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**Motherhood at the Crossroads:
A Deconstruction of Gender, Class, and Race
in Leïla Slimani's *Chanson Douce***

Defne Koyluoglu '24
Phillips Exeter Academy
New Hampshire, USA

Abstract

This study examines the portrayal of femininity, motherhood, and race in Leïla Slimani's novel, *Chanson Douce*. More specifically, it analyzes Slimani's storytelling and character depictions to uncover both implicit biases against working mothers and racial preferences in nanny hiring. The research delves into how the 2016 novel prompts readers to confront their own biases toward working women and women in non-traditional roles, making it pertinent to contemporary discussions on neo-momism and womanhood. The research is based upon Slimani's novel, interviews, other published works, and personal views and role in how race is perceived in France; and also, upon various additional feminist theorists' works, including Hélène Cixous and Simone de Beauvoir. Utilizing feminist theories and French cultural context, *Chanson Douce* implicitly alludes to the aforementioned themes. Her nuanced representation of these themes enriches comprehension of modern feminist literature, providing distinct perspectives that challenge societal norms and prejudices. This is particularly true when discussing race, as Slimani purposefully chooses when and when not to acknowledge the racial dynamic present between her characters. *Chanson Douce* effectively sheds light on crucial aspects of human experiences and societal dynamics, allowing Slimani to comment on neo-momism, class, and ethnicity in contemporary France.

Introduction

Femininity, while present in all cultures, takes different forms and is subject to several gender stereotypes that honor centuries-old patriarchal traditions. Indeed, women have been relegated to the domain of maternity, care, and affection due to their biology and other traits that are often associated with their gender. These include archetypes like the 1950s housewife, Victorian etiquette, and the chief role of wife and mother.

Femininity, womanhood, and differences associated with gender and biology have been heavily discussed and debated by a large number of female authors and gender equality advocates. Hélène Cixous was among these pioneering feminists from the last century. In her 1975 piece, *Le Rire de la Méduse*, Cixous discusses *l'écriture féminine* or how women can use writing as a space to reclaim power, autonomy, and freedom:

Every woman has known the torment of getting up to speak. Her heart racing, at times entirely at the loss of words, ground and language slipping away – that’s how daring a feat, how great a transgression it is for a woman to speak—even just open her mouth – in public.¹

Here, Cixous comments on the simultaneous difficulty and importance of being a female author and speaking about the issues that matter most to women within society through the process of writing. Simone de Beauvoir, another renowned thinker, explored the same concepts. In her famous 1949 book, *Le Deuxième Sexe*, she reflects on the “social, not biological, construction of femininity,”² by arguing that, “The ideal of feminine beauty is variable; but certain requirements remain constant; amongst other things, since the woman is destined to be possessed, her body must offer the inert and passive qualities of an object.”³ Beauvoir considers the job that is assigned to women to fulfill its inhuman realities, such as complete objectivity. Complexities of this quote are revealed when compared to the writings of her peer, Michel Foucault, a contrarian transdisciplinary theorist. In Foucault’s writing, he develops the idea of thinking differently about the opposite sex, however, this difference is not an othering factor, it is neutral and disengaged.⁴ The neutrality introduced by Foucault ends the perpetuity of the required

¹ Hélène Cixous. *Le Rire de la Méduse*. 2010.

² UNC Chapel Hill. *Le Deuxième Sexe (The Second Sex) (1949)* by Simone de Beauvoir.

³ Simone de Beauvoir. *Le Deuxième Sexe*. 1949.

⁴ Roe Sybylla. *Making Our Freedom: Feminism and Ethics from Beauvoir to Foucault*.

objectivity that Beauvoir claims is vital. It is female theorists like Cixous and Beauvoir, as well as philosophers like Foucault, who paved the way for modern-day female authors and feminists to continue fighting for female liberation within the patriarchal order.

A third author, Leïla Slimani, brings a new twist to these feminist discussions. She further expands on these sociological debates by involving more topical feminist preoccupations, such as race and class. This research explores how Slimani's 2016 novel, *Chanson Douce*, weaves together themes of femininity, race, and motherhood, resulting in an engaging story that seeks to deconstruct the intricacies of human connections and societal norms. Through her two female protagonists, Myriam and Louise, Slimani presents a nuanced portrayal that exposes the intricate relationships between womanhood, motherhood, class, and race in today's globalized society.

