

# **An Evaluation of Feminine Identity and Gender Stereotypes in Leïla Slimani's *The Perfect Nanny***

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## **Abstract**

There is a growing scholarly interest in understanding the multifaceted dynamics shaping women's roles in the society and scholars have investigated diverse literary works on feminine identity and gender studies. But little literature is recorded of these themes from Leïla Slimani's perspective. This study presents an assessment of feminine identity and gender stereotypes in Leïla Slimani's novel *The Perfect Nanny*. The aim of the research is to enrich critical revelations on the interplay between literature and societal norms, and the reinforcement of gender stereotypes in literary narratives. By drawing on relevant theoretical frameworks such as feminist literary criticism and gender studies, the study examines how the characters' identities are shaped by societal norms and cultural expectations. The paper employs a qualitative approach, utilizing textual analysis and close reading of the novel to identify instances of feminine identity construction and gender stereotypes. The study findings embodies diverse experiences, struggles, and agency and highlights the subtle and explicit manifestations of gender stereotypes that reinforce traditional gender roles and expectations. Moreover, the research uncovers the impact of societal pressures on the characters' choices and actions, shedding light on the complexities of their identities. The paper fortifies feminist literary criticism and gender studies by providing a focused analysis of the study sample text, which remains an essential work in contemporary literature.

**Keywords:** 21<sup>st</sup> Century Literature, Gender Stereotypes, Ecofeminism Theory, Feminine identity, societal norms

## **Introduction**

The theme of feminine identity in 21st-century French literature has emerged as a significant and evolving topic of exploration. Authors have ventured beyond traditional stereotypes to depict female characters with depth and complexity, reflecting the changing roles of women in society. The literature portrays the challenges, aspirations, and multifaceted experiences of women, capturing their struggles for agency, equality, and self-determination. Contemporary French authors such as Virginie Despentes, in *Vernon Subutex trilogy* (2015), Annie Ernaux's *The Years* (2020), and Leïla Slimani with his works *Adele* (2019), *Dans le Jardin de l'Ogre* (2013) and *The Perfect Nanny* (2016), have tackled issues such as the intersectionality of

identity, navigating cultural and societal expectations, and the quest for self-discovery amidst modern complexities. They have engaged with themes of empowerment, questioning conventional gender norms, and challenging patriarchal structures. Female protagonists are portrayed as diverse individuals, defying singular labels and instead representing a spectrum of identities.

Leïla Slimani's critically acclaimed novel, *The Perfect Nanny*, originally titled in French as *Chanson douce*, is a compelling literary work that reveals the intricacies of human relationships, societal pressures, and the complexities of feminine identity. First published in 2016, the novel earned the prestigious Prix Goncourt in the same year, catapulting Slimani to international acclaim. Set in modern-day Paris, the narrative revolves around the relationship between a young couple, Myriam and Paul, and their devoted nanny, Louise. As the story unfolds, the novel takes an unexpected and chilling turn, shedding light on the fragility of trust and the implications of gender dynamics in contemporary society.

The representation of feminine identity and the perpetuation of gender stereotypes in literature hold profound significance in shaping cultural perceptions and societal norms. Throughout history, literature has been a powerful medium for reflecting and reinforcing societal attitudes toward gender roles and expectations. By analyzing how authors portray feminine identity and gender stereotypes, we gain insights into the broader socio-cultural contexts of their times. Such analyses help us comprehend the ways literature both reflects and challenges prevailing gender norms, thereby influencing readers' understanding of gender issues and societal dynamics.

The primary purpose of this paper is to critically evaluate feminine identity and gender stereotypes in the study's sample text *The Perfect Nanny*. Through this analysis, the paper explores the multifaceted portrayal of female characters in the novel and examines how societal norms and cultural expectations shape their identities. More so, the paper identifies and deconstructs gender stereotypes in the narrative and analyze their impact on character interactions and choices in the novel. By employing feminist literary criticism and gender studies as theoretical frameworks, this study sheds light on the complexities of feminine identity and offers insights into the ways literature challenges or perpetuates gender stereotypes.

