

Implicated Subjects in Leila Slimani's *Lullaby*: A Transnational Feminist Approach

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ABSTRACT

Postcolonialism has been criticized for its binary oppositions, dichotomy, and othering. However, recent postcolonial writers and novelists developed new projects such as Afropolitanism and transnational feminism which have opened new insights and perspectives into the postcolonial disputes and agendas. Leila Slimani's *Lullaby* (2018) is a novel that deals with feminist issues *par excellence*. This study delves into the interconnectedness between transnational feminism and "the Implicate Subjects," as an approach, to examine the complexity of feminist issues in the novel. The paper tries to unravel how social and cultural norms infiltrate and entangle with discrimination, gender roles, power dynamics, and social-economic inequality that are practiced at the small-scale and large-scale in our contemporary societies. Besides, the intersection between Slimani's transnational feminism and Rothberg's *Implicated Subjects* offers new readings and insights, and bridges connections between Western and non-Western feminism which needs global solidarity and cross-border entanglement.

Keywords- Gender roles, Implicated Subjects, interconnectedness, transnational feminism, large scale, small scale, Social inequality.

I. INTRODUCTION

Transnational feminism is an arena of "interconnectedness", sharing, and caring about "global solidarity" where feminists and activists can map out the diverse accounts and experiences that women live and face in their lives. Thus, issues related to individual identity, gender roles, social class, discrimination, violence, and inequality are explored transnationally and globally which gives them foregrounding accountability and authenticity. Leila Slimani with her fascinating profile in journalism, activism, and literature has molded a thrilling narrative *Lullaby* (2018) that provides an inclusive and intersecting view of transnational feminism, "implicated subjects", gender roles, and inequality in our contemporary societies. The idea of transnationalism and

how it is entangled with "Implicated Subjects" offers new insights into how gender roles, discrimination, and systematic and institutionalized inequality are discussed and analyzed from a "small scale" process and investigation so as to move towards a more inclusive and comprehensive "large scale" process where legacies, cultural and societal norms, and apparatuses are deeply involved and dismantled. In other words, the intersection and the interconnectedness of transnational feminism and "Implicated Subjects" both attempt to delve into these convoluted, woven, and entangled issues that go beyond the individual identity, gender roles, and inequality that seem superficial to a profounder and deeper systematic and socio-cultural norms that exist within every society and culture. Besides, challenging and questioning the very foundations of Western feminism's hegemony and

universalism which Slimani examines in her *Lullaby* is very tempting and worth exploring. Slimani problematizes the diverse and intricate voices in the French milieu (Western context) where female issues such as gender roles, discrimination, inequality, and power dynamics are experienced by female characters such as Louise and Myriam. The author navigates into the nuisances and disparities that exist within the French Western context where the web of power, the perpetuation of institutionalized inequality that even some women benefit from and others are left at the margin as in the case of Louise. The writer calls for acknowledging these marginalized voices, which are vulnerable to gender discrimination, by rattling the cage of the French society which is put into the interrogation of *Implicated Subjects* paradigms so as to fathom the systematics and institutionalized inequality that does also exist in Western feminism. In short, Slimani tries to bridge the gap between Western feminism and transnational feminism by focusing on such disparities and marginalized voices that exist in the western context in order to draw attention to global solidarity and interconnectedness among feminist issues.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The idea of transnational feminism and postcolonial studies has gained much interest and depth in recent gender studies and scholarship. Many francophone female writers with a postcolonial background have come to dominate the francophone arena and world literature today. The present literature explores the major issues that consolidate and 'empower' the interest of transnational feminism when it comes to debates such as gender roles, discrimination, patriarchy, and female identities. Ultimately, transnational feminism is linked to Michael Rothberg's *Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (2019) which offers implicated insights into transnational feminism struggles while dealing with issues such as gender roles, violence, discrimination, and patriarchy in recent cultures.

