from Menstruation *to the* Menopause

The Female Fertility Cycle in Contemporary Women's Writing in French

Maria Kathryn Tomlinson

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Contents

Acknowledgements vii

Introduction 1

1. Problematising a 'universal' female bodily experience: The second-wave feminists and their critics 19
2. Violence, trauma, and medicalisation: The female fertility cycle in women's writing from France 51
3. Islam, politics, and education: Framing the female fertility cycle through an Algerian perspective 95
4. Multiculturalism and the legacy of colonialism: The female fertility cycle in Mauritian women's writing 141

Conclusion 181

Bibliography 197

Index 215

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1 See Maria Tomlinson (2019) 'Subverting Patriarchal Norms(?): The Pleasures of Menopausal Women in Michèle Sarde's *Constance et la cinquantaine*' in Maggie Allison, Elliot Evans and Carrie Tarr (eds), *Plaisirs de femmes: Women's Pleasures and Their Discontents in French Literature and Culture*, Oxford: Peter Lang, 139–52. Research first appeared as the 2018 article '"On dirait que c'est

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I dedicate this book to my dad.

honteux de devenir une femme": Narratives of a Girl's First Menses in Maïssa Bey's *Bleu blanc vert* and Leïla Marouane's *La Jeune Fille et la mère*', *L'Esprit Créateur* 58.2, 112–25.

Introduction

From Menstruation to the Menopause celebrates the richness and diversity of contemporary women's writing in French by focusing on works of fiction from three different francophone contexts: Algeria, Mauritius, and France.[1] It is the first book to provide an in-depth exploration of the female fertility cycle in contemporary women's writing in French. The female body has long remained a site of contention and conflict throughout the world. For centuries, women have navigated societal perceptions which stigmatise, marginalise, and undermine female bodily experience. Since the twentieth century in particular, women writers and activists have sought to challenge these harmful ideas through novels, essays, protests, artwork, and, more recently, on social media. In France, a feminist deconstruction and rejection of patriarchal discourses about the female fertility cycle can be traced back to the pioneering work of the second-wave feminists in the 1970s. This criticism and defiance of patriarchal norms and beliefs is very much still alive in contemporary women's writing today.[2]

So far, in scholarship which examines contemporary women's writing in French, the female fertility cycle is usually only a secondary concern

1 In the context of this book, 'France' refers to the territory of France in Europe as opposed to overseas territories or former colonial territories. The term 'metropolitan France' is to be avoided for its neo-colonialist implications. For further discussion on this topic see Bill Marshall's *The French Atlantic: Travels in Culture and History* (2009). Throughout this book the word 'francophone', always with a small 'f', will be employed to refer to all literature in the French language, including that of mainland France. This term is therefore being used in a way that Patrick Corcoran defines as an uncomplicated 'linguistic term […] generally understood as a mere synonym for "French speaking"' (2007, 6).

2 Throughout this book, the phrase 'contemporary women's writing' refers to novels which have been published since 1990.

in studies which focus on other themes. For example, a rare example of a scholar who investigates the depiction of menstruation in Algerian women's writing is Katherine N. Harrington. In her study of nomadism in Nina Bouraoui's oeuvre (2013), Harrington briefly examines a scene in *La Voyeuse interdite*. In this scene, the protagonist is beaten by her father because he notices that her sheets are stained with her menstrual blood. Nonetheless, Harrington selects this episode in order to support her argument that the protagonist is positioned by the text as an outsider, rather than her analysing how the novel represents her menstrual experience. The menopause has been almost completely neglected by scholars in the field of French literature. Thus, this book provides a unique insight into how the menopause is represented in contemporary women's writing in French. Ageing, however, is a topic which has started to receive attention in edited volumes about women's writing in French. Recent publications include Joy Charnley's *As Time Goes By: Portraits of Age* (2014) and Florence Ramond Jurney and Karen McPherson's *Women's Lives in Contemporary French and Francophone Literature* (2016). With the increasing popularity of motherhood studies, a field which Gill Rye has helped to bring to the forefront of scholarship on contemporary women's writing in French, childbirth is now emerging as a topic of interest for scholars researching women's literature from France. Works include *Women's Writing in Twenty-First-Century France: Life as Literature* (Damlé and Rye, 2013) and *Motherhood in Literature and Culture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Europe* (Rye et al., 2017). Nonetheless, studies rarely compare representations of childbirth across cultures. This book therefore is part of this emerging body of literature, but it also fills a gap by comparing representations of childbirth in women's writing from Algeria, France, and Mauritius.

In fact, cross-cultural comparative studies on any aspect of contemporary women's writing in French continue to be rare. Even though women's writing from Algeria, France, and Mauritius all foreground the female body, there exists very little, if any, research that considers these three cultural contexts together. When these literatures do appear within the same publication, this is usually within edited volumes, and therefore they are analysed in separate chapters without cross-cultural comparisons being drawn. For example, Rye and Worton's *Women's Writing in Contemporary France: New Writers, New Literatures in the 1990s* (2002) treats works by French authors, such as Christine Angot and Marie Darrieussecq, separately from Algerian authors such

as Leïla Sebbar. Similarly, *Rebelles et criminelles chez les écrivaines d'expression française* (2013) contains three separate articles on the works of Ananda Devi, Leïla Marouane, and Virginie Despentes, all of which explore female bodily experience. Typhaine Leservot also observes this very gap. She states that 'monographs […] in Francophone studies are rigorously separated into regions, to such a degree that one would be hard pressed to find a collection into which a book comparing several Francophone regions including France could fit' (Leservot, 2010, 44). This gap has remained unfilled since she identified it in 2010. This book hopes to provide such a study by comparing and also giving equal weighting to literature from Algeria, France, and Mauritius.

Another important aspect of this book is its critical approach to second-wave feminist theories and their continued application within academic studies of literature in French. These studies rarely consider the implications of using second-wave feminist ideas as a theoretical framework with which to examine more contemporary and non-European contexts. Forty years have now passed since many of these influential works were first published, and therefore the time has come to revisit the theories articulated by the second-wave feminists to see whether they are still pertinent within a contemporary and diverse French-speaking world. Indeed, this corpus has been criticised for being monolithic, essentialist, elitist, and ignorant of how differences between women – such as sociocultural context, religion, and class – may impact their female bodily experience. Much of this criticism has emerged from intersectional feminists such as Audre Lorde and Barbara Christian who underline the importance of framing women's experiences within the sociopolitical context in which they live. The main aim of this book is therefore to explore the extent to which contemporary women's writing is intersectional in its scope. It asks whether the selected novels portray female bodily experience as being influenced by factors such as society, culture, religion, class, and sexuality. The methodological approach reflects this aim. In order to draw out societal beliefs which impact the experiences of the characters, sociological studies are used as a framework for literary analysis. In order to consider the extent to which women's writing in French has evolved since the second-wave feminist movement, it is important first to consider how the second-wave feminists characterised the female body and patriarchal attitudes towards it.

Two generations: The second-wave feminists and the emerging women writers of the 1990s

The second-wave feminist movement was sparked by the events of May 1968. In keeping with more general protest against traditional, conservative institutions, the events of May 1968 engendered a feminist revolt against the patriarchal values and norms that women believed to be oppressing them. Second-wave feminists played their part in strengthening this anti-patriarchal sentiment and increasing the visibility of women's issues. For example, they took part in debates on the legalisation of abortion. Writers such as Annie Leclerc, Marie Cardinal, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, Christine Delphy, and Monique Wittig put pen to paper in order to theorise women's subjugation and seek strategies to overcome it. The female body is a central concern of many of their works; these include Leclerc's *Parole de femme* (1974), Cixous' 'Le Rire de La Méduse' (1975), Cardinal's *Autrement dit* (1977), and Kristeva's *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* (1980). Leclerc, Cardinal, Kristeva, Delphy, and Cixous were unprecedented in their exploration of aspects of female bodily experience which previous writers considered too taboo to discuss. These writers broke this silence which surrounded the female body in the 1970s by drawing attention to experiences such as menstruation, childbirth, and the menopause, which had, so far, been largely overlooked.

Generally speaking, second-wave feminist texts present female bodily experience as being characterised by silence, taboo, shame, and negative stereotypes. They blame patriarchal perspectives that have become engrained in discourse for perpetuating negative ideas about the female body. They argue that women have internalised these harmful patriarchal assumptions about their bodies. In the context of second-wave feminism, patriarchy refers to 'a social system characterized by male domination over women' (Hartmann, 1997, 100). Hence, the second-wave feminists aimed to disrupt and to question the normative beliefs of the society in which they lived because they perceived these normative beliefs as being patriarchal in origin. They considered these patriarchal beliefs as oppressive to women. The majority of the second-wave feminists posit patriarchal discourse as the cause of this oppression and argue that language, because it privileges male experience at the expense of female experience, is phallocentric in nature. The term 'phallocentric' is used by Irigaray, Cixous, and Kristeva, who all refer to the 'phallocentrisme' in language. Although they themselves do not offer a straightforward

definition of this term, Elizabeth Grosz provides the following clear and helpful definition: '[p]hallocentrism functions to reduce or categorize femininity so that it is conceived as a simulacrum, mirror-image or imperfect double of masculinity' (1986, 68). The related term 'phallogocentrism' is also often to be found within second-wave feminist texts. Second-wave feminists borrowed this term from Jacques Derrida. He too critiques phallocentrism which he defined as 'the way in which male speech dominates writing. Especially the writing done by women' (Agger, 1992, 126). Thus, we can see clearly from these two definitions that the second-wave feminists sought to challenge this patriarchal dominance over the French language which they believed rendered inferior women's ideas, expressions and, even, their corporeality.

As well as arguing that language reified and reinforced women's oppression, the second-wave feminists also believed that language could provide a solution to this problem. Leclerc, Cardinal, and Cixous sought to shatter the patriarchal elements of language through an *écriture féminine*, a term coined by Cixous in in her essay 'Le Rire de la Méduse'. Through *écriture féminine*, these authors encouraged women to find a more positive language with which to describe their bodies that would celebrate, rather than denigrate, female corporeality. In her pioneering essay, Cixous explains that *écriture féminine* is a way for women to take back control not only of the language which is used to represent their bodies but also of their bodies themselves. She writes: 'il faut que la femme s'écrive : que la femme écrive de la femme et fasse venir les femmes à l'écriture, dont elles ont été éloignées aussi violemment qu'elles l'ont été de leurs corps' (1975, 39). The term '*écriture féminine*' is often used by scholars to refer to all of the second-wave feminists. This study will avoid this term, however, because one can argue that its application to this entire group is problematic. Kristeva, for example, rejects this label because she believes that it is 'une réitération du romantisme plus ou moins euphorique ou déprimé' (Kristeva, 1980, 12). In addition, she argues that *écriture féminine* is essentialist: 'universalisé dans sa démarche, ce courant du féminisme *globalise* les problèmes des femmes de différents milieux, âges, civilisations ou simplement de différents structures psychiques, sous l'étiquette de la Femme Universelle' (1980, 8). As will become clear in the first chapter of this book, despite Kristeva's assertion about the importance of avoiding essentialism, one could argue that Kristeva also falls into this trap through her theory of abjection. She uses this theory, which is based on Judeo-Christian ideology about the female body, in order to characterise women's oppression without

consideration of other factors which influence women's experiences such as class, ethnicity, and sexuality.

These influential second-wave feminists texts provide a legacy for contemporary women authors who write about female bodily experience. Contemporary women writers have continued to explore the female fertility cycle as did Leclerc, Cardinal, and Kristeva who were some of the first authors to write overtly and in depth about menstruation, childbirth, and the menopause. Academic studies argue that the year 1990 marks the beginning of the subsequent generation of French authors to the second-wave feminists. This new generation of women writers who emerged in the 1990s is often characterised in academic scholarship as being distinct from, but also indebted to, second-wave feminism. For example, in an edited volume entitled *Aventures et expériences littéraires: écritures de femmes en France au début du vingt-et-unième siècle* (2014), Amaleena Damlé describes women writers of the 1990s as 'une génération qui a hérité d'une certaine tradition littéraire féministe qui a aussi, et à plus d'un titre, profité des « gains du féminisme »' (2014, 6). In *Contemporary French Women's Writing: Women's Visions, Women's Voices, Women's Lives* (2004), Shirley Jordan differentiates between the second-wave feminists and the next generation by outlining that women's writing post-1990 is characterised by 'a youthful vision and idiom and preparedness to shock' (2004, 16). This is true of many of the novels which will be explored in this book. The works of Virginie Despentes and Marie Darrieussecq, in particular, have become known for their sensationalist content. Alongside exploring their works, this study also considers some lesser-known authors from France who have published novels between 1990 and 2015 such as Agnès Desarthe, Hélèna Villovitch, and Michèle Sarde. Michèle Sarde is a slight exception in this group because she had already published her first novel before 1990 and has spent most of her life living in the United States. Her debut novel *Le désir fou* was published in 1975. Nonetheless, her novel *Constance et la Cinquantaine* (2003) is very relevant to this book, not only because it is about the menopause and it was published post-1990, but most importantly as it comments on the legacy of the second-wave feminists. This study also features the novels of Laurence Tardieu and Catherine Millet, who started to publish in the twenty-first century. The selection of authors for this book is therefore not limited to a strict definition of generation in terms of age. Instead, it considers representations of the body in women's writing from 1990 to 2015 in order to determine how the body is envisaged in contemporary literature.

However, scholarship which looks at the legacy of second-wave feminists on contemporary women writers does not tend to include authors who live outside France or write about non-European francophone contexts. This book's definition of this new generation of women writers goes beyond the borders of France to include writers who fictionalise the wider francophone world. Although the Mauritian and Algerian authors who appear in this book were mostly born outside France, they too are writing within the same literary tradition as the second-wave feminists. For this reason, novels in French by authors from outside Europe must also be considered in order to effectively analyse the extent to which contemporary women's writing today reflects, or provides a contrast to, second-wave feminist approaches. Authors from Algeria and Mauritius can be considered as both indebted to the second-wave feminists but also as taking a completely different direction from them.

In parallel with the new generation which emerged in France in the 1990s, many women writers from Algeria and Mauritius have also published their novels in French and through publishing houses that are based in France. Maïssa Bey and Ananda Devi, for example, were born under colonial rule and have written many books about their country of birth. Maïssa Bey was born in Ksar El Boukhari in 1950 and still lives in Algeria today. Many of her novels such as *Au commencement était la mer* (1996), *Cette Fille-là* (2001), and *Bleu blanc vert* (2006) represent women's lives in Algeria, spanning from the colonial era to the postcolonial present. The majority of her novels have been published by L'Aube, a publishing house based in the south of France. Ananda Devi is Indo-Mauritian and was born in Trois Boutiques, Mauritius in 1957. Her novels have been published by Gallimard and L'Harmattan. Many of her stories, such as *Pagli* (2001), *Soupir* (2002), and *Eve de ses décombres* (2006), are set in Mauritius. She has also published novels set in London, where she gained her PhD in anthropology, and set in India, where she has ancestral links. Since *From Menstruation to the Menopause* gives precedence to the setting of the novels over the country of origin of their authors, it also analyses *La Voyeuse interdite* (1991) by Nina Bouraoui who was born in France to an Algerian father and a French mother. The only exception to this rule is Devi's *Indian Tango* (2006) which is set in India. It does, however, tell the story of a Mauritian author who visits India, and explores many similar themes to her other novels which are set in Mauritius. These themes include the influence of the patriarchy and Hindu religion on the female body.

A cross-cultural approach to contemporary women's writing in French

As this introduction has established, contemporary women's writing in French is wide-ranging both in the ethnicity of the authors and also in the cultural contexts that they represent. A cross-cultural study is therefore necessary in order to do justice to the diversity of francophone literature today. French studies scholars have acknowledged the increasingly transnational nature of the field. They emphasise the importance of expanding our definition of French literature beyond the borders of France itself to incorporate literature from places such as Belgium, North America, North Africa, West Africa, and the Indian Ocean. The editors of *Transnational French Studies: Postcolonialism and Littérature-monde* (2010) explain in their introduction: 'The emergence of a Francophone postcolonial field has [...] taken as a given the need to question a monocultural vision of French literature, and equally of French Studies more generally' (Hargreaves et al., 2). It is this monocultural vision that *From Menstruation to the Menopause* also questions through both its cross-cultural approach and problematisation of the monolithic perspective of the second-wave feminists. Leservot builds on the introduction of *Transnational French Studies* by arguing the need for a more intercultural approach within French studies. She encourages other scholars to write cross-cultural studies rather than purely specialising in one region. She states that 'the real problem lies not so much with the regions themselves but rather in the absence of properly comparative studies between them' (Leservot, 2010, 45). Indeed, as Charles Forsdick has argued, critical approaches in postcolonial studies are indebted to comparative studies. Forsdick underlines that cross-cultural comparative approaches allow us to both redefine postcolonialism in the context of the twenty-first century as well as reposition it 'in relation to emergent disciplines such as transnational cultural studies, World Literature, diaspora studies or globalization studies' (2015, 18). Thus, the comparative framework of this book not only sheds light on the meaning of the 'postcolonial' within the twenty-first century, it also encourages an examination of the spaces, moments, and contexts (political, religious, and cultural) that are represented in contemporary literature.

In the context of this book, the added importance of a cross-cultural approach, as opposed to a monocultural approach, emerges in the consideration of whether contemporary francophone women's literature

takes a more intersectional approach to the body than it did in the 1970s. For this reason, novels from France, Algeria, and Mauritius have been selected because they represent divergent political, social, religious, and cultural climates. It is important to include women's writing from France since contemporary authors are writing within the same cultural context as did the second-wave feminists. It is therefore interesting to compare whether French literature which has been published since 1990 reflects an evolution in attitudes towards the female body. Mauritius and Algeria are ideal for cross-cultural comparison with France. Not only do Mauritius and Algeria have a shared French colonial history, they have very different postcolonial cultural, religious, political, and social compositions both to each other and to France. Mauritius is an officially secular island-nation with a diverse, non-indigenous, multi-ethnic, and multifaith population. Its ancestral origins are mainly in France, Africa, India, and China. The largest ethnic group are Indo-Mauritians, whose ancestors were brought to the island as indentured labourers under British colonial rule (1810–1968). The Indo-Mauritians are primarily Hindu, but some are Muslim. The Sino-Mauritians and Creoles primarily follow Christianity. Prior to British rule, Mauritius had been a French colony and Franco-Mauritians continue to constitute a small but elite minority. Mauritius is also a multilingual country. Mauritian Creole, which is based on the French language, is the lingua franca of Mauritius. The etymology of some Mauritian Creole words also come from English and South Asian languages. Algeria, on the other hand, is an Islamic country where the main language is Arabic. Since the early days of independence until the early twenty-first century, Algeria witnessed the rise of Islamism. An awareness of this Islamic fundamentalism is key to understanding how women's writing from Algeria engages with the difficulties and violence faced by Algerian women during the civil war (1991–2002). This time period became known as the *décennie noire*. Women were a particular target of massacres, especially those who refused to wear the veil. Meredeth Turshen in her sociological study of the *décennie noire* gives the following examples of the violence with which women had to contend during this period: 'A 1994 *fatwa* legalized the killing of girls and women not wearing the *hijab* […] another *fatwa* legalised kidnapping and temporary marriage' (2002, 897–98). We see, therefore, that women suffered from a patriarchal violence that was legitimised through the perversion of Islam.

As the example of the Algerian civil war demonstrates, it is important to link 'patriarchy' to sociocultural and political context. The nature

and impact of patriarchy is therefore varied between women's writing set in Algeria, France, and Mauritius because of their differing societal, religious, and cultural beliefs. Before the civil war in Algeria, patriarchal values were strongly inflected by Islam and Algeria's colonial past. According to Peter Knauss in the comprehensive work *The Persistence of Patriarchy: Class, Gender, and Identity in Twentieth Century Algeria*: 'The persistence of patriarchy in Algeria can be explained by the suppression of what most Algerian men regarded as their traditional identity by a draconian colonialism' (1987, xii). This remains somewhat true of Algeria today (Entelis and Naylor, 2019). In Mauritius, patriarchal attitudes are embedded in society and continue to influence the lives of women there today. According to sociologist Ramola Ramtohul, these patriarchal norms vary between each community and this division strengthens patriarchal oppression. Communalism, as Ramtohul explains,

> carries a gendered dimension because it promotes the patriarchal value system and all that is rightly or wrongly associated with religion [...] Multi-ethnic and plural societies are characterised by discord and divisions, which in turn threaten women's rights and also affect women's political mobilisation and activism. Women in a multicultural set-up therefore risk being more markedly oppressed. (2015, 31)

We therefore have to consider the influence of culture and religion when analysing how patriarchy is socially constructed in Mauritius. France, too, has an increasingly multicultural population. Nonetheless, unlike the Mauritian novels that are analysed in this study, the selected literature from France that engages with the female fertility cycle tends to focus solely on white characters. In France, patriarchal attitudes are still clearly visible in the maternal and sexual roles that are assigned to women by the media. The Madonna/whore dichotomy is still very much alive in the objectification of the female body and the glorification of motherhood. 'If anything, with sexual liberalization, the female body (if young and slim) has become even more exposed, made more available than it once was. Male sexuality is still represented as an irrepressible force, to be willingly complied with by women' (Cook and Davie, 2002, 49). Hence, we can also observe here a patriarchal valorisation of youth which impinges upon female bodily experience. As this book demonstrates in its analysis of the menopause in women's writing from Mauritius and Algeria, this patriarchal valorisation of youth is not unique to France.

Media coverage of menstruation and the menopause

To comprehend the timely nature of *From Menstruation to the Menopause*, we only need to look at today's global media to observe that, almost fifty years after the height of second-wave feminism, women across the world are continuing to challenge harmful patriarchal ideas that surround the female fertility cycle. By speaking openly about female bodily experience on social media as well as ensuring that their protests receive attention from traditional media, activists are claiming to break the silence. Activists, as well as women from all strata of society, and from across the globe, are using social media to challenge societal attitudes towards the female body, to share their personal bodily experiences, and to promote body positivity (such as by using the viral #bodypositive hashtag). This increasing visibility of the female fertility cycle in both traditional and social media can be dated back to menstrual activism in 2015. Of the three experiences examined in this study, it is societal attitudes towards menstruation that have received the most attention from activists. This has been reflected in the traditional media that has covered more stories about societal attitudes towards menstruation than the menopause or childbirth.

Menstrual advocacy in the form of grass-roots initiatives, artwork, or mediatised activism has attracted some attention from scholars in the field of critical menstrual studies, but much more research is needed to fully explore the impact of mediatised menstrual activism on societal perceptions of menstruation. In a recent ground-breaking interdisciplinary volume, *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies* (2020), Chris Bobel and Breanne Fahs define menstrual activism as 'a mobilizing effort that challenges menstrual taboos and insists that menstruators have the support they need to live healthy happy lives, throughout their cycles and throughout their lives' (Bobel and Fahs, 2020, 1002). Other elements of menstrual activism that they mention include advocating for the use of reusable products (such as menstrual cups or reusable pads) and a trans-inclusive advocacy that raises awareness of the experiences of transgender menstruators. Echoing the framework of *From Menstruation to the Menopause,* Bobel and Fahs also emphasise the importance that menstrual activism adopts an intersectional perspective. They note that such an approach is becoming more common within the movement: 'menstrual activism has also grown savvier in recent years in its approach to race and class diversity, particularly as menstrual activists recognize that different groups of menstruators have different

needs' (Bobel and Fahs, 2020, 1010). Since menopausal activism has only started to receive significant attention in the media since 2018, menopausal advocacy is yet to receive meaningful consideration within academic scholarship. Nonetheless, some studies have examined the impact of offline menopausal advocacy, such as movements focusing on implementing policies in the workplace that reflect the needs of menopausal women (Beck, Brewis, and Davies, 2019).

Much of the momentum behind the wave of menstrual activism that started in 2015 was sparked by women in India. For example, the campaign 'Happy to Bleed' began as a protest against a temple chief in India. In light of Hindu doctrine that forbids menstruating women from engaging in religious activities, the chief announced that he would not allow women to enter his shrine unless a machine were invented which could detect menstrual blood. Soon, 'Happy to Bleed' became #HappytoBleed on Twitter, a banner under which women shared their experiences of menstruation. Many other related hashtags have appeared. These include #livetweetyourperiod, through which women have described their periods as they are experiencing them and #FreePeriodStories that was coined by the activist Amika George to encourage people to share any menstrual-related stories. In addition, #periodpositive was created by Sheffield-based activist, Chella Quint who is campaigning for a more positive menstrual education in schools. Besides seeking to challenge the shame and stigma that can surround women's menstrual experiences, period poverty has also been a key theme of menstrual activism. Amika George, for example, was instrumental in the UK in the successful campaign for free menstrual products in schools.

Artists and celebrities have also sought to raise awareness of both period poverty and to challenge menstrual stigma. US-based musician Kiran Gandhi received a lot of media attention by running the London marathon visibly menstruating onto her leggings. Canadian artist and poet Rupi Kaur uploaded to Instagram a photograph of herself lying in bed with a small menstrual blood stain on her pyjamas, and then publicly contested Instagram's removal of this photograph. Although the majority of people who have challenged menstrual stigma on social media would define themselves as cisgender women, members of the LGBTQ+ community have also joined in the discussion in order to both take part in challenging societal stigma towards menstruation itself but also to raise awareness that it is not solely cisgender women who menstruate. Transgender activist Cass Bliss, who identifies as

non-binary, posted a photo of themselves with menstrual blood on their trousers holding the sign 'Periods are not just for women: #bleedingwhiletrans'. Bliss has spoken candidly about their own personal experience as a transgender menstruator and has sought to normalise menstruation through creating a colouring book which features the character 'Tony the tampon'. Drag Queen Manila Luzon posted a photo of herself on Instagram wearing a red dress with a menstrual pad on the front. She had originally hoped to wear the dress on the TV show *RuPaul's Drag Race* but had not been allowed because it was considered to be in 'poor taste' (Luzon, 2019). Manila wrote on Instagram 'My goal with this look was to normalize menstruation by looking sick'ning even if I was on my period!' (Luzon, 2019).

Menstrual activism and the increasing visibility of menstruation has not been limited to an anglophone context. In 2015, French artist Marianne Rosenstiehl exhibited a series of photographs that depict menstruating women and show their menstrual blood. These photos captured menstrual experience from women across the world ranging from adolescents to perimenopausal women. Her collection, entitled 'La Malédiction' received attention from French newspapers such as *L'Express* and magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*. From then on, there has also been an explosion of French blogs and YouTube videos on the subject which encourage women to share their menstrual experiences. As early as 2014, actress, comedian, and blogger Natoo created a humorous video about her menstrual experience with which she believed her audience could relate.

A website, titled 'passionmenstrues', was set up by Jack Parker (a pseudonym) as a space for women to share their stories about menstruation. This blog was later turned into a book, published by Gallimard, entitled *Le Grand Mystère des Règles* (2017). The book provides both health advice and a comprehensive view of societal attitudes towards menstruation. Parker's feminist approach to menstrual experience mirrors previous French feminist studies by framing menstrual stigma in the context of patriarchy. In her discussion of the menstrual taboo, Parker explains: 'D'un point de vue strictement féministe, c'est une évidence : étant considérées comme une fonction uniquement féminine, les règles représentaient donc le prétexte ultime pour justifier l'infériorité de la femme et installer ce fameux système patriarcal' (Parker, 2017, 143).

Francophone social media users have also been discussing menstrual experiences under a variety of French hashtags. For example, the creators

of #cavasaigner called menstruators to take part in a mass protest against period poverty on 15 July 2019. They asked for people to display red patches on their clothes and invited them either to join them on the streets of Paris and Lyon or to share photographs on social media. One post states: 'Tachez vos jeans, vos stories Instagram ou les sièges de votre métro! Avec du vrai ou du faux sang, on veut de rouge' (Cavasaigner, 2019). Other goals of this particular campaign were to raise awareness of the existence of transgender menstruators and to demonstrate that menstruation is something which concerns the entire population. Their desire for inclusivity is evident in their use of both masculine and feminine adjective endings.

The menopause is also an increasingly prevalent topic in traditional media and social media. In the anglophone world, the account @ rockymymenopause appeared in April 2018 with the aim of normalising conversations about the menopause and encourages women to share their experiences under #menovist. In addition, UK based Sharon McArthur, known as 'Miss Menopause', is active on social media and has made numerous appearances in the traditional media. She campaigns for the better treatment and education of menopausal women in the workplace. On her website she states that 'The menopause is the last taboo' (McArthur, 2019). In France, a variety of radio shows and television programmes have explored why, for many women, the menopause remains a taboo topic and something about which they feel ashamed. In March 2015, France Inter aired a phone-in radio show entitled 'La ménopause, encore un tabou?' in which listeners were invited to share their own menopausal experiences. In November 2017, BFMTV hosted a panel show called 'L'Avis des GG: La ménopause, encore un tabou en France' which included guests such as Zohra Bitan, a civil servant, who is trying to change women's attitudes towards the menopause. Some high-profile French figures have also started to break the silence that surrounds menopausal experience in France. During an interview on Europe 1 about her forthcoming television film 'Un si joli mensonge', French actress Corinne Touzet associates the menopause with depression, and states that the menopause is 'un sujet tabou' which is never discussed because 'ce n'est pas glamour' (Europe 1, 2013). In 2015, journalist and comedian Sophie Davant recounted her experiences as a menopausal woman both in a book, *Ce que j'ai appris de moi: Le journal d'une quinqua*, and during an interview on TF1's programme 'Sept à huit'. In both cases, Davant focuses on the sexual desire of menopausal women. During 'Sept à huit' the interviewer acknowledges that Davant has discussed openly

taboo topics such as the menopause, to which Davant responds, 'c'est pas tabou, ça concerne tout le monde' (TF1, 2015).

Chapter summary

The following chapters pay homage to the pioneering work of the second-wave feminists while at the same time revealing how their perspectives on the female body can be nuanced, updated, and reimagined through the study of more contemporary women's novels. Chapter 1 examines how the second-wave feminists portrayed women's experiences of, and patriarchal attitudes towards, menstruation, childbirth, and the menopause. One of the focal points is Kristeva's theory of the abject which she sets out in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: Essai sur l'abjection* (1980). She articulates this theory to explain why society reacts with repulsion and horror to menstrual blood and childbirth. Scholars such as Jane Ussher and Wendy Rogers, whose work is also discussed in this chapter, have also extended Kristeva's theory to explain societal responses to the menopause. Annie Leclerc's *Parole de femme* is also a focal point since this work provides a detailed exploration of menstruation and childbirth. Leclerc considers at length how women have internalised negative patriarchal attitudes towards their bodies. She advocates that women dispel these beliefs by creating a 'parole de femme' which celebrates, rather than denigrates, the female body. Leclerc and Cardinal's conversation about the menopause in *Autrement dit* (1977) is also considered in depth. Chapter 1 subsequently illustrates how the second-wave feminists have been criticised for their approaches towards women's oppression. It incorporates specific criticisms of the works of individual second-wave feminists, such as Delphy's problematisation of Leclerc's analysis of menstruation, as well as broader criticism of the second-wave feminist movement as a whole. This criticism emerges from feminists such as Audre Lorde and Barbara Christian who advocate a more intersectional approach to women's oppression and postcolonial feminists such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty who reflect on the implications of culture, religion, and society.

Chapter 2 analyses representations of menstruation, childbirth, and the menopause in women's writing from France. I argue that, as whole, women's writing from France has a tendency to explore how women's experiences are shaped by medical discourse and practices. It becomes evident that this literature portrays an image of female bodily experience

that is antithetical to Leclerc's idealism. Instead, we see in contemporary women's writing a concern with how female bodily experience can be violent and traumatic. This chapter analyses novels by a variety of different authors. These include Nathalie Schweighoffer's *J'avais douze ans…* (1990), Virginie Despentes' *Baise-Moi* (1993) and short story collection *Mordre au travers* (1999), Camille Laurens' *Philippe* (1995), Catherine Millet's *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M* (2001), Michèle Sarde's *Constance et la cinquantaine* (2003), Laurence Tardieu's *Le Jugement de Léa* (2004), Mazarine Pingeot's *Le Cimetière des poupées* (2007), and a selection of short stories from Isabelle Lortholary's edited collection, *Naissances* (2005). The following short stories are analysed: Marie Darrieussecq's 'Encore là', Agnès Desarthe's 'Les mois, les heures et les minutes', and Hélèna Villovitch's 'Mon Lapin'.

Chapter 3 examines how women's writing from Algeria portrays the female fertility cycle. It argues that Algerian literature generally considers how Islamic and patriarchal traditions, practices, and beliefs influence women's experiences. It also considers how female bodily experience can be subject to violence and trauma. This chapter will explore representations of menstruation in Maïssa Bey's *Bleu blanc vert* (2006), Leïla Marouane's *La Jeune Fille et la mère* (2005) and *La Fille de la Casbah* (1996), as well as in Nina Bouraoui's *La Voyeuse interdite* (1991). The subsequent section focuses on childbirth. It once again explores Maïssa Bey's *Bleu blanc vert* as well as her short story 'En ce denier matin' which can be found in the collection *Sous le Jasmin la nuit* (2012). It also examines two texts by Malika Mokeddem, namely *Les Hommes qui marchent* (1990) and *Je dois tout à ton oubli* (2008). The final section on the menopause focuses on Bey's *Bleu blanc vert* and *Hizya* (2015).

Chapter 4 analyses representations of menstruation, childbirth, and the menopause in women's writing from Mauritius. It argues that Mauritian women's writing has a particular interest in how female bodily experience is influenced by patriarchal interpretations of religion. Literature which portrays the Indo-Mauritian community considers how certain patriarchal figures manipulate Hindu doctrines to oppress women. Novels which are set within the Creole community reflect on the role of Christian values. In addition, Mauritian literature often frames the female fertility cycle in a society in which tensions exist between the poverty-stricken Creole population and the wealthier Indo-Mauritian Hindu population. Mauritian women's writing also portrays the violent, traumatic, and abject aspects of female bodily experience in order to

challenge the exoticisation of the Mauritian woman. This is a response to the legacy of colonialism and a neocolonial and exoticist attitude towards the island of Mauritius. This chapter features several works by Ananda Devi, including *L'Arbre fouet* (1997), *Pagli* (2001), *Soupir* (2002), *Ève de ses décombres* (2006) and *Indian Tango* (2007). It also analyses representations of menstruation and childbirth in Shenaz Patel's *Paradis blues* (2014).

The book ends with a concluding chapter which reflects on how approaches towards the female body have evolved in francophone literature from second-wave feminism until the publication date of the most contemporary novel (2015). It evaluates how, since 1990, women's writing in French has taken a more intersectional and contextual approach to the female body. It provides a cross-cultural comparison between women's writing from Algeria, France, and Mauritius. The conclusion illustrates that the female body is inflected by a variety of factors including sociocultural context, religion, tourism, medicine, class, sexuality, and trauma. It also demonstrates that the female body has been framed within a variety of traumatic and violent contexts which challenge the idealism of second-wave feminists such as Leclerc. It ends on the note that, although contemporary women's writing has significantly evolved since second-wave feminism, women writers are still very much writing in a spirit of defiance, subversion, and celebration.