The scope of this research encompasses a close examination of key female characters, including Louise and Myriam, and the intersections of their identities with race, class, and other factors. Drawing upon a qualitative research approach, this study is rooted in textual analysis and thematic investigation to identify and interpret instances of feminine identity construction and gender stereotypes throughout the novel. By doing so, it contributes to the existing body of knowledge in feminist literary criticism and gender studies while encouraging discussions on gender representation in contemporary literature.

### **Systematic Review**

The portrayal of feminine identity and gender stereotypes in literature has long been a subject of scholarly interest. In recent years, gender and identity have been central themes in literary analysis, often scrutinizing the intricate relationship between feminine identity and prevailing gender stereotypes. However, a crucial aspect that has been frequently overlooked is the

investigation of how feminine identity and gender stereotypes are portrayed and challenged within specific literary works. This literature review aims to bridge this gap by critically examining the representation of feminine identity and gender stereotypes in Leïla Slimani's renowned novel, *The Perfect Nanny*.

Amid the burgeoning landscape of research exploring gender stereotyping within the realm of entrepreneurship, there remains an evident need for deeper exploration and understanding. This review draws inspiration from the work of Jennings & Tonoyan (2022, p. 12). Their study seeks to catalyze a more comprehensive investigation into various dimensions of gender stereotyping, offering several promising avenues for exploration. Three distinct paths beckon scholarly attention: 'Investigating Intersectionalities', 'Mapping Masculinities,' and 'Revealing Rationales'. Each path, summarizing its essence and intellectual lineage, is intended to stimulate deeper inquiry and generate illuminating insights. While gender stereotypes' existence is well-documented, their implications within the context of literature, particularly the intricate interplay of feminine identity and societal expectations demand further investigation. Therefore, Jennings and Tonoyan's study adeptly navigates the gender stereotyping landscape within entrepreneurship, their emphasis on the need for deeper inquiry and exploration resonates beyond this domain. Within the analysis of our study's topic, the research gaps become evident.

Analyzing the dynamic interplay between feminine identity, gender stereotypes, and reading motivation has gained increasing significance within contemporary literature analysis. Espinoza and Strasser (2020, p. 45), examine the gender disparities in reading achievement and investigate the impact of gender-related factors on students' reading motivation. This study, though centered in Chile but resonating globally, as the investigation emanates from the premise of substantial gender gaps in reading achievement in Chile and beyond on gender study and feminine identity. The study unravels how reading gender stereotypes significantly influence students' reading self-concept. It sheds light on the impact of expressive identity traits, often stereotypically feminine, and self-reported sexism on the value attributed to reading. As the study's focus aligns with the broader examination of feminine identity and gender stereotypes in literature, a significant research gap emerges. While this study contributes key revelations to the dynamics of reading motivation and gender perceptions in Chile, it beckons a broader evaluation of how feminine identity and gender stereotypes are portrayed, challenged, and negotiated within literary narratives. The need for a comprehensive analysis akin to our study becomes evident, aiming to expand the discourse beyond reading motivation to encompass the multifaceted dimensions of gender representation within literary works.

Bauer (2019, p. 37), provides a lens into the under-representation of women in political office and the impact of gender stereotypes on political decision-making processes. Bauer's investigation evaluates the significant under-representation of women in political office across various Western democracies, highlighting that gender disparity is not confined to the United States. Within this landscape, gender stereotypes manifest as a crucial factor influencing political decision-making. Feminine stereotypes, portraying women as sensitive and weak, potentially hinder female candidates. The research gaps illuminated by Bauer's study resonate within the exploration of feminine identity and gender stereotypes in literature. While Bauer focuses on political contexts, her findings invite us to consider the literary realm's unique

dynamics. The portrayal of feminine identity and its intersection with societal expectations, personal agency, and character development in literature creates an intriguing avenue for investigation. The exploration of how characters navigate and challenge gender stereotypes, coupled with the influence of narrative constructs and reader perceptions, provides an unexplored territory.

Furthermore, central to this review is the role congruity theory proposed by Eagly and Karau (2003, p. 50), which posits that incongruity between perceived leadership demands and the gender of leaders' results in biased evaluations. While originally applied to leadership, this theory offers a compelling framework to scrutinize how role incongruity influences perceptions of feminine identity in *The Perfect Nanny*. By investigating how the characters' behaviors align or diverge from gender norms, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how societal expectations shape feminine identity in literature.

