

THE COST OF BEING A WOMAN: AN ANALYSIS OF NAWAL EL SAADAWI'S WOMAN AT POINT ZERO

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ABSTRACT

*A glance at women in the Maghreb showed that they have several 'mountains' on their backs. Thus, to identify the 'mountains' we used literature as a tool. This is because, in analyzing the place of African women in a modern African setting, literature is, certainly, a domain of visibility and audibility. But, since the movement that encourages people to write varies from one period to another and one social reality to another, our focus lied on Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*. Thus, the reading of the novel has not only proved that women are marginalized but also and mainly the thematic concerns raised by Nawal informed us about the peculiar living conditions of women in Egypt. The research supported that as each particular region of Africa has its particular problems; the literatures, as well, are quite naturally different from one another. That is, though all women have a fundamental unity in the suffering and in their desire for liberation, the cry of women in the Maghreb is not as same as the cry of other women from other countries. Such is the message that Nawal reverberates on the pages of *Woman at Point Zero*.*

KEYWORDS: *Woman at Point Zero, Aesthetics, Female Self-Assertion*

INTRODUCTION

The inspiration for this article comes from the premise that every literature is a literature of its community and it translates the socio-cultural and political realities of its community. Thus, after I had written and published some articles about women, in the novels by women writers in West Africa, I wonder what is special with the Arab women from the Maghreb. The reading of Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* informs us about practices which are not much evoked by women writers in West Africa. The main thematic concerns raised by West African Women in their writings are among others: Marriage, motherhood and/or polygamy but Nawal offers different issues to her readers.

While, for instance, marriage, motherhood and/or polygamy constitute central themes in Nwapa's *Efuru*, Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn*, Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*; there is no centrality for marriage in *Woman at Point Zero* except that it is arranged by parents, no centrality for motherhood as we learn through Firdaus, Nawal's protagonist, that often women tend to abort, and as well as no centrality for polygamy except that most men are cheating by having sex, illegally, with other women, married or not and often including their own daughters or nieces.

Aidoo, in her essay: “Ghana: To Be a Woman”, speaks in favour of western education which does not only empower women but also it offers them alternatives such as to work in public or private institutions as men do (Juliana and Nfat, 1997). But, Nawal, seemingly, points out that, in the Maghreb, for a woman, to be educated is one thing and to get a profit of one’s education such that to get a job is another thing. For instance, with a secondary school certificate, Firdaus could not find a job though she tried all her best to get one.

Mariama Ba, as well, in an interview once insisted on the importance of education so that when women are educated, they are able to use books to voice their concerns or to communicate with others: “ Books are a weapon, a peaceful weapon perhaps, but they are a weapon” (Harrell, 1980: 214). A weapon such that women must seize and use for themselves. In an interview at the end of the Dutch edition of *So Long A Letter*, Mariama Ba calls on women to stand up for their rights, using literature, despite the difficulties they may face, by using their own coordinated efforts and initiatives:

The woman writer in Africa has a special task. She has to present the position of women in Africa in all its aspects. There is still so much injustice. In spite of the fact that for a decade the United Nations have paid special attention to woman’s problem, in spite of beautiful speeches and praiseworthy intentions, women continue to be discriminated. In the family, in the institutions, in the society, in the street, in political organizations... as a woman, we must work for our own future, we must overthrow the status quo which harms us and we must no longer submit to it. As men, we must use literature as a non-violent but effective weapon. We no longer accept the nostalgic praise to the African mother who, in his anxiety, man confuses with mother Africa. Within African literature, the room must be made for women...the room we will fight for with all our might (Jones & Marjori, 1987:46-47).

There is no doubt that the above narrations, by Mariama Ba, set the tone of *Woman at Point Zero* and highlight the issues that will be analyzed. What is worth pointing out is that women are now writing about women by bringing out not only their points of view but also and mainly their lived experiences as a woman. However, as fictional narratives most often generate from real life experience, it is worth bringing out Nawal’s social and authorial background.

