two aspects of violence, the moral and the physical.

Chapter two will revolve around women's alienation and their mental disintegration which result from the constant oppression that they experience in society. The chapter will analyze the process of socialization and how the social construction of gender roles, which starts to work at the birth of individuals, leads some women to internalize the rules of patriarchy so deeply that they help enforce them to the detriment of other women. Then the focus will be placed on women's quest for identity; women attempt to construct their own personalities as independent individuals, but in the process, they are often confronted to the images and gender roles that are prescribed for them by patriarchy. This situation creates a social

alienation by which women feel estranged from the identity which is imposed on them by society. Their constant struggle often leads to women feeling trapped and helpless as they are unable to escape social pressure. The result is often seen in the form of mental breakdowns which illustrate the deep pain and sufferings that women feel and which they are often incapable of expressing. In fact, in patriarchal society, women are often confined to a world of silence and taboos. One major illustration of the pressure and intimidation that women go through is the fact that they are deprived of their voice. They are taught, very early in their lives, that they should not complain. They experience the worst forms of violence at the hands of men who are the closest to them like family members and husbands, so they are expected to simply accept the legitimacy of this authority and never question it.

The third chapter will tackle the crucial issue of self-actualization. First, it will deal with women's resistance to patriarchal oppression. In the journey that they take to find fulfillment, women understand that the only way to reach self-actualization is to face oppression. Some of them openly rebel against patriarchal authority and attempt to free themselves by challenging the social order; these women want to claim their right to be independent individuals in a clear and straightforward way. They try to follow their own path regardless of society's opinions. Other women prefer to resort to negotiation; they attempt to find a place for themselves without directly confronting patriarchal rule. These women try to find balance between what is demanded of them and what they want for themselves. Another form of resistance which will be dealt with in this chapter is that of the women writers who attempt to challenge patriarchal authority through their works. They present diversified images of women who struggle

everyday to improve their living conditions under patriarchal rule. Then, the chapter will deal with the end of the journey for women. In the last stage of their quest, some female characters manage to achieve self-realization and reach the goal of living their life as fulfilled individuals with the consent of society or in spite of its disapproval. In fact, some of them succeed in securing a certain degree of freedom which is accepted by their society while others take their liberty by force without regard to the social norms of conduct. It will be shown that there are various ways for women to live a satisfactory life; as they take alternative journeys, women reach different destinations. Yet, other women never manage to escape society's oppression; their attempts fail as they are confronted to forces that are too strong for them to challenge and they never succeed in reaching their goal. In this chapter, it will be argued that some female characters find peace only through death, which for them comes to represent liberation from the suffocating life they are forced to live under patriarchal rule.

Oppression, alienation, resistance, and eventually self-actualization are the different steps that constitute African women's quest for fulfillment in the four novels dealt with in this work. These will be probed into in order to see how women manage to move from a state of subordination to a position of agency and from voiceless females to independent individuals.

Chapter one: Oppression

In order to probe into women's struggle to reach self-actualization against the rule of patriarchy in *L'interdite*, *Nervous Conditions*, *The Grass Is Singing*, and *Woman at Point Zero*, one has to establish the context into which these female characters are born. Their struggle is made necessary by the oppressive social structure that places them in a position of inferiority and that restricts their freedom by limiting the roles they are allowed to perform in society. Women, who are defined as men's 'other,' are denied the position of agency as patriarchy demands of them to submit to the authority of the male members of society. In order to make them comply, pressure is exercised over women. Often starting within the family, the restrictions that are imposed on women might also be inflicted by their community, or even society as a whole. Under the rule of patriarchy, women are also subjected to different types of moral and physical violence. These forms of abuse can be considered as an integral part of the functioning of patriarchy as they are institutionalized and used against women in a systematic way in order to enforce patriarchal authority.

1. Patriarchal rule

The four novels dealt with in the present work are concerned with the lives, and sometimes the deaths, of different female characters who struggle to reach self-actualization against the rule of patriarchy. In these works, women find themselves trapped in different life situations that are imposed on them by the structure of their societies; a structure which is mainly based on the oppression of women and the empowerment of men.

This section is concerned with analyzing how patriarchy operates in the four novels and how it overpowers women. The functioning of this social system will be deconstructed in order to show how its principles have prevented and still prevent women from finding a space as free and fulfilled individuals. In her book *Gender Divisions and Social Change*, Nickie Charles writes:

Patriarchy has been defined from within feminism as ... the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men – by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, language, customs, etiquette, education and division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female everywhere is subsumed under the male (Charles 1).

From the perspective of feminism, which will be used in this chapter, it will be argued that each of the four novelists has included in her work elements which will be analyzed to illustrate how the patriarchal system, with all its components, serves as a deterrent for women's development. It will be shown that the different types of potential forms of oppression mentioned by Nickie Charles are materialized by the four women writers, Malika Mokeddem, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Doris Lessing and Nawel El Sadaawi.

In order to best show and analyze the mechanisms of the functioning of patriarchal society, the focus will be put on the fact that this structure is first and foremost based on a strong intrinsic hierarchy that works against women. This unequal structuring of society is what engenders the different forms of oppression that women are subjected to. Then the causes for this bias and how it materializes in the lives of women will be probed into in order to better understand the process by which patriarchal rule is perpetuated and how devastating it is for women who eventually have to fight against it in order to reach self-actualization.

1.1. Patriarchal Society's structure

“Patriarchy is a social system in which structural differences in privilege, power and authority are invested in masculinity and the cultural, economic and/or social position of men.” (Cranny-Francis et. al. 15). This definition seems as clear as it is concise and it offers an almost neutral and scientific explanation of the concept of patriarchy. Yet, it fails to convey the position of women in this system as it only refers to the place that men hold in patriarchal society. The definition, therefore, echoes one of the main aspects of the system which is the marginalization of women. It can be argued that patriarchy undermines the woman's presence and her role in society to the benefit of man's power.

Despite the diversity and differences of human societies and the several historical changes that humanity had to experience, patriarchy seems to be universal; its principles are the same in all the communities that fall under its rule. This system has been perpetuated for centuries; it was seen as necessary and unquestionable. This idea has been justified by many thinkers and philosophers who attempted to explain it by the ‘natural’ inferiority of women and their inability to lift themselves up to the position of men. In her article “Patriarchal Thought and the Drive for Knowledge,” feminist Scholar and Duke University Professor Toril Moi gives a clear example of this attitude when she quotes the opinion of German philosopher Hegel on the position of women in society. He writes:

Women may be capable of education, but they are not made for the more advanced sciences, for philosophy and certain forms of artistic production which require universality. Women may have ideas, taste, and elegance, but they do not have the ideal. The difference between men and women is like that between animals and plants; men correspond to animals, while women correspond to plants

because they are more of a placid unfolding, the principle of which is the unity of feeling. When women hold the helm of government, the state is at once in jeopardy, because women regulate their actions not by the demands of universality, but by arbitrary inclinations and options. (qtd. in Moi 195)

Women's oppression is, therefore, explained by their own nature rather than by the principles of male dominance. The structure of patriarchy is normalized and justified as one based on biological and "natural rules."

This idea was strongly challenged by American feminist writer and activist Kate Millet in her work *Sexual Politics*. She puts forward the notion that women are placed and kept in an inferior position because patriarchy wants to protect the power that is granted to men and which is exercised over women in a deliberate and institutionalized manner all the while justifying this hierarchy on the basis of nature. She advances that,

Perhaps patriarchy's greatest psychological weapon is simply its universality and longevity. A referent scarcely exists which might be contrasted or by which it might be confuted. While the same might be said of class, patriarchy has still more tenacious or powerful hold through its successful habit of passing itself off as nature. (Millet 58)

Patriarchy simply places women where it needs them to be regardless of their well being and of their own needs and desires.

The concrete materialization of these principles in patriarchal society can best be observed through a close scrutiny of the functioning of gender. It is, in fact, in the construction of the system of gender roles that the idea of women's subordination to men becomes clear. Therefore, an articulate definition of gender seems necessary in order to understand how it has been, and is still, used against women.

Feminist critics and scholars consider that Simone De Beauvoir's most famous sentence "On ne naît pas femme, on le devient." (Simone De Beauvoir. *Le Deuxième*

Sexe II : L'expérience Vécue 35) provides the best definition of gender as a social construct. With her book, Beauvoir introduced the notion of difference between the biological sex and the social construction of gender. This could be seen as a turning point for feminist literary criticism because the idea of the immutability of women's biology was going to be effectively challenged. In fact, once it had been established that individuals behave according to the requirements and norms of society and not according to their sex, women could no longer be imprisoned in their body or discarded from social life because of the limits of their physical abilities.

Yet, the task was going to prove more difficult than it appeared at the beginning. As it will be showed, many thinkers came to argue that the concept of gender in patriarchal societies is itself based on biology. As mentioned previously, gender has been defined as the distinction that exists between the scientific and the social attributes that make the difference between a male and a female. As Karen L. Kinneer puts it in her book *Women in the Third World: A Reference Handbook*:

Sex roles are behaviors that are determined by biological differences between women and men, such as pregnancy, lactation, erection and ejaculation. Gender roles are behaviors that are determined by the social and cultural context in which people live and how they define femininity and masculinity. All societies use gender as a primary means of determining the division of labor and the provision of rights and responsibilities for citizens throughout the world. (Kinneer 4)

Kinneer's definition introduces a new level to the concept of gender; it appears that its function is not only pointing the differences, but also determining the role that individuals are going to play in society. Despite the fact that they differ from one society to another, gender roles seem to function according to the same pattern in all societies.

Female oppression is going to result from the fact that in the creation of gender roles patriarchy put men in a superior position to women. Then, what, at first, could be considered as a set of rules organizing society comes to be viewed as a partial system, especially by the feminists who want to question the status quo of their societies. Yet, the task was not a simple one to be undertaken, and they still find difficulties today as “feminists ... find themselves confronting one universal – that, whatever power or status may be accorded to women in a given culture, they are still, in comparison to men devalued as ‘the second sex’” (Greene and Kahn 2). The fact that they are considered as men’s ‘other’ and put in a position of weakness has enabled patriarchy to keep women under control. Their own nature has been used as a justification for women’s marginalization and oppression.

It is through these aspects that illustrate patriarchal society’s biased structure that women’s oppression can best be observed in the four novels dealt with in this dissertation. By studying and analyzing various situations in the lives of the different female characters, it will be seen that patriarchal oppression is similarly experienced by women in a number of societies and through the different decades during which the novels are set.

1.1.1. Sultana’s impass

« Je sus née dans la seule impasse du ksar. Une impasse sans nom. » (Mokeddem, *L’interdite* 11). This sentence, with which Malika Mokeddem opens her novel *L’interdite*, introduces the situation of the female protagonist of the work. Since the author uses the first person narrator, Sultana announces her own entrapment by using the word ‘impasse.’ She also sets the tone for the situation of the other female

characters who experience oppression and imprisonment under the pressure of a patriarchal society that has a very strong hold over its members. It uses different aspects of tradition and culture against women in order to keep them silent and under control.

In the novel, the main story is that of Sultana who left her Algerian village of Ain Nakhla to study and live in France. As she comes back after the death of her friend Yacine, she is submerged by the violence and the oppression of a system that she had been raised to know, to fear, and to loath. She seems to have carried it with her, in her flesh, and she recognizes it immediately:

Je n'ai rien oublié. Ni cette curiosité qui cingle. Ni cette ingérence qui s'arroge tous les droits. Quand l'inquisition est érigée en civilité, les questions sont des sommations et se taire devient un aveu d'infamie... Je n'ai rien oublié de mes terreurs d'antan, non plus. Sous leur emprise, mes yeux s'effaçaient de tout, bannissaient même ceux qui me témoignaient de la compassion... Je n'ai pas oublié que les garçons de mon pays avaient une enfance malade, gangrenée. Je n'ai pas oublié leurs voix claires qui ne tintent que d'obscénités. Je n'ai pas oublié que, dès leur plus jeune âge, l'autre sexe est déjà un fantôme dans leurs envies, une menace confuse. Je n'ai pas oublié leurs yeux séraphiques, quand leur bouche en cœur débite les pires insanités. Je n'ai pas oublié qu'ils rouent de coups les chiens, qu'ils jettent la pierre et l'injure aux filles et aux femmes qui passent. (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 14-15)

When she comes back to her country, Sultana is once again assailed and confronted with the attitude of patriarchy towards women. Her description shows a system that is full of contained violence and contempt; women are discriminated against and put in the position of the inferior and the enemy. All the forms of violence seem to be justified and perpetuated. So much so that after many years in exile, as she calls it, Sultana still remembers all the aspects of the oppression. She describes being a woman as equal to being a criminal in the eyes of the men of her society. She is guilty of

existing, of being the other. Therefore, she deserves to be treated with disdain and violence.

As Mokeddem proceeds with the telling of her story, we are introduced to the lives of different women who suffer from the rule of patriarchy, for example, the two sisters Samia and Dalila whose gender is used against them by their father and their brothers. Indeed, when one looks closely into how the system of gender operates in society, one can see that this system is neither neutral nor fair. It is, in fact, based on a social division of individuals, and in this division all individuals are not equal. In *Gender Studies: Terms and Debates*, Cranny-Francis et. al. argue:

Not only does the system of gender divide the human race into two categories, it privileges the male over the female. Gender operates as a set of hierarchically arranged roles in modern society which makes the masculine half of the equation positive and the feminine negative ... This binary division of gender can take several forms. The two halves can seem to be equal but opposite, in a complementary relationship; as the Ying/Yang symbol of Chinese philosophy. However, often the two halves will be typified as opposite and with the female in the inferior position. (Cranny-Francis et. al.1-2)

Thus, patriarchy is a system that organizes society in terms of separation of gender roles, but it also, and more importantly, gives the privileged position to the male component. This position allows men first to be brought up into a world in which they are more valued than women, and then it gives them the right to exercise power over the female component of society. Then, it comes to be taken for granted that “men’s tasks – whatever they may be – are universally valued more highly than women’s.” (Charles 19). Accordingly, women will be automatically treated as the inferiors of men and their contributions to society, in whatever field and however essential they may be to the life and to the functioning of the community, will always be considered as less

important than the achievements of men thus limiting both the influence and the value of these women in their societies.

This reflects the situation of Samia and Dalila. Mokeddem introduces the reader to the difficulties endured by young women in Algeria through the character of the little girl Dalila who was born in a family of seven brothers. The little girl describes her daily life to Vincent, when she first meets him in the desert, and the feeling that seems omnipresent in the discourse of Dalila is fear. First, she is scared to take the drawing that Yacine wanted to give her back home. She explains her attitude: « Chez moi, ils crieront. Ils me taperont. Ils me laisseront plus sortir. Ils me couperont de l'école. » (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 34). The reaction that Dalila describes is full of violence, and although it might seem excessive to the reader, it is a reality that the girl knows about because of what happened to her sister. Despite her young age, she has already internalized what she is allowed to do and what is forbidden by patriarchal society, which in her life is represented by her brothers.

She has been a witness of the oppression of her sister which she explains: « Elle aime pas obéir et elle veut pas se marier. Ils ont trouvé beaucoup de maris. Mais elle, elle dit toujours non. Elle fait toujours des études, maintenant dans Lafrance. Et après elle veut plus venir » (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 36). Samia's desire for education is perceived as a rebellion by her brothers. Her refusal to conform to the gender role prescribed for her by rejecting marriage infuriates her brothers. They consider that since she has challenged the supreme authority of patriarchy, she no longer deserves to be part of the family or a part of society. The treatment her sister receives makes

Dalila aware of the risks of being a girl in this society. Despite the fact that she recognized the injustice, Dalila still conforms to the norms; it is a question of survival.

Her brothers are not educated and some of them are unemployed, but they all have the right to exercise power over the women of the family, Samia, Dalila, and even their mother. Their position as men grants them the right to give orders and to put restrictions on the female members of their family. Dalila describes her situation:

... j'ai trop de frères. Ils font trop de bruit. Ils se disputent tout le temps. Ils me disputent et ils disputent même ma mère. Ils me disent toujours : « Tu sors pas ! Travaille avec ta mère ! Apporte-moi à boire ! Donne-moi mes chaussures ! Repasse mon pantalon ! Baisse les yeux quand je te parle ! » et encore et encore et tu multiplies par sept. Ils crient et me donnent que des ordres. Parfois, ils me frappent. (36)

Dalila is subjected by her brothers because she is a girl. They feel that they have the “natural” right to give her orders; by forbidding her to go out, they confine her to the space of the house where they use her to perform domestic tasks to serve them. This right to exercise power over women is granted to men by patriarchal society.

This oppression has driven her sister away; Samia had to leave in order to exist. In the novel she and Sultana represent the female characters through which Malika Mokeddem shows that in order to exist, some women have to leave. As Belkheir puts it, « ... se sentant opprimées par et dans un espace masculin, elles revendiquent le droit d'être une personne à part entière parallèlement à la remise en cause des tabous et des visions étriquées et réductrices de la femme. » (78). But in their quest for their right to exist, these women are often confronted to the rejection and the violence of society as it will be argued in following chapters of this work.

Although illustrated by different situations, the same elements of bias and oppression of patriarchy are going to be found in Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel as the author also describes how the society in which Tambu lives puts women in a position of inferiority that renders their living conditions quite precarious from the day they are born.

1.1.2. The burden of gender in *Nervous Conditions*

Quite similarly to the Algerian society in Mokeddem's *L'interdite*, the Zimbabwean patriarchal society presented by Tsitsi Dangarembga in *Nervous Conditions* oppresses women. The author created different male and female characters who interact, the men in an attempt to keep the status quo that works in their favor and the women in quest for self-realization.

Very early in the novel, the main character, Tambudzai, is going to be confronted to patriarchy. The little girl yearns for learning; she loves school and when she is told that her family can no longer pay her school fees while they continue to pay for her brother who is not as good as her, she understands that boys are treated differently because they are male. Therefore, the preference of her parents, and of the extended family, goes to her brother, Nhamo. He is privileged because it is through him that the name of the family is to be transmitted. He is expected to become the pride of his family by pursuing higher education while his sisters are to be given in marriage to other household and become the property of other families. As the male child, he is also the one who is to financially contribute to their subsistence in the future, like his uncle does.

When Tambu discusses the possibility to go back to school with her father, his arguments sound as a speech in favor of patriarchal rule. He tells her that girls are not supposed to get education. While she can understand that she cannot go to school because her family is poor, the little girl does not accept her father's explanation of gender roles. She says:

I understood that selling vegetables was not a lucrative business. I understood that there was not enough money for my fees. Yes, I did understand why I could not go back to school, but I loved going to school and I was good at it. Therefore, my circumstances affected me badly.

My father thought I should not mind. 'Is that anything to worry about? Ha-a-a, it's nothing,' he reassured me, with his usual ability to jump whichever way was easiest. 'Can you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables.'

His intention was to soothe me with comforting, sensible words, but I could not see the sense. This was often the case when my father spoke, but there had not before been such concrete cause to question his theories. (Dangaremba, *Nervous Conditions* 15-16)

The voice of the father is used to reinforce and explain the requirements of patriarchy to his daughter. In his opinion, which reflects the view of his society, a girl does not need education because a woman is expected to become a wife and a mother. Tambu's ambitions are not taken into consideration; her intelligence and her capacity to learn are not characteristics for which she would be valued by her community. She is only expected to perform the gender roles which are associated with her identity as a female.

By starting the gender dialogue through arguing that the position of individuals in society is constructed according to the laws and rules each society abides by, feminists were attempting to subvert the theory by which women were kept in a secondary position in society merely because of the biological differences that exist

between male and female individuals. This discussion on gender roles started as a potential way to free women from the prison of their biology, yet, it can be argued that the notion of gender has not changed the perception that patriarchy has of women. Their position in society did not improve. This idea was explained by Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*:

On some accounts, the notion that gender is constructed suggests a certain determinism of gender meanings inscribed on anatomically differentiated bodies, where those bodies are understood as passive recipients of an inexorable cultural law. When the relevant “culture” that “constructs” gender is understood in terms of such a law or set of laws, then it seems that gender is as determined and fixed as it was under the biology-is-destiny formulation. In such a case, not biology, but culture, becomes destiny. (Butler 12)

In this sense, even if Tambu is not confined into certain roles because of her biology, she is still kept under the control of patriarchy and deprived from her freedom to learn because in her society, women are not expected to want education. Thus, she is advised by her father not to disrupt the existing order.

Despite his young age, Tambu’s brother Nhamo has the same vision. He informs his sister that she should count herself lucky that she was able to go to school for a few years. He explained to her that given the fact that he is a boy and she is a girl, he has the right to study while she only gets education as a privilege when it is bestowed upon her by good fortune (Dangarembra, *Nervous Conditions* 21). He does not seem to care about his sister’s situation because he finds that the rules work to his own advantage. But his upholding of traditional patriarchal rules does not stop at stating the obvious to his sister; he wants to stop her when she attempts to pay for school by growing maize and selling it to make money. First, he refuses to help her when she asks for his assistance, and then he starts stealing her cobs and giving them

to their friends to eat. With this act, Nhamo ceases to be neutral; he takes action to protect his own interests. He means to keep his position as the privileged male offspring.

It might be concluded here that the bias of society when it comes to women's roles, as expressed by Nhamo, is a fact that has been justified in different beliefs; first biology and then gender, but it can be explained only as being based on a deliberate attitude and a conscious act for keeping the division between men and women in society. "Thus the meaning of gender in patriarchal ideology is '*not* simply "difference," but ... division, oppression, inequality, interiorized inferiority of women'" (Greene and Kahn 4). The fact that distinction is made between the boy and the girl without taking into account the potential of Tambu who is better at school than her brother is further proof that he is favored not on merit but because he is a male while his sister's academic capacities are neglected because she is a female.

Although they are brother and sister, Nhamo and Tambu are not considered as equals because of the principles according to which they are raised in their society. The same society allows its male members to exercise power over the women. Therefore, "Nhamo... further practices his sexism and male chauvinism on both Tambudzai and Netsai [his other sister] by always asking them to go fetch some of his luggage from the nearby shop when he could have carried it all" (Moyana 28). He goes as far as using physical violence and beating his sisters, especially Netsai, when they do not obey his orders and refuse to fetch his belongings. Although violence and abuse will be dealt with in the second section of this chapter, it seemed important to show

here that they are used in combination with gender discrimination in order to keep women under control.

The forms of patriarchal oppression dealt with in *L'interdite* and *Nervous Conditions* are quite similar, but they are not the only ones that are experienced by women under patriarchal rule. Other forms of oppression will be pointed out in Doris Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing*.

1.1.3. Society's judgment on Mary

"*The Grass Is Singing* is a tale of subjection of a woman who was defeated and thwarted by the bullying of race, gender and other social discriminations" (Kaousar Ahmed 11). In fact, Mary Turner's life is directed by the strict and relentless rules that are closely followed by her South African Society. From the very first pages of the novel, we learn that Mary's community nourishes deep grudges against her. Although we fail to understand where this deep resentment comes from, we can easily feel the violence of the hatred that people have for the dead women; it was almost as if "... it served her right to get murdered" (Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing* 12).

On the first pages of the novel, Mary's murder is announced as an event that could have been foretold. She is the victim of the crime, but she is also perceived as the accomplice. It is the opinion of her neighbor Slater that illustrates the violence of society; it appears in his reaction to Mary's murder. "The hate and contempt that one would have expected to show on his face when he looked at the murderer, twisted his features now, as he stared at Mary. His brows knotted, and for a few seconds his lips curled back over his teeth in a vicious grimace" (Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing* 19).

His behavior comes to conclude a life of oppression and social pressure for Mary who is judged by patriarchy even after her death. As the story unfolds, we come to understand that Mary had lived under the strong hold of social constraints for a long time. Her murder is simply the consequence of all the experiences that had brought her on the farm and of the social structure that she had internalized from her childhood, as will be explained in the following chapters.

Very early in her life, Mary had been exposed to the image of unhappy married life. Her mother scorned her father who used to drink instead of providing for his family. Her mother was cold and careless and did not make any efforts to protect her daughter. Being raised in an unstable family environment had a deep stigmatizing effect on Mary. Kaousar Ahmed writes, “As she grew up in a broken family, alienation and non-involvement subjugated her absolutely” (Kaousar Ahmed 11). The idea of alienation is going to be discussed in further detail later in this study.

“Then she was sent to boarding school and her life changed. She was extremely happy, so happy that she dreaded going home at holiday-times to her fuddled father, her bitter mother, and the fly-away little house that was like a small wooden box on stilts” (Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing* 40). Her obvious desire to escape is motivated by the need to find a better atmosphere and better prospects for her own personal life. Being away from home seems to bring balance into Mary’s life; she is able to build a world for her own in which she does not need anyone to stand by her side. The cutting of family ties gives her a feeling of peace.

She liked things to happen safely one after another in pattern, and she liked particularly, the friendly impersonality of it. By the time she was twenty she had a good job, her own friends, a niche in the life of the town. Then her mother died

and she was virtually alone in the world, for her father was five hundred miles away, having been transferred to yet another station. She hardly saw him: he was proud of her, but (which was more to the point) left her alone... Mary was pleased to be rid of him. Being alone in the world had no terrors for her at all, she liked it. (Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing* 41)

Mary's ability to live on her own denotes a capacity for individuality. The woman, although she is very young, does not need the presence of people in her life or much interaction with them in order to be happy. She organizes herself according to her own needs. Her job, her daily routine, and her friends, with whom she always keeps a certain distance, are enough to make her feel satisfied. But this ideal situation is going to change because of the attitude of society which does not see Mary's self-sufficiency with a positive eye. In fact, Cranny-Francis et. al. claim that "Under a patriarchal regime, women are, by definition, excluded from positions of power and authority – except where that power and authority works to support individual men or the social system as a whole" (Cranny-Francis et. al. 15).

Although Mary does not hold, literally, a position of power, her strength lies in the fact that she does not need to conform to the requirements of society of family life and marriage. Her non-conformity, even if it was not undertaken as a challenge on her part, disrupts the fluidity of the order of her society. The fact that she neither chooses nor feels coerced to follow the same path as the other women in her community already represents a potential threat as Mary's nonchalant feeling of freedom goes against the principles of strong gender socialization exercised by society. The female character can be viewed as a flaw and a failing of the established social system, one that needs to be brought back within the limitations of what patriarchy allows women to do.

The fact is that between twenty and thirty, Mary lived the life of an independent woman; she earned her own money and relied on herself in every aspect of her existence. “Her life was really rather extraordinary” (Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing* 44). She was valued at work and surrounded by friends who invited her to parties or took her out in town. Yet, Mary failed to understand that this was supposed to last only for a certain period of time. There seemed to be a tacit agreement which Mary failed to fulfill. So, in the eyes of people and society

... she was not playing her part, for she did not get married. The years went past; her friends got married; she had been bridesmaid a dozen times; other people’s children were growing up; but she went on as companionable, as adaptable as aloof and heart-whole as ever, working as hard enjoying herself as she ever did in office, and never for one moment alone, except when she was asleep. (Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing* 45)

In the case of Mary, patriarchy expresses its discontent with her behavior through the opinion of her friends. It seems that the position of women is intrinsically related to the type of role they are required to play and to perform in society. Therefore, Mary will be reminded, almost summoned, to return to her initial functions; first wife and then mother. Mary was forced to face the situation, “[she] was brought face to face with it suddenly and most unpleasantly” (Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing* 47), when she overheard a conversation between her friends who were pronouncing a judgment condemning her way of life as an unmarried woman.

The consequences are going to be dangerous and irreversible for Mary; they eventually lead her to death. “Mary Turner [is] the victim of [gender] oppression... she was forced by her society to accept loveless marriage... Her life was tossed and turned by the wave of social insecurity” (Kaousar Ahmed 11). In this sense, women’s identity is forged according to both society’s perception of the female individuals and the

characteristics it attaches to them. This identity is defined as being inferior because as Green and Kahn see it, "... it is generally true that gender is constructed in patriarchy to serve the interests of male supremacy" (Greene and Kahn 3). It appears more and more clearly that the main objective of gender roles is to confine women into a constructed and imposed identity, as mentioned previously, one that best serves the interests of maintaining the power dynamic in society which give the upper hand to men.

With the same purpose as the other authors, but through different situations, Nawel El Saadawi deals with the ordeal of women in patriarchal Egyptian society.

1.1.4. Firdaus' hell ... is patriarchy

"Nawel El Saadawi's portraiture of the grim reality [of women's subjugation] in *Woman at Point Zero* brings to fore the various phases of injustices and abuses that women grapple with in phallogocentric societies" (Fwangyil 16). In fact, at the beginning of her life, the fate of Firdaus, the main character of the novel, is quite similar to the fates of Sultana and Tambudzai. She is born with the weight of gender and patriarchy on her, and she lives her life under oppression and persecution until she is executed for murder the murder of a man who constantly abused her and who tried to keep her under his close control her and whom she kills in an attempt to protect and liberate herself.

"The female child faces the problem of discrimination as soon as she is born. This stems from the fact that a male child is usually the preferred sex" (Fwangyil 16). This is a truth that the little Firdaus is going to learn at a very early age because she

sees the actions of her own father who does not only show a preference for the birth of male children, but goes as far as to react differently when female children die. Firdaus describes his reaction:

When one of his female children died, my father would eat his supper, my mother would wash his legs, and then he would go to sleep, just as he did every night. When the child that died was a boy, he would beat my mother, then have his supper and lie down to sleep. My father never went to bed without supper, no matter what happened. (El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* 23)

Through the behavior of Firdaus' father, Saadawi exposes the violence and the selfishness of a man who beats his wife when he loses a boy, but who does not fail to eat and sleep as he always does when one of his daughters dies. The two levels of oppression which are discrimination and physical violence are quite natural for the man given his position of power at the head of his family. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the male component of society is put at the center, in a situation of agent and subject, while the female one is relegated to an inferior position and acted upon as an object.

Another form of social pressure that can be found in *Woman at Point Zero* is forced marriage. Yet, unlike Mary who is pushed by her friends to question her position as an unmarried woman and to get married on her own terms, "Firdaus is forcefully married off to Sheikh Mahmoud, a sixty-year old rich widower, by her uncle" (Fwangyil 18). Indeed, after losing both her parents, she had been entrusted to the care of her uncle. The latter, just like her father had been, is a cruel man whose opinions on the position of the woman in the family and in society are no different from the ones of his patriarchal society. For him, the wedding of his niece is a bargain from which he plans to get an important amount of money. He discusses the matter

with his wife: “If he accepts to pay one hundred pounds that will be sufficient blessing from Allah. I will be able to pay my debts and buy some underwear, as well as a dress or two for Firdaus. We cannot let her get married in the clothes she’s wearing” (El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* 49). All this was organized by the uncle and his wife without consulting Firdaus. She is the object of the discussion, but her opinion is completely ignored. As Fwangyil puts it:

Although she runs from the house when she overhears this plan, she returns home to be married to Sheikh Mahmoud when she discovers that the society she belongs to does not have a safe haven for children who lack parental love, care, and security, and whose human rights are violated. (Fwangyil 18)

Despite the fact that Firdaus was good at school, her uncle chooses for her the path that will enclose her into the role of wife instead of sending her to university. This illustrates the attitude of patriarchy which puts women in an inferior position to that of men. The fact that they are not considered as potential active agents in society deprives women from their right to express their opinions or to take any action regarding their own lives. As opposed to men whose superiority, dominance, and freedom are granted by the system. Consequently, a woman’s life under patriarchal rule seems to be inscribed in the woman’s ability to bear, nurture and raise children; and their capacity to support men.

Women’s development is therefore hindered by the fact that they are not considered as autonomous individuals. More often than not, women’s identity is defined within patriarchy in reference to their relationship with a man. They are seen as daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers, but almost never as full-fledged independent women. In many cases, they are simply handled like commodities that can be owned. For Green and Kahn:

Women are the gifts which men exchange between each other ... They have no significant power or influence within a system which is controlled by men and work to their benefit. Men, not women have the power to determine the value of women in the exchange and the meanings associated with them. (Green and Kahn 7)

Thus, at the age of eighteen, Firdaus finds herself once again confronted to patriarchal oppression with no hope for escape.

Yet, the situation was going to get worse. Despite his age and the deformity on his face, Sheikh Mahmoud was never self conscious. His marriage with a girl who could have been his daughter does not prevent him from being cruel or violent with her as he often beats Firdaus and insults her. His position is that of power and strength because he is a man. Firdaus describes her life at his house:

He had retired from his job, was without work, and without friends... All day long he remained by my side in the house, or in the kitchen, watching me as I cooked or washed. If I dropped the packet of soap powder and spilled a few grains on the floor, he would jump up from his chair and complain at me for being careless. And if I pressed a little more firmly than usual on the spoon as I took ghee out of the tin for cooking, he would scream out in anger, and draw my attention to the fact that its contents were diminishing much more rapidly than they should... One day, he discovered some leftover scraps of food, and started yelling at me so loudly that all the neighbors could hear. After this incident, he got into the habit of beating me whether he had a reason for it or not. (El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* 58)

With this forced marriage, Firdaus' life becomes her prison. She is given no possibility to make her own decisions concerning her future. In this situation, she suffers from both physical and moral violence.

In the light of what has been said, it can be concluded that the four writers, although they describe different societies, were able to unravel the bias of patriarchy towards women. Through different situations, the female characters in *L'interdite*, *Nervous Conditions*, *The Grass Is Singing*, and *Woman at Point Zero* are all

confronted to the unfair rules of their respective societies. From forced marriage to denial of education, women are discriminated against and oppressed because of their inferior position in the patriarchal hierarchy.

It seems pertinent and interesting to look at the origins and the causes for the position of inferiority in which women are kept and to analyze the main aspects of oppression that appear in the four novels. This section will be devoted to answering the following questions: why does patriarchy see the necessity to keep women under control? And how does it enforce that control?

1.2. The operating of women's oppression

From what has been said earlier, it can be argued that the process of female subjugation and objectification is as subtle and smooth as it is pervasive in patriarchal society. The fact that female oppression is often justified by the need to protect women who are seen as the weaker sex or by the necessity to organize society by attributing specific gender roles to women makes it even more pernicious to women than it looks at the first analysis of its functioning. It is so embedded in the minds of individuals that it has hardly been questioned by both men and women.

In her work entitled *Patriarchal Attitudes*, English feminist author Eva Figes explains the perpetration of oppression by men and its perception by women as inevitable by the fact that members of patriarchal society are cloistered in the principles that they are born and raised with. For her, the fact that for hundreds of years the power of patriarchy was constantly maintained and that despite the

challenges that it sometimes encounters, it has never been overcome is mainly due to its capacity to protect its own functioning. She writes:

Thousands of books have been written about women, many studies have been made of them, many poems written, dozens of philosophical and psychological essays written. And in almost all cases the author has been a man. So consistently has the author been male that the point has been totally overlooked, taken for granted. Certainly the idea of bias is never entertained. But the moment a woman sets pen to paper it is another matter. I was accused of bias before I had even written a word of this book simply on the grounds that I was a woman... We are born into a world where the great discoverers, philosophers, artists and scientists have almost all been male. Male law-makers, male conquerors, even the God perpetuated in tradition, who still somehow haunts the early days of childhood is male. Our whole morality was formulated by men. (Figs 18-19)

In fact, when the whole system of thought is based on what men want and how they want society to be organized, there is no room for women to grow or to find fulfillment.

It will be proposed that patriarchy has reasons that can explain its attitude towards women. These reasons do not include women's nature or biology, but rather have one main purpose which is the maintaining of the status quo. The action of control is explained, justified and legitimated as being part of a necessary and almost positive process of protecting the social order. Under these circumstances, men are not oppressors; their authority comes to be perceived as a source of security for society while the oppression of women seems to be indispensable for patriarchy to survive and for its structure to be maintained since it is seen as necessary, however restrictive it might be for women..

The insecure situation in which women are kept arises from the fact that society sees in them a force that would be able to challenge its authority if it were left unchecked.

1.2.1. Women: the internal threat

In “Literary Representations of Women,” Mary Eagleton points to the fact that many feminist scholars, among whom Showalter and Gilbert and Gubar, suggest that women who do not conform to the pre-established gender roles are seen as figures of potential danger and disruptive desires who can tear down the whole patriarchal system (Eagleton 110).

For the feminists, this social attitude is a means to prevent women from engaging into a struggle to regain control over their own lives. They reject it as it excludes one half of society to preserve the privileges of the other. For them, men’s need for control is what drives patriarchal rule, and women are perceived as a threat when they have the ability to challenge this authority. For Ghanaian theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “the single woman who manages her affairs successfully without a man is an affront to patriarchy and a direct challenge to the so-called masculinity of men who want to ‘possess’ her” (qtd. in Newell 151).

Here, the notion of gender, mentioned earlier in the chapter, can better be understood when it is studied from the perspective that patriarchal society puts pressure on women in order to keep them under close control.

... a woman, especially in Africa, is only respected and regarded as fulfilled when she performs her duties as a housewife, mother, homemaker and caregiver who is meant to be seen and not heard. Any other role contrary to these stereotypical roles is regarded as an affront to male authority and ego which results in violence and oppression. (Fwangyil 16)

In the four novels dealt with in this study, the female characters find themselves in this situation. They are confronted to very strict rules that prescribe for them the path to be

followed in order not to disrupt the established order. As expressed in the previous quote, women are perceived as a potential danger by patriarchy; therefore, they are closely watched and put back in their place whenever they try to express their needs or desires. Society wants to reinforce the power of the men by keeping the women down.

In *L'interdite*, Sultana is the forbidden woman who is rejected by her community because she does not abide by the customs and the traditions of her hometown. Her presence in Ain Nakhla is seen very negatively by the men of the village, especially when she decides to attend the funeral of her friend Yacine although she knows that women are not allowed to go to the cemetery. In their hostility, they go as far as attempting to burn the house in which she lives. Khaled, who works with her at the hospital, comments on the attitude of these men: « Chez nous, même les plus couards deviennent héroïques lorsqu'il s'agit de s'attaquer aux femmes. Les maintenir en état d'esclavage semble être la seule unanimité des algériens dans le charivari actuel, le seul consensus de la sempiternelle discorde arabe » (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 148). Thus, women find themselves targeted by different types of oppression since all women, no matter their situation, are considered as being inferior to all men regardless of their social status.

The situation of Maiguru, Tambudzai's aunt, illustrates this situation in *Nervous Conditions*. She is married to Babamukuru who is the patriarch of the family. Although she is an educated active woman, Maiguru cannot express her full potential as an individual because she might hurt the ego of her husband. She is supposed to be very careful in order never to threaten his position of superiority. Tambu who has observed the situation of the husband and the wife comments: "I felt sorry for Maiguru

because she could not use the money she earned for her own purposes and had been prevented by marriage from doing the things she wanted to do” (Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* 103). Maiguru is neutralized by society through marriage. She has to put the well being of her husband before her own no matter what the consequences are for her. Therefore, it could be said here that Maiguru is deprived of a potential financial autonomy since it could grant her some independence and allow her to escape her husband’s complete domination.

Mary Turner suffers from the same treatment in *The Grass Is Singing*. After her marriage with Dick, she has to leave her comfortable life in town in order to join her husband on the farm because it is what a wife is expected to do. Despite the fact that she finds this life unbearable, it is impossible for her to ask her husband to live with her in town instead. It is the woman who is to leave her life behind in order to adapt to her husband’s life. Mary was never given any freedom. Isolation, mental and economic sterility and emotional vacuity are all that dominated her whole life. After her marriage she suffered from laxity and meaninglessness. She was forced by her society to accept a loveless marriage (Kaousar Ahmed 11). In order to prevent her from standing on her own as a fulfilled individual, society puts Mary under its control by forcing her to get married.

In *Woman at Point Zero*, the situation of Firdaus is no exception. She is denied the right to go to university and forced to get married because she has to be put under the power of a man by another man. Her uncle rejects the idea of giving her education: “To university? To a place where she will be sitting side by side with men? A respected Sheikh and man of religion like myself sending his niece to mix in the

company of men?!” (El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* 47). Here, it can be clearly understood that his refusal is not based of his concern for Firdaus’ future. His only purpose is to protect his own position in his society. It would be too dangerous, in his opinion, to allow his niece to go to university. Yet, he does not take into consideration her own desires or her well being.

The conclusion that can be reached is that the main reason for the oppression of women under patriarchal rule is the protection of the established social order. The power in place does not tolerate the threat that women could represent if they found the means to ask for a shift of power or at least for equal opportunities that would permit for a more balanced type of male-female relations within society.

In the following section, three different means of oppression are going to be discussed. In fact, patriarchy uses different means to exercise its authority over women. First, the confining of women to the space of the house will be analyzed as a major factor by which social rules are maintained. Then, it will be proposed that patriarchal restrictions for women can be influenced by factors of religion and race which come to reinforce the injustices that are experienced by the female members of society. These factors are used within some communities to strengthen the and further justify patriarch’s control over women.

1.2.2. Public vs. domestic sphere

The sense of oppression for women living under patriarchal rule arises from the different levels of restraints exercised over them. As mentioned previously, their subordination to male dominance, their marginalization, since they are considered as

men's other, and their confinements to specific roles they are expected to perform in the domestic sphere represent the main forms of abuse. The principal result of these different aspects of oppression is that women are deprived from the right to express themselves. They are also expected to perform a variety of chores in the house, raise their children, and support their husbands without any recognition of the physical, mental, and emotional efforts that they make daily. They live on the margins of the society and they are required to obey its unfair rules; they develop a sense of alienation, which will be discussed in the third chapter of this work, when their needs conflict with their duties. Eva Figes points this fact when she writes: "Until very recent times woman had no public voice. She was excluded from education and public affairs. It is a vast black ocean of silence stretching into the past" (Figes 152).

The exploitation and silencing of women play a central role in the operating of patriarchy; women are not allowed to speak even from the sidelines. It will be demonstrated that this is going to increase the feeling of oppression of women living under the rule of this type of society. Their incapacity to express themselves leads women to withdrawal and isolation which affects their ability to interact with their environment and with the people around them. They are first estranged from themselves and then from their surroundings.

This situation is dealt with by the four authors who show this form of confinement through their main protagonists and other female characters in their novels.

In *L'interdite*, the situation of the women of the village of Ain Nakhla is summarized by Sultana. The women who come to see her at the hospital describe their illness as something evil that hurts everywhere, in their body and their soul. « Quand tout, en arabe algérien *koulchi*, est douloureux, il s'agit de la *koulchite*, pathologie féminine très répandue et si bien connue ici. *Koulchite* symptomatique des séismes et de la détresse au féminin » (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 88). The pain experienced by the women at the hands of the system turns them into victims. They are trapped in their own lives in which the dissatisfaction and the oppression of marriage and domestic chores turn into physical and mental illness.

For Tsitsi Dangarembga, the situation of women is no different. For example, she describes how girls and women have to take care of the household even during the vacation. They are obliged to tend to the needs of men, whose comfort and satisfaction are primordial to the household, to the detriment of their own pleasure and to their own needs. Tambu gives an account of this situation:

... whatever time we returned it was in time to cook the next meal or wash the previous meal's dishes. Maiguru worked harder than anybody else, because as the senior wife and owner of the best working facilities as well as provider of the food to cook, she was expected to oversee all the culinary operations... This threw my aunt, who was a good woman and a good wife and took pride in this identity, into dreadful panic. She took to cooking, twice a day, a special pot of refrigerated meat for the patriarchy to eat as they planned and constructed the family's future. (Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* 137-138)

The role of the women is once again restricted to the domestic roles while the men are the decision makers.

In Doris Lessing's novel, Mary had almost the same painful experience when she was trying to adapt to her domestic life after her marriage with Dick. She started to

feel the void and the meaninglessness of this life when she found herself confined to the space of the house.

In the first flush of energy and determination she really enjoyed the life, putting things to rights and making a little go along the way ... Then, having done all she could do to the house, she began on dress materials, finishing an inexpensive trousseau. A few months after her marriage she found there was nothing more to do. Suddenly, from one day to the next, she found herself unoccupied. Instinctively starving off idleness as something dangerous. (Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing* 73-74).

Because of the restrictions of her society, Mary ends up feeling trapped in her own house. Within the span of a few months, she was transformed from an active and independent woman into a jobless and idle housewife who perceives her husband's farm as a prison.

In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus experiences a similar treatment at the hands of patriarchy. First, she has to perform domestic tasks at her father's house when she is very young. Then, she is required to help her uncle's wife when she is taken to live with his family. Finally, she finds herself performing the same tasks when she is forced into marriage with Sheikh Mahmoud.