CHAPTER ONE

Problematising a 'universal' female bodily experience

The second-wave feminists and their critics

In France, the origins of the second-wave feminist movement can be traced back to Simone de Beauvoir's hugely influential work, *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949). One can argue that Beauvoir was a mother figure to the post-1968 feminists, and her approach to menstruation, childbirth, and the menopause guided this next generation of feminists to pursue these topics further. *Le Deuxième Sexe* and the spirit of the May 1968 protests inspired this next generation of feminists, including such names as Julia Kristeva and Annie Leclerc, to challenge patriarchal ideas about the female fertility cycle and propose their theories that better represented women's lived experiences. Indeed, many of the protests launched by women in France during May 1968 centred around a woman's fertility and her bodily autonomy. Activists demanded the legalisation of abortion and contraception. These 'frank discussions about legalizing birth control paved the way for more open discussions of sexual matters within the women's liberation movement' (Greenwald, 2019, 72). This activism therefore opened up a space for the second-wave feminists to write frankly about women's sexual pleasures and other intimate bodily experiences. This chapter begins by tracing the origins of French feminist approaches to the female fertility cycle by considering Beauvoir's highly influential *Le Deuxième Sexe,* before considering how the post-1968 feminists developed feminist thinking on this fundamental aspect of women's lives.

Le Deuxième sexe: Problematising the patriarchy and inspiring the next generation of feminists

Whilst the primary focus of Chapter 1 is post-1968 feminism, it is important to firstly consider *Le Deuxième Sexe*. We cannot deny the enormous impact Beauvoir's work had on the way in which the second-wave feminists such as Leclerc and Cixous theorised the female body. According to some scholars, *Le Deuxième sexe* was the foundational text of the second-wave feminist movement, and post-1968 feminists saw her as a mother figure (Scarth, 2004). Within the many pages of *Le Deuxième sexe*, Beauvoir examines a great variety of female bodily experiences including menstruation, childbirth, and the menopause. She frames her study of female bodily experience by arguing that women have been objectified, dominated, and otherised by men (Beauvoir, 1949, 31). Her Western perspective is evident in her attributing negative patriarchal attitudes to Judeo-Christian teachings. She argues that negative patriarchal attitudes towards the female body are perpetuated, reified, and encouraged by the Bible: 'Toute la littérature chrétienne s'efforce d'exaspérer le dégoût que l'homme peut éprouver pour la femme' (Beauvoir, 1949, 270). Her close analysis of female bodily experience exemplifies and problematises this patriarchal dominance of, and disgust towards, the female body.

In Beauvoir's examination of menstrual experience and childbirth, we can find some ideas on which Kristeva and Leclerc later build. Beauvoir discusses the taboos which pertain to bodily fluids and emissions that occur during childbirth and menstruation. As does Kristeva in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* (1980), Beauvoir illustrates that these taboos have existed for thousands of years, were perpetuated by the Bible, and then continued to influence societal attitudes for generations. Beauvoir and Kristeva both demonstrate this fact by pointing to the Bible chapter, Leviticus, which describes as impure both menstruating women and women who are giving birth. In particular, Beauvoir emphasises the extremely pejorative and harmful approach of Leviticus to menstrual blood by exclaiming: 'Le Lévitique rapproche le flux menstruel de la gonorrhée' (1949, 246). By exclaiming that Leviticus treats menstrual blood as if it were an infectious sexual disease, Beauvoir emphasises that the Bible has turned a harmless substance into an entity to be feared because of its power to contaminate.

Although Beauvoir argues that Christianity has perpetuated the idea that menstrual blood is impure and taboo, she does not claim that these

ideas originated in the Bible. Indeed, she illustrates that these beliefs are patriarchal, rather than religious, in nature. She exemplifies this by describing menstrual rituals in the pre-patriarchal society of Ancient Greece: 'Les jeunes filles de certains cités grecques portaient en hommage au temple d'Astarté le ligne taché de leur premier sang. Mais, depuis l'avènement du patriarcat, on n'a plus attribué que des pouvoirs néfastes à la louche liqueur qui s'écoule du sexe féminin' (1949, 244). Here, she illustrates that, before men started to control and dominate society, menstrual blood was celebrated and not considered to be harmful. It was only with the advent of patriarchy that menstrual blood became reviled. Beauvoir's example therefore illustrates that in order to dispel negative ideas about menstrual blood from society, patriarchy itself must be challenged and deconstructed. Hence, this paves the way for works, such as Leclerc's *Parole de femme* (1974), to shatter patriarchal discourse and to coin a new more positive feminist discourse.

Since the menopause receives much less attention than childbirth and menstruation in post-1968 second-wave feminism, it is worth considering Beauvoir's perception of menopausal experience in greater depth. This context will provide greater clarity as to the extent to which francophone women's writing has evolved in its representations of the menopause between the second-wave feminists and post-1990 authors. Beauvoir's approach to the menopause is markedly different from her approach to childbirth and menstruation. Beauvoir is ambivalent both in her positioning the menopause as the beginning of a woman's decline but also as her liberation. She writes about the menopause in the chapter 'De la maturité à la vieillesse'. The choice of this title suggests that Beauvoir considers the menopause as a sign of old age and that she perceives societal attitudes towards menopausal women as primarily based on the menopause as a marker of old age. Indeed, this chapter weaves together discourses of menopause and ageing that are often difficult for the reader to separate. For example, she refers to the menopause as 'l'âge dangereux' and states, '[b]ien avant la définitive mutilation, la femme est hantée par l'horreur du vieillissement' (Beauvoir, 1949, 400). The 'mutilation' to which Beauvoir refers is the menopause. This word has the connotations of a traumatic and irreversible loss that leaves a mark on women.

Beauvoir illustrates why the menopause is a traumatic moment by portraying it as an abrupt and violent corporeal transformation rather than a process. She outlines that, because a woman's life can be split into distinct stages due to her having a window of fertility, female

ageing is more traumatic than is male ageing. Beauvoir characterises the menopause as a definitive sign that a woman has aged and a shock to the menopausal woman who has suddenly been stripped of her femininity:

> Chaque période de la vie féminine est étale et monotone : mais les passages d'un stade à un autre sont d'une dangereuse brutalité ; ils se trahissent par des crises beaucoup plus décisives que chez le mâle : puberté, initiation sexuelle, ménopause. Tandis que celui-ci vieillit continûment, la femme est brusquement dépouillée de sa féminité. (Beauvoir, 1949, 399)

Beauvoir's use of the word 'crises' portrays the menopause as a sudden and violent traumatic psychological experience. The phrase 'brusquement dépouillée de sa féminité' depicts the menopause as an attack which permanently disfigures the female body and renders it unrecognisable from its former youthful state. By characterising the menopausal woman as being 'dépouillée de sa feminité', Beauvoir demonstrates that in the eyes of the society in which she lives, once a woman starts the menopause she no longer fits into their definition of 'feminine'.

Whilst evaluating the role of menopausal women in society, Beauvoir expands upon her discussion of the menopause by linking fertility with femininity. She states: 'C'est encore jeune qu'elle perd l'attrait érotique et la fécondité d'où elle tirait, aux yeux de la société et à ses propres yeux, la justification de son existence et ses chances de bonheur : il lui reste à vivre, privée de tout avenir, environ la moitié de sa vie adulte' (Beauvoir, 1949, 399). Here, Beauvoir suggests that society determines a woman's sexual attractiveness based on her fertility. Without this fertility which renders her a desirable sexual partner, she is no longer part of the sexual order. According to Beauvoir, if a woman cannot produce children, she loses her *raison d'être* in the eyes of the society in which she lives. There is also the implication in this passage that happiness and usefulness are connected, so that if a woman no longer serves the purpose of producing children, she cannot be happy. Beauvoir thus envisions the menopause as a moment of irreversible loss of both happiness and purpose which is attributable to society's valorisation of fertility and youth.

The ambivalence of Beauvoir's approach emerges in the latter half of the chapter, when she paints a picture of the menopausal woman which starkly contrasts the mournful imagery of the infertile woman she had, so far, constructed. She illustrates that the menopause can also be experienced as a moment of liberation and rebirth for women. For Beauvoir, the menopausal woman can also subversively use her newfound lack of purpose in society to her advantage: 'la société

patriarcale a donné à toutes les fonctions féminines la figure d'une servitude ; la femme n'échappe à l'esclavage que dans les moments où elle perd toute efficacité' (1949, 408–09). We can infer that, since the menopausal woman is released from the task of birthing children, she is more at liberty to explore her desires rather than fulfil her husband's expectations. As is evident in the following passage, the menopausal woman finds a newfound freedom in her no longer feeling bound by certain rules and expectations:

> C'est dans son automne, dans son hiver que la femme s'affranchit de ses chaînes ; elle prend prétexte de son âge pour éluder les corvées qui lui pèsent ; elle connaît trop son mari pour se laisser encore intimider par lui, elle élude ses étreintes, elle s'arrange à ses côtés – dans l'amitié, l'indifférence ou l'hostilité – une vie à elle […] Déchargée de ses devoirs, elle découvre enfin sa liberté. (Beauvoir, 1949, 408)

This imagery of a woman at the age of the menopause breaking free from her chains is an empowering one. The menopausal woman uses her new lease of life to reject her husband and carve her own path in life. Beauvoir underscores that this is a moment of profound change by also theorising that the menopause can engender lesbian desire. She states: '[l]es tendances homosexuelles – qui existent de manière larvée chez presque toutes les femmes – se déclarent' (Beauvoir, 1949, 403). We can interpret this sexual awakening as a challenge to a patriarchal society which associates sex with fertility and valorises the female body only when it is fertile. For Beauvoir, it seems, the menopause offers women a chance to experience sexual desire outside a heteronormative space. Here we find a poignant feminist challenge to patriarchal hegemony over the female body. This subversive spirit is certainly echoed in the Leclerc's *Parole de femme,* even if it is targeted towards menstruation and childbirth rather than the menopause, a topic which her work completely neglects.

Annie Leclerc and Marie Cardinal: Breaking the silence and shattering patriarchal discourse

Parole de femme is a pioneering work that represents female bodily experience in much more detail and with more focus than many other works of second-wave feminism. However, it has been largely overlooked in academic scholarship. *From Menstruation to the Menopause* seeks to

redress this balance by providing an insight into this pioneering piece of feminist literature. In *Parole de femme,* Annie Leclerc demonstrates the need to create a new language to characterise women's bodies that shatters the negative patriarchal ideas which have become ingrained in discourse and, consequently, internalised by women. Leclerc states that many languages, French included, are patriarchal in nature, and therefore position female bodily experience in a negative and inferior space. According to Leclerc, the deep-seated patriarchal concepts in language silence many aspects of female bodily experience and, in turn, this silence leads to women feeling ashamed. Leclerc chastises her sisters for having internalised this negative patriarchal language:

> Comment avez-vous répondu à ces superbes condamnations et damnations ? Qu'elle fut triste et pitoyable votre réponse ! Vous avez fait de votre sang, de votre gésine, de votre lait, des choses anodines, des choses de passage, de pauvres choses à laisser de côté, à souffrir en silence, des choses à supporter, comme les maladies, les rages de dents, ou les boutons sur la figure. (1974, 50–51)

Leclerc emphasises here that women have internalised patriarchal discourse to such an extent that they have become, at best, apathetic and, at worst, disgusted by their fertile bodies. The implication is that women should celebrate their menstrual blood and milk as a sign of fertility and life rather than bodily functions which cause them hassle, pain, and suffering.

Leclerc's solution to combatting this 'parole de l'homme', which denigrates the female body, is to create a new language, a 'parole de femme', which instead celebrates the female body. In her introduction, Leclerc demonstrates that coining a 'parole de femme' is a matter of urgency:

> Rien n'existe qui ne soit le fait de l'homme, ni pensée, ni parole, ni mot. […] Les choses de l'homme ne sont pas seulement bêtes, mensongères et oppressives. Elles sont tristes surtout, tristes à en mourir d'ennui et de désespoir. Inventer une parole de femme. […] Toute femme qui veut tenir un discours qui lui soit propre ne peut se dérober à cette urgence extraordinaire : inventer la femme. (1974, 7–8)

As is evident in her reference here to 'toute femme', Leclerc is writing in a manner which addresses all women. Although many of the examples that Leclerc uses (such as tampon adverts) are from France, she extrapolates on them to create a theory of universal female oppression which, she argues, can be shattered with a 'parole de femme'. Leclerc structures her

work around the female fertility cycle by practising a 'parole de femme' herself in her approach to menstruation, childbirth, and pregnancy. She explains how each experience has been corrupted by patriarchal discourse and coins a more positive language to describe it.

Leclerc first tackles the subject of menstruation. She argues that, in the Western world, menstruation is generally perceived as abject, shameful, and taboo. She explains that a culture of concealment manifests itself in a societal insistence that menstrual blood must remain hidden from view and excluded from conversation:

> [ê]tre femme, c'est n'avoir pas de règles. Être femme, c'est n'être pas femme quand les signes en seraient trop évidents […] je sais trop quel dégoût, quelle répulsion je peux inspirer avec mon sang, alors je mets un tampax. C'est commode, commode. Comme ça on n'en parle plus. (Mais savez-vous bien ce qu'il me faut braver pour parler de ce sang ?). (1974, 62)

Leclerc's choice of the words 'dégoût' and 'répulsion' characterise Western responses to menstrual blood as ones of horror and disgust. *Parole de femme* points to the paradox of menstruation being a defining aspect of being a woman ('[J]e ne suis femme qu'à la condition d'avoir mes règles' (1977, 41)) and yet, in order to fit into an image of womanhood that is acceptable within the society in which Leclerc lives, women must conceal and never speak of it ('[ê]tre femme, c'est n'avoir pas de règles' (1974, 62)). *Parole de femme* thus reveals the impossible position in which women find themselves: the realities of having a woman's body which bleeds in no way resemble the 'sanitised' image of womanhood that patriarchal society expects women to portray. Leclerc is thereby illustrating to her readers that women's feelings of shame towards their menstruating bodies are rooted in negative and paradoxical patriarchal attitudes towards menstrual blood, rather than reflecting women's lived experiences or an objective truth.

The desire to break the silence that surrounds the female body is central to Leclerc's challenge to normative patriarchal discourse. Leclerc's rhetorical question 'savez-vous bien ce qu'il me faut braver pour parler de ce sang ?' (1974, 62) emphasises the sheer extent to which menstruation is surrounded by taboo. She portrays herself as a pioneer who is bravely undertaking the task of breaking this silence. She thereby perceives *Parole de femme* as laying the groundwork for women in the future to tackle this subject in an overt manner. In *Autrement Dit*, which features conversations between Leclerc and Cardinal as well as chapters written by Cardinal, Leclerc is more overt about the difficulty

of talking about menstruation, which she perceives as 'le sujet le plus difficile à aborder quand on veut parler de sa féminité, le plus refusé, le plus refoulé' (Cardinal and Leclerc, 1977, 37). Cardinal responds by developing this idea and using the term 'tabou': 'je crois que les femmes sont encore plus tenues à l'écart de leur corps que les hommes, à cause des tabous très lourds qui pèsent sur notre sang, sur nos règles' (1977, 37). By underlining the taboo nature of the topic which they are approaching, both Cardinal and Leclerc demonstrate the revolutionary nature of their act of writing about menstruation.

Leclerc demonstrates that the taboos and silence that surround menstruation are evident in menstrual product advertisements. These adverts 'se contentent généralement d'une image, d'un mot clé, d'une formule érotiquement ambiguë ; la non. On ne peut ni montrer, ni suggérer, ni éveiller le désir, il faut convaincre, expliquer, justifier, raisonner' (1974, 62). With this emphasis on denial, Leclerc underlines that these advertisements, by implying that women should neither speak about, nor show, their menstrual blood, encourage a culture of concealment around menstruation. Leclerc argues that menstrual product advertisements cause women to feel ashamed and humiliated by their menstrual blood: 'ce sang leur apparaît sous forme d'humiliation gratuite, injustifiée, injustifiable' (1974, 64). It is this shame which Leclerc seeks to dispel with her 'parole de femme'. She practises this anti-phallocentric stance by emphatically writing about menstrual blood and doing so in a jubilant manner. She exclaims: '[v]oir et sentir le sang tendre et chaud qui coule de soi, qui coule de source, une fois par mois, est heureux' (1974, 48). Hence, through her positive and open approach that celebrates, rather than denigrates, menstrual experience, Leclerc seeks to shatter the silence that surrounds menstruation and instead, create a language which women can use openly and proudly to discuss it.

Both Leclerc and Cardinal approach the topic of childbirth in a similar manner to how they tackle the subject of menstruation, i.e. by problematising existing dominant patriarchal ideologies and subsequently offering an alternative feminist language. They believe that patriarchal discourse has deprived women of an authentic and fulfilling experience of giving birth. In *Autrement dit*, Cardinal theorises that the only words available to describe childbirth reflect a societal horror towards the female body and its fluidity. Cardinal outlines that the only words which exist to describe childbirth position it as taboo and unclean. She argues, 'les mots du commencement, ceux de la naissance, sont tous honteux, laids, sales, tabous. Car leur intelligence profonde vient du sang, de la merde,

du lait, de la morve, de la terre, de la sueur, de la chair' (Cardinal and Leclerc, 1977, 81). This enumeration of the bodily substances that are emitted during labour evokes society's perception of childbirth as abject. Cardinal explains that, because of the patriarchal nature of the language at their disposal, women are left with two alternatives: either not to speak about childbirth, or only to refer to it in a vague, unnuanced, and trivial manner. She asserts, '[c]'est invraisemblable qu'on ne parle pas plus de la naissance ou qu'on n'en parle que d'une manière aussi stupide, aussi mignonne, aussi simple' (1977, 109). To combat this silence and the lack of pertinent vocabulary to befit such a momentous occasion, Cardinal uses the following alternative language that celebrates childbirth: '[ç] a doit être quelque chose de découvrir en quelques secondes l'air, la pondération, l'épaisseur, l'espace, les flammes de la lumière, la stridence des bruits, le froid, l'insécurité de la nudité' (1977, 109). This sensorial description, drawn from Cardinal's own experiences of labour, reflects the raw and intense reality of giving birth without connoting it with patriarchal ideas of abjection.

In contrast to Cardinal, who hints at the idea that childbirth is perceived as abject in the Western world, Leclerc explicitly rejects the notion that childbirth is 'un bourbier de souffrances abjectes' (1974, 107). Leclerc emphasises that, in comparison with all other aspects of female bodily experience, women's perceptions of childbirth are the most damaged by patriarchal discourse: 'l'accouchement est la fête la plus maudite, la plus persécutée et ravagée, où la répression fasciste de l'homme triomphe dans la torture' (1974, 86). She asserts that, because patriarchal discourse positions it as a sacrifice for the benefit of men, childbirth is imagined as torture. Leclerc employs Christian imagery to explain how this portrayal of childbirth has become so dominant in a Western context: 'l'accouchement est l'image même de la douleur : comme le Christ par sa passion témoigne de son amour des hommes, il a bien fallu que la femme souffre pour témoigner de sa reconnaissance' (1974, 86). By evoking this image of childbirth as painful and abject, Leclerc suggests that this event has been corrupted by patriarchal norms which cast the female body into a space of abjection. Childbirth is, therefore, not an inherently tortuous experience and, for this reason, does not need to be experienced as agonising and disempowering.

In addition, Leclerc highlights that women's labour is undervalued by society. Leclerc believes that this devalorisation of childbirth has its roots in a patriarchal contempt for women:

> Le mépris, la déconsidération de cet événement qui représente pour la femme le moment d'une épreuve extrême et cruciale de la vie, n'est autre que le mépris de la femme en général. Pas étonnant qu'elles continuent à vivre ça dans la douleur alors que ça devrait, que ça pourrait être vécu dans le bonheur. (1974, 93)

Here, Leclerc attributes women's negative experiences of childbirth to an ingrained sexism in society which undervalues and degrades women's labour. Women have internalised this sexist attitude toward the female body. This patriarchal perception of women has deprived them of positive images of childbirth to which they can refer and by which they can be inspired. However, by her evoking the happiness women should feel during childbirth, Leclerc suggests that women do not need to suffer through childbirth and can instead reimagine it as a joyous occasion.

In her evaluation of why childbirth has remained so undervalued within society, Leclerc argues that the medical profession is to blame for the perpetuation of damaging patriarchal perceptions of childbirth. This accusation forms part of a wave of feminist protest in the 1970s across Europe and the United States against the interference of the medical profession in childbirth.[1] In a French context, many of the women who had contributed to the revolution of May 1968 were becoming mothers and therefore began to write about their own experiences and problematise societal attitudes towards childbirth. Yvonne Knibiehler illustrates how their lived experiences fed into their militant spirit: '[l]es filles en révolte deviennent mères. Elles avaient refusé *la maternité institution*, elles vivent intensément la *maternité-expérience*, sans renoncer au militantisme' (1997, 189).

Leclerc, too, as a mother, builds on her own experience of childbirth in *Parole de femme* when she criticises the medical profession. Leclerc believes that a general societal devaluation of childbirth is manifest in how birthing women are treated in the hospital environment:

> Quelles que soient les garanties d'hygiène et de sécurité apportés par l'hôpital, ou la clinique, l'accouchement pratiqué en série est ramené à la dimension de l'extraction dentaire, étant entendu qu'une femme qui accouche n'est MÊME PAS malade, et qu'on lui fait une sorte de faveur en l'acceptant dans ces lieux réservés à d'autres. (1974, 93)

1 For example, we can find such criticisms in Elena Gianini-Belotti's *Dalla parte delle bambine* (1973) and Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1976).

Her conviction that women's agency has been taken away from them by the medical profession comes through strongly in this passage. By arguing that the hospital staff equate childbirth with a simple tooth extraction, Leclerc demonstrates that the medical profession denigrates childbirth. She thereby indicates that medical staff consider childbirth as a nuisance that takes time away from other patients. The medical profession, by conceptualising it as a minor medical issue, prevents women from experiencing childbirth in a way that allows them to celebrate the power of their bodies. We can infer from her capitalisation of 'MÊME' that Leclerc believes that women are even made to feel guilty for using hospital resources and staff time. With the phrase 'en série', which evokes images of mass production, Leclerc implies that birthing women have been reduced to a machine. Thus, she is illustrating that the medical environment depersonalises and belittles childbirth.

For Leclerc, it is possible for women to alter their perceptions of childbirth, which have been negatively influenced by medicalisation and patriarchal discourse, by their finding an authentic female voice with which to describe it. Leclerc believes that by creating a 'parole de femme', which both celebrates childbirth from a feminist perspective and diametrically opposes the existing 'parole de l'homme' that devalues childbirth, women will be able to experience giving birth as a creative and powerful moment rather than one of pain and sacrifice. Leclerc practises a 'parole de femme' by celebrating the physical sensations of childbirth and rejecting medical control over her body. She writes: 'accoucher c'est vivre aussi intensément qu'il est possible de vivre. C'est le somptueux paroxysme de la fête. Expérience nue, entière de la vie. Accoucher est plus que tout heureux' (Leclerc, 1974, 48–49). Here, she emphasises the sensuality of childbirth, and positions childbirth as the most intense female bodily experience. Leclerc elevates childbirth by portraying her body in labour using elevated language: 'plus vaste que la mer', and 'je suis devenue immense, tentaculaire' (1974, 94). For Leclerc, childbirth is the ultimate celebration of the female body and its strength.

Despite her focus on the female fertility cycle in *Parole de femme*, Leclerc completely ignores the menopause, even though it is an aspect of the female fertility cycle which has been traditionally surrounded by silence. However, Leclerc and Cardinal briefly discuss the menopause in *Autrement dit*. Since *Autrement dit* echoes the way in which *Parole de femme* approaches female bodily experience, we would expect that it would problematise societal perceptions of the menopause and offer an

alternative feminist discourse. Indeed, Cardinal outlines her intentions as follows:

> La meilleure manière de prouver qu'il manque des mots, que le français n'est pas fait pour les femmes, c'est de nous mettre au ras de notre corps, d'exprimer l'inexprimé et d'employer le vocabulaire tel qu'il est, directement, sans l'arranger. […] Comment dire notre sexe, la gestation vécue, le temps, la durée des femmes ? Il faudra inventer. Le langage se féminisera, s'ouvrira, s'embellira, s'enrichira. Notre sororité sera féconde et accueillante car nos mots survivront à tout le monde. (1977, 90)

Here, Cardinal underlines the importance for women of speaking about taboo topics in order that they become normalised. She emphasises the necessity of creating a feminist language that shatters the patriarchal language that disempowers women and which instead empowers and unites women. However, this stance is not reflected in Leclerc and Cardinal's conversation about the menopause. In contrast to the manner in which they approach menstruation and childbirth in *Parole de femme* and *Autrement dit*, Leclerc and Cardinal neither challenge societal perceptions of the menopause nor do they offer an alternative discourse which celebrates, rather than denigrates, the menopausal body.

Cardinal and Leclerc both frame the menopause within their reflections on the significance of menstruation, the implications of no longer menstruating and the definition of womanhood. Leclerc outlines that menstruation is a constituent part of a woman's identity: 'J'ai pu ne pas être femme, je ne peux plus être femme, je ne suis femme qu'à la condition d'avoir mes règles' (1977, 42). In response, Cardinal argues that to be defined as a woman one needs to menstruate: 'toute leur vie elles ont dû cacher leur sang et pourtant ce sang est une légion d'honneur puisque lorsqu'elles sont obligées d'enlever cette décoration bien rouge elles ne sont plus des femmes' (1977, 43). By arguing that one is only a woman if one menstruates, Leclerc and Cardinal both echo Beauvoir's characterisation of the menopause as the end of femininity. Cardinal again reflects Beauvoir's approach by viewing the menopause through the lens of sexual desire. However, rather than considering the desire of the other for the menopausal woman, Cardinal foregrounds the menopausal woman's own sexual desire. She tells Leclerc: 'La ménopause est une sorte de honte qui pèse sur elle, une honte telle qu'elle rend son désir indécent. La ménopause doit signifier la fin du désir […] En tout cas la chasse leur est interdite' (1977, 43). A discourse of shame strongly emerges here. For Cardinal, experiencing sexual desire during the menopause is

considered by French society as inappropriate. By describing the sexual desire of menopausal women as forbidden, Cardinal presents this sexual desire as highly transgressive. In her opinion, French society perceives the menopause and female sexual desire as mutually exclusive.

Kristeva and the abject female body

From the previous section, we can see that the abject is a theme that weaves its way through Leclerc and Cardinal's problematisations of societal discourses about the female body. Inspired by Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966), Kristeva explores these ideas of 'abjection' in more depth in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: Essai sur l'abjection* (1980). Through her theory of abjection, Kristeva examines why female bodily experience is viewed by society with horror and repulsion. By examining how Leviticus characterises menstruation and childbirth as impure and polluting, Kristeva contextualises her theory of abjection.

For Kristeva, the changing boundaries of the female body, as well as its bodily fluids, elicit an abject response in people who witness them. According to Kristeva, an abject response is one of repulsion, rejection, and defence against a threat. Bodily emissions and changing corporeal margins engender an abject reaction because they blur the boundaries between the inside and the outside, thereby threatening the stability of the subject. Kristeva explains that an abject substance 'perturbe une identité, un système, un ordre [et] ne respecte pas les limites, les places, les règles. L'entre-deux, l'ambigu, le mixte' (1980, 12). She elucidates that a person's subjectivity depends upon their being able to distinguish between the self and the other, and thus humans violently reject that which threatens to collapse this distinction. Kristeva writes that abjection preserves the frontier between life and death, chaos and order: 'Dégoût d'une nourriture, d'une saleté, d'un déchet, d'une ordure. Spasmes et vomissements qui me protègent. Répulsions, haut-le-cœur qui m'écarte et me détourne de la souillure, du cloaque, de l'immonde' (1980, 10).

In addition, Kristeva establishes a connection between abject responses and a human desire to reject all links with the animal world. Kristeva theorises that abjection is a human rejection of both animality and the threat of female sexuality. She illustrates that human subjectivity can only be preserved if we maintain the distinction between the human and

the animal: 'L'abject nous confronte […] à ces états fragiles où l'homme erre dans les territoires menaçant de l'animal ou de l'animalité, imaginés comme des représentants du meurtre et du sexe' (Kristeva, 1980, 20). Kristeva explains that this desire of man to distinguish himself from animals originated in so-called 'primitive' societies that endeavoured to establish a boundary between the threatening animal world, with its connotations of violence and sex, and the 'civilised' human world. Thus, since they elicit an abject response, female bodily experiences such as menstruation and childbirth are a reminder of the base animalistic nature of human beings.

Menstrual blood is one of the bodily liquids which Kristeva considers when articulating her theory of abjection. Kristeva turns to Leviticus to explain why menstruation is taboo and a fear towards it has become deeply ingrained in the Judeo-Christian psyche. She demonstrates that in the Bible menstrual blood is characterised as something impure that inspires horror and disgust:

> Les termes d'impureté et du souillure […] se trouvent attribués ici à la mère et en général aux femmes. L'abomination alimentaire trouve donc un parallèle […] dans l'abomination que suscite le corps féminin fécondable ou fertile (les menstrues, l'enfantement). (Kristeva, 1980, 119)

The word 'abomination' underpins Kristeva's argument that the Bible characterises menstrual blood as repulsive and positions menstrual blood as something that provokes horror. This intense and heightened word depicts menstrual blood as something immoral or monstrous. Resonating with her theory that abjection constitutes a human rejection of female sexuality, Kristeva argues that menstruation is a reminder of our animality and thus threatens the sexual order. She argues that menstrual blood 'représente le danger venant de l'intérieur de l'identité (sociale ou sexuelle) ; il menace le rapport entre les sexes dans un ensemble social et, par intériorisation, l'identité de chaque sexe face à la différence sexuelle' (Kristeva, 1980, 86). Kristeva explains that, in order to maintain this clear sexual division, patriarchal society responds to the menstruating female body with repulsion, and therefore tries to keep the menstruating female body at a distance. As a result, women are expected to ensure their menstrual blood remains invisible.

When examining why humans react with horror to childbirth, Kristeva argues that Leviticus characterises childbirth, and the liquids emitted during this process, as impure: '[d]e sa couche et du sang qui l'accompagne, *elle* sera « impure » comme « aux jours de la souillure

provenant de son indisposition » (Lev 12, 2)' (1980, 119). The Bible paints childbirth as abject by insisting on 'une séparation entre le féminin et le masculin comme fondement de l'organisation « propre »' (Kristeva, 1980, 119). For Kristeva, then, childbirth is abject because it is violent and disorderly; the changing shape of the birthing female body and its bodily emissions blur the boundaries of the mother's body. Echoing her arguments about menstruation, Kristeva implies that childbirth acts a reminder of the link between humans and the animal world. Kristeva underscores the violent and messy aspects of childbirth by asserting that it is '[une] acte d'expulsion violente par laquelle le corps naissant s'arrache aux substances de l'intérieur maternelle' (1980, 120). It is this violence and messiness that remind us of our animality, our need to separate from our mothers, and our mortality.

In comparison to Leclerc and Cardinal, whose works on the female body have largely been forgotten by contemporary scholars, Kristeva's theory of abjection has an enduring presence within a variety of fields, including critical literary analysis and sociological studies. In particular, Kristeva's theory of abjection has remained prevalent in critical menstruation studies and has become primarily a tool for analysing the representation of menstruation in literature.[2] For instance, we can find a reference to Kristeva's theory in Colette Trout's analysis of Marie Darrieussecq's *Truismes* (1996) in which the central character's menstrual blood is described as a 'raz de marée' (45). Trout analyses the protagonist's menstruating body through the prism of Kristeva's theory: 'son corps replet, renvoie au côté abject du corps féminin avec ses menstrues' (2016, 13). Although some studies that build their argument around Kristeva's theory are cross-cultural in scope, most of these studies focus uniquely on the anglophone world. Hence, the implications of Kristeva's theory have not been explored in a French-speaking context either within or outside Europe.

Many scholars have even broadened Kristeva's theory to examine other aspects of female biology, such as the menopause, a topic which is strikingly absent from *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*. In *Managing the Monstrous Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive Body* (2006),

2 See the application of Kristeva's theory to menstrual experience in Iris Marion Young (2005) *On Female Body Experience: 'Throwing Like a Girl' and Other Essays*, New York, Oxford University Press; and Lauren Rosewarne (2012) *Periods in Popular Culture: Menstruation in Film and Television*, Plymouth, Lexington Books.

Jane Ussher fills in the gap left behind by Kristeva by including the menopause in her analysis of societal responses to the female fertility cycle. Kristeva's theory provides a framework for Ussher's investigation of societal attitudes towards menstruation, childbirth, and the menopause. *Managing the Monstrous Feminine* explores how popular culture, law, and science shape our understanding of the female body. Ussher draws on Kristeva's theory of abjection in order to explain why society positions the female body as monstrous and associates it with excess. Examples from the media, popular culture, medicine, and law in a variety of cultural contexts are offered as evidence for societal attitudes towards menstruation. The following explanation illuminates why the female body is considered abject and is, therefore, subject to strict regulation:

> The margins of the body, in particular the markers of fecundity – menstruation, pregnancy, the menopause – stand as signifiers of the difference between within and without, male and female, necessitating containment through taboo and ritual, in order to keep the abject body at a safe, non-polluting distance from the symbolic order. (Ussher, 2006, 5)

We can see the influence of Kristeva clearly here in Ussher's reference to the abject response that is triggered by the female body when it blurs the boundaries between the inside and outside. Her use of the terms 'taboo' and 'polluting' are also evocative of Kristeva.

Wendy Rogers, a sociologist who has investigated societal responses to the menopause, also builds upon Kristeva's work. Kristeva's theory of abjection provides a theoretical framework for Roger's investigation as to why the menopause has become a medicalised phenomenon and why there are so few representations of menopausal women in popular culture. In *Reinterpreting the Menopause: Cultural and Philosophical Issues* (1997), Rogers explains this lack of representation by comparing menopause to menstruation: '[m]enstruation is abject, a ritual to be controlled with defined behaviors [...] Yet not to menstruate is even more abject. There are no references in culture to menopausal women' (1997, 233). Subsequently, Rogers posits that this societal perception of the menopause as abject has influenced medical practices such as the prescription of hormone replacement therapy (HRT). HRT is primarily used to relieve menopausal symptoms such as hot flushes, night sweats, and vaginal dryness, and was popularised in the 1990s (Seaman, 2005). Rogers illustrates that practices such as HRT exist in order to manipulate the menopausal body into an image which complies

with societal expectations for women: 'by defining them as diseased, as deficient, society has a ritual with which to control and intimidate this group, which is paradoxically polluted by a lack of menstruation rather than by its presence' (1997, 235). By asserting that in 'secular western societies medicine fulfils many of the functions of religion' (1997, 235), Rogers contrasts religious and secular societies. Here, she is arguing that medicine and religion are two sides of the same coin: they are both societal methods of limiting abjection by means of controlling the female body. By considering the impact of religion and medicine on societal responses to the female body, Rogers has therefore nuanced Kristeva's theory.