Recent scholarship has signaled a paradigm shift, suggesting that transformational leadership, a form of leadership associated with qualities stereotypically considered feminine is becoming more prevalent Eagly and Carli, (2003; p. 114) & Fletcher, (2004, p. 78). This shift prompts an intriguing exploration within the context of our study sample text. Through transformational leadership, characters challenge traditional gender roles and stereotypes, highlighting the complex relationship between feminine identity and leadership styles. The research gap within this domain becomes evident as existing literature has primarily focused on theoretical frameworks applied to leadership contexts, often overlooking their application within literary narratives. This study addresses this gap by situating the theoretical underpinnings within a specific literary work, *The Perfect Nanny*, to uncover how feminine identity and gender stereotypes are depicted, challenged, and negotiated. This comprehensive review provides a comprehensive synthesis of existing research on feminine identity and gender stereotypes in Leïla Slimani's novel. Through this review, this study enhances the awareness on the extent to which gender roles and stereotypes shape characters, interactions, and societal expectations in literature, thereby addressing a vital gap and advancing the discourse on gender dynamics in literary analysis.

Collectively, the reviewed studies offer crucial reflections on gender stereotypes and feminine identity, but none holistically address the elaborate distinctions examined within the context of Leïla Slimani's *The Perfect Nanny*. By focusing on this specific work, a gap in the literature becomes apparent, necessitating a dedicated evaluation to contribute to the broader understanding of gender dynamics in contemporary literature. The synthesis of these studies highlights the need for a focused analysis of the interplay between feminine identity and gender stereotypes embedded in the unique literary narrative of Slimani.

### **Theoretical Framing**

The framework employed in this study are ecofeminism and intersectionality theory. They serve as a powerful lens through which one can analyze and comprehend the intricate interplay of feminine identity and gender stereotype in literary works. Ecofeminism on one hand, is a feminist literary theory that explores the connections between the subjugation of women and the exploitation of nature. It posits that the patriarchal system and the domination of the natural world are interconnected. This theory explores the interconnected oppressions of the women

and the natural environment. Ecofeminism contends that patriarchal structures contribute to both the subjugation of women and the degradation of the environment. One of the proponents of ecofeminism is Vandana Shiva, an environmental activist and author, known for her work *Ecofeminism* (2020, p. 21), deals with the connections between women, nature and sustainability.

Intersectionality on the other hand, is a feminist theory that acknowledges how different aspects of social identity, such as race, class, gender, and sexuality, intersect and compound to shape individuals' experiences. This theory recognizes that individuals hold multiple social identities, and the intersections of these identities create unique and complex experiences that cannot be fully understood by examining each identity in isolation. Kimberlé Crenshaw, a legal scholar, and civil rights advocate, introduced this concept in her 'Essential Writings' (2019, p. 18). Furthermore, Rodriguez (2020, p. 28), explores how intersectionality theory can be applied to the field of intercultural communication, examining the ways in which various identities intersect and influence communication dynamics. Using the concept of performative gender identity will aid in understanding how the characters' behaviors and expressions of gender align with or challenge societal expectations and gender stereotypes portrayed in the narrative.

### **Methodology**

This study is rooted in a qualitative research approach that has been adopted to gain an in-depth understanding of feminine identity and gender stereotypes in Leïla Slimani's novel *The Perfect Nanny*. While a qualitative research is adopted to examine complex and multifaceted themes. This method allows for an in-depth evaluation of the text, characters, and themes in a holistic manner. By adopting a qualitative approach, the study aims to uncover the underlying meanings, motivations, and social dynamics that shape the portrayal of feminine identity and gender stereotypes in the novel. Textual analysis serves as a primary data collection method employed in this study. This involves a systematic examination of the novel *The Perfect Nanny* to identify specific passages, dialogues, and descriptions that pertain to feminine identity and gender stereotypes.