1. Postcolonialism

Postcolonialism has witnessed a range of metamorphoses and transfigures since it is an entanglement of "a loosely grouped field" (Herbert, 2022, p. 119) that engages with multiple disciplines such as culture, race, identity, colonialism, history, imperialism, and so on. The first stance that characterized the postcolonial literature era centralized on "racialized power relations, subjectivity, identity, belonging, the role of the nation-state, cultural imperialism and resistance (Herbert, 2022, p.119). However, in the last two decades, postcolonialism has altered its concerns and interests which have shifted from the negativity of othering and binary oppositions such as black/white, African/Western, us/them to less confrontational disputes and representations that celebrate pluralism, multiculturalism, hybrid cultures, and identities thanks to a new generation

of postcolonial and diasporic writers and critics who molded compatible frameworks such as Afropolitanism and transnational feminism. The latter trends in postcolonialism offer new insights and depth in which disputes such as race, belonging, hybrid identities, and cultures are discussed and negotiated in our contemporary scholarship and literary arena.

2. Afropolitanism

Achille Mbembe is one of the pioneers of postcolonial critics who set up the foundation of Afropolitanism in the last two decades. His two major books *Critique of Black Reason* (2017) and *Out of The Dark Night: Essay on Decolonization* (2021) are considered the guide to a new era of African and planetary representation and philosophy whose essence is "Afropolitan and cosmopolitan. The first chapter, "Planetary Entanglement," of his *Out of the Dark Night* introduces the *Africa-glebe* and "African-world-to-come" whose complex and mobile fabric slips constantly out of one form and into another and turns away all languages or pure sounds." The idea here becomes more interesting and smoother when Mbembe adds "this body in motion, never in its place, whose center moves everywhere... that name is Afropolitanism" (Mbembe, 2021, p.6). This wave of Afropolitanism tries to cut off the traditional prose and representations that are trapped in othering and binary oppositions that Mbembe harshly criticizes in his *Critique of the Black Reason*. Mbembe's Afropolitanism which is a "wide-open universe of multiplicities and pluralities" backs up one of the early essays on Afropolitanism by Tayse Selasi "Bye Bye Babar" (2005) that portrays the diasporic writers' engagement with Africa. Selasi believes "the newest generation of African emigrants...some of us are ethnic mixes...others merely cultural mutts... We are Afropolitans: not citizens, but Africans of the world" (Selasi, 2005, p.1). This is the new African generation that writes about Africa with a different perspective that does not only localize African cultures and identities, but also brings them forward into a planetary entanglement and cosmopolitan representations. Both Mbembe and Selasi cherish this Afropolitan trend, that celebrates *Africa-glebe* and *Africans of the world* which tries to free itself from localities, othering, dichotomies, and connects *worldly* to multiplicities and pluralities arena and transnationality which will be the forthcoming concept in this review.

3. Transnational Feminism and Implicated Subjects

Postcolonial feminism has always been a different version of Western feminism since the latter goes in unsymmetrical line with postcolonial and African transnational feminism agendas, priorities, and concerns. Many critics and essayists have leveled harsh criticism at Western feminism because its "discourse obfuscates the power dynamics between the North and South and lends itself to a paradigm of cultural imperialism" (Durmus, 2020, p.48). Besides, Serene Khader in her *Decolonizing Universalism: A Transnational Feminist Ethic* (2019) dismantles the Western ethnocentric universalism and the

possibility of defining female emancipation in terms other than Western hegemonic understandings (Khader 2). This trend in transnational feminism has given another spirit for postcolonial feminist writers and critics to debate such disparities and discrepancies that reside in Western feminism and try to establish an understandable canal where differences in feminist issues are prioritized but at the same time are transnationally echoed. In other words, gender roles, violence, patriarchy, discrimination, and social, cultural, and economic inequality are discussed and debated in transnational praxis without underestimating postcolonial feminist localities and values which may not be necessary and systematically align with Western feminism agenda and values (Khader 2019).