Nawal El Saadawi’s Social and Authorial Background

Born in a Muslim family in the small village of KafrTahlaon October 27, 1931, and the second-eldest of nine children, Nawal El Saadawi is an Egyptian feminist writer, activist, physician, and psychiatrist as well. Her family was once traditional and this has made Nawal have her clitoris cut off at the age of six, and at times progressive because given her father’s prominent status in the Ministry of education, Nawal was educated (Khaleeli, 2010). During the Egyptian Revolution of 1919, her father fought with his utmost energy against the British occupation of Egypt and Sudan. As a result, he was forced to move to a small town in the Nile Delta and, for about ten years, the government refused to promote him. Nawal’sself - determination does seem to come from her father who does not only encourages her to learn Arabic language but also and mainly teaches her certain values such as courage, dignity, and self-assertion. Unfortunately, her

parents, both her father and her mother (her mother is of Turkish origin), died and de facto Nawal becomes the 'man of the house' who provides the basic needs (Wikipedia).

Despite the difficulties, Nawal graduated as a medical doctor in 1955 from Cairo University and the same year she married a certain Ahmed Helmi, her fellow student at the medical school, but her marital relationship with the man did not last long as, after two years, Nawal got divorced by him (Koseli, 2013). After on, she kept working hard as a medical doctor in her birthplace of KafrTahla with focus on women's physical and psychological problems. She was later summoned back to Cairo and appointed the Director of the Ministry of Public Health. It was there she met and married, in 1964, a certain Sherif Hatata, a scholarly and quiet medical doctor and writer who had later been a political prisoner for about thirteen years. Sherif Hatata also divorced her in 2010, after forty-three years of marriage and after she got a son and a daughter from him (Cooke, 2015).

Though she was a very dedicated medical doctor, a promoter of education, defender of women's rights, an active member of women's association, a dedicated reformer and the writer (Douglas & Ruth, 2000:255), what brought Nawal El Saadawi to national and international fame is her activism as her writings did not appear in English translation until 1980s. Nawal's sensitivity resulted in the general awareness and sharp criticism of the inequalities that exist between male and female. Due to her criticism of gender inequality, she is viewed as a very problematic woman by the Egyptian government. Nawal's activism and her books included have made her lose her position at the Ministry of Health. She also lost her positions as chief editor of a health journal, and as Assistant General Secretary in the Medical Association in Egypt.

Anwar Sadat, the President of Egypt, later imprisoned her and she was released one month after the President's assassination (Uglow, 2015). The *Encyclopedia Britannica* described her as "the Simone de Beauvoir of the Arab World". Of her experience, she once writes: "Danger has been a part of my life ever since I picked up a pen and wrote. Nothing is more perilous than truth in a world that lies" (*The Hindu*, 2001).

Nawal's contact with a prisoner at Qanatir, nine years before she was imprisoned there, served as a catharsis for her novel, *Woman at Point Zero*, which is translated from the Arab by Sherif Hetata (*The New Yorker*, 2011). The novel is known for its significant testimony and true imaginative depth. Despite the hardship that she went through, Douglas and Ruth (2000:255) point out that: "she has managed to write twenty-seven books, including many books of fiction" and this despite her appearances on radio and television were banned in Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries. However, international Institutions recognized her achievements. To mention but one of the distinguished prizes accorded her, by the Council of Europe in 2004, is the North-South Prize (Wikipedia).

In 1988, when her life was threatened by Islamists and political persecutors, Nawal was forced to flee Egypt to find herself in the US with teaching positions at Duke University and as well as at the University of Washington. In 1996, she moved back to Egypt (Dora, 2015). Nawal continued her activism and declared herself candidate at the presidential election of 2005 before she was bound to withdraw because of stringent requirements for first-time candidates.

