

A Working Woman

La trabajadora

Presented by: Magda Potok

In *A Working Woman* (2014), Elvira Navarro tells a powerful story about how economic collapse, urban change, and psychological distress shape people's lives. The novel offers a personal yet socially aware look at the lives of two vulnerable women in present-day Madrid, showing how they cope with unstable work, mental illness, and social isolation. While Navarro's prose avoids slogans or overt political posturing, the novel's attention to lives broken by neoliberal working conditions makes it one of the most powerful political novels of post-crisis Spain. Through its narrative form and thematic focus, *A Working Woman* dramatizes the slow violence of economic insecurity and explores how it erodes not only social bonds but the coherence of the self.

The political dimension of *A Working Woman* emerges not from a call to action, but from a refusal to look away. In a cultural landscape that often invisibilizes or privatizes structural suffering, Navarro makes perceptible the conditions of psychic and material exhaustion that define the lives of many in Spain's post-2008 society. Her novel participates in a broader literary turn toward precarity, but distinguishes itself by foregrounding not resilience or resistance, but the lived experience of collapse. In doing so, Navarro aligns with a trend in contemporary European literature, particularly visible in the works of Annie Ernaux, Édouard Louis, and Christian Baron, that seeks to reclaim personal narratives as sites of political meaning.

Set in Madrid in the aftermath of the financial crisis, *A Working Woman* follows a narrator who shares her author's profession—she is a writer and editor—struggling to survive on unstable, underpaid jobs. Though she is educated and ostensibly middle-class, her life is marked by increasing precarity: she moves from flat to flat, sells belongings to afford rent, and struggles to maintain basic mental stability. The story becomes darker when the narrator meets Susana, a flatmate with schizophrenia who reflects some of her own struggles and pushes her further into mental and material crisis.

The story is told by the narrator herself, in a calm but sometimes disturbing tone. Navarro writes in a simple and direct way, but she creates a strong emotional impact, especially when describing mental instability. The narrative is split into two parts. In the first, we read the disturbing story that Susana tells Elisa — a sordid and fragmented account marked by her schizophrenia and marginal life experiences. In the second part, Elisa takes over the narration in the first person, describing how her own economic situation deteriorated: she was fired from a publishing house and rehired as a precarious external collaborator. These events lead to a series of anxiety attacks. This narrative structure not only contrasts two forms of vulnerability but also destabilizes the reader's sense of perspective, showing how precarious living can erode both mental stability and personal identity.

The political relevance of *A Working Woman* is tied to its exploration of a new form of subjectivity

shaped by neoliberalism: what some theorists have called the “precarious subject.” Drawing on thinkers such as Judith Butler and Isabell Lorey, we might say that Navarro's characters embody the condition of *precarization*—a mode of life in which economic insecurity is internalized, naturalized, and even aestheticized. The narrator, in particular, exemplifies what Lorey in *State of Insecurity* (2015) calls “self-precarization”: she disciplines herself, blames herself for her failures, and remains locked in a cycle of productivity and collapse.

But *A Working Woman* goes beyond sociological description. Its power lies in how it formalizes these conditions narratively and aesthetically. The novel's fragmentation, shifts in voice, and ambiguous temporality all contribute to a sense of ontological instability that mirrors the narrator's lived reality. Navarro uses literary form not to resolve her characters' crises but to inhabit them. This formal experimentation is not merely stylistic; it reflects the impossibility of narrative coherence under the pressure of precarity. The result is a novel that is both disturbing and politically urgent—one that forces the reader to confront the consequences of a system that makes life itself precarious.

The question *A Working Woman* poses—How does one narrate a life that no longer holds together?—is both literary and political. It challenges traditional modes of storytelling and disrupts the neoliberal myth of individual agency and resilience. Instead of overcoming adversity, Navarro's narrator is slowly undone by it. Rather than a triumph over circumstance, the novel takes the reader into the everyday struggle of trying to survive when every structure of support—employment, housing, friendship, even language—has become unstable.

The reception of *A Working Woman* in Spain reflects the novel's unsettling impact. Though it was not a commercial bestseller, it garnered critical acclaim for its daring subject matter and psychological depth. Critics praised Navarro's capacity to portray mental illness without romanticizing it, and to render visible the invisible burdens of the crisis years. The novel has since become a key text in discussions of precarity and literature, often studied alongside works by Rafael Chirbes (*En la orilla*), Marta Sanz (*Clavícula*), and Isaac Rosa (*La habitación oscura*).

Elvira Navarro herself has often resisted being labeled a “political” writer. Yet in *A Working Woman*, her refusal to provide catharsis, her commitment to depicting discomfort and disintegration, and her interest in the invisible costs of neoliberalism all mark her as an essential voice in Spain's contemporary literary-political landscape. The novel insists that mental suffering and economic hardship are not isolated phenomena, but deeply connected experiences shaped by historical and political forces.

In this way, *A Working Woman* expands the possibilities of what political fiction can be. It offers no slogans, no heroes, no solutions. What it gives instead is a form of radical exposure—a narrative of bodies and minds stretched to the limit, a testament to the quiet violence of ordinary life under late capitalism.

LANGUAGE: Spanish / Español

CENSORSHIP STATUS: