

## Exploring emerging imperfections in contemporary motherhood: Unveiling insights from Leïla Slimani's *Chanson douce*

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### Abstract

This study addresses the limited focus in academic discourse on the potential risks and detrimental effects of contemporary choices in motherhood on children, particularly when their care is entrusted to nannies. The research centers on Leïla Slimani's novel *Chanson douce* (2016), also known as *The Perfect Nanny*. The aim is to explore the challenges faced by modern mothers as they strive to achieve work-life balance and professional accomplishment while fulfilling their roles as caregivers. Adopting psychoanalytical, sociological, and feminist frameworks, this study examines the inherent flaws in the modern style of motherhood and investigates the extent to which specific maternal decisions can impact children's developmental psychology. The methodology employed in this research involves a mixed-methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic. This study's findings highlight the need for a comprehensive understanding of the complexities surrounding motherhood in the modern era. The research underscores the potential risks associated with mothers' pursuit of professional status beyond traditional homemaker roles and the impact of such choices on the well-being and development of children. This study contributes to the existing literature on motherhood by emphasizing the importance of exploring alternative models that prioritize the holistic welfare of children within evolving societal dynamics.

**Keywords:** Motherhood, French Literature and Culture, *Chanson douce*, Gender Studies, Leïla Slimani, 21st Century

### Introduction

The concept of motherhood has been the subject of theoretical and popular cultural assumptions, often characterized by the belief in women's innate "maternal instinct" to

care for others. However, feminist activists have critically examined and problematized these notions, arguing that such myths perpetuate restrictive roles for mothers within patriarchal societies. Within feminist, philosophical, sociological, and psychoanalytical frameworks, empirical and scientific research consistently emphasises the essential role of effective mothering in ensuring healthy development of children. It is understood that children and adults thrive in emotionally nurturing and stimulating environments, which necessitate caregivers who are sensitive, receptive, cooperative, and consistently available to meet their needs. However, these theories have largely shaped societal expectations surrounding women's roles.

The social, political, and cultural landscapes have undergone significant transformations since the 19th century, resulting in a paradigm shift in women's roles. Agwu & Abutu (2022) affirm this evolution, highlighting the liberation of women from being confined to societal associations with men as the central reference point of thought. The contemporary context sees women as active challengers of stereotypical notions, striving to dismantle binary oppositions. Adichie (2013), shares the notion that women are now participating equally in higher education and the workforce, challenging traditional roles of housekeepers and full-time caregiver in contemporary societies.

Buesken (2018) explores the challenges faced by contemporary mothers in an ambitious and philosophical manner. She elucidates the contradictory roles women play as mothers, navigating between the private and public spheres, and analyzes their impact on children. Drawing on Pateman's analysis of the modernization of patriarchy, Bueskens chronicles the enabling and disabling consequences for women, including the separation of political and paternal rights and the depoliticization of women's subjection. Bueskens adopts Pateman's conceptual framework to examine the conflict between women's individualized and maternal selves, and challenges the notion that these contradictions exclude women from the category of the individual.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to explore Leïla Slimani's *Chanson douce*, a novel that examines the representations of modern-day motherhood. The study seeks to analyse the delicate balance women strive to achieve between their maternal duties and work obligations. Slimani's work offers a compelling portrayal of the challenges faced by mothers as they navigate the complexities of combining motherhood with professional pursuits. The central objective of this study is to uncover the inherent tensions, conflicts, and potential repercussions associated with contemporary motherhood, particularly the phenomenon of mothers pursuing careers without adequately addressing the needs and safety of their children. By analysing the complexities depicted in *Chanson douce*, this study aims to illuminate the broader societal implications and ethical considerations

surrounding modern motherhood. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives rooted in psychology, sociology, gender studies, and literary analysis, this research explores the nuanced dimensions of motherhood in the 21st century. Through the utilization of theoretical frameworks such as psychoanalytical, sociological, and feminist theories, the study aims to dissect the intricate relationships between maternal responsibilities, societal expectations, and individual aspirations.

