

Women, Mothers, and Monsters in Leïla Slimani's Novel *Dans Le Jardin de l'Ogre*

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Article History: Submitted on 19th September 2020; Accepted on 25th November 2020;
Published on 31th December 2020

ABSTRACT

Leïla Slimani's novel *Dans le Jardin de l'Ogre* (2014) examines the elements that influence the development and the construction of female sexuality outside the mainstream or the norms. Borrowings from the theories of Rossi Braidotti, the aspects of motherhood on the one side and the monstrosity of women on the other side are explored through this research. Content analysis of the story is used as the research method, as it enables the convenient review of applicable and relevant data, i.e. the polarization between mothers and monsters. The data is collected and categorized according to that polarization. This study employs the notes technique as its research technique. It finds that, in *Dans le Jardin de l'Ogre*, women are depicted as internalizing values that support the dominant constructs of their sexuality usually constructed under the masculine social regime. As a result, women face severe consequences if they exhibit sexuality that is considered as outside the norms.

Keywords: construction, female sexuality, mother, monster

ABSTRAK

Novel Dans le Jardin de l'Ogre (2014) karya Leïla Slimani mengandung aspek-aspek yang menjelaskan konstruksi seksualitas perempuan dengan penggambaran yang keluar dari pandangan mainstream yang normatif. Penggambaran perempuan sebagai mothers di satu sisi dan monster di sisi lain menjadi aspek yang ditinjau dalam penelitian ini dengan menggunakan lensa konsep women as mothers dan monsters karya Rossi Braidotti. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode analisis isi cerita (content analysis). Metode tersebut digunakan untuk dapat meninjau lebih jauh narasi yang terdapat di dalam novel sesuai

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26714/lensa.10.2.2020.179-189>

dengan aspek-aspek yang ada pada teori. Data yang terdiri dari narasi dan dialog antar tokoh dikumpulkan dan dikategorikan sesuai dengan polarisasi perempuan sebagai *mothers* dan *monsters*. Teknik yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah teknik simak catat. Hasil penelitian mengenai konstruksi seksualitas ini menunjukkan penginternalisasian nilai yang mendukung terjadinya konstruksi seksualitas perempuan di dalam novel *Dans le Jardin de l'Ogre*. Penginternalisasian nilai-nilai tersebut menyebabkan seorang perempuan harus menerima konsekuensi ketika ia menunjukkan seksualitasnya yang secara umum diposisikan keluar dari norma.

Kata kunci: konstruksi, seksualitas, perempuan, mother, monster

INTRODUCTION

Feminist discourses have developed rapidly since the onset of the second wave of feminism in 1970. Over time, scholars have increasingly applied gender perspectives to critically analyze social and literary phenomena, thereby creating spaces that are free of inequality and injustices that, though potentially experienced by men, most commonly impact women. These feminist discourses have expanded to cover a wide range of topics, including sexuality, with extreme perspectives commonly being used to highlight current inequalities. Where adultery is most commonly practiced by men, in literature it is sometimes presented as a woman's activity. Such feminist works urge readers to wonder adultery is commonly accepted when done by men, but not by women. Take, for example, Gustave Flaubert's famous novel *Madame Bovary*, which challenged the sexual mores of nineteenth-century French society by reversing its expectations.

Leïla Slimani's novel *Dans le Jardin de l'Ogre* (2014), translated into English as *Adèle* (2019), is another novel that deals with the theme of adultery. It follows a young woman named Adèle, who loses control of her life and her family because of her sexuality. Adèle is narrated as a serial adulterer, as a result of which she neglects her son. Upon learning of Adèle's extramarital affair, her husband Richard begins to obsess over her every activity, and as a result she loses the freedom that she had found in adultery. In its narrative, this novel presents several elements that contribute to the construction of female sexuality and societal morality.

The topics of sexuality and women are commonly linked, with various writers seeking to solve the mystery of "women" and their sexuality. Groneman (1994) associates this with the term *nymphomania*, through which women's sexuality is defined as abnormal, as something that both frightens and arouses men. In his book *The Freudian Mystique*, Slipp (1993) writes that women have historically been identified with irrationality, with the creation of lust, and with

destruction. This abnormality is further highlighted by the fact that, throughout the 19th century and into the 20th century, women with high libidos were perceived as suffering mental illness. Together with women's roles as mothers and as wives, this sexuality is a main theme of *Dans le Jardin de l'Ogre*.