Dissecting Racial Constructs: Insights into Slimani's Personal and Literary Worlds

Leïla Slimani is a French-Moroccan journalist whose work explores the boundaries of psychological, biological, and historical fiction. After leaving her native Morocco to study political science and media studies at Sciences Po and ESCP Europe, she worked as a journalist for *Jeune Afrique* until 2011. Three years later she published her first fictional novel in 2014 titled *Dans le Jardin de L'ogre*, which explores a French woman of North African descent's struggle with sex addiction. In 2016, she won the Prix Goncourt for her second novel, *Chanson Douce*, which allowed her to become an internationally known novelist. Lauren Collins in 2017 discussed the novel in *The New Yorker* claiming, "I was both beguiled and a little shocked by Slimani's audacity in laying claim to [the story of *Chanson Douce*]." ⁵ One can argue that her highly visually detailed but casual writing style and exploration gave new perspectives on harmful societal norms.

Slimani is currently in the process of writing her third novel in a trilogy called *Le Pays des Autres*. This trilogy's stories are rooted in her own family's experience during Morocco's period of decolonization in the 1950s. This research, however, focuses strictly on her novel *Chanson Douce* – the most-read book in France in 2016 given its complex and troubling exploration of motherhood, femininity, and their interconnectedness with issues of race and class. In this novel, Slimani troubles her readers with a subtle and raw portrayal of motherhood through one of the most gruesome and tragic infanticides known to

⁵ The New Yorker. The Killer-Nanny Novel That Conquered France. 2017.

French literature. The first sentence of the novel reads, “The baby is dead,”⁶ immediately portraying death as a central theme throughout the novel. Here, Slimani appears to be influenced by Albert Camus’ *The Stranger*, whose famous first line is “Today, Mom is dead.”⁷ In a published interview, *Comment J’écris*, Slimani admits that motherhood was at the forefront of her mind while writing this novel, given that she is a mother herself. However, she is also conscious of how motherhood intersects with the graphic and gruesome details of infanticide, inspired by the 2012 infanticide of two children in New York by their nanny, portrayed in the book. She describes how her family was shocked upon reading the novel, indicating the impact of the narrative’s content: “This is the scene that traumatized my whole family. When they read the manuscript before publication, they said, ‘No, but really, that you can imagine such horrible things, we will forever be amazed.’”⁸

Slimani is also the personal representative of Emmanuel Macron, the current French president, within the *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie*. This role is interesting, as it puts her in a position where she is expected to be an advocate for diversity in the Francophone world, which conflicts with her troubling and color-blind statement about not believing in race: “I don’t believe in race. In France, we never use this word. You have a nationality, or maybe you have an ethnicity, an identity, but I don’t like this word.”⁹ This statement is both troubling and opens the opportunity for readers to question her intersectional activism. Readers can wonder whether or not she is more than an acolyte to French values with no true understanding of the implications that race plays in the lives of women in France and beyond. On one hand, she is the face of la Francophonie and la *diversité* in France, yet she perpetuates French Republican values of color blindness, which conflict with her prior claims of using her writing to fight for women of all races and walks of life.

In France, students are taught that race does not scientifically exist and should not be used in relation to French citizens. The idea of racism is taught to secondary-school-aged students; however, there is a theoretical finger pointed at the United States, blaming the country for the existence of racism, a dramatic oversight of colonial history in France, and racism as it exists in France. In these classroom settings, race

⁶ Leïla Slimani. *Chanson Douce*, 2016. 1.

⁷ Albert Camus. *L’Étranger*. 1942. 1.

⁸ Leïla Slimani. *Comment J’écris*. 2017.