Challenging the idea of the 'universal' woman: Criticisms of second-wave feminism

As well as inspiring many subsequent anthropological, feminist, and/or theoretical works, second-wave feminist texts have also attracted significant criticism for the manner in which they approach female experience. They have been particularly criticised for their lack of differentiation between women. Although Christine Delphy, a contemporary of Leclerc, specifically targets Leclerc's analysis of menstrual experience, the majority of those who criticise the second-wave feminists focus on their treatment of women's experiences as universal. These critics of second-wave feminism illustrate that there are many facets of a woman's identity such as her ethnicity, sexuality, religion, and socioeconomic status.

This idea that a woman's experience is influenced by a network of factors is known as 'intersectionality', a term first coined by Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989). Although many of the authors discussed in this section do not use the term 'intersectionality', we can clearly see that their criticisms of second-wave feminist work adopt an intersectional perspective. Patricia Hill Collins, who theorises the experience of African-American women and who criticises white feminism in general, provides a definition of intersectionality that is helpful in understanding why second-wave feminist work has received such heavy and enduring criticism. According to Collins: 'Intersectionality refers to particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation. Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and

that oppressions work together in producing injustice' (2002, 18). This definition therefore underlines that women's oppression is multifaceted and therefore there does not exist one specific way to successfully challenge the oppression of all women.

A strong resistance to the theories of Leclerc and Kristeva is first evident in texts written by two of their contemporaries: Monique Wittig and Christine Delphy, who were key contributors to *Questions Féministes*, a radical feminist journal founded by Simone de Beauvoir. Formulating their challenge only a few years after the publication of *Parole de femme*, Wittig and Delphy both find fault with the second-wave feminists for their essentialism and treatment of women as a homogenous category. Wittig accuses second-wave feminists of presenting a heteronormative view of female bodily experience which excludes a lesbian perspective. In her article 'La Pensée straight' (1980), she argues that feminists of her generation construct their arguments on the concepts '« femme » « homme » « différence »', and so tend 'à immédiatement universaliser sa production de concepts, à former des lois générales qui valent pour toutes les sociétés, toutes les époques, tous les individus' (Wittig, 1980, 49). For Wittig, the texts of her contemporaries cannot be representative of all women because they exclude non-heterosexual women: 'la pensée straight ne peut pas concevoir une culture, une société où l'hétérosexualité n'ordonnerait pas [...] toutes les relations humaines' (1980, 49). Evidently then, Wittig is demonstrating that when feminists such as Leclerc, Kristeva, and Cardinal address 'women', they are treating women as if they are all the same. Thus, according to Wittig, the second-wave feminists take a heteronormative and monolithic approach to women's identity that silences lesbian women.

In contrast to Wittig, who targets the second-wave feminist movement as a whole, Delphy targets an individual – Annie Leclerc. In *L'Ennemi Principal*, Delphy launches the following scathing attack on *Parole de femme*: 'même le traitement de la dépréciation du « sort » biologique des femmes est déformé et frappé de nullité par l'idéalisme d'A. Leclerc' (1998, 232). An intersectional perspective is evident in Delphy's argument that this idealism erases the notion that women's bodily experiences are differentiated by their socioeconomic status. In 'Proto-féminisme et anti-féminisme', Delphy delves into this idealism further by claiming that it has led Leclerc into:

> une impasse politique : cette analyse implique en effet qu'il s'agit de changer *non la réalité de la vie des femmes, mais l'appréciation subjective*

> *de cette réalité*. L'exploitation réelle – matérielle – des femmes n'est ni discutée ni même décrite. (1976, 1473)

According to Delphy, Leclerc merely offers a new way of looking at the body, rather than providing a solution to women's harmful views of their bodies that are rooted in damaging patriarchal stereotypes. For this reason, Delphy believes that Leclerc does not achieve the following of her objectives: '1) la reconquête par les femmes d'une image positive de leur être biologique; 2) la production d'une théorie de l'oppression' (1976, 1481). Hence, we can infer from Delphy's work that in order to theorise and reduce women's oppression, we need to take cognisance of the role played by material conditions in shaping women's differing experiences of oppression.

To provide an example of the deficiencies in Leclerc's argument, Delphy scrutinises her theories about the taboo nature of menstruation from a socioeconomic and sociocultural perspective. By arguing that menstruating is 'un événement matériellement, *objectivement* désagréable : rendu tel par la société', Delphy illustrates that menstruation will only be experienced more positively by women if their material conditions improve (1976, 1483). Further clarification is offered through an explanation that the public space is only set up for 'une population sans règles' (1976, 1483). Delphy points to concrete factors, such as a lack of facilities for disposing used menstrual products, that put women into 'une situation sinon dramatique, au moins extrêmement embarrassante' (1976, 1483). The importance of situating menstrual experience within a specific cultural context is also underlined in Delphy's work: '[o]n n'a pas « les » règles, les mêmes, dans tous les milieux et dans tous les pays, mais *ses* règles, différentes dans chaque culture' (1976, 1483). Here, she exposes that menstrual experience is highly individualised through her comparison of the word 'les', which is impersonal, and the word 'ses' which refers to a personal female experience. The following example is given to illustrate the impossibility of changing women's perceptions that menstruation is shameful as long as society still obliges them to conceal all signs they are menstruating: 'cacher ses serviettes est d'abord une *contrainte extérieure* ; elle provoque la honte subjective ; enfin dans un troisième temps la dissimulation apparaît *l'expression* de cette honte' (1976, 1484). After explaining the impact of cultural context and socioeconomic status, Delphy demonstrates the limitations of Leclerc's argument by illustrating how cultural and material factors intertwine to oppress women. She reveals that it is not solely a cultural

'dévalorisation du corps de la physiologie des femmes' which impacts on women's menstrual experience, but also 'le handicap matériel créé par les conditions sociales' (Delphy, 1976, 1484). Hence, Delphy's argument that women's experiences are shaped by a network of sociocultural and socioeconomic factors underscores the importance of taking an intersectional approach to menstruation.

In addition to their French contemporaries, second-wave feminist work has also received critical attention beyond the francophone world. We see echoes of Delphy and Wittig's criticism in anglophone scholarship which criticises both the idealistic and monolithic approach of certain second-wave feminists. In *Textual/Sexual Politics: Feminist Literary theory*, Toril Moi states that a major flaw in second-wave feminist work is the 'absence of any material factors preventing women from writing' (2002, 123). Here, she alludes to the privileged position of writers such as Cardinal, Leclerc, and Kristeva who, unlike others who are less privileged than them, have the time and financial stability which permits them to write a feminist language that can challenge patriarchal discourse. Moi exclaims that they 'take for granted an audience as Parisian as they are', and that their work 'smacks of elitism' (1980, 96). Here, she exposes that the second-wave feminists formulate their theories based on their middle-class experiences, and yet present them as applicable to all women. By emphasising the Parisian, European, and middle-class privilege of the second-wave feminists, Moi illustrates that their theories cannot possibly apply to women from a lower socioeconomic and non-European background.

Moi supports her argument that second-wave feminist texts erase the diversity of women's experiences by giving specific examples from the texts of Cixous and Irigaray: 'Cixous' global appeal to "women's powers" glosses over the real differences among women, and thus ironically represses the true heterogeneity of women's powers' (1980, 125). A similar criticism is levelled at Irigaray for analysing woman as a singular entity 'as if "she" were indeed a simple, unchanging unity, always confronting the same kind of monolithic patriarchal oppression' (Moi, 1980, 147–48). Moi links this privileged position to the idealism evident in Cixous' and Irigaray's work: 'seductive though such a vision is, it can say nothing of the actual inequalities, deprivations, and violations that women, as social beings rather than as mythological archetypes, must constantly suffer' (1980, 123). By claiming that their work lacks reference to a 'recognisable social structure', Moi criticises the second-wave feminists for not clearly situating their arguments

within a specific social context (1980, 126). The key term in both these quotations is the word 'social' since, like Delphy, Moi demonstrates that a woman's experience is very much dependent on the social context in which she lives.

We can find a similar critique of the second-wave feminist movement in Peta Bowden's and Jane Mummery's *Understanding Feminism* (2014) in which they state: '*[é]criture féminine* and its celebration of women's bodies seem to rest on the (essentialist) belief that there is a specifically feminist nature shared by all women' (57). Their reference to celebration is particularly relevant to *Parole de femme* because Leclerc proposes that negative patriarchal discourse and ideology can be shattered through the use of a more positive feminine language. This criticism of Leclerc's essentialism illustrates that Bowden and Mummery are advocating an intersectional approach to women's bodies because this recognises the multiplicity of bodily experiences. By criticising Cixous for her essentialism in *Hélène Cixous: Writing and Sexual Difference* (2004), Abigail Bray also adds her voice to critical scholarship that reveals the essentialist nature of second-wave feminism. Bray writes that 'the spectre of biological essentialism [...] has played a central role in the debates around her work' (2004, 28). In her castigation of Irigaray, we can see that Shoshana Felman also views second-wave feminist work as essentialist: 'Is she speaking *as* a woman, or *in the place of* the (silent) woman, *for* the woman, *in the name of the* woman? Is it enough to *be* a woman in order to *speak as* a woman?' (1975, 3). Here, Felman is emphatically demonstrating that Irigaray is silencing other women by speaking on their behalf from a position that can never represent their diverse experiences.

Ethnicity is also considered by many scholars as a factor that shapes women's experiences. These critics argue that the theories of the second-wave feminists, since they are based on their experiences as privileged white women, cannot speak for non-white women. They reveal that the second-wave feminists occupy a hegemonic position which renders invisible women from different ethnic and/or social backgrounds. In *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (1987), which explores issues of language, subjectivity, and feminism, Chris Weedon argues that the second-wave feminists 'render questions of race invisible' (155). Weedon also suggests that patriarchy is not 'a fixed structure' (1987, 155), thereby illustrating that patriarchal oppression can take many forms and its nature is dependent on social context. An intersectional feminist perspective is evident in her suggesting instead

that 'we need to look at the web of modes of patriarchal power and the range of feminine voices and subject positions which support and resist them' (1987, 155). Here, Weedon implies that the second-wave feminists' challenge to patriarchy is limited because they incorrectly conceive patriarchal oppression and its impact as universal, where in reality patriarchy manifests itself differently across societies and cultures.

As revealed in the beginning of this section, black feminists have been integral to criticisms of second-wave feminist literature. In 'The Race for Theory' (1989), black feminist Barbara Christian argues that theories that are produced by white European women have little or no relevance to the lives of most women, let alone black women. This study demonstrates that these theoretical texts exclude less privileged women from entering into feminist debates since they restrict 'the definition of what *feminist* means and overgeneralize about so much of the world' (1989, 233). As they do not take into account the influence of race and class on female bodily experience, Christian argues that the second-wave feminists have a 'tendency towards monolithism' (1989, 233). Christian theorises that, as a justification for an absence of a racial perspective, second-wave feminists frequently 'acknowledge that women of color […] exist, then go on to do what they were going to do anyway, which is to invent a theory that has little relevance to us […] I and many of my sisters do not see the world as being so simple' (1989, 233–34). We can therefore ascertain from Christian's work that women's experiences are diverse, and to speak of them as a homogenous group ignores the complex nature of their identities.

The voice of African-American and lesbian feminist Audre Lorde has also been central to debates about the representativeness of second-wave feminist theory. In April 1980, Lorde delivered a speech in which she criticises the second-wave feminists for their refusal to recognise differences of age, ethnicity, class, and sexuality. The speech problematises the theories articulated by the second-wave feminists by illustrating that, as a black and lesbian woman, she is unable to relate to their privileged white and heterosexual position. Lorde declares: 'white women focus upon their oppression and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class, and age. There is a pretence to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist' (2017, 96). Since she reveals that a wide variety of factors influence women's experiences, Lorde's intersectional approach resonates with the criticisms of Christian, Weedon, and Moi. Lorde explains that, by treating women as a homogenous entity, the second-wave feminists

silence women who are less privileged than themselves or who do not share their sexual preferences. As her powerful speech indicates, the arguments of the white second-wave feminists silence the struggles of black women: 'white women ignore their built-in privilege of whiteness and define *woman* in terms of their own experience alone, then women of colour become "other"' (Lorde, 2017, 98). The importance of considering the diversity of women's experiences is once more emphasised in the following declaration: 'Refusing to recognise difference makes it impossible to see the different problems and pitfalls facing us as women' (Lorde, 2017, 99).

A further writer who criticises the second-wave feminist group is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Spivak problematises the work of the second-wave feminists from a postcolonial perspective. In her essay 'French Feminism in an International Frame' (1981), Spivak not only criticises the second-wave feminists for being 'class and race privileged literary women' (158), but she also asserts that their work reflects 'the inbuilt colonialism of First world feminism towards the Third' (1981, 184). For this reason, she argues that it is inappropriate to use second-wave feminist theory as a framework with which to examine the experiences of 'third world women' because any 'deliberate application of the doctrines of French High "Feminism" to a different situation of political specificity might misfire' (Spivak, 1981, 156). Hence, Spivak's work acts as a warning against applying the theories of the second-wave feminists to texts that represent women from outside the West. This comment is pertinent to the Mauritian and Algerian novels which will be explored later in this study because they fictionalise two former colonies of France with their own unique political landscapes.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's article 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses' (1984) illuminates the importance of approaching female bodily experience from a cross-cultural perspective. This pioneering article discusses the disjunction between the experience of women writing from a privileged Western perspective and of those outside this frame of reference. Mohanty reproaches feminists who base their arguments on sexual difference, a criticism that has often been launched at the second-wave feminists:

> An analysis of 'sexual difference' in the form of a cross-culturally singular, monolithic notion of patriarchy or male dominance leads to the construction of a similarly reductive and homogenous notion of what I call the 'Third World Difference' – that stable, ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most if not all the women in these countries.

> And it is in the production of this 'Third World Difference' that Western feminisms appropriate and 'colonize' the fundamental complexities and conflicts which characterize the lives of women of different classes, religions, cultures, races and castes. (Mohanty, 1984, 335)

As Mohanty illustrates here, patriarchal modes of oppression must be considered within their sociocultural context and from an intersectional perspective. 'Under Western Eyes' therefore reveals that second-wave feminists erase the voices and oppression of formerly colonised women because they do not account for the multitude of societal, cultural, or other factors that shape women's experiences of key biological events.

This section has underlined the importance of approaching the female body from a cross-cultural and intersectional perspective. Feminists such as Moi, Christian, and Lorde illustrate the shortcomings of second-wave feminist theories and implicitly bring to the fore their Eurocentric, privileged, and white perspective. These critics illustrate that because the second-wave feminists treat women as a homogenous group, they ignore the true diversity of women's experiences. The works discussed in this section reveal various factors – ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, religion, colonial history, cultural context – that may influence female bodily experience. The cross-cultural and intersectional approach of *From Menstruation to Menopause* echoes and builds on these critical feminist works. However, this body of criticism which targets the second-wave feminists tends to only consider women's experience in general rather than examining the female fertility cycle or even the female body specifically. Thus, there is a crucial gap that needs to be filled before we can examine the extent to which contemporary women's writing in French takes a more intersectional and transnational approach to the body than does second-wave feminist writing. The analysis of contemporary novels from France, Algeria, and Mauritius in Chapters 2, 3 and 4 would benefit from work that takes an intersectional and cross-cultural approach to the female body specifically. We can, nevertheless, look to sociology to help tease out the differences, nuances, and contextualisation which may emerge in the novels that are explored in *From Menstruation to the Menopause*. A sociological approach to the body, which considers the impact of societal perspectives on the female body, therefore offers an ideal framework through which to consider representations of the body in contemporary women's writing in French.

Sociological approaches to the female fertility cycle

Managing the Monstrous Feminine, which was first introduced in this book in relation to Kristeva's theory of abjection, takes a cross-cultural approach to the female fertility cycle. Ussher expands on Kristeva's Judeo-Christian approach to compare cultural attitudes towards the female fertility cycle in countries such as France, Iran, Japan, Australia, and the United States. For the most part, Ussher structures her cross-cultural analysis by contextualising female bodily experiences within two distinct categories, religious societies and secular societies, arguing that: 'In non-secular societies, theological edicts and rituals serve to manage the monstrous feminine, muddying their malevolent intent through being positioned as unquestioned religious or "cultural practices"' (2006, 8). She cites the Jewish laws of *niddah*, the Islamic tradition of *hijab*, and the celebration of the purity of the Virgin Mary as examples of religious practices that are designed to limit the powers of abjection. Although the rituals and religious doctrines may differ, the notion that the abject female must be regulated is common across these various cultural boundaries. The taboo nature of female bodily experiences manifests itself in varying religious practices, discourses, and dogmas. For example, 'the ritualised separation practices associated with menstruation within the Orthodox Jewish faith, known as the laws of *niddah*, most explicitly draw on fears of contamination and pollution from fecund femininity' (Ussher, 2006, 9).

By separating non-secular and secular societies, Ussher establishes a dichotomy between them. She compares the regulation of the female body through religious rituals with the medicalisation of the female body in secular societies. This is most evident in the way in which Ussher frames menstrual experience. She argues that in both secular and religious societies: 'the bleeding womb stand[s] as a site of pollution and a source of dread' (Ussher, 2006, 1). Since these societies consider menstrual blood as an abject and polluting substance, '[d]epictions of menstrual blood are completely taboo; it remains the great unseen, the shame that must be hidden' (Ussher, 2006, 21). Although these discourses of concealment, taboo, and abjection are common to both secular and non-secular cultures, their ways of disciplining the menstruating body differ. She posits that, in religious societies, rituals are the method used to regulate the female body, whereas in secular societies, science and hygiene are the driving forces behind this control. Ussher writes: 'in the secular West, concealment is through secrecy and shame, menarche relegated to a

medicalised event, with hygiene and education about management of the changing body, of primary concern' (2006, 19). Bearing her theories in mind, the subsequent chapters of this book examine the extent to which contemporary women's writing from Algeria, France, and Mauritius represents female bodily experience as being inflected by religion or science. These chapters also consider whether her assertion that there exists a dichotomy of experience between religious and non-religious societies is borne out in recent women's writing in French.

Besides Ussher's sociological approach to menstrual beliefs and practices, we can also find a cross-cultural approach to menstruation in the works of Sheela Greene and Karen Paige Erikson. Both problematise the idea that menstruation is a 'universal' experience. In *The Psychological Development of Girls and Women: Rethinking Change in Time* (2014), psychologist Sheila Greene rejects psychoanalytic methodologies that present female identity as fixed. Greene emphasises the need to consider how material conditions impact upon the actual practicalities of menstruating: 'no matter how untroubling or psychically peripheral the menstrual cycle may be to a woman who menstruates, the reality of menstruation still has to be managed' (2014, 101). This focus on material conditions resonates strongly with Delphy's positioning of menstruation as a material concern. Greene also posits that a woman's psychological experience of menstruation is shaped by both cultural and personal factors: 'it is important to note that even when considering a phenomenon as all-but-universal in women's lives as menstruation, cross-cultural and individual differences ensure that the meaning of menstruation will vary dramatically' (2014, 101). The emphasis here on the differences between individual women mirrors the intersectional perspectives of feminists such as Chris Weedon and Audre Lorde. In addition to pointing to the role played by socioeconomic factors, Greene considers the influence of interpersonal relationships on women's experiences of menstruation: 'each person's attitudes and feelings will be shaped by her contact with her mother, sisters and other important women and men around her' (2014, 84). This focus on the individual and their relationships adds an extra dimension to the debates on the diversity of female bodily experience. *From Menstruation to the Menopause* explores this dimension when examining women's novels from Algeria, Mauritius, and France, as many of these texts place emphasis on the relationship between parents and their daughters.

In 'Menstrual Symptoms and Menstrual Beliefs: National and Cross-National Patterns' (1987), Karen Paige Erikson challenges the

negative assumptions about menstruation which are promulgated by the medical profession. In this study about premenstrual syndrome (PMS), she suggests a strong link between menstruation and culture: '[i]n Western nations, childbearing does not have the same critical implications for women's status that it has in non-Western societies. It is possible, then, that the psychological meaning of menstruation differs in the West' (Erickson, 1987, 187). Erickson urges researchers to build on her findings by adopting a transnational approach to menstrual experience that focuses on specific geographical settings: 'the similarities and differences in national and cross-national patterns of both beliefs and symptoms should make clear the necessity of a broad comparative approach in future research on the menstrual cycle' (1987, 187).

There also exists a body of work that takes a cross-cultural and intersectional approach to childbirth. These studies about childbirth refer in broad terms to culture and society as having the largest impact on a woman's experience of birth. In *Individu, culture et société: sensibilisation aux sciences humaines*, Florence Langendorff argues on the subject of women's experiences of childbirth that 'les représentations que la société a de la femme, du corps, de l'enfant, etc., – issues du contexte culturel, sorte de réservoir des représentations sociales – ont une grande importance et un impact déterminant' (2007, 61). Langendorff is therefore arguing that childbirth can be shaped not only by specific attitudes towards childbirth but also by broader cultural beliefs about a woman's role and purpose in society. Similarly, Shelley Romalis states in *Childbirth: Alternatives to Medical Control* that childbirth 'is never simply a physiological act but rather a performance defined by and enacted within a sociocultural context' (1981, 6). Both Langendorff and Romalis thereby emphasise the importance of considering how women's experiences of childbirth are influenced by sociocultural factors.

In Brigitte Jordan's edited volume *Birth in Four Cultures: A Cross-cultural Investigation of Childbirth in Yucatan, Holland, Sweden, and the United States* she also problematises the idea that childbirth is 'more or less universal, meaning virtually identical in all cultural contexts' (1992, 1). The collection of studies within this volume demonstrate that 'birth is everywhere socially marked and shaped' (Jordan, 1992, 1). These chapters point to specific cultural beliefs that influence aspects of childbearing such as the position the woman adopts during labour, and the role of the midwife. In *The Manner Born: Birth Rites in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, Sheila Cosminsky compares countries such as India, where 'birth is highly secretive: the house is shut,

and the woman is not supposed to cry out' and the Unites States where it is common practice to move the mother 'to a delivery room separate from the one in which she was in labour' (2004, 77).

In addition to sociocultural factors, Mary Lefkarites' article 'The Sociocultural Implications of Modernizing Childbirth Among Greek Women on the Island of Rhodes' (1992) examines the role played by religion in shaping women's experiences of childbirth. She argues that cultural beliefs about womanhood are informed by religious beliefs and traditions, and these, in turn, impact women's experiences of childbirth. Lefkarites introduces her article by illustrating that a woman's experience and perceptions about childbirth are shaped by a variety of cultural discourses that relate to broader beliefs, such as those which concern a woman's role within her family or her community:

> Childbirth is a significant human experience, its social meaning shaped by the culture in which the birthing women live. Cultures throughout the world express the meaning of childbirth through different beliefs, customs and practices. These diverse cultural interpretations are part of a larger integrated system of beliefs concerning men, women, family, community, nature, religion, and supernatural powers. (Lefkarites, 1992, 385)

Here, Lefkarites underlines that a woman's experience and perception of childbirth is influenced by a network of various intertwining beliefs which need to be unpacked. Some of the themes that are explored here also emerge in the novels that are examined in *From Menstruation to the Menopause*. Religion, the supernatural, family, and community are threads that weave across some of the novels that feature in this book and these themes often frame their representations of the female fertility cycle.

The menopause, too, has received attention from sociologists who advocate a cross-cultural approach to the body. Anthropological and sociological studies often underscore that a woman's experience of the menopause is dependent on a variety of factors which pertain to the culture in which she lives. For example, feminist anthropologist Jacquelyn Zita writes in a collection of articles on women and ageing in the Western world: 'Cross-cultural studies tend to confirm that the meaning of the menopause depends on dimensions of cultural practice and sense-making which inform the lived particularity of menopause as well as its generic representations within a given culture' (1997, 102). The term 'cultural practice' is broad and can refer to matters such as religious beliefs or medical practices. Zita therefore justifies her cross-cultural

approach to menopausal experience by arguing that it is influenced by the beliefs and practices that are specific to the cultural context in which the woman lives.

In Gabriella Berger's *Menopause and Culture* (1999), she makes a significant contribution to scholarship on the menopause by comparing and contrasting menopausal experience across a variety of countries including France, Japan, India, and the United States. Berger underlines the usefulness of cross-cultural studies by outlining that menopausal experience is dependent on cultural context and a variety of other factors. Berger states, 'the diversity of menopausal experience is particularly illustrated in cross-cultural investigations [...] The assumption that menopause is a universal experience at any level – biological, psychological, social and cultural – is questionable' (1999, 38–39). These findings therefore echo the ideas put forward by the critics of the second-wave feminists because she also problematises the idea that each woman has the same experience of the menopause. Berger illustrates that a network of factors impact menopausal experience, and these factors are teased out in cross-cultural studies.

Les Femmes et la discrimination: dépression, religion, société (2011) by Saïda Douki Dedieu, is another study which demonstrates that both sociocultural context and individual psychological factors define a woman's menopausal experience. Dedieu reflects on studies conducted in countries such as Japan, Ireland, and India. Firstly, Dedieu argues that a woman's own personal history plays a role in how she experiences the menopause: 'Le vécu subjectif de la ménopause varie certes selon les femmes et leur histoire personnelle' (2011, 121). She then demonstrates how personal history and broader factors intertwine to construct a woman's individual experience. Dedieu argues that '[l]e vécu psychologique de la ménopause est indissociable au contexte socioculturel' (2011, 121), thereby illustrating that a woman's psychological experience of the menopause is shaped by a network of broader sociocultural factors. She states that within certain cultures women embrace the menopause more readily than in others because it brings with it 'l'accession à un statut social privilégié' (Dedieu, 2011, 122). For Dedieu, the practice of pilgrimage in India is a pertinent example of how cultural practice influences menopausal experience. Dedieu writes, 'en Inde, la femme ménopausée peut participer aux cérémonies religieuses dont elle était au préalable exclu, à la suite de la disparition des règles, donc du sang impur' (2011, 123). Through this comparison between the burden of menstruation and the relief of the menopause, Dedieu

sheds a positive light on menopausal experience. This positivity is rare across sociological studies of the menopause, which usually frame the menopause as a negative experience because of societal stigma.

More recently, Milena Perianes and Elizabeth Kissling have adopted a transnational approach to the menopause in their analysis of interviewees and focus groups conducted with men and women in countries such as India, Brazil, and Fiji (2020). Despite the different cultures and traditions of the participants, the authors identify that there is a silence around the menopause and an ambivalence towards ageing in each community. Another common aspect between these communities is a lack of education about the menopause. Thus, menopausal women across these cultures are united in their lack of preparation for the menopause. The study ends with a call to action:

> These stories reiterate to us the importance of making menopause culturally visible. This means representation in the broadest sense, including literary and media representation that tells women's stories of menopause and menopausal women's stories. It also calls for greater openness about menopause in all aspects of life. Our Iranian respondent said, 'Women don't really show the transition to menopause. Our society is not welcoming towards this'. Let's make it welcome, with more talk and more stories. (Perianes and Kissling, 2020, 1028)

Defining a cross-cultural and intersectional approach to the female fertility cycle in women's writing in French

In this last section, I seek to briefly illustrate how this book builds on the above analysis of second-wave feminist texts, criticisms of these texts, and cross-cultural sociological studies. These aforementioned theories shape this book's approach to the female fertility cycle in women's writing from Algeria, France, and Mauritius. Responding to second-wave feminist theories, this book analyses the extent to which these ideas still resonate with contemporary representations of the female body. Bearing in mind criticisms of second-wave feminist theories, I evaluate whether contemporary women's writing takes an intersectional approach to the body. Sociological studies of the body, whether specific to the cultural context being examined or cross-cultural in scope, inform my approach to the novels. Drawing on sociological studies helps to unpack any specific cultural factors which influence the portrayal of the female fertility cycle in my chosen literary corpus.

The following chapters respond to the theories of Kristeva, Leclerc, and Cardinal. The question is whether, twenty or more years later, francophone novelists use a language which Leclerc would consider to be a 'parole de femme', or whether these authors continue to represent the female body in a manner which replicates the very same discourse Leclerc and Cardinal implore female authors to dispel. *From Menstruation to the Menopause* considers whether these contemporary authors challenge the idea that the female body is shameful or taboo. The book also asks whether these authors have found a positive and explicit form of expression that celebrates the female fertility cycle. For example, do contemporary authors challenge the idea that menstruation is taboo and abject? Do they challenge prevailing medical discourses about childbirth and advocate an alternative discourse? Kristeva's theory of abjection is also central to this study's analysis. In the subsequent chapters, I ascertain whether these more contemporary texts still reflect a traditional image of the female body as inspiring horror or repulsion, or if, whether indirectly or intentionally, they reject this idea. In addition, the following chapters identify whether contemporary women's writing, when representing the female fertility cycle, makes the same connection as does Kristeva between the female body and animality. This book's approach to the menopause is further shaped by Beauvoir's ambivalence in *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949). By highlighting both the positive and negative aspects of the menopause, I evaluate whether the novels also approach the menopause in such an ambivalent manner. Chapter 1 of *From Menstruation to the Menopause* has highlighted that second-wave feminist texts that examine menopausal experience focus on infertility; they argue that menopausal women are less desirable because they are no longer able to bear children. This book study therefore assesses whether contemporary novels still focus on infertility and portray the menopause as the end of a woman's sexual desirability.

This book takes an intersectional approach to women's writing from Algeria, France, and Mauritius. The intersectional framework seeks to uncover a variety of factors that influence the characters' experiences of menstruation, childbirth, and the menopause. Bearing in mind the factors which have been identified by intersectional feminism and those who criticise the monolithic approach of the second-wave feminists, the following chapters of this book consider the extent to which fictionalised female bodily experience is influenced by cultural context, colonial history, religion, and socioeconomic status. In addition, this book endeavours to uncover any other influential factors which have not been

identified in the scholarship explored in Chapter 1. *From Menstruation to the Menopause* analyses how the aforementioned factors shape the fictionalised female body and the extent of their influence.

Finally, one of the most innovative elements of this book is the use of sociological studies as a framework to analyse how novels situate the female body within a social or cultural context. In each chapter, I draw on sociological literature which examines female bodily experience in France, Algeria, and Mauritius. This country-specific literature allows me to tease out any cultural factors which influence characters' bodily experiences and attitudes towards the female fertility cycle. Cross-cultural sociological studies are also a key part of the framework of the book since they inform the comparisons that I draw between women's writing from Algeria, France and Mauritius. In Chapter 2, I begin this cross-cultural study of women's novels in French with an analysis of the female fertility cycle in women's writing from France, the very same culture within which the second-wave feminists were writing.

CHAPTER TWO

Violence, trauma, and medicalisation

The female fertility cycle in women's writing from France

Introduction

Despite receiving harsh criticism, it cannot be denied that second-wave feminism has left a profound legacy on contemporary women's literature from France. As Gill Rye and Michael Worton state in *Women's Writing in Contemporary France: New Writers, New Literatures in the 1990s*:

> In the 1970s, feminist literary criticism drew attention to the stark lack of horizons for women writers in France because of the overarching male dominance of the literary canon. Female authors who came to prominence in the 1990s are the first to benefit from a visibly rich female literary heritage. (2002, 5)

The second-wave feminists therefore opened up a path which led to women writers having greater freedom and establishing a greater presence on the French literary scene. Since 1990, women writers have been able to push the boundaries of representation and expression further than before. By building on second-wave feminist work, female authors have found ways to write more explicitly about bodies, sex, desire, violence, and trauma. According to Rye and Amaleena Damlé: 'since the 1990s, illness, death and trauma have surfaced as corporeal themes that expose the darker side to the female bodily experience and reflect a wider trend of witnessing texts and "wound culture"' (2013, 10). In addition, this new generation has fictionalised a more diverse range of bodily experiences, 'with anorexia, abortion, pregnancy, birth, illness and death now also recurrent themes, and new ways of representing them

being explored' (Rye and Damlé, 2013, 3). As Natalie Edwards explains, contemporary women writers have also evolved in their approaches to motherhood, since certain novels 'resist portraying motherhood as a romanticised, idealised or idyllic experience' (2013, 98). It is within this new, more violent, daring, traumatic, and controversial context that the female fertility cycle is inscribed.

The variety of authors from France whose novels are explored here reveals not only the importance attributed to the female body within women's writing in French, but also the dominance of female writers in the French literary scene today. The writers whose works are featured here are of various ages, from varying geographical locations within France, have published as few as one novel or as many as eighteen, and differ enormously in the amount of critical academic attention which has been paid to them. Virginie Despentes and Marie Darrieussecq, who were both born in 1969 and have published over thirty literary works between them, have received the most attention in academic scholarship. The novels of Camille Laurens (b. 1957) and Catherine Millet (b. 1948) do not feature in academic scholarship to the same extent as Despentes and Darrieussecq, but the body of academic literature on their work, and Laurens' in particular, is growing. This book also examines the novels and short stories of much lesser-known authors. The works of Nathalie Schweighoffer (b. 1970), Agnès Desarthe (b. 1966), Hélèna Villovitch (b. 1963), Mazarine Pingeot (b. 1974), Laurence Tardieu (b. 1972), and Michèle Sarde (b. 1939) have been analysed in very few or even no published academic work.

Blood, resistance and violence: Menstruation in women's writing from France

During the 1970s and 1980s, representations of menstrual experience rapidly proliferated within female-authored literary works. This rapid increase mirrored the contemporaneous interest in the subject by the second-wave feminists. Novels included Marie Cardinal's *Les Mots pour le dire* (1975), Annie Ernaux's *Les Armoires vides* (1975) and *La femme gelée* (1981), Jeanne Hyvrard's *Les doigts du figuier* (1977) and *La Meurtritude* (1977) as well as Marie Redonnet's *Rose Mélie Rose* (1987). Although interest in menstrual experience peaked in women's writing during the 1970s and 1980s, there exists a significant number of fictional works published since 1990 which explore menstruation. However,

menstruation is not the primary focus of any of these post-1990 works of fiction. At most, these texts contain a few paragraphs on the topic, for example in Virginie Despentes' novel *Baise-moi* (1993). In some of these literary works, such as Catherine Cusset's *Jouir* (1997), menstruation is only alluded to in one sentence. Other works which explore menstrual experience include Despentes' short story 'Des poils sur moi' (1999), Nathalie Schweighoffer's *J'avais douze ans…* (1990), Catherine Millet's *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M* (2001), and *New York, journal d'un Cycle* (2009), as well as Marie Darrieussecq's *Truismes* (1996). Chapter 2 examines menstrual experience in the texts of Schweighoffer, Millet, and Despentes because they pay significant attention to the subject.