Leïla Slimani, the author of *Dans le Jardin de l'Ogre*, is a Francophone journalist. She was born in Rabat, Morocco, to an intellectual family; her mother is an otorhinolaryngologist, while her father is a famous economist. After receiving graduating from a French-standard secondary school, she studied political and communication science at Sciences Po, Paris. For her debut novel, the one discussed in this study—*Dans Le Jardin de l'Ogre*—Slimani received the La Mamounia Literary Award. She received greater fame in 2016, after she received the Prix Goncourt for her novel *Chanson Douce* (translated in the United States as *The Perfect Nanny* and in the United Kingdom as *Lullaby*). Slimani was subsequently appointed by President Emmanuel Macron as his personal representative in the International Organisation of La Francophonie, an association of Francophone nations.

Of her works, the novel *Dans Le Jardin de l'Ogre* is particularly interesting owing to its frank discussion of sexuality, which is interesting not only because this topic is rarely encroached by women authors from Moroccan Muslim families, but also because this French-language novel has been read not only in France, but also in Morocco and in other Francophone countries. It can thus be positioned within the framework of a struggle against established norms and blatant gender disparities, particularly in Morocco. Such discussion of sexuality is important, as it is foundational for understanding and explaining gender relations and women's social positioning (Udasmoro, 2006). Michel Foucault (2012) argues that sexuality is linearly correlated with power; in other words, a group's ability to express its sexuality determines its specific political power.

Furthermore, this novel narrates the experiences of a woman who has married and become a mother, both of which inform her social construction. This novel also depicts a woman's secret life, through which she seeks individual freedom even as she is socially constructed as a wife and mother.

The novel *Dans Le Jardin de l'Ogre* has previously been discussed by scholars. Nessrine Naccach (2018), investigating the use of the term *ogre* in the novel and its title, argues that it refers to the main character, Adèle, and the deleterious effects of her inability to control her sexuality. Meanwhile, Sabrina Fatmi (2018) investigated gender roles and dominance in the novel, emphasizing that Adèle's lover is narrated solely in terms of his sexual function. Several aspects of the novel, thus, can be studied using a range of perspectives. The current study contributes an exploration of the novel's ironic positioning of women as mothers and monsters.

Asmara and Kusumaningrum (2018) argue that, in feminist poetry, the institutions of sex and marriage are most commonly "attacked" (read: deconstructed, reversed, and parodied). *Dans Le Jardin de l'Ogre* criticizes the institution of heterosexual marriage through its main character, Adèle. Frelick (2001) writes that women use several strategies to challenge heterosexual marriage and the patriarchy it embodies, including expressing their sexuality through homosexuality (lesbianism), becoming nuns, and having extramarital affairs. It is this last strategy that is used by Adèle, the main character.

In its discussion, this article refers to the theory of Rossi Braidotti. However, it only employs her concepts of mothers, wherein women are constructed as caregivers limited to the domestic realm, and monsters, wherein women are viewed as possessing a frightening and unnatural sexuality; these two concepts are most dominant in *Dans Le Jardin de l'Ogre*. Although Braidotti's theory also includes such concepts as womb envy—which posits that men envy women and their wombs, which provide them with complete control over the birthing process—these concepts are irrelevant to the novel and thus not employed.

METHOD

This study employs plot analysis to examine the construction of female sexuality, including its contributive factors, in Leïla Slimani's novel *Dans Le Jardin de l'Ogre*. Data, taking the form of narrative text or dialog that depicts the construction of women as mothers and monsters, were collected through a careful reading of the novel.