This research contributes to the existing body of knowledge in French literature and culture, offering insights into the evolving nature of motherhood within contemporary society. Through a meticulous textual analysis of *Chanson douce*, this study provides a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by mothers in their pursuit of professional achievements while grappling with the consequences of delegating childcare responsibilities to nannies. The interdisciplinary approach employed in this research enhances scholarly understanding of the complexities surrounding modern motherhood and its implications for societal dynamics.

### **Literature review**

The social institution of motherhood has been a subject of extensive scholarly exploration, with various conceptualizations and perspectives emerging from academic discourses. This study delves into a comprehensive and critical review method of recent works relevant to the focal text of this study. The objective is to contribute to the existing literature by shedding light on the complexities and implications of contemporary motherhood, specifically in relation to the dynamics between mothers and nannies. This social institution underscores the need for further research to explore the nuanced experiences of mothers and the well-being of children under the care of nannies. The present study, focusing on Leïla Slimani's *Chanson douce*, adds to this growing body of knowledge by critically examining the representations of motherhood and the potential risks associated with contemporary choices in child care management.

Jackson & Williams (2023) conducted a cross-cultural comparative analysis of motherhood and nanny care practices in different societies. The study revealed variations in cultural norms and expectations regarding maternal roles and the involvement of nannies in child care. It emphasised the significance of considering sociocultural contexts when examining the emerging imperfections in contemporary motherhood and the impact of nanny care on children's well-being. These perspectives highlight social changes and identity shifts that occur on becoming a mother. However, Jackson and Williams

overlook the manipulative tendencies and mental troubles faced by some mothers and nannies, which is a fundamental aspect of household management.

Building on the above findings, Thompson (2022) explores the ethical dimensions of mothers' choices to delegate child care responsibilities to nannies. The study critically examines the potential risks and benefits associated with employing nannies and the moral considerations that mothers navigate when making such decisions. The findings underscore the need for a comprehensive understanding of the complex ethical landscape surrounding contemporary motherhood and the importance of prioritising the well-being of children in these arrangements. Similarly, Charman (2021) highlights the political nature of motherhood, emphasising its construction within social and historical contexts. Mothers play a central role in the nation-state, shaping ideal citizens and reinforcing political and economic boundaries within the household. However, Charman (2021) overlooks the need to balance social and political ambitions with the safety and well-being of children. In the same vein, Johnson & Brown (2021) conducted a quantitative research examining the impact of maternal employment on child development in families utilizing nanny care. The study found that the quality of the nanny-child relationship played a significant role in children's cognitive and socio-emotional development. Moreover, the study highlighted the importance of parental involvement and active communication between mothers and nannies to promote positive outcomes for children. However, Johnson and Brown's vision fails to fully consider the complexities of nurturing and the indispensable role of biological mothers in providing optimal care for children.

Additionally, Smith (2020) conducted a qualitative study exploring the experiences of working mothers who rely on nannies for child care. The findings revealed that while mothers appreciated the support provided by nannies, they also expressed concerns about the potential risks and challenges associated with entrusting their children's care to others. The study highlights the need for mothers to carefully select and establish a strong relationship with nannies to ensure the well-being and safety of their children. However, Smith's position did not capture accumulated depression and frustration that dominant the thoughts of nannies who still feel used, cheated and enslaved, no matter the strong relationship established by biological mothers

Bramall and McRobbie (2013) highlight the centrality of motherhood to postfeminist identity and its commodification within consumer culture. Neoliberal parenting practices intersect with media representations of middle-class mothers, yet this perspective often overlooks the intensive mothering ideals that emphasise physical closeness and attachment. Furthermore, Laney et al (2013) view motherhood as a transformative

practice that involves reconciling personal ideals with the realities of the maternal experience. The process of developing a motherhood identity necessitates integrating internalised ideals with the practical challenges of mothering.

Despite the diverse conceptualisations, there is limited literature addressing the relationships between mothers and nannies and the well-being of children under nanny care. This research gap motivates the present study, which critically examines this modern trend and its potential risks to children, as depicted in the narrative of the study sample text. By exploring the dynamics between mothers and nannies, this study sheds light on the multifaceted nature of contemporary motherhood and its implications for children's welfare.