More so, this study employs a close reading method which complements textual analysis and a detailed and meticulous examination of selected sections of the novel. Thematic analysis will be employed to identify recurring themes related to feminine identity and gender stereotypes throughout the novel. The data collected through textual analysis, close reading, and thematic analysis are synthesized and interpreted to present a comprehensive grasping of feminine identity and gender stereotypes in the sample text. The findings are presented in a coherent and structured manner to provide meaningful perspectives into the complex themes presented in the novel.

### **Textual Analysis:**

#### **Feminine identity and experiences of Louise and Myriam in *The Perfect Nanny***

Leïla Slimani's offers a thought-provoking examination of feminine identity and experiences through the main female characters of Louise and Myriam in her novel.

## **Louise**

Louise is the titular character and the nanny hired by Myriam and Paul to take care of their two children in the sample text. Her presence in the novel raises questions about femininity and identity. Louise is depicted as a middle-aged woman who has dedicated her life to taking care of other people's children. Her identity is closely tied to her role as a nanny, and she finds purpose and fulfillment in caring for children. However, as the story progresses, it becomes evident that Louise's identity is also shaped by her own personal struggles and unfulfilled desires. She is shown to be deeply lonely and yearns for a sense of belonging and recognition. Through Louise's character, Slimani explores the sacrifices and challenges faced by women who choose to prioritize their professional identity over traditional family roles.

In *The Perfect Nanny* Louise is a complex character who embodies the struggles of feminine identity within the context of socio-economic challenges. As a nanny, she occupies a position of service and care, which aligns with traditional gender roles. Her role as a nanny involves taking care of Myriam's children, providing them with love and attention. However, her role also extends to performing various domestic tasks, reflecting the traditional gendered expectation of women as caregivers and homemakers. Textual evidence of this can be found in passages where Louise takes care of the children, prepares meals, and maintains the household. "For years, Louise had perfected her role: the nanny who knows everything, who is indispensable, but who never imposes herself" (p. 27).

Also, the nanny's experiences as an immigrant woman further highlight the complexities of her feminine identity. She faces marginalization and economic struggles, as depicted in passages where she talks about her past and her struggles to make ends meet. Her immigrant status and struggles for stability can be linked to ecofeminism, as her experiences mirror the exploitation of marginalized communities. According to Slimani "Louise arrived in France when she was twenty-one years old, and she quickly realized that the Parisian dream was a little more complicated than she had imagined". (p.42). However, her experiences contribute to her vulnerability and marginalization, reflecting the intersectionality of her identity. Ecofeminism comes into play as Louise's exploitation as a domestic worker parallels the exploitation of nature, drawing a parallel between the subjugation of women and the exploitation of marginalized communities.

## **Myriam**

Myriam is a successful career woman and the mother of two young children. She is depicted as ambitious, driven, and determined to achieve professional success. Myriam's character represents the modern woman who strives to balance her career aspirations with her obligations as a mother and wife. She takes on the role of the breadwinner in her family, while also feeling the pressure to be a perfect mother. In *The Perfect Nanny*, Myriam, the employer of Louise, is a career-driven woman who experiences the tension between her professional aspirations and familial responsibilities. She grapples with societal expectations of balancing motherhood and career, highlighting the challenges of negotiating feminine identity within a patriarchal society. Myriam's role as a mother and a career-driven woman creates internal conflicts. She desires a successful career but also feels societal pressure to prioritize motherhood. Her actions, such as hiring Louise as a nanny, demonstrate her attempt to juggle her roles as both a mother and a

professional. Textual evidence includes passages where she discusses her feelings of guilt and the difficulty of balancing her responsibilities thus: “Myriam felt her heart swell with guilt”. (p. 14).

Furthermore, Myriam's experiences are shaped by her pursuit of a successful career and her attempts to be a good mother. Her struggles with work-life balance and the pressure to excel professionally while being an attentive mother are evident in her reflections throughout the novel. “Her friends were all the same: torn between the desire to stay with their children and the desire to leave, to return to work”. (p. 16). Her experiences reflect the intersectionality of her identity as she navigates the complexities of being a woman, a mother, and a professional in contemporary society.