Research followed several stages. First, Leïla Slimani's novel *Dans Le Jardin de l'Ogre* was read carefully, with its contents fully understood. Second, the novel was reread; data were collected during this reading. Third, collected data were categorized and selected based on Rossi Braidotti's concepts of *mothers* and *monsters*. Fourth, selected data were analyzed and discussed in greater detail. The data analyzed using the content analysis of the story. The aspects found from the selected data were analyzed using the lenses of gender perspectives with the focus on the link between women's body and the position of women as mothers and monsters usually perceived by the society.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The events of the novel *Dans Le Jardin de l'Ogre* are inexorably linked to the construction of female sexuality, particularly through the simultaneous processes of mothering and monsterring. Braidotti (1997) writes that women are constructed as the binary opposites of men, being the 'negative' form of the

male 'default'. As Slipp (1993) women and femininity have commonly been perceived negatively. Men and masculinity are constructed as rational and orderly, while women and femininity are associated with lust, irrationality, and disorder (Udasmoro, 2012).

Such constructions of female sexuality are highlighted in the novel *Dans Le Jardin de l'Ogre* through its depiction of women as mothers and monsters. Sexuality is depicted as making Adèle, a mother, lose control of her life; her extramarital affairs are seen as detrimentally affecting those around her. In order to clearly understand the novel's construction of female sexuality, it is therefore necessary to investigate how Adèle is positioned as a mother and as a monster.

1. Women's Sexuality as Mothers

In her investigation of the division of domestic labor between parents, Nurhamida (2013) concludes that women handle the majority of caregiving duties. It is predominantly women who are expected to handle domestic affairs, an exploitive situation that results in women rarely having any opportunity to contribute to the public sphere (Udasmoro, 2017a). Even as many couples have sought a more equitable division of domestic labor, including childcare, disparity has remained (Udasmoro, 2017b). This situation that is staunchly criticized through the novel.

Adèle, the novel's main character, is described as a working mother who is happiest when she is at work, as it enables her to be "free" of her domestic life. Adèle desires to be free of her obligation to nurture Lucien, her son, and is frustrated by his self-centered behavior and his demand for her time and energy. For the first time in her life, Adèle must care for someone aside from herself. Although she does love her son, Adèle perceives Lucien as a burden. This can be seen in the following quote:

Lucien est un poids, une contrainte dont elle a du mal à s'accommoder. (Slimani, 2014: 39)

Lucien was a burden, something she could barely accommodate. (Slimani, 2014: 39)

Braidotti (1997) explains that, when women are constructed as mothers, they are expected to be responsible for nurturing children and guiding their development. If a child does not meet societal standards upon reaching adulthood, it is the mother who is blamed. Firestone (2003) argues that the repression of women is rooted in society's construction of their biological role in reproduction—i.e., their ability to give birth. The social and cultural roles of

women are constructed based on this biological function; women are viewed as agents responsible for ensuring the continuance of society, including by having children.

Such a situation is experienced by Adèle. After her husband discovers her adultery, her husband's main concern is that Adèle neglected their son in order to continue her extramarital affair. As stated below:

Elle essayait de lui expliquer le désir insatiable, la pulsion impossible à contenir, la détresse de ne pouvoir y mettre fin. Mais ce qui l'obsédait, lui, c'est qu'elle ait pu abandonner Lucien toute une après-midi pour retrouver un amant. (Slimani, 2014: 184–185)

Adèle tried to explain her urges to Richard, her uncontrolled lusts, her suffering when her desires went unfulfilled. But Richard could only think of how Adèle had left their son for the night so she could rendezvous with her lover. (Slimani, 2014: 184–185)

Ultimately, as a result of this incident, Adèle's husband Richard moves the family to a small hamlet on France's borders. He believes that restricting Adèle's mobility and limiting her to the domestic sphere will prevent any further adultery. This repression of her sexuality is legitimized based on Adèle's motherhood and the expectations it carries. In this novel, the author's concerns are not limited solely to the repression of women's sexuality, but their confinement to the domestic sphere, a "prison" wherein they may be rehabilitated. It is not a mere matter of adultery, but rather deeply entrenched in questions of women's domestic roles and their importance as mothers.