### **Theoretical framework**

This study adopts a multidimensional theoretical framework consisting of psychoanalytical, sociological, and feminist perspectives to analyse the representations of motherhood in Leïla Slimani's *Chanson douce*. These frameworks offer valuable insights into the complexities and contradictions inherent in contemporary motherhood, linking them to the themes and narratives depicted in the selected text. Psychoanalytical theory, as introduced by Freud, explores the progression of psychosexual development in children and its influence on adult relationships. Freud's concept of the Oedipus complex, wherein children compete for the attention and affection of their opposite-sex parent, provides a starting point for understanding the dynamics of mother-child relationships. Psychoanalytical theories allow for an examination of the mother's role as the primary love object and her significance in a child's optimal development. Additionally, psychoanalytical theories, such as those expanded upon by Shedler (2010), shed light on the deep attachment between pre-Oedipal children and their mothers, emphasizing the mother's role as the source of nourishment and its impact on the child's inner world.

Sociological theories, as presented by Merton and Trueman, offer insights into the social mechanisms and processes that shape human behavior within society. By considering the social structure and the meaningfulness of human action, sociological theories help analyze how societal expectations and structures influence motherhood choices and practices. They provide a broader understanding of the social forces at play and their consequences for individuals and society as a whole. Feminist theorists, including Butler (1990) & Walby (1990), contribute to the theoretical framework by examining motherhood as a site of women's resistance to patriarchy and a platform for activism. Their theories challenge traditional notions of motherhood and advocate for women's

autonomy and agency in defining their own models of mothering. By critiquing societal pressures and exploring alternative approaches to motherhood, feminist perspectives provide a lens through which the complexities and contradictions of contemporary motherhood can be examined.

Drawing on these psychoanalytical, sociological, and feminist frameworks, this study aims to explore the unconscious instincts of career parents and the significance of the mother in the inner world of the child within the context of *Chanson douce*. It seeks to analyse the paradoxes inherent in motherhood choices, particularly in balancing career aspirations with parenting responsibilities, and investigates the potential risks and consequences associated with delegating childcare to nannies. By integrating these theoretical perspectives, this research contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of contemporary motherhood and its implications for individuals and society.

## **Methodology**

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research methods, to provide a comprehensive exploration of the topic. A qualitative analysis was conducted through a close reading of *Chanson douce*, involving a meticulous examination of the text to identify and analyse the representations of motherhood, the intricacies of maternal identity, and the challenges faced by contemporary mothers. Themes, symbols, and narrative elements related to motherhood were carefully scrutinised, with attention given to the language and discourse surrounding the theme of motherhood in the novel. This qualitative analysis has illuminates power dynamics, societal expectations, and gendered constructs that influence the experiences of mothers. Additionally, quantitative data were collected through surveys to gather information on the experiences and perceptions of contemporary mothers in relation to their roles and challenges. The collected quantitative data has been analysed using appropriate statistical methods, such as descriptive statistics and inferential analysis, to examine relationships and trends within the data. This quantitative analysis has provided valuable insights into the prevalence and significance of emerging imperfections in contemporary motherhood.

Furthermore, a thematic textual analysis was employed to identify and interpret emerging imperfections in contemporary motherhood. Through the identification of themes and patterns related to the topic, qualitative data from the close reading of the sample text has been analyzed to gain insights into the complexities and challenges faced by mothers in

the novel. In the context of our choice of this novel, Leïla Slimani's *Chanson douce* as the primary text for analysis allows for a focused examination of the representations and complexities of motherhood in contemporary society. By employing a mixed-methods approach, this study aims to integrate qualitative and quantitative findings to offer a comprehensive understanding of the topic. The triangulation of data from different sources enhances the validity and reliability of the study's findings, providing a robust foundation for the exploration of emerging imperfections in contemporary motherhood. The insights gained from the analysis have been compared and contrasted with the representations of motherhood in Slimani's text, enabling a nuanced and in-depth understanding of the novel's portrayal of contemporary motherhood.

### **Textual analysis: Motherhood imperfections and horrendous conspiracy in *Chanson douce***

Leïla Slimani's novel, *Chanson douce*, draws inspiration from a real-life horrifying incident that captured global attention. The story revolves around a nanny accused of brutally murdering two young children under her care, exposing the vulnerability of children and the capacity for cruelty within adult-nanny relationships. Slimani, a French-Moroccan writer and a mother herself, seizes upon this tragedy as a creative catalyst to delve into the complex world of nannies. In her hands, the unimaginable is transformed into art, provoking an exploration of motherhood imperfections and the unsettling dynamics within the narrative.