Finally, upon reading the social and authorial background of Nawal El Saadawi, as stated above, punctuated with hardship, intimidation and imprisonment, there is a need to highlight the context of situation of Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*. That is, to give an overview of the position of women in Egypt.

An Overview of the Position of Women in Egypt

This section informs us of the ongoing discriminatory practices against women in the patriarchal Egypt which certainly serves as a catharsis for Nawal to write or to bring to the front burner of public discourse issues that affect the physical and spiritual well-being of women in Muslim majority Egypt.

It is good to mention right from the onset that human civilization is made by and for both men and women (Ayayi, 2005). As a result, both men and women have their own rights and needs to live with modest admiration. What is more, many institutions over the world encourage citizen participation by seeking the representation and participation of everyone, irrespective of sex, in the conduct and management of their affairs (UDHR, 1948). Then, why, in Egypt, men hold most of the important socio-economic and political activities while women are deprived of access to such power?

To begin with, the Arabs are found almost everywhere in Africa but they are numerous in the Maghred (Northern Africa), in countries such as Egypt, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. Northern African literature also offers a perspective that cannot separate a text from its context of the situation. Mpalive and Paul (1997:13) support that: "Northern African writing is therefore determined by the sense of belonging to an Arab nation which shares the same language[Arabic] and culture, and to a certain extent, the same religion."

Today, North African writing is largely informed by this common Arab heritage, which represents not only a way of connecting with the cultural tradition but also a way of understanding the present. Thus, although women are acknowledged to have had an important role in the social, religious and political affairs in ancient Egypt, upon considering Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, published in 1983, it is fortunate enough to evaluate women's rights, powers, and influence in the Maghreb in general and Egypt in particular.

It is good to recall that every literature is a literature of a given community at a given period. The above clarity is brought because there are records that women, in Egypt, enjoyed complete freedom during the time of Pharaon compared to their Indo-European counterparts. "women are acknowledged to have played an important role in affairs domestic, religious, and even political in ancient Egypt" (Anne, n.d: i). This study highlights a period of the setting of Nawal's *Woman at Point Zero* which, certainly, serves as a catharsis for Nawal to write. This then, clearly, shows the relationship between text and context.

In addition, thought what we are dealing with, in this analysis, is based on fiction, it is good to recall that fictional narratives often generate from real life experience. Nawal has proved it right when she says: "I wrote this novel after an encounter between me and a woman in Quanatir Prison" (Nawal, 2007: ix), she further adds "The name of the heroine may be fictional but the story does not seem to be so" (Nawal, 2007:3). However, since literature is a tool for informing, educating, elucidating, denouncing problems and proposing solutions (Wale, 2008:1), it is worth pointing out the place of women in Egypt according to UN statistic:

Egypt ranks low in gender equity compared to other countries worldwide. The 2015 Global Gender Gap Index, which measures disparities between men and women across countries, ranks Egypt at 136 out of 145 countries worldwide. Women have significantly lower participation in the labour force than men (26% versus 79%) and lower literacy (65% literacy for

women versus 82% of males). The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's Social Institutions and Gender Index 2014, which measures legislation, practices, and attitudes that restrict women's rights and opportunities, classifies Egypt to be among the countries 'very high' in gender discrimination together with others in Africa and the Middle East (*United States Agency for International Development, 2016*).

In fact, if we look at the position of women, as described in the statistic, there is a wide range of constraints and obstacles that impede women's progress and limit their ability to hold public office and to participate in socio-economic and political life, or else to occupy leadership positions whether in government, public or even private sectors. The relationship between male and female is socialized to the extent that the former is groomed to be a conqueror while the latter is trained to meet his needs at all levels. Dewi (2003:20) informs that: "Seldom does literature on women or gender in the Middle East address the issue of affection between husbands and wives and how bonds of mutual support and caring are constructed within households. Depictions of gender relations in Egyptian households always portray women as oppressed without ever mentioning relationships of kindness, sharing, and mutual love between husbands and wives."