Ultimately, Adèle comes to perceive the joy of adultery as nothing but a momentary pleasure. She internalizes the values and the social constructs that have been imposed upon her. She feels guilty about her sexual activities, and promises herself that she will never have another affair, as seen in the following paragraph:

Adèle a peur. Elle voudrait être au lit avec Richard. Les portes et les fenêtres fermées. Lui ne permettrait pas ça. Il ne laisserait personne lui faire du mal, il saurait la défendre. Elle accélère le pas, tire Lauren pas le bras. Le plus vite possible, être à la maison, au chevet de Richard, sous son regard tranquille. Demain, elle préparera à dîner. Elle rangera la maison, elle achètera des fleurs. Elle boira du vin avec lui, elle lui racontera sa journée. Elle fera des projets pour le week-end. Elle sera conciliante, douce, servile. Elle dira oui à tout. (Slimani, 2014: 55–56)

Adèle was scared. She wanted to be in bed, next to Richard. With all of the doors and windows closed. Richard would not let anyone hurt her. Richard would protect her. She walked faster, gripping Lauren's arm. She wanted to

get home as soon as possible, to be by Richard's side, to feel the warmth of her husband's gaze. The following night, she would cook dinner. Adèle would clean the house; she would buy flowers; she would drink wine with Richard and tell him about her day. She would plan her weekend. Adèle would be calm, tender, and obeisant. She would say 'yes' to his every request. (Slimani, 2014: 55–56)

In the above paragraph, it can be seen that Adèle recognizes what is expected of her as a wife and as a mother. She has internalized these values, as doing so has allowed her to find her "place". She has married and become a mother to find a sense of security. Delphy and Hill (2016) argue that heterosexual marriage is a social construct that serves to strengthen and maintain the patriarchy. As such, heterosexual marriage predominantly benefits men, while women are expected to raise and nurture their children (read: the heirs of their husbands). Adèle has internalized these values, and consequently feels guilty after having an affair.

2. Women as Monsters

Braidotti (1997) writes that, for millennia, women have been marginalized as weak, passive, and irrational, and that these characteristics have been discursively reproduced to the extent that they are perceived as natural. Within this context, Braidotti links the discursive construction of women with that of monstrosity, of an abnormality that goes against the laws of nature. She argues that monsters are not only sources of fear, but also sources of awe. Braidotti draws parallels between women and monsters, writing that both create a sense of fear and awe, and both are framed as an "Other" opposed to a dominant "Self".

The mystery of women and their sexuality has been widely discussed in academia. However, the majority of this discourse has been dominated by male writers employing a phallogocentric paradigm, which influences their findings and observations to such an extent that their validity must be questioned. Groneman (1994) writes that, in the Victorian Era, women who were perceived as excessively sexual were sent to psychiatric hospitals and treated for mental illness. A similar phenomenon is found in *Dans Le Jardin de l'Ogre*. Richard believes that he can save Adèle from the "disease" which she suffers. He subsequently moves the family to a small hamlet, as he believes that he is the only one capable of curing his wife. He perceives Adèle's sexuality as dangerous, as seen in the following quote:

Il lui a imaginé une nouvelle vie, où elle serait tenue à l'abri d'elle-même et de ses pulsions.
(Slimani, 2014: 192)

He imagined a new life, where Adèle would be protected from herself and her lust. (Slimani, 2014: 192)

Braidotti (1997) explains that women's non-reproductive sexual activities are deemed dangerous. Their ability to carry and bear children is perceived as giving women the ability to determine when life will begin. Women's sexuality is thus deemed dangerous, and constructed in a manner that enables men to guarantee the production of heirs.

In the novel *Dans Le Jardin de l'Ogre*, hatred of women's sexuality is most tangible when Adèle visits an adult entertainment venue, where a man shames her and spits on her after seeing her expensive clothes and her wedding ring. He uses the term *h'chouma*, a Moroccan loan word meaning 'shameful' that has become common in France, to insult her, insinuating that a married women should feel ashamed to not be in her place. Women who buck the status quo, such as Adèle, face consequences. In the incident narrated above, these consequences take the form of social sanctions.