4. *Implicated Subjects and Complicated Feminist Issues*

The notion of “Implicated Subjects” which Michael Rothberg developed in 2019 may offer new connectedness and entanglement between postcolonialism, Afropolitanism, and transnational feminism. Rothberg argues that the approach of implicated subjects “has a particular affinity to questions of race and racism...forms of violence and inequality premised on racial hierarchy...instantiated repetitively in the present yet burdened with active historical resonances” (Rothberg, 2019, p.2). Rothberg’s study of implicated subjects has already created this “affinity” between postcolonial and transnational feminist issues such as gender roles, violence, patriarchy, and inequality that many postcolonial writers have debated in their narratives as the case of Leila Slimani and others. The idea of Implicated Subjects that Rothberg has developed by working on Black Lives Matter and the Israeli - Palestinian conflict which deepens in the meaning of implication, simplicity, collective responsibility, and “subjects occupy positions aligned with power and privilege directly or indirectly” (Rothberg, 2019). Reflecting on the nature of implicated subjects and projecting on postcolonial feminism, especially transnational feminism may unravel the interconnectedness and the relevancy of issues which are at stake such as gender roles, violence, patriarchy, racism, social and economic inequality.

III. METHODS

This research article addresses the female ‘implicated subjects’ in Leila Slimani’s *Lullaby* (2018), and how gender roles, patriarchy, and inequality are reconsidered in the transnational feminism projects. The research method used is a qualitative one which is empowered with an interpretative and thematic analysis of the narrative *Lullaby*. The qualitative genre “offers much in-depth while analyzing textual content so as to identify patterns, themes, and meanings” (Kumar, Dubey and Kothari 2022) that parallel with the main objectives of the study and its research questions. Moreover,

engaging and doing a research on feminist issues and cultural studies, the qualitative methods function best at finding answers systematically to research questions (Khairullah 2022, p.993). Also, Louis Herbert (2022) suggests that qualitative methods produce in-depth quality and experience when it comes to interpretative and descriptive research. In data collection techniques, the study opts for a “mixed” data collection which involves close reading, character analysis, and thematic analysis. In other words, a close reading of passages and extracts from the novel to identify and understand the female implications requires such interconnectedness between themes, characters, events, and close reading, character and thematic analysis.

IV. RESULTS

Simply put, *Lullaby* is the story of a successful Parisian couple; Paul is a passionate musician and producer, and his beloved wife Myriam, a stay-at-home-mother but with an honored lawyer working experience at a prestigious law firm. The narrative reaches its peak when Myriam decides to go back to work as a lawyer at Pascal’s law firm. The Massé couple agree to hire a nanny to look after their adorable children Mila and Adam. After a long debate and recruiting, Myriam was convinced that Louise is the perfect nanny and choice to take care of their children and apartment. Initially, Louise establishes a good relationship with the Massé family. However, the relationship between Louise and Myriam deteriorates and collapses when Myriam starts to minimize and underestimate Louise’s access, commitments, and efforts. Louise feels that she could be dispensable at any moment. After many psychological conflicts and trauma, Louise eventually murders the two children in the bathroom which turns to be a shocking twist and an unpredictable act in the narrative.

Louise and Myriam’s relationship and interaction are some of the most vibrant characterization aspects in the novel. It is by no accident that most, if not all, Slimani’s protagonists are female characters since *Lullaby* tackles feminist issues and disputes like domestic violence, patriarchy, gender roles, economic inequality, and female maidservants which are given a transnational echo in the narrative. It is highly important to unravel the nature and the connection of these two major characters in order to grasp the implications of many feminist themes and issues that the novel tries to address.