Millet and Schweighoffer both choose a girl's first menses as a way of exploring societal and familial attitudes towards menstruation. Millet's *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M* is a work of *autofiction* and therefore the story's protagonist shares the same name as the author. Catherine, the narrator and protagonist, reflects back on her first menstrual bleed. She has evidently received no prior education about menstruation because she is unsure from where her menstrual blood is flowing. Catherine recalls:

> J'avais douze ans lorsque mes premières règles sont venues. Ma mère et ma grand-mère se sont agitées, ont convoqué le médecin, mon père a passé la tête par la porte et m'a demandé en riant si je saignais du nez. Voilà pour l'éducation sexuelle. Ce sang, je ne savais pas trop d'où il venait et je ne savais pas faire la distinction entre la voie par laquelle s'écoulait l'urine et celle par où venait les règles. (123)

In this analepsis, Catherine appears emotionally distant when she realises that she has menstruated for the first time. Her detachment from her body is made evident in the indifference with which she narrates this passage and in her impersonal reference to her urethra and vagina. The only emotion evoked here is her confusion at her own biology. Her detachment is accentuated by its juxtaposition with the emotive responses of her family which range from distress to amusement. We can argue that her family's lack of acknowledgement that she is menstruating, for example in her father's reference to her nose bleeding, may have caused Catherine's dissociative response to her body.

Despite occurring chronologically before any of the other scenes she narrates, Catherine's reflection on her first menses is placed at the very centre of the work. This highly symbolic position supports the idea that menarche was a defining moment which brought about this

separation between Catherine's mind and body. Catherine's first menses is framed by a narrative which primarily focuses on her active and experimental sex life. The tone of this episode of her first menstrual bleed mirrors Catherine's pervasive sense of detachment from her body, which is strongly felt throughout the multitude of sex scenes in the novel. Her sense of detachment is apparent in her articulation: '[p]lus je détaille mon corps et mes actes, plus je me détache de moi-même' (186). Critics of Millet's text tend to analyse Catherine's detachment through an examination of her sexual life, and so they have largely ignored the menstruation scene. In her article about the representation of sexuality in popular culture, Lubomira Radoilska explores 'la sexualité comme champ d'expérimentation' in Millet's text and argues that: 'on peut suivre jusqu'au bout la logique de la dissociation entre soi-même, et le corps qu'on habite, et estimer au juste ses effets' (2003, 40). If we analyse the menstruation scene through the lens of Radoilska's perspective, we can argue that her first menses marks the beginning of Catherine's detachment from her body, sexuality, and mind. Catherine's first menstrual bleed is therefore a key episode which builds an image of Catherine's disconnection from her body. This episode should, therefore, not be overlooked when examining the representation of detachment in Millet's work.

Damlé and Rye also focus on Millet's representation of sexuality. Resonating with the framework of this book, Damlé and Rye consider *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M* in relation to the legacy of the second-wave feminists. They include *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M* in their list of novels from the 1990s that form part of a body of texts 'in which desire and sex were presented in much more provocative and pornographic terms that contrast with the safe, affirmative spaces of female desire evoked by Cixous and others' (Damlé and Rye, 2013, 11). By focusing on the overtly sexual moments in the novel, Damlé and Rye make a valuable comparison between Millet's approach to sexuality and that of the second-wave feminists. However, they do not explore the menstruation scene, which also provides a significant and fascinating point of comparison between Millet's text and second-wave feminism. We can find, in the portrayal of Catherine's first menses, strong resonance with *Parole de femme*, wherein Leclerc refers to women as 'tampaxisée' and argues that they 'ne sentent rien quand viennent leurs règles' (1974, 62). We can speculate that Leclerc would label Catherine as a 'femme tampaxisée' because she has no emotional reaction to her first menses. The novel echoes Leclerc's belief that women experience menstruation

with detachment because French society insists that menstruation remains invisible rather than encouraging women to view it as a positive aspect of femininity. One could argue that the lack of discussion between Catherine and her family about her first menstrual bleed, as well as the father's euphemistic reference to her nose, are caused by, and indicative of, a societal perception of menstruation as a taboo subject.

Although this image of the detached menstruating woman is common to Millet and Leclerc, we can also argue, for a different reason from the one given by Damlé and Rye, that *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M* lies in stark contrast to second-wave feminist perspectives on the female body. By representing Catherine's first menses with apathy rather than celebration, the novel does not answer the call of the second-wave feminists for women to embrace and celebrate their bodies. Cixous, for example, believes that women's writing should dispel a sense of detachment from the female body. She urges women: 'ton corps est à toi – prends le' (Cixous, 1975, 39). Hence, Catherine's disconnection from her body and the lack of positive language about menstruation is indicative of the distance that exists between Millet's work and the aims of much second-wave feminist work. Evidentially, Millet's text neither shares Leclerc's idealism nor does it seek to reimagine her body outside a patriarchal space or try to feel more connected to her body. Instead, she allows her body to remain in the position of object rather than subject, from the moment of her first menses through to her sexual experiences in adulthood. Catherine aligns herself with a masculine perspective and elucidates her lack of solidarity with other women from the outset: 'ma place dans le monde était moins parmi les autres femmes, face aux hommes, qu'aux côtés des hommes' (16). This lack of feminine solidarity signals a break with the tradition of women's writing and, indirectly, a rejection of the works of the second-wave feminists.

When analysing Catherine's sense of detachment to her menstruating body, it is important to note that this detachment is coupled with an emphasis on the medical aspects of menstruation. The scene includes a reference to a doctor and her confusion between 'la voie par laquelle s'écoulait l'urine et celle par où venaient les règles' (123). This juxtaposition of menstrual blood and urine positions menstrual blood as another waste product. In Catherine's eyes, menstrual blood has no more value or interest than urine. Thus, instead of considering menarche as significant because it marks an entrance into womanhood, Catherine conceptualises menstruation in purely medical terms. We see that Catherine's only information about menstruation is gleaned from her father's

joke about her nose and, subsequently, from the doctor. Her mother's response to call the doctor, rather than personally explain menstruation to Catherine, would suggest to Catherine that menstruation is a medical matter rather than a significant milestone in life to be celebrated. This may provide a further explanation as to why the tone of this episode is very flat and distant.

La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M takes its exploration of the medicalisation of menstruation further by recounting Catherine's interaction with the doctor to whom her mother and grandmother have sent her. Rather than educating her about why she is bleeding, the doctor focuses on hygiene. Catherine recounts, 'le médecin m'expliqua avec tact que je devais me laver un peu plus profondément que je ne le faisais avec le gant de toilette, sinon, dit-il en reniflant le doigt caoutchouté qui m'avait examinée, « cela ne sent pas très bon »' (123). The tone of the phrase 'avec tact' appears sarcastic when juxtaposed with the doctor's exaggerated gesture of smelling his finger. It cannot be denied that the behaviour of the doctor, which appears predatory and perverse, constitutes an abuse of his position of power. Nonetheless, we can argue that his action of smelling Catherine's menstrual blood may constitute an exaggerated response to a preoccupation with menstrual hygiene within French society. His smelling his finger is a deliberate gesture designed to imprint on her mind the idea that she must ensure her menstrual blood is never detectable. He appears to be attempting to shame Catherine into becoming more 'hygienic'. If we consider the doctor as a representative figure, we can argue that Millet's novel positions him as a mouthpiece for a societal horror of menstrual blood. The doctor's prioritising of hygienic concerns over any other information suggests that the French society in which Catherine lives primarily views menstruation as a matter of hygiene.

As we can see in the doctor's gesture, the female body is depicted by Millet as being subject to external forms of discipline, namely, an attempt to enforce that menstruation is never detectable. This resonates strongly with Kristeva's theory of abjection as well as Leclerc and Cardinal's criticism of patriarchal discourses about menstruation. The doctor's disgust at the smell of Catherine's menstrual blood signals that he perceives her body as a contaminating and polluting entity. His response to Catherine's menstrual blood resonates strongly with Jane Ussher's sociological and psychological study of the female body. In *Managing the Monstrous Feminine* (2006), Ussher argues that all societies share the following aim: 'containment of the monstrous feminine and

protection from the threat of contamination from pollution, signified by menstrual blood' (19). According to Ussher, religious societies regulate the menstruating body through religious rituals and doctrine, whereas Western secular societies construct menstruation as 'a medicalised event, with hygiene and education about management of the changing body, of primary concern' (19). Indeed, Millet's text, which is set in France, supports this idea that the female body is regulated through rules about hygiene. We can see evidence of this medicalisation of the female body in both the mother's decision to give the doctor the responsibility of explaining menstruation to Catherine and in the doctor's emphasis on hygiene. Neither Catherine's family nor the doctor explain the significance of menstruation, for example through a discussion about fertility. We can argue that Catherine's detachment may be further reinforced by her only being subjected to discourses which characterise her body through a medicalised and hygiene-related perspective.

Nathalie Schweighoffer's *J'avais douze ans…,* which also describes menarche, is a testimony based on the author's real-life experiences of being sexually abused by her father. Soon after Nathalie's first menses, her father rapes her and threatens her to remain quiet. Nathalie feels too ashamed and frightened to report this abuse to her mother. Her father continues to sexually abuse her for a further five years until Nathalie finds the courage to denounce him on television. In this narrative of abuse and trauma, Nathalie recounts her first menstrual bleed which, at age twelve, she experiences as a moment of happiness. The tone is thereby a stark contrast to that of Catherine's first menses in *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M*. We can argue that this contrast is due to the fact that, unlike Catherine, Nathalie has already been educated about menstruation. Before her daughter's first menses, Nathalie's mother teaches her about menstruation at the dinner table in front of the family, including Nathalie's father. This choice to explain menstruation in the setting of a family dinner suggests that she wants to demonstrate to her daughter that it is not an embarrassing or shameful subject. She explains to Nathalie that menstruation is a sign of fertility: '[q]uand on les a, on est une petite femme, et il faut faire attention parce que ça veut dire qu'on peut avoir des enfants si on va avec les garçons' (34). By imparting the information to her daughter in front of her family whilst eating 'des biftecks avec des frites' (34) the mother is normalising menstruation and thereby underlining that it is not something about which her daughter needs to remain silent in a mixed-gender space. The mother is imparting to Nathalie the idea that menstruating is as agreeable and as ordinary

as a family dinner. At the same time, the mother is also preparing the family for Nathalie's first menses so that they discuss this topic frankly with her and offer her support.

Not only does the mother prepare Nathalie for this moment by explaining why women menstruate, she actively encourages her daughter to believe that her first menses will be a moment of happiness. Nathalie's mother tells her, 'tu verras, tu seras heureuse. Quand on devient une femme, tout le corps change, c'est beau d'être une femme' (34). Here, the mother characterises the first menstrual bleed, marking an entry into womanhood, as a moment which is worthy of celebration. For the mother, womanhood is to be cherished and the change from childhood into womanhood is a moment of beauty. Nathalie recounts that she found her mother's explanation to be 'formidable' (34), thereby illustrating that her mother has fostered a very positive impression of menstruation into her mind. The association between menstrual blood, femininity, and beauty, is reminiscent of Leclerc's *Parole de femme* in which she celebrates menstruation as a sign of womanhood. For Leclerc, '[v]oir et sentir le sang tendre et chaud qui coule de soi, qui coule de source, une fois par mois, est heureux' (1974, 48). In parallel, Nathalie's mother emphasises that the appearance of menstrual blood is something which Nathalie should celebrate. Whether Schweighoffer is aware of *Parole de femme* or not, *J'avais douze ans…* answers Leclerc's call for women to stop treating female bodily experiences, such as menstruation, as if they were 'des choses anodines, des choses de passage, […] à souffrir en silence' (1974, 62). For the mother, menstruation is not something about which Nathalie should be silent, but it is something that she encourages her to discuss openly and to celebrate.

In *J'avais douze ans….* Nathalie's first menstrual bleed is a positive experience because her mother has prepared her for this moment. Indeed, when the moment arises, it is evident that Nathalie's mother's jubilant words have a very positive effect on how Nathalie experiences her first menses: '[j]e suis sortie de la salle de bains en criant partout que ça y était. J'étais tellement contente. C'est vrai. Je me sentais toute neuve. Je rentrais dans le monde des adultes, j'étais fière comme tout' (34–35). The proud and uplifting tone used here alongside the anaphora on 'je' strongly evoke a feeling of being reborn into a new identity that confirms her sense of self and boosts her self-esteem. Her joyfully and loudly proclaiming this message highlights that Nathalie is not ashamed and that the first menses is an event that is too significant to be ignored. Therefore, but in completely contrasting ways, both *J'avais douze ans….*

and *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M* illustrates that the mother–daughter relationship is a defining influence on the first menses. We can observe that Catherine reacts with detachment to her first menstrual bleed because her mother has neither educated her about menstruation, nor does she acknowledge that her daughter is menstruating. In comparison, Nathalie, whose mother has prepared her for menarche, embraces and celebrates the arrival of her first menses. Hence, both works reveal the importance of educating young girls about menstruation.

Nonetheless, Nathalie's happiness that she has become a woman is short-lived. In fact, the primary function of this scene is not to celebrate Nathalie's entrance into womanhood. Instead, the happiness in this scene is juxtaposed with the deep trauma and shame engendered when Nathalie's father subsequently abuses her. This entrance into womanhood marks the beginning of her suffering. Since Nathalie's first menses is narrated in analepsis, it recaptures, through bathos, a happiness which she has now lost. This loss and her newfound sense of shame towards her abused body are stressed in the next paragraph when Nathalie repeats the phrase 'le monde des adultes' and switches from a tone of joy to one of despair: '[l]e monde des adultes c'est de la merde. Mon père est un con, et je le hais. Je peux plus le voir. Si c'est ça les adultes, j'en veux pas' (35). Hence, although the novel creates a positive language about womanhood and menstruation which Leclerc would characterise as a 'parole de femme', this is quickly undermined by the realities of the cruel world in which Nathalie lives. In this way, Nathalie's story illustrates that despite women's efforts to ensure that daughters view their bodies in a positive light, girls are still at constant risk of being dominated by men who can reverse the mother's celebration of womanhood. By comparing the message of Schweighoffer's text to Leclerc's theory, we can observe, as did Delphy, that Leclerc's idea of a 'parole de femme' is idealistic. Schweighoffer's text highlights that finding positive language to describe the female body does not always lead to women feeling liberated and unashamed about their bodies. Indeed, it demonstrates the need to approach the body from an intersectional perspective in order to determine how and from where the female body is being oppressed. Certainly, a 'parole de femme' does not work for marginalised women, such as Nathalie, who do not share Leclerc's privileged position.

Virginie Despentes' novel, *Baise-Moi,* also depicts the menstrual experience of protagonists who are marginalised. These characters, however, are marginalised because of their being from a poor *banlieu*

of Paris and their engaging in sex work. Nadine, a prostitute, and, Manu, a porn actress, meet after they have committed their first crimes. Bonding over murdering men, they decide to take revenge on French patriarchal society by going on a murderous rampage. A key parallel between *Baise-Moi* and *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M* can be found in their framing of menstrual experience within a text which details the characters' sexual acts. The scene in which Manu bleeds onto the floor is represented in a chapter at the very centre of *Baise-moi*. Perhaps then, as in *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M,* this placement signifies that menstruation is a defining aspect of the protagonists' identity and sheds light on their other bodily experiences. This part of the novel, much like Catherine's first menstrual bleed in *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M,* has largely been overlooked by scholars who instead focus on Despentes' representation of rape, prostitution, and violence.

In contrast to Millet and Schweighoffer's text, *Baise-moi* takes its representation of menstruation further by describing menstrual blood itself. Manu delights in watching her menstrual blood trickle all over the floor of the hotel room she shares with Nadine. Her blood is described in the third person, in a manner which is reminiscent of Kristeva's *Pouvoirs de l'horreur.* In order to explain society's horror at bodily substances such as menstrual blood, she compares it with our response to the skin on milk. Kristeva writes: 'la nausée me cambre, contre cette crème de lait, et me sépare de ma mère' (1980, 10). Similarly, Manu's menstrual blood, in which one can see 'des petits lambeaux plus sombres' (162), is compared to 'la crème dans le lait qu'on retient avec la cuillère' (152). This allusion to Kristeva, coupled with Manu's deliberate act of staining surfaces and her appreciation of the aesthetics of her menstrual blood, suggests that *Baise-moi,* by challenging negative societal perceptions of menstruation, goes beyond the scope of Kristeva's work. Manu's joy in watching her blood stain surfaces challenges the idea that menstrual blood is something which should inspire horror and remain permanently concealed.

Manu's staining of surfaces with her menstrual blood, an act which she started to perform as a teenager, is positioned in the novel as a revolt against the society in which Manu lives. As Nadine watches Manu menstruate onto the floor, Manu informs her that she used to stain her mother's furniture: 'je faisais exprès de tout tacher pour faire chier ma mère. Elle fait partie de l'ancienne école, ça la fascine pas trop ces trucs-là. Si elle pouvait, elle voterait contre. Ça la rendait carrément malade' (153). The characterisation of Manu's mother as

being part of the 'ancienne école' and use of the term 'voter' (which has political connotations) to evoke her mother's disapproval of women who display signs they are menstruating, frames Manu's action of staining surfaces as a form of political protest against the establishment. Her mother's feeling sick at the sight of Manu's menstrual blood suggests that this blood repulses her. As a representative of the establishment, she symbolises a societal belief that menstruation is abject, and therefore must be concealed.

Manu's penchant for staining surfaces is also portrayed as a challenge to patriarchy in particular. In response to Nadine's sarcastic question about whether her former boyfriends appreciated her ritual, Manu replies: 'je faisais ça dans les chiottes. J'ai remarqué que ça faisait rire que moi' (153). This signals that not only is the visibility of menstrual blood prohibited, as epitomised by her mother's response to the sight of Manu's stains, but that taking pleasure in the act of menstruating is even more transgressive. The necessity of her conducting this ritual in the toilets, a place where waste products are expelled, illustrates that in the France represented in *Baise-moi* menstrual blood is only assigned the same status as other human waste. Indeed, we see a resonance here with *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M* in which Catherine is confused about from where her body produces menstrual blood and urine. The fact that there has been little change in attitudes between the mother's generation and Manu's generation (as represented by her sexual partners) demonstrates the need for women in France to continue to break the silence and challenge the shame that surrounds menstrual experience.

The narrative voice subverts the idea that menstrual blood is merely a waste product by presenting Manu's menstrual blood sinking into the carpet as if it were paint on a canvas. The abject therefore becomes the sublime. The following sentence emphasises the blood's artistic merit and beauty: '[l]es taches rouges sombres restent un moment à la surface, bulles écarlates et brillantes, avant d'imprégner les fibres, s'étaler sur la moquette claire' (152). The imagery of the menstrual blood as bubbles which briefly rest and glisten on the surface portrays the blood as a beautiful and ephemeral substance. The light carpet appears as a metaphor for a blank canvas onto which Manu is painting. This suggests that she is a pioneer who other women should follow in order to continue the defiance of the taboos that surround menstrual blood. The language of beauty articulated in the narrative could certainly be described as a 'parole de femme' since it shatters the phallocentrism in language by replacing a discourse of horror with one of wonder.

As well as describing menstrual blood in a positive language, *Baise-moi* is also reminiscent of *Parole de femme* through Manu's celebration of the sensorial aspect of menstruating. Manu experiences the pleasure of menstruating through three of her senses: sight (by watching it trickle and stating 'ça fait plaisir à voir' (153)), smell (by commenting, 'ça sent bon'(153)), and touch (by playing with the blood with her hands and smearing it all over her body). This is a triple protest against a societal insistence that menstrual blood remain undetectable. Her pleasure is reminiscent of Leclerc's declaration that '[v]oir et sentir le sang tendre et chaud qui coule de soi, qui coule de source, une fois par mois, est heureux' (1974, 48). Indeed, Manu similarly finds joy in observing her own menstrual blood and feeling it trickle out of her body. The mutinous spirit in *Parole de femme* is definitely felt in this narrative, both in the language used to describe menstrual blood and in Manu's rejection of the silence and shame that usually surround menstrual experience.

The novel aggrandises Manu's act of smearing blood over her body by positioning it as a performative ritual which is designed to be observed by an audience. During this ritual, Manu articulates the pleasure that she has felt since adolescence by stating, 'j'ai gardé le goût. C'est spectacle, merde, ça fait plaisir à voir' (153). Through her choosing the words 'goût' and 'spectacle', she presents menstruation as a pleasurable and theatrical experience that should be a source of sensorial enjoyment rather than censure. The theatrical allusion apparent in the word 'spectacle' and Nadine's role as the spectator, positions Manu's menstruating body at centre stage. The tone conveys a sense of wonder which emphasises that menstrual blood can also be a form of art. Her smearing her body with menstrual blood is accompanied by a verbal expression of pleasure: '[ç] a sent bon dedans, enfin faut aimer' (152). This phrase reveals that the purpose of this performance may be to shatter the idea that menstruation is abject or unclean. This directly counteracts attitudes that the odour of menstrual blood should never be detectable, a perception that is articulated in *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M* when the doctor tells Catherine to wash because '« cela ne sent pas très bon »' (131).

Manu's use of the word 'enfin' suggests that her performance has engendered the beginning of a new order where women are able to take pleasure in menstruation and no longer feel compelled to conceal all traces of it. Her disregard for syntax and grammar demonstrates the disruptive potential of her words and her performance. According to Shirley Jordan, who is one of the very few scholars to examine the representation of menstruation in *Baise-moi*, '[in] this quasi ritual scene,

customary euphemisms and habitual perspectives on menstrual blood as a pollutant are reversed so that it becomes fascinating and exciting [...] a potent form of rebellion' (2004, 135). This insightful analysis underlines the subversive nature of Manu's act which has a much greater significance than merely dirtying a hotel room. If we interpret Manu's actions as a ritual, we can see that her menstrual blood takes the place of water. Hence, she subverts the notion that menstruation is unhygienic by treating menstrual blood as a purifying substance. This ritual elevates menstrual blood to a status of being sacred. Manu thereby completely turns Kristeva's theory of the abject on its head: rather than presenting menstrual blood as an impure liquid which inspires horror, *Baise-moi* positions menstrual blood as a purifying and sacred substance which brings joy.

One could argue, however, that the scene of Manu's menstruating on the floor of the hotel room also reveals a latent violence which problematises Manu's celebration of menstrual blood. Manu continues to bleed all over the hotel room as the two women pretend to shoot guns: 'elle laisse des traces ensanglantées partout où elle s'assoit. Elle raconte des scènes de tir qu'elle a vues au cinéma, en parlant, elle vise des trucs dans la pièce' (153–54). Upon examining this parallel between menstrual blood and violence, it becomes manifest that *Baise-moi* is not a straightforward answer to Leclerc's call that women celebrate their menstrual experience. On the one hand, this juxtaposition of menstruation and murderous weapons does indeed question why images of menstrual blood are taboo while images of blood resulting from violence are acceptable. As Jordan argues, the juxtaposition of Manu menstruating and holding a gun does certainly compel the reader 'to interrogate the culturally determined nature of our responses to different categories of blood' (2004, 34). The reader is made to question why Manu's pleasure in her menstrual blood is more transgressive than her desire to spill blood, against which the reader has become inured by graphic visual depictions of violence in films or on television. On the other hand, this comparison can also be interpreted as reinforcing patriarchal stereotypes about menstrual blood as a symbol of violence and excess.

Baise-moi replicates patriarchal notions of menstrual blood as a symbol of violence and vulgarity not only through the imagery of Manu holding a gun, but also through her use of language. This is evident in Manu's employment of the word 'spectacle' to describe her pleasure at the sight of her menstrual blood, a term which she also employs a few pages before to characterise the pleasure she takes in murdering

people: '[f]aire couler le sang, à flots. Du grand spectacle' (112). Manu characterises her menses in terms of excess and refers to it in animalistic language by declaring that she bleeds 'comme une chienne' (153) on the first day of her menstrual cycle. This link between the female body and the animal world is reminiscent of Kristeva's *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*. Manu's employment of such animalistic language alongside her playing with the gun, which we can interpret as a phallic symbol, suggests that she desires to enter a masculine space. Her ambivalence manifests itself through her desire to push the boundaries of socially accepted behaviour by both contesting patriarchal attitudes towards menstruation as well as appropriating a traditionally more masculine discourse and attitude to violence. As the chapter that focuses exclusively on Manu's menses is surrounded by episodes of Nadine and Manu's grotesque and gratuitous acts of violence, it frames menstruation as another form of violence. Hence, the relationship of *Baise-moi's* portrayal of menstruation to the second-wave feminists is rather ambiguous. Although *Baise-moi* certainly breaks the silence that surrounds menstrual experience in France and celebrates menstrual blood, it also reinforces stereotypes of menstruation as violent, excessive, and animalistic.

In Despentes' short story 'Des poils sur moi' (1999), which is narrated by a character who turns into a werewolf when she menstruates, menstruation is associated once more with abjection, animality, and violence. The necessity of her hiding herself away during her menses because she turns into a werewolf satirises the obligation for women to conceal their menstrual blood and parodies, through an allusion to PMS, the stereotype that women are angry or extremely emotional during their menses. Her episodes as a werewolf are 'un cauchemar d'à peine quatre jours' (116) during which she feels 'immontrable, abjecte et bourrée de honte à en être toute purulente' (116). The hyperbolical language here, such as the word 'purulente', satirises societal associations between menstruation and pollution or impurity. In creating a character who becomes a werewolf when she menstruates, Despentes associates menstruation and the supernatural. The protagonist's menstrual blood is thereby depicted as a source of danger or power. Moreover, her four-day spell as a werewolf evokes cultural ideas of menstruation as a curse. This is based on traditional ideas of menstruating women having supernatural powers which could, for example, turn food rotten. As sociological studies have shown, societal perceptions and discourses of menstruation in contemporary France are still influenced by 'les croyances archaïques ou « populaires »' (Obadia, 2016, 507) which

portray the menstruating woman as a supernatural threat. Because of the short story's hyperbolical language, we can argue that, rather than perpetuating ideas that menstruation is a curse, 'Des poils sur moi' is satirically critiquing the taboos and negative stereotypes that still exist around a harmless monthly event. By playing with the idea of the supernatural, Despentes exposes the ridiculous nature of perceptions of menstruation as dangerous, polluting, and horrifying.

Trauma, taboo, and transgression: Childbirth in women's writing from France

Since 1990, the topic of childbirth has become increasingly prevalent in women's writing from France. Women writers have produced a rich corpus by offering multiple perspectives on childbirth and motherhood. To reflect this multiplicity, this section analyses the work of six authors. Three of these authors have published short stories in the collection *Naissances* (2005), which includes narratives of childbirth and pregnancy. However, 'despite the intersection of eight independent fictional approaches to the theme of birth, *Naissances* is neglected by most literary critics' (Worth-Stylianou, 2017, 58). This is especially surprising because these short stories have been written by some of the most prominent French women writers of the twenty-first century. Many of the short stories are representative of the sustained interest in the medicalisation of childbirth by French women writers ever since Leclerc herself criticised the medical profession in *Parole de femme*. These stories, which are inspired by the authors' own experiences of giving birth, include 'Encore là' by Marie Darrieussecq, 'Mon Lapin' by Helena Villovitch, and 'Les mois, les heures et les minutes' by Agnès Desarthe. Desarthe's and Villovitch's stories examine the clichéd way in which childbirth is represented on French television. In Darrieussecq's story, the narrator's caesarean is performed under general anaesthetic and she misses the moment her baby emerges.

In addition to the short stories of *Naissances,* this section explores representations of childbirth in a selection of novels. Camille Laurens's novel *Philippe* (1995) is the focus of this section not only because of its resonances with second-wave feminism but also because it is representative of recent trends in women's writing from France. Since the 1990s, European French authors have increasingly framed childbirth within traumatic, previously taboo, and violent contexts. In *Phillipe,*

not only is the childbirth itself traumatic but it also culminates in baby Phillipe's death. The narrator blames the doctor for him being stillborn. As this section illustrates, there are many interesting parallels between her criticism of the medicalisation of childbirth with Leclerc's *Parole de Femme*. *Philippe* is inspired by real-life events and is narrated in the first person by a voice that represents Laurens. Infant mortality is also explored by Darrieussecq in *Tom est mort* (2009) which is not analysed in this section. However, it is interesting to note that Laurens accused Darrieussecq of plagiarising *Phillipe*. Not only does Laurens claim Darrieussecq stole her ideas, but she also claims that Darrieussecq appropriated her experiences since Darrieussecq has never given birth to a stillborn child (Laurens, 2015). Hence, we can infer that Laurens believes that a writer is only able to produce a narrative about such trauma if they have lived it.

In certain narratives of childbirth this trauma is paired with a storyline which transgresses normative societal expectations of mothers. A particularly popular transgressive social context in which authors inscribe childbirth is infanticide. This section examines Mazarine Pingeot's *Le Cimetière des poupées* (2007), in which the imprisoned protagonist explains, in a letter to her husband, why she committed infanticide. It also explores Laurence Tardieu's *Le Jugement de Léa* (2004), in which Léa tells her story whilst waiting for the jury to make a decision as to whether she is guilty of infanticide. *Le Jugement de Léa* and *Philippe* form part of a growing tendency of women in France to write testimonial novels which plead the case of their narrator, whether it be their innocence, a justification of their actions, or the crime of another party. *Le Jugement de Léa* is the testimony of a fictional character, whereas *Philippe* is based on Laurens' real-life experience of infant mortality. This style adds a sense of realism to the text and helps the reader to sympathise, or even empathise, with the protagonist. Despentes' collection *Mordre au Travers,* in which we find 'Des poils sur moi', also explores infanticide in the story 'A terme' which tells the story of a protagonist who murders her baby, chops it up, and posts it to her boyfriend. Once again, we observe Despentes interest in the female body, abjection, and violence.

In fact, the topic of infanticide is not limited to texts which describe childbirth and this theme has become increasingly popular with contemporary women writers since 1990. For example, Darrieussecq's *White* (2003), Suzanne Jacob's *L'Obéissance* (1991) and Sophie Marinopoulos' *La Vie ordinaire d'une mère meurtière* (2008) all explore infanticide

in depth. There are, of course, other narratives of childbirth which cannot be covered within the confines of this book. These include Marie Darrieussecq's *Le bébé* (2005) which is, in essence, a longer version of 'Encore là', and Christine Angot's *Interview* (1995) and *Léonore toujours* (1997). Angot's two novels, since they compare giving birth to incest, very much typify the recent trend in women's writing to insert female bodily experiences into taboo contexts. This comparison between giving birth and incest certainly transgresses societal expectations and norms of motherhood.

We begin our analysis of contemporary women's narratives of childbirth by looking at how these texts are producing a counter-narrative to societal norms and expectations. Portrayals of childbirth on television have become a target for critique by female European French writers. Desarthe and Villovitch expose the clichéd and unrepresentative nature of the discourses and imagery they encounter on television. They challenge these televisual depictions of childbirth and then subsequently reimagine childbirth in a more positive light. Hence, since both these contemporary authors criticise current discourses and then offer a more positive alternative, their approach echoes that of Leclerc in *Parole de femme*. In Villovitch's short story 'Mon Lapin', which recounts childbirth from the perspective of a first-person narrator, she exposes the ridiculousness and inaccuracy of the depictions of childbirth in French téléfilms. For her, these 'téléfilms idiots' (35) overdramatise childbirth and falsely depict it as torture. Villovitch's narrator states that during labour she did certainly not pronounce clichés such as 'c'est pas possible, mon Dieu, c'est pas possible' (35), or 'je n'ai jamais autant souffert de ma vie' (35) and 'arrêtez tout, je ne veux pas de bébé' (35–36). The phrases Villovitch employs here to exemplify the language used on television echo Leclerc's theory that childbirth is commonly misconceived as 'l'image même de la douleur' (1974, 86). The phrase 'je n'ai jamais autant souffert de ma vie' (35) also resonates with Leclerc's argument that society perceives this painful labour as a sacrifice. Resonating with Leclerc's approach, Villovitch's narrator uses her own experiences to challenge this narrative of childbirth as sacrifice and torture. The narrator in 'Mon Lapin' represents her experience of childbirth as the antithesis to the pictures she sees on television: 'j'imagine que j'ai plutôt plaisanté avec les infirmières' (36) and 'on s'est bien occupé de moi' (36). The depiction of her making jokes gives an impression of childbirth as a pleasant and congenial experience. This juxtaposition between the cries of the actors and her calm personal

experience reveals the overly dramatic and unrepresentative nature of childbirth on television.

If we draw on French sociological literature, we can argue that the television programmes to which Villovitch refers are not a complete fabrication of women's attitudes towards childbirth. Thus, Villovitch's narrative goes beyond solely critiquing television but extends to questioning French societal attitudes as a whole. Indeed, although these films may exaggerate a woman's experience of childbirth for dramatic effect, the imagery and discourses of pain and torture are actually indicative of contemporary French societal attitudes towards childbirth. In *Sociologie de l'accouchement*, Béatrice Jacques presents a series of case studies and interviews with women who have given birth, doctors, and midwives. Jacques finds in these interviews a discourse of illness and risk: '[l]'effort physique intense, la douleur, même sous péridurale, sont des sensations communes à la maladie' (2007, 133). The interviews reveal the existence of a 'culte de la souffrance' (142) and the predominance of the same discourse of pain and sacrifice that Villovitch notices in the téléfilms*:* '[l]a douleur comme sacrifice, propre au discours judéo-chrétien, est particulièrement dominante' (142). We can argue that the narratives of childbirth which Villovitch watches on television reflect a discourse of pain, suffering, and illness which French women themselves have internalised. The value of Villovitch's critique therefore extends beyond the realm of television which is merely a mouthpiece for negative societal ideas. Hence, Villovitch is challenging dominant societal narratives of birth and offering women a more positive example to which they can refer. Villovitch is bringing Leclerc's 'parole de femme' in the twenty-first century to challenge societal attitudes towards childbirth which do not seem to have significantly changed since the publication of *Parole de femme*.

In the short story 'Les mois, les heures et les minutes', Desarthe takes a similar approach to Villovitch. She reveals the melodramatic nature of televisual representations by contrasting these depictions of childbirth as torture with the anonymous narrator's self-affirming experience. The child narrator at the beginning of Desarthe's text becomes the adult narrator whose perceptions of childbirth drastically alter when, at the end of the story, she experiences childbirth for herself. Desarthe's text is narrated in the second person, which encourages the reader to imagine themselves in the narrator's position and thereby re-evaluate their own perceptions of childbirth. 'Les mois, les heures et les minutes' commences by depicting a mother and her children watching a soap.

The young narrator describes the scene on television: 'Les bonnes en tablier blanc se tordent les doigts. C'est très angoissant. La dame sue à grosses gouttes, son beau chignon est tout défait, elle tourne la tête à droite, à gauche, elle hurle' (56). A clinical atmosphere is created by the servants' white aprons. The screaming, sweating, and frantic movements of the woman in labour characterise her as helpless and frightened. The children mistake what they are witnessing for a death scene and ask, 'Maman, qu'est-ce qu'elle a la dame? Elle va mourir?' (56). At the end of the passage, the narrator looks at her siblings and thinks: '[d]ire qu'ils ont fait subir cette torture à ta maman, les ordures!' (56). The humorous tone with which the children's consternation is conveyed further emphasises the absurdity of the soap's portrayal of childbirth.