⁹ Rebecca Carroll. REBEL: Author Leila Slimani Explains Why She Doesn’t Like the Word ‘Race’. *Gothamist*. February 27, 2019.

is not used to refer to people, as it is considered inhumane. The word “race” was even removed from the French Constitution in 2018.¹⁰

Slimani does, however, acknowledge her racial and ethnic background. In an interview with *Words Without Borders* discussing postcolonial trauma, she says, “I’m a mixed-race person: I’m both French and Moroccan, I speak Arabic and French, and I’m part Muslim, part Christian.”¹¹ As she continues to reflect on her study of post-colonial Morocco for her newest trilogy, *Dans Le Pays des Autres*, she acknowledges the scandal of her grandmother’s marriage to an Arab man, as a white woman. She reflects, “It was accepted when it was a Frenchman having sex with an Arab woman (Frenchmen conquered the country, so they could conquer the women, too) but it was different when it was a white woman having sex with my grandfather, who was dark-skinned and very manly.”¹² During the period after Morocco gained independence, in the second half of the 19th century, a new conversation was inspired regarding subjectivity and the subjectivity of ethnicity. Foucault writes in *The Subject and Power* “...nowadays, the struggle against the forms of subjection – against the submission of subjectivity – is becoming more and more important, even though the struggles against forms of domination and exploitation have not disappeared.”¹³ In her comments about the conquering of Moroccan women and culture, Slimani emphasizes the forms of domination present, but, by focusing on her grandmother’s scandal, she follows Foucault’s argument that the interest has since changed to forms of submission. Throughout the rest of the interview, Slimani reflects on her childhood, including how speaking French at home in an Arab country was one of the scars that colonialism left on her family. She mentions that in France, colonialism is a topic many do not want to speak about, so she tries to gloss over it. While she discusses the colonization of Morocco and race issues and analyzes French culture’s intersection with that of Morocco, she, nor her publishers, ever use her ethnicity as a marketing point. However, Slimani’s government role as the face of the Francophonie inherently includes discussions of race, especially about the French versus Francophone peoples throughout the world.

¹⁰ Rokhaya Diallo. Opinion: France’s Dangerous Move to Remove ‘Race’ from Its Constitution. The Washington Post.

¹¹ Madeleine Feeny. “You Belong Nowhere”: Leïla Slimani on the Trauma of Colonialism and Her Forthcoming Novel. *Words Without Borders*. July 29, 2021.

¹² Madeleine Feeny. “You Belong Nowhere”: Leïla Slimani on the Trauma of Colonialism and Her Forthcoming Novel.

¹³ Michel Foucault. *The Subject and Power*. 1982. 6.

In the same interview with *Words Without Borders*, Slimani reflects on themes and struggles of motherhood and its relationship with freedom:

You feel hurt when you look at your children and want to abandon them, be alone, or return to the time before motherhood...How do you live with this metaphysical, very universal, very complex feeling that is simultaneously love and entrapment? You can also feel it in marriage, in work; sometimes the thing you love the most is also the thing that makes you feel most alienated. As a human being, you are always seeking freedom, and the more you grow up, the more you understand that freedom is very complicated. To be truly free, you would need to have no attachments.¹⁴

These themes of motherhood were explored in Myriam's character throughout *Chanson Douce*. Throughout the story, she struggles with wanting to return to her professional life, but having to also take care of the children, or feeling as though she inadequately does so, leaves her trapped between both lives. Like Myriam's character, Slimani is also a working mother. Her introspection to her experience is shared through her books, and because she is one of the first to explicitly acknowledge these difficult feelings, it has become part of her brand.

Distorting the Mary Poppins Archetype: Louise the Monstrous Caregiver

Slimani's *Chanson Douce* was inspired by the 2012 death of two American children, murdered by their Dominican nanny. She imagines a similar story, except she bases it on Paris and portrays the nanny as a white, French woman. The book starts in the present day, amidst a gory murder scene of two infant children, Adam and Mila, who are being rushed to the hospital. Myriam, their mother, is described thoroughly throughout this chapter. Slimani uses phrases like, "The mother was in a state of shock," or, "It only took a couple seconds."¹⁵ These types of phrases mimic a police report, portraying the image of the scene and allowing the reader to get emotionally involved and become a part of this investigation.

The rest of the book is a flashback starting a year before the murder when Myriam was ready to end her career as a stay-at-home housewife and return to her career as an attorney. Myriam is unique to

¹⁴ Madeleine Feeny. "You Belong Nowhere": Leïla Slimani on the Trauma of Colonialism and Her Forthcoming Novel.