The first outcome of this female relationship between Myriam and Louise is when the Massé couple starts to feel that Louise is an unusual nanny with strange habits and methods when it comes to taking care of the children and the apartment though she is a neat and perfect babysitter. For Louise, this gives her a feeling of satisfaction and “she feels a serene contentment when – with Adam asleep and Mila at school– she can sit down and contemplate her task. The silent apartment is completely under her power, like an enemy begging for

forgiveness” (Slimani 24). However, the Massé couple has another message for Louise; they “want the nannies to see that they are good people; serious, orderly people who try to give their children the best of everything. The nannies must understand that Myriam and Paul are the ones in charge here” (Slimani 5). Eventually, the first clash between the nanny and the couple takes place when Myriam thinks that Louise went beyond the limits and tried to impose her unusual methods and ways. Thus, a new approach is adopted by the couple while dealing with the nanny so as to restrict her impact on their children. Therefore, they start to neglect her comments, inviting her to their parties, vacations, and eating out. As a result of this, Louise noticed this cold treatment which affects her seriously, and develops psychological conflicts and symptoms. She becomes a lonely individual and easily tempered, and she can no longer stand the Massé comments, interactions, and instructions especially Myriam’s and her children’s behaviors. Importantly, Louise falls into unjust comparison when she thinks she can replace Myriam’s place as she is always available and perfect with Adam and Mila. Eventually, Myriam decides to restrict Louise’s access to the apartment, and excludes her from their social events and outings. Louise disappears for a while which is the third result of Myriam and Louise’s interaction. The nanny’s sudden isolation and disappearance does not suggest and imply any violent, and revengeful reaction. Henceforth, the dreadful and bloody killing of two children in the bathroom was unpredictable in the course of the narrative.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

There are three important outcomes which all refer to Myriam and Louise’s relationship that has been discussed in the above section. However, in this present section of conclusion and discussion, the two last outcomes can be discussed as one, because they intersect and intertwine. Michael Rothberg’s *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* represents a salient platform and window through which we can discuss and delve into the nature of female characters’ relation with each other, Louise and Myriam, and with their societal and cultural norms so as to understand “the institutionalized inequality”, discrimination, and marginalization that exist beyond the Massé couple and Louise interaction.

The first important point is the presence of Louise in the Massé couple is to take care of their children and the apartment so that they can work and feel free. Thus, the way Paul and Myriam have explained and demonstrated authority and power (Slimani, 2018, p.5) insinuates a kind of institutionalized power and inequality against Louise. The Massé couple represents what Rothberg calls “forms of violence and inequality which can be exercised through “legitimized, social class, and daily tasks on a “small scale” (Rothberg, 2019). Eventually, Louise feels burdened with such imposed,

unjust, discriminating, and biased treatment that hovers in the Massé apartment. However, Louise traces back the roots of such discrimination, inequality, and marginalization to a “large-scale” which is the French culture and the social class that demonstrates and permeates such hidden power and practices. Accordingly, the idea of complicated subjects in the context of the Massé couple and Louise goes beyond their daily tasks and “small scale” interaction to reach a “large scale” that is the source of this blurred and institutionalized inequality, violence, and discrimination that is hidden in the French cultural and societal norms.