The narrator plays with this tortured image of childbirth that she saw as a child and illustrates how it fed into her own fears in the delivery room before she gave birth. She compares the delivery room to a nightmarish laboratory: 'la salle qui ressemble au laboratoire dans lequel les professeurs fous fabriquent leurs créatures monstrueuses' (69). This description evokes an image of doctors in white lab coats and echoes the clinical images of the 'bonnes en tablier blanc' (56) on the soap, thereby illustrating the link between the impression left on her by the soap and her fear of giving birth. Her reference to 'les professeurs fous' and 'leur créatures monstrueuses' is likely to be an allusion to Frankenstein and his monster. It suggests that she is anxious that she will be at the mercy of medical professionals during childbirth, rather than being in control. In her brief analysis of Desarthe's story, Valerie Worth-Stylianou argues that '[m]adness, monstrosity, and frailty are here the spectres accompanying childbirth' and states that the monstrous is the 'key feature of the story' (2017, 64). Even though her analysis provides an enlightening interpretation of the fear of childbirth felt by the narrator before she starts to give birth, Worth-Stylianou appears to disregard the main purpose of the text which is to deconstruct and reject such imagery of childbirth. Once the narrator starts to push, the illusion of childbirth as a nightmare is immediately shattered and no such 'spectres' hover over her labour. Her fear dissipates and is replaced with a feeling of empowerment. A lexical field of horror is replaced by one of exhilaration and female strength. For the narrator, childbirth is 'exaltant' (68) and 'le dernier tour de stade d'une marathonienne' (70). She states: 'Tu as une force immense' (70) and '[t]u vois tres bien comment Hercule a fait pour ses douze travaux' (71). By comparing herself to Hercules and a marathon runner she represents childbirth as

an expression of the strength and resilience of the female body. Hence, once again, we can observe an approach which resembles that adopted by Leclerc, since Desarthe takes a stereotypical image of childbirth which is promulgated in France and subverts it with a language that celebrates the power of the female body.

We can observe an analogous lexical field and imagery of the monstrous in Darrieussecq's short story in the same collection: 'Encore là'. However, the appearance of such imagery in the narrative serves a different purpose from that in Desarthe's story. Darrieussecq employs such imagery and language when dramatising the narrator's experience of having a caesarean. The narrator of 'Encore là' recounts the rapid decision of the doctors to anaesthetise her: 'il a fallu m'endormir, m'anesthésier entièrement. Je n'ai pas tout suivi parce que c'est allé très vite, et mon mari a été prié de quitter la salle. Un masque sur mon visage, quelque chose dans ma perfusion, et je n'étais plus là' (12). This passage illustrates the narrator's bodily disempowerment. She neither comprehends what the doctors are about to perform nor is she able to identify the substance being inserted into the drip. The fact that her husband is made to leave the room adds to the protagonist's sense of helplessness and solitude. This departure magnifies the impression the novel gives of the hospital as a cold and heartless environment. The quick succession of the phrases in the final sentence which ends with the sharp climax, 'je n'étais plus là' (12), reinforces her feelings of powerlessness. After the caesarean, her liminal state between sleeping and being awake is articulated in a language which conveys her fear and disorientation: '[l]a lumière clignotait, la salle de réveil était très blanche, je refermais les yeux, éblouie, dans ce sommeil harassant des anesthésies. Des rêves me harcelaient, plus vraisemblables que le réel' (12). Language and imagery combine to evoke the horror of this scene. The words 'harassant' and 'harcelaient' characterise her medically induced sleep as a torment. The imagery of the flickering lights, which is a common trope in the horror genre, combines with the blinding whiteness of the room to turn the hospital environment into a frightening space of torture where her body is at the mercy of others.

Darrieussecq plays once again with the horror genre in order to contrast the dehumanising experience of her caesarean with the sensuality of giving birth naturally. The narrator imagines caesareans being performed in the third person, which evokes the depersonalising aspect of the operation. 'Encore là' therefore echoes Leclerc's belief that women who give birth in hospitals are treated as if they were on a factory

line: 'le ventre ouvert avec une créature qui sort de là… Mieux vaut masquer la béance, transformer l'*extraction* en théâtre de marionnettes, mains gantées soulevant le bébé… On ne dit pas *accouchement* quand il y a césarienne. On n'*accouche* que par *voie basse*' (13, italics in original). Her reference to the baby as a 'créature' and her use of meat metaphors evoke the dehumanising aspect of caesareans. The mother is a 'bout de viande' (13) and her peritoneum is known by 'les charcutiers' as a 'crépinette' (18). The hyperbolic imagery created of the caesarean is one of a body that is treated as if it were a piece of meat being prepared for market. An extra element of horror is incorporated to the scene through the abject imagery of 'la béance' and 'le ventre ouvert'. In addition, she describes her caesarean scar as 'une couture impressionnante, à la Frankenstein' (17) and 'un sourire métallique' (17). The combination of the abject imagery of an open body, the meat metaphors, and her reference to Frankenstein's monster, depict the caesarean as a monstrous violation of her bodily integrity. Italics underscore the artificiality of the caesarean, which is an *'extraction'* and not an *'accouchement'*, in contrast to a birth 'par *voie basse'*. For Darrieussecq, the doctors have deprived her of the experience of giving birth because a caesarean cannot be termed an 'accouchement'. Indeed, in 'Abandonnés', which is another short story in *Naissances,* Laurens also portrays her caesarean as depriving her of the experience of a 'natural' childbirth. She states, 'je n'ai aucune expérience de la naissance' (99). Hence, we can see that it is not childbirth itself that is abject, as in Kristeva's *Pouvoirs de l'horreur,* but the artificial cutting of the body and its stapling back together.

'Encore là' does not present vaginal childbirth as abject but as a 'natural' and sensorial experience to be cherished. The narrator's hyperbolical representation of her caesarean serves to emphasise the joy of natural childbirth by lying in such stark contrast with it. She laments that the caesarean has stripped her of the pleasure of a natural birth. She misses the feeling of her baby coming down her birth canal: '[p]our mon premier accouchement, j'avais senti mon fils descendre, poussé par les contractions […] ça m'a manqué aussi de ne pas emmener ma fille au bout de moi, par les *voies naturelles*' (14, italics in original). She does not hear her baby's first cry: 'que ça ne m'appartienne pas, ce moment-là, que les toubibs et les infirmières recueillent, eux, ce cri dont ils n'avaient que faire' (13). The medical staff are characterised as callous through their stealing this moment from her and yet being completely disinterested in it. For her, then, as the meat metaphors also suggest, the hospital is an uncaring and depersonalising space

which does not accord the importance to childbirth that she believes it deserves. Again, we observe some similarities with Leclerc's approaches to childbirth: Darrieussecq criticises the medical profession by targeting their devaluation of childbirth and also privileges the sensual aspects of giving birth. The representation of the caesarean is an approach to the medicalisation of the body that is not mentioned in second-wave feminist texts. Although 'Encore là' portrays caesareans as abject and horrifying, we can argue that this short story still celebrates the strength of the childbearing female body. This most strongly comes to the fore in the title 'Encore là', which conveys the narrator's resilience and recovery from the disconcerting and disempowering experience of the caesarean.

Disempowerment is also a central theme in Lauren's *autofictional* novel, *Philippe*. The narrator reflects back on her experience of childbirth whilst grieving the loss of her baby, Philippe, who died a few hours after his birth. Although *Philippe* is an example of the sustained condemnation of the medical profession since second-wave feminism, this criticism is inscribed in the new traumatic context of infant mortality. *Philippe* both denounces the hospital environment in which women give birth and sets out to prove the failings of a doctor, referred to as Dr L, who was in charge of Laurens' childbirth. Dr L is based on Dr Delinette who oversaw Laurens' stillbirth in real life. He is only referred to as Dr L from the second edition onwards because the real Dr Delinette took Laurens and her publishers to court in order that his full name did not appear in *Phillippe* (Ibrahim-Lamrous, 2005, 201). The narrator outlines that she is writing her testimony in order to build a case against Dr L: 'On écrit […] pour faire mourir les traîtres. On poursuit un rêve d'enfant: rendre justice' (80). The four chapters of the book 'Souffrir', 'Comprendre', 'Vivre' and 'Écrire' demarcate her stages of grief and personal transformation from sorrow into self-affirmation.

The representation of childbirth in *Philippe* is connoted with the taboo nature of infant mortality. Phillipe's impending death weaves itself through her traumatic description of her childbirth. In her analysis of *Philippe*, Gill Rye writes that infant mortality is 'taboo […] in a West which prides itself on the advanced medicalization – and safety – of childbirth' (2006, 101). Rye adds that the novel articulates 'what is otherwise virtually unsayable' (2006, 104). Thus, the autofictional form is a way in which Laurens can, through an imaginary narrator, find words for this taboo subject and articulate her anger. At the conclusion of the novel, the empowerment of the writing process is embodied in her statement, '[é]crire m'arme' (79). Writing helps her to attain a level

of clarity and to better process her grief: 'J'écris pour *voir*. Car la leçon des ténèbres, c'est la lumière' (80, italics in original). She represents her childbirth in great detail, not to create a language with which to celebrate it, as do Leclerc and Cardinal, but to explore it in a specific context. This context is one in which the medicalisation of childbirth does not provide the safety a woman would expect. Instead, this medical environment is responsible for 'une monstrueuse incompétence, une prétention sans autres bornes que la mort' (25).

The traumatic nature of the narrator's childbirth is evoked in the language and style of the passage in which she recounts her experience. This scene is written in the present tense, thereby giving the impression to the readers that they are there witnessing the birth take place. Before she rapidly recounts her labour, she underscores the mass panic that surrounded her childbirth: '[l]'affolement est évident et général' (52). The immediacy of the present tense coupled with a lengthy and largely asyndetic sentence imparts a breathless quality to the scene and emphasises its chaos and fast pace. The long sentence, which occupies eleven lines, recounts the very last moments of childbirth: 'je pousse de toutes mes forces, j'aspire de l'oxygène dans les pauses, je pousse jusqu'aux limites de mon souffle […] je sens glisser en moi, hors de moi, mon bébé, j'ai la sensation incroyablement précise des contours de son corps' (52–53). Theme and style combine to convey her feelings of asphyxiation. The fast pace of the birth scene comes to a halt with her opening her eyes and noticing that the baby has disappeared. She is left in 'un silence de plomb' (53). This deathly silence infiltrates the birth narrative with a sense of foreboding. The use of bathos emphasises the tragedy of her efforts, which result neither in a healthy baby nor the beginning of a journey into motherhood.

The representation of childbirth is not only shaped by grief and tragedy, but it is also permeated with violence. A few pages before the birth scene the narrator hints at what the reader is about to encounter: 'cet accouchement est devenu la guerre, avec sa violence, sa lâcheté, sa misère, et la mort au bout' (37). Indeed, she represents her labour as a battle between her and the medical professionals. This scene is devoid of their names as if to suggest that they have become a faceless enemy, attacking from all sides, and leaving her vulnerable and confused. An unidentified member of staff shouts at the obstetrician: '« Attention, vous allez lui casser l'épaule ! »' (52). The midwife's actions are also depicted as violent: 'La sage-femme appuie de tout son poids sur mon ventre par assauts répétés' (52). The word 'assaut' describes this medical

intervention as a violation of her body. This representation of childbirth is therefore nuanced by the incompetence and panic of the medical staff as well as the retrospective grief and trauma experienced by a mother faced with the death of her newborn.

The purpose of the novel as a witness statement that builds a case against Dr L becomes clear in the chapter titled 'Comprendre', which is the most substantial chapter of *Philippe*. In 'Comprendre' the narrator tries to fathom why Philippe died and if the doctors could have saved his life. This chapter includes multiple extracts from a specialist's report that points out the failures of Dr L, the midwife's notes, extracts from the autopsy, and an encyclopaedia entry on childbirth. The intertextuality of the novel turns it into a polyphonic text in which a variety of scientific discourses support the case the narrator is building against the doctor and imparts a sense of legitimacy and realism to this autofictional text. By juxtaposing the scientific discourses with her own voice, the narrator illustrates that blaming the doctor for the death of her baby is a rational decision based on evidence rather than an irrational response borne of grief. In addition, this intertextuality works to create a sense of 'incoherence and cacophony' (Stroia, 2019, 610). According to Adina Stroia in her analysis of *Phillippe's* articulation of trauma, these various narratives about the narrator's birth 'plait themselves together, not in a perfectly smooth, totalising narrative, but instead, through their juxtaposition, their interaction, and their tragic contradiction, they hint at the pain, the anger, and the sense of loss that exceed the unidimensionality of a single narrative' (2019, 601). These competing discourses illustrate the narrator's difficulty in staying in control of her own narrative of birth in the face of a medical profession which distorts the truth and does not put a woman's bodily experience at the centre of its practice.

However, she is able to stay grounded by doing her own research into childbirth which helps her to block out the competing narratives and demonstrate Dr L's culpability. Her multiple citations and personal reflections on these many texts are an expression of her intellect and in-depth knowledge about childbirth in response to Dr L who, shortly after the birth, patronises her by asking: 'qu'est-ce que vous en savez?' (63) to which she responds '[j]e le sais parce que j'étais là' (64). The narrator exposes the condescending nature of this question by juxtaposing it with her interior monologue in which she states, 'je comprends comment de telles choses arrivent. C'est l'histoire d'une femme qui, le jour le plus important de sa vie, fut changée en bûche' (64). We see similarities here with Leclerc's argument that the medical profession devalues childbirth

and, by not comprehending its importance, treats it as if it were an 'extraction dentaire' (1974, 93). *Philippe* reflects Leclerc's approach through the representation of Dr L's lack of compassion and his arrogant belief that he has a better understanding of the narrator's childbirth than she does herself.

Although *Philippe* and *Parole de femme* are both texts which criticise the indifference and the lack of compassion of the medical profession towards women who are giving birth, their solutions are completely different. As we have already seen in *Parole de femme*, Leclerc calls for women to shatter patriarchal discourse by reimaging childbirth with a 'parole de femme' that celebrates rather than denigrates it. However, *Philippe's* narrator argues that it is the medical professionals who should change their approach. She states that examining medical students on 'un texte de Proust' (78) would illustrate their capacities to become a successful doctor better than a maths test. Her solution is to teach literature and psychology to medical students so that future doctors can provide a more humane treatment for their patients by showing empathy and respect towards them. She writes:

> le langage des hommes et du monde leur sera plus utile que celui des chiffres […] La médecine, après tout, est une *science humaine :* une épreuve sélective par la littérature, la psychologie ou même, comme autrefois, la version grecque permettrait d'éliminer à la fois les « polars » et les brutes, ce qui serait déjà beaucoup. (78)

The narrator criticises the current education system for allowing people to gain degrees in medicine without testing their humanity. She expresses her anger and disgust at the medical profession as well as her desire for radical change. Her reference to 'les « polars »' sets up a binary image of doctors as criminals and women as victims. Her desire to eliminate 'les « polars »' underlines her wish that women in the future will not be treated by doctors in the same derogatory way as she was. The narrator emphasises the human aspect of medicine and illustrates that examining medical students on their mathematical abilities does not prepare them for a job in which human interaction is a fundamental element. The italicisation of '*science humain*e' underscores the fact that the narrator is proposing a compassionate alternative to the dehumanisation she experienced in the hospital environment.

Le Cimetière des poupées, by Mazarine Pingeot, and *Le Jugement de Léa,* by Laurence Tardieu, are also representative of the trend for contemporary female authors in France to explore childbirth within

violent, transgressive, and traumatic contexts. They are also, like *Philippe,* archetypal examples of the post-1990 trend of the testimonial novel in which the female narrator pleads her case. The thematic focus, however, is infanticide. Both novels are narrated in the first person by a fictional mother who kills, or who is suspected of killing, her child. Pingeot's novel is, however, inspired by the real-life triple infanticide committed by Véronique Courjault who confessed to these crimes in 2006 (Marder, 2012).

In *Le Jugement de Léa,* in which Léa is accused of pushing her four-year-old son down the stairs, her motives are unclear. The reader can infer that she finds motherhood extremely difficult since she is isolated, dependent on the finances from an ex-husband whom she hates, and struggles to care for the baby. Her description of the baby's cries paints them as piercing and agonising: '[c]es pleurs, jusque dans ma chair… On n'imagine pas jusqu'où peuvent aller les pleurs d'un bébé dans le corps d'une mère' (49). In *Le Cimetière des poupées,* the anonymous narrator addresses her confession to her husband and illustrates that his indifference towards her was partly responsible for her murdering their baby. She claims that he did not even notice she was pregnant: 'Te souvenais-tu seulement de mon corps, de mes seins, de mon ventre, pour ne pas voir la tumeur grossir, les tétons noircir, se gonfler? C'était mon défi que tu ne voies rien, je voulais seulement vérifier si j'existais encore' (94). Here, the narrator implies that she committed infanticide in order to restore the subjectivity which her husband's negligence eroded.

The theme of infanticide frames the representations of childbirth in both *Le Cimetière des poupées* and *Le Jugement de Léa*. The childbirths described by these two narrators are characterised as traumatic, both through their mental anguish and physical injuries. In both novels, violence manifests itself in the tearing of the body, pain, the loss of bodily liquids, and a desire for destruction. The reader experiences the violent imagery and heightened emotions of the murderous mothers on a visceral level, and therefore the reader can imagine being in the place of the mothers. Since these representations are inflected by the mothers' desire to murder their child, they are the antithesis of Leclerc's and Cardinal's sensorial celebrations of the female body during childbirth. These texts therefore provide a contrast to Leclerc's theory that childbirth is an innately happy event that women only experience as 'un bourbier de souffrances abjectes' because of 'la répression fasciste de l'homme' (1974, 86 and 107). It is not patriarchal discourse which produces the

abject depiction of childbirth in Pingeot and Tardieu's novels; it is the mother's abject desire for murder that renders childbirth abject.

Both texts investigate these infanticidal desires through an in-depth exploration of the protagonists' lives and psyches. This contextualisation marks a central point of divergence with second-wave feminist thought about the body. During the episodes in which they give birth, their potential for destruction lies beneath the surface. In *Le Jugement de Léa,* the narrator articulates her feelings of alienation from the baby and expresses a desire to dispose of it: '[j]e voulais qu'on me l'enlève. Qu'on me débarrasse de ce corps étranger' (58–59). Fear, restlessness, and a sense of helplessness predominate in the narrative. Léa mentions her 'envie de mourir' (84) because of the intense pain she feels and her dread of vaginal tearing: '[n]e pas se laisser déchiqueter, écarteler' (86). She feels '[u]ne peur primitive, animale' (85) which portrays this fear as instinctual and deeply engrained in the female psyche. Death seeps into the narrative in the anaphora on 'Je crève' in the sentences 'Je crève de soif. Je crève de trouille' (85). This emphasis on death imparts a foreboding tone to the passage. Childbirth is portrayed as unrelentingly weakening and damaging to her body and sense of self through the anaphora on 'je perds' – 'je perds mon corps, je perds mon sang, je perds mon eau' (85). The abject nature of her childbirth is evoked in these liquids that seep from her body. Towards the end of her labour she states, 'mon corps est en pièces, je vais mourir' (86). Her metaphorical loss of her body illustrates that, for Léa, childbirth is not reaffirmation of her corporeality but an alienation from her body. She becomes as alienated from her body as she is from the baby to whom she is giving birth.

In *Le Cimetière des poupées,* the violence and trauma of the childbirth scene are more explicitly linked to the narrator's murderous intentions. For her, childbirth is a 'misère physique' (97) and her body is a paradoxical 'meurtrier créateur' (139). This paradox portrays her as both the creator of life and the destroyer of it. She recounts her childbirth in answer to the question: 'Et les infanticides?' (97). Her response to this half-formed question contests the application of this label to her own subjective experience. She addresses the following to her husband:

> qu'est-ce que vous savez de la douleur de l'enfantement, quand les contractions t'empêchent de respirer mais que tu ne peux crier, sous peine d'attirer l'attention, et que tu es violette, cyanosée, que tes vaisseaux éclatent autour de tes yeux, sur ton front, que tes cheveux tombent, que le corps déchire ton vagin, que le sang mêle à d'autres liquides plus laiteux,

> visqueux […] Infanticide. Votre mot, clinique, juridique, il ne m'est rien, ne décrit aucune réalité que j'ai vécue. (97–98)

Her use of the second person to describe her childbirth invites the reader to imagine it as if they are experiencing it themselves, thereby encouraging us to empathise with her. This long asyndetic sentence heightens the traumatic nature of her childbirth through its fast pace that delineates her rapidly losing control of her body. This rapid rhythm conveys, on a stylistic level, the asphyxiating nature of her contractions. Her body is fragmented by it being reduced to its parts such as 'ton vagin', 'tes yeux', and 'ton front'. This fragmentation, in combination with her use of the second person, depersonalises her childbirth and implies a disconnection between her mind and body. Although reminiscent of Kristeva's *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, Pingeot's abject portrayal of childbirth is nuanced by the disturbing and violent intent of the infanticidal mother.

The abject, chaotic, and unseemly nature of the narrator's childbirth emerges both in the bursting of blood vessels and the mixture of blood and the other 'liquides plus laiteux' (97). Whether intentionally or not, the milky quality of the bodily liquids in *Le Cimetière des poupées* echoes Kristeva's reference to the skin on milk that she uses to explain abjection. This resonance with Kristeva's theory of abjection, alongside the depiction of the narrator's body in fragments, underscores that childbirth is above all a corporeal experience that is messy because it causes the body to leak and tear. One could argue that the depiction of tearing and bodily emissions in Tardieu's and Pingeot's novels serves to de-romanticise childbirth by representing its physical impact on the female body. Indeed, Tardieu and Pingeot are not alone in this approach.

Despentes' approach to childbirth, for example, parallels her approach to menstruation. As we have already observed in *Baise-Moi,* Despentes describes the materiality and smell of menstrual blood in her works. Childbirth takes centre stage in two of her short stories in *Mordre au travers*. In 'L'Ange est à ses côtés' she emphasises the abject nature of the odour and liquid which emanate from the body of a protagonist who is giving birth to an aborted foetus. The smell is 'une odeur de mort, pourriture moite intérieur d'elle' (88) and she is losing blood 'par litres' (88). Her body is depicted as dying and decaying. In 'A terme', the protagonist, who murders her baby as soon as he is born, tries to stop herself from crying because of the acute pain of childbirth: 'son ventre se déchire, elle se répand au sol, serre les dents, elle ne criera pas' (62). Hence, in contrast to second-wave feminism which has been criticised

for its idealism, these texts do not seek to idealise childbirth but instead to highlight the visceral, painful, and messy aspects of it.

We can argue that Pingeot's, Despentes', and Tarideu's texts are a violent rejection of the societal expectation for motherhood to occupy a central and defining role in a woman's life. The acts of infanticide committed by their narrators do not conform to the normative image of the mother as nurturer. Their violence spills over into the act of giving birth which is inflected by this brutality. In *Le Cimetière des poupées* the contrast between the normative nurturing image of the mother and the transgressive figure of the murderous mother is made explicit in the narrator's comparison between maternity and infanticide: 'ma maternité, ce mécanisme qui me rassurait en me certifiant que j'étais normale […]. Que je ne sois plus normale est un châtiment mérité' (122).

Natalie Edwards' analysis of infanticide in contemporary French women's writing sheds light on how francophone women writers, in France and beyond, have taken a distinctive turn since 1990:

> not only is [infanticide] 'unnatural' in the sense that the women are supposed to be givers of life and not takers of it, but it also represents female violence, which is profoundly disturbing to the patriarchal norm. It disrupts discourses both of maternity and of patriarchy. (2013, 118–19)

By continuing to challenge the central position that women are expected to accord to motherhood, contemporary women writers, such as Tardieu, Pingeot, and Despentes, have followed in the footsteps of the second-wave feminists. This protest, however, has transformed into a disruption of normative ideas of motherhood and patriarchal norms through violence, destruction, and the taboo. The violence of childbirth is not only apparent on a thematic level, it is also recurrent throughout these narratives by means of abject imagery, irregular rhythm, and stylistic devises such as anaphora.

Negotiating abjection, infertility and sexual desire: The menopause in contemporary women's writing in France

As the two previous sections illustrate, women writers have produced a rich corpus in which we can find various depictions of childbirth and menstruation. It would therefore not be unreasonable to expect that contemporary women writers from France would also follow in the footsteps of the second-wave feminists through their writing about

menopausal experience. However, this is not the case. There is a distinct silence around the subject. Even if characters of menopausal age are depicted, their menopausal experience is usually absent. Michèle Sarde's *Constance et la cinquantaine* (2003), which is the sole novel that is explored in this section, is unique because it takes the menopause as a central theme. It pays significant attention to this topic by not only describing the women's attitudes towards the menopause but also their ageing bodies and menopausal symptoms.

To ascertain why there may exist such a silence around the menopause, we can turn to anthropological and sociological literature about France. This literature tends to argue that the menopause is still very much considered as a taboo subject in France. According to the menopausal women interviewed by Daniel Delanoë in *Sexe, Croyances et Ménopause* (2007), the menopause remains a subject about which they feel uncomfortable speaking. They comment that it is the psychological aspects, rather than the physical aspects, that they most fear discussing. In *Psychologie du Vieillissement* (1993), Estelle Casellas argues, 'la ménopause est tabou, méconnue, empreinte de connotations péjoratives déterminants' (Casellas, 1993, 31). Thus, we can observe in these two studies that in France, women do not wish to, or feel unable to, speak about their menopausal experiences because society views the menopause as shameful. It is an experience which society only envisages in a negative manner. It is something which must remain unspoken and hidden.

In addition to investigating the taboo nature of the menopause within French society, studies from France link a woman's infertility with a lack of sexual attractiveness. This illustrates that, within sociological and anthropological literature at least, female authors have continued to make the same connections between the menopause, infertility, and sexual desire as are apparent in second-wave feminist texts. For example, Françoise Héritier, whose methodology involves consulting case studies and interviews with menopausal women and gynaecologists, links a loss of fertility with invisibility: 'pour les hommes, une femme ménopausée n'a généralement plus de valeur sur le plan de la séduction, car elle n'a plus ce pouvoir de faire des enfants. La ménopause met les femmes hors du désir et hors du regard' (2009, 102–03). Héritier continues to frame the menopause as a time of loss by referring to it as 'une perte irrémédiable' and stating that menopausal women lose 'une partie de leur identité et de leurs caractéristiques féminines' (2009, 103). Here, once again we can find a variety of pejorative language with which women's

menopausal experience is described as well as a discourse which insists that the menopause remains hidden.

As we have already seen in the work of Jane Ussher and Wendy Rogers, the medicalisation of the menopause is a preoccupation of contemporary Western anthropologists and sociologists who examine menopausal experience. This tendency is clearly visible in studies from France. According to Cécile Charlap, who both performed an in-depth analysis of the lexical field used in medical literature and conducted interviews with menopausal women, '[l]a question de la ménopause est, en effet, marquée par l'absence de l'élaboration hors du cadre médical' (2014, 60). Here, Charlap argues that for women living in France it is hard for them to describe menopausal experience without resorting to using medical discourse. Charlap writes that the medical profession characterises the menopause with a lexical field of 'déficience' and 'dégénérescence' (2014, 57) by highlighting certain aspects of the menopause, including dryness of the skin and the atrophy of tissues. She argues that this vocabulary of deficiency is internalised by menopausal women. The body of sociological literature which has been discussed in this section strongly informs the analysis of societal attitudes in *Constance et la cinquantaine*. As such, this section reflects on these ideas of the taboo, medicalisation, loss, infertility, sexual desire, and femininity which emerge in sociological studies from France and considers the extent to which they inform the experience of Sarde's characters.

Constance et la cinquantaine follows the lives of a fictional group of women and men who are between the ages of fifty and sixty. The main focus is on the five women of the group who refer to themselves as 'Les Félines': Constance, Julia, Alice, Soledad, and Caroline. The Félines met in France in 1968 and took part in feminist protests until the mid-1970s. The novel examines how they negotiate their longstanding feminist philosophies during the menopause. Constance and Julia live in the United States and Soledad has returned to her homeland of Chile. Soledad's fiftieth birthday party, which is the very first scene in the novel, provides the characters with the opportunity to discuss the menopause and their ageing bodies. Upon her return, Soledad finds a note from her husband that announces that he has left but this note provides no explanation. Throughout the rest of Sarde's story the characters speculate, both face to face and via email, on why he has disappeared. The Félines' perceptions of the menopause are expressed in these emails (which are presented on the page for the reader to see) and in their interior monologues. *Constance et la cinquantaine* alternates

between third-person narrative incorporating free indirect speech, and email correspondence in the first person. It touches on issues such as HRT, cancer, and the pressure exerted by the media for women to look young. Sarde's novel is highly intertextual and includes references to the works of feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Germaine Greer, and Erica Jong.

In *Constance et la cinquantaine* there are multiple depictions of the menopausal body. One of the key tendencies in the novel is to portray menopausal bodies as decaying and decomposing. Within the context of an email exchange in which the Félines discuss their menopausal symptoms and HRT, Caroline writes a long and detailed description of the menopausal body. Caroline references Germain Greer by referring to the menopause as 'la cinquième période climatique' (149) and therefore anchors her portrayal of the ageing body within a woman's menopausal years. She provides her own viewpoint on the menopause. Her main reason for doing so is to argue her case for plastic surgery, more so than showing solidarity with her menopausal friends. The long enumeration of specific body parts overwhelms the reader, and portrays a body which is failing in a multitude of ways:

> Nos cheveux s'assèchent, tout comme notre étui intime, […] nos dents s'abîment, notre peau devient flasque, nos lèvres s'amincissent, nos cheveux se raréfient, nos seins pendent, nos croupes bombées deviennent des sacs de son, nos bras sont flasques, nos genoux gonflés, nous avons du ventre et parfois des bouffées de chaleur. Quant à nos visages, ils ne valent pas mieux que nos corps, appelés à se rétrécir, se flétrir ou s'épaissir […] Poches sous les yeux, bourrelets, rides, sillons divers. (148)

Caroline's horror for the menopausal body emerges in her horrified tone and in the lexical field of deterioration and decay. The verbs 's'abiment', 's'amincissent', 'se raréfient', 'se rétrécir', and 'flétrir' which appear in quick succession build an image of the menopausal body as rapidly wasting away. The flabbiness and bloated state of the body are underscored through her use of 'flasque', 'gonflé', and 's'épaissir'. Her employment of the verb 's'assèchent' indicates that Caroline is playing into stereotypes of menopausal women as dry. The imagery is one of a body that has, through its shrinking and bloating, rapidly changed boundaries. Hence, Caroline's description is, through its focus on the ambiguous and changing boundaries of the menopausal body, reminiscent of Kristeva's theory of abjection. Caroline presents the reader with a menopausal body which 'ne respecte pas les limites'

(Kristeva, 1980, 12). Caroline draws on these abject images in order to persuade the others that surgical intervention is necessary before her body decomposes completely. We therefore see an image of the menopausal body that reflects Caroline's personal repulsion which she heightens for dramatic effect in order to argue her case for plastic surgery.

Alongside this lexical field of deterioration, *Constance et la cinquantaine* demonstrates a sense of degradation in the motif of the biological clock. This motif illustrates that the Félines are reflecting on the fact that the menopause marks the end of their fertile years. Alice, for whom pregnancy is the 'seul état qui lui ait jamais apporté la felicité' (46), is devastated at the thought of no longer being fertile: '[e]lle continuait à avoir ses règles assez régulièrement tous les mois. Pour combien de temps ? De toute façon, avec les traitements hormonaux qu'elle supportait mal, la fameuse horloge biologique se déréglait elle aussi' (46). The wordplay between 'règles' and 'déréglait' is a pun which demonstrates how Alice associates her lack of menses with her life winding down to a close. This wordplay adds a whimsical, yet depressing, tone to the passage. Alice frames her perception of pregnancy as the only way she can experience happiness, and therefore the wordplay serves to emphasise Alice's sadness that she is losing her fertility. Her mention of medical treatment and biology combined with an imagery of loss and degradation echoes the language used in sociological literature from France. The character of Alice is therefore representative of an internalised French societal attitude which paints the menopausal woman as deficient and in need of medical management (Charlap, 2014).

Alice is not the only character who experiences her loss of fertility as depressing. Constance, who has never become a mother and regrets having three abortions into which she was pressured by the fathers, attempts to kill herself when she finds out an ex-boyfriend is soon to become a father. It is apparent that she experiences the menopause as traumatic because it signals the end of her fertility and thus any chance of her becoming a mother. Her thoughts are relayed in free indirect speech: '« Nos ventres nous appartiennent », avait-elle clamé fièrement sur le pavé de Paris en compagnie de ses sœurs. Aujourd'hui, elle n'avait plus de ventre et plus de sœurs […] Elle s'était desséchée; elle avait pourri sur place. Alors, autant en finir' (258). Echoing Caroline's depiction of the menopausal body, Constance creates an imagery of decay and dryness. Her lost fertility is symbolised in the reference to her lost

'ventre'. The impression that her loss of fertility has engendered a loss of identification with her fellow women emerges in the juxtaposition: 'plus de ventre et plus de sœurs'. We can infer from this that Constance's suicidal feelings are based both on her sense of non-belonging and on her no longer being fertile. Her infertility leads her to perceive her body as drying up and rotting. We can see that Constance's childlessness inflects her menopausal experience because, now that motherhood is no longer possible, she regrets past abortions. Since her memories of abortion return to haunt her during her menopause, the depression she feels is very personal. This highly individual experience that is informed by Constance's own personal history reflects Dedieu's argument that '[l]e vécu subjectif de la ménopause varie certes selon les femmes et leur histoire personnelle' (2011, 121). The depiction of Caroline and Constance's happiness as being contingent on their fertility is reminiscent of Beauvoir's statement that once a woman loses her fertility she loses 'ses chances de bonheur' (1949, 399). *Constance et la cinquantaine*, therefore, portrays a contemporary France in which women's attitudes towards the menopause and fertility have not changed since the publication of *Le Deuxième Sexe*. However, by illustrating how their individual experiences of motherhood shape their perceptions of the menopause, the novel differentiates between Alice and Constance.

The biological clock motif reappears in Caroline's narrative. Again, the novel illustrates how the Félines' perceptions of the menopause are inflected by their taking part in the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Whilst awaiting her plastic surgery Caroline reflects on the shift in her feminist struggle from the early 60s, when she was part of a movement of women who were trying to gain equality through fighting for reproductive rights, to her present day struggle against ageing: 'à présent elles se replaçaient à nouveau en première ligne, affrontant leur longévité – elle aussi nouvelle – face à l'inévitable horloge biologique qui rétablissait à partir de cinquante ans l'inégalité avec les hommes' (165). Caroline exposes that women in France, such as the Félines, who have attained equality with men by winning rights to legal contraception and achieving a 'libération sexuelle' (165), suddenly witness the vanishing of this equality once they are no longer fertile. Subsequently, Caroline visualises menopausal women eating alone whilst their male counterparts start 'des deuxièmes ou des troisièmes familles' (165). The implication is that this lack of equality is based on a biological difference that, unlike the previous inequalities which they combatted

during their fertile years, cannot be defeated through feminist protest. Indeed, Constance seems to share Caroline's perspective by referring to the menopause as a 'désastre programmé' (23) which emphasises both the inevitable nature of the menopause and its catastrophic impact on women, an impact which is evident in her suicide attempt. All of these examples (from Alice, Caroline, and Constance) which reflect on fertility resonate with anthropologist Héritier's observation that women in France experience the menopause as 'une perte irrémédiable' (2009, 103). For the Félines, there is no way to overcome or challenge this strong sense of loss.