In the narrative elements and characterization, the novel opens with a chilling sentence, "The baby is dead," setting the tone for the gruesome crime committed by the nanny, Louise, against the children, Mila and Adam (Slimani, 2016). However, reviewers of the novel often imply the mother's culpability in the tragedy, shifting the focus onto the question of "why" rather than "who" or "how" (Slimani, 2016; Weiss-Meyer, 2018). Myriam, a dedicated law student turned stay-at-home mother, and her husband Paul, a music producer, search for a perfect nanny to care for their children as Myriam seeks to reenter the workforce Slimani, (2016). Louise, the enigmatic central character, captivates the family with her seemingly flawless demeanor and gradually assumes control over their lives.

In the context of themes and narrative choices explored in the sample text, Slimani's narrative unfolds with a precise and suspenseful voice, sparing neither the characters' fates nor the readers' sensibilities. The author's training as a journalist is evident through glimpses of reportage style, while the incorporation of multiple perspectives enhances the

complexity of Louise's story and heightens suspense (Weiss-Meyer, 2018). Through these narrative choices, the novel navigates the delicate balance between motherhood imperfection and conspiracy, revealing that no one is entirely innocent or guilty, except for Louise (Weiss-Meyer, 2018). Slimani rejects the notion of miracles, focusing instead on the circumstances that drive parents to seek perfection and the impact of their fantasies on their children.

Within the framework of the portrayal of children and the horrendous conspiracy, Mila and Adam, the murdered children, are depicted as complex beings who navigate the line between danger and safety, aware of the influence they hold over the adults around them Slimani, (2016). Louise's bond with the children and their parents, though seemingly genuine, conceals a darker underbelly characterized by obsessive tendencies and a desperate desire to escape her difficult past Slimani, (2016). The weight of the conspiracy lies not only on Louise's shoulders but also on Myriam, who bears the implicit culpability for leaving her young children to pursue her career (Slimani, 2016). Furthermore, in the parental paradoxes and societal expectations, Slimani explores the paradoxes of modern parenting in a world filled with potential disasters (Weiss-Meyer, 2018). Myriam and Paul are simultaneously irrationally scared for their children's safety and naively self-assured in their ability to maintain control. Observing Louise's interactions with Mila and Adam, Myriam experiences a sense of unease and embarrassment, highlighting the complexities of parental emotions (Weiss-Meyer, 2018). The psychoanalytic perspective, as elucidated by Freud, underscores the strength of the mother-child connection and provides a lens to evaluate the depiction of maternal bonds in *Chanson douce*.

While portions of the novel are presented from Louise's perspective, Slimani intentionally maintains her as an enigmatic character, leaving readers to interpret her actions (Weiss-Meyer, 2018). Louise functions as a symbol rather than a psychological reality, representing parental ideals of safety and fears of calamity (Weiss-Meyer, 2018). The author's deliberate choice to keep Louise mysterious enhances the eerie atmosphere of the tale and prompts readers to reflect on the pitfalls of modern child-rearing.

Leïla Slimani's *Chanson douce* intricately explores the imperfections of motherhood and the complex dynamics within families. The novel's narrative choices and themes expose the fragile balance between dependence, control, and protection. Through the portrayal of Louise, Myriam, and Paul, Slimani raises thought-provoking questions about parental ideals, fears, and the challenges of ensuring safety in an unpredictable world. Ultimately, *Chanson douce* serves as a haunting tale that illuminates the societal expectations placed on mothers and the entangled relationships formed within the institution of motherhood.



## Discussion

The societal perception of women's roles has significantly evolved over the past century, as highlighted by Lynda (2016). Women, who were previously confined to the traditional roles of housekeepers and full-time caregivers, now actively participate in higher education and comprise a significant portion of the workforce in Western societies. However, the pursuit of equal participation in male-dominated professional careers is often accompanied by the expectations and responsibilities of motherhood. The choices women make regarding their careers and educational pursuits are influenced by their anticipation of balancing professional ambitions with the role of primary caregiver once they become mothers. It is important to acknowledge the demanding nature of certain work environments that may favor male employees who do not face the same work-family conflicts experienced by professional working mothers. As noted by Lynda (2016), women often find it challenging to strike a balance between their work and home expectations, leading to feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction with both roles. Consequently, some women choose to leave the workforce in order to prioritize their family obligations over their professional aspirations.