¹⁵ Leïla Slimani. *Chanson Douce*, 2016. 13, 14.

the story in the context that she is Moroccan, and married to a white man, Paul Massé. When she and Paul look for a nanny for their children, they find Louise to be the *Perfect Nanny*.¹⁶ Louise was a native French speaker, well-mannered, seemingly clean-cut, and above all, white. Quickly, she became a vital member of the Massé household, cooking, cleaning, and caring for the children, as well as giving herself and her time to the job, sometimes staying the night there. Paul and Myriam later decide to bring Louise along on a family vacation to Greece. During this trip, Louise reveals that she does not know how to swim, a revelation that deeply upsets Paul as he feels embarrassed by her, and so he commits the rest of his vacation to teach Louise how to swim. This is one of the first times Paul and Myriam confront the class differences between themselves and Louise. Throughout the rest of the novel, similar class and race-based tensions arrive more and more frequently. Through these tensions, the reader learns more about Louise's background with an abusive husband, Jacques, and a runaway daughter, Stéphanie.

As Patricia Uberoi writes in *Sociology, Gender, Family Studies: Regressive Incorporations*, "The family is a basic source of domination and oppression: of...men over women and children...the family is (or could or should be) the source of important social values – of love and caring... – that 'healthy' families are the basis of 'healthy' society."¹⁷ In combining this idea – that if someone comes from a healthy family, they will become a healthy contributor to society – with the storyline of *Chanson Douce*, Slimani adds layers to Louise's character. Without having come from a healthy family, Louise falls into a pattern of idolization in the Massé household, pretending it is flawless. She begins to live vicariously through the Massé household, believing that she deserves to be a part of their family as a way to escape the reality of her miserable life of poverty and loneliness.

After shifting the focus away from Louise and the Massé family, the final chapter does not continue to build up to the murder; rather, it is an epilogue written from the perspective of the detective in charge of the murder case. The final note that is implied is that the detective does not know, and will never know, why Louise killed the children – a narrative tactic used by Slimani to empower her readers to reach their conclusions. The race and class-based tensions against Louise, as well as an expectation of Myriam to never return to her law profession because of

¹⁶ The *Perfect Nanny* is the title of *Chanson Douce* when translated for British audiences. The direct translation of *Chanson Douce* is Sweet Song, similar to the American translation of the title: *Lullaby*.

¹⁷ Patricia Uberoi. *Sociology, Gender, Family Studies: Regressive Incorporations*.

its long hours, identical to those of her husband, turn the reader against Myriam for choosing to confide her children to a stranger to pursue her career goals. By leading the reader to believe that the murder of her infant children is Myriam's fault, rather than that of Louise, Slimani makes a point of the tasking expectations put upon the working mother. Through the use of this narrative thread, Slimani brings attention to the unreasonable expectations that are put on the modern woman who is expected to both care for her children and yet continue to contribute to the household by joining the labor force, even though the infanticide was committed by someone else. Myriam is indirectly blamed for the death of her kids, while her husband, who was equally involved in the selection of their perfect nanny, is not.

To add further layers to this commentary on the complexity of gender relations and the unreasonable expectations put on women in modern society, Slimani decides to bring race into the mix. Her choice to make Louise's character simultaneously white, and less rich than the Massés points out a disturbance in the country's historically sound system rooted in monarchy, colonialism, and racial prejudices. In an interview with *Vogue*, Slimani said, "The fact that Louise performs work that is usually done by immigrants only adds to her feeling of being socially downgraded."¹⁸ Louise's race gives her a significant advantage over other candidates for the nannying position, being that the rest were immigrants and women of color. This is one of the many ways the racial dynamic – Louise being white and Myriam being a woman of color – is used as a tool for Slimani to make a point of unconscious biases that may be ingrained in her reader's minds. The couple wishes to have a white nanny, believing that she will do a better job of raising their children than a woman of color. However, they overlook the fact that Myriam, herself, is a woman of color on the basis that she is wealthy, further complicating the novel. In the scene where Paul and Myriam are interviewing babysitting applicants, "Myriam was very clear. She did not want to hire a *Maghrébine*¹⁹ to babysit."²⁰

In addition to this classism, the first half of the timeline in Slimani's book continues to depict Louise as essentially flawless. Only later is vital information regarding her inability to take care of her daughter, Stéphanie, whom she severely abused and neglected, revealed. The relationship between Louise and Stéphanie is extreme, to the point where Louise is disgusted by her own daughter. Halfway through the

¹⁸ Leïla Slimani for *Vogue*. 'It's Impossible to Tell the Story of Morocco Without Employing Sensuality': An Interview with Author Leila Slimani. 2022.