Women's sexuality, space, and agency are, strictly, regulated. Women's role is reduced to that of wives and mothers (Ahmed, 1992). Badran (1991: 226) states that according to one of the most popular Islamic preachers, Sheikh Sharawi (who hosted a prime-time television program): "A woman who works while she has a father, brother or husband to support her is a sinful woman." Although the Egyptian Constitution did not set conditions preventing women candidacy in elections, and despite giving them the right to stand for parliament and/or elect their preferred candidates since the constitution of 1959, Egyptian society, in general, deplores the idea of women running for elections. Women are vowed to face the difficulties and they are intimidated to bear the consequences (*The National Council for Women*). The case of Nawal El Saadawi's withdrawal of candidacy for the presidential election of 2005 due to intimidations, as raised in the section dealing with her social and authorial background, is quite illustrative.

Also, girls' marriage at an early age is a common practice. This, unfortunately, eliminates their chances of education. Within marriage, sexuality is also regulated. It is interesting to note that men, as well as some women, share the notion that men have the right to discipline their wives by using force. That is, a certain amount of physical abuse against women can be justified under certain conditions, particularly if a woman refuses to have sex with her partner (El-Zanaty et al., 1996).

What is more, there is a continuation of some wrong habits (female genital mutilation), a practice that involves the removal of part or whole areas of the girl's or woman's genitalia. Nissrin (2013) utters that, in Egypt, the practice can be traced back to the times of the ancient Egyptians, during the era of the Pharaohs.

The aim of the practice is to control women's sexuality and autonomy and, unfortunately, it is widely practiced in Egypt. Nissrin (2013:1) supports that: "The practice is mostly reported to be highly prevalent in Africa, as well as some countries in the Middle East and some of the Asian countries." Focusing on Africa, the report indicates that the practice has been performed on close to 92 million girls who are 10 years old and above. In Egypt, alone, it was estimated that close to 92% of the women in the country had undergone the ritual of female genital mutilation. Nissrin (2013:2) points it out that: "Religious leaders who advocate for the prevalence of FGM have attested that FGM is a practice that the religion claims is

a right for the women. They pursue that for a woman to not be excised, that she is not pure and clean in the eyes of God.”

Yet, in the Holy Quran, there is no express or explicit mention of the practice of genital mutilation on a woman being a compulsory practice that ought to be performed. At least, this is what we learn from Al-Awa (2012:2), General Secretary of the International Federation of Islamic Scholars, who rationalizes that: “The Holy Qur’an is void of any reference to FGM, there is no Ijma’ or consensus on specific legal ruling, and there is no Qiyas or analogy that can be accepted.”

As a result, the oppression of women constitutes a great barrier to development. Joyce Mangvwat (1999:5) observes that: “It has been proved beyond a reasonable doubt that no Nation can move forward in terms of development if her womenfolk (who are usually in the majority) remains marginalized”. This is, also, evident to Dora (1991:10) who observes that: “if the building block, the mothers, are poor, ignorant and unmotivated, the nation is likely to be poor, ignorant and unmotivated.” What is more, Dora (1991:64) rationalizes: “No religion to the best of my knowledge forbids women from active participation in politics. Being a Muslim, I know Islam allows women to vote and be voted for. It provides for women’s views to be heard on private and public affairs.”

The above quotation, by Dora, is, certainly, known to Nawal, as well. What is more, Nawal’s writing finds its moment of appointment in the absence of African women in public spaces or even better in the negative portrayal of the image of women by African men writers. Nawal, herself, in her paper entitled: “The Heroine in Arab Literature” observes that:

Among the male writers I have read, both in the west and in Arab world, irrespective of the language in which they have written, or of the region from which they have come, not one has been able to free himself from this age-old image of woman handed down to us from an ancient past, no matter how famous many of them have been for their passionate defence of human rights, human values and justice, and their vigorous resistance to the oppression and tyranny in any form. Arab literature is littered with the image the She-devil, possessed of many faces (Nawal, 2007: 520).

She is also aware that her struggle to correct misconceptions seems even more difficult than the struggle for the national liberation as Gwendolyn describes it: “The struggle for equal rights between the sexes is going to prove even more difficult than that of decolonization because in essence, it is a struggle between husband and wife, brother and sister, father and mother” (Davies, 1986:8). That is certainly why, she armed herself with determination to fight the status quo established by patriarchy by pointing out, in *Woman at Point Zero*, through Firdaus, her protagonist, the cost of being a woman in her patriarchal society. For Mpalive and Paul (1997:19), “The emergence of fiction in the Arabic literature [*Woman at Point Zero* was originally written in Arabic] in the twentieth century also reflects the transition between the old world and the new age.” Thus, *Woman at Point Zero* should be read as Nawal’s cry but yet a determination to transform the society.

Analysis of the Situation of Women in *Woman at Point Zero*

This section informs us, through *Woman at Point Zero*, how a society with all its complex structures has conspired to subjugate and marginalize women in the schemes of events and socio-economic privileges. Men in the novel are dominant and assume the position of influence and authority not only on any other merit other than being male. There is no doubt, in *Woman at Point Zero*; Nawal has taken to the trial bench, issues that affect the physical and spiritual well-being of women in a Muslim majority Egypt. Issues that border on gender discrimination, oppression, and suppression. This is true because according to Nnolim (2009:108): “the function of the artist in Africa, in keeping with our traditions and needs, demands that the writer, as a public voice, assumes a responsibility to reflect public concerns in his [or her] writing. ”

To begin with, the story of Firdaus revolves around the marginalization of women. That is why Nawal calls attention to the need to end the violence or any other forms of discrimination against women. This is because in Egypt, as in many other countries of Africa, the society is materialistic. The value of a human being is measured by how much the individual possesses. Knowing that it is capitalism that produces materialism and that it is based on the system of productions, there is no doubt that women who are confined at home are likely to be poor and dominated in all the socio-economic and political areas. It is said that in the community of Firdaus: “nothing shames a man but an empty pocket” (Nawal, 2015:48).

The marginalization of women is quite manifest in the arranged marriage between Firdaus and Sheikh Mahmoud. In fact, Firdaus does love Sheikh Mahmoud who is over sixty with deformities on the face; while she is only seventeen years old; but as the society is materialistic, in Firdaus' marriage, the focus is not her own concern. Firdaus' uncle who arranges the marriages says: “If he [Sheikh Mahmoud] accepts to pay one hundred pounds [as bride wealth] 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” (Nawal, 2015:49).

What is more, after the celebration of marriage, Sheikh Mahmoud, usually, menaces and even beats Firdaus to the extent that blood comes out: “one day he hits me with his heavy stick until the blood ran from my nose and ears” (Nawal, 2015:60). When she later finds intolerable to stay within the household; she returns to her uncle's. But, there too, she is not welcomed open-handedly as her uncle once tells her that all men beat their wives, and he finally takes her back to her husband's house without consolation. “...my uncle told me that all husbands beat their wives, and my uncle's wife added that her husband often beats her. I said that my uncle was a respected Sheik, well versed in the teaching of religion, and he, therefore, could not possibly be in the habit of beating his wife. She replied that it was practically men well versed in their religion who beat their wives” (Nawal, 2015:59).

Surprisingly, when she was taken back to her husband's house, despite the odds, this is what the latter says: “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 that I'm the only person who is prepared to feed you” (Nawal, 2015:59). Through such descriptions, Nawal certainly wants to tell us that despite Egypt is a Muslim majority country and despite the reading of the Holy book, marriage is not based on virtuous such as good character or good conduct but money. Moreover, through the marriage between Firdaus and Sheikh Mahmoud, Nawal informs us that arranged marriage is a common practice and a wife beating is quite a rule in Egypt. Then, we are tempted to ask a rhetorical question: Is feeding a woman one willingly married deserve blackmail?