Adèle's sexuality is also rejected by her husband, Richard, who had previously seen her predominantly as an intelligent woman. Personally, Richard does not consider sex and sexual intercourse to be important; rather, he sees it as a mindless and animal activity. He only has sex for procreation, and is relieved when Adèle becomes pregnant after their first sexual encounter. He believes that, by continuing to have sex with Adèle, he would be damaging her body. When Adèle's adultery is revealed and Richard learns that she has had intercourse with numerous men, he is disgusted. This is emphasized in the following quote:

« *Tais-toi. Surtout, tais-toi. Ta voix m'écœure. Ton odeur m'écœure. Tu es un animal, un monstre.* » (Slimani, 2014: 162)

"Quiet! Shut your mouth! Your voice disgusts me. The stench of your body disgusts me. You are an animal, a monster." (Slimani, 2014: 162)

After learning of her adultery, Richard equates Adèle with an animal. He is disgusted by her sexuality, and becomes increasingly obsessed with controlling her. After they move to a small hamlet on France's borders, Richard keeps a careful watch on Adèle, controlling her mobility by restricting her to the domestic sphere. He becomes obsessed with Adèle's activities, and after the couple meet their new neighbors he interrogates Adèle to ascertain her thoughts. Even minor matters such as Adèle's clothing are problematized.

Borrowing from Kristeva, Braidotti (1997) describes the hatred of women's sexuality as resulting from abjection, as being rooted in the pleasure derived from the othering process. Subjectification can only occur—i.e., the Self

can only be the Self—through abjection. Women, as the "other" in the male–female binary, are viewed as abnormalities that must be correct. Correcting such abnormalities creates a sense of pleasure, such as that experienced by Richard when he attempts to "cure" his wife.

More specifically, through his obsession with curing Adèle's "disease", with "correcting" the Other, Richard receives a sense of satisfaction. He decides that Adèle must quit her job, and that the family must move to a distant hamlet. Adèle thus becomes financially dependent on her husband. At the same time, as a consequence of her efforts to challenge the status quo, her mobility within the public sphere is restricted.

The great hatred of women's sexuality is recognized by Simone, Adèle's mother, as seen in the following paragraph:

« Les hommes ne savent pas qui nous sommes. Ils ne veulent pas savoir. Mais, je suis ta mère, je me souviens de tout. De la façon dont tu te trémoussais, tu n'avais même pas huit ans. Tu affolais les hommes. Les adultes parlaient de toi alors que tu aurais dû être invisible. Ils ne disaient pas du bien d'ailleurs. Tu étais ce genre d'enfant que les adultes n'aiment pas. Déjà, tu avais le vice en toi. Une sainte-touche, une hypocrite de première. »
(Slimani, 2014: 216)

"Men don't know who we are; they don't want to know. But I'm your mother. I remember it all. How you shook your hips, even before you were eight years old. You scared all of the men. Adults talked about you behind your back, and they didn't have nice things to say. You were the kind of kid that adults hated. Your vices were clear; you pretended to be innocent; you were the greatest hypocrite." (Slimani, 2014: 216)

From Simone's story, it is apparent that Adèle had shown her sexuality from a young age. The sentence "you scared all of the men" emphasizes that women's sexuality is perceived as dangerous, and that manifestations of female sexuality are inherently rejections of the status quo. The fear of women's sexuality, as narrated above, reflects the negative view of women and womanhood, one that can lead to men losing control of their objectivity and their rationality.

In this paragraph, it is clear that, even as a child, Adèle had been perceived as a wicked girl. This seemingly validates the belief that women, from birth, have a natural capacity to negatively influence men, a view that supports the positioning of women on the negative pole of a binary opposition (see (Braidotti, 1997)).

CONCLUSION

In *Dans Le Jardin de l'Ogre*, the main character Adèle is constructed as a mother and a monster. Although she is a working woman, she is also a mother, and thus expected to bear the burden of childcare; this social construct serves to limit her mobility and to increase her time within the domestic sphere. Meanwhile, after her adultery is revealed, Adèle is constructed as a *monster* (a being that simultaneously creates a sense of fear and awe, see Bradotti (1997)) She is perceived by her husband, Richard, not only as disgusting, but as "ill", as having a disease that can only be cured by him. Richard thus becomes obsessed with Adèle and her behavior.

Owing to her construction as a mother and a monster, Adèle frequently feels a loss of her personal identity. Her expression of her sexuality is perceived as threatening the status quo. Women are believed to have inherently negative characteristics, the effects of which can only be controlled and mitigated through education. However, such a belief results in women losing their freedom and their human dignity.

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