¹⁹ Term for a North African person.

²⁰ Slimani. *Chanson Douce*. 29.

book, Slimani writes, “Louise, definitely, hates the weekends...Stéphanie complained of doing nothing on Sundays, of not having the right to engage in the activities that Louise organized for the other children.”²¹ This background information tells a story contradicting the pre-existing notion of Louise’s seemingly picturesque resume, thus further complicating the Massés’ racially motivated approach to choosing the perfect nanny, which sadly led them to choose the most unfit caregiver. Incorporating Stéphanie into Louise’s archetype allows Slimani to play into the ideologies of authors such as Terry Caesar in *Motherhood and Postmodernism*; “...in the space where the mother is, there is room for one story only: the child, as a child, is to be referred to its origin, where the mother stands ready to provide care and nurture.”²² Allowing Louise to be defined by the children (both from Louise’s and the Massé family) agrees with Caesar’s claim, making Louise’s failing relationship with Stéphanie, and Myriam’s continuation of a professional life, define them both as “bad” mothers.

Louise was quick to disown her background when she began working for the Massé family. Believing she deserves to live the lavish, central Parisian life of her employers, Louise loses herself in her work and loves Adam and Mila obsessively. However, this obsession slowly veers into her viewing them as her very own children, and she begins feeling as though she is the fifth member of the family by making herself indispensable. When the children start gaining independence, she goes as far as wanting to arrange for the couple to have intercourse to conceive a third child, which would potentially enable her to extend her presence in the family home. When she realizes that the couple has no intention of having another child and that the clock is ticking, Louise’s mental state deteriorates and she transforms into the monstrous and murderous caregiver that Slimani’s readers know her to be from the very first line of the novel.

Distorting the Perfect Mother Archetype: Myriam’s New-Age Motherhood and Internalized Racism

As the mother of the story’s victims, Myriam’s character takes an interesting role. She is split between being a good mother who is expected to take care of her children, and her dreams and aspiration to succeed in her career as a lawyer. After Louise manages to make herself indispensable to the family in an attempt to never leave her new life, Myriam has close to no role in the children’s lives, and she hands off all her parental duties to Louise who steps in at the most essential mother-

²¹ Slimani. *Chanson Douce*. 99.

²² Terry Caesar. *Motherhood and Postmodernism*. 1995.

child moments and takes full care of the kids' daily needs. Paul, of course, still sees Myriam as his wife and does not acknowledge Louise all that much. He is very dismissive toward her and after the previously mentioned Greece trip, he begins to dislike her, as she is no longer seen as the perfect nanny in light of her poverty. As Cixous writes in *Le Rire de la Méduse*, "...a woman is never far from 'mother' (I mean outside her role functions: the 'mother' as non-names as a source of goods). There is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink."²³ Here, Cixous writes about the societal constraints of motherhood, which Slimani portrays through Myriam, who, while minimally acting as a mother, cannot escape the maternal role in the novel. This is apparent both in the home and at work, because of the multitude of expectations placed on her. Among these, due in part to Paul's lack of involvement, is Myriam's role as Louise's primary employer. This job is an addition to her "motherly duties." It gets added onto her long and tasking work schedule, which is identical to her husband, who is not nearly as participatory in the household. This is why, as the story retraces the year leading up to the murder, the reader subconsciously begins to blame Myriam for the children's deaths. The reader asks questions such as, why did she trust the children with someone who would eventually murder them? Were there signs of violence from Louise that Myriam overlooked out of convenience to continue her job? What if Myriam came home earlier every day, and spent more time observing Louise's interactions with her children? But the question that Slimani is asking is, why is Myriam the one blamed when she and Paul worked an equal number of hours and came home late an equal number of days? The answer is that there is a preexisting expectation for mothers to live only to serve their duty to society as maternal contributors, with no room for forgiveness. In *Deviant Care: Chanson Douce and the Killer Nanny*, Julie Rodgers writes "It is clear from the outset in *Chanson Douce* that the myth of motherhood does not correspond to the lived experience...Myriam's sense [is] that she is being physically consumed and psychologically unhinged by mothering..."²⁴ The guilt of not having a traditional spot in her children's lives eats at Myriam. She struggles with splitting her commitment between herself and her children, rather than fully committing to them.