(As Sheikh Mahmoud does to Firdaus).

It is then clear that what men need in women is not love but sex. For them, love is a waste of time. That is, even though men are religious, not only is culture stronger than religion but also and mainly their religiosity is filled with hypocrisy. In the novel, Firdaus recalls the story of her uncle who is a religious man as follows: “My uncle as he followed the lines in his book with peering eyes while his hand stole out from behind, searching for my thigh” (Nawal, 2015: 90). Also, when Firdaus gives money to a charitable Association, she was praised; yet, it is known that the money she donated is obtained through prostitution: “One day, when I donated some money to a charitable association, the newspapers published pictures of me and sand my praises as the model of a citizen with a sense of civic responsibility” (Nawal, 2015:124).

For abused and battered women are found all around Arab countries in general and Egypt in particular. For instance, as most often Arab girls are confined within the homes, their first love or even better their first sexual experience is often through their own fathers or uncles. It follows that in opposition to the tradition of wooing a girl with letters, flowers, messages or sweets, they woo with menace. Firdaus, the protagonist, is abused by her uncle as she recalls: “[Firdaus] 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 is traveling up my thigh with a cautious, stealthy, trembling movement his hand would continue to press against my thigh with a grasping, almost brutal insistence” (Nawal, 2015:17). Nawal’s attempt in depicting the above issue is a need to challenge and overcome those forces that deprive human beings of their right to live, love and to real freedom.

Nawal’s message does seem to warn us that such attitudes towards women would drive them to the extreme and commit evil. Bell (2015, 84) supports that: “The domination of one human being by another is the basic evil in society.” In the novel, such attitude is materialized when Firdaus left her husband’s house for the second time. She refuses to go back to her uncle’s and in looking way out to survive, she was ready to accept any kind of job, including prostitution: “But if necessary I’m prepared to do anything, even the kind of work that requires no certificates[alluding to prostitution]” (Nawal, 2015: 62). But, as opposed to other women who involve in prostitution for pleasure or as a profession, Firdaus involves in it as a survival strategy.

Nawal informs us that even in prostitution, a condition of women is not as safe as one could imagine because they are still marginalized. That is, even in prostitution, women are not free to ‘sell’ their ‘bodies’ to whoever they want. They are most often tortured without having anybody to rescue them. Firdaus’ Pimp, Marzouk, once tells her: “There isn’t a woman on earth who can protect herself” (Nawal, 2015:125). For instance, Firdaus was sent to prison for refusing to have sex with a very important personality: “On one occasion, they put me in prison because I turned down one of these important men” (Nawal, 2015:123). It was thanks to the service of a lawyer that she was liberated. This is because women who are involved in prostitution are regarded as unworthy women. In the novel, when someone else than Bayoumi, the man whom Firdaus encounters in her adventure and who accepts to offer her a room and occasionally sleeps with her, wants to have sex with Firdaus and when the latter questions who he was, he replied in a sarcastic way as we learn through the conversation:

Who are you? I said.

Bayoumi, he answered.

I insisted you are not Bayoumi. Who are you?

What difference does it make? Bayoumi and I are one.

Through the above conversation, the author does seem to ask a rhetorical question such that is a woman an object to belong to or to be passed from one person to another? The answer is certainly “no” but Nawal, simply, uses her aesthetics to inform the readers and community at large that such attitude towards women would end up turning women who are good into bad. For a woman to have sex with someone she does not love or someone who does not love her is nothing but pain. In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus says: “With love, I began to imagine that I had become a human being” (Nawal, 2015:116). The pain later turns her into a social rebel. Nawal, prefacing the novel, says: I had never seen a woman who had killed” (Nawal, 2015: x). Also, even the prison’s doctor, who explains the situation of Firdaus to Nawal, says: “if you look into her face, her eyes, you will never believe that so gentle a woman can commit murder” (Nawal, 2015:4). Yet, in *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus kills her pimp. Through Firdaus’ violence, Nawal calls our attention that even women are capable of violence. As a result, instead of pushing women to retaliate, it is high time both men and women work to stop the violence. The crux of the matter or the irony, as Nawal depicts, is that protecting one’s honor requires money; yet, for a woman to get money she has to sacrifice her honor. Firdaus rationalizes: “ Now I had learned that honor required large sums of money to protect it, but that large sums of money could not be obtained without losing one’s honor” (Nawal, 2015:123-124).