Here, it becomes clear that the confinement of women to the space of the house also restricts their identity. Firdaus who wants to pursue her higher education and eventually find employment is prevented from doing so by her family and forced into marriage. Once again, patriarchy's control over women is maintained and justified because it is presented as a protective enterprise aiming to keep women safe from the dangers of the public places. Consequently, it is often perceived by women as inescapable and unavoidable. But the action of society, although it is presented as

“natural”, was deconstructed by the feminists who saw it as a deliberate act that has the marginalization and the control of women as underlying motives.

Many forms of patriarchal oppression can be seen as universal as they are experienced by all women living in patriarchal societies, yet there are other factors that come to put more pressure on women. These particular forms of restriction are specific to a certain context and to certain societies. In what follows, religion and race will be considered as two stifling forces that work against women in patriarchal society.

1.2.3. Religious oppression

This aspect of female discrimination will be deconstructed in *L'interdite* and *Woman at Point Zero*. It can be clearly seen in the two works that religion, in the Algerian and in the Egyptian societies, is used by men to restrict women's freedom. Religion, in its extreme form, serves as an alibi for patriarchy to perform its subjugation of the female characters in the two novels. Both Malika Mokeddem and Nawel El Saadawi show the impact of the strict religious rules imposed on the female characters in society; they seem to have the same vision on the fact that they are but an additional form of restraint, especially in the context of two societies that experienced periods during which religious extremism spread and created major tensions and conflicts in the two countries.

El Saadawi describes the instrumentalization of religion in the process of women's oppression in her own words. For her,

We all know that in all religions women have an inferior position relative to men. This is especially true for the monotheistic religions. Adam is superior to Eve, and

in almost all religions women should be governed by men. In human history, to exploit women and the poor was not possible without the use of religion...

Now we are faced by a resurgence of religious so-called fundamentalism. Some people think it is only Islamic. This is not true. Religious fundamentalism is an international phenomenon. The international patriarchal class system is encouraging the revival of religion all over the world...

All fundamentalist groups, whether Christian, Jewish or Islamic, are antagonistic to women's liberation and women's rights. The backlash against women's rights is thus also a universal phenomenon, and is not restricted to our region. (Newson-Horst 84)

In this sense, it can be argued that religions, more specifically in their extremist forms, can be seen as an aggravating factor where women's oppression in society is concerned. Their underlying hierarchical principle of submitting women to the absolute authority of men consolidates the operating mode of patriarchy.

Like in most patriarchal societies, the organization of the Algerian and Egyptian Muslim societies rests on principles that are mostly based on the superiority of men and the inferiority of women. In this sense, the religious structure of society mostly reinforces patriarchal rules in these two countries. In *The House of Obedience*, Juliette Minces explains that the status of women in Muslim societies rests on two elements. The first is the idea that the woman belongs to her father's family with the implication that the male members of her extended family are responsible for the woman's actions and behavior. The second is the concept of family pride and honor. The woman is expected to conform to the social and religious norms of behavior of her community in order to protect the reputation and the status of her family. (Minces 17)

In the opening chapter of *L'interdite*, the situation is even more complicated for women, as Sultana comes back to Algeria in the 1990's when the Islamic party, Front Islamique du Salut (FIS), was gaining popularity among the population. Several references are made by Mokeddem to the radicalization of society when two of the

characters, Sultana and Dalila, are confronted to it. This presence of the Islamists adds another oppressive force for the women to fear in addition to patriarchy. In fact, it was preached, during that period, by extremist preachers, that men had the right, and sometimes even the duty, to restrict the freedom of women and keep their behavior under strict control. The evolution of the mores of society was more than ever related to what women should and should not do as can be clearly seen through the experiences of the female characters in Mokeddem's novel.

Sultana, although she is conscious of the danger, decides to challenge the authority of the Islamists, who are led by Bakkar, the mayor of the village, first by attending Yacine's funeral and later on by taking his position at the hospital and staying in his house. Her defiance, which is not deterred by their pressure and attempted intimidations is met with violence. First, they slash the tires of Sultana's car in an attempt to scare her and force her out of Ain Nekhla (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 122). As this attempt fails, they set fire to the house in which Sultana had been staying (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 180). These extreme acts of violence appear as desperate endeavors to preserve the social order. For Zahia Smail Salhi, "...such forms of violence are often falsely backed up with a religious tenet that gives them legitimacy and makes them difficult to shift or remove." (Smail Salhi 3). The situation of women like Sultana was very precarious in Algeria during the 1990's as Islamist groups openly targeted them. As Karima Bennoune puts it, "...fundamentalist ideology and activity unquestionably pose[d] a unique and overwhelming threat to the lives of Algerian women" (Bennoune 185). Religious oppression is one more form of subjugation that Algerian women have to endure in society.

In the novel, Dalila who is still a little girl has already internalized the paralyzing fear of what might happen to her if she shows too many signs of independence. Despite the fact that she desperately strives for freedom, Dalila's attempts to face the limitations imposed on her by her patriarchal and religious society, which is represented in her case by her numerous brothers, are very mild. She wants to get education and follow the example of her older sister, Samia, who left the country in order to study in France. Yet, despite her success, Samia was rejected by her father and brothers who saw her refusal to get married and her decision to pursue her studies as an affront. Therefore, Dalila tries inconspicuous in order not to be taken out of school; even when she goes out on her own, she makes sure to go back home before her absence is noticed by her family. For the little girl, the space of the home is not one where she feels safe and protected; she views it as a place to be feared and if possible, escaped. Dalila's seven brothers, four out of which she describes as bearded Islamists, take their authority over their sister for granted.

The position of the girl in her family is a secondary one. She does not have the same rights as her brothers, and more importantly she is required to submit to their patriarchal authority. She is required to perform specific gender roles defined by her society. She finds herself obliged to serve her brothers with no possibility to challenge the power that they have over her because she knows that there would be consequences as they could beat her or even take her out of school as a punishment.

In *Woman at Point Zero*, El Saadawi also exposes the strong hold of religion on people and its use as a means to intimidate women. For Fwangyil, "... the novelist reveals the deep rooted cultural and religious beliefs which are actually barriers to the

self actualization of the female” (Fwangyil 16). Similarly to the Algerian society described by Mokeddem, the Egyptian patriarchal society in El Saadawi’s novel uses religion to reinforce and justify the authority of men over women. As Juliette Mince explains, “The men of a family are institutionally supported in the exercise of [control over the women] by the religious and legal system, which means they can impose upon a woman whatever sanctions they see fit whenever they feel that family honor has not been respected... A woman in Islam is thus characterized by her status as minor...” (Mince 18). Firdaus experiences this “institutionalized” repression when she is put under the authority of her uncle after the death of her parents. As her tutor, he forbids the young woman to pursue her studies at university, as she wanted, and forces her into marriage with a much older man. By doing so, her uncle simply puts her under the control of another man.

In addition to its abusive control over women, Saadawi points out the hypocrisy of the religious institution in her society. In fact, at the beginning of her work, the author presents Firdaus’ uncle as a student at the renowned Egyptian religious school of Al Azhar who at the same time takes advantage of the innocence of his young niece when he sexually abuses her. Firdaus describes this in her own words:

To knead the dough I squatted on the ground with the trough between my legs... My *galabeya* often slipped up my thighs, but I paid no attention until the moment when I would glimpse my uncle’s hand moving slowly from behind the book he was reading to touch my leg. The next moment I could feel it travelling up my thigh with a cautious, stealthy, trembling movement. Every time there was the sound of footsteps at the entrance to our house, his hand would withdraw quickly. But whenever everything around us lapsed into silence,... his hand would continue to press against my thigh with a grasping, almost brutal insistence. (El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* 17-18)

Later in the novel, he is also described as a man who regularly beats his wife and who considers this violence as part of his marital prerogatives as a Muslim man.

In both *L'interdite* and *Woman at Point Zero* the religious institution comes to reinforce the already oppressive force of patriarchy. It reinforces and legitimizes the control that men have over women while at the same time strengthening the sense of pressure that women suffer from under the authority of their families and their communities. Sultana, Dalila, and Firdaus are victims of the persecution and hypocrisy of the religious tyranny of their respective societies. These women have to face one more layer of coercion and constraint that add to the restrictions imposed on them by society on the basis of their sex.

1.2.4. Racial oppression

In *Nervous Conditions* and *The Grass Is Singing*, it is race that comes to join patriarchy in the definition of the restrictions that women are subjected to in society. Although slightly differently, both authors show how the functioning of race increases the sense of repression and estrangement of women in patriarchal society. It is one more layer which is added to oppressive force of patriarchy.

In the context of Dangarembga's novel, racial oppression is one of the results of colonization as the novel explores how Zimbabwean women attempt to find a position as independent individuals in a society in which they are doubly oppressed. In fact, the female characters in the work have to construct their identity as the 'other' against men in their patriarchal society and at the same time as the 'other' against western and white colonizers in their post-colonial country. This "double colonization of women,"

as Katrin Berndt calls it in her book *Female Identity in Contemporary Zimbabwean Fiction* (80), increases the sense of oppression and alienation that these women experience.

The character who suffers the most clearly from this... in the novel is Tambu's cousin, Nyasha who, as Berndt puts it, "...embodies the psychologically destructive effects of colonization" (Berndt 80). In fact, after spending several years in England with her family, the young girl comes back to her hometown where she finds difficulties to re-adjust to customs that seem quite unfamiliar to her. As Moyana writes:

Nyasha's problem is compounded by the fact that she is a girl whom her parents expect miraculously and automatically to conform to their traditional ways. It appears that the education that her parents have acquired is extremely alienating. Their traditional culture is conservative, sexist, patriarchal – regarding women as second class citizens and therefore as people who should work at home, tending their husbands and children with no opinion of their own to be vocally expressed. (Moyana 32)

Nyasha's hybrid education makes it difficult for her to accept the positive aspects of Western education without seeing the hypocrisy of colonialism and the consequences of its abusive and oppressive presence over the Zimbabwean people in general and women in particular. Yet, the same Western education allows her to look at her own traditional culture from a critical perspective.

Nyasha's view of the life of her community is sometimes contrasted to the view of her cousin Tambu. When Nyasha questions the rules of patriarchy and views them as oppressive and restrictive for women, Tambu is more reluctant to probe into the situation of women in her society. Her attitude towards both gender and racial oppression seems to be more lenient than the one adopted by her cousin. For Berndt,

“The character of Nyasha... attacks the ‘native’ identity construct produced by colonialist ascriptions. She does, however, also stress the double colonization and double oppression Black women have to face” (80). Tambu on her part wants to see the positive aspect of both her culture and Western education without questioning the negative ones. Yet, this does not prevent her from being subjected to both gender and racial oppression in the novel.

Tambu also experiences problems with racial discrimination when she is confronted to the rejection of her classmates in the mission school. The young girl starts to understand that the issue of race is more complex than she had thought until then. The girls of her school, with whom she had had no problems before, start associating her with the Western white culture when they learn that she has been accepted in the Sacred Heart School. Their hostility is palpable when they refuse to let her participate in one of their games.

‘Don’t waste our time,’ she snapped. ‘we’re practicing for the team. They don’t play netball where you’re going, do they? So what are you doing here? Basketball,’ she chanted, bouncing the ball in a professional way, ‘and hokey and tennis and swimming. That’s what you’ll be doing. With your whites. Knowing you, the next thing we’ll hear is that you’ve gone to the Olympics.’ (Dangarembra, *Nervous Conditions* 191)

Here, it is the perception of race as a social construct that makes of Tambu an intruder. She becomes the ‘other’ inside a group to which she had always belonged because she is viewed as part of another group, the whites. Race here gives another dimension to the oppression and discrimination experienced by Tambu in society.

In *The Grass Is Singing*, race is also interwoven with patriarchal oppression. In Mary’s South African societies the issue of race is very intricate. The apartheid system

which rests upon the systematic segregation of the whites and the blacks puts the latter in the position of ‘other.’ They are also viewed as the inferiors of the whites. Katherine Fishburn sees that white characters like Charlie Slatter, Mary and Dick’s neighbor, define themselves in regard to the racial differences that exist between them and the ‘natives’ (Fishburn 4). Therefore, he feels Mary’s familiar interaction with her black servant Moses as a form of betrayal to her community, especially when she had rejected the attempts of support that he and his wife had made to help Mary adapt to life on the farm. For Fishburn:

Slatter’s own sense of individual self worth is so dependent upon his conviction of *general cultural* superiority that he cannot bear to witness Mary Turner’s isolated fall from grace. For if Mary is visibly no better – in her appearance and behavior – than the undifferentiated natives against whom Slatter defines himself, his own identity as superior white man is threatened. If, in Slatter’s interpretation, Mary can look in the mirror of native (the Other) and see the common humanity they share, the possibility exists that Slatter can see in the same mirror the humanity he too shares with the native. (Fishburn 5)

By associating with Moses and treating him as a human being, Mary transgresses one of the most important rules of her community. She becomes a traitor to her race. The man’s hatred of Mary can be sensed at the very beginning of the novel when Doris Lessing describes his reaction to the woman’s murder. The neighbor considers that her behavior is an offense to the community and to him personally. He cannot forgive her betrayal.

Racial oppression is also addressed by Doris Lessing through the relationship of Mary and Moses, and more specifically through the balance of power between the two characters. As Kaousar Ahmed explains, “The subjection of the feminine self starts when Mary begins remaining in fear of Moses, the Native house boy, from the outset of his stay in the house, and when gradually and inexorably Moses becomes Mary’s

master in ways she dared not admit consciously to herself” (Kaousar Ahmed 12). Mary becomes doubly oppressed first by her own white community, as mentioned earlier, and then by the man who works for her. Here a shift of power can be seen when the native takes advantage over the white woman. Mary’s position as a woman puts her in a situation of weakness even when she should have been in control. Kaousar Ahmed goes even further in the analysis of the relationship. For him, through the murder of Mary,

...Moses achieves his revenge. He considers Mary as a representative of the whites. But ironically while protesting the White or colonial subjection, he has subjected somebody from the opposite sex. He dares to target a masculine partner and Mary becomes the victim. He chooses Mary not only because she is white, but also she is a female, supposedly the weaker sex. (Kaousar Ahmed 13)

The persecution and abuse that Mary is subjected to by both her community and Moses illustrates the double oppression that women experience in a society in which both race and gender work against them.

Through the analysis of the functioning of race in *Nervous Conditions* and *The Grass Is Singing*, it can be said that despite the diversity of characters and situations, female abuse through the two novels is used to suffocate women and race comes to reinforce the patriarchal order in place. It can be seen as one further restriction that limits the space of freedom within which women can evolve in society.

The structure of patriarchal society which is based on the hierarchy that puts women in an inferior position to men also functions according to specific gender roles which strictly define and limit the functions and the spaces that women are allowed to perform and occupy in society. In order to ensure the perpetuation of this social structure, patriarchy exercises a strong pressure over the female members of society

who are coerced and threatened in order to be kept under control. This social oppression is also maintained through the use of other forms of pressure that include moral and physical violence. In the following section, different forms of violence and abuse will be analyzed in an attempt to understand how they are used against women and how they limit the freedom that they might attempt to obtain within patriarchal societies that attempt to keep the restrictions that are exercised over the female members of society.

2. Violence and abuse

In the continuity of what has been argued in the first section of the chapter, it becomes clear that patriarchal rule, very often, exercises its oppression and enforces its authority over women through violence. In her book *Gender Violence in Africa: African Women's Responses*, December Green writes:

Gender violence is commonly defined as violent acts (real or threatened) perpetrated on females because they are female. Whether gender violence operates as direct physical violence, threat, or intimidation, the intent is to perpetuate and promote hierarchical gender relations. It is manifested in several forms, all serving the same end: the preservation of male control over resources and power. (Green 1-2)

This section will be dedicated to the identification and the analysis of different forms of violence that women are confronted to in patriarchal society in *L'interdite*, *Nervous Conditions*, *The Grass Is Singing*, and *Woman at Point Zero*.

It can be said that these types of abuses are direct consequences of the patriarchal rule that has been dealt with in the previous chapter. It will even be argued that gender violence, which is perpetrated against women, is a deliberate act the

purpose of which is to grant men the right and the opportunity to exercise and maintain their power over the women.

The different forms of violence are going to have the same purpose when it comes to the maintaining of the status quo. It will also be demonstrated, as Margaret Schuler formulates it, that “Gender violence is a pervasive and prevalent problem worldwide, touching all aspects of women’s lives – from the home, to the workplace, to the street” (Schuler 1) through analyzing the experiences of different female characters. Indeed, the four writers dealt with in this research devote an important part of their works to exposing the difficulties that women face in society, including gender violence. In the four novels, elements of violence against women will be analyzed in order to show how these writers expose the pain and sufferings experienced by their female characters at the hands of men.

Although the fates of female characters differ from one novel to another, all of them are subjected to several forms of violence. Their common experiences illustrate the shared destiny of women in their respective societies. Yet, some differences are going to be taken into consideration when analyzing the situations of these women. Like Sally Engle Merry formulates it in her work *Gender Violence: A Cultural Perspective*:

Despite its near universality around the globe, local manifestations of gender violence are highly variable. They depend on particular kinship structures, gender inequalities, and levels of violence in the wider society. They vary depending on how gender is defined and what resources are available to those who are battered. Violence against women in the home is shaped by patterns of marriage and the availability of divorce, by conceptions of male authority and female submission, and by the family’s vulnerability to racism, poverty, or marginalization. (Engle Merry 1)

Thus, this section will at the same time be looking at the ‘universal’ aspects of gender violence while pointing out the specificities related to each society in the four novels.

It is often stated that violence originates from different circumstances such as poverty, insecurity, or even psychological disorders that violent men might suffer from. Here, it will be argued that it is an institution knowingly built and deliberately maintained for the main goal of securing the sustainability of patriarchy. Thus, it is the anthropological rather than the psychological approach which is going to be used in order to analyze violence and abuse in the four novels. Sally Engle Merry defines it as follows:

The anthropological perspective emphasizes culture and context rather than psychological or biological dimensions of violence. It focuses on the meanings of gender violence in various situations. Its comparative approach shows how gender violence is related to larger patterns of social inequality such as class and racial discrimination, histories of colonialism, and ethnic inequality and hostility as well as patterns of gender inequality, family organization, and marriage arrangements. (Engle Merry 19)

This definition is going to serve as a basis to approach the texts and study the functioning of violence as it is purposefully used by patriarchy in order to maintain women in a position of inferiority and under the control and authority of the male members of society.

For so doing, the section will be divided into two sub-sections because it aims at dealing with two types of gender violence. Nahid Toubia writes:

A wide range of behaviors can be defined as violence... The first is a straightforward, aggressive act of physical brutality inflicted on one person by another which may range from battery to rape, and which may occur domestically or be inflicted by a stranger. The second kind of violence that is crucial to acknowledge is more subtle and slippery to define; it is violence constituted by violation of rights or denial of rights which often operates not only on personal

but societal or cultural levels. The defining characteristic is not the presence of abusive behavior, but the lack of recognized basic human rights. (Toubia 16)

The two forms of violence defined by Toubia constitute the main aspects of abuse that women undergo in society. The first part of the section will be devoted to the study of moral violence. It will be concerned with the pressure and intimidation as well as the verbal abuses that women suffer from. The second part will include beating and sexual abuse since it is intended to probe into the physical violence which is inflicted on women in society. These will be viewed as institutionalized means by which women are subdued and objectified within a patriarchal social structure that wants to preserve its close control over women's lives by any means necessary. Women are subjected to violence as a way to ensure their obedience and punish their transgressions.

2.1. Moral violence

As mentioned in the previous definition, this form of violence is quite difficult to grasp. When it is quite simple to acknowledge that battering, assault and rape are forms of violence, it is more challenging to clearly describe moral and emotional abuses as violence even if some progress has been made in the recent years. This might explain why, for a long time, these have been neglected and given a secondary position in the fight to end violence against women. Yet, in this section, it will be considered as a very pernicious and effective form of violence. In fact, as Margaret Schuler writes,

... emotional abuse is a category [of gender violence] that affects countless women: whether through threats of reprisals for failing to conform to expected behavioral norms; through confinement (at times reaching the point of false imprisonment); or through forced marriages, those arranged by the family and carried out without the consent of the "bride." (Schuler 13)

These aspects of abuse are going to be tackled in four distinct sub-sections. Pressure and intimidation and verbal abuse are going to be used to illustrate moral violence. They will be analyzed in the four novels through the study of different situations involving several female characters.

2.1.1. Pressure and intimidation

In the continuity of what has been argued regarding patriarchal rule, it can be said that pressure and intimidation are used by patriarchy in order to force women to conform to its requirements. It seems quite clear that the necessity that patriarchy sees for keeping the balance of power in society is what engenders oppression against women which is enforced through different means among which pressure and intimidation. As Francine Pickup writes in her work, *Ending Violence Against Women: A Challenge for Development and Humanitarian Work*,

Gender analysis of human development shows us that the root cause of violence against women is not psychological damage to individuals, or external economic or political factors. Rather it lies in the unequal power relations between women and men, which insure male dominance over women, and are a feature of human societies throughout the world. (Pickup 19)

Under the clutch of these situations, African women find themselves unable to live their lives as independent individuals as their position in society is subjected to different conditions of submission and obedience. Very often, the laws of the country are modeled on the customs and traditions dictated by strict social and sometimes religious rules.

Most of the time, in patriarchal countries, the fate of women can be summarized by the description given by Asma Mohamed Abdel Halim in the following quote taken from her article “Tools of Suppression:”

Women are considered sealable, disposable, replaceable, not individuals but property to be acquired and accumulated. This attitude is of course backed by an outdated interpretation of religion and a set of traditional rules that are seen as sacrosanct; any change to these rules will threaten the “sanity” of the society. (Abdel Halim 23)

In this process, the point of view of women is never taken into account. Their sanity does not seem to be the concern of society; this eventually leads to their alienation, as will be discussed in the following chapter. One might think that these are traditional practices which are no longer relevant to the modern societies, but there has been little evolution as one might notice from the reading of the four novels which were published in four different decades: *The Grass Is Singing* (1950), *Woman at Point Zero* (1975), *Nervous conditions* (1988), and *L'Interdite* (1993). Despite the ‘modernization’ of some African countries, before or after their independence, the situation of women remains very precarious and has not evolved much.

Although, in the last decades, women have started to have access to education and to certain working positions, they were still expected to conform to patriarchal social expectations regarding the roles they are to perform within society in general and their families in particular. As Juliette Minces explains:

... women are supposed to emancipate themselves without abandoning the moral code which is primarily traditionalist: efforts towards emancipation within the traditionalist framework are, of course, as likely to succeed as attempts to square a circle. The reality is that women’s lot is marginally improved only in order that they may fulfill their allotted role as wives and mothers. (Minces 92)

The pressure put on women goes farther. By demanding from women to perform certain roles, society also deprives them from any possibility to define their identity and to express their own needs and desires. Consequently, women are intimidated by different practices into accepting and even internalizing what is expected of them in terms of social functions and behavior. For example, a married woman or a young girl who aspires to get married must behave according to a strict set of rules in order to avoid disgrace. As December Green explains, “Concern with honor results in the external imposition of social control upon females, whereas shame is a method of social control that is internalized by women. As young girls, female are socialized to accept shame as their lot in life” (Green 23). In what follows, several examples of pressure and intimidation are going to be discussed.

First, the pressure and intimidation seem to begin with the close supervision that women have to endure throughout their lives. This is based on the implicit idea that women are the responsibility of society; the family is not alone in taking charge of the women’s behavior. It is the whole community that takes control of their lives. Thereby, they are observed to the point of being put under surveillance because they are not trusted to behave properly enough if they were to be left unchecked. Females of all ages, social conditions, and levels of education are treated in the same way. The only exceptions are older women who, with age, acquire a special status in the sense that they are expected to help maintain restraint over the younger women of the community. In this sense, American author and Social activist Bell Hooks writes: “...the power the dominant exercises is maintained by the threat (acted upon or not) that abusive punishment, physical or psychological, could be used if the hierarchical

structure is threatened” (Hooks 120). In the present case, the hierarchy is the one upon which patriarchy is constructed; the one that puts all women in an inferior position to all men.

There are different forms of pressure, but the method seems to be the same. Women are coerced into performing what is expected of them by threats of reprisals. The fear of being rejected or punished by their society keeps women from attempting to liberate themselves from the grip of patriarchy. They are put in a position in which they do not have a choice; their future is already planned for them by their families in accordance with society’s limitations.

In *L’interdite*, almost all the female characters suffer from pressure and intimidation. Patriarchy, through the power of men, has complete control over the existence of the women in the Algerian society depicted by Mokeddem in her novel. Sultana, the main character, Yacine’s little friend Dalila, her sister Samia, and their mother live under these circumstances. For Alison Rice, “The author calls attention from the outset the controls and the dangers that ... women must constantly face in Algeria, as well as to gender differences” (Rice 142). To be born a girl in this society is equivalent to being considered as unable to be a full individual. Control is inherent to the relationship between society and its female members.

The character of Samia provides a perfect illustration of this situation. She is rejected by her family, especially her father and brothers, for wanting to be independent and for deciding to get educated abroad. Although she appears in the story

only through the narrative of her sister Dalila, the reader comes to understand that her demands are legitimate. Yet, as Juliette Minces explains:

Unfortunately, Algerian women are considered incapable of behaving ‘decently’ once ‘liberated.’ The most common argument is based on the idea that women are not ready, not educated or mature enough to live in freedom with dignity and a sense of proportion. In other words, women are still seen as children. (Minces 89)

Even when they are given the opportunity to study and get a job, women are still required to act within a restricted area. They are given some latitude, but not complete independence. This idea becomes clear when in the novel, Sultana and Ouarda, are contrasted. Despite the fact that they are both educated and active women, the attitude of society is different towards them. The response of society to Sultana, as expressed by some of its male members, is very hostile, sometimes even violent. On the other hand, Ouarda is respected, even by Dalila’s brothers. This can be explained by some latitude in the rules of society. For Juliette Minces, “Professional women, by the very nature of their occupation, usually deal only with children and other women. Furthermore, they are expected to conform to the general law of these societies: they must marry and have children of their own” (Minces 30). Thus, Sultana’s situation results in society’s disapprobation while Ouarda, who is a teacher, a wife and a mother, succeeds in obtaining society’s approval.

One interesting element that clearly illustrates the pervasive scrutiny and the constant intimidation that women cannot escape are the eyes of men. Wherever they go and whatever they do, women are continually subjected to a close observation which reminds them that they are not free. Women have to endure the impudent gazes and disapproving frowning of men as part of their daily life since men feel that they

are entitled to check women's every move and women come to view this as an inescapable part of their life in patriarchal society.

For Sultana, the persistent pressure of the eyes of men represents the materialization of the constraints of society. She experiences the gazes of men on several occasions in the novel. When she tries to walk the streets of the village, the young woman finds herself the target of staring men who follow her every move. She describes her experience:

En sortant de l'hôpital, je flâne sans but. Pas longtemps. Très vite, la fièvre des yeux force mon indifférence, m'interroge et m'interrompt. Foule d'yeux, vent noir, éclairs et tonnerres. Je ne flâne plus. Je fends une masse d'yeux. Je marche contre des yeux, entre leurs feux. Et pourtant, je n'ai plus de corps. Je ne suis qu'une tension qui s'égaré entre passé et présent, un souvenir hagard qui ne reconnaît aucun repère. (Mokeddem *L'interdite* 83).

Sultana feels assailed by the eyes of men that she describes like a brutal and sudden storm violently attacking her. The aggressive scrutiny that she can neither avoid nor fight makes her feel lost and deprives her of the basic possibility of taking a walk. Most importantly, it instills within her a sentiment of insecurity that reflects the pressure and intimidation that women experience under the rule of patriarchy.

Sultana is confronted again to the judgmental and disapproving eyes of men when she goes to see Dalila. As she is with Vincent outside the hotel she notices that they are being observed. He explains:

Un groupe d'hommes, devant l'hôtel, ne nous lâche pas des yeux. Ils n'ont pas l'air avenant.

- J'imagine que cela doit être pénible...
- Pénible est, ici, un euphémisme. Cependant, poussé à l'extrême, même le tragique verse dans la caricature, le burlesque, le grotesque. Mais qu'ils plantent donc leur regard jusqu'à la garde, qu'ils zyeuvent comme dit si bien Dalila, qu'ils

condamnent, vocifèrent ou insultent, ils ne pourront jamais atteindre que le vide en moi. (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 103)

Through this declaration, Sultana analyzes the situation of women in the Algerian society; they are always confronted to the inquisitive eyes of men who act as if they were entitled to monitor women.

Even Dalila, despite her being only a little girl, is already aware of this oppressive attitude that she tries to avoid by escaping to the loneliness of the desert as often as she can. She feels safer in her isolation than she does in her family and in her community. She expresses her rejection of the pressure that she feels when she tells Sultana about a dream that she had and in which she sets to challenge the oppression by destroying the eyes of men. The little girl recounts:

- Ça existe un beau cauchemar qui te fait plaisir ?...

J'ai rêvé que j'étais le Tambour, le Tambour en fille. Je marchais dans les rues de Temmar et je frappais sur le bendir. Je frappais, je frappais. Dans les rues, les homes et les garçons me regardaient. Et tous les yeux qui collaient, je leur criais fort, très fort. Ça faisait éclater les yeux comme du verre qui casse. Les figures étaient drôles, avec des trous rouges à la place des yeux. Et moi je riais. Et mon cris fusillait encore et encore d'autres yeux. Tac ! Tac ! Tac ! Comme quand les femmes jettent du sel dans le feu pour brûler le mauvais œil. Ça pète, ça pète, ça pète.

The dream that the little girl has, and which she refers to as 'a beautiful nightmare that makes her feel good,' represents her desire to free herself and the women of her society from the pressure and intimidation represented by the eyes of men. Through destroying their eyes, that she compares to what she calls 'the evil eye' Dalila wishes to deprive men and boys from the possibility to exercise their abusive power over the women and the girls in Algeria.

This element is also found in *Woman at Point Zero* in which the lot of Egyptian women is very similar to that of the Algerian women in Mokeddem's novel. As previously mentioned, the two Arab societies have very similar patriarchal systems. Nawel El Saadawi uses her main character, Firdaus, to describe the feeling that women have when they have the eyes of men on them. The idea of surveillance is reinforced by the description that Firdaus gives of the eyes of men. "I saw them as they watched what went on around them with wary, doubting, stealthy eyes, eyes ready to pounce, full of aggressiveness that seemed strangely servile" (El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* 16). Although this description contrasts the one that Sultana gives of the deliberate and insistent gazes, the attitude of violence and intimidation is the same in both novels.

The female characters in El Saadawi's novel are subjected to the same forms of pressure that are encountered in *L'interdite*. They are not given consideration for their capacity to stand as human beings, but judged for their ability and willingness to conform to the social order. They are brought up with the idea that they would be rewarded for following the rules and punished for infringing them. For F. O. Orabueze,

Saadawi...wants to point out that the violation of the basic rights of women like denial of right to education, freedom of movement, breach of the dignity of the female are prevalent in Egypt. She masterfully uses Firdaus's family to show the relationship between the male and female members of her society. It is a relationship which may be best described as a master/slave relationship. (Orabueze 127)

In the case of Firdaus, the pressure and intimidation are perpetuated within her family first. Her father, her mother, her uncle and her aunt are the ones who make certain that she performs what is expected of her. Firdaus is always intimidated by the authority of

patriarchy through the violence of her father, the oppression of her mother, and then the cruelty of her uncle and aunt who give her in marriage to another man who exercises his power over her. Asma Mohamed Abdel Halim argues that “Traditionally women are reduced to sex objects to such an extent that the right to their bodies becomes that of their male partners. Their right to resist a sexual relationship is given up for a dowry which is usually paid to their guardians or families” (Abdel Halim 24). Thus, “Firdaus is sold to old Mahmoud from whom the uncle and the wife extort a very huge dowry. Firdaus’ consent is not needed” (Orabueze 134). She becomes the prisoner of a husband she did not choose.

In *Nervous Conditions*, the situation of the female characters is quite precarious. They endure, at the hand of patriarchy, quite similar offences to the ones encountered by the female characters of the two previous novels. Dangarembga aims at exposing the situation in which women find themselves in her society. For Eustace Palmer, “The novel’s most important theme...is the condition of African womanhood in both the traditional and the modern settings” (Palmer 176). Whether they live in a traditional village like Tambu, Mainini, and Lucia, or in a more modern setting like Maiguru and Nyasha, all the women in the novel are submitted to pressure and intimidation. Although by means of different events, these women have quite similar lives when it comes to confronting patriarchy. It can be noticed that the work is, as Susan Z. Andrade writes, “...based on women’s shared experience of oppression or persecution” (Andrade 41). Their lives overlap and are influenced by one another; they support each other to be able to bear their hardships. Andrade further argues that:

Through its men, the African family is portrayed in this novel as a network of power relations which almost always works against its most disadvantaged members, children, and, particularly, women. Examples of masculine offences within this network include Jeremiah's laziness, N'hamo's malicious rivalry, Tekesure's philandering, and Babamukuru's benevolent domination. (Andrade 41)

Although the flaws of these male characters are completely overlooked or partially justified by their society, they represent a source for the pressure applied on the women whose lives are entangled with theirs. In fact, the careless attitude of Jeremiah increases the difficulties that his wife, Mainini, has to bear in her everyday life. The feeling of rivalry of N'hamo pushes him to intimidate Tambu in order to stop her from going to school, as mentioned earlier in the chapter. The lack of responsibility in Takesure prevents Lucia from having a stable life. As for Babamukuru, he represents the supreme patriarchal authority under which the very existence of Maiguru is threatened.

The idea that being a woman means being oppressed can be further sustained by comparing the situation of different characters, for example, Mainini, Tambu's Mother, and Maiguru, her aunt. The two women have very different lives, but are confronted to the same elements of intimidation. For Ann Elizabeth Willey,

At the beginning of the story, ... Tambu without hesitation believed that the process of development through education could mitigate the limitations of the process of development into a woman in her family world. For example, she contrasts her mother, a poor and over-worked woman, with her aunt, a well-educated, well-fed and, in Tambu's eyes, very lucky woman. She regards her mother as someone who is crushed doubly by womanhood and poverty but by her own choice. (Willey 71)

But, the girl soon comes to realize that her analysis of the lives of the two women was quite hasty and erroneous. She is quite right when she sees her mother as a woman who has the weight of society on her shoulders and who is incapable of reacting. For

Eustace Palmer, “As a woman, she supports her daughter, but having experienced nothing but childbearing and childrearing and general hard labor, this lethargic woman has given up all hope and has come to embrace an almost deterministic conception of the woman’s role” (Palmer 180).

Yet, Tambu’s idealization of her aunt’s life is based on what she sees as modernity that can bring improvement to the life of women in society. “But what she finds upon arriving at her uncle’s house is that the realm of modernity, so hotly anticipated, also limits her development as a female subject. For Maiguru, though equally as developed in the modern world as her husband, is certainly not equal to her husband in any other sense” (Willey 72). This realization comes to disrupt Tambu’s vision about education which she had seen as a powerful tool that could grant her escape from difficult living conditions. The girl’s enthusiasm is brought into question when she starts to realize through her aunt’s experience that the pressure and intimidation experienced by women in society is not automatically prevented by a woman’s higher education.

It becomes clear that for society in general and her family in particular, the place of Maiguru is not different from the place of Mainini. The only thing that gives her value is her marriage to Babamukuru.

The family, it seems, would rather pretend that Maiguru does not have a degree. They would rather see her, not as an educated woman, not as a breadwinner, but as a wife and mother. It is significant that we never see Maiguru at work. In fact we are rather surprised to discover that she is a teacher. We see her only in her very subordinate role as wife and mother, a woman truly trapped by marriage and prevented from realizing the full potential that her education might have led her to expect. (Dangarembra, *Nervous Conditions* 138)

Thus, the only value given to women by patriarchy is contingent upon their ability to conform to the norms of their society. Much like children who are very often praised for their obedience, these women are approved of when they follow the established rules.

Pressure and intimidation are also experienced in the novel by the character of the admirably self-confident and yet disreputable Lucia. She is disapproved of by the men of her family and the members of her community because she neither conforms to nor blindly obeys the rules like the other women around her. In an attempt to make her submit to their authority, the men decide to organize a 'trial' which Lucia is not even asked to attend. As Nellie Annie Katenje writes, "One evening, just after the breaking of the new year of 1970, Babamukuru summoned a kind of family *dare* which consisted of the patriarchy – the three brothers, who were Babamukuru, [Tambu's] father and Babamunini Thomas, and their sister – and the male accused" (Katenje 159). Their evaluations and accusations of Lucia's behavior represent the voice of patriarchy and its disapprobation of the actions of a woman who does not hesitate to live her life as she pleases, even if she has to transgress some of the strict rules of her society. For Eustace Palmer, "When the men of the family meet to deliberate Lucia's fate – the male family members designate her "vicious," "unnatural," and "uncontrollable," because she acts out her sexuality as she pleases..." (Palmer 178-179). Lucia represents a danger to the established social order because she is not married and has no children and, therefore, cannot be controlled by confinement in the roles of wife and mother. Patriarchy wants to put pressure on her in order to make her conform by placing her under the control of a man.

The second element which will be used to illustrate the materialization of pressure and intimidation is the combination of forced marriage and confinement. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, patriarchy does not provide women with any right or space to decide for their future. Marriage is often imposed on them, either by force or because they are deprived of the economic resources to support themselves and consequently they have no other choice but to get married. In this regard it can be considered as a form of violence, or at least as an oppressive institution. For Margaret Schuler, "...gender violence is embedded in the context of cultural, socioeconomic, and political power relations. These relations, in which male power dominates, reduce women to economic and emotional dependency, the property of some male protector" (Schuler 11). Thus, marriage represents the best institution to perpetrate the power dynamics within patriarchy.

This situation can be observed by analyzing the lives of Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero* and Mary Turner in *The Grass Is Singing*. Although their experiences are quite different, the two women were forced, by patriarchy, into marriages they did not want. Yet, more than the coercion itself, women suffer from the consequences of their marriages. One of the worst for many female characters is their confinement within the domestic sphere. Consequently, women are deprived of their freedom of action and often also of speech. For F. O. Orabueze:

In these marriages, there is the absence of emotions, particularly on the man's side. He simply sees the marriage as a means of assuaging his sexual desires within the armpit of religious code, a way of procreation of sons and procurement of cheap or inexpensive labor. The woman is voiceless in the choice of her suitor. Her father or her brother or her uncle or any of her male relations can choose a suitor for her. If she dares to reject their choice, unpleasant consequences may follow. (Orabueze 134)

In the case of Firdaus, she is directly obliged by her uncle and his wife to marry Sheikh Mahmoud. Thereby, the young girl who was hoping to go to university finds herself in a position from which she has no possible escape; the pressure and intimidation of society give her no way out. The confinement that she experiences is very violent and Firdaus' pain very real. As Eustace Palmer writes:

Marriage to the repulsive Mahmoud means that Firdaus goes [back] into a prison where she is abused, beaten, and tamed. Mahmoud is really just another variation of the repulsive and repressive father figure representative of all the various male and societal forces that use and abuse Firdaus. (Palmer 162)

Marriage deprives Firdaus from all her rights as a human being. She is put in a position of inferiority from which she can do nothing but obey and keep silent. She is reduced from the situation of student, who could potentially have become an educated and later on an economically independent woman, to that of an oppressed female who would never be able to reach self-actualization. Despite the fact that she is capable of analyzing the situation, her inability to act is paralyzing. As Orabueze puts it:

A married woman's degradation must have been the lowest and that must have necessitated Nawel El Saadawi's overt title to her novel, *Woman at Point Zero*. Marriage in the world of the novel is the worst experience in a woman's life... Firdaus insists that the lowest status of a woman is wifehood because she is totally enslaved and emasculated by her husband. A married woman is more devalued than a daughter, or a prostitute, or a female employee. (Orabueze 134-135)

It can be concluded that the oppression resulting from forced marriage is so violent that Firdaus, who speaks from her own experience, sees it as the worst thing that a woman can endure in society.

As for Mary Turner, the situation is very similar, but with the difference that she was not physically forced into marriage; she was brought to take the decision on her own by the means of strong social pressure. Although Mary, unlike Firdaus, had

succeeded in building an independent life for herself, she sees this life fall to the ground when her friends speak with disapprobation about her independence. For Jean Pickering:

... what she overhears destroys her self-image, the vast hollowness that will later overwhelm her makes its first appearance. In this hollow state, she becomes oversensitive to what others are thinking and marries Dick out of a desperate need for a husband to release her from the life she has built – a life she later looks back on as ideal. (Pickering 26)

Mary was intimidated by the opinion of the collective; she was not in a position to simply dismiss or ignore the comments because as a woman she is keenly aware of the necessity to conform if she wants to be accepted as part of the community.

The consequences faced by Mary after her marriage with Dick are quite similar to the ones dealt with by Firdaus. She finds herself trapped in her own life. Her confinement starts when she goes to live with Dick on his farm.

[T]he farm ... means prison for [her] ... Dick's love of the farm means imprisonment for Mary; she realizes that she will never leave, no matter how prosperous the farm becomes. Ironically, Mary's only chance to leave comes too late, when social pressure forces Dick – now on the edge of bankruptcy – to sell the farm to Charlie Slatter so that he can take his disturbed wife for an extended holiday. (Pickering 23-24)

It seems to be society's prerogative to decide when and how people should act or react. As long as Mary's pain was personal, no measure was taken to help her, but when her behavior was evaluated as potentially dangerous for the established social order, her case was taken into notice by the community. In fact, for years Mary had suffered in silence.

She slept for hours and hours: it was a way to make time pass quickly. At one o'clock she lay down, and it was after four when she woke. But Dick would not be home for two hours yet, so she lay half clothed on the bed, drugged with sleep, her mouth dry and her head aching. It was during those two hours of half-consciousness that she allowed herself to dream about the beautiful lost time when

she worked in an office and lived as she pleased, before ‘people made her get married.’” (Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing* 188)

This situation of entrapment and helplessness leads Mary to a slow mental disintegration which will be discussed in the following chapter of this study. Forced marriage led her to lose everything in her life, including herself.

Thus, forced marriage and confinement are strong forms of pressure and intimidation deliberately used by patriarchy against women. In her article “Literature, Feminism, and the African Woman Today,” Ama Ata Aidoo writes:

When we were young we were told that people who were condemned to death were granted any wish on the eve of their execution ... Anyhow, a young woman on her wedding day was something like that. She was made much of, because that whole ceremony was a funeral of the self that could have been. (Aidoo 161)

This clarifies the extent to which women are deprived of their identity by marriage. They are expected, like Mary and Firdaus, to forget their ambitions and their intellectual abilities and to put themselves at the service of the established social order. They are expected to embrace their position as married women even if in so doing they have to lose their humanity.

It can be said that pressure and intimidation as well as forced marriages and confinement are potent tools used by society against women. They are forms of violence which deprive women from their rights and freedom in society.

2.1.2. Verbal abuse

In the continuity of what has been argued, it might be said that verbal abuse is one of the different types of violence to which women are subjected in society. It is often considered as a negligible form of oppression as a supposedly less dangerous or less

serious than physical assault, but the women who are victims of insults suffer from serious emotional and psychological consequences. Their experience with the violence of the words is as difficult as that of physical pain. In fact, it is often more difficult to deal with verbal violence. In the view of December Green, “The most insidious forms of violence do not involve overt brutality but psychological cruelty that results in anguish and the disintegration of the self” (Green 26).

Verbal abuse is one form of psychological cruelty which can be found in the two novels *L’interdite* and *Woman at Point Zero*. Just like pressure and intimidation, it is used for the purpose of preventing women from gaining any freedom in society. Insults are used to belittle women and diminish their value in the eyes of society, and also to hurt and break their own self-image. Sometimes they are even used as reprisal against women who supposedly challenge some of the restrictions of society.

For example, this is the case with Samia. Mokeddem presents her as a girl who rejected the demands of her family to see her married and who decided to pursue her studies abroad. Because she does not conform to the social expectations, Samia is insulted and called “a whore.” Her little sister Dalila explains the situation to Vincent in her own words: « Quand ma mère parle d’elle, mes frères, ils disent que Samia est une putain. C’est pas vrai! Samia, elle veut seulement étudier et marcher dans les rues quand elle veut et être tranquille » (Mokeddem, *L’interdite* 37). In a society like the Algerian one, which supposedly values honor, the word ‘whore’ is used to shame women. By labeling them with this word, society gives them a bad name which at the same time annihilates their existence as respectable members of the community. Thereby, they supposedly lose their credibility and they are no longer in a legitimate

position to demand a status by which they would be treated as full-fledged respected members of their society.