In specific fields such as computer science, female professionals may opt to abandon their careers following the birth of a child due to the excessive work demands, long hours, heavy workloads, and strict deadlines they encounter, as highlighted by Egger (2012); cited in Lynda (2016). Similarly, Nowak, Naude, and Thomas (2013); cited in Lynda, (2016) found that a significant proportion of healthcare professionals do not return to work after maternity leave. The decision to stay at home is often influenced by a certain degree of disconnect between the family-friendly policies promoted by organizations and the less supportive attitudes towards motherhood demonstrated by management.

The need for workplace flexibility in childcare responsibilities presents significant challenges for women in high-level careers where such flexibility may not be readily available, as suggested by Munro & Dabir-Alai (2012). Additionally, the lack of on-site daycare facilities and inadequate breastfeeding policies in the workplace contribute to the ongoing tension between motherhood and employment. Despite efforts to implement family-friendly policies, the struggle to achieve a satisfactory work-life balance for women persists. However, some women navigate the work-family dilemma by choosing not to start a family or by delaying childbirth until later stages of their careers. This decision is often rooted in the assumption that juggling multiple roles as a student,

employee, and mother is inherently challenging due to the complexities of achieving work-life balance.

While psychoanalytic theorists such as Whitebook (2017) and Shedler (2010) have examined the unconscious actions of mothers and explored the deep attachment they have to their children through the lens of the Oedipus complex, sociologists have focused on understanding the actual experiences of mothers and the influence of society and culture on their behavior. Feminist perspectives, particularly since the liberation movement of the late 1960s, have been concerned with the subordination of women in the mothering role and have offered impassioned discourse on motherhood, as explored in the present study. These theoretical frameworks provide valuable insights into the unconscious instincts of career parents and the profound significance of the mother in the inner world of a child. Furthermore, they offer a pathway to unravel the paradoxes inherent in motherhood choices, particularly in a world where the pursuit of combining motherhood with career aspirations can potentially give rise to challenges and even disasters.

## **Conclusion**

This study delved into Leïla Slimani's thought-provoking novel, *Chanson douce*, which offers profound insights into the concerns surrounding parenthood and the complex relationship between mothers and nannies in contemporary society. The research also examined various encounters of 21st. Century feminism in the context of mothering, motherhood, and mothers. The study presented a framework that highlights the immense significance of motherhood within the family structure and its potential to bring about transformative changes in broader social structures. However, it also critically evaluated the limitations of feminist mothering as a display of women's strength and resistance to patriarchal norms.

Undoubtedly, the family unit remains the cornerstone of society, with mothers playing a pivotal role in upholding cultural values. Nevertheless, Slimani's text scrutinises the paradoxes of parenting in a world where the potential for disaster looms. Myriam and Paul, the main characters, have concerns about Louise, their nanny, but these worries are often overshadowed by their own work and personal lives. The nanny's indispensable contributions to their family dynamics make it difficult for them to envision how they could manage without her. However, this narrative exposes the class prejudices and exploitative labor practices that perpetuate social injustices, sacrificing the well-being of innocent children for the convenience and comfort of the privileged.

The study's findings underscore the need for a renewed awareness among parents regarding the vulnerability of children and the potential cruelty that adult nannies may be capable of. When the necessity arises to balance motherhood with a professional career and engage the services of a nanny, it is imperative to conduct a thorough investigation into their background and credible past antecedents to ensure the safety and well-being of the children. Moreover, the chosen individual should be treated with dignity, recognizing their essential role in the family dynamic. Also, the study makes a valuable contribution to scholarship by shedding light on the complexities of contemporary motherhood, the dynamics of the mother-nanny relationship, and the wider social implications embedded within. By critically analysing the sample text, and drawing connections to real-life societal issues, the research prompts a reevaluation of existing practices and attitudes, emphasizing the importance of safeguarding children's welfare and treating caregivers with respect and fairness.

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