What is more, though the society is much critical of prostitutes, Nawal informs us that not only all women are prostitutes but also and mainly the life of the prostitutes is even better than that of other women who are not prostitutes, but they have to sell their ‘bodies’ not to lose their jobs. Materialism, within the society, has reached its peak. This is what we learn through Firdaus who says: “ I came to realize that a female employee is more afraid of losing her job than a prostitute is of losing her life. An employee is scared of losing her job and becoming a prostitute because she does not understand that the prostitute’s life is in fact, better than hers. And so she pays the price of her illusory fears with her life, her health, her body, and her mind. she pays the highest price for things of the lowest value. I now knew that all of us were prostitutes who sold themselves at varying prices(Nawal, 2015:103).”

However, Nawal’s aesthetic message does seem to say that enough is enough. Men should stop considering women as easy prey and destroy their honor. Men often use their positions to abuse the company’s women. For instance, Ibrahim’s attempt to have sex with Firdaus is not based on love but simply because he does not need to pay the service as they both work in the same company: “I [Firdaus] realized that he[Ibrahim] had not really been in love with me, but came to me every night only because he did not have to pay” (Nawal, 2015:120). Then, Firdaus’ determination not to fear the loss of her job by refusing to have sex with a high company official finally earns her esteem: “ And so the word went round that I was an honorable woman, and a highly respected official, in fact, the most honorable, and the most highly considered of all the female officials [both the married and unmarried] in the company. It was also said that none of the men had succeeded in breaking my pride and that not a single high-ranking official had been able to make me bow my head, or lower my eyes to the ground (Nawal, 2015:103-104).”

All in all, girls and boys, and to larger extent men and women, do not have equal considerations. In *Woman at Point Zero*, Nawal points out such concern when she informs us that “When one of his [Firdaus father’s] 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...[as if the mother is responsible for the death]” (Nawal, 2015: 23).

CONCLUSIONS

In problematizing African women’s space in a modern African setting, literature is a domain of visibility and audibility. This is because women writers are motivated by the silences in early African literatures, which were largely patriarchal. Meanwhile, an incomplete or one side understanding is a distorted understanding. Then, it is clear for Nawal that presenting women’s reality is not an option but an imperative. It is this awareness that has prompted Nawal to search for alternatives. That is to listen to Firdaus and let her voice her problems without interruption. Reading the story of Firdaus gives the impression that there is nothing more difficult than being a woman in Egypt. This is because the protagonist of Nawal faces multiple burdens: confronting patriarchy, tradition and ‘Islamic ideology’, which all put the woman in a marginal place.

For Nawal, the story of Firdaus is the story of any other woman in Egypt and that her experience is, as well, representative of the determination and resourcefulness of women from her home Egypt. That is why, from the dilemma of a woman at zero point, Nawal is able to create a heroine who refuses to be tools in the hands of men. For Nawal, African women cannot be the same within traditions that destroy them. However, for Nawal, women are not violent in nature. Even what is called Firdaus’ murder is simply a self-defence, as she is not prepared to kill. Finally, by sending Firdaus to prison, men do not, certainly, fear Firdaus’ knife but her truth: “They [men] do not fear my knife. It is my truth which frightens them” (Nawal, 2015:140). The sum total of the messages or the truth of the matter is that instead of pushing women to retaliate, it is high time both men and women work together to stop the violence.

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