Verbal abuse is, therefore, a deliberate tool used by patriarchal societies to humiliate women and tighten their grip over them. One of the first aspects of this practice is that it has become commonplace. In the same way that women can be verbally abused within the domestic sphere by their fathers, brothers, or husbands, any woman can be insulted in public spaces by any man who considers that her attitude is inappropriate.

It must be specified that, in Algeria, sometimes the mere presence of women in the street is considered inappropriate, as suggested by Mokeddem, it is indeed perceived as a challenge to patriarchal rules. As Juliette Minces puts it, “A 10-year-old urchin will quite naturally make obscene or sexually complimentary comments to a passing woman in the street. He knows what he is saying, and his superiority as a male allows him to do so” (Minces 36). Most of the time, the woman cannot even answer. This situation is very degrading and frustrating for women who find themselves unable to complain because, very often, they are too scared of worsening their situations. In some cases, they would even be blamed for going out because, according to the norms of society, it is the fault of the woman for putting herself in a position to be insulted as traditionally the occupation of the public space is the prerogative of men.

This is experienced by Sultana, Mokeddem’s main character, when she is confronted to the realities of her society upon her return from France. Her taxi is surrounded by a number of children one of which insults her:

Le visage illuminé de rire, un des enfants me lance, avant de lâcher prise :

- Putain !

Je sursaute. « Putain ! » Plus que l'image navrante de la rue, plus que la vue du désert, ce mot plante en moi l'Algérie comme un couteau. Putain ! Combien de fois, lors de mon adolescence, encore vierge et déjà blessée, n'ai-je pas reçu ce mot vomi sur mon innocence. Putain ! Mot parjure, longtemps je n'ai pu l'écrire qu'en majuscule, comme s'il était la seule destinée, la seule divinité, échues au rebut féminin. (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 16)

Although she had become a doctor and lived away from Algeria for many years, the pain of verbal abuse was still present in Sultana's mind. The weight of the shame a woman has to carry with her wherever she goes is the direct result of the insults she hears on an almost daily basis.

Despite the fact that they cannot be seen, the stigmas of this type of violence are as dangerous for women as the scars that might be left by beating. The extent of the damage will be discussed in the following chapter.

Another female character who has to endure verbal abuses from her society is Firdaus in Nawel El Saadawi's novel. As mentioned earlier, this character had to deal with different forms of patriarchal oppression ever since she was a little girl and whose experience with verbal abuse is very traumatic. This proves how devastating this form of violence can be.

Once she is confronted to the hypocrisy of society when a police officer, who knows she is a prostitute, wants to sleep with her. When she does not immediately respond to his demands, he threatens to arrest her despite the fact that she had not done anything wrong. When she asks for an explanation, he simply tells her: ““you're a prostitute, and it's my duty to arrest you, and others of your kind. To clean up the country, and protect respectable families from the likes of you”” (El Saadawi, *Woman*

at *Point Zero* 83). The attitude of the man is full of condescension; he treats Firdaus as a 'whore' when he seems to think that he remains respectable even after asking her to sleep with him. The simple fact that he is a man and she is a woman grants him the right to insult her. Besides, as a police officer, he is supposed to be an example of integrity and respectability, but he simply puts himself in a position to judge Firdaus and exempts himself from the sin at the same time. To him, she is guilty simply because she is a woman.

For Diana Royer, "...her world is altered and her body violated in a different way when a customer turned friend, Di'aa, tells Firdaus that she is not respectable" (Royer 108). Once again, Firdaus is confronted to the verbal violence of a man who wants to devalue her. He hypocritically questions her respectability as a prostitute when he had been a client. The judgment pronounced by this man had a devastating effect on her. The pain that these words produce and the description that Firdaus makes of it seems to be deeper and stronger than any pain she had experienced before.

She says:

... before the words 'not respectable' had even reached my ears, my hands rose to cover them quickly, but they penetrated into my head like the sharp tip of a plunging dagger. He closed his lips tightly. A sudden deep silence enveloped the room, but the words continued to echo in my ears, took refuge in their innermost depths, buried themselves in my head, like some palpable material object, like a body as sharp as the edge of a knife which had cut its way through my ears, and the bones of my head to the brain inside. (El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* 95-96)

After this incident, Firdaus was never able to overcome the destruction of her self-image and to carry on with a life that she had been content with. She was definitively destroyed by the words of a man to the point of wanting to become 'respectable' if the price was her life.

Verbal abuse is also experienced by Tambu's cousin in *Nervous Conditions*. For Nellie Annie Katenje, "Sexual inequality and prejudice are also demonstrated when Nyasha is labeled a whore by her father" (161). Babamukuru disapproves of his daughter's behavior because she wants to go out and enjoy her time with her friends. Yet, he does not seem to mind the fact that his son, Chido, has the same attitude as his sister. The fact that Nyasha is a girl is used against her in order to limit her freedom, but when she does not want to submit, she is insulted by her own father.

Through this section, it has been demonstrated that verbal abuse is one of the means used by society to oppress women. It is one more manifestation of the violence that women have to suffer from under patriarchal rule. The insults and the condescending remarks that women are subjected to in their everyday life also illustrate the deep and strong hypocrisy of the social norms of patriarchy which accepts and even encourages certain behaviors when they are performed by men while it rejects and punishes the same behaviors when they are performed by women. For example, men are encouraged to have a strong and forceful presence in the public spaces while women are asked to be as discreet as possible when they are allowed to go out at all. Indeed, these societies use double standards to evaluate the behaviors of men and women.

Women are confronted to other forms of violence which originate from the same source and which have similarly devastating effects. In fact, they are subjected to different forms of physical violence that are used both as a deterrent to control women's behaviour and as a form of punishment against women who challenge social authority.

2.2. Physical violence

Physical violence against women is the tangible version of the pressure and verbal abuses dealt with earlier. In a system based on hierarchy, the position of inferiority of women is often maintained by force; physical violence is one of the instruments used to deter women from attempting to gain more independence.

For a long time, physical violence was understood as part of the identity of individuals; a man or a father, for example, was considered to have the right to beat his wife and children. Today, the practice is still accepted as part of the patriarchal social system. The damages brought by this kind of behavior upon the victims is often ignored or dismissed as unimportant because it has been made common place for men to discipline their wives and children as part of their prerogatives. Sally Engle Merry explains the functioning of this form of abuse. For her, “Gender violence is a highly variable phenomenon that takes shape within particular social arrangements. The identification of any act of violence is always a matter of interpretation within a particular social and cultural context” (Engle Merry 22-23). The fact the physical violence is accepted and even justified within patriarchal rule makes it very difficult to denounce and fight on the part of women.

The main interest here being the analysis of the physical violence used in order to enforce patriarchal authority, the forms of violence which will be deconstructed and assessed are perpetrated by men against women who are placed under their authority. This can be illustrated by physical violence within marriage. December Green views that:

Violence by husbands against wives should not be seen as a breakdown in social order but an affirmation of a particular sort of social order, namely a patriarchal one. In this sense violence is recognized as the norm; it is not dysfunctional to the system but functional to it. And it affects all women, even those not directly victimized. (Green 28)

In fact, physical violence is intrinsic to the oppression exercised over women in their society. It is a means by which women are coerced into complying with the requirements of patriarchy.

Two forms of physical violence will be used to analyze the situation of women in the four novels studied in this work: beating as a means of control and sexual abuse. These two forms are the most common and the most devastating in the lives of women. They appear in different ways and are the results of different situations, but they seem to have the same purpose and the same impact on women in *L'interdite*, *Nervous Conditions*, *The Grass Is Singing* and *Woman at Point Zero*.

The image of the father, or the patriarch, can be seen as a symbol of patriarchal oppression in the four works because the fathers exercise their authority over their wives and daughters in a very restrictive, sometimes even, repressive manner. Although they perform different types of violence, the four father characters will be studied to expose the pernicious roles they play in the lives of different female characters and the deep stigmas their acts leave behind.

2.2.1. Beating as a means of control

Physical violence is an integral part of the patriarchal system; it is used to ensure that women are confined to the spaces that are delimited for them by society. It also serves to punish the women who transgress the social rules. In this sense, it can be seen as a

necessary part of patriarchal rule, one that allows it to have complete control over the female members of society. It also illustrates the extent to which men are ready to go in order to enforce their authority over women. In this sense, Sally Engle Merry writes:

From a performative perspective, doing violence is a way of doing gender. In some situations and contexts, the performing of gender identities means acquiescing to violence or being violent. By putting up with violent assaults without complaint, minimizing the violence, calling it deserved, or treating it as inevitable, women “do” gender. Just as women steer away from less “feminine” jobs, they may resist labeling their experiences as crimes. The woman who refuses to put up with male violence and takes her batterer to court risks defaulting on her gender performance. She faces exclusions and pressures from both his kin and her own. When a man uses violence against a partner whom he suspects of flirting with another man, he also accomplishes gender. His actions demonstrate that he is a man who cannot be cuckolded, who is in control of his woman, and who is a person of power and authority. (Engle Merry 11)

Thus, beating is often accepted within the family. Fathers, brothers, and other male members of a woman’s family might use, with the tacit approbation of the community, different forms of physical violence to punish her for an act which is judged indecent or simply to prevent her from having a behavior that does not meet the established social norms.

This can be seen in Mokeddem’s *L’interdite* through the behavior of Dalila’s brothers. They consider that they have the right to keep their sister under control by threatening and beating her. Her mother and father seem to see this as an acceptable situation because they do not intervene. The little girl learns that she has to strictly follow the directives of her brothers or face the corporal punishment that they are entitled to give her (Mokeddem, *L’interdite* 34-35).

There is a similarity with what is experienced by Nyasha in *Nervous Conditions*. Tambu’s cousin has a difficult relationship with her father. The fact that the girl has opinions of her own, which seem to originate from her personality and

from the education she received when she lived in England, made her develop a reluctance to blindly obey the orders of her father. Nyasha, by showing signs of disagreement, challenges the authority of her father who, as previously mentioned, is the patriarch of the family. The strength and the attitude of his daughter are very disconcerting for Babamukuru who cannot accept or even understand the personality of Nyasha. She seems to threaten his position of power and he has to keep her under control. This leads to continuous arguments between father and daughter; very often, these are related to Nyasha's eating disorder which Babamukuru does not try to understand. He simply wants to force Nyasha to eat. Therefore, their arguments often lead to the father beating his daughter in an attempt to make her submit to what he wants her to do (Dangaremba, *Nervous Conditions* 16-17).

The use by men of physical force against women is inscribed in their position of superiority. The main purpose of this prerogative is to control women's acts and behavior in society. This form of violence comes to reinforce the pressure and intimidation that women undergo. The terrible consequences of the trauma that beating generates within women are to be dealt with in the following chapter.

Another example of this situation can be found in *Woman at Point Zero*. The image of Firdaus' father is quite similar to that of Babamukuru. The position of the man at the head of his family gives him the patriarchal authority to impose his power using force and violence. Through the description made by his daughter, it can be noticed that the man has integrated violence in his behavior; he seems to have learnt it gradually while acquiring other characteristics relative to his gender role. Firdaus describes him as follows:

My father, a poor peasant farmer, who could neither read nor write, knew very few things in life. How to grow crops, how to sell a buffalo poisoned by his enemy before it died, how to exchange his virgin daughter for a dowry when there was still time, how to be quicker than his neighbor in stealing from the fields once the crop was ripe. How to bend over the headman's hand and pretend to kiss it, how to beat his wife and make her bite the dust each night. (El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* 14)

For Firdaus, the violence of her father is an aspect of his personality; she relates it to dishonesty and social hypocrisy. Yet, it is also symptomatic of how men are raised within patriarchy as his violence was instilled into him as part of his gendered education.

The violence described by Firdaus seems to be inherent to the family and more specifically to marriage. As mentioned previously, marriage in patriarchy is based on the principle of male superiority while the female is subordinated and put in a position of servitude. This creates a strong sense of possessiveness in the man's behavior; he comes to think that he has the right to abuse his wife, if he considers that she has failed to satisfy him in any way. This attitude is largely accepted since it is justified in the eyes of patriarchy as being necessary and useful in the maintaining of the status quo, mainly the power relations between the male and female members of society. For
December Green:

Wife battery is certainly a development, if not a human right problem. Through a variety of mechanisms wife battery limits the ability of women to participate in their communities to their full potential. When wife battery provokes women's fear through threats to kill, mutilate, or torture the woman or her children, it is especially potent. (Green 28)

This sad and cruel reality is worsened by the situations of women who very often have no possibility to change their lot or to escape the domestic violence they experience. The precariousness in which they are placed when they are denied education and economic independence comes to consolidate the impossibility for women to react

against violence. When they are raised and then married according to the restrictive rules of patriarchy, women are turned into prisoners of their husbands and other male members of their families.

Nawel El Saadawi denounces the ubiquity of domestic violence and wife battery in her novel. Through the experience of Firdaus with Sheikh Mahmoud, we learn that the Egyptian society, which is similar to many patriarchal societies, considers that it is a personal and familial matter relative to the private domestic sphere; a woman should not ask for help or reject the acts of her husband as criminal.

Then, violence itself becomes an institution. It is based on rules and principles and it has a definite function within families and in society in general. It is a daily experience for women. This idea becomes clear through the description that Firdaus gives of her situation:

On one occasion he hit me all over with his shoe. My face and body became swollen and bruised. So I left the house and went to my uncle. But my uncle told me that all husbands beat their wives, and my uncle's wife added that her husband often beat her. I said my uncle was a respected Sheikh, well versed in the teachings of religion, and he, therefore, could not possibly be in the habit of beating his wife. She replied that it was precisely men well versed in their religion who beat their wives. The precepts of religion permitted such punishment. A virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband. Her duty was perfect obedience.

I was at a loss what to answer. Before the servant girl had even started putting lunch on the table, my uncle took me back to my husband's house...

'Why did you come back from your uncle's house? Couldn't he bear to feed you for a few days? Now you will realize I'm the only person who can put up with you and is prepared to feed you...

One day he hit me with his heavy stick until the blood ran from my nose and ears. So I left, but this time I did not go to my uncle's house. I walked through the streets with swollen eyes, and bruised face, but no one paid any attention to me. (El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* 58-60)

The beating that Firdaus is subjected to by her husband is not occasional; it is systematic. His recurrent violence against his wife is not motivated by anger or given as reprisal; it seems to originate from the fact that he simply has the prerogative of beating his wife as he pleases. This illustrates that women, under patriarchal rule, are subordinated but also considered as non-human. The man does not have any form of compassion or affection for his wife. Bell Hooks views that “Male violence against women in personal relationships is one of the most blatant expressions of the use of abusive force to maintain domination and control. It epitomizes the actualization of the concept of hierarchical rule and coercive authority” (Hooks 120). For this reason, this form of violence is widely accepted and rarely questioned within patriarchal societies.

The reaction of her uncle and his wife is also a predictable one. Their discourse is there to reinforce the patriarchal system. First, they forced Firdaus to marry Sheikh Mahmoud, and then they tell her that she cannot leave him because it would be against the teachings of society and religion. The young woman is put under the double pressure of traditions and religious teachings which come both against women’s rights to ask for change. The physical and moral pain that Firdaus suffers at the hands of her husband are never discussed, they are not even mentioned. As Juliette Minces explains regarding this situation:

A husband exercises both physical and psychological domination over his wife. He will frequently be extremely violent towards her, and will vent all his frustration upon her. Battered wives are very common, although the Koran gives physical violence as valid ground for divorce. But it is so generally accepted that a husband may beat his wife, and the women are so unaware of their rights that they very rarely bring their husbands to court. Indeed, many women offer the fact that they are not beaten as proof that they have a good husband. (Minces 43)

So, when she comes to realize that no one can help her, Firdaus understands that her situation is helpless. She has no other choice but to stay at her husband's house where she is regularly beaten and despised. Yet, when the pain becomes unbearable, she is going to turn to a place where she thinks she might find safety and solace: the street.

Another society in which women are constantly confronted to beating is the Algerian one. In *L'interdite*, Mokeddem depicts the different forms of violence that women undergo in this society, but the most terrible example is the murder of Sultana's mother by her husband.

From the beginning of the work, Sultana describes a lingering pain from her past which haunts her and prevents her from being at peace with her identity and with her country. She explains her reluctance to come back to her country by criticizing the strict and unfair patriarchal society that oppresses women and deprives them from their humanity. Yet the source of her estrangement is deeper. As Alison Rice explains,

It isn't until near the end that we learn the unthinkable details of Sultana's past, in a chapter composed by Vincent. He quotes her as she recounts a murderous moment from her early childhood, when her father and her mother exchange blows and their battle becomes so violent that her mother fell to her death. The five-year-old Sultana witnessed this horror, as well as the subsequent death of her little sister, who was buried just two days later. (Rice 127)

Just like Dangarembga and El Saadawi, Mokeddem denounces violence against women, but she is the only one who goes as far as to show that more often than one might think women are killed by their husbands or their partners. More than physical or psychological pain, women risk their lives when they are victims of violence. The death of Sultana's mother had repercussions on her daughters as well. One of them

died right after the murder of her mother while the second had to live with the stigmas and the traumas of her past.

Beating is one of the many strategies used against women in patriarchal societies. It is accepted, validated and adopted by many men who use it against women who can be their sisters, wives, daughters, sometimes even their own mothers. Some men even feel entitled to beat women of their extended family, their neighbors, or even strangers whose behavior they disapprove of. It is endured by women who most of the time see it as inevitable and hesitate to denounce it because they are scared of the consequences in societies in which women's well being is given so little attention.

In addition to beating, another form of physical violence which is perpetrated against women in patriarchal societies is sexual abuse.

2.2.2. Sexual abuse

Sexual abuse is probably one of the most terrible and devastating forms of violence that women have to endure in patriarchal societies. This violence is a direct consequence of the situation of women; not only are they discriminated against and considered as men's subordinate, but they are also placed in a position of objects of men's desire. They are reduced to their sexuality and most of the time they are abused because of it.

If women go through different difficult experiences because of the way they are treated within their families and within society in general, they most often suffer because of the way in which their sexuality is viewed in society. For example, in strict patriarchal and Muslim societies like the Algerian and the Egyptian ones, women's

sexuality is closely watched and controlled because it is directly associated to the reputation and to the position of their families within the community. As Juliette Minces explains:

[t]he family group, in the broad sense, is the keystone of society. In order to ensure the purity of the line, the fiancée must be a virgin, so girls are frequently married off young. They are educated almost entirely with a view to their future roles as wives and mothers, and are closely watched from puberty onwards. A girl's virginity is a family possession of considerable importance, even today. (Minces 43)

This attitude on the part of society can explain some of the situations that women face. A good example to mention is the confinement to the domestic space and the close control that female characters like Samia, Dalila, and Firdaus have to cope with from an early age. Mokeddem shows, through the attitude of Samia's family, that they want to prevent their daughters from obtaining any freedom because they want them to get married according to the rules of society. El Saadawi illustrates the same thing when she shows how Firdaus' uncle refuses to send his niece to university because he does not want her to be in direct contact with young men. Thus, the protection of women's virtue comes to justify their oppression. Instead of protecting the women by giving them more rights and more value, society simply prefers to keep them out of men's reach by confining them to the inside of the house.

This situation, already very oppressive for women, sometimes takes an even more dangerous and extreme form: female circumcision. For December Green, "Even more controversial than wife beating is emotionally charged debate over whether the genital cutting ... alternately known as female genital mutilation (FGM) is even a form of gender violence" (Green 44). It will be argued here that this practice, which is more widespread than one might think, is one of the worst forms of gender abuses that

women can be subjected to. It is, in fact, a clear form of sexual violence against the women who undergo this terrible practice because of the severe consequences on both their physical and the mental health. As December Green explains:

Although its origins are unknown, female genital surgery is a long standing customary practice. It is most accurately understood as a practice that has socioeconomic and political ramifications as well as symbolic meaning. The practice is deeply embedded in the cultures that perform it. To both its proponents and its detractors, the genital surgery and the ceremony that may accompany it are recognized as fundamental to defining male/female roles. (Green 45)

Once again, women are subjected to the authority of men through the perpetration of an abusive practice which is endorsed by patriarchy in spite of the physical and mental pains that it causes women. The painful experiences of women are relegated to a secondary position while priority is given to the maintaining and preservation of an oppressive social order.

The pain and danger of the surgery itself, which is often performed in very precarious environments with traditional tools, is amplified over the years and the consequences of the operation often prevent women from having a normal life. Their sexual life as well as their ability to conceive children and to give birth is hindered by the results and possible complications of the surgery. Besides, the fact that the circumcision is generally performed on very young girls by women of their community and with the consent and the approbation of women of their own family accentuates the psychological impact of this practice. These girls feel a betrayal when they are subjected to pain by the people who should have protected them. Thus, the aggression is even more traumatic. As Nahid Toubia writes:

The voluntary practice of female genital mutilation is one particularly extreme example of a way in which women injure themselves in order to conform to the

traditional values they have absorbed. The practice is typically performed on women, by women, and acts as a sort of punishment of the collective self for having an autonomous sexuality. (Toubia 19)

This describes what happens to Firdaus in *Women at Point Zero*. El Saadawi introduces this subject because the practice is quite widespread in Egypt and because she had to experience it herself when she was a girl. From the moment Firdaus starts asking her mother questions which show that she starts to become aware of the relationships between men and women, the mother takes the decision to circumcise her. Firdaus describes her experience:

... one day I asked my mother ... [h]ow it was that she had given birth to me without a father? First she beat me. Then she brought a woman who was carrying a small knife or maybe a razor blade. They cut off a piece of flesh from between my thighs.

I cried all night. Next morning my mother did not send me to the fields... (El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* 16-18)

In this sense, F. O. Orabueze writes, "Circumcision is another method through which women's sexuality is caged and controlled by men" (Orabueze 180). In the view of patriarchy, women's bodies do not belong to them; they are objectified for the pleasure of men and for bearing children, but are never dealt with as full-fledged individuals.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the different forms of violence that are used against women are accepted as part of the patriarchal system. December Green sees that "[i]n many families worldwide a husband's use of some level of physical violence to discipline his wife is considered acceptable behavior. Similarly, where female genital cutting is the norm, the decision to circumcise one's daughter is legitimately made within the family" (Green 15-16). From a very early age, women are subjected to the requirements of patriarchy and its social norms.

In *The Grass Is Singing*, although it is never explicitly expressed by Doris Lessing, the fact that Mary had been abused by her father can be clearly deduced from her dreams and her night terror that occur on different occasions in the novel. It can be understood that Mary's difficulties to have a normal marital relationship with Dick is a consequence of her past experience of sexual abuse by her father. The trauma of her childhood had an effect on the woman; she became a victim of her past in the sense that she was never able to develop a healthy sexual desire for any man, not even her husband.

Another society in which these kinds of abuses can be encountered is the one described by Malika Mokeddem in her novel. As mentioned previously, the Algerian society has a strict way of constructing gender roles and of making sure that people internalize and perform them. In this context, and as Juliette Minces explains, "[i]t is difficult for a man, given his education, to imagine any form of relationship other than a sexual one with a woman who is not a member of his family. A woman from another family can only be a prey" (Minces 36). Yet, this education by which a man is exhorted to show his virility and prove his manhood sometimes gets out of control and leads to rape or, as illustrated in *L'interdite*, to incest.

Sultana is confronted to a case of incest while she was working at the hospital of Ain Nekhla. She is able to observe the devastating consequences before she even learns about what happened to the young girl she has to treat.

Je vois une jeune fille au visage fermé qui ne pipe mot. La femme qui l'accompagne présente une rigidité anormale du visage. Son verbe et ses gestes sont rares, hachés. Au moment où je les accueille, Khaled me fait signe :

- Pouvez-vous venir une seconde à l'infirmierie ?

Je le suis.

- La jeune fille a été engrossée par son frère.

Problème de promiscuité, entre autres. Ils sont treize frères et sœurs à vivre avec leur mère dans un deux-pièces. Leur père est mort il y a quelques années. Lorsque la mère s'est rendu compte de la grossesse de sa fille, elle l'a emmenée dans le nord du pays. Elles sont revenues après l'accouchement, seules. On murmure que la mère aurait tué le bébé de sa fille. Depuis, la jeune fille est devenue muette et la mère est raide, tremble et bégaye. Un malheur sans remède. (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 126)

The most noticeable thing about the tragic situation is that all the consequences have to be borne by women. The girl who had been the victim of circumstance, and probably also of her own brother, had to keep silent when she was taken away from her home so much so that she stopped talking altogether. She probably also had to witness the death of her baby.

Through the character of this girl, the Algerian author portrays a society that has deep problems with gender roles and sexuality. The terrible aftermaths of the unfair social structure are often endured by women who find themselves helpless in the face of patriarchy.

It has been argued in this chapter that violence and abuse represent the materialization of patriarchal oppression of women. Both moral and physical violence are used against women in order to ensure the stability and continuity of the patriarchal system. For December Green:

In societies worldwide male, and sometimes female, relatives are granted the right to sanction female family members. The controls on female behavior centers on sexual relations of power but go beyond issues of sexuality and have wide ranging socioeconomic and political repercussions ... whether expressed as wife battery or female circumcision, the right to sanction women amounts to a social control. This control, often identified ostensibly over sexual matters, has clear political and economic ramifications. (Green 51-52)

It prevents women from obtaining any form of independence from their male relatives and act as agents within the system. It also deprives them from the possibility to obtain financial autonomy because they have to depend on men for their subsistence. These elements, which have been analyzed in the four novels that constitute the main focus of this work, show how African women suffer from patriarchal oppression.

Yet, more than the economic and the political ones, the deepest impacts of these forms of violence against women are emotional and psychological. Their lives are very often determined by the cruel and painful experiences that society subjects them to. The main result of oppression, which will be studied in the following chapter, is alienation. It is one of the emotional and psychological steps that women have to go through on their quest for self-actualization.

From the analysis of the mechanisms of patriarchal rule and its functioning in the four works under study, *L'interdite*, *Nervous Conditions*, *The Grass Is Singing* and *Woman at Point Zero*, several conclusions can be drawn. The first is that men are granted agency and autonomy while women's actions are limited and closely monitored. Most of the time, their roles are dictated by the needs and desires of men who exercise their power over the women. This oppression limits the rights and freedoms of the women. For the different female characters, their patriarchal societies are similar to space of imprisonment in which they are to exist with almost no possibility to evolve. The protagonists and secondary characters regardless of their educational status, social-economic conditions, and social positions are all subjected to the binding authority of men. This deprives the women in the women in the novels from any opportunity to freely pursue the studies and careers that they want. Some are

even forced into marriages that they do not want. These women are compelled to live under the constant pressure of society.

Another characteristic of patriarchal rule is that it tries to keep women under control because they are perceived as potential threats to the established order. If given the space and the education that they have been denied for so long, women would be able to challenge the authority of patriarchy. Therefore, the system tries to confine them in the domestic sphere. In addition to gender, there are other forces that work against women; racial and religious oppression are two examples that can be found in the four novels analyzed here. This chapter also takes a close look at some of the most extreme mechanisms of violence used by patriarchy to restrict women's freedom. As previously discussed, women are victims of different forms of moral and physical abuses that are used to impede their evolution and to punish their defiance. In many instances, female characters are insulted or threatened with bodily harm by male characters when their comportment is disapproved of. Eventhough these are individual acts, they emanate from a tacitly institutionalized violence that is part of the operating mode of patriarchal societies. Beating and sexual abuses are two examples that were dealt with in order to show that female characters are often victims of such forms of violence in their societies and that these are part of the maltreatment that women are widely subjected to. The authority that men have over women is never questioned even when they abuse their wives, daughters, sister, and other women of their family. In fact, women's position of inferiority within patriral societies makes it difficult for them to react against the deliberate and repetitive acts of moral and physical assaults that are perpetrated against them.

The different forms of oppression that women experience, under the strict rule of patriarchy, have devastating consequences that affect both their physical and their mental integrity. The following chapter of this work is to be devoted to examining one of these destructive consequences: women's alienation.

Chapter two: Alienation

“Throughout the world, woman has been thought of for centuries as opposite man – as an object opposite the subject (stripped of all subjectivity other than what is needed to depend on a masculine standard)” (Orlando 6). As suggested by Valérie Orlando in the quote taken from her book *Nomadic Voices of Exile: Feminine Identity in Francophone Literature of the Maghreb*, on their journey toward self-actualization African women, who are no exception, are very often confronted with different obstacles, many of which are direct or indirect results of patriarchal rule, as mentioned, analyzed, and illustrated in the previous chapter. One of these consequences that women find themselves confronted to is the feeling of alienation that they come to experience when they are torn between what society wants for them and what they want for themselves.

This feeling is what American feminist writer and activist Betty Friedan calls “the problem that has no name” in her 1963 work *The Feminine Mystique*. This reinforces the idea that women find it difficult to put into words the deep pain that they feel when they conform to social demands. Friedan writes:

Gradually I came to realize that the problem that has no name was shared by countless women...

Just what was this problem that has no name? What were the words women used when they tried to express it? Sometimes a woman would say “I feel empty somehow...incomplete.” Or she would say, “I feel as if I don’t exist...”

Sometimes a woman would tell me that the feeling gets so strong that she runs out of the house and walks through the streets. (Friedan 5-6)

Thus, women’s alienation is often worsened by their inability to express and voice their sufferings. When they are born into a society that is structured around the central

idea that females are inferior, women learn from infancy that their pains and concerns are of very little importance and they rapidly internalize the idea that what they have to say is of no consequence. The absence of any possibility for them to verbalize their anguish becomes an essential part of their alienation.

This chapter will be devoted to the study and analysis of the situations of female characters who are alienated because of the conflict that arises when they feel estranged from their own identity as they are forced to endorse the roles defined for them by patriarchy. For so doing, alienation will be considered as a social process that results from the different forms of female oppression in society as introduced in the field of social-psychology.

In his article “Alienation as a Social Process,” James E. Twining writes, “Alienation can ... be defined as an interactional, or relational, consequence of a negative encounter of some duration which involves the degree of felt separateness from fundamental social situations in which self is being defined” (Twining 422). This reflects women’s experiences under patriarchal rule. Clearly, women in *L’interdite*, *Nervous Conditions*, *The Grass Is Singing*, and *Woman at Point Zero* are placed in a position from which they have to define themselves within a social context in which they are considered as ‘the other.’ The female characters are born and raised into communities that have very little consideration for their well being and which require that they submit to the authority and desires of men. Thus, they have to go through the difficult process of facing the social pressure in an attempt to create a personal space in which they can exist.

In this sense, it will be argued that the feeling of alienation that women experience is a consequence of the social pressure as well as the moral and physical abuse that they undergo. It has to be specified that depression will be dealt with as a feeling and a condition produced by a social process rather than as a medical condition which results in a certain psychological state.

Thus, the situations of depression and mental disintegration will be used to probe into the disturbed mental state of women rather than psychiatric illness. It will be shown that the construction of women's identity through the processes of socialization and conformism put in place by patriarchy leads to their state of alienation. Women are deprived of the possibility to achieve their own goals and desires of independence, through education and work for example, in favor of more restrictive functions of wives and mothers. In fact, as it is proposed by Dorcas Akintunde and Helen Labeodan in *Women and the Culture of Violence in Traditional Africa*:

In all cultures, women are considered to be inferior to men. African culture, though diverse, is not an exception. Women are wives and mothers. They do the cooking, the mending, the sewing and the washing. They take care of the men and are subordinate to male authority. They are largely excluded from high status occupations and from positions of power. (Akintunde and Labeodan 17)

These pre-established and pre-defined roles that women are expected and required to follow are very restrictive and they limit the women's potential of creativity and intellectuality to the sole performance of household duties. Their value is limited to what they can perform in order to satisfy the demands of their society; their own needs and desires have to be set aside since they are of lesser importance than the duties that they have to perform.

1. The quest for identity vs. socialization and conformism

Due to the functioning of patriarchy, the rules of which are transmitted mainly through a process of socialization, many women start to internalize the social prescriptions which they are expected to follow at a very early age. This can be considered as an alienating process for women because they feel pressured to construct their identity in such a way that would be accepted and approved of by patriarchal society even if it does not allow them to reach self-actualization. The main goal for them becomes to please and satisfy the needs of everyone around them and not themselves. Quite often, women's need to conform is stronger than their desire for freedom. According to sociologist Richard Jenkins, "...two motivations inspire conforming behaviour: the desire to be correct and the desire to remain in the good graces of others. The first has its greatest impact on backstage private decision-making, the second on front-stage public behaviour. Each is rooted in primary socialisation and each is an emotional allotrope of the desire to *belong*" (Jenkins 149). In what follows, the process of socialization and its alienating effect will be dealt with through the experiences of different female characters whose lives are determined by their strict conformism.

In addition to the alienating process of socialization different states of alienation of the female characters will be investigated and deconstructed for a better understanding of women's struggle to overcome social alienation in order to reach self-realization. According to Mary Hanemann Lystad, "Alienation is seen as a sign of personal dissatisfaction with certain structural elements of society ... This dissatisfaction has been defined in ... recent studies in terms of expressions by individuals of feelings of powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, social

isolation, and self-estrangement” (Lystad 90). These different situations of alienation are going to be used in order to probe into the experiences of the different female characters dealt with in this work.

1.1. Socialization and conformism

As it has already been defined in the previous chapter, gender is used to establish the rules that administer the lives of people in society. And it seems clear that the distinction is made very early in the lives of individuals. Yet, in order to better understand its impact on women’s identity and its contribution to their alienation, it seems important to look at the mechanisms through which these roles are constructed in society and how the gender roles internalized by individuals, and more particularly by women. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler attempts to answer this question by going back to the definition of Simone De Beauvoir and bringing a new element to it. She writes:

For Beauvoir, gender is “constructed,” but implied in her formulation is an agent, a *cogito*, who somehow takes on or appropriates that gender and could, in principle, take on some other gender. Is gender as volitional as Beauvoir’s account seems to suggest? Can “construction” in such a case be reduced to a form of choice? Beauvoir is clear that “becomes” a woman, but always under cultural compulsion to become one. (Butler 12)

The idea expressed here is that women are constrained to become what their culture demands from them to be. The social construction is not deliberate and it does not seem to be conscious. Women are simply coerced into specific roles that they endorse out of the necessity that they feel to have an appropriate behavior in order to avoid the rejection of society.

This comes to reinforce the idea that individuals are subjected to the different mechanisms of patriarchy which they cannot escape and, as mentioned earlier, one of the most important of these mechanisms is socialization, or the process by which gender roles are created. Yet, although it is a procedure that turns both men and women into social beings, only women are negatively affected by socialization within patriarchy because "... cultures may define woman's nature and status variously, but always from a male standpoint" (Green and Kahn 8).

Socialization also operates at different levels in the formation of the female as a social creature, so much so that sometimes women internalize the constraints of patriarchy to the point of becoming oppressor in their turn. At times it is to reproduce the same forms of oppression they had experienced at the hands of society, and at other times because they believe that by upholding the rules of their communities, they are more likely to be approved of thereby securing for themselves a position and a safe place within the social order. These women simply decide to conform because they think that they do not have a choice. Laura Chakravarty gives a clear example of this situation when she describes the traditional extended family system:

Presiding over the women's section of the hierarchy was the mother-in-law, with whom a woman has perhaps her most complex familial relationship. A woman was expected to be harsh and overwork her daughter-in-law, but be kind to her daughter, who would need protection from her mother-in-law. (Chakravarty 53)

The process of socialization which leads to conformism results in women working against the well being of other women. The status quo is kept in place by both men, whose interests it serves, and some women, whose situation is so precarious that they try to improve it and secure it by perpetuating the tradition. Questioning the patriarchal order that works in their disfavor would endanger them even more.

This situation is experienced by different female characters in the four novels. It must be said that the level of socialization differs from one work to the other, but they all contain examples of women who, by force, find themselves in a position to put pressure on other women. It will be demonstrated that this attitude reinforces the hold of patriarchy over women and gives even more power to men thus accentuating the difficulties that women face under patriarchal rule and even strengthens their feelings of alienation.

It is mainly through the figure of the mother that the process of socialization can best be observed in *L'interdite*, *Nervous Conditions* and *Woman at Point Zero* while the sense of conformism is presented differently in *The Grass Is Singing*. In fact, it is through the mother that society expects the traditions and customs to be perpetuated. Women are put under the control of their husbands and they are summoned to transmit the demands of their society through raising their children in accordance with the gender roles in the way that they are pre-established by society.

1.1.1. Aspects of socialization in *L'interdite*

In Mokeddem's novel, socialization can best be observed through the behaviour of the character of Dalila's mother. This Algerian woman seems to represent, by her attitude towards her daughters and her sons, a good example of the process of socialization. Although she cannot be considered as a real oppressor, she, on several occasions, reinforces the injustices and mistreatments of society towards her daughters, especially Dalila. The little describes her mother as a woman who has been crushed by the weight

of social oppression and who has become so weary of her life that she completely submits to patriarchal authority.

The first sign is the complete surrender of the woman to the rules she was brought up to follow. She never attempts to question them or to change her situation or the lot of her girls. It becomes clear as the story unfolds that she has accepted the rejection of her eldest daughter, Samia, by her husband and her sons. She cannot defend her against their violence; then, she has the same behavior with Dalila. It seems that her absence of action comes from the fear of what might happen to her daughter if she learns how to rebel. Then, it can also be noticed that the mother actively contributes to the process of socialization of her younger daughter by forcing her to remain silent and by exhorting her to conform. She tells Dalila: « Obéis à tes frères, sinon tu es pas ma fille » (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 36). By so doing, she places the little girl under the authority of her brothers and at the same time allows them to exercise power over her. This puts Dalila in a difficult situation; the girl finds herself obliged to conform because her mother tells her to. It becomes even harder for her to challenge the rule of patriarchy despite the fact that she views it as unfair to her and to her sister.

It appears that the mother's behaviour emanates from a sense of fear and certainly not be considered as a personal weakness on her part. As a woman who has been brought up in a patriarchal society that uses different types of pressure against women including various forms of verbal and physical abuse, Dalila's mother merely developed a sense of self-preservation. The purpose of her life is not to aspire to find fulfillment; she simply tries to find a way for her, and for her daughters, to avoid the

violence of men. She attempts to achieve that by keeping her voice down and by urging her girls to do the same.

Although the mother is aware of the injustices experienced by her daughters, she does not encourage them to speak up. She wants Dalila to go to school and succeed in her studies, but she does not tolerate it when the girl shows signs of discontent with her situation. This creates an ambivalent situation that the little girl does not completely grasp. For Dalila it is hard to understand her mother. She explains: « Ma mère je lui dis rien. Des fois, elle aussi elle a la colère de mes frères. Mais si moi je dis des choses contre eux, elle me tape. Elle dit que je dois leur obéir ... Non c'est pas très rigolo d'être une fille. Ta mère, tu lui dis rien que des mensonges ou tu te tais » (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 96-97). The mother wants her daughter to adopt an attitude of negotiation similar to the one she uses herself in order to deal with the injustices of her society without taking the risk of bringing punishment upon herself. Yet, she does not clearly explain the situation to the little girl who does not understand her mother's attitude.

It is clear that the woman wants to protect her younger daughter, but by imposing on Dalila her own desire to conform the mother increases the pressure that Dalila feels and she pushes her to keep things to herself. The most difficult thing for Dalila to understand is the fact that her mother does not question the injustices that she is clearly aware of. Due to the fact that she is still a child, she does not seem to have realized yet that her mother is overwhelmed by the pressure that had been put on her throughout her life and that she has more difficulties than her daughters to challenge social rules that she has been taught to fear for so long. The girl is lost between what

her mother tells her to do and the fatalism that she wants to instill in her and the freedom and independence that the little girl deeply longs for. It is one more layer on top of the different forms of patriarchal oppression. The incapacity of the mother to react also shows the depth of the socialization that she has experienced and which she does not seem to be able to escape.

1.1.2. Consequences of socialization in *Nervous Conditions*

In Dangarembga's work, Tambu's mother has a similar attitude. She also conforms to society's demands even if she is aware of the fact that they are unfair. She seems to have internalized her own roles of wife and mother which she performs without complaining. Like Dalila's mother, she experiences difficult conditions, but she rejects the idea of questioning the situation. As a woman who has assimilated the social norms for such a long time, she has come to believe that challenging them would be a waste of time and energy. She seems to be submerged by the weight of the social pressure that she silently endures. Despite the keen awareness that she has of the injustices of her life as woman, Tambu's mother still attempts to raise her children the same way she was raised by giving preference to her sons and by conditioning her daughters to follow the same path she was made to take despite the difficulties which she knows they will have to endure.

Her relationship with Tambudzai is complicated by the tendency of the mother to support patriarchy which she sees as inevitable. Socialization seems to be at work here, since the mother strictly follows the rules and asks her daughter to do the same. When Tambu claims that she has the right to get educated, her mother disagrees:

My mother was too old to be disturbed by my childish nonsense. She tried to diffuse some of it by telling me many things ... 'This business of womanhood is a heavy burden,' she said. 'How could it not be? Aren't we the ones who bear children? When it is like that you can't just decide today I want to do this, tomorrow I want to do that, the next day I want to be educated! When there are sacrifices to be made, you are the one who has to make them. And these things are not easy; you have to start learning them early, from a very early age. The earlier the better so that it is easy later on. Easy! As if it is ever easy... Aiwa! What will help you, my child, is to learn to carry your burdens with strength. (Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* 16)

The mother has a quite clear understanding of her situation in her society. She is conscious of the restrictive nature of patriarchy, yet she declares that women should bear the burden. Her position comes to contradict the position of Tambu who refuses to give up on her education only because society tells her that she does not need to be educated. It is also interesting to notice that Tambu's mother gives her almost the same arguments used by her father when he tried to dissuade her from going to school. The wife seems to share the opinion of her husband despite the fact that it works against her and her daughter.

Even if Mainini does not directly oppress her daughter, she contributes to the manipulation of the girl. She tries to teach Tambu what she has experienced and what she sees as inescapable without taking into consideration the possibility that the little girl wants a different path and that she might be able to attain better living conditions through education.

1.1.3. The effects of socialization in *Woman at Point Zero*

In the case of Firdaus, socialization is also embodied in the character of her mother. Firstly, the girl sees her mother accept the oppression and violence of her father without reaction. For instance, when there was not enough food for the whole family,

the wife would hide what little food was available for her husband and would send her children to bed with empty stomachs (El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* 23). This attitude serves to reinforce the idea that men are at the center and that they are to be treated as superior in the family and in society. Once again, this does not suggest that the woman shows a personal weakness when she does not react. Her lack of action rather indicates a form of helplessness that results from her own social up-bringing, which in turn, she performs, whether consciously or unconsciously, transmits to her own children.

Another example of socialization appears when the mother perpetrates violence against her daughter when she subjects her to excision. For Fwangyil, “[it] is worrisome to know that this practice is carried out by elderly women who have gone through the same painful exercise that is enforced by traditional customs and they know the devastating effect of this mutilation” (Fwangyil 16). It is quite disturbing to see that women put themselves in a position to oppress other women, but it can be understood when put in the context of socialization. In fact, the submissiveness of the mother and her attempt to subdue her daughter from a very young age perfectly illustrate the degree to which a woman can be controlled within a patriarchal society. She not only internalizes social norms of conduct, she also helps uphold the standards of behaviour by forcing them onto her young daughter. The mother’s decision to have Firdaus circumcised is further proof that the oppression of patriarchy operates through and is perpetuated by the process of socialization.

Besides, it can be argued that by this act, Firdaus’ future life as a woman is already determined by society. In fact, Female Genital Mutilation is used as a means

by which female sexuality is monitored and limited in patriarchal societies. Thus, as a young woman, Firdaus is not prepared to have a healthy sexuality. She is merely expected to be the object of men's desire and to be able to satisfy their physical needs regardless of her own. This complicated situation will majorly contribute to her alienation in the future.

Her mother is not the only woman who exercises a form of oppression over Firdaus in the novel. Indeed, her uncle's wife seems not to accept the presence of her husband's niece in her house. Although it is never clearly stated by El Saadawi, it can easily be deduced that it is her pernicious influence that pushes the uncle first to send his niece to boarding school in an attempt to drive Firdaus away from her home, and then to force her to get married with Sheikh Mahmoud who is the wife's relative. The woman does not show any compassion towards Firdaus despite the fact that the girl is an orphan. She condemns her to a life of pain because she cannot bear to share her home with her. The animosity with which the aunt treats Firdaus is part of her socialization as, very often in patriarchal societies, women are raised in a spirit of competition. They are expected to show their worth by respecting the rules of society, but their value is also frequently measured in comparison to other women of the same age-group in the community. This leads girls to want to compete with other and to develop feelings of jealousy and hostility towards their peers. The fact that the uncle's wife shows no empathy for her orphan niece is the consequence of the fact that she sees her as a threat and that she does not want to share her husband's affection and attention with Firdaus.

This situation of contention between women often leads them to contribute to the oppression that other women are subjected to when they persecute and abuse each other. More importantly, it prevents women from creating opportunities to support other women thus depriving them from having a sense of sorority and female community. This would provide women with the encouragement and endorsement that they lack in patriarchal societies. Potentially, it could create a more favorable environment for them to challenge social norms and achieve their goals, among which self-actualization.

1.1.4. Conformism in *The Grass Is Singing*

In Doris Lessing's novel it is the process of conformism more than socialization that has an impact on the main character's life. As mentioned earlier in the dissertation, her decision to get married was a reaction to a comment made by her friends who disapproved of her life as a single woman. Yet, this was only the beginning of Mary's attempts to conform to the strict and restrictive social norms of her community.

Although she had almost always live in town, Mary does not hesitate to join her new husband to live on his farm because that was the way things were done. As soon as she arrives, she takes on her role as housewife and starts to make changes to the house in order to improve the state in which she had found it. Yet, despite all her efforts, she is never satisfied with her interior the shabbiness of which she blames on her husband's poverty. The young woman seems to reproduce the pattern of her parent's miserable marriage. By avoiding marriage for a long time, she had been able

to escape the sad memories of her past, but in her need to conform, she found herself doing what her mother had done when she decided to share her life with a man whom she does not respect and whose way of life she deeply disapproves of. Her decision leads her to a situation in which she becomes estranged from her environment. This will lead to her alienation.

Mary's desperate need to conform can best be observed during the first visit of the Slatters, who are Dick's neighbors. She was so self-conscious about her house that she was unable to properly welcome and socialize with Mrs. Slatter in spite of the woman's best efforts to befriend Mary who reminded her of her early days on her husband's farm.

... Mary was stiff with resentment, because she had noticed Mrs. Slatter looking keenly around the room, pricing every cushion, noticing the new whitewash and the curtains.

'How pretty you have made it,' she said with genuine admiration, knowing what it was to use dyed flour sacks for curtains and painted petrol boxes for cupboards. But Mary misunderstood her. She would not soften at all. She would not discuss her house with Mrs. Slatter, who was patronizing her. (Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing* 91-92).

The younger woman's eagerness to display her comfort and to earn the older woman's respect turns into frustration and resentment. Mary seems to be desperate for social approval; the same way she had been when she decided to get married at any cost, even at the detriment of her own happiness. She sacrifices her satisfactory life as a single working woman for an idle existence that does not suit her active and independent disposition.

Mary's conformism can also be seen in her obstinate refusal to help her husband on the farm. Despite the fact that she had been an active woman during the numerous

years that she had spent working as a secretary, Mary decided to stay idle in the house instead of participating to the running of the farm. She thought that it was her husband's job to provide for their family and she despised him for failing just like her mother had done with her father. Because of her focus on the necessity to conform, she was not able to break the pattern that she had internalized as a little girl. Notwithstanding her deep dissatisfaction with her life, the young woman did not question her conformist attitude.

It can be said that socialization and conformism functions against women because they are social processes by which the unfair rules of patriarchal society are internalized by individuals and used against the women who are already regarded as inferior members of society. They are also problematic in the sense that when women are socialized and required to conform, they are, at the same time, obliged to disregard their own well being and this is the first step of alienation.

It is, therefore, within this context and against the reductive and restrictive patriarchal rules that women have to attempt to define their identity. Some of them try to find a personal space within the social boundaries of patriarchy while others attempt to reach self-actualization creating a new space in opposition to the existing norms of their communities.

1.2. The quest for identity

In order to better comprehend the state of alienation that women experience, it seems important to understand the different impediments that they face when they attempt to construct their own social identity. By restricting women's freedoms from an early

age, patriarchy prevents them at the same time from developing an independent sense of self. They find themselves trapped in a position in which they have to define themselves according to social norms and conventions that mostly work against them as patriarchy considers that they are of secondary importance. Therefore, the sense of alienation arises from the difference that exists between patriarchal society's expectations and what women want for themselves and what they need in order to reach self-fulfillment. This discrepancy, when it cannot be avoided by women within their rigid societies, gives birth to a feeling of separatedness that very often leads to isolation and eventually depression.

In this sense, it is argued by Nigerian authors Dorcas Akintunde and Helen Labeodan that,

In most parts of the world today women are struggling to assert a spirit of independence and a feeling of self worth. The struggle is occasioned by the wrong projection of women in patriarchal societies. In most cases they have been projected as apes who lack initiative and need to be put through, guided, monitored in whatever they may set out to do. (Akintunde and Labeodan 28)

This situation is illustrated through the lives of the four main characters of the novels under study. The four women are driven by society on a path that they do not necessarily want to follow. Their own understanding of their identity is completely opposed to the expectations of their societies. These female protagonists find themselves dissatisfied with their environment and they experience alienation as they struggle to reach self-actualization.

The feeling of estrangement, although it seems to be felt by all the female characters, manifests itself in different ways and appears at various stages of their lives. It often depends on the two main factors of socialization and oppression. In fact,

as previously mentioned, girls are born and raised according to the social norms of their society. Many of them come to internalize these rules and integrate them as normal and inevitable; they do not even see the harm of the pressure they feel or the one that they sometimes exercise over other women because they are educated to accept and submit to society's constraints which for them become inevitable and impossible to challenge.

Consequently, they are socialized into becoming what their community demands which in the long run results in the dehumanization of the female subject into a social standard. If, however, the girls fail to fully surrender to the social requirements, society uses intimidation and even tangible restriction to make them obey. Pressure, threats and even violence are often used if the girl is seen as potentially dangerous for the stability of the status quo.

For Mary Hanemann Lystad, "Alienation from the social order can be intimately connected with alienation from self" (Lystad 101). Therefore, women often reach the painful state of alienation because they have to conform to the rules that deprive them from their basic human rights or because they are forced to fight a battle against patriarchy that seems to be lost before it has even started. Women are very often put in situations in which they are under so much pressure that they find themselves unable to react, as is the case for some of the female characters in *L'interdite*, *Nervous Conditions*, *The Grass Is Singing*, and *Woman at Point Zero*. They are paralyzed by the fear that they have of being rejected by their communities to the point of not being able to express their needs and their pains.

1.2.1. Women's alienation in *L'interdite*

The situation of women's estrangement from society is well represented by Malika Mokeddem in *L'interdite*. The character of Sultana is a woman who has to deal with a number of issues related to her identity, all of which are relative to her position in her patriarchal society. She expresses her own feeling in a very strong way at the beginning of the first chapter when she says:

Je n'aurais jamais cru pouvoir revenir dans cette région. Et pourtant, je n'en suis jamais vraiment partie. J'ai seulement incorporé le désert et l'inconsolable dans mon corps déplacé. Ils m'ont scindée... mon oasis est à quelques kilomètres d'ici. Un Ksar de terre, cœur labyrinthique, ourlé de dunes, frangé de palmiers. Je me revois adolescente quittant la contrée pour l'internat d'un lycée d'Oran. Je me rappelle le contexte pénible de ce départ. Ensuite, de fuite en ruptures, d'absences en exils, le temps se fracasse. Ce qu'il en reste ? Un chapelet de peurs, bagages inévitables de toute errance. Cependant, distance conjuguée au temps, on apprend à dompter les pires angoisses. Elles nous apprivoisent. De sorte qu'on finit par cohabiter la même peau, sans trop de tiraillement. Par instants, on parvient même à s'en délester. Pas n'importe où, non. Au plus chaud de la culpabilité. Au plus secret du regret, un coin privilégié de l'exil. (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 11-12)

Sultana experiences alienation at different levels as, first, she is confronted to rejection and violence from her society and then she is confronted to the difficulty to define her identity in exile.

Her sense of belonging is never complete because when she has to come back to her hometown, she is still disappointed and traumatized from her past experiences and the difficulties that she had had to face as a child and as an adolescent. The rejection, the frustration and the violence of her traditional patriarchal society have created an identity crisis that Sultana is not able to overcome. For her, Ain Nekhla is associated with the oppression and the rebuff that she witnessed and experienced and from which she had fled.

Despite the geographical distance that she is able to take, she is incapable of finding balance and peace because of her past. She explains the pain and the fear when she says: « Je venais de renaître et j'éprouvais, tout à coup, une si grande faim de vivre... Peu à peu, les menaces et les interdits de l'Algérie me sont devenus une telle épouvante. Alors j'ai tout fui. Une fuite irraisonnée lorsque j'ai senti poindre d'autres cauchemars » (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 47). Her feeling of estrangement results from the treatment of society and the rejection of her community which made it impossible for Sultana to identify with her environment. Even if she physically distances herself from the oppressive grasp of her society, the young woman is never able to completely reconcile with her identity as an Algerian woman. Her alienation is too deep to be resolved only by her physical exile.

The contrast between Sultana's displacement and her return gives birth to what she describes as a division of self. The divergence of the experiences that she has of the exile and of her homeland creates a cleavage that she feels is an alienation from her own identity. She describes her distress as she says:

Mes Sultana, antagonistes, s'en trouvent disjointes, disloquées. Celle du vouloir est partie là-bas, sur le lieu de ses chantiers... L'autre, ici, guette comme un chat une petite douleur ou une joie à se mettre sous la dent... Mes deux composantes se nourrissaient l'une de l'autre. Séparées, elles sont l'une et l'autre désactivées, désamorçées. Et moi qui vivais dans leur jonction étroite, tumultueuse et tiraillée, je me retrouve, de par leur scission, en dérive sur un calme détaché de tout, glacé. (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 82-83)

Sultana was not able to construct a united self because she had been incapable of reconciling her past with her present, the life she had fled in the village and the life she had built abroad.

In addition to this, another dimension of alienation which is proper to the Algerian context can be found in Malika Mokeddem's novel. The author refers to the ambivalent situation of the women who participated in the war for independence from the French colonization. In fact, at that point of Algeria's history, women were considered as important and active members of society as many of them fought alongside men and showed courage and commitment that were as deep and strong as men's. Many of these 'moudjahidat' had even left their homes to join the fight in spite of the disapproval of their families. For a period of time, they were praised for their courage and commitment and they were celebrated as heroes of the revolution alongside their male counterparts, but women in Algeria were not granted any concrete positive change in their living conditions under the strict rule of patriarchy. They did not tangibly see the positive consequences of the material freedom that their country had obtained.

In this regard, Juliette Minces writes:

When they were arrested and tortured, they showed as much courage as the men. A few became national heroines during the war, and were proclaimed as such by the FLN in its propaganda. The Front hoped that by publicly honouring women combatants it could convince world and especially French public opinion of the progressive nature of the struggle, and thereby win the support of anti-colonialist element in France. (Minces 84)

This situation had given hope to people in general and to women in particular. They had played a crucial role in the liberation of the country and consequently expected to enjoy the freedom they had helped bring to Algeria. Anne-Marie Nahlovsky writes in *La femme au livre : Itinéraire d'une reconstruction de soi dans les relais d'écriture romanesque : Les écrivaines algérienne de langue française:*

La révolution algérienne et l'Indépendance de 1962 ont suscité de nombreux rêves dans le bonheur de tout un peuple ivre de sa liberté enfin retrouvée mais elles n'ont pas apporté, comme on aurait pu l'espérer, une véritable promotion de la femme. Pourtant, pendant la guerre de libération, les rapports égalitaires de la vie des maquis avaient souvent habitué les femmes à des responsabilités et les avaient instaurées dans un rôle social et politique qui les avaient sorties de leur enfermement et de leur silence. Mais une fois la paix revenue, elles ne trouvèrent pas, dans le tissu sociopolitique, la place escomptée. (Nahlovsky 13)

This alienating situation caused women to be disappointed in the policy adopted by the Algerian governments after the independence. They were deprived of the right to freedom that they had obtained by participating in the war effort. They were robbed of their right to autonomy and individuality by the hypocrisy of a society that accepted and benefited from the strength, individuality, and independence of women during the war, but was not ready to grant women social justice and equal opportunities after the independence. It is worth emphasizing here that there had been a shift in the rules and values in the patriarchal Algerian society during the time of the revolution and in the few years leading to it. Women were encouraged to take a stand and fight for their country only to be asked to go back to the restricted and restrictive space of the domestic sphere. As Djamila Amrane puts it, « ... le militantisme n'a pas apporté à ces femmes une transformation de leur statut social... » (Amrane 261). This rapid back and forth change in the norms adds to the sense of alienation of Algerian women.

It is important to know this historical context because the same inconsistency is shown by Mokeddem through the character of Salah. After experiencing failure in a marriage that had been arranged by his family, he divorces his wife and is obliged to face his past and see his mistakes. Retrospectively, Salah understands that as a man he who had been educated at university he could have attempted to bring change or at least point out the injustices of his community towards women. Yet, by complying

with the demands of the status quo, he had contributed to the maintaining of the patriarchal system of his country. He represents the ambivalence of society in the sense that he understands the necessity of education for women in a certain context, but does not uphold his opinion. He commits to a classmate at university, but breaks his commitment when he accepts the marriage that his family arranges for him. His behavior is tolerated, even accepted by patriarchy while the same behavior is reprimanded if perpetrated by a woman. He is able to diagnose the problem and phrase it in his own words during a discussion with Sultana:

Nous n'avons cessé de tuer l'Algérie à petit feu, femme par femme. Les étudiants mâles de ma génération, les élites zaâmâ, ont participé au carnage. Nous nous sommes d'abord fourvoyés dans le mensonge et l'imposture. Nos études terminées ... [n]ous avons abandonné celles qui avaient eu l'imprudence, le malheur de nous aimer à l'université. Qu'étaient elles venues chercher à l'université celles-là ? La débauche du savoir. A la fin de nos études, nous, jeunes hommes de « grandes tentes », virilité auréolée du désespoir des abandonnées, nous endossions le burnous de la tradition pour goûter aux pucelles incultes que nous choisissaient nos familles. Mais dès que les tambourins de la fête se taisaient, nos jeunes épouses nous paraissaient insipides et niaises. Alors nous fuyions nos maisons. Nous hantions les bars, la lâcheté et même, du moins pour certains, les recoins les plus infâmes de nos âmes. Nous nous sommes installés dans la magouille et la schizophrénie. (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 51)

The double standard of the Algerian society when it comes to how it considers and treats men and women adds to the sense of alienation experienced by the female members of society.

Despite the fact that her return is a way for her to confront the past and her own fears, Sultana is once again confronted to the pressure of patriarchy. Despite her position as a doctor and the self-confidence she was able to build along the years she spent in exile Sultana still finds several difficulties in facing the pernicious social rules of her community. One of the reasons is that, as formulated by Dorcas Akintunde and

Helen Labeodan, “No matter her level of achievement in the society, the unmarried woman is seen as a failure and treated with disdain. She is looked upon as irresponsible and reminded often to go and marry and bear children” (Akintunde and Labeodan 31). Therefore, the thing that increases the feeling of alienation of Sultana is that society does not value her individuality or her potential.

She is often reminded of the disapproval of society through the judgment of other women whose socialization is so strong that they uphold and perpetrate patriarchy. They judge Sultana because she does not correspond to the image of what a woman ought to be, primarily a wife and mother. Sultana describes this situation:

Je pense. Je couds. Je plâtre. J'examine et écoute les longues plaintes. Lorsque je baisse le nez pour rédiger une ordonnance, les femmes retrouvent un œil d'aigle et la vivacité du bec. Elles me scrutent, me jaugent, me décortiquent, avant d'oser : « Tu as des enfants ? » L'alarme du danger sonne dans ma tête. Si je réponds négativement, gare à l'avalanche de pourquoi, aux éclairs des regards scandalisés ou compatissants. Je n'arriverai plus à m'en dépêtrer. Je m'esquive par un docte : « Ici c'est moi qui pose les questions, n'inverse pas les rôles ! » Atténué par un rire dosé. Soupis de soulagement, sourires. Je ne suis pas totalement un monstre. Malgré mes fonctions et mon apparence, mon corps appartient à la confrérie des candidates à la boursouffure du ventre, aux fidèles du culte de la matrice. (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 88)

In this description, Mokeddem deals with one of the most restrictive roles that patriarchy confines women to, which is that of motherhood. The very existence of women has been attached to their capacity to reproduce. Their identity, therefore, depends on this ability to bear and nurture children. As expressed by Dorcas Akintunde and Helen Labeodan, “The identity of the woman is important in so far as it is linked to child bearing” (20).

One other form of alienation that Sultana is affected by in the novel is the emotional estrangement that she feels. Sultana does not seem to be capable of creating

deep human bonds with the people in her life. After the murder of her mother by her father and her alienation from her community, the little girl never really recovers from the trauma of the rejection of her society. Without any emotional attachment, she has no roots to ground her.

As she grows up, she is nurtured by different characters who support her and who come to represent parental figures for the orphaned girl who is so starved for human contact that she feels a sickness which cannot be assuaged by any treatment. She explains:

Les médicaments ne pouvaient rien pour moi, rien contre l'anorexie mentale et les maux de la solitude. Adolescente, j'ai eu de la chance d'avoir un médecin mélomane et poète. Il agissait en charmeur de serpents, réussissant pour un temps à neutraliser les reptiles qui nichaient dans mes friches. Durant mes vacances, durant tous mes instants libres ou noirs, j'allais vers eux, sa femme et lui. (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 44)

The deep feeling of emptiness that the female protagonist describes epitomizes her isolation and her inability to open herself to the world around her. The construction of her identity is tainted by the violence and abuses that she witnesses in her society. The safety that the child Sultana needs in order to create balance is absent from her life.

Dr. Paul Challes and his wife Jeanne probably also allowed Sultana to have role models to look up to, which helped her in her choice of profession. In fact, she decides to study medicine in Oran and later to continue her specialty in France. What the couple of French do for her permits Sultana to find a reason to exist in spite of the pain that she feels. They offer the young girl the stability and structure that enable her to move forward with her life. She becomes capable, thanks to this substitute family, to find a space in which she can exist. She explains this in her own words when she

describes the time that she spends with the doctor and the mid-wife at the hospital where they work:

Jeanne était sage-femme. Elle régnait sur une rotonde et des nuées de gros ventres, sans cesse renouvelés. Plaintes et vagissements, sexes vomissants. Dans les cris de naissance, je percevais, j'entendais les hurlements de la mort. Je m'enfuyais vers l'autre aile de l'hôpital. Je me réfugiais auprès de Paul. Je rédigeais des ordonnances sous sa dictée. Je faisais des pansements sur ses indications. J'insistais sur ses directives auprès des patients dont je soupçonnais la négligence... Je me dissolvais dans l'intensité de son activité. Les douleurs, les gémissements des autres m'apaisaient... Alors malgré l'irrépressible nausée que j'avais de la vie, malgré la folie toujours griffée aux limites de mes rejets, ce rapport tenu au quotidien m'a ancrée dans une survie, aux frontières de la réalité, longtemps. (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 44-45)

Sultana's alienation from her society is attenuated by the presence and the generosity of Paul and Jeanne. The fact that they are French is also quite significant in the sense that Sultana finds tenderness and humanity with foreigners who are supposed to be strangers to her community. Yet, they are the ones who give her a glimpse of what a family ought to be. This blurs the lines of the spaces where Sultana feels that she belongs and where she feels loved and protected.

The young woman describes her relationship with another surrogate parent who embraced her as a little girl, Emna, a Jew who used to live in the village. The woman opens her house and her arms to Sultana who comes to see her as a surrogate mother. As adult Sultana walks the streets of the village, she sees the house where Emna used to live and she is reminded of that time of her life:

L'émotion me revient, me redessine un corps tout en frissons et oppresse mes poumons. Je revois cette femme. Elle s'appelait Emna... seule tendresse pendant des années. Son affection, comblant un peu du vide laissé par ma mère disparue, m'avait fait adopter le mellah juif. Emna me serrait contre sa poitrine... Lovée là, je humais sa peau et m'y reconnaissais : couleur sable d'ombre, odeur d'ambre. Je ne bougeais plus. Elle riait d'attendrissement. Je levais un oeil et admirais le lisse de ses joues, leur brun ocré de sable au coucher. Ses yeux m'inondaient, coulaient le velouté de leur nuit sur les brûlures de mes jours. Quand elle travaillait, je

demeurais près d'elle. Je ne faisais pas de bruit. Je la regardais. Dans sa maison, l'arôme du poivron grille sur les braises, les enteurs de basilica et le chant andalou enivraient le matin. A chevaucher, chaque jour mes propres frontières pour aller la rejoindre, je les ai rognées, cassées et dépassées. (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 84-85)

Once again, Sultana feels that she is happy in a space that should have been foreign to her, but the sense of belonging that she experiences in Emna's house is further proof that differences such as religion and nationality which resemble barriers do not prevent people from creating bonds that are simply based on human sentiments of generosity and affection. For Sultana « Son affection a été le meilleur antidote aux rejets croisés, pieds-noirs, juifs et arabes, qui sévissaient dans le village. Les joies de l'Indépendance ont été attristées par le départ d'Emna. Avec elle j'ai perdu les derniers lambeaux de l'enfance. Elle m'a faite orpheline une seconde fois » (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 85). Sultana's experience suggests that what brings human beings together is much more important than what divides them. Unfortunately, the young woman has a very different experience with her patriarchal society.

At a different level, Sultana also finds it difficult to create an emotional bond with the men in her life. In the opening chapter of the novel, the reader learns that Sultana is back in Algeria to attend the funeral of Yacine Meziane, a man that she has loved, and whom she had left behind when she left the country for France. In spite of her deep feelings for the young man, she had decided to leave. It had not been possible for her to exist in the traditional Algerian society in which she had been born. In a conversation with Salah, she describes her complicated relationship with Yacine:

-... Pourquoi as-tu quitté Yacine s'il a tant compté pour toi ? Je n'ai jamais rien compris à votre histoire.

-...

Ils n'ont tous que ce mot à la bouche : comprendre. Comment expliquer ce qui relève du mystère ? Avant Yacine, je regardais sans voir. Mes yeux, couverts d'une prunelle tenace de mélancolie, je les avais mis au rebut, dans le grenier de mes rejets. Depuis si longtemps qu'ils étaient ainsi, mes yeux, comme deux fruits pourris sur leur branche. Je ne sais pas par quel hasard, un jour, je les ai retrouvés au fond de ceux de Yacine. (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 45-46)

Sultana's wounds are too deep and painful for Yacine's love to heal them. The alienation is too profound for her to be able to stay in Algeria. She cannot reconcile her desire for life with the constraints that Algerian women are bound to live with under the rule of patriarchy.

The deep human connection that she had with Yacine is also noticeable at the physical level. Sultana is from a society that closely monitors female sexuality, and in which it is almost impossible for women to claim any sort of sexual freedom. This could be explained, as Baumeister and Twenge put it in their article "Cultural Suppression of Female Sexuality," by the fact that "...female sexuality represents a potential threat to the orderly society that men want" (Baumeister and Twenge 169). Thus, her relationship with the young man already represents a transgression of all the boundaries and limitations that society imposes on Sultana. For the short time that their relation lasts, she learns how to reconcile with herself through her feelings for him. She says:

Au contact de la peau de Yacine, j'ai connu la mienne, sa sève et son grain, ignores, les longues décharges et les courts-circuits du plaisir. Peut-être avions-nous réappris à voir ensemble ou l'un par l'autre comme deux grands malades qui, lentement, revenaient par le même regard, vers la vie. Maintenant je le crois. Depuis, l'autre avait beau être loin, il était toujours là dans cette attention même, portée seulement à vivre l'instant libéré. Depuis, du fond de mes peurs, j'observe le monde à travers la lumière des de Yacine. (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 46)

But the wounds of the young woman are already too deep and too infected for her to stay in her country. The ordeal of Sultana and all Algerian women is symbolized by the fresco painted by Yacine on the wall of his house:

...une mer de flammes. Une mer agitée. Là où les flammes déferlent, il s'en échappe un peu de fumée. Le ciel est bouché. Une femme, de dos, marche sur les flammes, indemne. Elle laisse derrière elle un sillage blanc et plat comme une route trace dans la houle du feu. On ne distingue d'elle que sa silhouette en ombre chinoise, enfumée. Yacine a intitulé ce tableau « L'Algérienne ». (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 48)

The process of alienation in *L'interdite* is one by which women are estranged from their environment and from themselves because of the social oppression that they are subjected to. The social hypocrisy of the Algerian society also contributes to preventing women from performing active and meaningful professions that would benefit women and society as well. The limitation of their abilities and their deprivation from opportunities reinforces to the estrangement of women and it leads them to the state of alienation that they experience. Some female characters are also subjected to different forms of abuse; they are threatened, insulted, and even beaten. This omnipresent violence contributes to creating an environment of fear and insecurity which prevents women from aspiring to reach self-actualization.

1.2.2. Women's alienation in *Nervous Conditions*

Tsitsi Dangarembga's main character deals with similar issues in *Nervous Conditions*. Tambudzai is confronted, at quite a young age, to the injustices with which patriarchy treats the female individuals in society. As a child, she was allowed a certain amount of freedom and she was even sent to school, but she was told that as an adolescent and then as a woman she would have to perform the same roles her mother and aunts had had to perform in their community. Thus, the young girl is at a loss in regard to her

status and to her identity within society. As argued by Jerilyn Fisher and Ellen S. Silber in their book *Analyzing the Different Voice: Feminist Psychological Theory and Literary Texts*:

... as girls come of age in early adolescence as young women in patriarchal cultures, they face an unyielding relational dilemma: they may either continue to speak authentically, living fully and freely in the world of relationships as they had in childhood, and in the process risk being dismissed, denigrated, or rejected as young women – or, alternatively, learn to silence their authentic voices in order to protect and preserve their relationships...

As teenage girls become self-reflective and capable of abstract thinking, they also become more acutely aware of the cultural ideals and expectations for women. The norms, ideals, and ideologies of prescribed femininity come into focus, and girls suddenly find themselves struggling for their own voices as they try to hold fast to what they once knew from experience... (Fisher and Silber 46-47)

Tambu is subjected to this form of questioning in the novel when she is forced to face her condition of female. Her situation as a girl deprives her from the possibility to be valued for her individual qualities; she is not praised for being self-reliant or intelligent because she is confronted to patriarchy's restrictions for her sex. Tambu experiences alienation because she does not understand why her environment is carved the way it is. She is unable to identify with the traditional female figure of the housewife represented by her mother because she aspires to have a different life.

She is capable, at an early age, to see the difference of treatment that the male children of the family, her brother Nhamo and her cousin Chido, receive. She can also judge this difference as unfair for the girls of the same family. She cannot come to terms with the fact that the women are not allowed to participate in the life of the family by taking part in the discussions and the making of decisions. She felt excluded from the issues that really mattered, confined to the domestic sphere, and limited to the

performing of house chores. This was a form of restriction of her identity as a human being. She explains it in her own words:

Exclusion held dreadful horrors for me at that time because it suggested superfluity. Exclusion whispered that my existence was not necessary making me no more than a by-product of some inexorable natural process. Or else it mocked that the process had gone wrong and produced me instead of another Nhamo, another Chido, another Babamukuru-to-be. I often felt superfluous in those days, but there in the camaraderie of the cooking, it was comfortable to occupy the corner that the same natural process had carved out for me. It was comfortable to recognize myself as solid, utilitarian me. (Tsitsi Dangarembga. *Nervous Conditions* 39-40)

In this quote, Tambu seems to want to find a purpose for her existence. The need to feel useful leads her to accept and even enjoy the chores she is assigned to perform in the kitchen. Yet, she cannot accept, as we see later in the novel, the fact that her identity as a human being can be restricted to only those roles.

In *Nervous Conditions*, female characters are praised and valued for conforming and rejected when they express their discontent with the way they are treated in their society. They are alienated because they are placed in a position of powerlessness and deprived of even the possibility to voice their discontent with their situation within their communities. They are merely expected to blindly and silently conform to society's demands.

1.2.3. Women's alienation in *Woman at Point Zero*

Nawel El Saadawi's main character in *Woman at Point Zero* also goes through a quest for identity. She is confronted to the same difficulties as Sultana, Tambu and Mary in her traditional Egyptian society. At a very early age, Firdaus is subjected to oppression and violence. Both her father and her mother, who represent the authority in her life, are very cruel with her during her childhood. Her father who represents patriarchal rule

does not hesitate to beat her in order to get her to do what he wants. Her mother, who has been socialized by patriarchy, perpetrates society's oppressive traditions when she subjects her daughter to female genital mutilation. Therefore, the young girl comes very soon to understand that she, as a female, has no status in her family and her society.

Similarly to Tambudzai, Firdaus wants to get education; she is very eager to learn and to graduate from university. Yet, her desire is not taken into consideration by her uncle, who became her tutor after the death of her father. As mentioned in the first chapter, her uncle does not want her to go to university because he wants Firdaus to marry a rich man of his choice. The young woman faces a situation in which she is deprived of her free will and her identity as she is treated as an object who can be handed by one man to another because in accordance with the rules of her society.

El Sadawi shows through her protagonist that women are driven, by force, on a path that they would never have chosen for themselves. For Firdaus, her uncle's decision is going to determine her future. In the view of Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi and Tuzyline Jita Allan:

Firdaus's marriage is presented as the first step on the road of prostitution. The stinginess of the husband, his physical abuse of her; as well as his off-putting physical characteristics push the young woman to the streets to learn to fend for herself. While still married, the young Firdaus is beaten up by her husband and returns to her uncle for sanctuary against this abuse. But the uncle is completely unsympathetic. A husband, he tells her, may beat his wife to ensure her obedience. The uncle's wife, ironically enough, agrees with his view. She tells Firdaus that her husband, Firdaus's uncle, beats her as part of his prerogative as a husband. (Ogunyemi and Allan 68)

This situation teaches Firdaus that she has no independence and no value of her own; she is not an individual in her society. She also comes to realize that she can be

subjected to violence within a legal and institutionalized context which is marriage. She learns that she has no dignity as a human being and that she will not obtain help from her family. She is denied an identity despite all her efforts to escape oppression.

In addition to this, Firdaus is confronted to society's double standards. In fact, she comes to see that men and women are treated differently by patriarchy not only in terms of rights and duties or in terms of gender roles to be performed by them but also in terms of value. Men and women are valued for different qualities and achievements; the best example is education. Firdaus' uncle is respected and recognized for his level of education and status at university, but society has a different attitude towards the education of Firdaus. She is sent to school as a girl, but her education is not really important for her family or for society. Despite the fact that she is intelligent and that she succeeds at school, she is not valued for her intellectual abilities.

It is significant that Firdaus gets an education and receives a secondary school degree with flying colors. She seems to embody the dream of many feminists who saw the education as the cornerstone not only of women's personal fulfillment but also of the reform of the whole society. Firdaus's degree, however, is shown to be so superfluous that it is almost a laughing matter. It is only when she becomes a successful prostitute that she has her own library and has the free time to spend alone with her books. Her degree is placed in a prominent position in her apartment as ironic, perhaps defiant testimony to an ambition that was never fulfilled. Robbed of its authentic meaning as a gateway to a respectable life, the degree becomes a vacuous emblem decorating the walls. To attain her higher pleasures of the mind, a woman needs to stoop to selling her body to the highest bidder. (Ogunyemi and Allan 69)

Firdaus is pushed into prostitution by her experiences in society. She was never given an opportunity to obtain a work position that would have granted her economic independence. Her identity is forced on her by patriarchy and she cannot build a personality of her own.

Firdaus is also alienated at an emotional level. The family environment, in which she grows up, with the death of her mother and the violence and abuses of her father, does not equip her to have healthy relationships with the people that she encounters in her everyday life. The absence of parental love and protection renders Firdaus vulnerable in the sense that she never learns that she has a value as a human being and as a woman.

The pain that the young woman can neither understand nor voice creates a deep estrangement that Firdaus cannot explain. This can be seen through an event that happened when she was studying at a boarding school for girls. Firdaus was not able to fall asleep so she left her room to sit outside. When her teacher, Miss Iqbal, asks her why, the girl is unable to answer and she burst out crying. In a kind gesture, the teacher does her best to console Firdaus and to help her overcome her sadness by sitting with her and holding her hand. What is very significant about this incident is the way in which the girl explains what she feels:

The feeling of our hands touching was strange sudden. It was a feeling that made my body tremble with a deep distant pleasure, more distant than the age of my remembered life, deeper than consciousness I had carried with me throughout. I could feel somewhere, like a part of my being which had been born with me when I was born, a cloudy awareness of something that would have been, and yet was never lived. (El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* 38-39)

It is clear that Firdaus is starved for human emotions and contact. As the girl craves the tenderness and kindness that she had never received before, she is surprised by the feelings that are new to her and which are awakened by the compassion that her teacher shows her. Since on the day of her graduation Miss Iqbal helps Firdaus by receiving her certificate when no family member of the girl comes to represent her, it

becomes clear that the teacher simply wants to support Firdaus as an adult, especially that she is one of the best students in her class.

Firdaus' hunger for love is never satisfied in the novel. She goes through life with a desire and a need to feel safe, but she never finds security anywhere in spite of the fact that she incessantly hopes and looks for the feeling of safety and protection, especially with the men that she meets. One example is when she trusts Bayoumi who finds her on the streets and takes her home. He starts by reassuring her, but he soon shows that he wants to control her, and he eventually turns her into a sexual object for him and his friends (El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* 47-50).

Later in the story, as she had managed to be financially independent and even to get her own apartment, she is once again destroyed by a man. This man is one whom she considers as a friend and whose name is Di'aa. He manages to turn Firdaus' world upside down simply by telling her that she is not a respectable woman (El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* 70). Firdaus is unable to dismiss or to forget his words since she has no real self-esteem due to the fact that she was never able to construct her own identity. She desperately looks for approbation, especially from a person like Di'aa whom she views as an educated man of culture.

On another occasion, Firdaus is emotionally drawn to a person who shows her compassion: her co-worker Ibrahim. In the same way that had happened with Miss Iqbal, Ibrahim consoles Firdaus and tried to bring her solace as he sees her crying. Once again, Firdaus experiences feelings that she can neither understand nor explain. When he sits by her side, she takes her hand and she describes her feelings:

At that moment a memory came back to me and my lips parted to express it in words, but my voice failed to emerge, as though no sooner did I remember than I had already forgotten it. My heart faltered, overcome by its frightened almost frenzied beating because of something I had just lost, or was on the point of losing for ever. My fingers grasped at his hand with such violence that no force in the world, no matter how great, could take it away from me. (El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* 107)

Unlike the teacher who had shown Firdaus true sympathy, Ibrahim takes advantage of her emotional weakness and makes her believe that he is interested in her until Firdaus discovers that he was engaged to the daughter of the company's chairman. After the disappointment, Firdaus quits her job, a position in which she had been happy for three years. Firdaus' life is disrupted by the man's deception and by her emotional instability. This recurrent pattern is the form of emotional alienation that impacts Firdaus's life.

In a patriarchal society that values men and deprives women from any sense of importance, Firdaus' perception of herself is defined by how she is perceived by men. Besides, the fact that she is deprived of fatherly and motherly love leads Firdaus to be emotionally alienated. She is not capable of being emotionally independent as she needs the affection and the protection that she feels she could find with the people around her.

Firdaus also experiences another form of alienation in the novel; one which is the result of her excision. As previously mentioned, Female Genital Mutilation is a common custom in traditional patriarchal societies including the Egyptian one. It is a practice by which female sexuality is controlled and by which women are kept under the close monitoring of patriarchy. FGM is performed on Firdaus when she is only a

little girl and at first she does not understand anything except for the pain that she experiences when she is circumcised.

Later on, the girl notices that something in her body has changed, although she is unable to understand or explain what. She knows that a part of her has been taken away because she is no longer able to experience pleasure in her body like she had before, but she does not know how or even why she had been robbed of that which she had been born with. She expresses this when she says:

... I no longer felt the strong sensation of pleasure that radiated from my body. I closed my eyes and tried to reach the pleasure I had known before, but in vain. It was as if I could no longer recall the exact spot from which it used to arise, or as though a part of me, of my being, was gone and would never return. (El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* 18)

In this way, Firdaus had been amputated; she had been made incomplete and a part of her identity was completely gone. The traumatic event of the excision had an impact at the physical level since Firdaus describes the terrible pain that she felt when she was circumcised and the fact that she had had to stay at home until healed, but its alienating effect is even more terrible as it deprives Firdaus from a part of herself.

In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus is alienated because of the cruelty and the brutality with which she is treated from an early age. She is unable to find a space in which to express her individual qualities and achieve her personal goals of education and economic independence. She finds herself at odds with what society expects of her.

The deep and devastating estrangement that women experience is a direct consequence of the constraint and coercion that they are constantly subjected to by

patriarchy. They are profoundly dissatisfied with the injustices that they face and which they cannot challenge without suffering severe repercussions. The hostility and the violence of their societies lead women to feel anguish and to become frustrated with their lives as they are unable to fully express their potential. Many female characters reach a state of deep depression before they are able to voice their anguish and attempt to challenge the authority of their patriarchal societies in order to reach self-actualization.

2. Mental disintegration, silences, and taboos

The social pressure exercised on women, and which leads to their alienation, eventually produces a state of mental disintegration. They reach a level of estrangement that, in most cases, prevents them from interacting with their environment. They experience withdrawal as a result of the oppression and abuses of patriarchy. This situation is aggravated by the fact that most female characters are almost completely deprived of a possibility to voice their pain which leads to an almost complete isolation.

2.1. Mental disintegration

As part of their struggle for self-actualization and during their quest for wholeness, women have to go through different stages in order to come to terms with their identity and their place in society. The alienation that women experience very often leads them to a stage of deep depression. It must be specified, again, that in this work depression will be dealt with as a final stage of alienation resulting from social pressure and the inability of women to express their desires or to escape the difficult situations in which

they find themselves. The main objective is to demonstrate that the mental disintegration that some African female characters come to experience is directly related to patriarchy's pressures and to the strict limitations that women encounter and which prevent them from expressing themselves and from developing their potential. In her work *Roses in Salty Soil: Women and Depression in Egypt Today*, Dalila A. Mostafa writes:

Numerous worldwide epidemiological studies ... reported that depression is twice as common in women as it is in men. Some studies have even found ratios as high as 4:1... Cross national studies have also subscribed to the conclusion that these ratios cut across nations, age, race, and, socio-economic conditions. The reasons are unclear ..., but several theories have been brought forward to explain this gender difference, including biological and psychological factors. Therefore, many researchers argue for a thorough understanding of the underlying mechanisms of the illness, as well as its expressions and risks. (Mostafa 1)

Here it is suggested that different factors and parameters are involved in the increasing number of women who suffer from emotional and psychological distress. Yet, the most important one seems to be their position of inferiority in society. It might be suggested by some that their fragility is related to their biology and their gender, but when one comes to closely observe the realities of women's lives under patriarchal rule, one can come to the conclusion that the depression experienced by women is caused mainly by the social pressure they are subjected to. Thus, it can be proposed here that mental disintegration should not be dealt with only as a mental health problem since it is a direct consequence of the social alienation experienced by women.

Women find themselves trapped in a life that they did not choose for themselves and which does not allow them to express their full potential. Their skills and ability to think and use their free will are limited and restricted by the situations in

which they are put by patriarchal society. In this case, it seems quite logical that men would not suffer from this state because, contrarily to women, they are valued and encouraged to express themselves and to develop their potential. Society puts them at the very centre of its functioning while women are relegated to the periphery. Very often, they are free to do whatever they want and to make their own decisions. Consequently, their identity is built in accordance with their own needs and desires. Women on the other hand have to endure all the limitations placed on them because of their gender.

As it can be seen in the four novels, women go through mental disintegration when the pain they experience becomes too strong for them to bear. When the social pressure and the identity crisis that results from it become too difficult for women to cope with, they go through a phase of despair. The process is often progressive as the women, most of the time, see a continuous degradation of their mental condition that goes hand in hand with the deterioration of their “social” condition. This process often results in a complete breakdown of the woman and the destruction of her intellectual abilities.

Yet, women do not all experience the same outcome for their mental disintegration. Their situations and former experiences as well as the particularities of their societies seem to play an important role in determining the final results of women’s breakdowns. This point can best be illustrated through analyzing the deterioration of the mental state of two female characters that have different personalities and who are troubled by different forms of oppression Mary and Nyasha in *The Grass Is Singing* and *Nervous Conditions*. The two women, despite their

strength of character, are almost crushed under the weight of the suppressive social pressure that they encounter.

Doris Lessing's main character in *The Grass Is Singing* is the best example of a woman driven to depression and destruction by her society. Mary Turner goes through a mental disintegration which, as the writer suggests, derives from the precarious situation in which her community puts her when it pushes her to get married against her own desires and better judgment. As mentioned in the previous chapters, this female character is required to conform to the constraints of her society when she is confronted to the vision of her friends who voice the necessity for her to find a husband in order to fulfill her role in life. From that moment on, Mary finds herself in a state of constant nervousness and doubt; she is unable to reconcile her own needs and desires with the situation of a married woman which has been imposed on her.

What destabilizes Mary is the fact that she does not really understand her social environment. As an independent woman, she has friends that she interacts with and with whom she socializes and enjoys several activities like dining out, going to the cinema or even attending parties, but she always stands aloof when it comes to emotional attachment. She does not seem capable of creating human bonds with her friends.

... Mary was never shocked, never condemned, never told tales. She seemed impersonal, above the little worries. The stiffness of her manner, her shyness protected her from many spites and jealousies. She seemed immune. This was his strength, but also a weakness that she would not have considered a weakness: she felt disinclined, almost repelled, by the thought of intimacies and scenes and contacts. (Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing* 43)

Mary's personality seems to have been shaped in this way by the cold relationship between her parents whose marriage was devoid of any form of emotional stability as they constantly fought over money. The absence of love and affection in her family also had a direct impact on Mary's emotional development. The young woman seems to have found a sort of balance by shunning the world out and relying on a sort of emotional independence.

However, this attitude does not protect her from the interference of her friends who judge her way of life and comment on the fact that she is still unmarried at her age. Mary is deeply affected when she overhears a conversation about her. In society, many people feel entitled to comment on other people's lives despite the damage that they can do.

It is terrible to destroy a person's picture of himself in the interest of the truth or some other abstraction. How can one know he will be able to create another to enable him to go on living? Mary's idea of herself was destroyed and she was not fitted to recreate herself. She could not exist without that impersonal, casual friendship from other people; and now it seemed to her there was pity in the way they looked at her, and a little impatience, too, as if she were really rather a failed woman after all. (Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing* 52)

Mary's self image is shattered when she hears the opinion of others because the woman does not have a strong sense of value. Her self-confidence is hurt by the comments that are made about her situation in society.

Her inability to bear deep emotions can be observed in her incapacity to create any emotional connection with her husband. It is true that Mary accepts Dick's marriage proposal because she desperately wanted to prove her friends wrong and find a husband as soon as she possibly could, yet she can hardly bear the idea of actually be

married to him with all that the role of wife entails. There is no affection between them; they even find it difficult to talk to each other.

Mary also finds it difficult to have physical intimacy with her husband since she feels no real attraction towards him. Her uneasiness is so deep that she never feels comfortable to be touched by him. After their first night together, “It was not so bad, she thought, when it was all over: not as bad as *that*. It meant nothing to her, nothing at all. Expecting outrage and imposition, she was relieved to find she felt nothing” (Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing* 66).

Her ability to keep this emotional distance probably results from Mary’s observation of her parent’s unhappy marriage and the miserable relationship that they had had throughout her childhood. The young woman uses this remoteness as a protection that shelters her from the pain that she could be exposed to if her feelings were hurt by Dick. She is so scared of deep emotions that she prefers not to get invested in her relationship with her husband.

Her physical coldness is also a possible consequence of the assaults of an abusive father. Although it is never explicitly mentioned by Lessing in the novel, Mary’s memories of past experiences come back to her in her dreams:

Her father caught her head and held it in his lap with his small hairy hands, to cover up her eyes laughing and joking loudly about her mother hiding. She smelt the sickly odour of beer, and through it she smelt too – her head held down in the thick stuff of his trousers – the unwashed masculine smell she always associated with him. She struggled to get her head free, for she was half-suffocating, and her father held it down, laughing at her panic. And the other children laughed too. Screaming in her sleep she half-woke, fighting off the weight of sleep on her eyes, filled with the terror of the dream. (Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing* 201)

Mary's dream suggests a deep childhood trauma that has affected her capacity to construct a healthy relationship with a man. It seems that she has projected her father's image on all men and especially Dick which is why she cannot create intimacy with him.