Unlike her relationship with Louise, Myriam's race is not a point of tension in her relationship with her husband. During the period of French colonization of Morocco, it was fully accepted for a white man to be romantically or sexually involved with an Arab woman. These types of relationships just became extensions of the conquering of Morocco

²³ Hélène Cixous. *Le Rire de la Méduse*. 2010.

²⁴ Julie Rodgers. *Deviant Care: Chanson Douce and the Killer Nanny*.

and its culture. Especially evident in one scene of the book, Wafa, another nanny that Louise befriends at the park, and someone who is clearly of immigrant status in France, shows the race difference and alienation applied to and expected of nannies in Paris. Another notable detail is that Myriam, being a biblical name coming from the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus, and Saint Mary Magdalene, is a popular name in both France and Morocco. Miriam is the traditional French spelling, but this name choice was entirely intentional on Slimani's part for its fluidity in both countries' cultures. Her name has a deep history in both countries and continues the dynamic of her representation in both countries.

Throughout the story, it also becomes evident how Myriam's financial standing bestows upon her certain advantages that other women of her race may not readily enjoy. Her character is used to show how socioeconomic dynamics and wealth impact a person's life. Being that her wealth status undoubtedly puts her in a powerful position compared to other women of her race, she is an educated and ambitious professional with an expanded roster of opportunities. Ultimately propelling her career forward, her well-paying job and high education are a rarity among other Moroccan women mentioned in the book. Her greatest wealth-based advantage is having the ability to hire a nanny like Louise. Because of this advantage, she can dedicate more time to forwarding her career. Myriam's wealth effectively relieves the burdens of domestic labor and eases her children's impact on her life. As well as this, she has the choice of which nanny to choose and decides based on a racial preference. Myriam's wealth-based privilege is subtly shown throughout the book. Enjoying cultural and leisurely activities out of reach for others, her financial status shapes her identity and self-perception. Her wealth, however, does not entirely shield her from the reality of racial prejudice and discrimination. She still faces subtle bias and microaggressions explicitly mentioned in the story, as well as the implicit awkwardness of the racial preference of a white nanny, by an Arab woman.

The Crossroads of Care: Disturbing Encounters of Motherhood and Mother-work

The nanny-mother or employee-employer dynamic between Louise and Myriam is the central theme of *Chanson Douce*. It shows the intricacy of power, dependency, and blurred boundaries in their relationship. Originally, Louise's entry into Myriam's life seems promising, but as faults such as underlying tensions and complexities become apparent, it is clear this is not the case. Louise's character is

introduced with an unassuming and nurturing presence. Slimani portrays the power dynamics with Myriam in the dominant role as the employer, and Louise is dependent on her employment for financial stability. As Louise weasels herself into the family, she starts to become an integral member. She maintains a possessive affection toward Mila and Adam, often asserting her authority over them and making decisions without consulting Myriam. The trip to Greece raised concerns for Myriam since it is where she begins to grapple with gratitude for Louise's commitment as well as discomfort in her level of involvement in their lives. Slowly, throughout the novel, the power dynamic shifts. The revelation that Louise has secretly been living in the family's apartment further disrupts the balance. This hidden living arrangement not only invades Myriam's personal space but also alters the dynamic, as now Louise has further insight into the family's private life. Myriam's sense of security shatters and she begins to feel vulnerable in her own home.

Louise also envies Myriam's affluent lifestyle. The slight tension there causes Louise to be simultaneously in awe of and resentful towards Myriam's privilege. That dynamic is visible in scenes such as when Louise accompanies Myriam to a high-society party. At that moment, her discomfort and sense of inadequacy are evident, furthering the divide between the two women. Louise's financial dependency on the family keeps her in a position of subservience. She is acutely aware that her livelihood is tied to her ability to maintain a *façade* of being the perfect nanny, causing her to suppress her frustrations and insecurities. This is visible as Louise goes to great lengths to appear agreeable and devoted to Myriam. Near the climax of the novel, Myriam decides to part ways with Louise.