In sum, the analysis of the main female characters, Louise and Myriam, in *The Perfect Nanny* reveals the intricate interplay of ecofeminism and intersectionality in shaping their feminine identities and experiences. The novel portrays the challenges and constraints imposed by societal norms and expectations, shedding light on the broader complexities of feminine identity in a modern context. Through the characters' roles, actions, and experiences, the novel encourages readers to contemplate the intersections of gender, class, race, and immigrant status in shaping feminine identity and experiences.

### **The perpetuation of stereotypes through character interactions in *The Perfect Nanny***

Through the lenses of social constructionism, symbolic interactionism, and intersectionality, this study explores through which stereotypes are reinforced and perpetuated. The aim is to shed light on the power dynamics and social expectations that influence the characters' behaviors and identities. Social Constructionism suggests that societal beliefs and norms shape people's understanding of reality. In the novel, character interactions reflect and reinforce gender stereotypes deeply rooted in society. For instance, Louise's adherence to established societal norms is evident thus: “Louise made sure to wear sensible shoes, an unadventurous coat, and a discreet scarf. She knew that, in this neighborhood, you didn't have to look like a nanny”. (p. 11). This excerpt illustrates how Louise conforms to the societal expectations of a nanny by deliberately dressing in a way that aligns with the stereotypical image of a caregiver. It suggests that there is a preconceived notion of how nannies should look, perpetuating the stereotype and reinforcing the social construction of their role. Also, Louise's nurturing and caring nature aligns with the traditional image of a female caregiver, while Myriam's struggle to balance her career and motherhood reinforces the societal expectation that women must prioritize family over professional success. These interactions perpetuate the stereotype that women should embody specific roles and behaviors.

In the context of symbolic interactionism, it emphasizes the role of social interactions in constructing meaning and identities. In the study's sample text, character interactions contribute to the construction and reinforcement of stereotypes. Slimani affirms “She had become a mother who no longer had a proper job, a woman who was only a mother, who only had a mother's responsibilities”. (p. 23). This passage reflects Myriam's internal struggle as she feels confined to the societal expectations of being solely a mother. The interaction between her perception of her identity and societal pressures demonstrates how character interactions contribute to the reinforcement of gender stereotypes, implying that a woman's primary role

should be motherhood. In addition, Myriam's interactions with her husband and colleagues reflect the pressure she faces to conform to societal expectations of an ideal mother and successful career woman. These interactions shape the characters' identities and perpetuate stereotypical gender roles. Similarly, Louise's compliant and subservient demeanor, coupled with her unassuming appearance, reinforces the stereotype of an obedient and unthreatening nanny.

As for intersectionality, it recognizes that individuals embody multiple social identities and that different forms of oppression intersect. In the novel, the interactions between characters demonstrate how gender stereotypes intersect with other aspects of identity, such as race and class. For example, "Louise couldn't help thinking that it was easier for Myriam to leave her children because she was white". (p. 65). This line indicates how race intersects with gender stereotypes. Louise's observation highlights the privilege that Myriam, as a white woman, may have in society. It suggests that the expectations and consequences associated with motherhood may differ based on racial identity, illustrating how character interactions in the novel perpetuate stereotypes specific to different social groups. More so, Louise's character, as a working-class woman, faces unique challenges and experiences related to her socioeconomic status. Myriam, as a white, middle-class woman, may encounter different expectations and privileges. These intersecting identities influence character interactions and contribute to the perpetuation of stereotypes that are specific to different social groups.

These textual analysis demonstrate the perpetuation of stereotypes through character interactions in *The Perfect Nanny* and how they align with the study theories. The social constructionism theory is supported by Louise's deliberate adherence to the visual expectations of a nanny. Symbolic interactionism is evident in Myriam's struggle to reconcile her identity as a mother with societal pressures. Lastly, intersectionality is illustrated by Louise's observation of the potential racial privilege affecting Myriam's experiences as a mother. Through this analysis, the study has demonstrated how stereotypes are reinforced and embedded within the narrative.