Another turning point in Mary's life is the change that happens when she is profoundly affected by what her friends say about her status in society. She starts to internalize the idea that her friends might be right about her situation as an unmarried woman and she begins to question all the certainties that she had had so far about her personal and professional life and with which she had been deeply satisfied until that moment. As a reaction, she decides to get married to a man she barely knows because she believes he represents her only hope to save herself from the life that has been judged unacceptable by society. Finally, she finds herself trapped on a farm to which she cannot get accustomed and into a house in which she feels more like in a prison. From then on, her mental state is going to progressively deteriorate to finally lead her into mental disintegration. By renouncing her freedom of choice for the benefit of conformism, Mary also condemned herself to be in perpetual quest for social approval and self-denial. Without realizing this, the young woman has triggered the start of a series of painful events that will eventually lead to her alienation and then to her tragic end.

The first thing that she starts suffering from is idleness. At an early stage of her marriage, she tried to connect with the farm and with the house. She did everything she could to improve the conditions in which she was going to live as she desperately needed to keep herself busy. Yet, this did not last long and very soon, she found

herself empty and without occupation. "She was restless she did not know what to do with herself" (Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing* 75). The shift from active employed woman to idle housewife has deprived Mary of a part of her identity.

Then, Mary tries to find refuge in reading the novels she had brought with her when she moved to the farm after the wedding. Despite the fact that she had read the books before, she finds herself unable to process their content.

She had read each one a dozen times, knowing it by heart, following the familiar tales as a child listens to his mother telling him a well-known fairy tale. It had been a drug, a soporific, in the past, reading them; now, as she turned them over listlessly, she wondered why they had lost their flavor. Her mind wandered as she determinedly turned the pages; and she realized, after she had been reading for perhaps an hour, that she had not taken in a word. She threw the book aside and tried another, but with the same result. For a few days the house was littered with books in faded dust covers. (Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing* 75-76)

At this point of her life, Mary seems to be completely alienated from the person she was before she married Dick. At this stage of her mental disintegration, she seems to have lost her intellectual ability. Her incapacity to read or understand what she reads is quite symptomatic of her alienation and mental disintegration. She has lost her intellectual abilities which are considered as superfluous to her new position of wife. The woman who has received an education that had allowed her to be active and independent had now regressed to a point of illiteracy. Because of social oppression and alienation, Mary is on the brink of breakdown.

Mary also shifts from being a sociable young woman who enjoys going out in the company of friends for different activities to a state of complete isolation and withdrawal. She started to shrink from the company of people. She and Dick did not have many neighbors and she rejected the company of the ones who wanted to

befriend her like Mrs. Slatter. After she had been confronted to the judgment and disapprobation of her friends, Mary feared to have interactions with society. The destruction of her self-image had left her with a deep stigma which led her to close in on herself.

Her new situation leads to a deep change in Mary's character. The woman, who used to be poised and in control of her life and her affairs, becomes irritable and unable to maintain her calm when dealing with different aspects of her household. This becomes clear mainly through her relationship with the native houseboys that she employs to work for her. She is very harsh and cold, almost violent, when dealing with them. Her husband notices this change in her behavior and does not understand it.

He looked at her attentively, his forehead contracted, his lips tight. She seemed possessed by irritation, not herself at all. ... Dick saw all this with increasing foreboding. What was the matter with her? With him she seemed at ease, quiet, almost maternal. With the natives she was a virago. (Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing* 81-83)

This attitude seems to indicate that Mary needs to be in control of her native servants; she wants them to do exactly as she says and she does not hesitate to dismiss the one that does not. At this point, she seems to have lost all control over her own life and she seems to be looking for a way to keep her grasp on something that would make her feel strong and in control.

These manifestations of mental distress result mainly from the fact that this woman relinquished her freedom and her right to live an independent life in order to please society and perform the role that had been demanded from her. Mary does not seem to know herself or her needs; all she wants is to conform in order to feel normal and accepted by her friends who, as previously mentioned, represent their society.

At one o'clock she lay down, and it was after four when she woke. But Dick would not be home for two hours yet, so she lay half-clothed on the bed, drugged with sleep, her mouth dry and her head aching. It was during those two hours of half-consciousness that she allowed herself to dream about that beautiful lost time when she worked in an office and lived as she pleased, before 'people made her get married.' That was how she put it to herself ... Then came the thought that there was nothing to prevent her running away and going back to her old life; here the memory of her friends checked her: what would they say, breaking up a marriage like that? The conventionality of her ethics, which had nothing to do with her real life, was restored by the thought of those friends, and the memory of their judgments on other people. (Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing* 118-119)

The process of Mary's mental collapse continues to worsen as she is incapable of taking action to change her situation. She becomes more and more idle and passive as time goes by. She slowly falls in a state of torpor which results in her becoming almost lifeless. As Lessing writes, "This was the beginning of an inner disintegration in her. It began with this numbness, as if she could no longer feel or fight" (Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing* 125).

One event in the novel comes to reinforce the idea that Mary's mental state is the result of the pressure and alienation that she experiences: the illness of Dick. When her husband suddenly falls ill and finds himself unable to work on the farm Mary hesitates to replace him; she is not sure that she wants to have anything to do with his work. Yet, as Dick is too weak and worries about his work, she decides to help her husband. From the moment she took charge, Mary's condition changed. Her energy was restored and all she had been suffering from stopped bothering her. She took it upon herself to bring back the "natives" who had neglected their duties since the boss was sick and put them back to work. She would go to the fields and spend the day supervising every aspect of the labor. "She was exhilarated by the unfamiliar responsibility, the sensation of putting her will against the farm ... She was oblivious

to anything outside of this field, the work to be done, the gang of natives. She forgot about the heat, the beating sun, the glare” (Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing* 136-137).

This situation is further proof that Mary’s mental condition was caused by her situation of idleness and confinement in the house. For the first time since her marriage, she was able to be herself: the assertive and active woman that she had always been. On this occasion, Mary is given the opportunity to actively use her skills and resources to solve a problem; she feels useful when she is able to exploit her individual capacities.

Yet, she soon comes to realize that this new situation was not going to last. Dick would recover and go back to running the farm. He would attempt different things to make it more productive and to make more money, but he would indubitably fail. Mary, once again, found herself prisoner of her own life, but the situation gets worse because she is slowly going to lose even hope.

Then followed a time of dull misery: not the sharp bouts of unhappiness that were what had attacked her earlier. Now she felt as if she were going soft inside at the core, as if a softness were attacking her bones.

For even day-dreams need an element of hope to give satisfaction to the dreamer. She would stop herself in the middle of one of her habitual fantasies about the old days, which she projected into her future, saying dully to herself that there would be no future. There was nothing. Nil. Emptiness. . (Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing* 162-163)

Mary’s alienation has reached a stage at which the woman is completely overwhelmed and defeated by the hostility of her environment. She is no longer capable of finding the smallest amount of energy to challenge the emptiness that she feels. The process of mental disintegration is going to move forward and Mary’s state will further

deteriorate taking her closer to her tragic end which will be discussed in the last chapter of this work.

The other female character whose situation is quite similar to that of Mary is Nyasha, Tambu's cousin, in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. Nyasha is one of the main female characters in the novel, and more than any other woman, she allows the author to explore alienation and mental disintegration because she experiences both in a very deep and destructive way.

Her character and her evolution are mostly presented in the novel through Tambu's eyes, from the moment Nyasha comes back from England where she had been living with her parents to the day of her nervous breakdown. Going through a process which is quite similar to the one Mary experiences, Nyasha moves from being an energetic and smart little girl to becoming alienated from the society she lives in and the rules of which she has difficulties to accept and internalize. As it is the case for Mary, Nyasha does not recognize herself in the role society has prescribed for her as she cannot accept the idea of silently complying with the authority of patriarchy like her mother does. The suppression of her identity leads to a mental disintegration which is going to manifest itself in different forms and on different occasions.

The first time the reader learns about a change in Nyasha's personality, the alteration seems very subtle, almost understandable, as it is perceived by Tambudzai on Nyasha's return from England. Tambu says:

I missed the bold, ebullient companion I had had who had gone to England but not returned from there. Yet each time she came I could see that she had grown a little duller and dimmer, the expression in her eyes a little more complex, as though she were directing more and more of her energy inwards to commune with herself

about issues that she alone had seen. (Tsitsi Dangarembga. *Nervous Conditions* 52)

At this point, the evolution of the girl's character seems to be a logical result of five years spent abroad. She seems to be, naturally, estranged from a family and a household she has not seen for a very long time. Yet, as time passes, it becomes clear that the change runs deeper and is related more to the impact that this change of environment has on Nyasha's mental state. It is her new condition that creates the disorder. Unlike Tambu who had internalized the social rules of her community, Nyasha who had grown up in a more urbanized Western environment was not used to seeing the injustices perpetrated against women.

Nyasha is a female character confronted to a patriarchal society that alienates and oppresses her. Things become clearer when her situation is juxtaposed to the situation of her brother Chido. As Keith Booker writes in his work *The African Novel in English*:

Nyasha and her brother Chido have grown up largely in England and have been so westernized that they speak almost entirely in English and hardly remember their native Shona language. Both children are thus radically estranged from traditional Shona culture. Chido, however, does have a stable cultural position to occupy. He has a good chance of success in colonial culture if he follows the example of his father.

As a girl, Nyasha stands to profit less from modernization, and thus suffers more from her loss of contact with traditional culture. Nyasha has learned the lesson of British education all too well ... [s]he therefore becomes bitter and rebellious when she returns to Rhodesia and finds that in the colonies, the British rhetoric of freedom and equality consists of empty slogans that bear little relation to reality. (Booker 193-194)

It can be argued, therefore, that Nyasha's situation as a young girl in patriarchal society is what creates the strong sense of alienation that she experiences. She finds it difficult to reconcile the education that she received abroad, her needs and desires, and

her own vision of herself with the values and requirements of her traditional patriarchal society.

Unlike Tmbudzai who understands the rules, although she does not always agree with them, Nyasha seems to be incapable of understanding some aspects of her society that she finds unfair to women. Her cousin, who has observed her attitude comments: “Nyasha gave me the impression of moving, always moving and striving towards some state that she had seen and accepted a long time ago. Apprehensive as I was, vague as I was about the nature of the destination, I wanted to go with her” (Tsitsi Dangarembga. *Nervous Conditions* 154)

Nyasha’s main difficulty seems to be the acceptance of patriarchal authority that she views as oppressive and degrading for women’s dignity. She exhorts her cousin to think critically about the situation of women in their society; she even encourages her mother to rebel against the same authority. For Susan Z. Andrade:

Nyasha ... is the exceptional woman, or in this case, girl, doomed either to transgress and be punished, or to suffer a life in which she does not believe. Tending towards the former path, Nyasha frequently challenges her parents’ authority, especially that of her father, Babamukuru. She pays the price for open defiance with her mental and physical health and even at the novel’s end persists in an unstable, uncertain psychological state. (Andrade 29)

Despite her attitude, Nyasha does not seem to be aware of how challenging she can be. For her, the acts of reading, critical thinking, and questioning of the things that do not seem logical is quite a natural process.

At the beginning, she does not purposefully reject the authority of her father or even try to oppose his views; she simply expresses her own opinions and concerns as honestly as she conceives them. According to Tambu:

She did not realize how deeply [Babamukuru] felt the misfortune of having a daughter like Nyasha. Not considering herself a misfortune, she could not have known how disillusioned her father was. She took seriously the reasons that Maiguru gave for Babamukuru's bad humor – he was busy, he had responsibilities – and on this basis made allowances for him so that she did not judge him too harshly and remained herself in spite of her father's wishes. (Tsitsi Dangarembga. *Nervous Conditions* 157)

It is only as the story moves forward, and as Nyasha becomes more and more aware of her father's disappointment in her that she starts to deliberately and openly challenge his authority. She seems to be deeply affected by the strong disapproval of her father and by the inability of her mother to stand with her and support her despite the fact that she has done nothing wrong. Nyasha does not consider that she has to be mild about expressing her opinions because, for her, she is simply saying the truth.

One of the most obvious signs of mental disintegration that the young girl experiences is her eating disorder. The alienation she goes through manifests itself in the form of anorexia. Nyasha's inability to eat properly seems to result from her need to regain control over at least this aspect of her life. She is incapable of reconciling her feelings with the demands of patriarchal rule represented by her father as she cannot be the quiet and obedient daughter who expresses her opinions mildly if she does it at all. She expresses her profound distress in her own words when she talks to Tambu after having an argument with her father at the dinner table and going to the bathroom to vomit what he had forced her to eat.

'Are you ill?' I asked when she came in. She sat heavily on her bed, shook her head. 'No,' she answered at length. 'I did it myself. With my toothbrush. Don't ask me why. I don't know.' She was quiet for a minute, not looking at me, and when she turned to me again her eyes were distressed.

'You know, Tambu,' she began again painfully, 'I guess he's right to dislike me. It's not his fault, it's me. But I can't help it. Really, I can't. He makes me so angry. I can't just shut up when he puts on his God act. I'm just not made that

way. Why not? Why can't I just take it like everybody else does? I ought to take it, but really, I can't.' (Tsitsi Dangarembga. *Nervous Conditions* 193)

As previously mentioned, in the case of Mary, Nyasha is caught up in a conflict between what she is told she should do and what she can't help doing. It is simply her identity that is opposed to the role society tells her she should play. When she loses grasp of all other possibilities to maintain some sort of control over her life, her anorexia manifests itself.

Nyasha's alienation and her mental condition manifest themselves through her inability to have normal eating habits. Her disrupted relationship with food is symptomatic of the inner pain that she cannot express. In her article "The Nervous Collusions of Nation and Gender: Tsitsi Dangarembga's Challenge to Fanon," Heather Zwicker writes:

Nyasha's eating disorder has several meanings in the text. Most immediately and literally, it is a response to her father's authority. The two of them fight throughout the novel, not least over Nyasha's body: Babamukuru wants to control how she uses it, how she trades it, and how she feeds it, prompting Nyasha to respond by controlling her food consumption. More figuratively, Nyasha's anorexia is a response to the collusion of patriarchy and colonial domination. (Zwicker 14)

As previously argued, in *Nervous Conditions*, race and patriarchy represent a force of double oppression which both contribute to Nyasha's alienation. As she is unable to change the situation or to cope with the realities of her life, the mental and emotional state of Nyasha continues to deteriorate. She cannot overcome her condition despite her efforts to regain control.

One way by which she attempts maintain a certain amount of control over her situation is by studying all the time. She seems to need the intellectual activity to keep her mind busy. Unlike Mary, who had lost her intellectual abilities, Nyasha seems to

find refuge in her studies. She desperately tries to keep control over her mind by intensifying its activity to the point of exhaustion. Tambu, who observed this process, describes it as follows:

Nyasha grew weaker by the day. She wavered when she walked and every night was the same. Although we were on vacation she studied fourteen hours a day to make sure that she passed her 'O' levels. She worked late into the night to wake me up regularly and punctually at three o'clock with a problem – a chemical equation to balance, the number of amperes in a circuit to be calculated or an irregular Latin verb to conjugate, although I was only in Form One and could not often help her ... It was truly alarming, but nobody commented, nobody acted; we were all very frightened. (Tsitsi Dangarembga. *Nervous Conditions* 204)

Nyasha's condition deteriorates because she is not able to have any grasp or control over her life. Her behavior is constantly disapproved of by her parents. She is not free to read what she wants, to go out with her friends, or even to eat the way she wants. The slow deterioration of her mental condition eventually culminates in a nervous breakdown that comes in the form of a violent and uncontrollable outburst as described by Tambu:

Nyasha was beside herself with fury. She rampaged, shredding her history book between her teeth ..., breaking mirrors, her clay pots, anything she could lay her hands on and jabbing the fragments viciously into her flesh, stripping the bedclothes, tearing her clothes and trampling them underfoot. (Tsitsi Dangarembga. *Nervous Conditions* 205)

The unstable mental state in which Nyasha is left at the end of *Nervous Conditions* is used by Dangarembga to show one of the terrible results of social pressure and intimidation on a young girl who cannot conform to the norms of behavior of her community. The alienation of Nyasha also points out the problematic situation of women who are culturally alienated because of the Western influence that they were exposed to as children. Here the oppression of the woman is reinforced by another factor. Eustace Palmer argues that:

... in some cases, the female is subject to a kind of triple jeopardy, for she is not only exploited by the colonial system and her male counterpart, but also alienated from her roots and forced, with the connivance or at the instigation of her African male, to conform to an alien lifestyle. This is precisely Nyasha's position. (Palmer 193)

The "nervous conditions" of the novel's title seem to be used to describe the situation of this female character who sees things so clearly that she cannot ignore them, and yet finds herself powerless when it comes to changing her situation or that of the other women around her. She finds herself mentally destroyed when her will is crushed by the immutable rules that govern her society.

To conclude this point, it could be said that despite the differences that exist between the two characters and their situations, both Mary and Nyasha are women whose mental disintegration is caused by society's bias against their sex. Both women are subjected to a social pressure which is so strong that it alienates them to the point of break down. Although Mary's degradation is mainly expressed through idleness and fading away and Nyasha's deterioration manifests itself in episodes of violent outbursts and anorexia, both characters are women who are completely alienated by patriarchal oppression in its most pernicious forms. They were both brought to the brink of madness because they were first denied their right at expressing themselves as individuals with freewill and then further deprived from even the possibility to express their dissatisfaction with their situation. The condition of two women illustrates the devastating effect of the social pressure that denies them the freedom to live their lives in the way that they want. Even if both Mary and Nyasha are intelligent and capable women, their intellectual potential is never taken into consideration as their not encouraged to exploit it.

2.2. A world of silences and taboos

In addition to alienation in its different forms, social oppression results in one more form of suffering that women are subjected to: silencing. In this section, it will be proposed that most of the pain and internal tearing that women experience are heightened by the fact that they are not allowed to express their hardships. In fact, silencing and voicelessness add to the feeling of estrangement that women are faced with in patriarchal societies. The suppression of their voice deprives women of any outlet for their pain. For Dorcas Akintunde and Helen Labeodan:

Over centuries the African woman has undergone a lot of demoralization. Oppression, suppression, emotional trauma and discrimination have made her insecure. ... millions of women are not only stopped physically but they are bowed and crouched in their mental attitudes towards life. They are bent in their spirits by the unbearable weight and unfair burden of religion, culture, tradition, laws and doctrines disregarding women. (118)

Due to these circumstances that patriarchal society imposes on them, women find themselves entrapped. First, they are forced to conform to gendered roles through oppression, then they are denied their individuality and put in a very precarious situation through pressure and intimidation, and most importantly they are coerced into keeping silent. One of the most important requirements for their gender is to quietly obey. The docility in attitude has to be accompanied with the calm acceptance of the social rules. From a very young age, girls are taught not to raise their voices when they speak; especially when they address figures of authority. The mildness of character is instilled in them as part of the process of socialization by which the gender roles are created in society, and at the same time, their voices are reduced to a constant state of silence.

One of the most important things that prevent women from voicing their difficulties is fear. This fear arises from the feeling of insecurity that they experience in society. As previously mentioned, women learn to keep their place in society through pressure and socialization; in both cases, they learn that they should not complain or there would be reprisals. As Charlotte Bunch writes in her work *Gender Violence and Women's Human Rights in Africa*, "... practices and values attributed to the power of tradition act as effective oppressors, silencers – most tragically – eliminators of women's true voices and desires, not only in the public sphere but in their own hearts and minds" (Bunch 20). The women's personalities and their identities are shaped in accordance with the demands of the traditions of their communities.

It can be argued that along with their identity and their freewill, women are deprived of their voices. Most of them are incapable of speaking against the rules of their societies. No matter how repressive and unjust they might be to them, women feel that they have to strictly follow these rules if they are to survive. Most of the time, silence is for them a question of self-preservation. It will be shown that in the four novels dealt with in this work, the women who best represent the silencing of women are the mothers.

The first illustration appears in Malika Mokeddem's *L'interdite*. This traditional Algerian woman, who is a nameless character, is introduced to the reader through the eyes of her youngest daughter Dalila who talks about her with Vincent. She is presented as a wife and mother of nine children, seven sons and two daughters, who

has no other purpose in life. As previously mentioned, she represents the women who have been socialized by patriarchy and who per force perpetuate its traditions.

Although the author does not give many details about her situation, it becomes clear, with the development of Dalila's story that she is in a very precarious situation. The first thing that she probably suffers from is giving birth and raising nine children; although childbearing is seen as a blessing by both men and women in patriarchal society, especially if the children are male, the terrible health consequences are borne by the woman alone. Despite the fact that the mothers are the ones who give birth and nurture the children, they are not allowed to express their opinions on how they want to live their own lives. In fact, Dalila's mother has given birth and raised her children, but has no right to express her opinion regarding their situation in society. The best example is that of her daughter Samia. The mother has no right to show her approval regarding her daughter's decision to study abroad. Her father and her brothers disapprove of Samia's decision and they reject her because she refuses to conform, but the mother is given no opportunity to defend her daughter. She cannot even voice her opinion out of fear of her husband and sons.

The ambivalence of her situation is further illustrated by her attitude towards her youngest daughter Dalila. The mother urges the young girl to be obedient and to listen to her brothers who ask her to do the chores and serve them at home. But she exhorts Dalila to study and pursue her education in order to become independent. Thus, it can be concluded that her passivity and her silence result not from her ignorance or shortsightedness, but from the fact that she is deprived of a voice by the oppressive forces at work within patriarchy. She is capable of seeing the problems, but

her position of weakness impedes any attempts on her part to express any disapproval regarding her situation and the situation of her daughters.

The mother's attitude is clearly stated by Dalila when she discusses her family problems:

- Ma mère, elle dit comme ça que c'est « la misère qui fait ça ». Elle dit que l'Indépendance, elle est injuste. Des fois elle est si triste, alors elle dit qu'Allah, lui aussi, il est injuste. Quand elle dit ça devant eux, mes frères islamistes crient et la disputent. Ils disent qu'elle ira en enfer. Moi, je ne veux pas. Tu crois qu'elle ira en enfer, ma mère ?
- Mais non ! L'enfer n'existe pas.
- Toi, tu es de Lafrance. C'est pas la même chose. C'est pas le même enfer ... Ma mère elle, elle fait toujours ça.

Elle illustre ses paroles par un haussement d'épaules avant de continuer :

- Elle dit : « L'enfer c'est tous les jours, c'est maintenant. » Elle dit qu'après, dans la mort, elle sera tranquille. (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 38-39)

It is quite clear that this female character feels quite keenly and understands quite logically the injustices of the restrictive limitations imposed on the women in her society; in this case, they are represented by the political and religious institutions. Yet, she is incapable of speaking against the social order. Through a life experience, she has come to the conclusion that she is not in a position to make any comments or voice any of her predicaments regarding her position in society. She is unable to stand up to her husband or even to her own sons because, in her society, the voice of a woman is merely a fading noise that no one pays attention to until it dies out on its own.

Another woman who stands in an ambivalent position in the novel is Ouarda, the schoolteacher. She seems to represent the woman who knows how to deal with some unfair aspects of patriarchy without voicing any disapproval against its rules. It

is clear from the fact that she helps Dalila and her sister that she sides with the two girls acknowledging the right of both to education and independence, but she is careful enough not to openly question the decisions of the father and the brothers of the two girls. As a woman, Ouarda manages to get a privileged position by conforming to the two primary demands of her community. First she is a wife and a mother. Then she takes a job which is approved of by the Algerian society.

Yet, Ouarda does not have a voice in the novel. She does not seem to have any possibility to express her opinions because society would not listen. Ouarda might even endanger her position should she attempt to defend the rights of Samia and Dalila to education and freedom. Therefore, she merely tries to act within the limits of what society allows. Even if her situation seems to be slightly better than that of Dalila's mother, the scope within which she is permitted to speak and act is quite restricted. She is granted a certain amount of flexibility, but she does not seem to enjoy any real independence of thought or action. More importantly, she seems to be keenly aware of the necessity to be quiet.

In *Speak Out Black Sisters: Black Women and Oppression in Black Africa*, Awa

Thiam writes:

... women have been silent for too long. Are they now beginning to find their voices? Are they claiming the right to speak for themselves? Is it not high time that they discovered their own voices, that – even if they are unused to speaking for themselves – they now take the floor, if only to say that they exist, that they are human beings – something that is not always immediately obvious – and that, as such, they have a right to liberty, respect, and dignity? (Thiam 11)

It is quite impossible to answer these questions by a simple yes or no. It is true that the situation of a limited number of women, as presented by female writers, has improved,

but it is still very difficult for the majority of them to express their basic needs or desires or even to give their opinion on matters that directly affect their lives.

This seems to be the case for Tambudzai's mother, Mainini, in Dangarembga's novel. She is also presented through the eyes of her daughter, as a traditional wife and mother who suffers from difficult living conditions that are due mainly to poverty and to her husband's idleness. She has to handle almost all the work in her household in addition to taking care of her children. She soon comes to understand that, as a woman, she has no other purpose in life. Yet, she makes no attempt to improve her living conditions or even to complain about the hardships that she has to face in her everyday life.

For Eustace Palmer: "Tambu's mother is the kind of woman who is the bane of all modern feminists, African or otherwise, because she has allowed herself to be brainwashed into a passive acceptance of the system in the silly belief that it cannot possibly be changed" (Palmer 180). It is clear that what Palmer calls "brainwashing" is the result of the complex process of socialization that women undergo in patriarchal societies rather than the weakness of the woman's character. He even seems to suggest, to a certain extent, that Tambu's mother is to blame for her situation; he seems to believe that it is her acceptance of the rules of patriarchy that led her to be oppressed and that it would be enough for her to react or rebel in order to make a difference.

But, there are various parameters that he does not take into consideration. First, the process of socialization is internalized at an early age and serves as a road map for women who very often are unable to conceive of a different life. Second, there is the

fear of transgression. Most of the time, women come to the conclusion that their position in society is acquired and to be kept through conforming to the prescribed roles they were attributed by the social order, so any attempt at challenging or even questioning the rules would bring immediate retaliation on the part of the community. Finally, these women are very often in a position of weakness which prevents them from any possibility of demanding any change. According to Awa Thiam:

It is a recognized fact that in patriarchal societies the woman may not speak out. Victims of institutionalized polygamy and forced marriages ..., African women who have no paid work devote themselves, according to their different ethnic groups, to varying forms of agriculture ... and carry out their domestic tasks. (Thiam 14)

Therefore, it can be understood that Mainini's "passive acceptance" does not result from the woman's weakness or lack of personality, but rather from the fact that from the moment of her birth, she has been deprived of her free will and of her voice. Tambu analyzes her mother's attitude in this way: "Since for most of her life my mother's mind, belonging first to her father and then to her husband, had not been hers to make up, she was finding it difficult to come to a decision" (Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* 155). Thus, Mainini is not capable of voicing her opinion or even making up her own mind about an issue concerning her own future because she has been dispossessed of any possibility to express herself for so long that even when she is asked to do so, she fails.

As the reader comes to understand with the development of the novel, Tambu's mother does not lack the intelligence or the discernment to properly analyze her situation and that of the rest of the women of her family, including her daughter and her sister Lucia. What she does lack is the opportunity and the possibility to speak

against the injustices that she sees and experiences. Her world is one of silence not one of self-expression. When Lucia asks her whether she would like to stay at home or go to the mission with her, she answers in a manner that leaves no doubts about the state of her mind:

“‘Lucia,’ she sighed, ‘why do you keep bothering me with this question? Does it matter what I want? Since when has it mattered what I want? So why should it start mattering now? Do you think I wanted to be impregnated by that old dog? Do you think I wanted to travel all this way across this country of our forefathers only to live in dirt and poverty? Do you really think the child for whom I made the journey to die only five years after it left the womb? Or my son to be taken from me? So what difference does it make whether I have a wedding or whether I go? It is all the same. What I have endured for nineteen years I can endure for another nineteen, and nineteen more if need be. Now leave me! Leave me to rest.’” (Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* 155)

Mainini has come, rightfully, to the conclusion that her opinion is of no consequence to the decision makers of her community; she is very lucid in this speech, contrarily to what Palmer suggests. She knows all too well that patriarchal society, and the men who represent it in her life, do not intend to listen to what she has to say. The woman seems to have been worn down by the pressure of society and by the difficulties in her life to the point that she can no longer see an alternative to her painful existence.

Women’s silencing and voicelessness are very important elements that illustrate the alienation of women under the rule of patriarchy. As Nigerian author Molara Ogundipe-Leslie puts it in her work *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformation*:

Women are shackled by their own negative self-image, by centuries of the interiorization of the ideologies of patriarchy and gender hierarchy. Their own reactions to objective problems therefore are often self-defining and self-crippling. Woman reacts with fear, dependency complexes and attitudes to please and cajole when more self-assertive actions are needed. (Ogundipe-Leslie 36)

It might be difficult, for some, to understand the extent of the damage done to women by socialization, but it becomes clear through the analysis of some female characters, like Tambu's mother, that by depriving women of their basic human rights, patriarchy not only affects the events of their lives, it also interferes with their vision of themselves and their ability to interact with society and its members. The most painful situations in which women find themselves trapped are made worse by the incapacity of women to speak against their lot. The world of silence and voicelessness in which these women live deeply affects their emotions and very often leads them to hopelessness.

A mother figure who can be used to further illustrate the impact of silencing and voicelessness on women is Firdaus' mother in Nawel El El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*. The first thing that Firdaus says about her family is that her father is abusive and violent and that her mother remains powerless and silent in the face of his tyranny.

As it is the case for Mainini, Firdaus' mother has to deal with all the hardships that life puts on her way without so much as a complaint. She has to carry out the most difficult chores as well as child bearing and childrearing and at the same time take constant humiliation and beating from her husband. She sees no possibility for changing her situation or the situation of her children and she also fears that by complaining or showing any signs of rebellion, her husband might retaliate by more cruel violence and abuse. It is also suggested by Nahid Toubia that:

Women also internalize their oppression for more complicated psychological reasons. They tend to identify very closely with the men who hold the most immediate power over them. These figures of authority may be highly abusive, and yet they simultaneously represent protection from threats posed by the external world. (Toubia 17)

It is, therefore, because she conceives of her household as the only safe place for her and for her children that Firdaus' mother does not try to escape or even protest against her husband's treatment. December Green writes that: "It is often argued that women stay with their partners because they want the abuse to end, not the relationship. The combination of social and economic factors keeping women in abusive relationships may contribute to some women's tendency to romanticize abuse" (Green 40). For women like Firdaus' mother, the violent attitudes of their husbands or partners are part of the men's prerogatives granted by society, and for this reason, they are not to be questioned.

In the case of Firdaus' mother, her complete silence does not even allow the reader to know what she wants or how she feels about her situation. Of course, Firdaus' description of the situation shows how terrible the pains of her mother were. Yet, the woman herself never voices anything about her sufferings. The problem, however, does not seem to be related only to her acceptance of her situation, but also, and more importantly, to the absence of a possibility for her to react. This, as previously mentioned, is the result of the pressure and intimidation exercised over women by society.

One more element that reinforces this idea about Firdaus' mother is the fact that she does not appear to have any identity of her own. This reinforces the idea that patriarchy insists on putting women on the margin, not even dealing with them as individuals. As expressed by F. O. Orabueze, "In Firdaus' family women come and go and she cannot identify any of them as her mother..." (Orabueze 129).

The little girl seems to be at a loss when it comes to identifying her mother as an individual; she is unable to distinguish her from other women. Her confusion is perceptible when she says: “Was I really the daughter of my mother, or was my mother someone else? Or was I born the daughter of my mother and later changed into someone else? Or had my mother been transformed into another woman who resembled her so closely that I could not tell the difference?” (El El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* 20).

The question that Firdaus is asking shows that the girl is confused concerning her mother’s identity and her own. Despite her young age, she starts to internalize the fact that in her society women and girls are not given an identity of their own; they are merely attributed roles to perform and required to remain silent. This situation is further illustrated by Firdaus when she says:

In summer I would see [my mother] sitting at [my father’s] feet with a tin mug in her hand and she washed his legs with cold water.

When I grew a little older my father put the mug in my hand and taught me how to wash his legs with water. I had now replaced my mother and did the things she used to do. 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 garment, the same face, and the same way of moving. (El El Saadawi *Woman at Point Zero* 22)

Here, it can be understood that Firdaus’ mother having died, her father married another woman. The fact that the father remarries almost instantly after the death of his first wife shows that women are not considered as individuals who should be valued for their personal qualities by the man; he merely wants them to perform the tasks for which he needs them, in this case, the washing of his feet. His first wife, his daughter, and his second wife seem to be interchangeable in the sense that they do not have any

value or function other than to serve him. The man does not seem to have any attachment to Firdaus' mother whom he replaces as soon as she dies. He also shows no affection whatsoever towards his daughter. He merely sees in them the servants that he needs to perform their duties toward him.

As a conclusion, it can be said here that in addition to all the burdens that they have to bear in their societies, women are subjected to the stifling of their identity and to the silencing of their voice. This point is illustrated here by the image of the mother. As opposed to the image of the father, that symbolizes the authority of patriarchy, the mother is seen as the object upon which this authority is exercised. Contrarily to what was argued by Palmer, quoted above in this chapter, these female characters do not undermine the work of female authors in promoting women's self-actualization. They simply illustrate patriarchy's attitude and women's capacity to react to pressure and to challenge oppression. In this regard, Gloria Chineze Chukukere writes: "In their attempts to present a balanced viewpoint, female writers are equally objective in their analysis of female roles especially in exposing the inherent weaknesses of their victims which assist to perpetuate their subjugation within the patriarchal society" (Chukukere 10).

Infact, the African female authors do not necessarily attempt to present an idealized version of the African woman by introducing only strong and assertive characters who manage to heroically overcome the authority of patriarchy. These writers, including Dangarembga, Lessing, Mokeddem, and El Saadawi, aim to show the difficulties that women experience in society. They faithfully portray different female characters who represent various types of women in a number of burdensome

life-situations. They also emphasize the extent and the importance of the struggle that these women have to face in order to achieve self-realization.

In this chapter, it has been argued that one of the most overwhelming difficulties that women are confronted to is the problem of constructing their identity. They have to come to terms with the images and roles that patriarchy expects them to conform to while these are in complete opposition with their own needs and desires. These expectancies are imposed on women through the oppression that comes in the form of verbal and physical violence as well as pressure and intimidation. This situation results, most of the time, in a mental disintegration that takes women to the verge of nervous breakdowns.

As any form of oppression, patriarchal pressure sometimes leads to conflicts between the oppressed and the oppressor. Thus, many women who experience pressure and abuses at the hands of patriarchy and who go through mental disintegration often come to the realization that their only hope for a better life is resistance. For Awa Thiam, “Women must assume their own voices – speak out for themselves. It will not be easy and the ones who up to now have been enjoying all the privileges – the men – and who have been making use of women’s voices, will not give them up easily” (Thiam 11-12).

It is, therefore, up to the women to stand up for themselves and to develop strategies in order to face the restrictions of patriarchy and to challenge reductive social norms. In the following chapter, different forms of resistance will be analyzed in

order to see how women endeavor to fight the oppression of patriarchy and whether they manage to liberate themselves from its suppressive hold.

Chapter three: Self-actualization?

This chapter endeavors to analyze the means by which female characters attempt to overcome the oppression and alienation that they suffer from under the rule of patriarchy. It will also look into the outcome of their attempts in order to see whether they actually manage to reach self-actualization.

1. Resistance

As mentioned in the previous chapters, most female characters in the novels under study are relegated to the position of subordinate and confined to the margins of patriarchal societies. The formative years of childhood and adolescence for women resemble training on how to become the best version of what society wants them to be. Their thoughts and actions are closely monitored by society through the power exercised over them by their families. Their duties and responsibilities are dictated to them while they are denied the opportunity to express themselves; they are rarely given any alternative path. In her article “Invite Tyrants to Commit Suicide: Gender Violence, Human Rights, and African Women in Contemporary African Nation States,” Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie writes:

Women are not seen as producers of ideas, particularly African women. And when they have ideas, these ideas are pirated, appropriated, and used without acknowledgement, recognition, or compensation. This insures that women are silenced and men in the power classes are in control. (Ogundipe-Leslie (1998) 7).

This reductive attitude towards women allows society to reduce or completely overlook their intellectual abilities thereby restraining their capacity to express their intelligence or to use their skills outside of the confines of the domestic sphere.

Women are denied any opportunity that would permit them to challenge the authority of patriarchy.

This, as previously discussed, leads women to the feeling of entrapment that they experience when confronted to all the restrictions that society imposes on their sex. Very often, this signals the beginning of alienation and mental disintegration for many women. Yet, some of them are socialized to the point of internalizing, and therefore, accepting the rules of patriarchy as necessary and immutable. They come to the conclusion that they were born for the sole purpose of serving the community and they, per force, perpetuate the tradition despite the fact that it is most unjust towards them.

In African literature, and for a long time, the issue was mainly one of representation as the female characters were stereotyped. Male authors like Chinua Achebe, Elechi Amadi, and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, who had been among the first to have access to education and therefore to the African literary scene, had focused on giving a positive and idyllic image of pre-colonial Africa. They portrayed women in a very restricted and restrictive set of roles like submissive and voiceless wives and mothers. Therefore, even in fiction, women had no alternative images to look up to. Many African women could not see any possibilities to escape or change their situations.

It is in this context that female African writers such as Flora Nwapa, Grace Ogot, and Ama Ata Aidoo started to come to the fore. In *Representation and Resistance: South Asian and African Women's Texts at Home and in the Diaspora*,

Jaspal Kaur Singh writes that “... women ... felt they [had to] rewrite their (her)stories, and to do so, they [had] to resist, recreate, and re-empower themselves ... the persistent inequalities are represented in many [African] women’s texts” (Singh 5). The first objective for female African authors of the first generation was to rehabilitate the image of the African woman by creating more life-like dynamic women in their texts. They gave centrality to these women and they created a variety of female characters whose experiences reflected more faithfully the lives of real African women.

The first attempt of African women writers was to deconstruct the functioning of patriarchy by showing the injustices that women are subjected to in their everyday life. They expose the oppression that women suffer from as well as the different consequences that result from it, as discussed in the previous chapters. The second and no less crucial step for these authors was to show the reactions of women towards oppression. Female characters are given an opportunity to take action and to become agents in their own lives. In *Rebellious Women: The New Generation of Female African Novelists*, Odile Cazenave writes:

In order to respond to the marginalization of women and women’s literature by male critics, women writers started to systematically favor certain kinds of female characters that are typically marginalized in African society. By taking this alternative route, they have created a privileged gaze and a greater space from which to freely express criticism of their society. (Cazenave 10)

Yet, one cannot help but notice that African female writers do not focus exclusively on one type of characters; they rather make the choice of portraying women with different personalities and in a variety of situations. By so doing, these writers also create for themselves the opportunity to explore several themes that had been neglected in earlier

works by male authors because they had been viewed as secondary and unimportant because related to women's concerns.

In her work *A Passion for Difference: Essays in Anthropology and Gender*, Henrietta L. Moore writes:

One important theme has been one of resistance and another, by implication but less often referred to directly, that of complicity. As types of agency, resistance and complicity are notoriously difficult to analyse. What makes individuals resist or comply? [In order to answer this question] issues of desire, identification, fantasy and fear all have to be addressed. (Moore 49)

In the first chapter, the theme of complicity was addressed in the form of 'socialization' that sometimes leads women to act against other women by perpetuating the injustices of patriarchal society. The present chapter will be devoted to the theme of resistance.

Resistance represents a crucial step in African Women's quest for freedom as it is an inevitable threshold that they have to cross in order to be able to attain one form of self-actualization or another. The act of resistance means that female characters are ready to face patriarchy and its oppressive rules in order to regain control and agency. These women need strength and courage in order to take a stand against their subjugation.

For so doing, they need to develop different strategies that would allow them to obtain their freedom. Their attitudes and behaviors differ as these often depend on the specificities of their personalities, their situations, and even their communities. In fact, some women are resilient by nature while others develop a challenging attitude through their experiences. Some women also manage to obtain help and support from

other women who facilitate their resistance while others have to stand on their own. The strategy of collective resistance can be very effective since it allows women to assist each other in their development by creating a sense of sisterhood and support system. The rules of the communities also vary from extremely restrictive to more lenient in their oppression of women.

Yet, what needs to be emphasized is the fact that all the female characters have to fight in order to survive. They attempt to reach self-fulfillment in spite of their societies. They are never handed any opportunities for improving their living conditions unless they fight to obtain them.

African women writers, including Dangarembga, Lessing, Mokeddem, and El Saadawi, show how the female characters depicted in their works reach a point of breakdown after experiencing oppression and alienation and how they are left with no choice but to resist in order to survive. It will be argued that women's resistance can take different forms.

These authors, who come from different African countries and who published their works in different decades, share the same perspectives when it comes to the situation of women in their societies. As many other African writers, they found difficulties expressing their strong opinions regarding the oppression of women because their patriarchal societies were not ready to hear and see what they wanted to expose. Some of them wrote fiction and others used semi-autobiographies to speak about what had been silenced in men's texts. For Odile Cazenave, "... they even go so far as to introduce critiques of their societies, and they do so in an indirect manner in

order to avoid immediate suppressions by publishers or male critics who may have seen only some dangerous audacity” (Cazenave 8). Challenging the social order in a mild way allowed female authors to be published when their manuscripts would probably have been rejected had they been more critical of patriarchy.

This attitude is adopted by some female characters in the four novels dealt with in this work. These characters who come to the conclusion that patriarchal oppression and the state of alienation that results from it can be overcome only through resistance adopt a strategy of compromise. They understand the rules of their societies and they are aware that a direct opposition might be faced with harsh retaliation; therefore, they make attempts to improve their situation by obtaining more agency, more freedom, and more consideration in society through what will be called in this chapter negotiation.

1.1. Negotiation:

This section will be devoted to the analysis of one of the strategies that women use as a form of resistance and which will be called negotiation. It will be shown that some female characters adopt the attitude that Buchi Emecheta describes in her 1974 novel *Second Class Citizen* as “Be cunning as a serpent and as harmless as a dove” (34). In fact, one of the ways for women to resist oppression in society is through engaging in negotiations with their communities. It will be shown through the experiences of different female characters that women try their best to change their situations without upsetting the social order. They are so keenly aware of the precariousness of their position in society that they do not dare to openly challenge its authority. Yet, at a

certain point in their lives, these women reach the conclusion that they will not be able to survive if they do not attempt to make a change at their own individual level. In her article “Women’s Reproductive and Sexual Rights,” Sudanese surgeon and women's health rights activist Nihad Toubia writes:

Women tend to be survivalists, and the most efficient way to survive in the course of daily life is to accept and internalize oppression and to turn it to one’s advantage to the greatest extent possible. Ironically, women willingly accommodate and preserve injurious cultural beliefs and practices because of the degree to which they are immersed in the values and consciousness of their communities. (Toubia 17)

This shows how heavy the oppression of society can be on women and how difficult it would be for them to openly challenge it. These women seem to think that they have no alternative but to negotiate through bargain with society or finding a space in between rebellion and submission.

1.1.1. Bargaining with society:

Quite a few female characters try to negotiate with society when they believe that they can obtain a privileged position, when compared to other women. They might think that they can use some of society’s rules to their advantage by striking a bargain with their communities.

This seems to be the attitude adopted by two of Dangarembga’s characters: Maiguru and Tambu. Both characters are offered what many other females in the novel are denied. To some extent, one might come to understand that Maiguru represents what Tambu would like to be in the future. The girl sees her uncle’s wife as a model because she received the education that Tambu craves. In fact, Maiguru was educated in her country and was even able to pursue her studies abroad with her husband, but

she, just like Tambu, is also a woman who internalized very well the teachings of her society regarding her position as a woman. Thus, the bargains that they make do not always improve the situations of women in society.

The character of Maiguru is rather ambivalent. Her position in the family is a privileged one when compared to the position of other women like Tambu's mother, but at the same time, she has no real existence as an individual. She does not enjoy any independence in spite of her education. She manages to maintain her position merely by conforming to what is expected of her as the wife of Babamukuru. She does everything she is asked, but never out of a decision that she makes; she simply acts as it is expected of a woman in her position. This can be seen when she comes to the village and receives her husband's extended family for whom she provides and cooks because that is what the wife of the head of the family is supposed to do. She also takes Tambudzai under her roof and takes care of her as a daughter because her husband decides to bring his niece to the mission.

Yet, the voice of Maiguru is barely heard through the novel as she does not express her opinion. She neither approves nor disapproves of the actions her husband takes; she merely conforms. This attitude shows a great willingness to compromise on the part of this female character. Despite her level of education, she acts as a wife and mother, but never as an independent woman. She does not show any agency in the life of her family.

Maiguru seems to have decided to maintain her position through a 'bargain' with her society. She feels that what she has obtained is better than nothing and she

does not attempt to challenge the social order like her daughter does because, in spite of the fact that it could improve her situation, Maiguru knows that most of the time such actions result in strong retaliation on the part of the community. She does not want to be rejected.

In *Ending Violence Against Women*, Francine Pickup et. al. explain this idea first by quoting the definition given by Kandiyoti who writes: “Bargaining with patriarchy refers to various strategies in which women engage to ensure their own survival and security, within a social, economic, and political context that is shaped and dominated by men” (qtd. in Pickup 21). They further explain the attitude of women in this situation:

Although women who undertake such strategies may sacrifice the long-term interests of women as a category by supporting the status quo, as individuals they may be granted economic, social, or political rewards. Sometimes, the bargain they strike requires them to collude with men in episodes of violence against other women. These episodes are the logical outcome of women’s conforming to the rules of a game that has been designed by men. (Pickup 21)

This act can be identified as a type of resistance since it represents a strategy by which women attempt to ameliorate their conditions of life within their society. The fact that they are unable to find the means by which to change their situation as second class citizens leads them to take on individual strategies to obtain more freedom or more value in their community by showing that they are willing to conform in exchange for a few privileges. Maiguru does not even seem to believe that she deserves better or that she should ask for more. For example, she does not even consider the possibility of having economic independence by managing the money she earns by working with her degree. She has internalized the strict rules of her society to the point of being almost unable to question them. All she hopes for is to maintain the consideration that

society has for her, which is more than many other women in her community can dream of. For Keith Booker:

Maiguru, like her husband, has received a master's degree in England. However, while he occupies an important position of authority in the mission school, she is a lowly teacher who is not even paid for her work – her salary goes directly to her husband, who thereby maintains a position of economic power that reinforces his authority as head of the family. (Booker 197-198)

In this sense, the position of superiority is granted to men by patriarchy regardless of their level of education or achievements in society while women are denied agency and recognition in spite of what they might achieve.

Another character who seems to opt for bargaining is Tambudzai. As previously mentioned in chapter one, Tambu is a girl who strives for education. At the beginning of the novel, she challenges the status quo when she decides to work in order to send herself to school because her family decides to pay only her brother's fees. Yet, her need for learning does not seem to originate from her desire to change her life or her situation. The girl seems to be aware of the fact that the only thing she can obtain is a little improvement of her status.

The attitude of Tambu becomes clear when it is juxtaposed with that of her cousin Nyasha. In fact, Dangarembga's main character sees the world with different eyes from her "westernized" cousin. She views the structure of her society as unfair but she wants to amend it instead of changing it. Nyasha, on the contrary, wants to challenge the status quo and change the social order, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

Tambu views her condition as one that can be improved, but not completely changed; she thinks that her aunt, Maiguru, is a model to be followed. In her view, the situation of her uncle's wife is much better than that of her mother and she aspires to achieve the same kind of success. Tambu seems to view her future in terms of negotiating with society in order to obtain what she wants. She does not want to reject her upbringing, like Nyasha does, but she also refuses to give up on her education, as her father asks her to do. In this sense, Nfah-Abbenyi writes:

For Jeremiah, cooking, not intellectual pursuits, defines womanhood and feminine living. He views education as that which ruins women distracting them from their gendered role. Contrary to what Jeremiah thinks and believes, Tambudzai tries to subvert this ideology by combining intellectual pursuits with cooking. She refuses an either/or split by refusing to confine and define herself only in terms of the domestic sphere..., but to make both the spheres of home and school work for her. (Nfah-Abbenyi 62)

This attitude clearly shows that Tambudzai wants to find a place in her society that requires neither submission nor rebellion. This form of resistance seems to be the safest in order to avoid confrontation and rejection from the family and the community. Tambu herself analyzes her situation when she says in the novel:

Beside Nyasha I was a paragon of feminine decorum, principally because I hardly ever talked unless spoken to, and then only to answer with the utmost respect whatever question had been asked. Above all, I did not question things. It did not matter to me why things should be done this way rather than that way. I simply accepted that this was so. I did not think that my reading was more important than washing the dishes, and I understood that panties should not be hung to dry in the bathroom where everybody could see them. (Dangarembra, *Nervous Conditions* 157)

The situation of Tambu clearly shows how women who are raised within communities that closely observe the rules of the patriarchal social order find difficulties challenging the same rules in spite of their unfair treatment of women. Tambu simply

wants to improve her situation, mainly through education, without offending her family and society.

Bargaining with society is a strategy which is also used by El Saadawi's main character. In fact, during her adolescence, while she was studying at a boarding school, Firdaus believed that thanks to her education she would be able to have opportunities that other women, like her mother, had not had. Despite the heavy oppression she experiences, the girl does not yet see that the social order needs to be challenged or completely changed. At this stage, Firdaus still views negotiation as a sufficient means to achieve what she wants.

For her, the fact that she manages to leave her father's house in the village to go to school is going to help her escape the painful pressure and the terrible violence that she had been subjected to as a child. For the young woman, the bargaining strategy is quite efficient in the face of the oppressive rules of her society, which is why she does not challenge patriarchal authority and only tries to bring change to her life through education. She explains her own vision when she says:

Sometimes I imagined that I would become a doctor, or an engineer, or a lawyer, or a judge. And one day the whole school went out on the streets to join a big demonstration against the government...when I got back to school my voice was hoarse, my hair in disarray, and my clothes were torn in several places, but all through the night I kept imagining myself as a great leader or a head of state.

I knew that women did not become heads of state, but I felt that I was not like other women, nor like other girls around me who kept talking about love, or about men. (El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* 32)

Firdaus believes that she can achieve success at an individual level by making personal efforts. She seems to have quite a naïve view about the situation of women in her society. She suggests that it is possible to succeed if one is ready to make efforts and

that other women fail mostly because they get distracted by things like love and marriage instead of focusing on the most important objective of improving their living conditions.

Yet, as she is confronted to failure and disappointments, the young woman comes to realize that oppression against women is an institutionalized and intrinsic part of patriarchal rule. Later in the novel, after she experiences deep alienation, she decides to resort to a different strategy to resist against the pressure and the violence that she is confronted to.

The strategy of bargaining with society might provide women like Maiguru and Tambu with a certain amount of freedom and consideration within their community, but it does not help the collective cause of women's resistance against patriarchy. It is an individual strategy that has limited benefits, even for the women who use it since it does not entail any real independence.

1.1.2. Finding a space in between

Another strategy of resistance that some female characters use to negotiate with society is finding a space in between. This situation is experienced by women who manage to stay in an intermediary space between rebellion and submission that represents a form of balance in their lives.

These characters seem to have reached the conclusion, through the observation of their society and the experiences of other women, that they can reach a certain degree of freedom by taking what they are offered in terms of benefits without challenging the patriarchal authority. They seem to know the functioning of their

societies so well that they want to obtain what they can without disrupting the balance of the community which would result in them being rejected or subjected to harsher forms of pressure and repression than the ones they already experience in their daily life.

The difference between these characters and the ones in the previous section seems to be that by wanting to find a space of freedom, these women do not want to bargain with society. They do not seem to be willing to sacrifice any part of their freedom in exchange for privileges. They are not willing to follow orders or conform but, at the same time, they are well aware that they cannot oppose society openly and directly without risking reprisal.

This seems to be the situation of Dalila. The little girl is one of the main characters in *L'interdite*, and she represents this quest for a space in between. She seems to hold an intermediary position between the passivity of her mother who is a voiceless house wife who submits to the authority of her husband and her sons and that of her sister, Samia, who challenges the authority, and therefore, finds herself banished from her home and exiled from her country.

Dalila finds refuge in her education which is disapproved of and frowned upon as a potential source of freedom for women, but not completely forbidden in her village. She finds refuge in literature and she uses her readings as a source of inspiration for her own fights. Yet, Dalila does not follow her sister's footsteps because she knows the consequences all too well. Her fear of being taken out of school

and rejected by her family is so strong that she does not dare challenge the authority of her father and brothers.

Dalila's strategy allows her to escape some of the restrictions imposed on her by being as discrete and mild as possible. She goes out of the house and takes walks in the desert while her family thinks she is staying at her teacher's house. She also plans to go to university, but does not say so in order to avoid conflict. (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 37-38)

Another character who seems to adopt the same strategy is Tambudzai's aunt, Lucia, in Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. According to many critics, she serves to show a contrast with her sister, Mainini. She is a woman whose condition is the same as that of her sister, but whose attitude makes her stand out. For Katrin Berndt, "The main contrast between her sister, Lucia, who embodies a completely different layer, and Mainini, is that the former expects a kind of individual satisfaction from life. She is a self-assured and curious woman who liked to offend and outwit the men who attempt to control her" (89-90).

In spite of the fact that she is uneducated, Lucia is the only woman in the novel who manages to have a clear reading of the situation of the female members of society. She clearly understands that patriarchy allows men to exercise power over women regardless of their status or position in society. She even manages to escape the oppression of all the men who want to keep her down: Tekesure, Jeremiah, and even the revered Babamukuru. Unlike her sister, Maiguru, and even Tambu, Lucia does not seek for the approbation of the men around her. Yet, at the same time, she does not

openly challenge patriarchy like Nyasha does. She simply states that she wants to obtain what is best for her and she is determined to do whatever it takes to get it. For example, "... she refuses to marry when she gets pregnant. Instead, she asks Babamukuru for a job and starts attending classes. Eventually, she manages to leave the homestead and the restricted existence it offers and sets up an independent life at the mission station" (Berndt 100).

Where other female characters fail, Lucia succeeds in finding balance in this space in between challenging society and conforming to its requirements. At the same time, she seems to simply press for what she wants when she wants it and she is smart enough to use the system in place to her own advantage. For Berndt,

Lucia manages to rouse solidarity among the women of the Siguake clan who, too afraid to openly criticize their men themselves, gratefully take the chance to watch Lucia confronting them... Next to Lucia, the men of Tambudzai's family all look a bit helpless and ridiculous, even the admired patriarch Babamukuru. Although Lucia gives him the impression that she fulfills his wishes, Babamukuru finally supports her ideas. Lucia knows how to flatter his vanity. She knows that Babamukuru is always anxious to strengthen his position as head of the family. So, she does not question his authority, but appeals to it when she needs assistance to further her own goals. (Berndt 100-101)

Her ability to turn situations to her own advantage allows Lucia to obtain what she aims for and even gives her the opportunity to make fun of Babamukuru when she praises his greatness after he gives her a job. According to Donald R. Wehrs, "... Lucia reproduces the precolonial pattern of offering flattery in return for favors even as she cunningly uses and even mocks that pattern" (Wehrs 117).

Her strength allows her to create her own space in which she is able to live the life that she wants. In fact,

Lucia is the only female character in *Nervous Conditions* who neither questions her actions nor her motives. She is as free and confident as the younger sister of a conscientious older sister is allowed to be. Furthermore, she is the only prominent figure who never seems to suffer from any 'nervous condition' but easily adapts to the changing conditions of life (Berndt 101).

Female characters who choose to resist through strategies of negotiation might fail like Maiguru and Firdaus who do not really manage to successfully strike a bargain with society in order to reach self-realization. They merely obtain temporary and precarious improvements of their situations which remain contingent upon them sacrificing more than they win in the bargain. Other characters who attempt to find a space in between also realize that what they end up doing is simply hide their real objective of finding fulfillment in the long run in order to only focus on what they can obtain in the short run.

1.2. Rebellion

As previously mentioned, the act of resistance can take different forms; one of them is rebellion. As opposed to negotiation, rebellion rests on strategies of direct confrontation used by female character to challenge patriarchal authority and its oppressive rule. These women who face different forms of abuse in their societies very often end up rebelling against the injustices that they are subjected to. In this sense, it can be said that there are similarities between the rebellious female characters and the strong female authors who created them. In fact, it seems important to look at the intentions of the authors who engage in a purposeful gender discourse that aims at exposing the injustices undergone by women in society and bringing to the fore the strategies of resistance that these women use in order to face oppression as they try to reach for self-fulfillment.

Most African female authors started writing in contexts that made the simple act of writing look like an act of rebellion in itself. They appeared rather late on the African literary scene, since in many African countries education was not as common for girls as it was for boys. Besides, many female writers who had managed to write found many difficulties to be accepted by publishers. These authors aimed to create a space for women who had been marginalized in male-authored texts. In this regard, Valérie Orlando writes in her work *Nomadic Voices of Exile: Feminine Identity in Francophone Literature of the Maghreb*:

Women, for centuries, have thus been speaking through the thoughts and speech of men – dictated to by a male conception of the world that has always dispossessed womanhood and feminine agency. It is, therefore, imperative that women learn to develop a theoretical discourse through which to voice their identity.

... The female author must move outside the masculine-feminine dialectic framework of established notions of subjectivity in order to eradicate the male model and in its place set up her own modes of identity. (Orlando 17)

It is precisely through this attitude that the four female authors dealt with in this work construct their female characters. Two main points which illustrate the rebellious attitude of these characters will be developed in this section: attempted escapes and open rebellion.

1.2.1. Attempted escapes:

One strategy of rebellion adopted by women under the oppression of patriarchal rule is escape. In fact, some female writers expose the situations of characters who are so entrapped that they cannot challenge the pressure of society. Many of them suffer from crippling alienation, to which is added, in some cases precarious socio-economic

conditions. Many of these characters reach a turning point in their lives after which they see no alternative but escape.

One character who clearly illustrates this situation is the protagonist of *The Grass Is Singing*. Doris Lessing shows through the character of Mary how a woman's life can change from independence and agency to oppression and mental disintegration. As developed in the previous chapter, Mary goes through a process of degeneration that affects her both physically and mentally.

When Mary comes to understand that she can no longer stand the life she has on the farm, she simply decides to escape in order to go back to her former job. By this act, Mary attempts to run away from the terrible conditions in which she lives. She is unhappily married to a man she does not love and cannot understand. She also tries to get away from the house and the farm that she hates so much. Lessing describes her situation in the following lines:

She thought, now, of nothing but getting away, of becoming again what she had been. But then, there was such a gulf between what she now was, and that shy, aloof, yet adaptable girl with the crowds of acquaintances. She was conscious of that gulf, but not as unredeemable alteration in herself. She felt rather, as if she had been lifted from the part fitted to her, in a play she understood, and made suddenly to act one unfamiliar to her. It was a feeling of being out of character that chilled her, not knowledge that she had changed. (Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing* 159)

Her strong desire and her need to leave result from the fact that Mary is completely alienated from her own life. She reaches the point where escape becomes a necessity in order for her to survive. Yet, when Mary decides to leave the farm and go back to her town, she quickly understands that nothing was the same. She was not able to go back to the pension in which she used to live because they did not take married

women, and her former employer seems not to be willing to take her back. After spending sometime in a hotel room, Mary found herself obliged to go back to the farm and to her husband.

Although it failed eventually, this attempt at escape shows how unhappy Mary was. She was so deeply dissatisfied with her life that she was ready to leave everything behind if she had the chance to go back to her former life. This failure seems to have precipitated Mary's mental breakdown. After she fails, she sees no other way out of her misery.

After this event, Mary finds herself even more hopeless than before. She loses touch with reality because she is completely detached from human beings as she is almost completely isolated. The only person whom she manages to communicate with and who treats her with humanity is her black servant, Moses. Her attraction to him and her relationship with him are the greatest transgression to the rules of her community. Her relationship can, therefore, be seen as a form of both escape and rebellion. In this sense, Ruth Whittaker writes:

Sexual relations between the races were a powerful challenge to their separateness; here, a double standard prevailed. Miscegenation between white men and black women is shown to be tolerated, although not generally approved. Sexual relations between white women and black men were unthinkable, although if brought to the conscious consideration of white society, rape, one assumes, would have been preferable to willing acquiescence. That the idea of a white woman actually being attracted to a black man was considered so shocking, perhaps reveals the prevalence of such an unconscious desire, and much of the power of *The Grass Is Singing* comes from the way Doris Lessing analyses this taboo. (Whittaker 20)

It seems that through her relationship with Moses, Mary tries to regain control over what is left of her life and her humanity, but at the same time she challenges the most

sacred rule of her community. As the novel starts with the murder of Mary, the reader can be surprised by the attitude of the neighbors who despise her in spite of the fact that she is clearly the victim. It is only in the light of her involvement with her black servant that her offence against them becomes clear.

Although she seems to recognize her act as a direct affront against her community, Mary cannot refrain from connecting with Moses; she seems to be irresistibly drawn to him. This can be read as a form of escape since the woman finds no other human being to connect with in her state of solitude. Yet, it can also be seen as an act of rebellion because she clearly rejects the help of the Slatters who represent the social order that Mary holds responsible for her misfortune. Mary's decision to be involved with Moses is a stand that she takes against her society and through which she expresses her individual will. The realization that her submission to society had deprived her of her freedom and of her happiness makes her unhesitant to challenge its authority regarding race. She confronts one of the most immutable taboos of her society: sexual relations between a black man and a white woman. It will be argued in the following chapter that Mary will pay the price of this attempt at escape with her life.

Another character who attempts to escape by several means is Nawel El El Saadawi's Firdaus. This female character often finds herself victim of her society's oppressive rule, as developed in the previous chapters. Firdaus attempts to escape from difficult living conditions on several occasions in the novel, but she inevitably fails because of the strength of patriarchal oppression.

Her first step is to seek education which she sees as a possible way to improve her condition since her uncle, who studied at al-Azhar, is praised and respected by everyone. Yet, what Firdaus comes to understand very quickly is that men and women are not praised and respected for the same reasons in her society. She manages to go to Cairo and does well in her primary school years of education, but her first attempt at escape eventually fails when she is forced to abandon her studies. In her work *A Critical Study of the Works of Nawel El El Saadawi*, Egyptian Writer and Activist Diana Royer proposes that “This ambiguously beneficial period of Firdaus’s life ends when the uncle marries and Firdaus is seen by the couple as a problem. The new wife has a negative influence on Firdaus’s uncle and serves as a [strong] example of [a woman] upholding the patriarchy...” (Royer 102).

She is, therefore, sent to boarding school where she manages to do well in her studies and even to make some acquaintances that help her feel hopeful about her future. Firdaus starts to believe that she will be able to go to university and start a life as an independent individual. Yet, once again, something prevents her from getting what she so deeply wants. “When Firdaus overhears her uncle’s wife complaining of the cost of keeping her and how at her age she should be married, and that an elderly and physically repulsive relative of the wife would make an ideal husband—plus offer a good dowry, Firdaus decides to run away...” (Royer 104)

Yet, she soon understands that she cannot find any refuge because of the cold eyes staring at her on the streets. She finds herself back at her uncle’s and she is forced to marry a man that disgusts her. He beats and humiliates her to a point that Firdaus finds no other way of dealing with the situation than that of complaining to her uncle

who tells her that it is a husband's right to beat his wife. This is confirmed by her uncle's wife who informs Firdaus that she is often beaten by her own husband who is a learned and respectable man. The only thing that Firdaus can do is to try, once again, to escape. Georges Tarabishi writes:

When Firdaus runs away from the marital home, she is to fare no better at her lover's. It is true that the café-owner Bayoumi takes her in off the streets, gives her refuge and feeds and clothes her. But no sooner does she express a desire to be independent and look for work (she has a secondary school certificate) than the 'man' inside Bayoumi erupts, standing up and slapping her in the face saying, 'How dare you raise your voice when you're speaking to me, you street walker, you low woman. (Tarabishi 21-22)

This cycle that the woman goes through every time she tries to improve her situation illustrates not only the strong hold that society keeps over women, but also the strength and the resilience of the character. She is not ready to give up on herself. She makes several attempts to escape the life of oppression that she is subjected to, but she cannot find a way out that would allow her to live as an independent woman. The final attempt she makes is to free herself by taking up prostitution as a means to achieve the financial independence that she knows is one of the essential components necessary to women's freedom. This idea will be developed later in this chapter.

1.2.2. Open rebellion

Another form of resistance adopted by some women in patriarchal society is open rebellion, a strategy which is based on a direct confrontation. Despite the fact that this type of rebellion was often met with strong retaliation on the part of patriarchy, some women found no other way to gain agency and to claim their individual identity but to openly challenge the social order.

Despite the fact that in the last few decades African women have started to get a wider access to education and employment, their situations remain very precarious because they are not allowed to stand as individuals. They are still expected by the community to perform the duties of wives and mothers along with their education and careers. They are also expected to accept this accumulation of tasks without calling for social justice or equality.

In fact, despite them being employed and having a salary, many women do not manage to be autonomous since they are still completely dependent on their husbands, fathers, or even brothers who have complete control over their finances. In her article “Violence Against Women: An International Perspective,” Margaret Schuler describes the situation of these women:

The study suggests that female economic inequality is the strongest factor, strengthened by male control in the household and the wife’s inability to divorce. In effect, women are most vulnerable to violent actions the more total their dependence on men. When their freedom is restricted and they have no options for escape, women are more likely to be abused by their husbands or male authority figures. (Schuler 17)

These situations have been explored by many women writers including the four dealt with in this work. They probe into the situations of female characters who undergo different forms of abuse mainly related to the fragility and precariousness of their situation in society. Most women are not properly educated and cannot have access to economic independence. These authors show how some women do their best to free themselves from the oppression of their society mainly through education and hard work. The two characters that best illustrate this open rebellion are Malika Mokeddem’s Sultana and Tsitsi Dangarembga’s Nyasha. They both represent strong women who challenge patriarchal authority.

The story of Sultana, in *L'interdite*, perfectly illustrates this idea. As a little girl, she is rejected by her community. She soon understands that she will not be allowed any freedom as a woman unless she acts and reacts against the prejudices of her society. Her first chance is to get education outside her hometown, but despite the fact that she becomes a doctor, she notices that she will never be able to reach the self-actualization that she wants. Her first impulse is to escape and go to France. There, she manages to live the life that she longed for far from the oppression and injustices of her community.

Yet, Sultana faces another problem that deeply affects her as a young woman, the problem of her identity. She finds herself in an in between space. She cannot identify with the culture of the country she lives in, but she cannot feel that she completely belongs to her own culture. This physical and emotional displacement results in a constant feeling of alienation. She voices this on several occasions in the novel; one of them is during a conversation with Salah after Yacine's death and her coming back to Ain Nekhla. She says:

Une femme d'excès? Le sentiment du néant serait-il un excès? Je suis plutôt dans l'entre-deux, sur une ligne de fracture, dans toutes les ruptures. Entre la modestie et le dédain qui lamine mes rébellions. Entre la tension du refus et la dispersion que procurent les libertés. Entre l'aliénation de l'angoisse et l'évasion par le rêve et l'imagination. Dans un entre-deux qui cherche ses jonctions entre le Sud et le Nord, ses repères dans deux cultures. (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 47)

This declaration shows how deep the feeling of displacement that Sultana experiences is. Her life in France is, for her, more an escape than a choice. She finds a place nowhere and she keeps living in a position between the two countries and the two cultures.

The open rebellion of Sultana can be seen in the novel after she comes back to attend Yacine's funeral. First when she challenges the authority of the community by staying in his house and by marching in his burial alone; two things that are forbidden for women. Then, her greatest act of rebellion appears when she goes to work in the hospital in spite of the hostility of the community, more specifically the religious extremists of the region who believe that a woman should stay at home and perform the domestic roles assigned to her by patriarchy.

Such individual acts of rebellion might not seem very significant at the scale of society, but they represent a first step towards women's resistance against the oppression of patriarchy. For Valérie Orlando:

Understanding and having access to the realm of the public is important for all women of the world. Establishing public agency, although it differs in certain aspects, depending on the society and culture, marks a new beginning for women, a new becoming... All women, whether white or of color, must step into a public space in order to establish agency and voice. This public sphere is often an exiled space – a place of marginalization on the peripheries of traditional feminine roles. (Orlando 11)

For Sultana, this peripheral space is created when she leaves her country for France where she manages to create for herself a role that was not prescribed by patriarchal rule. She had to leave in order to physically remove herself from the incessant pressures that she was subjected to at home. Her education and her work at the hospital represent a form of freedom that she acquired through rebellion and sacrifice and that she wishes to keep in spite of the rejection of her society. She has to suffer the consequences in the form of hatred and hostility as well as verbal abuse and even threats. Her position of defiance is strongly reprimanded because she represents an alternative role for women to see and to follow.

Her attitude is met with a very violent reaction from the men of the village; they decide to organize themselves in a group in order to put pressure on Sultana to make her leave the hospital and the village. Sultana, who is not ready to give in to their threats, tells them:

- Vous n'êtes que des frustrés, dans vos têtes et dans vos slips ! Vous n'avez jamais eu de cerveaux. Vous n'êtes que des sexes en érection ! Une érection insatisfaisante. Vos yeux ne sont que vermines. Une vermine constamment à souiller, à ronger, à dévorer les femmes ! (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 163)

This violent response emanates from the years of pressure endured by Sultana; she reaches the point of rebelling against all that represents patriarchal oppression, and in this case, it is represented by the group of men from the village. She is no longer afraid of what they might do to her because of the confidence she was able to build thanks to her education and to the construction of her personality in the public sphere. She is able to stand up for herself and for other women in spite of the danger represented by these men and the order they stand for. She represents a woman who has reached a level of resistance that allows her to openly confront society in order to fight for what she wants.

In *Nervous Conditions*, Tsitsi Dangarembga presents Nyasha, a female character, who openly rebels against the society in which she lives in order to attempt to achieve self-actualization. Similarly to Sultana, Nyasha's personality is formed in an in-between space. As a child, she has to travel to the UK with her parents, so the first years of her education take place in England. The girl learns a foreign language and she is exposed to different culture. Because of this, she manages to see the discrepancies that exist between her traditional culture and the Western one when she juxtaposes the two. She also sees what both cultures lack in terms of social justice and

equality. She is able to locate the hypocrisies of both cultures when it comes to dealing with women and other (colonized) races. According to Nfah-Abbenyi:

Nyasha has lost part of her history, and she struggles to fill in the blanks that two different types of histories (a fragmented one and an alternative alien one) have created in her life: one history that is patriarchal, that views femaleness as opposed to and inferior to maleness; the other that is racist, that views and uses colonization and assimilation as a potent weapon of power and control... This unique position offers Nyasha the possibility of defining an identity politics and positionality that offers her an almost integrated though still problematic understanding of both histories. (Nfah-Abbenyi 67)

This allows Nyasha to hold a position of rebellion because she has not internalized the pressure that patriarchy puts on women in their childhood. She was able to enjoy a certain amount of freedom that helped her build her spirit of contestation. She openly challenges the rules that she finds unfair and she does not hesitate to voice her discontent. The first figure of authority that Nyasha openly rebels against is her father. She does not accept his supreme rule and she questions his orders whenever she gets the chance.

Nyasha's protest also rests on her education in English schools. She seems to have learned that freedom and equality are principles that human beings should adopt in their everyday life, as she was taught as a child. What she seems to be willing to do is hold everyone accountable for what they stand for. She wants colonist countries to keep their promises of civilization and democracy for her country. She also wants nationalist men who supposedly fight for justice and equality to include women in their fight.

Nyasha wants her education to be synonymous with freedom of thought and freedom of speech. She uses her critical mind to analyze the situation of the world and

to question the status quo. As Tambu narrates, “She read a lot of books that were about real people, real people and their sufferings...She had nightmares about these things, the atrocities; but she carried on reading all the same, because, she said, you had to know the facts if you were ever going to find the solutions” (Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* 95). The young woman is interested in history because she is aware that by analyzing the past she can understand the present and might even be able to change the future.

She also hopes that women will be given agency or at least the opportunity to have their own voice and to decide for themselves. Her fight can be seen through her very tense relationship with her father whose authority she perceives as oppressive and restrictive. She challenges his authority on different occasions, but she fails to liberate herself from his rule. She comes to realize, with the evolution of the novel, that the fight is still very long and that the hypocrisy of society will still stand for many years to come. Her rebellion ends when she has a nervous breakdown. In this sense, Susan Z. Andrade comments:

At the level of surface representation Nyasha’s personal struggle against her father’s benevolent tyranny might be a failed one. However, closer inspection illustrates that Nyasha’s very failure as a coming-of-age subject raises questions about subjectivity, power, and control that go beyond the private domain of home and family to the public one of nation and state. (Andrade 46)

As for Sultana, the potential Nyasha’s individual rebellion is closely connected with the resistance of women both in the domestic and in the public spheres. The younger female character illustrates the difficulties that many women have to endure in an attempt to free themselves from the oppression of patriarchy. For both women, education seems to represent the source of strength and self-affirmation. The two

characters face the same alienation from their original culture after living abroad, but they both feel a deep connection to their roots. What they dream of is a change for women of their society; a change that for them can be brought by asserting women's presence in the public sphere. They both strongly influence the women around them and bring everyone in their entourage to see and question the conditions of women under the rule of patriarchy.

This open rebellion has many consequences that can be negative for the protagonists, but their attitude emanates from a need to say their truth and to challenge a system that they see as unfair. Some of these characters are faced with violent reactions when they attempt to challenge patriarchy. Sultana has to fight religious fundamentalists who attempt to physically attack her and Nyasha experiences both physical and moral violence at the hand of her father whose authority she rejects. The presence of these two female characters is positive in the lives of the women around them as they represent models that can inspire others. Their fight for self-actualization is a long and difficult process, but one which is necessary for the survival of these women.

1.3. Challenging images

Another form of resistance that will be discussed in this section is the challenging attitude of the female authors. The four writers whose works are dealt with here openly question the social order which they depict as oppressive and restrictive for women. They also create different spaces for their female characters to evolve in order to bring

these women out of the margins in which they had been confined for a long time by male authors.

In fact, as authors and literary critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar explain it in their work *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, when men write about women, they do so without ever granting them any sort of agency or independence. They create female characters who are docile and submissive; they mostly represent what men want to see in a woman. For Gilbert and Gubar,

A ... paradox of the metaphor of literary paternity is the fact that in the same way an author both generates and imprisons his fictive [female] creatures, he silences them by depriving them of autonomy (that is, of the power of independent speech) even as he gives them life. (Gilbert and Gubar 14)

The two authors believe that it is up to women writers to challenge these limitations by telling their own stories.

Dangarembga, Lessing, Mokeddem and El El Saadawi, who write from the perspective of women, offer alternative positive images to the stereotypical ones that could be found in male-authored texts. First, most of them try to free their female characters from restrictive and reductive roles like the ones of wives and mothers. Besides, they present male characters who differ greatly from the ever strong and powerful protagonists created by African male writers by showing that men can also be passive, lazy, and rely on women to live. These two aspects of their writing will be considered in this section as strategies of resistance used by the authors to deconstruct and undermine the authority of patriarchy.

1.3.1. Childless female characters

In a large number of African male-authored texts of the first generation of African writers, the image of the mother was idealized and glorified. In the works of authors like Léopold Sédar Senghor, Wole Soyinka, and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o this image of the nurturing mother is often equated with the symbol of mother Africa creating what Florence Stratton calls "The mother Africa trope" (Stratton 39). In their attempt to refute the negative descriptions that had been made of the continent as a dark and barbaric place, these authors created idyllic versions of the beauty and bounty of the African nature. They describe Africa as a beautiful woman that has the ability to give birth and nurture its children. Yet, this positive image was created to the detriment of African women since they were depicted exclusively in these terms. This resulted in the imprisonment of female characters in the roles of wives and mothers depriving them of the possibility to be represented as anything else. Their contributions to society and community in field like farming or trade were neglected and they became valued solely for their capacity to have children.

In her work *To Lay these Secrets Open: Evaluating African Writing*, South African Professor of African studies Brenda Cooper deals with the same idea when she writes:

The language and rhetoric of African nationalism is highly patriarchal: Africa is often characterized as 'mother' and, by extension, the mothering and the nurturing of children is glorified and reaffirmed as the primary defining characteristic of women. I am not suggesting that women should reject childbearing and nurturing but that it is a problem when the role of mothering is used to paralyse women and to restrict their potential to this one role. (Cooper 77)

It is, therefore, from this perspective that the role of child bearer becomes problematic for African women. From the moment that they are put on a pedestal, women are denied the opportunity to define their own roles within their communities. They are turned into a symbol which greatly limits the scope of their evolution in society by restricting it to motherhood only.

For Nigerian author Flora Nwapa, this issue started to be addressed by African women writers during the 1960's and 1970's who aimed to address what had been left out by their male counterparts. In "Women and Creative Writing in Africa," she puts forward that "Male authors understandably neglect to point the positive side of womanhood, for very many reasons... [Therefore], women have started to redefine themselves; they have started to project themselves as they feel they should be presented" (Nwapa 90). Thus, African women authors aspire to offer more realistic and diversified representations of female characters in order to rehabilitate the images and roles that African women are already playing and that should be reinforced in order for them to be considered as important contributors to the development of their societies.

Another crucial problem that emanate from the idealization and glorification of motherhood is the stigmatization of barrenness and childlessness. In fact, when women are valued only for their capacity to be wives and mothers, all the women who cannot perform this role, for one reason or another, are completely marginalized. Flora Nwapa writes:

My conclusion on this issue of barrenness is that women are what they are because they can give life, they can procreate. So in African societies, when this unique function is denied a woman, she is devastated. But should this be so, all

the time, in this day and age? Does this handicap, this childlessness make a woman less woman, less human? I do not think so... Therefore, we *should* create characters that are fulfilled and not weighed down by the shackles of marriage and motherhood. (Nwapa 97)

It is one of the purposes of the works of African female writers to show that women who are not able to have children, for one reason or another, are not to be discarded by society because they have different roles to play.

This section will be devoted to the attempt that the four female authors make to challenge the image of the mother or the fertile woman by creating powerful childless protagonists. They clearly want to free women from the heavy biological expectations that are attached to them by their society. As argued by De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, women, for a very long time, were held prisoners in their own bodies because society put their capacity of reproduction above any other human quality. By dealing mainly with childless protagonists, female writers force the readers and critics to focus on women as individuals. It is argued by Ola-Aluko and Edewor in their article “Women, culture and the African society” that:

Whereas it is true that there is a basic traditional role which women play within the cultural setting and that this, primarily, is childbearing, it is important that this should not be allowed to continue to overshadow the need for women to exercise their individuality, creativity, authority and ingenuity and to enjoy the facilities that specifically address their own problems. Understandably, in most societies, women have been brought up to view themselves as child bearers. They devote the bulk of their time to raising children, doing household chores and mothering the family. (Ola-Aluko and Edewor 20)

Because women have lacked opportunities to have access to education in many African countries during and after colonization, many of them were unable to exist outside of the private space. In the spaces ruled by patriarchal authority, they were not able to impose and expand their presence outside their roles as wives and child bearers.

In the four novels, motherhood is dealt with in an extremely deconstructive way. It is clear that, although they do it differently, the four authors attempt to contrast the situations of women who have children and women who do not. Although motherhood is never portrayed negatively in the works, the authors show that it can be very restrictive. For Mobolanle Ebunoluwa Sotunsa, "...some African female writers have debunked the myth of motherhood as the ultimate fulfilling role for the African woman. They present the bitter experiences that often characterize motherhood" (Sotunsa 44). On the other hand, childlessness is no longer treated as a tragedy for women. The writers create female characters who do not perceive the idea of becoming a mother as the ultimate purpose of their existence.

The first author who clearly juxtaposes the situation of women who have children to the situation of women who do not is Tsitsi Dangarembga. The two women who represent motherhood in the novel are Maiguru, Babamukuru's wife, and Mainini, Tambu's mother. They are both traditional women, each in her own way, when it comes to performing the roles and duties required by society. Despite her education and her position as teacher, Maiguru is no different from her uneducated sister in law in the eyes of society concerning the African woman's status in the community. In fact, for South African novelist and essayist Lauretta Ngcobo, "The ideal wife is defined through her relationship with her husband and her children. More so if this commitment entails the sacrifice of her own interests" (Ngcobo 538). Thus, the two characters are esteemed because they are able to perform the precious tasks of wifedom and motherhood.

Besides, both women take pride in being mothers and have preference for their male children. They both assume the traditional patriarchal vision of their gender and they even attempt to transmit it to their daughters. Mainini clearly tells Tambu that women in their society are only valued for their capacity to give birth and take care of their families and that there is nothing they can do about it. Despite the fact that she almost dies giving birth to a male child that she had after she had lost her eldest son, she does not question the functioning of her community, and she would want her daughter to follow the same rules.

Maiguru also finds her daughter's rebellious attitude very disturbing. As a woman who has been socialized into becoming a submissive wife and mother, she seems unable to see that what Nyasha demands is simply the right to exist as an individual. Maiguru does not seem to understand or to mind the fact that as a woman, she has no agency of her own. She is simply a wife and a mother who would not be able to exist outside her home. For Ngcobo, "A close analysis of these characters and their motives reveals characters who opt for the path of martyrdom for lack of any alternatives" (Ngcobo 539). Maiguru and Mainini seem to accept their lives in spite of the difficulties that they must endure.

This traditional image of the African woman, as seen mainly in male-authored texts, is clearly challenged in *Nervous Conditions* through the character of Lucia. It is through Mainini's sister that Dangarembga shows how an unmarried and childless woman manages, to a certain extent, to free herself from the oppression of patriarchy. Lucia's childlessness is not presented as a tragic condition; this situation is clearly introduced by the writer as a privileged one. In fact, Lucia does not conform to what is

expected of women in her community and she does not seem to be plagued by her condition as a barren woman. Dangarembga shows that this woman who “does not fit,” manages to gain a certain amount of freedom thanks to the fact that she does not have children. For Mary Jane Androne:

Perhaps the most daring, if not the most powerful, woman in *Nervous Conditions* is the unmarried Lucia, the African woman with the least education who lives on the margins of society. When the men of the family meet to deliberate Lucia’s fate – the male family members designate her “vicious,” “unnatural,” and “uncontrollable,” because she acts out her sexuality as she pleases – Lucia interrupts their council and takes her fate into her own hands when she demands employment in the nearest town and the freedom to live on her own. (Androne 277)

In the case of Lucia, the fact that she does not conform to any of the rules allows her to get this position of a woman who is depreciated by the male family members, but who cannot be controlled by them because she is not a wife or a mother. The clear message of the author is that by being marginal and by ignoring the requirements of society, Lucia manages to escape the oppression of patriarchy.

Another childless character is Mary. The protagonist of *The Grass Is Singing* does not have children despite the fact that she is not barren. She is presented as a woman who simply does not show any interest in becoming a wife and mother. Her imperviousness to social rules gives Mary a feeling of freedom and independence at the beginning of the novel. She does not feel the pressure related to her gender of necessarily finding a husband and having children. Even after her marriage with Dick, Mary does not want to have children; first, because it is not the right time as she wants to make a home of Dick’s farm before welcoming a baby, and then because they cannot afford to have a child. Later on, she feels so alienated and hopeless that she

thinks a child might help her overcome her loneliness and the emptiness of her life, but she never really decides to get pregnant.

Mary's life as it is unable to bring her the prosperity that she expected when she married Dick. The path that she is pressured to take by patriarchal society proves fruitless; she cannot feel any happiness with her husband and she feels completely alienated from the realities of life on the farm. The fact that she does not have a child is, in a certain way, a representation of the sterility of the woman's life as a whole. Motherhood, as opposed to the way it is sometimes presented by male writers, does not seem to be seen as a refuge by Mary.

Another author who strongly challenges the glorification of motherhood is Malika Mokeddem. The Algerian author creates female characters who do not conform to the rules of society and who represent alternative role models for women. By challenging the restrictive norms and the oppressive rules of society these female characters manage to create a space for themselves in spite of all the difficulties that they go through. In this sense, Sonia Lee writes:

Dans le texte autobiographique *La transe des insoumis* Mokeddem raconte son désaccord avec sa mère qu'elle a cru haïr pendant longtemps. Révoltée contre cette mère qui ne vit que pour la maternité et la naissance des garçons qui la valorisent dans la famille et la communauté...

Cette rage caractérise aussi bien les héroïnes de Mokeddem que l'auteur elle-même. Refusant la maternité pour ne pas suivre l'exemple maternel, l'écrivaine engendre des filles fictives qui osent dire non à tout ce que la tradition attend d'elles et en particulier le mariage...

Ce refus de la tradition en ce qu'elle enfreint la liberté de la femme et se traduit souvent par la violence dirigée contre celles qui s'insurgent et refusent l'ordre établi s'inscrit dans toute l'œuvre de Mokeddem. (Lee 226-227)

This attitude towards motherhood appears in *L'interdite*. The character of Sultana also rejects traditional roles of wife and mother. After experiencing the traumatic death of her mother, who was murdered by her father, Sultana attempts to escape every aspect of traditional village life. She studies in the city of Oran, and then she leaves for France where she settles as a doctor. Although it is mentioned at a certain point in the novel that she and Yacine had been in a relationship, she never shows any interest for marriage or children.

Sultana associates this life of wife and mother with pain and oppression. She knows that society has used and still uses those two roles to confine and restrict women; therefore, she refuses to make a commitment that would prevent her from becoming the independent woman she so longs to be.

Mokeddem introduces Sultana as a woman who asks herself profound questions about identity. Her physical and mental displacement creates a sense of alienation that deeply affects the young woman's vision of herself, of her origins, and of her future. Yet, Sultana never longs to be a wife or a mother. When Dalila asks her what names she would give to her children, Sultana tells her: « Je n'en aurai pas. C'est ma seule certitude » (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 96). She does not believe that the balance she is looking for could come from conforming to the norms of a society she so deeply dislikes and views as unjust.

The view of Nawel El El Saadawi is quite similar. She creates in *Firdaus* the character of a woman who never finds a place in society despite all her attempts. El Saadawi challenges the image of the mother by showing that this role never grants the

woman any privileged position and never gives her any form of gratification. Firdaus's mother has many children and her husband still mistreats her. She lives in misery until the day she dies and is replaced by another woman. Her aunt is also beaten by her husband and has no individual value in society in spite of the fact that she is a mother. In *Woman at Point Zero*, motherhood is a condition that does not prevent women from suffering under patriarchal oppression. For Orabueze:

Ironically the ultimate goal for marriage in the novel is not motherhood but sexuality. Motherhood is a secondary factor men consider in marriage. Mahmoud is not worried that Firdaus is not pregnant and no mention is made of any child in his previous marriage. Firdaus' father breeds a lot of children and they die like fowls but he exchanges women like his underpants. (Orabueze 134)

By putting the function of motherhood in a very secondary position, El Saadawi writes from a different perspective. The idealization of motherhood is quite a restrictive vision of what a woman should be, so female characters who do not have children can be seen as taking a stand against this reductive function.

The role which is presented as a way out for Firdaus in *Women at Point Zero* is that of the prostitute. It seems to be suggested that women can beat the system from the inside by turning some rules to their advantage. Thus, the function of the prostitute is no longer presented as that of a weak woman who can be taken advantage of by men and the whole social system, but rather as a position, slightly superior to that of a wife, that if properly performed might allow women a certain amount personal and financial independence.

As a general rule, female writers denounce the sexual exploitation of women and their objectification by society as a whole and particularly by men. Yet, El

Saadawi seems to consider that women can challenge society through appropriating and controlling this practice. This is clearly seen in her novel. As Orabueze writes:

... El El Saadawi x-rays the life of a prostitute to show another metaphor of womanhood: still her sexuality. Having realized that wifedom is the worst status of a woman, having realized that hers is a society that does not have any space for a woman's growth, she decides to go into prostitution ... In the novel, therefore, prostitution becomes a metaphor for survival because it gives her all the good things she has never had in her life either as a daughter, or as a wife, or as a student ... Firdaus also notes the freedom she enjoys as a prostitute. She can afford to engage someone as a cook, and another as a cleaner. She has the freedom to arrange her affairs as she wants them; relax whenever she feels like; go to the cinema, or theatre; read newspapers, or befriend whoever she wants to. Besides, she has a choice to dictate which man to take to bed as a customer and fix a price for her body. Most importantly, it is in prostitution that she loses her fear of the street and feels liberated; it is in prostitution that she realizes the power of money – money gives choices, power and honor. (Orabueze 135)

El Saadawi clearly exposes the situation of women in patriarchal society and challenges the image that is attached to womanhood and motherhood; she suggests that women should free themselves by turning situations to their advantage. Prostitution becomes, for El Saadawi, an alternative role that allows women to resist the oppression of society and the exploitation of patriarchy. For some African female writers some female characters attempt to use prostitution as a stepping stone towards financial autonomy. For example, Buchi Emecheta suggests the same thing through the character of Adaku in her 1979 novel *The Joys of Motherhood*. This shows that women should react in whichever way they can in order to save themselves from the oppression of patriarchy. They are the only ones who can change their second class position in society.