The interest in the medicalisation of the menopause which is apparent in sociological studies from France is also very clearly reflected in *Constance et la cinquantaine*. A great concern with female biology is manifested through the Félines' frequent use of medical discourse and references to doctors, menopausal symptoms, illness, and medical treatments. For example, Constance uses hyperbole to convey the horror of her hot flushes. She tells the other Félines: 'les abominables bouffées de chaleur. Celles qui vous donnaient l'impression de brûler toute vive ou de se noyer dans sa propre sueur' (23). The word 'abominable' combined with the imagery of burning and drowning portrays hot flushes as a waking nightmare. The nightmarish imagery of the menopause continues in the novel through its juxtaposition with other illnesses such as osteoporosis and cancer. Caroline, for example, writes in an email: 'nous sommes menacées d'ostéoporose et du cancer de nos organes les plus féminins : seins, utérus, ovaires, etc' (148). In this way, Caroline portrays the menopause as an attacking force which primarily targets organs that only women possess. In light of the fact that this statement is framed in an email in which Caroline is trying to demonstrate how plastic surgery will help her regain her lost femininity, we can argue that Caroline's reference to 'nos organes les plus féminins' is a metaphor for the loss of femininity which the characters feel once they begin the menopause. This is evident in Caroline's rhetorical question: 'Pourquoi cesserions-nous d'être des femmes parce que nous atteignons ce que Germaine Greer appelle « la cinquième période climatique » ?' (149).

The perception of the menopause as a disease is evident in Constance's stream of consciousness. Constance approaches Caroline's cancer scare as follows: 'rien ne pouvait arriver à la plus vivante, la plus vibrante d'entre elles. Ni la ménopause, ni la déprime, ni le cancer' (32). The juxtaposition of the menopause with cancer and depression reveals that Constance also considers the menopause as an illness. By equating

the menopause with cancer and depression, Constance characterises it as a serious condition which can have a dangerous psychological and physical impact on women. In a later passage, her perception of the menopause as an unnatural and violent condition emerges in her comparison between the menopause and operations which remove female organs: 'ménopause, hystérectomie, ablation d'un sein puis de l'autre. Leurs contemporaines s'en allaient par morceaux' (175). Once again, the menopause is characterised as attacking the integrity of the female body. This imagery of the menopause as tearing a woman's body apart piece by piece is evocative of Beauvoir's representation of the menopause as 'la définitive mutilation' (1949, 400). *Constance et la cinquantaine* frames this image of a mutilated menopausal body within a contemporary medical discourse. This framing suggests that the medical profession has cemented and promulgated this negative perception of the menopausal body that Beauvoir observed in the 1940s. Indeed, the strong influence of the medical profession on the characters' conceptualisation of the menopause is evident in the above examples which demonstrate that both Constance and Caroline view the menopause as an illness that requires treatment rather than a natural biological event. Their positioning the menopause as an illness resonates with Charlap's argument that in France, '[l]a question de la ménopause est, en effet, marquée par l'absence de l'élaboration hors du cadre médical' (2014, 60). Indeed, the Félines rarely discuss the menopause outside a medical framework.

The novel provides an explanation as to why the Félines consider the menopause as a disease by presenting Constance's experience of being prescribed HRT by a doctor. Constance recalls an episode eight years prior at a doctor's surgery when she assumed, since she had stopped menstruating, that she was pregnant. Her pride is wounded when a male doctor confirms avec 'une espèce de jubilation' (174) that she is not pregnant but unquestioningly menopausal. He subsequently states in an impersonal and clinical manner, 'nous avons affaire à un début de ménopause. Il faudra démarrer les hormones de remplacement' (174). Here, the doctor silences Constance because, rather than allowing her to discuss her options, he orders her to take HRT. The doctor does not use the second person to address her which gives the impression to the reader that he does not look on Constance as a person who has feelings and opinions but rather as an object which must be fixed. His use of 'faudra' positions HRT as a non-optional treatment. He is therefore subscribing to the view that the menopause is an illness to be treated rather than a

natural biological event in a woman's life. HRT is framed in this episode as a method of controlling the menopausal body, of rendering it into an image which is acceptable within society.

The extent to which the characters in *Constance et la cinquantaine* have been influenced by medical discourse is evident in Julia and Caroline's horror at the idea of unmedicated menopausal bodies. They both see HRT as necessary. Interestingly, they primarily view HRT as a treatment which prevents the visibility of ageing rather than one that manages menopausal symptoms. Julia states in an email that HRT gives women 'la peau plus fraîche' (142) so that they do not resemble 'des vieilles courbées sur leur fagot' (142). The archaic, but also amusing, imagery she creates of crooked old women with bundles of sticks suggests that Julia considers a life without HRT as a relic of the past and the unmedicated menopausal body as deficient and unattractive. The implication is that Julia takes HRT in order to preserve her youthful appearance. Caroline's response to Julia more explicitly links HRT to youthfulness.[1] Caroline proclaims: 'toutes les tumeurs plutôt que de renoncer à ce supplément de jeunesse procuré par lesdites hormones qui nous manquent ! Comme elle, je continuerai à me doper quoi qu'il arrive' (143). Caroline's perception of the female body as lacking in hormones demonstrates that she sees the menopausal body as deficient. Caroline's willingness to risk cancer from HRT treatment, despite the fact that she recently experienced a cancer scare, demonstrates her desperation to maintain her youthful appearance. The word 'doper' underscores Caroline's addiction to HRT. These two examples suggest that in the France portrayed in *Constance et la cinquataine* women feel a pressure to maintain an image of youthfulness which, at the menopause, becomes increasingly difficult and requires medical intervention, either through HRT or, in Caroline's case, plastic surgery. HRT renders the menopause invisible, because it maintains an image of pre-menopausal youthfulness which is acceptable within society. Julia's and Caroline's bodies can therefore remain of value through their sexual desirability.

Caroline's and Julia's compulsion to take HRT at all costs can be explained by the unrealistic standards of beauty that are perpetuated in the French media. Alice analyses the detrimental impact the media has on the self-perception of menopausal women:

1 The novel exaggerates this particular effect of HRT. However, HRT has been proven to enhance the appearance of skin. See Mark Lees (2013) *Skin Care: Beyond the Basics*, New York, Cengage Learning.

> Les magazines féminins et les médias avaient beau vous seriner avec des histoires de femmes de cinquante ans et plus qui en paraissaient trente et vivaient une éternelle jeunesse, la vérité vous assénait que tout changeait progressivement et irrévocablement et que les trente prochaines années ne représenteraient qu'une lente descente vers l'inéluctable decomposition. (44)

The comparison here between the women in the media who never lose their youthful appearance, and the reality that Alice portrays of menopausal women's decaying bodies, illustrates the unrealistic nature of the images with which menopausal women are bombarded. The bathos of Alice's long sentence that commences with the promise of an eternal youth and ends with an image of decomposition, highlights the gap between women's expectations for the appearance of their bodies once they begin the menopause (as based on media images of menopausal women) and the reality of the menopause when it begins. Her use of the terms 'seriner' and 'assénait' characterise the media's promulgation of unrealistic images of women in their fifties as a repeated attack on the mental health of menopausal women. When comparing Alice's analysis of the media with Julia and Caroline's reliance on HRT, we can observe that the novel presents the media as a factor which significantly inflects menopausal experience. It is represented as another force, alongside the medical profession, which controls and shapes menopausal women to an image which is deemed acceptable within the France that *Constance et la cinquantaine* fictionalises.

So far, this section has both determined that the Félines have a very negative attitude towards the menopause, as well as identified a variety of factors which explain why they envisage the menopause in such a manner. Another, perhaps more surprising, reason for the language of loss, dysfunction, and deterioration that the Félines employ to characterise their menopausal experience is their reading of feminist literature. Indeed, this lexical field is evident in the passages they quote to each other via email. They select these passages from the works of Beauvoir, Colette, Greer, and Erica Jong. The influence of these canonical texts on the Félines' perception of the menopause is also manifest in their use of language. For example, Caroline's reference to 'lesdites hormones qui nous manquent' (147) echoes a passage from Jong's *Fear of Fifty* (1994) which Julia quotes in a previous email: 'Qu'allons-nous devenir maintenant que nos hormones nous lâchent ?' (142). The notion of the menopausal body as lacking hormones paints it as deficient and decaying. We can therefore argue that the Félines' use of a lexical field

of deterioration which this section has so far linked to the influence of the medical profession and the media, may also be shaped by the Félines' reading of feminist literature.

A strong sense of irony emerges in the novel's revelation that feminist literature is in part responsible for the Féline's internalisation of a negative image of the menopause. One would assume that such works would provide a more positive perspective or a way to combat negative societal stereotypes about the menopause, rather than perpetuating negative patriarchal ideas about this period of a woman's life. As I have already discussed in the introduction to this book, the menopause is, in second-wave feminist works, largely represented as a traumatic and shameful experience. With this in mind, it is therefore unsurprising that Sarde's novel portrays these feminist works as having a negative impact on the Félines who consider them as providing guiding principles for their lives. Constance articulates her resentment towards Beauvoir for not providing a positive example which women of the Félines' generation can follow:

> Elle éprouva soudain comme une bouffée de ressentiment contre Beauvoir, sa littérature et son féminisme de femme soumise à la pensée d'un homme, tous ses paradoxes qui avaient fait basculer la vie de Constance et d'une génération de femmes. (31)

The word 'bouffée', which evokes Constance's hot flushes (bouffées de chaleur), connects her unhappy experience of the menopause with Beauvoir's approach to the topic. Constance expresses her anger at Beauvoir's inability to write a text that is not subject to patriarchal ideology and that would provide menopausal women with a feminist perspective which problematises, as well as negates, this ideology. She implies that the ambivalences in Beauvoir's work have left a profound negative legacy on women who cannot understand the constructed nature of the negative discourse that they have internalised. An example of such an artificial discourse is evident in the Félines' perceptions that their menopausal bodies are, by nature, deficient. As *Constance et la cinquantaine* illustrates, they have internalised this idea from medical discourse. Hence, this feminist literature, to which the Félines turn for guidance, has left them ill-equipped to reject the harmful discourse about the menopause which is promulgated within the cultural context in which they live. For this reason, the Félines are unable to apply their feminist ideas to a productive protest against the inequality they see between menopausal women and men of the same age.

The Félines' loss of fighting spirit is underscored by Soledad at the very outset of the novel, thereby setting the tone for the shifting feminist perspective of the characters. Soledad compares their meetings during their youth with their reunion at a party where they discuss both the menopausal symptoms from which they suffer and their ageing bodies. Soledad announces to the group: 'je suis tellement… tellement charmée de vous entendre comme autrefois… sauf qu'on ne parlait pas de rides, mais de patriarcat, d'aliénation et de répression' (11). The implication, here, is that a feminist discourse for menopausal women does not exist. It also suggests that the Félines lack the desire and energy to continue to fight the patriarchy. There are no models for them to follow nor a feminist language for them to emulate. Thus, it is a struggle for them to continue their feminist fight and now apply their feminist ideologies to shattering the patriarchal discourse, oppression, and alienation to which they are subject as menopausal women. Sarde's novel, then, both challenges the legacy of the second-wave feminists and calls for a new feminism, or further feminist writings, which would both challenge negative societal perceptions of the menopause and provide a positive model by which menopausal women could live.

However, there is also a strong sense of hope in the novel that menopausal women may find a language to challenge patriarchal attitudes towards them. The possibility of a new feminist approach to the menopause is implied in Constance's emphatic statement that she has given up HRT. Her statement acts as a call for menopausal women to join together to challenge the way in which the medical profession behaves towards them:

> Je m'efforce d'accepter la fuite sans retour de ce qui faisait de moi chimiquement une femme et viens d'arrêter définitivement mon traitement hormonal. Mais je me joindrai volontiers à une *class action,* une action collective en justice contre une médecine sexiste qui ne nous a fait miroiter une illusion que pour mieux nous infecter. (145)

For the first time in the novel, the menopause is positioned here as a natural biological event which is a constituent part of being a woman. Constance realises that the menopause is not a disease that needs to be treated and it is not the menopausal woman who needs to be controlled. Instead, it is the medical profession which must be regulated. The term 'infecter' is evocative of Kristeva's theory of abjection because the abject (in this case the menopausal body) is something which pollutes and must be contained. By reading Rogers' sociological findings on the

menopause, for which she uses Kristeva's theory as a framework, we can observe how Constance's thoughts resonate with Kristeva's theory. Rogers characterises HRT as a ritual and argues that society views the menopausal body as being polluted 'by a lack of menstruation rather than by its presence' (1997, 235). We can argue, therefore, that Constance reverses this paradigm by demonstrating that it is not menopausal women who pollute, but the medical profession which infects the minds of menopausal women. By refusing to continue her HRT, Constance is defying a societal ritual that is designed to fashion menopausal women into a socially acceptable image.

Constance et la cinquantaine also queers normative perceptions and discourses about menopausal women through an exploration of lesbian sexual desire. This may perhaps be a nod to Beauvoir's theory in *Le Deuxième Sexe* that the menopause is a period when '[l]es tendances homosexuelles – qui existent de manière larvée chez presque toutes les femmes – se déclarent' (1949, 403). Indeed, before the menopause Julia has a husband who she leaves for Deborah. Julia feels reborn because of this relationship which exists outside the heteronormative sexual order. Julia is, at the end of the novel, represented as the most content of all the Félines. *Constance et la cinquantaine* therefore gives the message to the reader that happiness may only be possible for women outside a heteronormative space. This is problematic because it offers no solution within the heteronormative space that most of the Félines occupy. In an email to the Félines, Julia describes her relationship with Deborah: 'Elle est en train de transformer ma vie et de me faire découvrir deux vérités existentielles et essentielles : l'amour n'a pas d'âge et il n'a pas de sexe' (191). Her newfound belief in the existence of love after the menopause challenges the idea that the menopause should mark the end of a woman's sexual desire. The implication here is that Julia previously believed that desire was no longer possible after the menopause, an idea which she may have formulated based on perceptions of menopausal women within the fictionalised France in which she lives. By exiting this heteronormative space, Julia is able to live a more fulfilled life in which she is less subject to harmful patriarchal perceptions of the menopausal body.

In their analysis of *Constance et la cinquantaine*, Susan Ireland and Patrice Proulx highlight the transformative power of Julia and Deborah's relationship. They write that this relationship 'offers a positive image of sexuality and aging […] This variant of the […] narrative, with its rejection of the heterosexual paradigm, thus emphasizes the need for a

revisioning of the manner in which society looks at the sexuality of the aging woman' (2016, 117–18). Ireland and Proulx's argument reveals that this relationship is one that challenges the negative discourse about the menopause which the novel positions as emanating from French culture and offers a new perspective on the sexual desire of menopausal women. The sexual desire of Julia and Deborah towards each other also provides a stark contrast with the approach to the menopause in second-wave feminist literature and anthropological literature. Julia and Deborah's sexual desire provides an alternative perspective both to Héritier's observation that '[la] ménopause met les femmes hors du désir' (2009, 102–03) and also to Cardinal's argument that '[l]a ménopause est une sorte de honte qui pèse sur elle, une honte telle qu'elle rend son désir indécent. La ménopause doit signifier la fin du désir' (1977, 43). The representation of Julia and Deborah's relationship subverts these two approaches by celebrating sexual desire after the menopause rather than treating it as something objectionable.

This section has illustrated that not only are the Félines' experiences of the menopause determined by sociocultural context, the medical profession, the media, and their reading of feminist literature, Sarde's novel also positions menopausal experience as a highly individualised phenomenon. Soledad, whose thoughts about the menopause are not presented in as much detail as the other Félines, is not portrayed as being affected to the same extent as the other Félines by the negative discourse about the menopause which is promulgated by the medical profession, media, and in feminist literature. Whilst the other characters share their feelings of horror towards the menopausal body and share stories of suffering from menopausal symptoms, Soledad is represented as being perplexed by their anxieties. The text implies that Soledad's indifference pertains to her Chilean origins: 'Elle-même se sentait très différente des autres Félines. Pour des raisons culturelles peut-être' (24). This distinction between Soledad and the other Félines positions menopausal experience as being determined by cultural context. It suggests that the primary reason why Julia, Constance, Caroline, and Alice view the menopause in such a negative light is due to their being born into a culture in which pejorative images and stereotypes about the menopause are perpetuated. Even though this dichotomy between Soledad and the others is made clear at the beginning of the novel, the rest of the narrative problematises this by highlighting the very individual nature of each character's experience.

Conclusion

As Chapter 2 has shown, some key resonances exist between contemporary women's writing from France and second-wave feminism in their approaches to menstruation, childbirth, and the menopause. These contemporary authors are certainly writing in the legacy of second-wave feminist work even if they take a more nuanced approach to the female fertility cycle which considers how women's experiences are influenced by a variety of cultural and personal factors. Kristeva's theory of abjection is particularly pertinent to some of the novels which have been analysed here. In *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M,* the menstruating body is also abject as evidenced by the doctor's disgust at the smell of Catherine's vagina. In *Baise-Moi,* Manu's menstrual blood, which she personally finds pleasurable, is perceived with disgust by her mother. We can observe the leaking and transforming bodies in *Constance et la cinquantaine* which are reminiscent of Kristeva's idea that female bodies are abject because they blur the boundaries between the inside and the outside. In 'Encore là', the protagonist's caesarean is a nightmarish experience which reminds us of the boundaries between the inside and outside of the body. However, this contemporary corpus of work differs from *Les Pouvoirs de l'horreur* in its challenge to a discourse that paints these bodies as abject as well as in its attributing the blame for such discourses to either the medical profession or the previous generation. These characters do not wish to internalise these negative societal discourses about their bodies so instead protest against them both corporeally (such as in Manu's bleeding on the floor) and linguistically (such as in Constance's call to action).

Leclerc and Cardinal's celebratory attitudes towards the female body are also echoed within some contemporary novels. For example, in 'Les mois, les heures et les minutes', childbirth is portrayed as an expression of female strength and resilience. In *Baise-Moi,* Manu celebrates the aesthetic beauty of her menstrual blood. However, for the vast majority of the protagonists whose bodily experiences have been explored here, celebrating their bodies would not allow them to overcome the oppression they face. The reasons behind this are due to the personal traumatic circumstances they have faced, which include sexual abuse in *J'avais douze ans…,* a stillbirth in *Philippe* and the memory of abortion in *Constance et la cinquantaine*. By juxtaposing the traumatic and tabooed contexts in which these characters navigate their bodily experience with *Parole de femme* and *Autrement dit,* we can see that

their linguistic solution to patriarchal oppression is too idealistic. First, the societal, economic, or familial oppression which they suffer must be tackled. Indeed, it is in re-inscribing the female body in new traumatic, tragic, taboo, and transgressive contexts that contemporary women's writing most differs from second-wave feminism.

CHAPTER THREE

Islam, politics, and education

Framing the female fertility cycle through an Algerian perspective

Introduction

In Chapter 2, it became evident that contemporary women's writing from France has been shaped by the legacy of the second-wave feminists. Yet, by inscribing the body within traumatic, taboo, and tragic contexts, contemporary writers have also pushed the boundaries of corporeal representation much further than their predecessors. Although some contemporary texts from France employ a language that celebrates the body in a manner which is reminiscent of a 'parole de femme', many contemporary novels insert the body into traumatic contexts, thereby demonstrating the idealism of Leclerc's linguistic solution to women's oppression. Chapter 3 travels across the Mediterranean in order to consider how the female fertility cycle is represented in women's writing from Algeria. Since the second-wave feminists were criticised for articulating essentialist theories of female oppression which were very much based on their specific European white perspectives, analysing a context outside Europe will more clearly illustrate the extent to which contemporary women writers frame the body within specific sociocultural contexts. Algeria is an Islamic country which suffered socioeconomic and political consequences as a result of French colonialism. Hence, there are a variety of social, economic, cultural, and political factors with which women have to contend that are strikingly different from those that exist in France.

The female body assumes just as much of a central role in contemporary women's writing from Algeria as it does in women's writing from France. In Algerian women's writing, we can find diverse aspects of female bodily experience including menstruation, childbirth, pregnancy,

miscarriage, abortion, and the menopause. Although Chapter 3 focuses on menstruation, childbirth, and the menopause, it also engages with other aspects of female bodily experience that intersect with, and inflect, these three specific elements of the female fertility cycle. The following sections analyse the work of four writers who have all written novels that explore female bodily experiences in Algeria. Malika Mokeddem (b.1949), Maïssa Bey (b.1950), Leïla Marouane (b.1960), and Nina Bouraoui (b.1967) have published over 60 works of fiction between them. Mokeddem, Bey, and Marouane were all born in Algeria before independence. In their novels, Bey and Mokeddem are able to draw on their experiences in school both during French colonialism and during Algeria's transition into independence. Leïla Marouane was born in Algeria just before independence, whereas Nina Bouraoui was born in France to an Algerian father and a French mother. In addition to occupying a principal place in women's writing from Algeria, all three aspects of the female fertility cycle have also been investigated within sociological and anthropological studies about the Maghreb. These studies inform and frame Chapter 3's analysis of the body in women's writing from Algeria.

Silence, impurity and rebellion: Menstruation in women's writing from Algeria

By examining sociological studies from North Africa, we can find various discourses of menstruation which influence how women perceive their menstruating bodies and which may be reflected in Algerian women's writing. Studies emanating from the Maghreb, of which there are many more than from France, tend to analyse the impact of Islamic beliefs on commonly held conceptions of menstruation in North Africa. These studies explore the Islamic belief that menstruation is impure and usually focus on the psychological aspect of a girl's very first menstrual bleed. Shame and trauma are two psychological responses which these studies associate with the girl's first menstrual bleed. Sociologist Fatima Mernissi outlines that menstruation has remained a contentious subject in the Arab world since the very beginning of Islam. Mernissi demonstrates the impact of such longstanding attitudes by stating that a 'negative response to women's menstruation remains deeply internalised in the collective psyche' (1991, 187). By interviewing 360 women (120 of whom were young adults) living in both urban and rural areas, Soumaya Naamane-Guessous

has researched women's attitudes towards menstruation in the Maghreb. Naamane-Guessous questions these women about their 'rapports avec leurs corps et les pratiques qui en découlent' (2000, 17). She argues that Islamic notions of menstrual blood as impure lead to women experiencing menstruation as shameful: '[i]mpure, sale, honteux, le sang des menstrues est chargé des préjugés qui peuvent annihiler l'individu-femme en période de menstruations' (Naamane-Guessous 2000, 22). The word 'annihiler' has very strong connotations of destruction, thereby emphasising that menstruation can be a traumatic physiological experience for women in the Maghreb. Her use of the term 'l'individu-femme' suggests that, in a North African context, women may feel very isolated during their menstrual bleed. One could infer from Naamane-Guessous' study that this sense of isolation is linked to the fact that women feel unable to openly discuss menstruation.

Studies about North Africa also have a tendency to associate menstruation with silence, taboo, and sex. Naamane-Guessous reveals that menstruation is a topic about which women in the Maghreb generally do not speak. For Naamane-Guessous, this silence explains why girls can feel traumatised by their first menstrual experience: '[a]ujourd'hui encore, les jeunes vivent les troubles de la puberté sans y avoir été préparés au préalable et sans possibilité de dialogue à ce sujet avec des adultes, pouvant les rassurer et les aider à traverser sereinement cette étape'. (2000, 14). Sociological research demonstrates that this silence exists because, within the cultural context in which they live, menstruation is associated with sex. Studies signal that there is a pressure for young women to remain virginal until marriage. Menarche marks a moment in which a girl could become pregnant and therefore transgress her society's moral codes in a manner which would be evident to all. In Isabelle Charpentier's study on virginity in Algeria, she notes:

> Malgré le silence qui entoure les questions sexuelles concrètes (par exemple l'apparition des premières règles) dans les transactions éducatives, l'obligation sociale de rester vierge est littéralement incorporée par les filles dès le plus jeune âge, conscientes de cristalliser l'honneur et la respectabilité de la lignée, tout en portant en elles la honte potentielle. (2012, 299)

Here, Charpentier draws attention to the fact that girls receive little, if any, education about menstruation because, in the Algerian psyche, menstruation is strongly connected to sex. The idea of the female body as shameful appears in Charpentier's study, thereby echoing many

sociological works about women's bodies in North Africa. According to such studies, the female body and shame are inseparable and therefore it is difficult for women to conceptualise their bodies outside this internalised discourse.

Khalida Messaoudi's analysis of menarche supports the view that there is a strong intertwining between the first menses and virginity in the Maghreb. She explains that menarche marks the moment when a girl is warned against engaging in sex outside marriage: '[e]n fait, jusqu'à la puberté, on insinue ; mais ce n'est que lors des premières règles qu'on te met en garde contre la grossesse illicite et la séduction. […] Et on te fait la liste de toutes les interdictions qui vont désormais peser sur toi' (Messaoudi, 1995, 49). Here, she demonstrates that a girl's first menses is a watershed moment in her life because she suddenly becomes subject to many restrictions and controls. In *Naissances et abandons en Algérie* (2001), Badra Moutassem-Mimouni also clearly encapsulates this cultural link between menstruation, sex, and the taboo by stating: '[l]es jeunes filles ne sont pas préparées, tout ce qui touche au sexe est tabou' (2001, 31). These various sociological studies corroborate the idea that North African society links menstruation with the taboo subject of sex, and therefore, by association, also silences menstruation. As a result of this silence, girls are not prepared for menarche.

In fact, the level of interest in menstruation within sociological and anthropological studies of the Maghreb is mirrored in the significant number of Algerian novels which broach this subject. With a glance at the number of novels which have been published by women writers since 1990, it is certainly evident that menstruation is not a taboo subject for contemporary Algerian writers, even if it remains so for the fictional women whom they depict. Indeed, the preoccupation with menstruation in Algerian literature is so pervasive that one can, perhaps unexpectedly, find a great number of novels by male authors, such as Rachid Boudjedra and Driss Chraïbi, which also approach this subject. Boudjedra's *La Répudiation* (1969) describes the narrator's dream about his mother's 'menstrues démentielles' (14) that overflow beside a sacrificed rabbit, thereby associating menstrual blood and sacrifice. In *La Pluie* (1987), he compares writing to menstruation. The female narrator of *Le Journal d'une femme insomniaque* (1989) considers menstruation as symbolic of the female condition. Finally, menstruation is represented as natural and purifying in *Hôtel Saint-Georges* (2011). Driss Chraïbi parodies the Islamic prohibition of sex during menstruation in *Le passé simple* (1954).

The vast majority of women's novels that portray menstruation within an Algerian sociocultural context focus either on the girl's very first menstrual bleed, or on her experiences of menstruation during early adolescence. *La Voyeuse interdite* (1991) by Bouraoui, *La Jeune Fille et la mère* (2005) by Marouane, and *Bleu blanc vert* (2006) by Bey all include references to menstrual blood, imagine menstrual experience from the point of view of an adolescent girl, and consider the perspectives of her mother or father. Bouraoui's *La Voyeuse interdite* explores the Islamic doctrine that menstrual blood is impure through the relationship between a father and his two daughters (Fikria and Zohra) who he has sequestered since puberty. This section analyses Bey's *Bleu blanc vert* and Marouane's *La Jeune Fille et la mère* together because of their many similarities. Both novels depict protagonists who have not been educated about menstruation prior to their first ever menstrual bleed. These two works of fiction also consider how the protagonists respond to finding blood in their underwear, and how their mothers react to this news. A notable exception to the focus on a girl's first menstrual bleed is Marouane's *La Fille de la Casbah* (1996). Hadda, the novel's protagonist, is forty years old and unmarried. The story is set during *la décennie noir* and bears witness to the rising fundamentalism in the country. In an episode in which Algerian police attempt to enforce the Islamic tradition of fasting during Ramadan, *La Fille de la Casbah* foregrounds the violence and the lack of privacy to which Algerian women are subject. The police interrogate women in restaurants as to whether or not they are menstruating. Other Algerian novels by women writers which make brief references to menstruation but are not discussed here include Marouane's *Ravisseur* (1998), Bey's *Cette Fille-là* (2001) and Leïla Hamoutène's *Sang et jasmin* (2000).

La Voyeuse interdite primarily frames its representation of menstruation through the relationship between Fikria, who is the first-person narrator of the novel, and her father whose extremist views significantly impact Fikria's attitude towards her menstruating body. The relationship is characterised by the father's physical violence, cruelty, misogyny (which he expresses through insults to Djamila, such as referring to her as a 'femelle au sexe pourri' (31)), and his extremist views on Islamic doctrine. Fikria highlights his extremist position by calling him a 'père dictateur' (12). The narrative implies that the father had started to identify as an Islamist shortly before Fikria's first menses by describing his adoption of a beard and 'une fine moustache' (31). As Valérie Orlando notes in her analysis of *La Voyeuse interdite*: 'Facial

hair (beards and moustaches) is synonymous with hard-line Islamic fundamentalism [...] Fikria's father's adoption of stringent religiosity coincides with her own launch into pubescent femininity' (2003, 128). One archaic Islamic practice which the father maintains is the sequestration of girls once they have their very first menstrual bleed. Fikria states, '[n]ous étions parmi des hommes fous séparés à jamais des femmes par la religion musulmane' (21). It is important to note here that the 'reintroduction' of practices such as sequestration by Islamic fundamentalists such as Fikria's father is not a pure application of doctrine in the Qur'an or Hadiths. Viewing the father's beliefs, and their influence on Fikria, solely through the lens of Islam would be reductive. We have to consider how politics and religion interweave to understand his behaviour.

Jane Hiddleston's observations, albeit being written as part of her analysis of Assia Djebar's representations of Algeria, can help us to understand how, in *La Voyeuse interdite,* the interweaving of politics and religion influences menstrual experience.

> Notions of Islamic 'tradition' are often constructed rather than lifted intact from the early sources. Conceptions of the position of women, for example, stem from a desire to define Algerian identity in contra-distinction to Western, neo-colonial influence rather than from careful readings of the Koran or Hadiths. The sequestration of women serves to define Islamic culture in Algeria as well as making a moral point. (2006, 123)

Indeed, the practice of sequestering pubescent girls is similarly framed in *La Voyeuse interdite* as being influenced by the intersection of Islam and politics. Fikria illustrates that her sequestration is typical of the zeitgeist of the 1970s in which rising Islamic fundamentalism started to erode women's rights and freedoms. She explains:

> Ils vivaient en l'an 1380 du calendrier hégirien, pour nous, c'était le tout début des années soixante-dix. Devant l'anachronisme grandissant de la vie de ces hommes, il fallut prendre une décision. Ferme et définitive. Dès la puberté, les femelles de la maison durent vivre cachées derrière les fenêtres d'un gynécée silencieux où le temps avait perdu sa raison d'être. (22)

Here, Fikria positions sequestration as an archaic practice that is being carried out by men, such as her father, who feel threatened by a modern world in which women are becoming increasingly present and influential in the public domain. Gender and Middle Eastern studies

specialist Zahia Smail Salhi examines this particular sociopolitical context in a chapter entitled 'Gender and Violence in Algeria: Women's Resistance against the Islamist Femicide' (2013). Salhi explains that during the 1970s 'women became a clear target for the Islamic fundamentalists, whose aim was to bully them out of the public sphere through intense harassment, verbal abuse and segregation' (2013, 167). The story of Fikria, who is prohibited from leaving the private space of her home and who has suffered verbal and physical abuse from her father, is therefore situated within a very specific temporal and sociopolitical context.

As well as being figuratively silenced by being deprived of the freedom to leave her home, and therefore not to be seen or heard in a public space, Fikria is also literally silenced. From the moment of Fikria's and Zohr's menarche, the father forbids them both from speaking: 'aucune parole, aucun regard ne trahit le silence un peu solennel imposé par l'homme de la maison' (23). Fikria's first menses marks the end of both her freedom of speech and movement. The father's suppression of female voices within Fikria's household is a metaphor for the desire of the fundamentalists to silence women within the public space. We can therefore argue that Fikria's story is an allegory of the diminishing freedoms and rights of women during the period to which Salhi's statement testifies. Fikria too is segregated, harassed, and deprived of her voice.

An examination of the sociopolitical context of the above extract from *La Voyeuse interdite* reveals a stark contrast between Bouraoui's novel and the 'universal' approach of the second-wave feminists. Bouraoui does not treat patriarchy as a reified universal atemporal source of oppression. Instead, she shows how patriarchal discourses and practices are very much shaped by contemporaneous sociocultural and political factors. However, if we explore the use of language in this extract, we can also find a resonance with Kristeva's theory of abjection. The language of animality to describe the pubescent girls who must be segregated from society because they menstruate is reminiscent of Kristeva's approach to the female body in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*. In this passage, Fikria refers to sequestered girls such as herself and her sister as 'les femelles' (22). She repeats this term across the narrative in phrases such as 'je suis un épouvantail articulé, une femelle au sexe pourri' (31), 'pénétraient l'entrecuisse de la femelle' (41) and 'la femelle amoureuse' (103). Earlier in the novel, she describes herself and Zohr as 'animaux cloîtrés' (12), thereby constructing an image of her and her sister as caged animals. These terms demonstrate that the abuse she has suffered at the

hands of her father has caused her to dissociate from her body and to no longer feel human.

In addition to this discourse of animality, Fikria characterises the female body using terms that evoke impurity and decay such as 'souillure' (28), 'pourri' (31) and 'pourriture' (27) which replicate her father's perception of menstrual blood (and the female body as a whole) as impure.[1] As illustrated by sociological studies on the Maghreb, in Islam, menstrual blood is equated with impurity. This is echoed in Fikria's description of her pubescent body: '[d]eux longues années au cours desquelles mon corps n'a pas arrêté de suinter de l'impureté' (31). The word 'suinter' creates an imagery of an insidious seepage which connotes abjection through its blurring of the boundaries between the inside and the outside of the body. Elsewhere, in a passage in which Fikria addresses young women directly, she argues that they are oppressed by so-called Islamic traditions, and urges women to challenge them: 'Adolescentes, vous vivez dans l'ombre d'une déclaration fatale, votre jeunesse est un long procès qui s'achèvera dans le sang, un duel entre la tradition et votre pureté. Pures trop impures!' (13). Fikria's representation of adolescents as impure animals that must be segregated from others echoes Kristeva's link between the animal and the abject in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*. Indeed, Kristeva's and Bouraoui's texts both use a lexical field of animality alongside one of impurity and seepage. In this way, both Kristeva and Bouraoui highlight that the female body is deemed by society as a threat.

The representation of the menstruating body as abject is, however, nuanced in *La Voyeuse interdite* by an increasingly volatile sociopolitical context and the father–daughter relationship. Since the beginning of the novel positions the narrative as Fikria's call to women who are similarly silenced to speak out and challenge the way in which they are treated, we can argue that Fikria does not use words such as 'pourriture' (27) and 'femelles' (22) to reflect her own perception of women and women's bodies. Due to Fikria's feminist intent, we can see that she is consciously aware that she has to some extent internalised these patriarchal terms and wants other women to challenge them and the shame these terms engender. Fikria appropriates this pejorative discourse from her father in order to inspire anger in the female compatriots to whom she addresses her discourse. In her exploration of nomadism in Bouraoui's oeuvre,

1 The father's attitude is a perversion of his faith and demonstrates his extremist attitude because Islam 'does not in any way perceive the whole body as "polluted"' (Mernissi, 1991, 187).