### **Discussion: Intersectionality of Race, Class, Gender and Stereotype in the Novel.**

In this work, Leïla Slimani skillfully weaves the intersectionality of race, class, and gender to shape the experiences and identities of the characters. Louise's immigrant background, Myriam's middle-class status, and their gender identities intersect to create multifaceted portrayals of feminine identity. However, in the context of race and gender intersectionality, Louise's identity as an immigrant woman from Morocco influences her experiences as a domestic worker in France. Her status as an outsider is evident in the way she is perceived and treated by others. Textual evidence reveals where Myriam's friend reflects on Louise's background, saying, "She was Moroccan, wasn't she? There's something wrong with them, I'm telling you". (p. 46). This intersection of race and gender exposes the prejudices and stereotypes faced by immigrant women in contemporary society. More so, in the case of class and gender intersectionality, Myriam's middle-class status affords her certain privileges, but it also adds complexity to her feminine identity. As a career-oriented woman with a nanny, she grapples with feelings of guilt and societal expectations surrounding motherhood. This class and gender



intersection is reflected in Myriam's internal struggle to balance her roles as a mother, professional, and employer.

Furthermore, Slimani's novel is characterized by complexities of feminine identity and stereotypes. One of the major elements that the female identity in the study's sample text, is the working mother stereotype. Through Myriam's character, the novel challenges the working mother stereotype that portrays ambitious women as neglectful or less devoted to their families. Myriam's pursuit of a career is not simply a choice to prioritize work over family; rather, it reflects the complexities of modern motherhood where women navigate multiple roles and responsibilities. Also, another element in the novel is the subservient caregiver stereotype. The portrayal of Louise as a nanny also confronts the subservient caregiver stereotype often associated with domestic workers. While Louise is depicted as a nurturing caregiver, her actions are not solely defined by servitude. She cares deeply for the children and forms genuine bonds with them, debunking the stereotype of the detached and emotionless nanny. The novel underscores that identity is not singular but rather shaped by multiple intersecting factors. Louise's identity as an immigrant, woman, and domestic worker influences how she is perceived and treated. The intersectionality of her identity highlights the vulnerability and challenges she faces in her work and personal life. Additionally, both Louise and Myriam grapple with internal struggles, reflecting the complexities of feminine identity within societal expectations. Louise wrestles with feelings of inadequacy due to her socioeconomic status, while Myriam experiences guilt for not being able to devote all her time to her family. These internal battles exemplify the nuanced nature of feminine identity and the diverse pressures women face.

Through the framework of intersectionality and feminine identity, this novel examines the intricacies of race, class, and gender in shaping the characters' experiences and identities. The novel challenges stereotypes associated with working mothers and domestic workers, presenting complex portrayals that mirror the realities of contemporary feminine identities. In the light of this interplay of race, class, and gender, this research presents a thorough examination to the diverse and multifaceted nature of feminine identity within societal contexts.

## **Conclusion**

This critical analysis of feminine identity and gender stereotypes in Leïla Slimani's 'The Perfect Nanny' has shed light on the complexities of gender representation and the multifaceted nature of feminine identity within the novel. The study adopted a qualitative research approach and employed feminist literary theories, specifically ecofeminism and intersectionality, to examine the portrayal of feminine identity and gender dynamics in the narrative. The study revealed how race, class, and gender intersected in shaping the experiences and identities of the main female characters. Louise's immigrant identity and economic struggles intersected with her gender, highlighting the vulnerability and exploitation faced by immigrant domestic workers. Myriam's middle-class status intersected with her gender, presenting the challenges of balancing professional ambitions with motherhood responsibilities. Also, the analysis showed that the novel challenged traditional gender stereotypes associated with working mothers and domestic workers. Myriam's pursuit of a career defied the stereotype of neglectful working mothers, while Louise's genuine care for the children countered the stereotype of detached and

emotionless nannies. More so, the study found that feminine identity was depicted as complex and influenced by various factors, including socioeconomic status, immigration background, and societal expectations. The characters of Louise and Myriam exemplified the diverse experiences and challenges faced by women in contemporary society. This study adds depth to the existing body of knowledge on gender representation in literature, emphasizing the need for multifaceted and inclusive depictions of feminine identity. While this critical analysis provides valuable insights, there are avenues for further research in the field of gender representation in literature. Future studies could focus on the representation of other female characters in the novel to understand the broader spectrum of feminine identities. Additionally, comparative analyses of gender dynamics in different literary works or across various cultural contexts could enrich the understanding of feminine identity in diverse narratives.

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