1.3.2. Passive male characters

This section will be devoted to analyzing the idea that female writers challenge the image attached to women in patriarchal society by deconstructing the gender roles.

One of the best ways to do so seems to be through the juxtaposition of secondary male characters to central female protagonists. These authors create positive images of assertive and strong-willed women who go through difficult situations and who find different strategies to reach self-actualization. On the other hand, they present their male characters in quite a negative light. This deliberate approach allows these writers to invert the stereotypical, almost Manichean, dichotomy of male positivity and female negativity. They attempt to show that the superiority granted by patriarchal society to its male members mainly rests on unfair prejudices rather than real abilities or qualities. For Florence Stratton:

Such an inversion – female and male, good and evil, subject and object – does not resolve the problems of gender, but it is, nonetheless, a subversive manoeuvre. For it exposes the sexist bias of the male literary tradition and creates space for the female subject... inversion is a strategy that... women writers have employed in their attempt to combat patriarchal manicheism. (Stratton 62)

This deliberate stand that female writers take allows them to propose an alternative version of the construction of the gender roles thereby showing that women can be the productive element in society while men are merely inactive spectators.

In *Nervous Conditions*, Dangarembga uses male characters like Jeremiah and Takesure to show that men can be quite useless and passive. These two characters are very different from the image of the strong man who works hard to provide for his family. They are very far from being the protectors and providers that they are supposed to be.

In traditional African societies, men were celebrated for their physical strength, wealth and ability to have children and provide for them. In this sense, Jeremiah appears as a failure. His presence in the novel is a very passive and sometimes even

negative one. At the beginning of the story, he voices opinions that reinforce patriarchal control over women when he urges his daughter to forget school and learn how to become a good housewife. He also attempts to affirm his status as a man by wanting to take Lucia, his sister in law, as second wife. He thinks that by bringing this assertive woman under his control, he can gain some confidence and legitimacy. Yet, he is incapable of taking any positive action in the novel.

His only strength, as he acknowledges it himself, is to be the brother of Babamukuru. As previously mentioned, Babamukuru represents the highest authority of the family. His education and his willingness to help his relatives financially make of him the patriarch of the family; he seems to be everything Jeremiah could not be. The younger brother relies on Babamukuru to provide for him and for his family which allows him the leisure he needs to enjoy life without thinking of the well being of his wife and children. According to Kathryn Holland, "...the homestead's markedly decrepit state remains an apt indication of Jeremiah's failing standards. Figured in this way, Jeremiah demonstrates the shortcomings of the midlevel man within an African patriarchal system" (Holland 126). Jeremiah's presence in his family seems to be equivalent to that of a member who does not play any active role not even in taking care of his own children. He simply exists without purpose. As Holland notes, "The weakness and disadvantage of Jeremiah's position are readily apparent...Displaying a simpering pliability, he is ready to obey every command issued from his brother's mouth whether or not it contradicts what he himself has said" (Holland 136). Through this character, Dangarembga demonstrates that masculinity is not necessarily positive. In fact, patriarchy's idealization of the male members of society mainly rests on

prejudices and a desire to uphold and maintain the the existing distribution of gender roles.

The idea of active and positive masculinity as opposed to passive and negative femininity is also challenged by Doris Lessing in *The Grass Is Singing*. In fact, the author goes through the process of showing that positive and negative traits of human character are not related to sex/gender, but rather to the abilities, skills, and attitude of each individual. Through the character of Dick Turner, it can be seen that Lessing exposes how a man can be defeated by the circumstances of his life, but most of all by his own shortcomings.

When he is first introduced, as Mary meets him, he is a man who works the land and lives on a farm; he hates every aspect of life in town. He seems very uncomfortable and out of place in the suburbs. Lessing writes:

He could not bear it. He did not put these feelings into words; he had lost the habit of word spinning, living the life he did, out on the soil all day. But the feeling was the strongest he knew. He felt he could kill the bankers and the financiers and the magnates and the clerks – all the people who built prim little houses with hedged gardens full of English flower for preference. (Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing* 54)

At this point, the reader might come to think that Dick is a man who prefers farm life because he is a successful farmer; it could come to mind that he has chosen a life for himself that best suits his mental and physical abilities and that he enjoys a comfortable situation, but the reality is different. The reader soon learns that:

He had started farming five years before, and he was still not making it pay. He was indebted to the Land Bank, and heavily mortgaged, for he had no capital at all, when he started. He had given up drink, cigarettes, all but the necessities. He worked only as a man possessed by a vision can work, from six in the morning till seven at night, taking his meals in the lands, his whole being concentrated on the farm...

But it seemed to him sometimes that he was very far from getting what he wanted. He was pursued by bad luck. The farmers about him, he knew, called him 'Jonah'. If there was a drought he seemed to get the burn of it, and if it rained in swamps then his farm suffered most. If he decided to grow cotton for the first time cotton slumped that year, and if there was a swarm of locusts, then he took it for granted, with a kind of angry but determined fatalism, that they would make straight for his most promising patch of mealies. (Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing* 55-56)

Yet, the situation was not a matter of time or circumstances. In fact, with the progression of the novel, it becomes clear that the problem is not related to bad luck, but rather related to Dick's lack of knowledge and expertise in farm work. In spite of all his failures, he never questions his own faults; he does not seem to be aware that he should learn from his mistakes instead of considering his losses as inevitable. Dick shows a lack of maturity and a great amount of passivity when it comes to taking care of his farm. He does not attempt to bring any improvements to the way he runs his business despite the fact that he clearly sees that his way of doing things is completely inefficient. Dick does not seem to be willing to analyze his situation in order to find a solution; he simply blames bad luck. In this sense, it can be said that he is described as very shortsighted; he misses every opportunity to succeed because he is incapable of developing the necessary skills for the life he chose to live.

The passivity of Dick becomes even more evident when it is juxtaposed to the actions of his wife. In fact, Mary, who had always refused to accompany her husband to the fields, finds herself obliged to take over the farm work when he gets sick. During this very brief period of time, Mary is capable of doing and seeing things that Dick had been unable to do or see for years because she clearly has many capacities that he lacks. She manages, in a relatively short time, to identify and locate the problems that the farm suffers from and she writes a report for Dick in which she

makes several propositions and suggestions that could be implemented to improve their business.

As she spoke her voice became harsh, insistent, angry. Since he did not speak, but only listened uneasily, she got out his books and supported her contentions with figures. From time to time he nodded, watching her finger moving up and down the long columns, pausing as she emphasized a point, or did rapid calculations. As she went on he said to himself that he ought not to be surprised for he knew her capacity; had it not been for this reason that he had asked her for help?" (Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing* 155)

Through this situation, Lessing creates a shift of power in the couple; seemingly each one of them going back to his/her rightful place. Dick's character is clearly not made for the type of work he chose to do while Mary has all the skills required to run her husband's farm and even improve it.

Yet, according to the gender roles of patriarchal society, the couple should rely on the man and not the woman for the financial income. Here it becomes clear that the rules of society force human beings to go against their deep nature in order to conform to their demands, which creates a misbalance and a type of frustration that can hardly be overcome. Dick keenly feels the failures that he keeps experiencing on the farm while Mary, as previously argued, suffers from the emptiness and meaninglessness of an empty life.

The impact of gender roles is one that influences all aspects of Dick and Mary's marital life. It determines their vision of themselves and of each other. The passivity and helplessness of her husband are judged harshly by Mary who comes to despise him for his flaws. In a society that does not encourage people to work in a domain that best suits their abilities, but rather forces them to follow a predetermined path, it is very difficult to overcome one's weaknesses. Mary disapproves of her husband's

behavior because of the social construction that she internalized of what a man ought to be. Lessing writes:

Once she had exerted her will to influence him, she withdrew and left him alone. Several times he made an attempt to draw her into his work by asking advice, suggesting she should help him with something that was troubling him, but she refused these invitations as she had always done, for three reasons. The first was calculated: if she were always with him, always demonstrating her superior ability, his defensiveness would be provoked and he would refuse, in the end, to do anything she wanted. The other two were instinctive. She still disliked the farm and its problems and shrank from becoming, as he had, resigned to its little routine. And the third reason, though she was not aware of it, was the strongest. She needed to think of Dick, the man to whom she was irrevocably married, as a person on his own account, a success from his own efforts. When she saw him as weak and goal-less, and pitiful, she hated him, and the hate turned in on herself. She needs a man stronger than herself, and she was trying to create one out of Dick. (Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing* 156)

This idea clearly supports the fact that both husband and wife have a prejudiced view of what they should be and what their partner should be. The fact that Lessing shows this reversal of situation illustrates the pressure that is put on individuals by their society and also the prejudices that come with the Manichean view of the genders that associates masculinity to positive actions and agency and femininity to passivity and subjugation.

In the case of the Turners, this view is used by the author to challenge the prejudices of society and to show that more often than not, they work against the individuals, especially women, preventing them from achieving fulfillment and self actualization.

The passivity of male characters is an idea which can also be found in *L'interdite*. It is mainly through Salah, Yacine's friend, that Mokeddem, introduces this idea. Just like Sultana, he comes to attend Yacine's funeral; he stays with her in Yacine's house. It becomes clear through his conversations with Sultana that Salah

feels a deep frustration regarding his life and his society; he is able to clearly voice his malaise, but he does not seem to be capable or even willing to take any action in order to change his situation.

As opposed to Sultana, he does not attempt to challenge the authority or the principles of his society even though he identifies them as the main cause of his divorce and his unhappiness. At a certain point in the discussion, he even blames the female character for being rebellious and independent. He does not understand her desire for freedom and change. When she decides to take Yacine's job at the hospital, even if it is only temporary, he tries to dissuade her. He argues: « - Tu n'imagines pas comme la vie est rude dans ce bout du monde, même pour un homme. La mise au ban de tous ceux qui sortent du conformisme est rapide, radicale et définitive » (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 41). The attitude of Salah can be juxtaposed to that of Sultana; where she questions the conventions and tries to create a space of freedom and independence for herself, he simply continues to strictly follow and obey the rules to the detriment of his own well-being.

The passivity of the male character allows Mokeddem to show that in spite of the similar situations and ideas they experience, Sultana has more willingness to fight for herself and for other women than Salah who merely complies with the social norms he was brought up with. In her work *Écritures algériennes : la règle du genre*, Christiane Chaulet Achour writes that:

Une telle perspective laisse nécessairement les personnages masculin en seconde ligne mais ne les exclut pas et les promeut au rôle de faire-valoir de l'héroïne dans un paysage humain où les autres femmes s'effacent. Les hommes sont en retrait par rapport au « je » centrale ou au « Elle » mais nécessaires. (Chaulet Achour 107).

This contrast which works to the benefit of the female character allows the author to shift the power relations between Sultana and Salah and it serves to reinforce the idea that being a man does not necessarily make Salah braver or stronger than Sultana. Nor is he more prone to taking action to regain control of his own life than the female character is.

In *Woman at Point zero*, El El Saadawi does not simply point out the fact that male characters can have a negative presence because of their passivity; she shows a variety of male characters who all share the same attitude of oppressiveness and exploitation of women. She shows men who blindly take advantage of their position of privilege in patriarchal society. In fact, every man encountered by Firdaus in the novel is one who attempts to exploit her or other women for his own benefits. Her father and her uncle, as mentioned in the previous chapters, are the first men who show Firdaus the cruelty that men are capable of. Later on, she learns, at her own expense, that her society not only tolerates, but even supports this attitude from men; it is considered as one of their prerogatives.

One clear example is her encounter with Bayoumi after she leaves her house to escape the violence of her husband. At the beginning, he shows her kindness and concern; he takes her to live in his house where she cleans and cooks for him for months. Yet, the moment Firdaus tells him that she wants to go to work outside the house with her secondary school certificate, Bayoumi becomes violent and oppressive. The idea that he would lose the control that he has over her makes him lock Firdaus in the house as a prisoner. He even goes as far as sexually exploiting her by allowing his friends to come to his house and sleep with her.

In an attempt to show that women have been discriminated against in society because of prejudices related more to their biology and to the gender roles that society confined them to more than to their inability to act as independent agents, the four female authors dealt with in this work rely on creating female and male character who help them deconstruct the stereotypes.

In order to resist patriarchy's oppression and to fight for self-actualization, the female characters dealt with in this work resort to different strategies. Yet, whether through negotiation, escape, or open confrontation with society, these women all attempt to gain or regain control of their lives. As will be seen in the following chapter, some of them succeed while others die.

2. Freedom or death

As they reach the last stage of their quest for self-actualization, the female characters dealt with in this work are most of the time confronted with either escape or death. This section will be devoted to the analysis of both situations; one as women find self-fulfillment after being subjected to the oppression of society and succeeding to overcome it, and another as women are victims of their environment and can only find peace in death. The quest for self-actualization is a difficult journey that is undertaken by female characters who want to live as fulfilled individuals. It is a journey that takes them through different stages towards a state of agents who have the possibility to act and react without being oppressed by society. The final goal for these women is to find a voice to speak for themselves. It is also to create a space in which they could exist as

real citizens and to no longer be excluded or confined to the margins of their communities.

Yet, in the four novels dealt with here, the female characters never manage to reconcile with their societies. They are not able to reach the self-fulfillment that they aspire to as they are never able to completely overcome their sense of alienation. As it was proposed in the previous chapters, African women are born in patriarchal societies in which they have the disadvantage of being in a position of inferiority from the moment they are born. Society also strictly defines the roles that they are expected to play as they grow up, so they are unable to find harmony within their restrictive environment.

First, Malika Mokeddem's Sultana voices her exile in the first few sentences of the novel: « Je n'aurais cru pouvoir revenir dans cette région. Et pourtant, je ne suis jamais vraiment partie. J'ai seulement incorporé le désert et l'inconsolable dans mon corps déplacé » (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 11). This places the woman in a position of displacement; she is a woman in exile who has left her country behind while seeking refuge abroad. Sultana's experiences reinforce her sense of estrangement and alienation in her own hometown of Ain Nekhla, as previously discussed in chapter two. The result is that at the end of the novel Sultana decides to leave her country once and for all. This permanent and deliberate exile can be considered here as the final stage in her quest for wholeness as she was unable to overcome the sense of alienation that she feels in her country.

Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* starts with Tambudzai's declaration that she was not sorry when her brother died (Dangarembra, *Nervous Conditions* 1). Many critics see that this simple and ambivalent statement encompasses a whole range of gender-related issues dealt with in the novel. As surprising as it might sound at the beginning, the young girl sees her brother's death as an opportunity and not as a sad event. It becomes clear with the unfolding of the events in the story that her feelings are completely justified.³ In fact, Tambu views the death of Nhamo as the starting point of her 'escape.'

Tambudzai's journey – or quest for wholeness – is the shortest since, as the novel ends, she is still an adolescent and her future is still in the making. Yet, and thanks to her brother's death, she manages to move from her native village to the mission station to pursue her studies which for her already represents a major improvement of her condition. The end of the novel shows her final escape as she starts at Sacred Heart School for girls.

Doris Lessing uses a similar beginning in her work. In fact, *The Grass Is Singing* starts with the announcement of Mary's murder in the newspaper. In the two first pages the author deems the event expected by the people all over the country and more particularly the people in the 'district' in which it happens. (Lessing. *The Grass Is Singing* 9-10).

³Nfah-Abbenyi argues this in *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997, p. 61. As well as Anthony Appiah in his introduction to *Nervous Conditions* (1988). Oxford : Ayebia. 2004, p. vii.

The fact that Mary had been murdered by her native servant seems to be seen as an unsurprising event since the natives are considered by the whites as being capable of the worst atrocities. Yet, what seems even more unsettling is the attitude of the people closer to the Turners. They act as if the murder, that they call ‘a bad business,’ had been the logical result of some transgression or some behavior on their part. What becomes clearer with the reading of the story is that the Turners, more particularly Mary, were disapproved of because they failed to meet the standards set by their community.

It will be argued that in her attempt to satisfy society’s requirements, Mary undertook a journey that ended up by taking her in the opposite direction of self-fulfillment and which resulted in and culminated with her murder by her black servant Moses.

On the first pages of *Woman at Point Zero*, when the readers hear about Firdaus for the first time, they learn that she is in prison for murder and that she has been sentenced to death. Yet, what comes as a surprise are the adjectives used by Nawel El El Saadawi to describe her main character; she qualifies Firdaus as being a gentle woman and even as being innocent despite her being a murderer (El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* 3-5). The ambivalence of the situation of this woman spurs a deep curiosity within the female narrator of the story and at the same time within the reader as Firdaus appears to be a mystery waiting to be solved.

As Firdaus starts narrating her own story, her journey becomes clearer and the steps that led her to commit the crime she was convicted for seem to make of her more

a martyr than a criminal. She, herself, views her imminent execution as a form of liberation from the oppression that she had been subjected to all her life.

2.1. Women's self-actualization:

In African literature, the theme of self-actualization is present in many female-authored works and it is dealt with differently by authors. One example of self-fulfillment of a female character is that of Efuru as presented by Nigerian author Flora Nwapa in her eponymous novel first published in 1966. In this bildungsroman, Nwapa describes the evolution of her heroine who manages to free herself from patriarchal oppression by standing up for herself. She manages to challenge different social rules, but she keeps the respect of the community the rules of which she refuses to follow because they are far too restrictive for her. Another example is that of Adha in Buchi Emechta's *Second Class Citizen* (1974). The young woman manages to achieve self-actualization when she decides to leave her abusive husband and become a writer. She succeeds in spite of the social oppression that she faces at home in Nigeria and the racial discrimination that she is subjected to in England where she also experiences racial discrimination as she is seen as a 'second class citizen.'

Yet, in *L'interdite* and *Nervous Conditions*, the main female characters reach a different type of balance. Tambu and Sultana both succeed in finding their own independent paths away from the pressure of patriarchy through escape. They both manage to free themselves from oppression by taking distance from a society that does not understand or accept their needs and desires.

2.1.1. Sultana's exile:

As previously established, being born in a patriarchal society puts women in a position of inferiority which is supposedly inherent to their gender. They are seen as subordinate to men and are never viewed as potential subjects or agents in society. This is particularly true for the conservative community in which Sultana was born. Her hometown of Ain Nekhla is a small Algerian village in which the community has a very stronghold over its members. This situation leads Sultana to favor exile and escape over life in her own country twice in the novel.

Yet, there seems to be a clear distinction between the first 'escape' and the second one. It will be argued that Sultana's first attempt to flee and leave everything behind was the result of a desperate need to escape while her second departure, at the end of the novel, is the result of a self-introspection that gave birth to a strong sense of attachment to the country and particularly the women she leaves behind. At the end, the protagonist seems to have reached a form of self-actualization as she is able to face her fears and to deliberately make the choice to leave them behind.

2.1.1.1. "La fuite en avant":

Sultana's first exile or displacement seems to come as an answer to the immediate necessity to leave a painful existence behind and to look forward to the future. Her life outside her village, first in Oran and then in France, gives her the opportunity to study and become a doctor, but the years she spends away never really give her the opportunity to heal from the wounds of the past. The sense of alienation that she continues to experience during her exile proves that she was not able to completely

break free and leave the past behind her when she left her village. She describes this experience in her own words:

Je me revois adolescente quittant la contrée pour l'internat d'un lycée d'Oran. Je me rappelle le contexte pénible de ce départ. Ensuite, de fuites en ruptures, d'absences en exils, le temps se fracasse. Ce qu'il en reste ? Un chapelet de peurs, bagages inévitables de toute errance. Cependant, distance conjuguée au temps on apprend à dompter les pires angoisses. Elles nous apprivoisent. De sorte qu'on finit par cohabiter la même peau sans trop de tiraillements. Par instants, on parvient même à s'en délester. Pas n'importe où non. Au plus chaud de la culpabilité. Au plus secret du regret. Un coin privilégié de l'exil. (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 11-12)

Sultana's attempted escape does not help her overcome the painful past that she tried to leave behind; it was merely a way to survive that pain by trying to forget the traumatic experience she had been through as a little girl. Yet, the stigma of her mother's murder and the rejection of her community are deeply imbedded within her in spite of the time and distance that she puts between her and her hometown, so much so that the death of her friend, and former lover, Yacine triggers within her the need to come back home. Sultana had never really been able to solve the issues of her past and she felt alienated from the world she lived in. Her desire to come back seems to be motivated by the need to face the past in order to be able to live the present and consider the future. She voices her situation:

Pourquoi cette envie soudaine de reprendre contact ? Est-ce à cause de ma nausée du monde ? Une nausée ressortie des oublis par le désenchantement des ailleurs et des là-bas, dans le cru de la lucidité ? Toujours est-il que je me trouvais de nouveau défaite de tout. Mon détachement avait, de nouveau, gommé mes contours, piqué à ma bouche un sourire griffé, répudié mes yeux dans les lointains de la méditation. (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 12)

Sultana cannot find peace in her first exile because she needs first to resolve the issues of her past that she left in Ain Nekhla several years ago. She still feels the burden as a

weight on her chest because she had never been able to face the pain of the loss of her mother who had been murdered by her father.

What needs to be specified here is that by leaving her village and later on her country, Sultana also takes a stand against the injustices of her community. Her departure emanates not simply from the fear that she feels, but from the lucid certainty that as a young woman on her own she would not be able to face and overcome the oppression of patriarchy. Her exile, the first and the second, is not rooted in weakness, but rather represents a conscious and deliberate rejection of the mistreatment of women by the traditional Algerian patriarchal society. It is also, for the young woman, a necessary means by which she believes she will be able to obtain the education that could serve as a tool, if not a weapon, with which she could fight in order to obtain self-actualization.

As she comes back to Algeria, Sultana is aware of the risks she runs of opening old wounds and even of sustaining new ones when she says, after the taxi driver makes her pay too much for the ride from the airport to the village: « Ce voyage, s'il pouvait ne me couter qu'en argent » (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 19). Yet, she also feels the necessity to overcome her fears and her feeling of alienation by coming back and facing the forces that had driven her away.

Through this liberating backwards journey, Sultana finds herself confronted to her worst nightmares when she re-experiences vivid memories of her mother's death and of the beginning of her own exile. Although it is for her a salvaging experience that allows her to face the truth and put some pieces of herself back together, it also

clarifies in her mind the vision of a beneficial exile. She reaches the conclusion that a geographical displacement is not sufficient to live a fulfilled life. She says:

J'ai fait un infarctus de mon Algérie. Il y a si longtemps. Maintenant mon cœur frappe de nouveau son galop sans algie. Mais une séquelle de nécrose reste : sceau de l'abandon à la source du sang à jamais scellé. J'ai fait une hémiparésie de ma France. Peu à peu, mon hémicorps a retrouvé ses automatismes, récupéré ses sensations. Cependant, une zone de mon cerveau me demeure muette, comme déshabillée : une absence me guette aux confins de mes peurs, au seuil de mes solitudes.

Partir encore ? Quitter alors et la France et l'Algérie ? Transporter ailleurs la mémoire hypertrophiée de l'exil ? Essayer de trouver un ailleurs sans racines, sans racisme ni xénophobie, sans va-t-en guerre ? Cette contrée fantasmagorique n'existe sans doute que dans les espoirs des utopistes. Il n'est de refuge que précaire, dès que l'on est parti une première fois. Ailleurs ne peut être un remède. La diversité de la géographie ne peut rien contre la constante similitude des hommes. (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 82-83)

Thereby, her own self-actualization no longer lies in the fact that she has been able to leave Algeria for France, but in the fact that by coming back she was able to understand herself and the situation of her country and her community.

2.1.1.2. “Exil réconciliateur”:

After a few days in Algeria, where she is confronted once again to the stronghold of patriarchy and to (religious) fundamentalism, Sultana realizes that she will not be able to stay, but this time she wants to leave on her own terms. She wants to stay for a while in order to help at the hospital because she knows better than anyone that the women of Ain Nekhla desperately need to treat their physical as well as their mental and emotional problems. She tells Salah: « - Je veux rester à Ain Nekhla quelques temps. Cela me donne une illusion d'utilité qui m'est nécessaire, en ce moment. Après, je retournerai à Montpellier » (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 133). Sultana feels the need to

stay in Algeria because she wants to overcome the feeling of displacement created by her first exile. This time she wants to have a choice.

Yet, she is not naïve or idealistic; she is well aware of the situation of Algeria. She has seen what the fundamentalists of the village are ready to do to a woman who dares to openly challenge their authority. Thus, she knows that she cannot live safely in Ain Nekhla unless she conforms and follows the rules, which she cannot do. As Pamela A. Pears puts it: "... it is her true independence that renders impossible a definitive return to Algeria" (Pears 119). To find herself, once again, in the position of the outcast, rejected by society because she does not respect the norms in place, is too much to take for her to take. She expresses her feelings as follows:

Comme si la prise de conscience de l'impossibilité d'un véritable retour avait consumé mes autres envies, m'avait désincarnée. Mon corps ponctué s'est évaporé. Les autres, dispersés dans mes diverses étrangetés, ne me sont plus que des songes lointains, comme irréalisables. Insidieuse, cette sensation d'impossible retour, malgré le retour. L'incapacité de retrouver cet « espace perdu », vous expulse du présent et de vous-même. J'aimerais essayer de décortiquer ce sentiment de perte pour l'anéantir. Mais je le pressens si confus enterré que cela me décourage. Je me sens tout à coup si lasse. (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 133)

The impossibility of finding a place in one's own country and community is a realization that accentuates the feeling of alienation of Sultana. She wants to help as much as she can, but she is well aware of the fact that she will never be able to stay in Algeria definitively.

Another crucial aspect of Sultana's return is that it allows her to face her past. In the novel, Mokeddem presents this experience of her main character in the form of a sand storm. The violence of the scene that Sultana describes as she approaches the Ksar merely reflects the storm of feelings inside her as she vividly remembers the day

her father kills her mother and the death of her little sister a few days after that. Sultana's tumultuous memories are so violent that she imagines being caught in a sand storm that brings her images that are inside of her rather than outside (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 135-136).

When Salah, Vincent, and Allilou find her she is in shock, incapable of speaking or reacting to their presence. They try to warm her, feed her, and make her drink whiskey and then they listen as she whispers her story in the form of memories that come back during the trance that she had experienced moments before. After she finishes her painful story, Salah tells her that she should never have come back to Algeria. She answers:

- Si, je le devais. Depuis quelques années, il ne me reste de mes parents que des silhouettes, des fantômes sans visages. Je n'ai aucune photo ni de l'un, ni de l'autre. Encore un autre morceau de moi qui me renie et m'abandonne. Et puis des gens d'ici, je ne me rappelais plus que des ricanements, des insinuations et des insultes dans mon dos. Etre revenue exercer ici, me permet de refaire provision de leurs douleurs, de leurs plaintes et leurs gémissements, des abîmes de leurs tristesses, de leur regards-blessures ; de leur redonner une chair de réalité ; de les appréhender dans leur globalité, ni totalement bonne, ni tout à fait mauvaise, mais conservatrice et arriérée. Cela me sauve des jugements manichéens, m'exorcise des perversions de la rancune, même si je me rends compte que mes souvenirs pèsent encore et toujours plus que les fardeaux de leur mémoire. (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 154)

Through this very painful and difficult experience, Sultana seems to find some reconciliation both with her past and with the community from which she had been estranged for so long. She seems to have come to terms with her own judgment of her society and its shortcomings. She seems to have reached the conclusion that the dichotomy of negative and positive as applied to Algeria and France or to the here and there is too simplistic to really apply to her own situation or even to that of so many others who had left before her or who would leave after her.

Sultana no longer views her exile as the desire to leave and never look back; she has come to understand that she would not be able to be fully satisfied with her life if she did not come to terms with her past. She also wants to make peace with the present; escape no longer represents a solution for her and she can no longer find refuge in exile. This time, Sultana wants to leave while reconciled with her country, her community, and with herself. Mokeddem seems to allow her female character to grow from the mistakes of past experiences. The author makes it clear that there is no possibility for Sultana to find peace and fulfillment in Ain Nekhla, but she offers her an opportunity to make the decision to leave as a positive step for her own future and that of her community.

In her article “Conterviolence and the Ethics of Nomadism,” Trudy Agard-Mendousse argues that:

To the colonial oppositions of colonizer/colonized, human/anima, and masculine/feminine, Mokeddem adds a further binary opposition of nomad and citizen (*sédentaire*), where “nomad” is the positively valued term. These cultures are distinguished from each other principally in terms of radically opposed conceptions of time and space. The citizen lives closed in by the walls of his house within a town. The space of the town is viewed with suspicion by the nomad who avoids this urban enclosure for fear of being contaminated by its alleged immorality... A smooth or nomadic space, in contrast, is one in which the trajectory determines the points of passage. (Mendousse 186-187)

Although for Sultana, unlike for other characters of Mokeddem, the borders and boundaries are not of a physical nature, the feeling of restriction is still the same. Sultana feels the need to turn her exile into “nomadism” in order to overcome the feeling of being an outcast both in Algeria and in France. She no longer wants to feel the displacement in space that she experienced in the past and that seemed to alienate her even from herself. By enlarging the space of her life, she no longer feels her

departure as a forced escape or an exile; she rather feels that she can be part of a community despite the physical distance. For Allison Rice,

Sultana's departure from Algeria at the close of this novel is not a flight in the way her first trip to France was. When she left to build a career and establish herself, she did so all by herself, with no sense of community with others. In contrast, this return to Montpellier is a movement that is not the equivalent of the cutting of all ties but rather one that carries the hope of creating a lasting sense of community with the women of Algeria. (Rice 149)

This journey to Algeria allowed Sultana to start healing from the trauma of the past in the sense that it allowed her to change her perception both of herself and of others. She is no longer an exiled woman, but rather a nomad who has the capacity to move from one space to another without the feeling of alienation that very often comes with displacement.

Thus, it can be argued that Sultana's self-actualization lies in her finally acquiring the capacity to cope with the past and with the flaws of her society. The certainty of the fact that she cannot stay does not deprive her from the sense of belonging that she had developed while working at the hospital in Ain Nekhla. The community of women who accepted and even welcomed her helped Sultana overcome the rejection of patriarchal society that she had experienced in the past. This experience also showed her that not all the members of the community reject her as the forbidden woman (*l'itérdite*) of Mokeddem's title. Sultana decides that she would not let fundamentalists rob her of her country and of her community.

The novel closes with Sultana's imminent departure after the fundamentalists and the mayor set fire to Yacine's house to drive her away. Yet, she does not feel that she is being forced to go as Khaled tells her that the women of the village decide to

burn city hall in reprisal; Sultana does not feel the need to stay and fight alongside them either. All she can do is to follow her own chosen path of reconciling exile or 'nomadism' and at the very end of the novel she tells Khaled: « Dis aux femmes que même loin, je suis avec elles » (Mokeddem, *L'interdite* 181). She leaves, but she still wants to be part of the community of women that she has reluctantly left behind when she departs from Algeria.

2.1.2. Tambu's escape:

As it was the case for Sultana, Tsitsi Dangarembga's Tambu manages to achieve her self-actualization through escape. Her quest for wholeness takes her on a journey that helps her find her balance in the physical and emotional distance she has to put between herself and her hometown and family. The first step for her is to be allowed to pursue her education. Tambu had always craved learning and after the death of her brother, she is sent to 'replace' him on the mission station where she is taken in by her uncle to live with his family. This first small geographical escape allows Tambu to considerably improve her day to day life. Yet, the most important change in Tambu's life is the distance that she is able to take by observing the lives and personalities of other women around her. She becomes more and more aware of the prejudices and pressures that women are subjected to in her society. This distance will give her the possibility to finally question some things that she used to take for granted, like her uncle's authority, for example.

2.1.2.1. Tambu's Physical escape:

The very first step that eventually leads to Tambudzai's escape is the physical displacement that comes along with her education at the mission. The fact that she is sent to live with her uncle's family allows the girl to start her journey towards self-fulfillment as it already liberates her from several forms of pressure that she had experienced in her village. First, she no longer has to worry about being taken out of school because girls are expected to learn how to become good housewives and they are not really encouraged to pursue education. Besides, Tambu no longer has to worry about the poverty that her family suffers from. Finally, the girl is relieved of the physical chores that she had to perform in the village and although she is expected to help in her uncle's house, her education is considered as her main priority. In this regard, Sadia Zulfiqar writes:

Tambu in *Nervous Conditions* experiences traditional culture as a heavy burden and an intensely limited and stifling existence, where she cannot feel "most at ease." Tambu's meager existence enables her to accept unashamedly the death of her brother as her chance to leave the world of poverty and lack of basic amenities. (Zulfiqar 114)

It is in this state of mind that Tambu leaves her parents' house to start school at the mission. The girl views this opportunity as one that will allow her to greatly improve her situation and one which will grant her a better future than the one prescribed for her by her patriarchal society.

Tambu welcomes the possibility to escape her 'fate' and she feels ready to leave everything behind in order to pursue her studies. She does not feel guilty or apprehensive as she leaves her family behind. She is very eager to move forward with

her life and she feels quite hopeful and excited as her uncle comes to drive her to the mission. She describes her own feelings as follows:

How can I describe the sensation that swamped me when Babamukuru started his car, with me in the front seat beside him, on the day I left my home? It was relief, but more than that. It was more than excitement and anticipation. What I experienced that day was a short cut, a rerouting of everything I had ever defined as me into fast lanes that would speedily lead me to my destination. My horizons were saturated with me, my leaving, my going. There was no room for what I left behind. (Dangaremba, *Nervous Conditions* 59)

It can be argued here that in addition to her looking forward to the future, Tambu shows an important amount of naivety. It can clearly be seen that she has been idealizing her departure and that she not only considers herself lucky, she also believes that she can set an example for her two younger sisters. Yet, although it is true that “Tambu’s social status changes from a poor village girl to a student at her affluent uncle’s mission school and later at a prestigious multicultural convent” (Zulfiqar 116), her situation remains quite precarious because she is a girl living in a patriarchal society.

In fact, the young girl comes to understand that as she starts observing and analyzing the situation of her uncle’s wife. Tambu sees that in spite of her education, Maiguru is not a self-actualized or even an independent woman. She remains accountable to her husband and to the extended family; she is valued only so long as she does what is expected of her. Thus, her niece understands that obtaining one’s freedom as an individual is more difficult than she had thought and that it requires more than merely having access to education. Sadia Zulfiqar argues that:

Tambu suffers greatly under Shona patriarchal codes and customs, and poverty exacerbates an already precarious existence. Her colonial education enables her to question the violence perpetrated by men against the female members of her local community. However, since Tambu considers traditional lore a burden, the same

education is also responsible for creating a distance between her and her family which leaves her not only homeless, but hopeless. (Zulfiqar 118)

This statement, although pertinent, seems a little extreme as Tambu does not seem to get completely alienated from her traditional culture as it is the case with her cousin Nyasha. While it is true that Tambu wants to leave some aspects of her life in the village behind, she still believes in a certain sense of community and family commitment unlike her cousin whose violent rejection of both traditional and western attitudes respectively towards women and the colonized leads her to what is seen as a nervous condition.

Thus, it can be seen that this movement from the village to the mission relieves Tambu from part of the burdens that have to be carried by women in her patriarchal society, but it does not give her the necessary experience or understanding that would allow her self-realization as a woman.

It will be argued that Tambu's escape does not really succeed with her physical displacement and that the possibility to find wholeness through escape will require her to gain consciousness and self-awareness that are further steps she has to take and she expects to be able to do that at her uncle's house. She says:

At Babamukuru's I would have the leisure, be encouraged to consider questions that had to do with survival of the spirit, the creation of consciousness, rather than mere sustenance of the body. This new me would not be enervated by smoky kitchens that left eyes smarting and chests permanently bronchitic. This new me would not be frustrated by wood fires that either flamed so furiously that the *sadza* burned, or so indifferently that it became *mbodza*. (Dangarembra, *Nervous Conditions* 59)

Yet, Tambu does not seem to anticipate that the journey ahead is long and difficult; she will soon learn that her escape would require more hard work than she had

expected and she would have to question her own understanding of her community and society.

One crucial element in Tambu's individual development is her contact with Nyasha. In fact, her cousin whose western education in England had led her to question every aspect of life around her, has a deep influence on Tambu who, at the beginning of the novel, tended to have a rather naïve and simplistic understanding of situations.

2.1.2.2. Tambu's consciousness:

Through her contact with her cousin, Tambu learns to question things that she used to take for granted. Although she sees some aspects of her traditional culture as burdensome and even sometimes oppressive, she is still able to appreciate many other aspects of her community. Besides, she deeply idealizes western education and she sees it as the best way to reach her goals in life. But, through her discussions with Nyasha, she develops the ability to see things from a different perspective. It is for her a very slow process to move away from what she had been brought up to believe and to have her own independent view of things, and she acknowledges the influence that her cousin had on her. When they have different views on Babamukuru finding a job for Lucia, Tambu says:

... it is difficult for me to make the long leaps that Nyasha's mind made between Babamukuru and Lucia and events past, present and future. All the same, I tried hard to understand, because Nyasha was very persuasive and also because I liked to think. I liked to exercise my mind. The things Nyasha said always gave me a lot to think about. This is how I began, very tentatively, to consider the consequences of our past, but I could not go as far as Nyasha. I simply was not ready to accept that Babamukuru was a historical artefact; or that advantage and disadvantage were predetermined, so that Lucia could not really hope to achieve much as a

result of Babamukuru's generosity; and that the benefit would only really be a long-term one if people like Babamukuru kept fulfilling their social obligation; and people like Lucia would pull themselves together. (Dangaremba, *Nervous Conditions* 162)

Despite the fact that she is unable to doubt her uncle's magnanimity in spite of his daughter's skepticism, Tambu makes the effort of considering the issue from her cousin's perspective. This is one example of the second, and most important, escape that Tambu begins to achieve when she starts to see things from her own perspective. She had been able to physically escape the burdens of her life in the village by coming to the mission, but she, for a long time, remained a prisoner of the influence of patriarchy, which is so well represented by the character of Babamukuru. The fact that Tambu starts to doubt her uncle's perfection will lead to more and more questionings and understandings of her own situation and that of women within the traditional society that she lives in.

The following issue that forces Tambu to reflect on Babamukuru's decisions is when he unilaterally announces that her parents had been living in sin and that they need a religious wedding. This occasion gives the young girl a cause to question both her uncle's patronizing attitude and the western wedding that puts into question her parent's traditional marriage and therefore her own legitimate existence. She is deeply affected by the idea of her parents getting married at a church while wearing western clothes. She says:

Sweet. Sweet enough to bring a smile and a chuckle. That was what Nyasha thought about my parents' wedding and it hurt. It hurt even though I knew she was being kind to call it sweet when the truth was much worse than that, when in fact the whole performance was ridiculous. The whole business reduced my parents to the level of the stars of a comic show, the entertainers. I did not want to see them brought down like that and I certainly did not want to be part of it. So I could not approve of the wedding... With the preparations in full swing and

people talking about nothing else but the wedding, there was no way of pretending that it was not going to happen. I had to think about it, about the fact that I did not want to go to that wedding. A wedding that made a mockery of the people I belonged to and placed doubt on my legitimate existence in this world. I know I had to come to a decision, take some sort of action, but I was not like Nyahsa: I couldn't simply go up to Babamukuru and tell him what I thought. (Dangaremba, *Nervous Conditions* 165)

This attitude on the part of Tambu clearly shows that she has acquired the ability to think for herself. She has developed enough consciousness to stop idealizing her uncle and his decisions. She is now able to analyze a situation from different perspectives and draw her own conclusions. By observing the evolution of Tambu, it becomes clear that she is starting to escape the strong influence of that patriarchy has on her. She had been able to partly free herself by seeking education and, at this point in the novel, she was starting to liberate herself by escaping the psychological barriers that were represented by the impact of her uncle's patriarchal authority.

Despite the fact that she is not yet capable of voicing her objections to her parent's wedding or refusing to take part in the ceremony, Tambu takes a rebellious action which illustrates her newly acquired ability to escape authority. Indeed, when Babamukuru decides that she is to go back home before the wedding to help with the preparations, Tambu runs away and comes back home very late to avoid the planned journey. Then, on the day of the wedding, Tambu finally takes a direct action when she simply tells her uncle that she does not want to go to her parents' wedding. What is even more important is that she stands her ground firmly and refuses to be persuaded to change her mind. Tambu says:

He threatened all sorts of things, to stop buying me clothes, to stop my school fees, to send me home, but it did not matter anymore. Babamukuru did not know how I had suffered over the question of that wedding. He did not know how my mind had raced and spun and ended up splitting into two disconnected entities that

had long, frightening arguments with each other, very vocally, there in my head, about what ought to be done, the one half mechanically insisting on going, the other half equally mechanically refusing to consider it. I know I was not evil to have endured all that terror in order to be sure of my decision, so when Nyasha asked whether I would go, I was able to tell her calmly, 'No.' (Dangaremba, *Nervous Conditions* 165)

In this moment that can almost be considered as an epiphany, Tambudzai manages to confront the pressures that had weighed her conscience. As she describes her inner battle, she is able to clearly make the distinction between the two opposite forces which create the conflict: her own free will and the demands of society.

The evolution of Tambu has given her enough discernment for the girl to be able to analyze and evaluate her situation in a rather enlightened way. For Katrin Berndt:

Tambudzai has become aware of the forces that affect her. She has identified the identity layers available to her. It seems she enjoys the ability to decide which components she develops into subject positions. She struggles to refuse to remain a colonized object, hence she claims the right to construct her own personality out of different subject positions. (86)

Tambu's real escape, the one that can lead to self-actualization, is the emotional and psychological distance that she is finally able to take toward the end of the novel. She manages to find a certain balance between what her culture and community demand and what she wants to achieve as an individual. She reaches a level of individual identity that she could never have reached within her community. In fact, Tambu would not have been capable of acquiring enough maturity and freedom if she had stayed at home as she would have had to keep following the strict rules that restrict individual freedom, especially for women.

Tambu was able to move away from both traditional and western expectations and managed to create her own objectives towards which she moves as a subject. She explains it as follows:

Quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed, bringing me to this time when I can set down this story. It was a long and painful process for me, that process of expansion. It was a process whose events stretched over many years and would fill another volume, but the story I have told here, is my own story, the story of four women whom I loved, and our men, this story is how it all began. (Dangarembra, *Nervous Conditions* 208)

With this final sentence, it can be said that, just like Sultana's, Tambu's escape has opened new perspectives for her future and that it was going to help her move forward as an independent woman.

2.2. Liberating deaths:

Unlike Mokeddem and Dangarembga, Lessing and El Saadawi end their main characters' journeys with death. The life stories of both Mary and Firdaus culminate with the murder of the first and the execution of the second. Yet, both their deaths can be seen as a form of liberation because they are the result of deliberate actions that the two characters take in order to free themselves from the oppression of their societies.

It will be argued that Mary and Firdaus both accept their deaths because by doing so they challenge their societies' authority. Mary, who dreams of her death before it happens, accepts it as a welcome consequence of transgressing her community's rules, which is her ultimate act of defiance while, Firdaus sees her death as a purification which makes her a martyr and the ones who condemn her are the criminals.

2.2.1. Mary's murder:

On the surface, it might be difficult to see the death of Mary Turner in *The Grass Is Singing* as a form of wholeness. Yet, this death can definitely be seen as a liberating one, especially when the life of Mary is closely considered. The journey that Doris Lessing's character takes is one that leads her from a difficult childhood to an even more difficult adult life which ultimately leads to her death.

Yet, Mary experiences a time in her life during which she lives as an independent and self-reliant woman. She manages to get education then gets a job and a satisfying life. But everything changes when she feels compelled to get married because her friends and her community disapprove of her because of the fact that she is an unmarried woman. Therefore, it can be argued that Mary takes a reversed journey to that of other female characters who strive to achieve personal freedom as she moves from relative independence toward (self-imposed) oppression. Then, her dissatisfaction with life on her husband's farm will lead Mary to a dangerous transgression of the racial rules of her community and which eventually leads to her death.

2.2.1.1. The reversed journey:

In order to better understand what the idea of the Mary's reversed journey means, it could be interesting to look at Simone De Beauvoir's opinion on the importance of work in the process of liberation of women. For her:

C'est par le travail que la femme a en grande partie franchi la distance qui la sépare du mâle ; c'est le travail qui peut seul lui garantir la liberté concrète. Dès qu'elle cesse d'être une parasite, le système fondé sur sa dépendance s'écroule ;

entre elle et l'univers il n'est plus besoin d'un médiateur masculin. La malédiction qui pèse sur la femme vassale, c'est qu'il ne lui est permis de rien faire : alors, elle s'entête dans l'impossible poursuite de l'être à travers le narcissisme, l'amour, la religion ; productrice active elle reconquiert sa transcendance ; dans ses projets elle s'affirme concrètement comme sujet ; par son rapport avec le but qu'elle poursuit, avec l'argent et les droits qu'elle s'approprie, elle éprouve sa responsabilité. (*Le Deuxième Sexe II : L'expérience Vécue* 597)

With this statement De Beauvoir explains what women can achieve by acquiring the status of a working individual. The first obvious benefit of financial independence and stability is but one component of women's self-fulfillment through work. In addition to that, she believes that having a job helps the woman find her place in the world as an individual, an agent, a subject. The woman who is not dependent on a man to support her finds her own agency as a member of society. Her existence is not defined in relation to another person, a male, in her life be he a father, husband or even son. The life of the working woman is a meaningful one because it gives her purpose along with economic independence.

Yet, in the case of Mary the opposite happens. Mary moves from the position of a working woman to that of a dependent wife. Thus, instead of improving, her situation deteriorates. As opposed to the journeys undertaken by Sultana and Tambu, her quest for wholeness is one that takes her backward instead of taking her forward. The main difference is that Mary's motivation is not internal or personal, but rather one that comes from external circumstances. In fact, she does not feel the need or even the desire to get married. She simply complies with her friend's demand. Unlike other female characters, the changes that she makes in her life are not directed toward her own satisfaction but to pleasing a community that is displeased by her behavior as an independent, working and unmarried woman.

It can be argued here that Mary deprives herself from the opportunity to reach self-actualization through freedom of thought and behavior. She chooses to conform to what she hears is her duty and by so doing compromises her chance at achieving happiness. Mary also ignores her own desires when she leaves her job to marry Dick because she had been living a satisfactory life that made her feel quite content before her fiends criticized it. By going against her own needs she traps herself in a life that does not satisfy her.

In addition to leaving her work, another thing that makes Mary deeply unhappy is leaving the city for Dick's farm. As a young woman living in the city, Mary had enjoyed the different activities available to her; she was able to exercise, go out with friends, and attend parties. As Lessing writes:

Mary was such a good pal! Just as she seemed to have a hundred women friends, but no particular friend, she had (it seemed) a hundred men, who had taken her out, or were taking her out, or who had married and now asked her to their homes. She was friend to half the town. And in the evening she always went to sundowner parties that prolonged themselves till midnight, or danced, or went to the pictures. Sometimes she went to the pictures five nights a week. She was never in bed before twelve or later. And so it had gone on, day after day, week after week, year after year. (Lessing, *The Grass Is Singing* 44)

By leaving this life behind, Mary also removed herself from the social life that she was used to. On the farm Mary was going to become almost completely isolated for the first time in her life. She had to adapt to a completely new rhythm of life on the farm; one that she was unfamiliar with and which did not suit her at all.

It can be noticed after a few weeks that Mary is mostly affected by her inaction. She is deeply transformed by this change that leads her from working every day and going out every night to having almost nothing to do. By depriving herself of any

purpose in life, Mary regresses to the situation of entrapment that women attempt to escape through education and work. As she is unable to adapt to her new situation, she starts losing ground and she soon becomes unable to connect with her environment, even with her husband. As previously mentioned, this leads to her alienation and mental disintegration. Through the experience of her main female character, Doris Lessing shows the impact of social pressure and patriarchal demands on the lives of women.

2.2.1.2. The dangerous transgression:

As a woman who was born and who had been raised in South Africa, Mary is aware of the strict rules of her society concerning race. She is shown to have internalized those said rules through her first interaction with her servants in the house and even with Dick's native workers on the farm. Yet, she is going to transgress the rules that she knows so well in her interaction with her native servant Moses. For Ruth Whittaker: "The impact of this novel derives largely from the characterization on Mary Turner. Her relationship with Moses is shown to be not out of character, but in fact a culmination of repressed feelings and incidents which are built up gradually throughout the text" (Whittaker 23-24)

Mary's life on the farm is so devoid of purpose or meaning that she hardly knows what to do with herself. All her attempts to occupy herself with housework or reading or even by attempting to have a child fail to give her any sense of hope for the future. At the very height of her depression, she is able to clearly analyze her situation. "For a short period Mary sees the farm and her marriage with absolute clear

sightedness. She sees Dick as a good man, but doomed to failure, and the vision is too painful to be borne without hope or escapism” (Whittaker 25).

When she tries to leave her husband and the farm to return to her job in the city, she understands that she will not be able to find the things that she had left behind when she got married. This leaves Mary even more hopeless than she had been because it deprives her even of the idea that she would be able to escape if she tried to do so.

Mary’s isolation and the deep alienation she experienced leave her in a very vulnerable state. She is, at the same time, desperate for human contact but unable to connect with her husband or even her neighbors. It is in this difficult emotional state that Mary finds herself when she starts to have forbidden feelings for Moses. These sentiments are so ambivalent and transgressive in their nature that they are difficult to understand or explain.

When she first meets Moses in the fields at the time she was helping run the farm during her husband’s sickness, Mary feels fear and hatred towards him, as she feels towards all the natives. She even strikes him with a whip in the cheek for being too slow at work. Later on, as Moses starts to work in the house, Mary cannot help but be physically attracted to him against her better judgment. But Mary does not simply feel a sexual attraction towards her servant, she seems to simply have a human connection with him. Yet, the worst aspect of the white woman’s transgression seems to be that she relinquished the absolute power of the whites over the natives by letting Moses take ascendance over her. This shift of power is the ultimate taboo in her

society, but Mary no longer seems to pay attention to that. At this stage, Mary seems to be ready to act as she wants rather than do what society requires her to. Yet, if this act of rebellion is not to be considered as a form of conscious stand that the woman takes against society, it still results in terrible consequences ultimately leading to Mary's death. For Ruth Whittaker: "This is not to say that Mary is consciously taking an ideological stand against apartheid: Mrs. Lessing makes it clear that her need for Moses arises from a personal neurosis which has isolated her from ordinary marital and social contact" (Whittaker 27).

Yet, this act still represents a dangerous precedent that could jeopardize the life of the community as it challenges the racial rules that are at the core of the South African colonial system. This can be clearly seen in the handling of Mary's murder. As Whittaker explain:

Tony [hired by Charlie Slatter to take over the Turner's farm] is aware that the motives for the murder are complicated by Mary's emotional involvement with her black servant... Mary's murder has to be seen as unprovoked, since any culpability on her part muddles the equation of black with guilt and white with innocence. Charlie Slatter witnesses Mary's relationship with Moses, and is appalled at her coy but terrified acceptance of the servant's power. That Mary was sexually attracted to Moses is almost unthinkable, and certainly unspeakable. (Whittaker 33)

It can be argued that Mary's death is liberating for the female character because it comes to conclude a life that could not have been more painful for her. After escaping a difficult childhood, Mary succeeds in finding balance when she establishes herself as an independent working woman. Yet, since this role does not strictly meet the requirements of society, she is (emotionally) coerced into getting married. Her very unhappy marriage simply leaves her with a bitter feeling of failure. Although, her connection with Moses goes against everything Mary knows and understands, she

cannot stop herself. Not so much because her feelings are too strong, but because she wants to explore something that is strictly forbidden by her society. She simply wants to regain control of her life even if she knows that she cannot go against the norms without having to pay a high price.

This idea is reinforced by the fact that Mary deliberately chooses death over life on the farm. Lessing makes it clear to the reader that her main character knows what to expect on the last day of her life and she accepts, almost welcomes it. Whittaker writes:

In the final chapter we are shown Mary's last day from her viewpoint. Her perspective is disturbed, but she is exhilarated by the beauty of the morning, and she is also clairvoyantly aware that she will be murdered at the end of the day. She walks off the paths into the bush for the first time since she has lived on the farm, and experiences its terrifying beauty and vitality. (Whittaker 27)

It is in this sense that Mary's death can be seen as a deliberate and liberating action resulting from Mary's own act of rebellion. Although she had been unable to experience wholeness during her life, the woman finds a certain form of completion in her death.

2.2.2. Firdaus' execution:

Similarly to that of Mary, Firdaus' life ends with a liberating death. Her acceptance of her own imminent execution is quite surprising at the beginning of the novel, but Firdaus proudly and unwaveringly goes towards her death as a punishment for killing a man who attempted to subdue and abuse her, and by so doing shows that she does not have any regrets. By killing Marzouk, she symbolically puts an end to a

life of pain and misery at the hands of different men who had oppressed her and taken advantage of her.

At the beginning of the story, the narrator is surprised when the prison ward tells her that Firdaus refused to send an appeal to the president in order for him to give her pardon and cancel her execution (El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* 6). Yet, when she hears the full life story of Firdaus, she comes to understand that the woman views her execution as a liberating death. She was being punished for the stand that she took against female oppression. In fact, by refusing to submit to the will of Marzouk who wanted to suppress and subjugate her, Firdaus was finally able to find wholeness in the act of taking control of her life by killing the oppressor. In her own words she tells the narrator how she views her execution:

Tomorrow morning I shall no longer be here. Nor will I be in any place known to man. This journey to a place unknown to everybody on this earth fills me with pride. All my life I have been searching for something that would fill me with pride, make me feel superior to everyone else, including kings, princes and rulers. (El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* 13).

It seems that Firdaus has finally come to terms with life. The act of killing Marzouk has given her the control that she was never able to enjoy during her life. Her death puts her out of reach of those who want to bring her back under their control. Now that she has seen and experienced so many painful situations, she is able to find peace in a death that results from the most significant moment in her life; the moment she decided to never let anyone bring her down again.

2.2.2.1. The innocent victim:

The very first oppressor that Firdaus describes in the novel is her father. His violence against her and against her mother is the earliest abuse that the little girl Firdaus is exposed to. He is the first man who is supposed to make her feel safe and protected and who, instead of taking care of her, oppresses and abuses her. The family home is a space where she experiences fear and insecurity.

The second man to teach Firdaus a similar lesson is her uncle who sells her into a profitable marriage out of greed. He and his wife decide to give Firdaus to an elderly relative because they no longer want to keep her with them and because they hope to obtain financial benefits from the union.

The third man to abuse her physically and verbally is her husband. Firdaus is so repelled by him that she can hardly stand his presence. He beats her, sexually abuses her, and even deprives her of food and shames her for her poverty. When she tries to find shelter at her uncles' house, she is sent back because according to him and her aunt, it is a husband's privilege to beat his wife.

With each terrible experience, Firdaus learns that she cannot rely on any man for her protection or even for her comfort in life. She makes several attempts to escape, but all of them fail. She almost succeeds when she meets Bayoumi who takes her in after she leaves her husband's house. He treats her decently until she tells him that she wants to work. Then, feeling that he might not be able to control her any longer, he, just like all the men in her life had done before him, becomes oppressive

and abusive. Once again, Firdaus was left with no choice but to attempt escape. She narrates:

I ran out of Bayoumi's house into the street. For the street had become the only safe place in which I could seek refuge, and into which I could escape with my whole being. As I ran, I looked back over my shoulder now and again to make sure that Bayoumi was not following me. And every time I found that his face was not visible anywhere, I leapt forwards as fast as I could run. (El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* 68).

The terrible experiences taught Firdaus that, in her society, the space of the home was not the place where she could feel safe, but was rather the source of physical and emotional suffering. She had also come to the realization that no man would provide her with the protection that she needed to keep her from the danger posed by other men. She was not able to see that in a patriarchal society most men worked as one to prevent women from escaping their control. They were all ready to exploit women to their own advantage and no one was ready to treat them as independent human beings with their own needs and desires. It is in this state of mind that Firdaus meets a woman who would help her change her life, Sharifa Salah el Dine. Firdaus narrates:

I became a young novice at Sharifa's hands. She opened my eyes to life, to events in my past, in my childhood, which had remained hidden in my mind. She probed with a search light revealing obscure areas of myself, unseen features of my face and body, making me become aware of them, understand them, see them for the first time. (El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* 72).

What Sharifa gives Firdaus is a new perspective from which to look at her life and at her previous experiences. Thanks to the maturity of the older woman, Firdaus is able to take some distance and have a new outlook on life. Sharifa helps her get confidence and control, but more importantly she helps her develop awareness and consciousness about her situation as a woman in a patriarchal society. She learns that when a woman is constantly abused, it means that to a certain extent she is letting herself be a victim.

She soon comes to understand that she can have value and control if she knows how to stand as an independent agent of her own life.

Yet, for some time even Sharifa tries to exploit Firdaus, as if to give her one more lesson that no one was going to help her if she did not stand up for herself. One day, Firdaus finally runs away and is approached by a man who gives her a good amount of money to sleep with him and as she gets her own money for the first time she understands that financial independence is what can help her break free from any form of oppression. With the ten pounds that she received, she was able to buy herself food and feel the safety and the importance of having one's economic autonomy. She explains her feelings:

From that day onwards I ceased to bend my head or to look away. I walked through the streets with my head held high and my eyes looking straight ahead. I looked people in the eyes, and if I saw someone count his money, I fixed it with an unwinking gaze. I continued to walk the streets. The sun was on my back. It flowed through me with its rays. The warmth of good food ran through my body with the blood in my veins. The rest of the ten pound note nestled safely in my pocket. My footsteps on the dark tarmac road struck the ground with force, with a new elation, like the elation of a child that has just pulled a toy to pieces and discovered the secret of how it works. (El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* 92)

It can be noticed here that Firdaus finally understands how the world around her works because of all the terrible ordeals that she goes through in her life. She seems to have opened her eyes on the realities of her society.

2.2.2.2. The experienced fighter:

As she has become aware of the functioning of her society, Firdaus is going to somehow come to terms with it by becoming an independent prostitute. By assuming this role, she is able to afford an apartment and to have a relatively comfortable life until she is told by a client, whom she also considered as a friend, that she is 'not

respectable' (El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* 95). As she is deeply affected by his words, she decides to turn her life around once again in order to prove to herself and to others that she could be a respectable woman. She applies for a job using her secondary school certificate. After securing a position and working in a company for some time, Firdaus comes to understand that women are looked down upon in her society simply because they are women and not because of their profession. She states: "After I had spent three years in the company, I realized that as a prostitute I had been looked upon with more respect, and been valued more highly than all the female employees, myself included" (El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* 102).

Yet, Firdaus seems to still hold some innocence and still has hope when she falls in love with Ibrahim, another man who takes advantage of her and who shatters her hopes and feelings reminding her that she should not rely on any man to reach wholeness. For Diana Royer:

Separation is the only form of freedom Firdaus has. All relationships have subjected her to the will and domination of others. She gains self-control through detachment. Having attained freedom by renouncing the search for love, Firdaus decides to use men for their money just as they have used her body for their physical pleasure (Royer 111).

Thus, it can be said that Firdaus has taken one more step towards freeing herself from society's oppressive demands; she is now aware that she has to fend for herself in all aspects of life. More importantly, she has reached the conclusion that social hypocrisy was mainly used to shame women and keep them down. After experiencing

different forms of pain and humiliation at the hands of different men, Firdaus is now ready to unapologetically move forward with her life. She says:

The time had come for me to shed the last grain of virtue, the last drop of sanctity in my blood. Now I was aware of the reality, of the truth. Now I knew what I wanted. Now there was no room for illusions. A successful prostitute was better than a misled saint. All women are victims of deception. Men impose deception on women and punish them for being deceived, force them down to the lowest level and punish them for falling so low, bind them in marriage and then chastise them with menial service for life, or insults, or blows.

Now I realize that the least deluded of all women was the prostitute. That marriage was the system built on the most cruel suffering for women. (El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* 118).

Firdaus has now completely opened her eyes on the realities of her society and she is no longer willing to be fooled by its hypocritical treatment of women. She finally takes the decision of breaking away from the life that had been imposed on her and to not be a victim any longer. For Irene Salami-Agunloye:

Firdaus' refusal to accept the place society has carved out for her as a woman; being curious, adventurous, intelligent, daring, bold, leads to her various trials and challenges in the novel. Thematically and stylistically, the tone of El Saadawi's story of Firdaus, communicated to the readers the sense that women are now gradually breaking through the patriarchal barriers. (Salami-Agunloye 195)

Yet, this attitude was not going to grant self-actualization for a long time. What Nawel El El Saadawi seems to emphasize through the story of this woman is that patriarchy is not ready to let a woman escape its grasp, especially not when her story could serve as an example for other women to follow. Thus, Firdaus does not obtain wholeness at the end of the novel in the form of a fulfilling life but rather through a liberating death. In fact, the strongest stand that El Saadawi's main female character takes against patriarchy is killing a man which leads her to be convicted and sentenced to death for murder.

Firdaus kills Marzouk because he was a pimp who exploited her and who refused to let her go when she wanted to leave. He once again brings her to the state of the exploited victim that she thought she had left behind by becoming a prostitute. When she tells him that she does not want to be a slave and that she wants to be a master, he argues that a woman on her own cannot be a master. And when she insists on leaving he refuses to let her go. She describes the scene:

I continued to look straight at him without blinking. I knew I hated him as only a woman can hate a man, as only a slave can hate his master. I saw from the expression in his eyes that he feared me as only a master can fear his slave, as only a man can fear a woman. (El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero* 130)

The fear that she sees in him gives her enough courage to try to escape, but when he tries to keep her by force and wants to use his knife, she is quicker to take it and she plants it in his neck and then in different parts of his body. After she kills him, Firdaus goes out of the apartment feeling light as if she had been liberated of every weight she might have been carrying. For Diana Royer:

She is light because her lifelong fear of men is gone as a result of her triumph over this man who tried to control her, but this also may be an illusion to the Ancient Egyptian concept of Ma'at, right order of justice, pictured in hieroglyphs as how at death, one's heart is weighed against the weight of a feather. Firdaus has no guilt over her action; she has acted justly. (Royer 112)

Through this act Firdaus has freed herself from injustice; she has acted in order to save herself from oppression and she shows no regret or remorse because her act is one of revolt against the aggressor. She does not even attempt to hide her crime or to escape the consequences of what she had done; she owns her act and acknowledges it. For Eustace Palmer:

It is also an affirmation of her selfhood. When the police come for her, she has no fear, feels no regrets, and offers no resistance. She even feels justified because, in her view, she has only killed a criminal, a criminal that a hypocritical and unjust

society would not kill. Firdaus knows they are going to execute her, not because she had killed a man (her act was, in fact, one of self-defense) but because she had exposed the truth and the ugly reality of their society and her continuing existence would be a threat to the corrupt security that all those men had constructed for themselves. (Palmer 173)

Firdaus' acceptance of her fate and the fact that she does not try to plead for her life is proof enough that she views her death at the hands of a system that she despises as a form of resistance and self-affirmation. Firdaus has finally reached the end of her quest for wholeness and for Tanure Ojaide, "She welcomes the punishment because it means that she will at last be free" (Ojaide 239).

By the end of her story, the actions of Firdaus come to indicate that the strong and assertive woman has decided to retake control over her life and decide her death on her own terms. In fact, despite the fact that she had always been determined and strong-willed, the female character had never been able to emancipate herself from the oppression and exploitation of men until she killed Merzouk. In her article "Feminist Awareness and Narrative Change: Suicide and Murder as Transitional stages toward Autonomy in Women's Protest Writings," Rachel Giora proposes the idea that killing the oppressor is one form of deliverance for women that comes in the form of a protest against tyranny. She writes:

Suicide and killing mark two stages of emancipation in the protest writings of women; they symbolize the way women deal with anger in their process of liberation. The category of suicide – the resort of the weak – pertains to a set of self-destructive acts, such as illness, depression, madness, killing of one's offspring, or killing oneself. The category of killing – enacted by the more powerful – pertains to a set of damages inflicted on the abuser, culminating in murder. (Giora 77)

Although what she calls self-destructive acts are not always the results of a choice made by the characters, but often difficult consequences that are inflicted on them by abusive circumstances, she makes an interesting point when she considers that acts of

violence against the oppressor, including killing, are a means by which victims are able to assert their power and leave their status of sufferers. In the case of Firdaus, the act that she commits against her pimp sets her free from the repression that she had had to endure all her life. Besides, “[Firdaus’] trial allows the author to protest the injustices done to women in the Arab world” (Giora 80). In fact, by telling the story of the life and death of Firdaus, El El Saadawi was able to address the abuses perpetrated against women in her Egyptian society and in Arab, Muslim, and patriarchal societies as a whole.

The fact that Firdaus decides to tell her story to the narrator right before her execution is a way to let her story be known from her own perspective. In opposition to the confessions that are made by repentant prisoners before their death, Firdaus’ account is a reaffirmation of her act and her refusal to plead with the authorities for her life shows that she is not ready to compromise her integrity and endanger the completion that she was going to find at last. For Palmer, “...she is not afraid to die because in death she would finally be free and her lack of fear of death means that she has triumphed over both life and death” (Palmer 173). By choosing this end, she is finally able to have total control over her life.

Just like Mary, Firdaus is only able to find peace in death. She is liberated from the injustices and hypocrisies of her society by an execution that she welcomes because she sees it more as a reward than a punishment since it represents a moment of liberation for her.

As their quest for self-actualization comes to an end, some female characters are able to find a form of fulfillment through escape. Sultana and Tambu never really manage to completely reconcile their needs and desires with the demands and expectations of their societies. Yet, the two women succeed in reaching a certain sense of balance through a deliberate escape. For other female characters, who never manage to achieve self-actualization, wholeness can only be achieved through death. In fact, Mary and Firdaus find peace through the deaths that liberate them from the oppression of their societies.

African women's fight for freedom and self-accomplishment under patriarchy's authority is one that requires courage, resilience, and strength. Despite their differences and the variety of their personalities, all the female characters dealt with demonstrate an amount of defiance to the established social order because, as seen in the different chapters of this dissertation, the only way for women to reach self-realization is defiance because just like Alice Walker writes it in her 1992 novel, "RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY!" (Walker 202).

Conclusion

In an attempt to complete this work, the first conclusion that can be made is that African women's quest for self-actualization is merely a journey to re-claim their humanity and their individuality. The purpose of this research was to analyze the different steps that women go through on the path that they take to reach fulfillment. In the four novels dealt with in the work, *L'interdite*, *Nervous Conditions*, *The Grass Is Singing*, and *Woman at Point Zero*, the women writers Malika Mokeddem, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Doris Lessing, and Nawel El Saadawi describe the journeys undertaken by their female characters born in patriarchal societies and who attempt to fight in order to find a way to exist in spite of the limitations and the restrictions imposed on their sex.

The purpose of the study was to demonstrate that the lives of the different women protagonists represent the experience that most African women have had and still have to go through on a daily basis in order to achieve individual independence in their patriarchal societies. It is undeniable that some changes have happened and that some improvements have been made within African societies regarding the situation and position of women as a result of individual and collective activism of women, but a lot of work remains to be done in order for African women to achieve goals such as individual freedom, economic independence, and social equality which would allow them to enjoy the same rights and have the same duties as their male counterparts in the future.

In fact, in many African countries, most specifically in the rural areas, women still suffer from issues like families' preference for male children, difficulties to access education, forced marriages, and precarious economic conditions. These are due mainly to the functioning of patriarchy and they clearly impede the evolution of women and their contribution to society. In many regions women are still considered as men's property and they are deemed incapable of fending for themselves or of making their own decisions and are, therefore, deprived from agency by their families and communities. Thus, it seemed crucial in the present work to address the issues that women have had to struggle with over last few decades because they are still relevant today.

One aspiration of this thesis was first to probe into the aches of the female characters in order to expose the injustices of patriarchy and then to analyze the fight of these characters so as to demonstrate that through resistance women might achieve self-actualization in spite of the oppression of patriarchy. Their fight represents a possibility and an alternative that African women might be inspired by in their own struggle against the repressive forces of patriarchy.

As shown in the different chapters, the female characters are confronted to an oppressive patriarchal rule. Very often they are subjected to several forms of pressure and intimidation that lead to moral and physical abuses. The perpetual confrontation with society creates within women a feeling of unease which sometimes leads to alienation and mental breakdowns. In fact, women are placed in a position of inferiority which prevents them from acting as independent subjects; they are required to obey and follow the rules of society. As they are unable to express their needs and

desires freely, women find themselves trapped in the roles they are required to play. They are incapable of constructing their own subjective identity and consequently experience a feeling of alienation from society.

It is when they reach this state that these women find themselves cornered and see no alternative but to start a process of resistance in order to attempt to reclaim agency and control over their own lives. Within patriarchal society, resistance manifests through different strategies that women use depending on their situation and on their personality. Some female characters openly challenge their societies by speaking up and by taking action to assert their rights to exist as independent women. Many of them rely on education and on work to achieve their goals. Other female characters adopt other strategies for resistance as they choose to negotiate with patriarchal authority. A few of them strictly follow the rules imposed by society, while at the same time they try to improve their lives. They do not attempt to completely change their situation in society. They merely aspire to have better lives.

As they reach the final stage of their quest, some women reach self-actualization while others find peace in death. Many female characters manage to liberate themselves from the stronghold of patriarchy either through escape or by gaining a form of awareness that allows them to pursue their need for freedom. Other women's journeys end when they can no longer survive within the limits imposed by the oppressive social order. They are liberated by their deaths which become inevitable as these female characters are confronted with the choice of either surrender or die, in which case they choose death over their live of subservience.

The first chapter was dedicated to analyzing the oppression that female characters are subjected to in their patriarchal societies. It mainly deals with the discriminating nature of patriarchal rule and its impact on women. In the four novels, women suffer from their position of inferiority within society. They are deprived of their basic rights. For example, Sultana, Tambu, and Firdaus find difficulties to have access to education because they are women. They have to fight in order to go to school when it is something which is easily granted to the men in their society because they are entitled to it.

The subjugation of women is motivated by the fact that their liberation is perceived by patriarchy as a threat to the established social order. By obtaining more freedom, women would be able to gain agency and to stand as independent individuals which would limit the power exercised over them by men. It could be considered as an open challenge to patriarchal authority since it could result in the diminishing of its control over women.

The oppression of female characters takes various forms in the different works studied in this thesis. One aspect is the confining of women to the domestic sphere. In fact, for a long time, the public spaces were considered as rightfully belonging to men. Even today, in certain regions of countries like Algeria, the presence of women is barely tolerated in the public space. In *L'interdite*, Sultana experiences the hostility of men when she decides to go to Yacine's funeral. In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus learns through experience that the streets of Cairo are very dangerous for a woman. In *Nervous Conditions*, for characters like Mainin and Maiguru, it is very difficult to exist

outside the walls of their houses as they are valued almost exclusively for their roles as wives and mothers.

In some patriarchal societies religious rules can add one more layer to the oppression of women. In countries, like Algeria and Egypt, extreme religious views are used to reinforce the power of men and discriminate against women. Mokeddem and El Saadawi describe communities in which religion restricts women's freedoms as it is used to justify the functioning of patriarchy. When backed by religious claims, the restrictions imposed on women acquire a certain legitimacy which women are often more reluctant to challenge. Yet, both Sultana and Firdaus, when confronted with the hypocrisy and the violence of supposedly religious individuals never hesitate to question their authority and rebel against it. The use of religion is another means by which patriarchal society tries to subdue women in order to keep them under its strict control.

In *Nervous Conditions* and *The Grass Is Singing*, it is racial oppression which serves as an element that reinforces the discrimination against women as it is used to further limit their freedom in society. Tambu experiences racial discrimination when she is ostracized by her classmates after she is accepted to integrate Sacred Heart, a school that they associate with white and Western culture. Mary is also subjected to a similar treatment by her community. She is rejected by her neighbors, especially Slatter, when they see her interact with her servant Moses as a human being rather than as an objectified slave.

The second part of the chapter handles the violence and the several forms of abuse that are used to enforce the authority of patriarchy over women. It shows how moral and physical violence are inflicted on female characters of different ages and social classes in order to keep them under the control of men. In the four novels, many of these characters are subjected to pressure and intimidation. This form of moral abuse is used mainly to force them to conform to the requirements of patriarchy. In fact, Sultana and Firdaus are both scrutinized by the eyes of men in their everyday life; for the two characters, it is a strong form of pressure since they always feel watched and disapproved of by society.

In *Nervous Conditions*, the female characters are pressured by the men of the community into submitting to its strict rules. The characters of Mainini, Maiguru, Lucia, and even Tambu are aware that they can exist in society only if they perform their duties of wives, mothers, and daughters. Intimidation is also illustrated by the forced marriages of Firdaus and Mary. El Saadawi's character, who was practically sold into marriage by her uncle, had no other choice but to comply since she had no means to sustain herself and take her independence. As for Mary, she was pressured to get married by her friends who disapproved of her life style. In an attempt to conform to their expectations, she finds herself trapped in an unhappy marriage with a man she does not love.

As seen in the chapter, verbal abuse is also a form of violence which is largely used against women in patriarchal societies. Female characters like Samia, Sultana, Firdaus, and Nyasha are the victims of insults and other verbal intimidation. Some of them have to face this almost on a daily basis. Even more than the physical pain, the

sufferings that result from the humiliations that they experience lead to the feelings of alienation from society.

The chapter also deals with physical violence as a means by which women are oppressed in society. Beating is often accepted within families as a way to discipline women and also to punish them when their acts are considered against the rules. It is approved of by society when husbands beat their wives and when brothers physically discipline their sisters because it is a prerogative within patriarchy. In *L'interdite*, *Nervous Conditions*, and *Woman at Point Zero*, different female characters suffer from the physical violence inflicted on them by male characters who want to exercise patriarchal power over them. This violence has terrible consequences as it alienates these women from their societies and it instills within them a fear that sometimes prevents them from acting as agents in their community.

Sexual abuse is another form of violence seen in this chapter. The female characters suffer from the way in which sexuality is viewed in society. In fact, patriarchy considers that women's sexuality has to be closely watched and controlled since it is very often associated with reputation and the honor of the family. This considerably limits the freedom of women in the name of protecting their virtue and it results in forced marriages.

The oppression exercised over the female characters often leads to their alienation. The second chapter looks into their experiences with alienation and mental disintegration. As discussed in the chapter, it is the conflict which arises between women's quest for identity and the pressure put on them by society that creates the

distress that they feel. These women are submitted to a strong process of socialization and conformism. From a very early age, they are told how to behave in order to be accepted by society. Their freedom is restricted as they are raised to be silent, obedient, and passive. This prevents the female characters from creating their own identity. They are often trapped in situations in which they define themselves according to social norms of behavior. Characters like Mokeddem's Dalila and Dangarembga's Tambu perfectly illustrate this situation.

The second section of this chapter is devoted to the mental disintegration, the silences, and the taboos that are the results of the characters' alienation in society. It was proposed that the deep depression in which some of these women find themselves is mainly caused by the pressure and abuses that they are subjected to by patriarchy. In *The Grass Is Singing*, Mary Turner experiences a mental disintegration which culminates in a complete nervous breakdown when she decides to get married under the pressure of society. During her marriage, Mary constantly doubts her decision as she is unable to find any sort of fulfillment as a married woman. Nyasha has a similar experience in *Nervous Conditions*. The young girl cannot conform to the requirements of her society as she is unable and unwilling to be docile and silent. She rejects the patriarchal authority represented by her father, but her inability to completely challenge it or escape it eventually leads to her mental breakdown. In fact, in her desperate attempt to regain control of her life, Nyasha develops an eating disorder which turns into anorexia.

For other female characters, alienation leads to a complete suppression of their ability to voice their pains and sufferings. They are imprisoned in their lives and are

incapable of externalizing their fears and anxieties. It is the case for Dalila's mother in *L'interdite* and Tambu's mother in *Nervous Conditions*. The two women are presented as nameless characters; they are identified only as mothers. These characters seem to have a passive acceptance of the restrictive rules of society. In spite of being aware of the injustices of their position of inferiority in society, they do not have the capacity to question the status quo. Their socialization as well as the fear of reprisal prevent them from voicing their discontent. Both women try to raise their daughters to be obedient and passive as for them it is the only way to protect them from patriarchy's possible retaliation.

As they reach these stages of alienation, depression and silencing, many female characters come to the realization that the only way for them to reach the self-actualization they aspire to is to challenge the authority of patriarchy. The third chapter of this work deals with the resistance of female characters as they try to defy the restrictive norms and unjust rules of their societies.

The first strategy that some of these women adopt is negotiation. Through this attitude women try to improve their situation without openly questioning the authority of men. They believe that instead of openly confronting social injustices, they can bargain with society in order to obtain a privileged position. It is the case, for example, of Maiguru and Tambu. Babamukuru's wife succeeds in maintaining a position within her family by fulfilling what is expected of her; she is respected as the wife of the patriarch of the family, but she has no other status. The fact that she is an educated working woman does not prevent her from submitting to patriarchal rule. Her niece, Tambu, adopts a similar approach of resistance since she takes her aunt as a model.

The young girl believes that she can improve her life through education without upsetting the established social order. She does not reject the strict and restrictive rules of her community; she simply tries to gain a better position by going to school and focusing on her education.

Another strategy adopted by some female character is finding a space in between. This is the situation of women who manage to stay in an intermediary space between rebellion and submission. This is illustrated by Dalila in *L'interdite*. Her attitude of "in betweenness" allows her to escape some of the restriction of society, while her discretion protects her from the violence of her father and brothers. In *Nervous Conditions*, Mainini's sister Lucia has a similar attitude. She attempts to gain control over her life by finding balance between challenging society and conforming to its requirements. She refuses to get married and asks Babamukuru to help her get educated and find a job. She does not confront patriarchal authority, but does not completely surrender to it either.

Other female characters decide fight for their self-actualization through a direct confrontation with patriarchy. They adopt different strategies of rebellion to challenge the authority of their patriarchal societies. Some of the women try the strategy of escape. They prefer to take their distance with the oppressive context in which they live to a more direct defiance of the rules. In *The Grass Is Singing*, Mary attempts to escape when she decides that she can no longer stand her marriage and her life on the farm. She fails in her enterprise of going back to her former job and her former life which accentuates her feeling of helplessness. Firdaus also adopts a similar strategy in *Woman at Point Zero*. On several occasions, the young woman tries to free herself

from patriarchal oppression through attempted escapes. The failure that Firdaus experiences every time illustrates how strong the restrictions of society are, but also the strength and the resilience of the character.

Another strategy adopted by some female characters is the open rebellion. This can be seen in *L'interdite* as Sultana boldly defies patriarchal authority in Ain Nekhla. She decides to attend Yacine's burial, to stay in his house with Salah, and to take his position at the hospital while she knows that these will be seen as acts of rebellion by the community. Nyasha has the same attitude in *Nervous Conditions*. The young girl openly rebels against her society in an attempt to reach self-actualization. She challenges the oppressive authority of patriarchy and she openly questions its rule. She voices her discontent with the situation of inferiority of women in her community and she points at the hypocrisy of her society.

The last part of the chapter concentrates on the deconstruction of some stereotypes which, for a long time, worked against women and prevented them from reaching self-actualization. First, it was shown that the four authors construct their novels around protagonists who are childless. They also juxtapose the lives of women who have children to the lives of the ones who do not. Dangarembga, for example, contrasts the situation of Mainini and a Maiguru, to that of Lucia. The two first characters are defined almost exclusively by their motherhood and their duties as wives while the childless Lucia manages, to a certain extent, to free herself from the oppressive restrictions of her community because she is not weighed down by motherhood.

Mokeddem and El Saadawi show through Sultana and Firdaus that motherhood is not an aspiration for the two characters who long for self-actualization since it does not bring any happiness or gratification to any of the female characters in the novels. Lessing's main character Mary is also childless by choice. She does not have children with her husband Dick; although they talk about having a child several times, their marriage remains childless.

The last part of the chapter deals with the deconstruction of the gender roles through what Nfah-abbenyi calls 'the inversion strategy' and which aims at challenging the dichotomy of male positivity and female negativity. By the juxtaposition of the female and male characters in the four novels, it can be noticed that the strength and the active spirit of the women drastically contrasts with the passivity and the helplessness of the men. For example, Tambu's father, Jeremiah, is a complete failure by the standards of his own community as he is unable to provide for his family and he totally relies on his brother for financial support and on his wife and children for farm labor. In *The Grass Is Singing*, Dick also fails to properly run his farm. Despite his lack of knowledge and expertise in the field, he keeps trying and failing without ever attempting to bring any positive changes to his business. In *L'interdite*, Salah who is deeply dissatisfied and frustrated with his life never attempts to defy the authority and the rules of his society even though he identifies them as the main cause of his unhappiness. As opposed to Sultana, who openly challenges the injustices of the Algerian society of the 1990's, Salah passively accepts to relinquish control over his own life. In *Woman at Point Zero*, El Saadawi shows a variety of male

characters who oppress and exploit women in order to satisfy their own needs and desires

In the last chapter, it was important to focus on the final stage of women's fight for self-actualization in order to see whether the different female characters were able to reach fulfillment or not. In fact, the realization of the self in spite of the oppression of society and its alienating consequences takes different forms for the characters in the four works. For some of them it is acquired through partial or complete escape while for others it comes through a liberating death.

Sultana, for example manages to find refuge in her exile, first in the city of Oran where she goes to study and then in France when she immigrates. Yet, she continues to experience alienation as she cannot find peace. Her escape was merely a way to survive and flee the pain of her mother's death and the oppression of her community. It is only when she comes back for Yacine's funeral that Sultana is able to face her past. When she decides to stay in Algeria for a while and work at the hospital, she finds the control that she had been deprived of as a young adolescent. By facing her fears and challenging the patriarchal authority of the village of Ain Nekhla, she is finally able to feel that she belongs to the community again. She eventually leaves Algeria, but with a sense of reconciliation with her country, her people, and with herself.

Similarly, Tambudzai manages to find balance through escape. The young girl strongly believes that the only way for her to improve her life is through education. Her first escape is when she leaves the house of her father in the village for the house of her uncle on the mission where she starts to go to school after the death of her

brother. This displacement relieves Tambu from the burdens that she had to carry back home. Yet, it is really the time that she spends at the mission, especially with her cousin Nyasha, that contributes to Tambu's real escape. In fact, the latter lies in her becoming more and more aware of the flaws of her society. She starts to question the things that she used to take for granted thanks to the influence of her cousin. One example is when she rejects the idea of her parents' wedding and she refuses to go back home to help prepare it. She even challenges the authority of her uncle des and she stands her ground despite his threats and his disappointment in her. Her newly obtained decisiveness is what constitutes Tambu's real escape from patriarchal oppression. It is through this positive shift that she manages to start her self-actualization.

Unlike Sultana and Tambu, Mary and Firdaus conclude their journey with a liberating death. The two women never manage to reach self-actualization and they both deliberately choose the freedom that death can offer them over the lives of oppression and alienation that they had. The two women see their deaths as a final challenge to their societies' authority.

Mary's murder comes to conclude a life of alienation and mental disintegration that started when she left her job to marry Dick and moved to his farm. In fact, under the strong pressure of her society, Mary takes a reversed journey to the ones taken by Sultana and Tambu, and by so doing she deprives herself from the possibility to reach self actualization. Mary regresses to the situation of entrapment that other women attempt to escape through education and work. Her mental health degrades to the point of a deep depression that leaves her almost completely incapable of any human

interaction. Mary's challenge to society can be seen in her relationship with her black servant, Moses. When she first meets him in the fields while she was helping Dick with the farm, she only feels fear and hatred towards him. Yet, Mary's isolation and her deep alienation leave her in a very vulnerable state. So, when Moses starts to work in the house, she cannot help but feel a physical attraction toward her servant. More importantly, she seems to have a human connection with him. She simply embraces these feelings and does not try to distance herself from Moses despite her awareness of the dangerous transgression that this relationship constitutes in her South African society. This is, for her, a way to regain the control that she had relinquished when she gave in to the pressure of society. Although Mary realizes that Moses is going to kill her, she does not want to avoid death. She simply chooses to walk deliberately towards the end of her life.

Firdaus, on her part is executed for the murder of a man who wanted to exploit her and take advantage of her. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator presents her as a woman who refuses to appeal to the president to cancel her execution. She refuses to be pardoned for an act that she fully endorsed as an act of rebellion against the oppression of patriarchy. In fact, with the murder of Marzouk, Firdaus was finally able to find wholeness in the act of taking control of her life by killing the oppressor.

The journey taken by Firdaus in the novel leads her from being an innocent victim to becoming an experienced fighter. Young Firdaus is continually abused by men. Her father, her uncle, her husband, and later on, men like Bayoumi. This creates within her a feeling of insecurity which follows her all her life. Yet, Firdaus also realizes that her status of victim is one that she can change by taking control of her life, so she becomes

an independent prostitute. Firdaus decides to enjoy the freedom and material comfort that this job grants her for a certain period of time but more men keep oppressing and exploiting her like Ibrahim who pretends to love her and who eventually betrays her.

Firdaus comes to the realization that her patriarchal society cannot allow a woman to reach self-actualization. She does not obtain wholeness at the end of the novel in the form of a fulfilling life but rather through a liberating death. Just like Mary, Firdaus is only able to find peace in death. She is freed from the oppression and abuses of society by her execution which for her, is more a reward than a punishment.

In conclusion, it can be said that the aim of this work was to shed light on the fact that women have to constantly fight for self-actualization in African societies. Through the analysis of the situation of the female characters in the four works it was noticed that they are deprived of their basic rights. Despite the fact the works cover the decades of the 1950's through the 1990's, the themes that they deal with are still very relevant to the African Societies of today. Although there have been major evolutions in terms of women's rights in the last couple of decades, there is still much to be done in order for women to be considered as independent individuals. This work aimed to contribute to the evolutionary process by pointing out the injustices and showing that women have to keep up the fight which most probably is going to be long and difficult.

In her 1972 work *Women, Resistance and Revolution* English feminist historian Sheila Rowbotham writes: "It is a very simple idea, but one with which we have lost touch, that the liberation of women necessitates the liberation of all human beings" (Rowbotham 11). It is in this sense that women's struggles and their battle for

women's equal rights and liberations, in Africa and on other continents, should be seen as an integral part of the larger fight for human rights around the world. Women's actions and their activism have often been, and are sometimes still marginalized because they are viewed by societies as dealing with secondary issues that are only important for a minority of women. This is why it is crucial today to emphasize the absolute necessity for women's fight for self-actualization to be seen as an inevitable and mandatory step towards creating societies that are based on equality and that give importance to the well being of all the individuals regardless of their sex and the gender roles that they perform. All women should enjoy the freedom necessary to be able to achieve their own goals without having to conform to the demands of patriarchal societies.

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ملخص

يهدف هذا العمل إلى التحقيق في النضالات التي يتعين على المرأة أن تمر بها من أجل الوصول إلى تحقيق الذات في ظل حكم الأبوية في أربع روايات أفريقية الممنوعة (1993) للكاتبة الجزائرية مليكة مقدم ، الظروف العصبية (1988) من قبل كاتبة من الزيمبابوي تسييتسي دانغاريمبجا ، العشب يغني (1950) للفائزة بجائزة نوبل دوريس ليسينج ، وامرأة عند النقطة صفر (1977) للكاتب والناشط المصري نوال السعداوي. تسعى الرسالة إلى: دراسة الاضطهاد الذي تتعرض له الشخصيات الأنثوية ، وتحليل حالة الاغتراب التي تنتج عنه ، واستكشاف استراتيجيات المقاومة التي تستخدمها النساء في محاولتهن للوصول إلى الإنجاز. وهكذا ، من خلال استخدام النسوية ، يسعى العمل أولاً إلى النظر في سير النظام الأبوي ، ومعاملته القمعية للمرأة والعنف والإساءة التي تتعرض لها المرأة في المجتمعات الأبوية. بعد ذلك ، يدقق في التحقيق في مشاعر الاغتراب المختلفة التي تنجم عن الانتهاكات التي يتعين على النساء تحملها. من خلال الاقتراب من الأعمال من منظور علم النفس الاجتماعي الذي ينظر إلى الاغتراب كعملية اجتماعية ، فإنه سينظر في التنشئة الاجتماعية للمرأة ، وبحثها عن الهوية ، وإسكات المجتمع لها. أخيراً ، تتعهد بدراسة الأشكال المختلفة للتفاوض والتمرد التي تتبناها الشخصيات النسائية من أجل مواجهة الاضطهاد والوصول في النهاية إلى مرحلة أو تحقيق الذات والتي قد تتخذ أشكالاً مختلفة بالنسبة للشخصيات النسائية المختلفة. بحلول نهاية قتالهم ، تمكن بعضهم من إيجاد شكل من أشكال الإنجاز بينما يختبر الآخرون الموت المحرر

الكلمات المفتاحية: القهر ، الاغتراب ، تحقيق الذات، الشخصيات النسائية ، الأدب الأفريقي