The second important point, in this discussion, is how the idea of ‘Implicated Subjects’ and transnational feminism is resonant and intersect through Myriam’s and Louise’s relation and interaction in the narrative. Myriam’s and Louise’s entanglement can be seen through the transnational feminist and complicated subjects intersecting lens. The first face of this entanglement is that Myriam and Louise are two female characters who have been exposed to much suffering, discrimination, and cultural biases though with a different level of complication and involvement. For example, Myriam, who is a mother and lawyer, had struggled to fit into the French upper social class which is merciless, biased, and intolerant to her immigrant and postcolonial background. As for Louise, she is a divorced mother and nanny who belongs to a poor and marginalized class; though she is a white French citizen. She is at the margin because she struggles for divorce, alimony, and the education of her only daughter Stephanie. However, the two female characters meet in an intricately and nuanced spot. If we look at their level of ‘complication’ and ‘complicity,’ there is a kind of difference and dissimilarity, but they intertwine and intersect at many levels and points. In other words, Myriam may be seen as an agent who exercised power, discrimination, and inequality when she interacted with Louise, or at least this is what and how her nanny felt most of the time. Following this line of thought, if we delve into the nature of and structure of this discrimination and inequality, Myriam can be considered just a passive and agent who exercised hidden institutionalized, cultural biases and inequalities which are unfortunately merciless and racial to Myriam who might be considered as a victim as well in this context. On the other hand, Louise is considered a traditional victim who is under the mercy of her employer’s social class and cultural norms on “a small scale” in terms of Rothberg. Still, the level of implication of the French culture and society to the issue of identity, social class, discrimination, and marginalization is the one that intersects at the “large scale” and translates this hidden structure of institutionalized inequality between Myriam and Louise in the narrative. Though Louise is considered a complicit subject when she murders the two children in the bathroom, Rothberg’s concept of implication/complication offers another reading of violence and goes

beyond the limits of superficial interaction to shed light on a large-scale implication and complication.

Implicated Subjects, Transnational Feminism and beyond

Both Slimani and Rothberg delve into the dynamics of “implicated subjects” in order to uncover the hidden and “silent” institutionalized and cultural practices that legitimize and normalize actions of inequality, discrimination, individual identity, social class, and minorities. In short, the entanglement of Rothberg’s “Implicated Subjects” and Slimani’s project of transnational feminism in *Lullaby* intersect at many levels. Rothberg works to dismantle the forms of violence, discrimination, and institutionalized inequality which are related to issues of race, identity, and gender roles. This form of “implicated subjects” may occur at “small-scale” interactions, but has resonance and hierarchy at “large scale”. What Louise witnesses in the Massé’s apartment is an example of a small scale one, but this can be found in a large scale which is the French society, institutions, and culture. Furthermore, Slimani provides a new approach to a transnational feminism when it is consolidated by “complicated subjects” who offer a comprehensive and inclusive understanding of gender roles issues, discrimination, inequality, and forms of oppression which can not only be found in day-to-day space (the Massé’s apartment) but also extended to the whole French culture and society. Slimani’s mode of transnational feminism connects and reconnects issues of gender roles and inequality not only to race, identity, and social class but also to the institutionalized practices that can be agents through which these forms of oppression perform and act.

Thus, the choice of Louise as a white French character who experienced such alienation, discrimination, and inequality is a flawless choice by Slimani to represent another echo of gender roles and sufferings. In other words, Louise, as a white French nanny, can exemplify a kind of interconnectedness between Western feminist and non-Western feminist agendas and offer a better understanding of various forms of discrimination and oppression that women experience cross-border and globally. Besides, Louise’s experience is a waking call that can bridge connections between women across borders and understand the global solidarity that writers like Slimani try to set up. The issue of gender roles and inequality which Slimani tries to unravel in *Lullaby* is a resonant one in many cultures. Hence, the need for an interconnectedness of women’s struggle for global solidarity and understanding is the spirited message in the narrative.

In the whole, the intersection of “implicated subjects” and transnational feminism provides an inclusive understanding of questions of discrimination,

violence, inequality, and gender roles that Myriam and Louise undergo in the novel. Hence, Rothberg’s notion of the “small-scale” interaction of oppression and inequality is all-pervading in Myriam’s and Louise’s relation in the narrative which can untangle the implicated subjects than exit within the “large scale” and the hidden mechanisms of the French culture and society. By the end, the two characters seem to be trapped in this merciless chasm of being both “implicated subjects”, but once we go beyond these superficial dynamics of “the victim” (Myriam, because she had lost her two children) and “the perpetrator” (Louise, because she had murdered the two children), the image becomes clearer and filmier. Both Myriam and Louise are victims and implicated subjects while facing this incomprehensible institutionalized oppression and inequality which challenge their identity and gender roles in the French culture and society.

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