Katharine N. Harrington sheds light on Fikria's role as a 'spokesperson for those who cannot speak' (2013, 83), and argues that Fikria achieves an 'outsider perspective as she is able to expose the dangers and limitations of a society bound by a rigid set of rules' (2013, 80). Thus, by using such emotive and brutal language to describe female bodies, Fikria is using her privileged position as an outsider who has an excellent insight into the injustices of the society in which she lives in order to encourage other silenced women in Algeria to speak out against 'le cours de la tradition' and 'des torrents de règles' (14). Fikria's tone of defiance and challenge to a discourse which positions the female body as impure and animalistic provides a contrast to Kristeva's approach in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* which does not appear to challenge or disrupt this discourse of abjection.

In an analepsis, it becomes clear that the lexical field of impurity and animality employed by Fikria is a reflection of her father's hatred towards the female body which is inspired by his extremist viewpoint. Through her horror at the sight of her own menstrual blood, we can see that Fikria has internalised her father's disgust toward the menstruating body. His misogynistic insults combined with his physical violence render Fikria's experience of menstruation traumatic. Whilst narrating in the present tense that her father has not spoken to her for two years, Fikria has a flashback to the night when she lay in bed and started to menstruate. She recalls: 'Tout mon corps bavait. Un étranger me tailladait le sexe de l'intérieur, je me transformais en une monstrueuse insulte et priais Dieu de toutes mes forces pour qu'il arrêtât cet écoulement ignoble et ignominieux !' (32). In Fikria's imagery of a monstrous body from which an unstoppable stream of blood is oozing, we can, once again, find resonances with Kristeva's theory of abjection.[2] This parallel also emerges in Fikria's terms 'ignoble et ignominieux' which portray menstrual blood as shameful and repulsive. Fikria's sense of alienation from her body and lack of control emerge in a metaphor which likens her menstrual bleeding to a stranger who is violently slashing her insides. Here, the novel is playing with the horror genre by creating a scene comparable to Stephen King's *Carrie* (1974) in which a character is traumatised by the sudden appearance of menstrual blood and in which the amount of such blood is exaggerated for dramatic

2 Fikria recurrently characterises the female body as monstrous throughout the novel, for example, 'les corps aux forms monstrueuses de mes soeurs' (16) and her mother's 'cuisses monstrueuses' (37).

effect. By positioning menstruation as a violence enacted on Fikria's body and by playing with the horror genre, Bouraoui's novel emphasises the extent to which Fikria's menstrual experience is shaped by her father's verbal and physical abuse. Within an atmosphere of misogyny and violence, menstruation, as a sign of womanhood, becomes shameful and taboo.

Fikria's fears are realised when her father discovers her lying in bloodstained sheets. The father's verbal and physical response to the visibility of this blood, which demonstrates his association between menstruation and sex, confirms the taboo status of menstruation in his household. Indeed, this link between menstruation, sex, and taboo echoes the aforementioned sociological studies of Naamane-Guessous, Messaoudi, and Moutassem-Mimouni. Fikria recalls, '[i]l me roua des coups et dit: « Fille, foutre, femme, fornication, faiblesse, flétrissures, commencent par la même lettre »' (33). Her father's use of fricative alliteration exhibits his increasing anger at the sight of Fikria's menstrual blood and implies that he believes that these words are inherently linked to the female condition. For the father, the menstrual blood he sees in front of him is both a symbol of woman's inferiority (as evident in his use of the word 'faiblesse') and also the disruptive potential of her sexuality. It is evident in his characterisation of women as metaphorical stains ('flétrissures') and in his employment of the word 'fornication' that he perceives women as a danger to society because of their impurity and sexual nature. His verbal and physical abuse of Fikria signifies his violent rejection of the abject menstruating body. The connection made in the fricative alliteration between the impure female body and sexuality evokes the Islamic concept of *fitna* (disorder). According to sociologist Fatima Mernissi, 'the woman is *fitna,* the epitome of the uncontrollable, a living representative of the dangers of sexuality and its rampant disruptive potential' (2003, 44).

We can observe that the father not only responds to the dangers of Fikria's sexuality by beating her, but, as we have already seen, he also sequesters her until she is married. Sequestering her ensures that she will not become the subject of male sexual desire which, because she is not married, would be illicit in nature. By hiding Fikria from the male gaze and beating her into a submissive state, he is minimising the danger her sexuality poses to the Muslim community. For the father, menstruation is a reminder of the danger of female sexuality, and his punishing her for visibly bleeding reflects his desire to ensure her sexuality remains hidden from public view so that a husband can be found. The father's

decision to sequester Fikria, combined with Fikria's perception of her menstruating body as 'une monstrueuse insulte' (32) resonates strongly with Ussher's argument that in a religious context 'theological edicts and rituals serve to manage the monstrous feminine, muddying their malevolent intent through being positioned as unquestioned religious or "cultural practices"' (2006, 8). Fikria's monstrous body is regulated through the practice of sequestration and disciplined through a violence that the father justifies as a response to a sexually deviant body which must be suppressed. As we have already seen, by placing this practice of sequestration within a specific temporal and sociopolitical context, the novel problematises the 'unquestioned' nature of this practice.

Greene's analysis of menstruation is also highly relevant here because she argues that both broader factors and interpersonal relationships combine to shape menstrual experience: 'each person's attitudes and feelings will be shaped by her contact with her mother, sisters and other important women and men around her' (2014, 84). Indeed, as the above analysis has illustrated, the representation of menstruation in *La Voyeuse interdite* is shaped by Fikria's traumatic interactions with her father whose attitudes towards the female body reflect his radicalisation within a society in which women's freedoms are becoming increasingly threatened by Islamic fundamentalism. *La Voyeuse interdite* therefore is intersectional in its scope because it illustrates that women are subject to a network of factors which work together to oppress them. Bouraoui's approach to menstruation, therefore, contrasts with that of the second-wave feminists who do not reflect on how familial relationships and sociopolitical context may inflect menstrual experience.

Echoing the approach to menstruation in *La Voyeuse interdite*, *La Jeune Fille et la mère* and *Bleu blanc vert* also reveal how menstrual experience is profoundly shaped both by the parent–child relationship and sociocultural context. *La Jeune Fille et la mère* and *Bleu blanc vert* both feature protagonists who have not previously been educated about menstruation and who are, therefore, frightened at the sight of menstrual blood in their underwear. In *Bleu blanc vert*, Lilas recalls her first menses in a chapter in which she discusses the early days of Algerian independence. Her becoming a woman therefore parallels the birth of the new Algerian state. It also symbolises the hope that women will have a greater voice in postcolonial Algeria than they did under French rule. This chapter also describes the restrictions Lilas' mother imposes on her, such as her not being allowed to leave the apartment other than for attending school. Lilas recollects, '[l]e jour où j'ai eu mes règles,

j'ai eu très peur. Parce qu'elle ne m'avait rien expliqué. Quand j'ai vu le fond de ma culotte taché de sang, je suis sortie des toilettes et je l'ai dit à Maman' (57). Here, through the fragmented style of the narrative and the emphatic statement of fear, we can observe that, due to her being completely unaware about menstruation, Lilas experiences her first glimpse of her own menstrual blood as a traumatic event.

La Jeune Fille et la mère is narrated by Djamila as an adult who is looking back to her childhood and has now found freedom living in France. She is able to reflect back on her menstrual experiences with distance and insight and make connections between her bodily experience and the restrictive society, and household, in which she lived. Djamila's first menstrual bleed is described through analepsis during a scene in which she recounts the day when four elderly women, known as 'les marieuses' (93), appear at her house to convey the message that a man in the village would like to marry Djamila. In the analepsis, Djamila's fear becomes apparent through her desperation to hide her bloodied underwear from her mother and her belief that the blood is a form of supernatural punishment. Djamila explains: '[c]omme j'avais découvert la première tache de sang en faisant pipi, le matin, ne me doutant pas alors que j'intéresserais les anges, qu'un jour Bouzoul viendrait me trouver, je n'eus d'autre choix que de conclure à une visite malfaisante' (92). This long asyndetic sentence conveys Djamila's confusion and panic that leads her to the far-fetched conclusion that she is bleeding because she is being punished by evil spirits.

One can argue that the respective decisions made by Lilas' and Djamila's mothers not to educate their daughters may reflect a broader perception of menstruation as a taboo subject in the society in which the characters live. Indeed, these two fictional depictions of a girl's first menstrual bleed reflect a societal norm not to educate young girls about menstruation. This norm has been observed by sociologists such as Naamane-Guessous: '[a]ujourd'hui encore, les jeunes vivent les troubles de la puberté sans y avoir été préparés au préalable et sans possibilité de dialogue à ce sujet avec des adultes, pouvant les rassurer et les aider à traverser sereinement cette étape' (2000, 14). These novels make the same link as Naamane-Guessous between a girl's experience of her first menstrual bleed as traumatic and her not having received prior education about menstruation. Drawing on Naamane-Guessous' findings, we can argue that the two fictional mothers who have not prepared their daughters for their first menstrual bleed are subject to the silencing and prohibitions that surround menstruation within the broader society

in which they live. By creating both a fictionalised Algerian society in which menstruation is a taboo subject and characters whose experiences reflect the norm not to prepare girls for their first menstrual bleed, Bey and Marouane demonstrate the physiological impact this taboo can have on young girls and therefore the importance of educating them about menstruation. *Bleu blanc vert*, *La Jeune Fille et la mère,* and *La Voyeuse Interdite* resonate with Harrington's argument that 'des tabous très lourds' (1977, 37) impact women's experiences of menstruation. Cardinal's statement therefore has a cross-cultural resonance. Both Bey and Marouane break this silence by writing novels in which they find an explicit form of expression to characterise menstrual experience.

In addition to fear at the sight of blood in her underwear, Djamila also experiences feelings of guilt, humiliation, and shame. Her feelings of guilt are apparent in her frantic act of hiding her 'culottes sales' for fear her mother will discover she is bleeding. Djamila believes that if her mother were to find out she is bleeding she would have to endure 'un esclandre', 'des incriminations' and 'des humiliations' (92). Her employment of such heightened vocabulary characterises Djamila as a criminal who fears being caught and reveals that Djamila perceives the blood as a form of punishment for a transgression she has committed. Djamila's response to her menstrual blood is linked to sex through the *djinn*, Bouzoul. Bouzoul appears in various places in the novel when Djamila has transgressed the strict rules about female sexuality within the community in which she lives. When Djamila looks at her underwear she thinks to herself: 'un jour Bouzoul viendrait me trouver' (92). Siobhán McIlvanney examines the figure of Bouzoul in an analysis of Djamila's resistance and 'frustration to governing ideologies' (2013, 69). McIlvanney writes, '[Bouzoul] vindicates the narrator's sexual activity. When he first appears in her room the night following her father witnessing her "sexual transgressions", his presence encourages her to follow her desires and masturbate in order to achieve sexual satisfaction' (2013, 71). Nevertheless, we can also argue that Bouzoul is not purely a source of sexual liberation for Djamila and is, instead, a much more ambivalent figure. When Djamila has her first menses, Bouzoul is a spectre who haunts and taunts her. The ambivalent figure of Bouzoul becomes a symbol of Djamila's fear that her menstrual blood is a sign that her body is sexually transgressive and that she will be punished for this misdemeanour. Since Djamila thinks menstrual blood is symbolic of the sexual deviance of her body, her fear that Bouzoul will punish her signifies the consequences Djamila thinks she will face if her mother

finds her bloodied underwear. Thus, to a certain extent, Bouzoul symbolises Algerian society's policing of the female body and Djamila's fear of being caught transgressing her society's strict rules.

In order fully to comprehend why Djamila associates menstruation with sex and why her response to her first menstrual bleed is one of shame, guilt, fear, and anxiety, we must investigate how the mother–daughter relationship is inflected by broader societal expectations about female sexuality which the mother strives to uphold. It is clear that Djamila's guilty response to this blood is inflected by her mother's attitude towards sex because, from a young age, the mother has treated Djamila as if her body is sexually deviant and has engendered in Djamila a strong sense of guilt. Although she did not explain menstruation to Djamila before her first menses, the mother had, albeit somewhat euphemistically, educated Djamila about male sexual desire and the importance of her remaining virginal until marriage. Djamila recalls, 'sa peur du déshonneur était telle qu'elle me traitait parfois comme si j'avais été la fille de sa pire ennemie' (39). The mother frequently expresses her fear to Djamila that she will lose her virginity and tries to discipline her in a variety of ways. Djamila remembers her once uttering, 'tu la perds, et ton père nous jette dans le désert' (40). In addition, the mother has blamed Djamila, from the age of five, for arousing male sexual desire.[3] A long time before Djamila began puberty, the mother started frequently to inspect Djamila's hymen, thereby implying that she does not trust Djamila to remain virginal until marriage. Djamila describes her mother's humiliating practice of checking her hymen as follows: 'elle va m'étaler sur le sol, me dénuder, m'écarter les jambes, vérifier l'intégrité de mon « honneur »' (31). As the quotation marks suggest, the word 'honneur' is used by Damila's mother to euphemistically refer to Djamila's hymen, again suggesting that words associated with sex are taboo. This word also emphasises that the family's standing within the community is very much dependent on Djamila remaining a virgin and thus her body must be policed by her mother in order that it does not transgress her community's moral codes.

3 Djamila comments that by the age of five, when her cousin tried to get into her bed, her mother had already trained her to cry out if she felt that her virginity was at risk. Despite following her orders, the mother blames Djamila for the incident: 'ma mère parvint à me faire croire que cet épisode de mon cousin avait eu lieu par ma seule faute, et peu à peu, je finis par me sentir responsable de tout regard mâle posé sur moi' (43).

The regular checking of Djamila's virginity provides an explanation as to why Djamila feels alarmed and guilty when she realises that she is bleeding from her vagina. The mother's behaviour towards Djamila in *La Jeune Fille et la mère* resonates with the father's behaviour towards Fikria in *La Voyeuse interdite*. In both novels, the parent's methods of discipline pertain to the Islamic concept of *fitna* and are designed to ensure that the daughter remains virginal until marriage. In *La Jeune Fille et la mère,* the mother's violent attempts at controlling Djamila explain why she internalises her mother's fears about losing her virginity. They also explain why, when Djamila realises that she is bleeding from a sexual organ, she feels as if she deserves punishment. The mother's threats, checks, and accusations therefore intertwine to cause Djamila to feel guilty that her menstruating body is a sign of sexual transgression. Hence, *La Jeune Fille et la mère* demonstrates that menstrual experience can be shaped, not only by attitudes towards menstruation within a specific cultural context, but also by expectations that surround female sexuality. Again, as we have seen in the sociological literature, menstruation and sex cannot be disentangled.

In both *La Jeune Fille et la mère* and *Bleu blanc vert* the taboo nature of menstruation within the Algerian spaces they represent is once again evident in the mothers' responses to discovering their daughters have menstruated for the first time. Lilas recounts her first menses immediately after recalling a conversation in which her mother euphemistically tells her to be aware of the threat posed to her by male sexual desire: '[e]lle dit que je dois faire deux fois plus attention parce que je n'ai pas de père. Attention à quoi ? Elle répond : plus tard, tu comprendras' (57). Her first menstrual bleed is described in free indirect discourse:

> Il y avait mes frères. Maman m'a vite entraînée dans la chambre. Elle m'a dit que je ne devais pas *en* parler devant eux. C'est *des choses* qui ne regardent que les femmes. Et elle m'a annoncé que j'étais devenue une femme. Elle m'a donné une serviette hygiénique. En me demandant de ne pas la laisser traîner dans la salle de bains. Et de la laver toute seule. Avec du savon de Marseille. Et c'est tout. (57, my italics)

The mother's reference to menstruation as 'des choses' and 'en' implies that she considers menstruation to be a taboo subject, and therefore feels too ashamed, or uncomfortable, to address it directly. Her refusal to discuss the subject in front of Lilas' brothers reinforces the notion that menstruation is taboo. The fragmented style of the narrative here, which consists of short sentences that are presented as if they were a quick

'to do' list, sheds light on her mother's discomfort, and therefore her haste to end the conversation as soon as possible. This rushed style also exposes her perception of menstruation as an inconvenience that she must teach her daughter to tackle. Lilas' first menstrual bleed is viewed by her mother as an entrance into womanhood. Yet, rather than characterising this as something of note or worthy of celebration, she brushes over this fact as if it were a trivial matter. The flat tone of the 'c'est tout' reflects Lilas' disappointment at the lack of information her mother has imparted to her as well as the anti-climactic nature of her entrance into womanhood.

The fact that Marouane's and Bey's novels, which were published almost 30 years after *Autrement Dit,* also represent menstruation as a taboo subject demonstrates that the silence that surrounds menstrual experience is still a topic of interest and concern within women's writing in French. Even though both *Bleu blanc vert* and *Autrement Dit* portray menstruation as a taboo subject, the reasons for this silence are different. Leclerc and Cardinal theorise that menstruation is a taboo subject in France because menstrual blood is perceived as abject. In Bey's novel, the context is an Algerian Islamic society in which menstruation is closely associated with sex, which is in itself a taboo subject. The links made in *Bleu blanc vert* and *La Jeune Fille et la mère* between sex, menstruation, the taboo, and the lack of preparation girls receive before their first menses, reflects the findings of the North African sociological studies explored in the introduction to this section. Therefore, Moutassem-Mimouni's observation that '[l]es jeunes filles ne sont pas préparées, tout ce qui touche au sexe est tabou' (2001, 31) is highly pertinent to the fictionalised spaces of Marouane's and Bey's novels. Reading fiction and sociology together helps to unpack how Bey's and Marouane's novels demonstrate that their protagonists' experiences of menstruation are culturally influenced.

It is also important to note that in this passage about Lilas' first menses, there is a strong emphasis on hygiene. In Algerian novels, discourses of impurity and hygiene often go hand in hand, thereby reflecting the importance of hygiene within the Islamic faith.[4] According

4 For example, we can find a specific link between Islam and an anxiety about hygiene in Marouane's *La fille de la Casbah*. The protagonist relates the way in which she washes herself to the teachings in the Quran: 'Quand j'eus libéré mes entrailles, j'empoignai le broc d'eau de la main droite. De l'autre main, je me savonnai puis me rinçai, allant du vagin à l'anus puis de l'anus au vagin, comme

to Mernissi, educating children about hygiene is a key aspect of the Islamic faith. As Mernissi explains:

> Il est indéniable que l'Islam a une attitude plutôt angoissée envers la propreté corporelle, qui provoque chez un grand nombre une rigidité quasi névrotique. Les préliminaires de notre éducation religieuse débutent par cette attention portée au corps, à ses sécrétions, aux liquides, aux orifices que l'enfant doit apprendre à surveiller, à contrôler incessamment. (1987, 91)

One can see literary representations of this anxiety in both *La Voyeuse interdite* and *Bleu blanc vert*. When Lilas' mother announces that Lilas is a woman, she immediately gives her a menstrual pad and insists it is washed regularly and hidden from view. The mother is thereby linking womanhood, pollution, and the need to contain the menstruating body through rituals which promote hygiene. As for Fikria, one can interpret that her father's repetition that women are stained and impure has engendered in Fikria an obsession with hygiene: 'j'ai beau me laver, panser mes « plaies » cycliques et épiler les poils de mon intimité, je reste sale et indigne de sa parole' (31). The presence of quotation marks around 'plaies' demonstrates that she has learned this term from her father. Her reference to her menstrual blood as coming from a wound, taps into a popular discourse that characterises menstruation as an illness that needs to be treated, or an infection that must be cleaned. This term has been commonly used to characterise the bleeding vagina in anthropological literature and novels for decades.[5] Bey's and Bouraoui's texts similarly alert readers to the continuing dominance of a discourse of hygiene and how it influences menstrual experience. This discourse of hygiene perpetuates the idea that menstruation must always be concealed from view and absent from speech. Thus, we find in Algerian literature a strong resonance with Ussher's statement that '[d]epictions of menstrual blood are completely taboo; it remains the great unseen, the shame that must be hidden' (2006, 21).

le fait une musulmane pour se purifier. L'instant d'après, je me surpris en train de réciter la Fatiha, la Sourate qui ouvre le Coran' (130).

5 See Havelock Ellis's *A Study of British Genius* (1904) in which he describes women as 'periodically wounded' (1904, 284) and Penelope Shuttle and Peter Redgrove's psychoanalytic text on menstruation entitled *The Wise Wound* (1978). For literary references see, for example, Jeanne Hyvrard's novel *Mère la mort* (1976) in which she describes her vagina as 'ce sexe qui n'est plus qu'une plaie par où s'écoule la vie du monde' (139).

In *La Jeune Fille et la mère*, Djamila's mother takes the silencing to the extreme by forbidding Djamila from talking about menstruation to anyone at all. This silence is necessary so that the father does not find out Djamila has begun puberty. Against the mother's wishes, the father desires to marry off Djamila as soon as she enters puberty.[6] He asks the 'marieuses' to find a husband for Djamila. The meeting between Djamila, her mother, and the 'marieuses' is recounted in the same scene in which Djamila has a flashback to her first menstrual bleed.[7] The mother tries to hide the fact that Djamila is 'pubère depuis les lunes' (92) and declares emphatically that Djamila 'se mariera quand elle le voudra avec qui elle voudra' (91). For the same reason, two years before, she ordered Djamila to keep her first menses a secret. The language with which Djamila's mother expresses her demands that Djamila never reveals to anyone that she has menstruated characterises menstruation as if it were a conspiracy between the mother and daughter that must be kept secret: '[q]u'on ne le sache pas, qu'on ne le sache surtout pas' (93). The 'surtout' emphasises her mother's determination that this secret is never revealed as it could result in serious punishment. Once more, a few lines later, we find the notion that menstruating is transgressive and a punishable offence: Djamila states that as soon as her pubescent body adopts a more rounded feminine form, she will be sure to, in her words, inspire 'la hantise suprême de mon père' and will be forced to live 'clandestinement et sous son toit' (93) until a suitable husband can be found. This phrase refers to the risk of the father sequestering Djamila if he realises that she has begun puberty. 'Clandestinement' is a highly charged word that creates an image of Djamila as a rebel who would be imprisoned if her crime (menstruating) is brought to light.

The reasons why Djamila's first menstrual bleed is surrounded by silence differ, in part, from those outlined in second-wave feminist literature. We find in *La Jeune Fille et la mère* a much more nuanced perspective on silence. This silence is due to the familial and sociocultural context that frame Djamila's first menses. In addition to societal taboos around menstruation, the silence imposed on Djamila is also a form of protection against a cultural norm of marrying girls off at the age

6 This societal norm to marry women at the age of puberty is a common theme of Algerian women's writing. See, for example, *Cette fille-là* in which protagonist Malika describes Yamina's life, including a reference to marriage: 'Yamina est mariée tôt, à l'âge où sont mariées toutes les filles – dès la puberté' (73).

7 One of the 'marieuses' states to the mother: 'C'est son père qui le veut' (91).

of puberty. As such, *La Jeune Fille et la mère* clearly underscores the privileged European position of second-wave feminists by portraying a father who could deprive Djamila of her freedom to leave the house if he were to find out that she had menstruated for the first time. This phenomenon is, of course, not one with which the second-wave feminists had to contend and, therefore, their theories of menstruation do not incorporate such possibilities. They did not envisage that for women less privileged than them, breaking the silence that surrounds female bodily experience could, in fact, be dangerous. This attests to their lack of problematisation of silence and their ignorance of how it may sometimes be necessary.

It is important to point out that a specific historical event has influenced the language the mother employs to maintain Djamila's silence. The mother fought for Algeria during the Franco-Algerian war. This fact explains why she employs a language nuanced by her military experience: she refers to Djamila as her 'camarade' (169) and to Djamila's father as 'l'ennemi' (171).[8] Her expression 'qu'on ne le sache surtout pas' (93) reveals that she regards her daughter's menses as a military secret that binds the two comrades together against a common 'ennemi' (170) who, if he were to find out Djamila has menstruated, would sequester her and subsequently force her to marry. We can therefore observe that Djamila and the mother's silence is not passive but a form of resistance against a common enemy. By drawing on Brinda Mehta's analysis of Algerian literature, we can better contextualise Djamila and the mother's relationship. Albeit being oppressed by a network of factors, Mehta argues that Algerian female characters are not portrayed as silent victims: 'Algerian authors dispel monolithic representations of women as passive victims of colonial history or nationalist and religious ideology, even as they demonstrate how the masculinist ethics of war have ravaged the female body and women's history through violence, silencing and exclusion' (Mehta, 2014, 27). *La Jeune Fille et la mère* therefore echoes other feminist Algerian novels in which the female body is a site of resistance which, albeit being subject to violence and war, has remained strong and defiant. This representation of silence as

8 At the end of the novel, when the mother plans Djamila's escape from her father who is brutally punishing her for having been caught having sexual relations with a young man in a park, she calls upon her 'camarades de lutte', advises Djamila: 'arme-toi de patience', and asks her '[e]ntends-tu les tirs de mitraillette?' (170).

resistance both provides a stark contrast to the second-wave feminists' conceptualisation of silence as something oppressive and which should be broken and demonstrates a much more nuanced approach to silence and the female body.

It is within this silence that the mother hopes that Djamila can empower herself. Her primary motivation for commanding that Djamila remains silent is to ensure that Djamila will not be blocked from what she sees as her only escape from a life of inferiority: education.[9] The mother's belief that education will give Djamila freedom, and, in particular, the ability to choose a husband or whether to marry at all, is evident from the outset of the novel. Djamila recalls, 'ma mère avait tenu à ce que mon destin soit celui d'une femme libre. Elle me voulait instruite' (12). We learn from the beginning of the novel that Djamila's mother sees education as a way in which the daughter can avoid her fate of an abusive marriage in which she has no voice. She tells Djamila '[t]u ne prendras pas mon chemin' (12) and warns her against married life. For example, she asks her 'qu'est-ce qu'une femme mariée sinon un dépôt de spermatozoïdes? un nid à avortons?' (24). This rhetorical question reveals a political feminist consciousness that she wishes to pass onto Djamila in order that she reject the passive role into which women such as her mother have been forced. The mother's wish for her daughter to become a free woman is the defining characteristic of the relationship and, as we have already seen, profoundly influences the representation of menstruation in the novel.

For the mother, then, the significance of Djamila's first menstrual bleed is far greater than marking Djamila's entrance into puberty. In parallel to the mother in *Bleu blanc vert*, Djamila's mother considers this moment as the beginning of womanhood. In contrast to Lilas' mother, who seems more embarrassed than upset that her daughter has begun puberty, Djamila's mother's response is far more dramatic. Her utter horror is manifest in the language she uses when she finds her daughter's bloodied underwear. Djamila recounts: 'Mon Dieu, répétait-elle. Tu as à peine onze ans. Oh, mon Dieu, moi aussi, à ton âge… Oh, ma pauvre, tu as tout pris de moi, difforme avant l'heure…' (93). The mother's

9 Mokeddem's *Je dois tout à ton oubli* also explores the norm to marry girls at the age of puberty and how this can result in a girl missing out on schooling. The protagonist, Selma, is saved from this fate because her father dies: 'un tel malheur [a] apporté à Selma la certitude que plus personne ne pourrait tenter de l'arracher à ses études pour la marier' (120).

sense of dread and impending doom is conveyed on a stylistic and linguistic level. The two ellipses underscore Djamila's mother's struggle to articulate her horror at, and pity for, her daughter menstruating at such a young age. One can deduce that the parallel between the age at which mother and daughter begin menstruation causes the mother to panic that her daughter will befall the same fate. Her use of the term 'difforme' to characterise Djamila's newfound status as a menstruating woman has connotations of monstrosity, abnormality, and inferiority. Indeed, this attitude echoes the father's treatment of Djamila as inferior which begins at her birth because he is furious that she is not a boy. It is manifest that the mother perceives womanhood as something monstrous because her experiences of it include suffering multiple births, miscarriages, and physical abuse from her husband.

The word 'difforme' creates imagery of a body which troubles the clearly defined bodily parameters that are expected by society. This word is therefore reminiscent of Kristeva's theory of abjection. In contrast to Kristeva's approach to menstruation which characterises menstrual blood as abject, the mother's use of the term 'difforme' does not reflect a perception of menstruation itself as monstrous. For Djamila's mother, womanhood itself is monstrous because, for her, it is synonymous with suffering. Rather than positioning menstruation as abject, Marouane's novel emphasises the abject nature of Djamila's possible fate if her father were to find out she is menstruating: sequestration, forced marriage to a man similar to her father, and a withdrawal from her education. For the mother, Djamila's menstrual blood is a reminder of the inferior position women hold in the society in which she lives and the importance of changing this status quo for the next generation of women. Hence, menstruation is a platform through which Marouane's novel explores women's inferior status and voicelessness within the fictionalised Algerian society it represents, alongside the importance of educating women so that they can empower themselves.

Menstruation and education also intertwine in *Bleu blanc vert*. Lilas' search for answers about menstruation is framed within the increasing educational opportunities available to girls in Algeria. Again, we find a mother figure who is keen that her daughter takes advantage of the education she is able to access: 'La seule chose qui compte, dit ma mère, ce sont les études. Elle veut qu'on aille jusqu'au bout' (56). In contrast to the vast majority of women in her mother's generation, Lilas is able to read, and uses this skill to inform herself about menstruation. Lilas is more fortunate than is Djamila because she is able to alleviate her

anxiety about why she is bleeding by consulting her brother's medical textbook: 'quand j'ai eu mes règles, je suis allée voir dans un dictionnaire médical. En cachette, bien sûr' (58). By underlining that Lilas educates herself about menstruation in secret, *Bleu blanc vert* highlights the transgressive and radical nature of Lilas' act of reading. Once again, the taboo nature of menstruation is apparent. Hope that this silence will be broken takes the form of increasing literacy levels: because they can read, young girls such as Lilas can break the silence that surrounds menstruation by accessing information about it in books, which they can one day pass on to their own daughters. A key contextual difference emerges here between the privileged second-wave feminists, for whom literacy was the norm, and an Algerian fictionalised space in which literacy is quite a new tool with which women are starting to resist the silence that surrounds menstrual experience.

Finally, we find in Marouane's *La Fille de la Casbah* another representation of menstruation which is very much framed by the sociopolitical , historical, and religious context in which the novel is set. Echoing *La Voyeuse interdite,* the novel considers the impact of Islamic fundamentalism on female bodily experience. Hadda, the protagonist, comments on the strict enforcement of fasting during Ramadan. Although men are not allowed to eat or drink whatsoever, women are permitted to eat if they are menstruating as their impurity invalidates the fasting (Katz, 2013). She attends communist meetings in bars which close their doors and windows during Ramadan so that the customers are not targeted by the police. Hadda explains that the police, 'surprenant des « casseurs de jeûne », allait jusqu'à vérifier les arguments des filles qui prétendaient avoir leurs menstrues' (54). The police here are enacting a very invasive disciplining of the female body which emanates from an Islamic fundamentalist drive to tightly control the female body. The fact that police ask young women whether they are menstruating, shows that the taboos around menstruation only exist when it serves the patriarchy. These taboos are engendered by a patriarchal desire to control the female body. For the protagonists of *Bleu blanc vert, La Jeune Fille et la mère* and *La Voyeuse interdite* menstruation is a taboo subject because the patriarchal society in which they live links menstruation to sex and, in turn, the prohibition of sex outside marriage, whereas in *La fille de la Casbah* the police talk about menstruation and ask women to reveal their status as menstruators in order to ensure that they are abiding by Islamic moral codes. It is because of this strict policing of the female body which is enacted in the name of Islam that Hadda gives up her

faith: 'je ne retenais que le refus de croire en Dieu' (54). Thus, as we can observe when we read these four Algerian novels together, the taboo nature of menstruation in the fictionalised Algerian societies they depict is complex and volatile.

Community, expectation and refusal: Childbirth in Algerian women's writing

Although there do exist studies on childbirth in the Maghreb, this topic is much less of interest to sociologists than is menstruation. In the cross-cultural volume, *Temps et rites de passage : Naissance, enfance, culture et religion* (2011), we can find a study on childbirth within the Muslim communities of the Maghreb. Karim Hanouti bases his findings on ethnographic and psychological studies which have been undertaken in both Berber and Arab communities. In contrast to sociological studies on childbirth in France, he does not mention the medicalisation of childbirth, despite the fact that most women in the Maghreb give birth within a hospital environment.[10] His approach is representative of that taken in anthropological literature about childbirth in North Africa: he does not explore women's experiences of the act of birth itself, but focuses on cultural, societal, and religious expectations for women to become mothers. In addition, Hanouti explores the shame that surrounds infertility, and the preference of sons over daughters. Hanouti offers the following viewpoint of cultural expectations in the Maghreb: '[le] mariage et les enfants sont les deux événements indispensables à l'accomplissement de l'homme et de la femme' (2011, 139). By referring to a North African myth that angels 'crient de joie si c'est un garçon et se taisent si c'est une fille', Hanouti exemplifies the preference for boys in Algerian Muslim culture (2011, 141). Anthropologist Najib Djaziri supports this view in *Une naissance au Maghreb: essai d'anthropologie psychanalytique* (2006). He argues that this preference for sons over daughters has persisted into the modern age: '[c]e qui est premier, c'est le désir de l'enfant mâle. Et ça reste toujours une réalité – y compris dans les sphères touchées par la modernité' (2006, 36). By describing the tradition of women's celebration of the birth of sons (and not daughters) with

10 'Si la majorité des femmes accouchent à l'hôpital ou dans des cliniques, dans les régions rurales, la pratique de l'accouchement traditionnel existe encore' (Cheurf, 2007, 31).

'youyou' sounds, Hanouti emphasises how this preference for boys over girls manifests itself in tradition. The 'youyou' is a celebratory ululation that is traditionally performed by women in North Africa. Djaziri writes, '[s]i l'enfant est de sexe mâle, [les anges] remontent au ciel en poussant des *youyous* en signe de joie' (2006, 37). These studies thereby demonstrate that women's experiences of giving birth are influenced by societal discourses about motherhood and gender.

Indeed, in Algerian women's novels, representations of childbirth are often inseparable from those of motherhood. Algerian literature reflects a great variety of approaches to, and experiences of, motherhood. For example, some characters feel pressurised to accept the role of motherhood, as we can see in Bey's *Bleu blanc vert* in which Lilas has a daughter with her husband. Certain characters reject motherhood completely such as Hadda in *La fille de la Casbah*. This refusal of motherhood is also apparent in the works of Mokeddem, including Leïla in *Les Hommes qui marchent* (1990) and Malika in her autobiographical work, *Mes hommes* (2005). There are many narratives about characters who give birth multiple times, these including the unnamed protagonist of Bey's 'En ce dernier matin' and characters Yamina and Mounia in Mokeddem's *Les Hommes qui marchent*. In *Bleu blanc vert* contraception and abortion are presented as alternatives to childbirth whereas in *La fille de la Casbah* contraception is presented as a problematic solution to preventing pregnancy because women struggle to understand the complex instructions on how to use it. The theme of abortion is central to Mokeddem's *Je dois tout à ton oubli*, in which the women try, and fail, to abort a baby that is the product of incest.[11] Abortion is a prevalent topic in Algerian literature which has been largely ignored by literary critics and merits greater scrutiny. However, the scope of this study does not permit the topic the attention that it deserves.