Paul's initial views of Louise align with Myriam's. However, as the narrative progresses, Paul and Louise's interactions take on a different tone than those between Myriam and Louise. Paul becomes increasingly uncomfortable with Louise's intense attachment to their children, perceiving it as excessive and possessive. He also goes to lengths to embarrass her, when she embarrasses him. During the Greece trip, after Paul lashes out at Louise, he commits the remaining vacation time to teaching her how to swim and infantilizing her, by requiring her to wear children's floaties on her arms to show her childlike knowledge of swimming. He is also continuously disgusted by her thinness because it reminds him of her poverty. He says, "You are so petite that even children's armbands fit you!"²⁵ Louise's presence also causes a greater distance between Paul and Myriam's relationship. He feels excluded and replaced in some aspects of parenting. This leads to feelings of jealousy

²⁵ Slimani. *Chanson Douce*. 81.

and insecurity for Paul, and his interactions with Louise bring to light the issue of gender dynamics within the employee-employer relationship. Louise's traditional characteristics of caregiving and domestic responsibility evoke a sense of masculine pride in Paul. He is discomfited by Louise's ability to effortlessly care for the children and maintain the household, as he feels the urge to assert his significance and contribution to the family. Louise challenges Paul's preconceived notions about social class and privilege. He is often embarrassed by her working-class background, in social events together.

One of the key traditional traits of being a good mother is selflessness and undivided dedication to one's children. Myriam, as a mother, is expected to prioritize her children above all else. However, as she immerses herself in her career, the boundary between motherhood and professional life is blurred. Myriam struggles with guilt, conflicted feelings, and a desire to excel in her career while staying present for her children. She fears that Louise is replacing her role as the mother. Louise takes on the traditional caring role of the mother figure. She cares for Adam and Mila deeply and her excessive devotion removes the children's autonomy. There is competition and jealousy between Myriam and Louise.

Another traditional maternal trait is being able to provide for one's children. Myriam's professional and financial success allows her to ensure a comfortable life for her children with access to plentiful opportunities. Louise struggles to provide for her own family, much less the Massés. Myriam holds the upper hand in this dynamic, and Louise is left vulnerable at the mercy of her employers who slowly develop a deep hatred and disgust towards her and her poverty. The societal expectation of mothers as caregivers and homemakers impacts Louise's perception of her worth and identity. She finds purpose and validation in her role as the nanny, equating her value as a person with her ability to care for the children. This blurring of boundaries between her personal identity and professional role leads to a sense of possessiveness and pride over the children, which later escalates into a chaotic scene resulting in a monstrous infanticide. Effectively, Louise's self-worth becomes tied to her position within the family – she would rather be in jail for murder than be alone and vulnerable.

Conclusion

In *Chanson Douce*, issues of class, gender, race, and motherhood intertwine to create a compelling narrative that delves into the complexities of human relationships and societal expectations. Through

the characters of Myriam and Louise, Slimani skillfully examines the dynamics of power, dependency, and blurred boundaries in the nanny-mother or employer-employee relationship. Slimani's masterful storytelling weaves together the racial, gender, and class dynamics of modern Paris, challenging social norms and shedding light on the complexities of motherhood and womanhood. The characters of Myriam and Louise represent the broader struggle that women face in modern society, balancing their aspirations with societal expectations and the ever-evolving notion of femininity. *Chanson Douce* serves as a thought-provoking exploration of the multifaceted nature of womanhood and the impact of race, class, and motherhood on human relationships. Slimani prompts the reader to reflect on their own biases and societal pressures that shape individual experiences.

After publishing *Chanson Douce*, Slimani made a profound impact on the French literary world and beyond, and the novel's success catapulted her into international fame. Her other texts, specifically *Dans Le Jardin de L'Ogre*, continue to explore themes of femininity and monstrosity in ways that keep the readers intrigued by her disturbing narrative choices. Her leading female characters always have a vice that exposes them to society's harsh realities and they are all seen undergoing psychological fights that reveal the harsh battles that many modern women universally face. In *Chanson Douce*, Myriam's voice was her seeming inability to reconcile between motherhood and work, and not only did it cause a psychological dilemma for her, but it even cost her the lives of her own children. Beyond the literary realm, Slimani's work sparked vital conversations on gender, race, and class dynamics, fostering greater awareness and empathy for the complicated lives that women lead throughout the world. As such, her contributions continue to inspire and shape discussions on social issues worldwide.

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