The most striking tendency in Algerian women's writing, which sets it apart from second-wave feminist works, is the limited representation of the act of childbirth itself. Although childbirth is a topic which is frequently mentioned, it is primarily situated within a shared societal

11 See also abortion in Bey's *Au commencement était la mer* (1996) and in *Mes hommes*. In Mokeddem's novel, Malika, who is a medical student, accuses gynaecologists of financially profiting from women to whom they recommend the ineffective rhythm method and then charge for an abortion once they become pregnant.

belief that a woman's main roles are those of being a wife and mother. It is therefore important, when analysing the representation of childbirth in novels set in Algeria, to bear this societal emphasis on maternity and marriage in mind. Some characters, such as Lilas in *Bleu blanc vert,* feel under extreme pressure to give birth as soon as they are married. As soon as Lilas marries Ali, she suggests that her mother and mother-in-law are exerting pressure on her to have a baby: 'je n'ai même pas eu le courage d'en parler franchement avec ma mère ou avec Yemma. De leur dire que [...] nos choix et notre vie ne regardent que nous' (166). Lilas' fear to admit that she would like to delay motherhood implies the contentious nature of such a decision. Aïcha Benabed, in interviews with a cross-section of women in Algeria, witnesses this same pressure to become a mother: '[p]rocreation holds a foremost rank among the statutory values of the Algerian family. Delay in having a child quickly leads to tensions and conflicts in the couple's life and the life of the whole family' (2016, 55). We can observe this same pressure in Bey's *Cette Fille-là,* which is set in an asylum. Narrator and resident, Malika, records the stories of the other inhabitants such as M'barka. M'barka is ostracised from her village for being unable to produce children. Malika states: '[l]es femmes stériles sont maudites' (163). We can observe, therefore, that *Bleu blanc vert* and *Cette Fille-là* echo sociological studies by emphasising that bearing children is considered, within the Algerian family unit and wider community, as a woman's main purpose.

Bleu blanc vert develops this idea further by criticising a culture in which interfering in a woman's reproductive choices is the norm: 'tous se sentent concernés. Les parents, les voisines, et même les collègues. La vie de chacun est l'affaire de tous' (166). We can, by examining anthropological literature, find an explanation as to why Lilas' community, and also M'barka's, take an interest in their fertility. Karim Hanouti reveals that in the Maghreb, 'l'enfant n'appartient pas seulement à ses parents [...] Il appartient à une famille, un lignage, à un clan, à un groupe ethnique (berbérophone ou arabophone), à un pays et à la *umma*' (2011, 142). Hence, by reading these texts in parallel, we can observe that *Bleu blanc vert* and *Cette Fille-là* situate childbirth within a specifically Algerian and also Muslim context in which it is valorised as a contribution to the entire community. By switching from the first person 'je' to 'une femme' (166), Lilas is depicting her experiences as representative of other women in Algeria, and is therefore suggesting they are also subject to the same pressures.

In this same passage, Lilas uses her own personal experiences as a springboard to challenge the limitations she believes her community imposes on women by defining a woman's worth based on her ability to have children – and boys in particular. She expresses mournfully:

> Une femme ne peut avoir d'autre justification à sa présence sur terre que de donner naissance à des enfants. Et si possible en nombre suffisant pour ne plus avoir le loisir de penser à elle-même. À ses désirs. À ses aspirations. Ces mots eux-mêmes sont incongrus dans la bouche d'une femme. (166)

Lilas portrays her choice to delay motherhood as being in conflict with her society's core values, which she believes to impede the aspirations of women. She underscores that for many women, such as her patients, the societal expectation for married women to become mothers instils a profound fear in them. This pressure to bear sons resonates strongly with the aforementioned sociological studies from the Maghreb. Lilas observes that her patients feel: '[l]a terreur de ne pas pouvoir accéder au rang de « mère de fils » et d'en tirer les avantages très convoités du statut de future reine-mère' (129). Through the imagery of the 'reine-mère' Lilas presents childbirth, and giving birth to boys in particular, as an achievement which can provide women with power within their family and community. The archetype of the 'reine-mère' is prevalent in Algerian women's writing. For example, as we have already seen in *La Jeune Fille et la mère*, the respected elderly grandmothers are given the task of finding suitors for the young women in the village. Mokeddem's *Les Hommes qui marchent* tells the story of three generations of women who were all born during French colonialism. Grandmother Zohra is the archetypal 'reine-mère' who arranges the marriages in her family and is approached for advice by members of her community.

Lilas' criticism of patriarchal norms which are associated with childbirth takes a completely different form from that of Leclerc and Cardinal; it is not the act of giving birth that is devalued in Lilas' community, but a woman's aspirations and dreams which do not pertain to her becoming a mother, and a mother to sons in particular. As an ambitious woman who is prioritising her career in the medical profession over having a child, we can interpret Lilas' comments about women's aspirations as a criticism against a community which values her capacity to give birth above her working contribution to it. The Algerian society described in *Mes hommes* also defines women based on their ability to have children and, echoing Lilas' opinion, the protagonist believes

this is limiting to a woman's aspirations: 'C'est contre elles-mêmes que les femmes tournent leurs armes. Comme si elles ne s'étaient jamais remises du pouvoir d'enfanter. Elles m'ont enlevé à jamais le désir d'être mère' (12). Here, Malika underlines that it is women who perpetuate a patriarchal valorisation of motherhood and that this is against their own best interests. Hence, across both *Mes Hommes* and *Bleu blanc vert*, we find an echo with the second-wave feminists who, as Julie Rodgers articulates, challenged the position of motherhood 'at the core of womanhood' (Rodgers, 2016, 46).

A societal discourse which valorises women as the producers of men is featured in various other Algerian novels besides *Bleu blanc vert*. In Bey's 'En ce dernier matin', the dying protagonist reflects back on her life. The protagonist has achieved the famed status of a 'mère de fils' by giving birth to seven sons. She reflects, in indirect speech, on a life which for her has been defined by her role as a child-bearer: 'elle a reçu les hommages de ceux et celles qui venaient lui rendre visite chaque fois qu'elle donnait naissance à un petit d'homme. Sept jours de gloire. Sept fils et trois filles' (26). Her use of the archaic phrase 'petit d'homme' emphasises that her sons are valorised because they will maintain patriarchal traditions and values. Echoing *Bleu blanc vert,* 'En ce dernier matin' reveals a valorisation of childbirth in an Algerian context only when the woman gives birth to sons. The days in which she gave birth to the 'trois filles' are not referred to as 'jours de gloires'. It is, therefore, not her efforts or endurance during labour that her community valorises, but the product of this labour: the male child. In *Les Hommes qui marchent,* Leïla tells the story of her own birth. After Leïla was born, a French midwife breaks the mournful silence of the household by celebrating her birth with 'youyous', a sound which, as we have already identified in sociological literature, traditionally celebrates the birth of sons. This unconventional act is firmly rejected by the women in the room: 'Non. On ne s'égosillait pas en youyous pour la naissance d'une fille !' (72). The word 'non' is emphasised by the subsequent full stop, illustrating the women's profound horror that their societal tradition has been misappropriated by the French midwife.

'En ce dernier matin' also reflects another recurring theme in Algerian women's writing, which is to consider how giving birth many times impacts on a woman's body.[12] The prestige which others bestow upon

12 See, for example *Mes hommes*. During Malika's childhood, she befriends a doctor who allows her to observe patients in a hospital. She watches women giving

the elderly protagonist is contrasted with the shame she feels towards her body. From the age of 30 she avoids looking at her naked body 'pour ne pas avoir à regarder, à affronter la vision rebutante d'un ventre tellement plissé, froissé, des dépressions de chair flasque sous ses doigts. Et ses seins prématurément flétris, comme des outres vides' (28). This passage, through the dying protagonists' sense of disgust at the changing boundaries of a body that has become creased, sunken, and flabby because of childbirth, resonates with Kristeva's theory of abjection. The fragmented style portrays her despondency at the sight of a body which has been aged prematurely by a husband who she believes merely used her body rather than desired it. She articulates that her body was 'jamais désiré, seulement pris' (27). The simile which compares her sagging breasts to an empty goatskin bag evokes the milk with which she has fed her many children. This comparison to a farmyard animal portrays her as nothing more than a vessel for carrying and birthing offspring. She has evidently internalised negative stereotypes about the ageing female body because she perceives her body as undesirable. The withered appearance of her body mirrors her infertility, thereby demonstrating her internalised view that a woman's desirability is linked to her procreative ability.

Algerian women writers further develop the concept of the 'mère de fils' by illustrating that if married women do not achieve this status, they may face consequences. In *Les Hommes qui marchent,* Yamina gives birth to three daughters in a row. Zohra believes that if Yamina continues to give birth to girls, she risks repudiation or her husband taking a second wife: 'Si elle continuait, la répudiation risquait de lui prendre bientôt au nez. Le problème, c'est que renvoyer Yamina à Oujda ou l'affubler d'une *darra,* une deuxième épouse, aboutirait à une nouvelle brouille des deux clans familiaux' (79). Yamina's childbirth is framed, here, within the context of the relationship between two clans, thereby suggesting that her giving birth to sons is necessary to maintain harmony between the two tribes. The implication is that the community

birth and cursing with pain. She humorously responds: '[a]rrête tes jérémiades. Tu sais bien que dans quatre à cinq mois, ton zig va te shooter un nouveau ballon ! Et ni Mohammed ni Allah n'y pourront rien' (59). See also *La Jeune fille et la mère* in which multiple childbirth comes hand in hand with miscarriage. Djamila's mother is portrayed as suffering under the burden of 'une alternance de grossesses, fausses couches, des coïts forcé' (13). Miscarriage is of particular interest to Leïla Marouane who has also written on this subject in *Ravisseur* (1998) and *Le Châtiment des hypocrites* (2001).

blames Yamina, rather than her husband, since she will be replaced if their next child is a girl. References to polygamy and repudiation frame Yamina's childbirth within a specifically Algerian and Islamic context.[13] Sociologist Mounira Charrad discusses polygamy and repudiation in *States and Women's Rights: The Making of Postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco* (2001). Charrad acknowledges that since Algerian law is based on the Maliki school of Islamic thought, then marriage is more fragile in Algeria than it is in any other Islamic nation. Maliki jurisprudence only demands for a man to pronounce 'I repudiate thee' three times for a divorce to be effective. In addition, Charrad explains that if a woman 'fails to behave in accordance with her husband's wishes, she runs the risk of having to live in a polygamous household' (2001, 38). By reading *Les Hommes qui marchent* in conjunction with Charrad's work, we can see that experiences of childbirth can be intertwined with religious and cultural specificities. Since Islamic law leaves women in a vulnerable position, women such as Yamina and the patients to whom Lilas refers in *Bleu blanc vert*, associate childbirth with the fear of not being able to meet their community's normative patriarchal expectation for them to produce sons. Mokeddem's novel therefore highlights the fact that a woman's experience of childbirth may not only be shaped by her community's attitude towards the sex of her newborn baby, but also by religious laws. In Yamina's case, these are a palpable threat to her security.

Alongside revealing the influence of the family and the local community on a woman's experience of childbirth or choice to have children, Algerian novels such as *Les Hommes qui marchent, Bleu blanc vert,* and *Je dois tout à ton oubli* also portray childbirth as being of national importance and influenced by nationwide issues. In *Les Hommes qui marchent* Leïla, at first, expresses her disgust at the regularity with which her aunt, Mounia, and mother, Yamina, give birth. She refers to them with the synecdoche 'deux ventres candidats à la boursouflure' (253), which reduces them to vessels and suggests that Leïla perceives them as having little agency, and merely performing patriarchal expectations. In 1965, however, and from a place of greater maturity, Leïla reflects on the Algerian War of Independence and the

13 Repudiation is a recurrent theme across many Algerian novels, including Leïla Marouane's *Ravisseur* in which a husband repudiates his wife on suspicion that she is having an affair, and Bey's *Bleu blanc vert* in which a woman worries she will be repudiated if her husband were to find out she is menopausal.

resulting civil and political unrest. Through this new lens, Leïla problematises her earlier negative interpretation of Mounia's and Yamina's many childbirths. She repositions these births as acts of resistance, not only to French colonialism, but also to Algerian patriarchal society:

> La terre pouvait trembler, des pays entrer en guerre, des militaires fomenter des coups d'Etat… les deux femmes enfantaient. « Quelques ventres comme ça suffiraient à repeupler une contrée après un cataclysme », pensait parfois Leïla. Et dorénavant, elle regardait ces ventres avec tendresse car il lui semblait que, finalement, c'était là une superbe revanche sur une société qui les enterrait vivantes. Donner la vie sans relâche, porter au monde de nombreuses existences pour mettre en échec la vermine qui dévore leur quotidien (282).[14]

The ellipsis emphasises their heroic ability to remain undeterred and unshaken by any national crisis. We can infer that the 'cataclysme' (282) is the Algerian War of Independence, and the 'vermine' refers to members of a post-independence Algeria who continue to ensure women are not granted equal rights and freedoms. Leïla is not only suggesting that the many childbirths of Mounia and Yamina make a valuable contribution to the rebuilding of Algeria, but also that the children who they bear provide hope for a better future for the women of Algeria.

Indeed, Yamina's and Mounia's many childbirths reflect the population explosion in the early years of Algerian independence. According to Zahia Ouadah-Bedidi and Jacques Vallin's study of the birth rate in Algeria: 'au lendemain de la guerre de libération, la fécondité algérienne avait atteint un sommet, dépassant même 8 enfants par femme en 1966 […] Cela pouvait aisément s'expliquer compte tenu du rapprochement des familles après la guerre et de l'euphorie de la libération et du retour à la paix' (Ouadah-Bedidi and Vallin, 2012, 3). Although the national importance of childbirth is framed in Mokeddem's novel in an Algerian context, the perception of childbirth as a woman's contribution to nation building is one that has been shared across a variety of cultural contexts and epochs. For example, after the Second World War ended in France, Charles de Gaulle called on the women of France to help rebuild the nation by producing twelve million babies in ten years (Doron, 2016).

14 There is, in *La Jeune fille et la mère,* also evidence of the practice of burying baby girls. Djamila explains, 'je compris tout à coup pourquoi ma naissance, ainsi que celle de mes nombreuses sœurs, avait endeuillé mon père, et pourquoi, autrefois, en Arabie, on enterrait les petites filles, vivantes, à peine nées' (27).

Leïla illustrates that childbirth has an even greater significance than its contribution to the repopulation of Algeria after the war: for her, childbirth is a sign of female strength and survival instinct which not only defies war but also patriarchal oppression. Her use of hyperbole to describe Yamina's and Mounia's power to repopulate Algeria creates a dichotomy between life and death. This dichotomy contrasts their wombs that bring life into the world with a patriarchal society that precipitated death by burying baby girls. By positioning childbirth as both a contribution to rebuilding Algeria and to a feminist cause that fights against women's inferior position in society, Leïla is powerfully inverting the idea that giving birth multiple times is a sign of a woman's submission to patriarchal norms. Therefore, in a similar way to that found in the works of Leclerc and Cardinal, childbirth is reimagined outside the parameters of a normative patriarchal discourse. Instead of finding an alternative discourse for the act of childbirth, its purpose is repositioned as a challenge to patriarchal norms, rather than a submission to them.

Other novels, however, such as Bey's *Bleu blanc vert* and Mokeddem's *Je dois tout à ton oubli,* present this increase in the birth rate as highly problematic. In Mokeddem's novel the population explosion is depicted as having a harmful effect on the quality of life of those living in poor communities. Selma, who is the main character of the novel, looks back to the late 1960s and remembers the day when she surreptitiously witnessed her mother help her aunt Zahia to kill her baby. The women, who had already tried to abort the baby by giving Zahia 'infusions d'herbes et de racines' (60), claimed Zahia had suffered a miscarriage. The baby is evidence of Zahia and her brother-in-law breaking Islamic moral codes because 'having intercourse with [...] one's brother-in-law or sister-in-law is forbidden and considered incest (*zena*) in Islam' (Tremayne, 2009, 151). We can see once again that the representation of childbirth is inflected by Islamic doctrine because the definition of this relationship as incest, added to its adulterous nature, necessitates the family keeping this birth a secret. Since Selma's mother and aunt believe that this childbirth would cast shame on the family, it takes place behind closed doors and culminates with infanticide. Selma demonstrates that her family valorised their reputation in their community above the life of the baby: '[s]eules la honte et la menace du déshonneur ont présidé à la décision familiale d'un meurtre' (73). The birth is, therefore, also shaped by it taking place in the context of a community in which the idea of 'honour' is central.

In her analysis of *Je dois tout à ton oubli*, Jane Evans notes, '[s]eeing her own mother as a pawn caught in her country's misogyny helps Selma further understand the desperate measures to which Algerian women are driven in their struggle to survive' (2010, 85). Evans here underscores that the act of infanticide is, in the context of a patriarchal society in which women have no voice, one of self-preservation. Selma does not solely attribute the infanticide to 'her country's misogyny' (2010, 85); she nuances it by situating the infanticide in the moment of history in which it took place. In retrospect, Selma realises that this act of infanticide is indicative of a widespread issue in the poor Algerian communities in the years following independence: 'avec une population qui a plus que triplé depuis l'indépendance, l'exode rural massif, la paupérisation, le manque de logements qui fait s'entasser plusieurs générations d'une même famille dans des espaces exigus, l'Algérie doit battre tous les records en nombre d'incestes. Et d'infanticides' (66). Here, infanticide is framed as a widespread problem that was the consequence of a nationwide degradation in living conditions. Selma illustrates that childbirth in the early days of Algerian independence was shaped by poverty, poor living conditions, and a mass exodus into the cities. Hence, we can argue that *Je dois tout à ton oubli*, lies in stark contrast with second-wave feminist texts which have been criticised by critics for presenting a monolithic view. The novel demonstrates that women's experiences of childbirth are shaped both by the temporal and socioeconomic context in which women give birth. Mokeddem's work therefore provides a contrast to the purportedly 'universal' approach for which the second-wave feminists have been criticised. Instead, Mokeddem's narrative mirrors the views of critics, such as Moi and Collins, who argue that women's experiences of childbirth are shaped by social factors.

Bleu blanc vert depicts contraception as a powerful solution to this sharp increase in the population. More emphatically, Lilas celebrates contraception as a method of female empowerment. During this period Lilas is yet to be married and is working as a doctor. She is only permitted by national government policy to prescribe contraception to married women who must prove their marital status by showing her their 'livret de famille' (125). Lilas explains that government policy prevents her from encouraging married women to stop giving birth: '[d]ans le centre, le mot « limitation » est banni. Il n'est pas question, du moins officiellement, de demander aux femmes de s'arrêter de procréer. Ce serait contraire à la politique de natalité prônée par les autorités' (126). The word 'limitation' is a temporal anchor which links childbirth to politics.

Clinics, such as the one in which Lilas works, were first established in Algeria in 1967 in response to a call by the Union Nationale des Femmes Algériennes (UNFA) for the creation of family planning centres to tackle the population explosion. Bearing religious sensibilities in mind, the government declared a policy of '« espacement » des naissances et non « limitation »' (Ouadah-Bedidi and Vallin, 2012, 4). To contextualise this policy, it is important to note that contraception is not prohibited by Islam. In fact, in the late 1960s, the Islamic council encouraged the use of contraception to reduce the alarmingly high birth rate in Algeria. In her study of childbirth in Algeria, Badra Moutassem-Mimouni acknowledges: '[l]a contraception en islam n'est pas interdite […] En Algérie, dès avril 1968, le conseil islamique a prononcé des fatwas pour la contraception' (2001, 29–30).

Lilas demonstrates how the ease with which married women can access contraception has offered women the possibility of choosing when they want to have children:

> Beaucoup de femmes viennent ici parce qu'on leur a parlé de la pilule contraceptive, qu'elles appellent « cachet ». Un cachet miracle qu'elles se font prescrire très facilement par la gynécologue du service. Sur présentation, bien entendu, du livret de famille. Et le mari n'est pas toujours consulté, ni même informé de ce recours à la science pour espacer les grossesses et avoir ainsi un an ou deux de répit. (125–26)

Here, Lilas praises science as providing women with a tool with which they can take control of their bodies by giving birth when they choose. In addition, women are further empowered by not requiring the permission of their husband to access the pill. By referring to the pill as a 'cachet', Lilas' patients are underscoring its subversive potential by evoking its homonym 'cacher'. In this way, Lilas depicts this act as a silent and hidden revolution. She reinforces the idea that women want to avoid multiple childbirths by explaining that the contraceptive pill alleviates the anxiety of women as they wait for 'l'écoulement du sang libérateur' (126). Her depiction of menstrual blood as a liberation and the pill as providing 'un an ou deux de répit' (126) evokes the burden of multiple childbirth on the female body and the relief of being able to avoid it. Lilas has witnessed this burden on the body of her Aunt Zahia which has become 'précocement déformée par des grossesses tellement rapprochées qu'on finit par ne plus savoir si elle est enceinte ou non' (98). For Lilas, then, medical advancement provides an empowering method for women to reject normative expectations for them frequently

to give birth throughout their fertile years.[15] She presents contraception as a feminist choice which constitutes a defiance against a patriarchal society in which bearing many children is the norm. Therefore, *Bleu blanc vert* demonstrates that societal perceptions and experiences of childbirth are shaped by the intertwining of political discourse and medical advancement.

The availability of this emancipatory medical marvel is limited by the government which is conscious that offering contraception to unmarried women is in conflict with Islamic doctrine. It is these religious sensibilities that influence the requirement of the 'livret de famille'. As the previous section on menstruation illustrated, the prohibition of sex before marriage is a common theme which shapes female bodily experience in novels set in Algeria. According to Isabelle Charpentier, Algerian women writers such as Bey, Marouane, and Mokeddem 'rappellent que le tabou de la virginité s'inscrit au cœur du système de valeurs' (2012, 61). Lilas, however, acknowledges that some women are able to circumnavigate these rules. She celebrates the pill as having radically changed the lives of women, such as herself, who want to break the taboo of sex before marriage whilst avoiding the family conflict which a pregnancy outside marriage would cause. As a doctor, Lilas is easily able to access contraceptive pills and disregards government policy by secretly giving packets to her friends. Lilas observes that other unmarried women also defy Islamic taboos and state regulation by obtaining contraception from a friend 'qui vient de se marier et qui dispose chez elle d'un stock constamment renouvelé de plaquettes de pilules' (126).

Lilas describes women's flouting of the government's policy and rejection of their community's taboo on sex before marriage in a defiant tone: 'même si elles doivent ruser pour se procurer la précieuse ordonnance – ce qu'entre filles on appelle « le visa » […] plus rien n'est pareil' (126). Their referring to the pill as a 'visa' connotes it with the idea of freedom. The word visa also conveys a sense of evasion, in this case from the restrictive norms which govern female sexuality. Lilas,

15 Marouane's *La fille de la Casbah* presents an alternative view to contraception by depicting the difficulties many married women face when asking for the contraceptive pill at the clinic. They are portrayed as finding the doctor's questions about their sex life as 'trop humiliantes' (84) and those about their menstrual cycle as being 'trop compliquées' (84). Subsequently, some of these women return home and throw away their 'plaquette de pilules compromметante' (84) because they cannot understand the instructions.

who hides her packets of pills from her mother so that she does not find out about the sexual aspect of her relationship with Ali, takes herself as an example of how the pill has provided unmarried women with greater sexual freedom. Her tone expresses her delight in her being able to follow her sexual desire without the anxiety of pregnancy: 'je pense qu'elle tomberait de haut si elle savait que sa fille […] se vautre chaque fois qu'elle le peut dans les bras d'un jeune homme […] et surtout, qu'elle y prend plaisir !' (128).

Lilas, then, represents women's taking of the pill in Algeria as a powerful political and feminist act.[16] She reinforces the power of contraception to shape women's lives and experiences of childbirth by stating that the pill is 'la vraie révolution du XXe siècle, la seule révolution non violente' (162). This statement politicises contraception by representing it as the most powerful way in which women have been able to effect change in their lives. We can infer that the violent revolution to which she refers is the Algerian War of Independence, in which women fought but did not see the improvement in their rights that they expected would follow. Lilas demonstrates that it is a peaceful revolution, facilitated by science, which has shaped female bodily experience more profoundly than any previous war or political action. Through this emphatic statement Lilas is writing women into the revolutionary history of Algeria. We can, therefore, find a parallel between *Bleu blanc vert*, *Parole de femme,* and *Autrement dit,* because all three seek an alternative feminist discourse which challenges the dominant patriarchal discourse about the female body. However, the nature of their discourses varies. On the one hand, the second-wave feminists are targeting a patriarchal discourse which devalues the act of childbirth itself. On the other hand, Lilas is challenging the expectation for women to give birth many times and to prioritise motherhood above all else. As this section has demonstrated, Algerian women's writing depicts childbirth as something which is celebrated as making a contribution to perpetuating a patriarchal society that treats women as inferior. As a feminist challenge to this discourse, Lilas celebrates

16 On the other hand, she does not present abortion as such a powerful and feminist act. Her friend Naïma's abortion is positioned as a tragedy. Whilst Naïma was undergoing the procedure 'son ami s'est empressé d'aller oublier cet épisode dans d'autres bras (127). See also Bey's *Au commencent était la mer* (1996) in which Nadia's abortion is 'dicté par un instinct sauvage de conservation' (116). When her Islamist brother finds out she became pregnant outside marriage and aborted the baby, he stones her to death.

female sexual freedom. Lilas, therefore, is not seeking an alternative to a patriarchal discourse that devalues the act of giving birth, but is creating a discourse that valorises contraception as providing women with the power to gain control over their own bodies and destinies.

Silence, desire, and vitality: The menopause in Algerian women's writing

Sociological studies from the Maghreb have a tendency to portray the menopausal woman as someone who no longer feels or begets sexual desire. In a sociological study which is based on interviews conducted with a cross-section of women in the Maghreb, Soraya Naamane-Guessous reveals that, in the Maghreb, sexual desire is not deemed appropriate for menopausal women: 'se sentant désormais inutiles, vieilles, elles démissionnent de leur rôle d'épouse, fuyant leurs devoirs conjugaux. La morale dit que la femme ménopausée ne droit plus prétendre au plaisir, puisque sa sensualité est morte' (2000, 12). The image that Naamane-Guessous paints of menopausal woman in North Africa is a rather bleak one. She describes the menopausal woman as a wife who has reached old age, lost her sense of purpose, and is neither perceived as sexually desirable or desiring. We can find reference to similar negative societal perceptions of the menopause in Fatima Sadiqi's feminist anthropological work *Women, Gender and Language in Morocco,* in which she writes: '[m]enopause is perceived in this culture as "old age", "uselessness", "failure" and "the beginning of the end"' (2003, 82).

Both Sadiqi and Naamane-Guessous underscore that the menopause is a topic which is rarely ever discussed. Fatima Sadiqi argues, '[p]eople do not talk about the menopause because it is considered as a phase in the life of women which does not deserve to be mentioned' (2003, 82). She therefore attributes the lack of dialogue in North Africa to a cultural disinterest in the menopause. Naamane-Guessous questions why there exists a silence around the menopause, both within everyday conversation and within literature from the Arab world. She states, 'la littérature arabo-musulmane a complètement ignoré ce sujet […] curieux silence pour une littérature qui s'est intéressée au corps féminin de manière obsessionnelle' (Naamane-Guessous, 2000, 10). In contrast to Sadiqi, Naamane-Guessous attributes this silence to centuries of the menopause being deemed a taboo subject: 'Pendant de nombreux siècles, ce thème était complètement ignoré, tabou : d'une part, la ménopause arrive à un

âge où les femmes, ayant pris de l'âge, n'intéressent plus personne par leurs corps fanés, ayant dépassé les limites d'âge et de la beauté, de la jeunesse et de la séduction' (Naamane-Guessous, 2000, 8). Here, we return to the societal perception of the menopausal body as being old and therefore sexually undesirable. Naamane-Guessous theorises that the menopause is a topic which has, in North African culture, largely been ignored because the female body is only valorised if it is youthful. Hence, we can see across these two studies that the menopausal woman in the Maghreb is silenced by a discourse which paints her as old and undesirable. She is a marginalised figure who exists outside the sexual order.

Naamane-Guessous' statement about literature from the Arabic speaking world certainly applies to women's writing in Algeria: despite exhibiting a fascination with the female body, Algerian literature has certainly ignored the menopause. This becomes evident when contrasting the number of Algerian novels which represent the young fertile female body (through depictions of puberty, menstruation, and childbirth) and the ageing menopausal body. In fact, Maïssa Bey's two novels *Bleu blanc vert* and *Hizya* (2015), can be considered as exceptional in their representing the menopausal body, menopausal symptoms, and the characters' attitudes towards the menopause. Both of these novels are narrated by characters who are observing their mother's experiences of the menopause. In *Bleu blanc vert,* Lilas' mother is starting to experience menopausal symptoms during the period of Lilas' life when she has started to work as a doctor. Lilas also refers to the experiences of her mother's friend (hereafter referred to as 'the friend') who has not disclosed that she is menopausal to her husband. *Hizya* (2015) is set in a time contemporaneous to its publication date. It is narrated by the 23-year-old Hizya who, despite holding a degree in translation, works in a hair salon because there are few job prospects in Algeria.

To examine Lilas' description of her mother and her friend's menopausal experiences, we must return to the chapter of *Bleu blanc vert* in which we examined discourses of childbirth. Lilas frames her discussion of menopausal experience amongst stories about her female patients which include their unwanted pregnancies, abortions, and requests for contraception. Since the passage about the menopause is situated amongst stories about her patients, it is framed as a medical issue. Lilas comments on her mother's hot flushes: 'elle souffre seulement des premières manifestations de la ménopause, des bouffées de chaleur qui la laissent pantelante, anéanti' (129). Lilas' perception of the menopause as a primarily medical issue is evident in her focus on the

symptoms (the hot flushes) and their effect on her mother (breathlessness and exhaustion).[17] Her use of the words 'souffre' and 'anéanti' highlight that the menopause is an arduous moment in a woman's life and can be debilitating. Her reference to these symptoms as 'des premières manifestations' (129) suggests that worse is yet to come and is indicative of Lilas' foresight as a medical professional.

Through a closer examination of the friend's menopausal experience, *Bleu blanc vert* begins to investigate how menopausal experience is influenced by cultural context. In contrast to Lilas' mother who does not appear to be hiding the fact that she has begun to experience menopausal symptoms, the friend is fearful to admit to her husband or friends that she is menopausal. She makes an exception for Lilas' mother as a trusted friend. The friend's reasons for her silence are revealed by Lilas in free indirect speech: 'elle n'osait en parler avec personne, pas même à son mari, de peur d'être rejetée ou d'être considérée comme inapte. Inapte à la procréation, donc inapte comme épouse ou à donner plaisir au mari' (129). The breathless style here coupled with the repetition of the word 'inapte' emphasise the friend's sense of panic about being rejected by her husband who may no longer see her as sexually desirable because she can no longer procreate. The explanation provided here, as to why she has remained silent, mirrors recent anthropological and sociological literature on menopausal experience in the Maghreb. The term 'inapte' parallels the perceptions of the menopause as 'uselessness' and 'failure' that are outlined by Sadiqi (2003, 82). The friend's connection between the menopause and her no longer being considered as being able to fulfil her wifely duties echoes the following observation by Naamane-Guessous about menopausal women in the Maghreb: 'se sentant désormais inutiles, vieilles, elles démissionnent de leur rôle d'épouse, fuyant leurs devoirs conjugaux' (2000, 12).

We can, by observing these parallels between sociological literature and *Bleu blanc vert*, argue that the representation of the friend situates her anxiety within a specific sociocultural context. This is a sociocultural context in which menopausal women are perceived as 'inutiles' (Naamane-Guessous, 2000, 12) and as no longer being able to fulfil their wifely duties or sexually satisfy their husband. Despite

17 Hot flushes are also mentioned in Bey's novel *Hizya*. Hizya makes a comparison between her mother's hot flushes and her habit of raiding Hizya's bedroom: 'Ce ne sont en réalité rien d'autre que des accès de méfiance. Aussi imprévisibles que ses bouffées de chaleur' (44).

these specific cultural nuances, it cannot be denied that the link forged in *Bleu blanc vert* between the friend's infertility and her fear she will not be able to sexually satisfy her husband reflects a literary representation of one of the key tendencies in the second-wave feminist approach to the menopause. For example, Beauvoir writes, 'c'est encore jeune qu'elle perd l'attrait érotique et la fécondité d'où elle tirait, aux yeux de la société et à ses propres yeux, la justification de son existence et ses chances de bonheur' (1949, 399). We can, therefore, observe in the friend's anxiety in *Bleu blanc vert* a similar association with infertility and sexual desirability which Beauvoir theorised in 1949. This striking parallel between a novel published in 2006 and a feminist text published in 1949 suggests a continuity of approach as both Beauvoir and Bey represent the menopausal woman as being perceived as less sexually desirable because she is infertile. It also reveals that this perception of the menopausal woman as no longer being sexually desirable traverses cultural boundaries.

Indeed, Lilas paints the friend's anxiety about losing her husband as culturally inflected because she positions it as indicative of the difficulties faced by Algerian menopausal women. Lilas switches from indirect speech to her own internal monologue: 'inapte comme épouse ou à donner plaisir au mari. Des maris qui risquent alors d'aller chercher ailleurs' (129). By changing from the singular 'mari' to the plural 'maris', Lilas turns the friend's individual experience into a representative one. The anchoring of the friend's story within a specific sociocultural and religious context is evident in Lilas' allusion to the fragility of marriage in Algeria. Lilas is referring to the possibility of repudiation or polygamy, which are two concerns that are specific to women who live in Islamic countries. Fatima Mernissi links ageing and marriage in *Beyond the Veil: Male–Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (2003). She argues that the competitive nature of the marriage market translates into a huge disadvantage for women who have reached the age of the menopause because they live in a society wherein 'youth is avidly prized' (Mernissi, 2003, 63). The friend's fear of being abandoned is therefore legitimised by that fact that she can easily be replaced. Repudiation and polygamy are two factors that tie together the themes of childbirth and menopause.

In *Bleu blanc vert,* the friend's fear is framed by the temporal progression of the novel. *Bleu blanc vert* is divided into three sections entitled '1962–1972', '1972–1982', and '1982–1992'. The novel follows the development of women's rights and freedoms from the hopeful early

days of independence, when many women believed that they would be rewarded for their contribution to the Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962), through to the implementation of the Family Code in 1984,[18] until the *décennie noire* during which violence against women escalated.[19] The friend's anxiety is situated in the middle section which describes the build-up to the Family Code which reduced women's rights and freedoms. Lilas characterises this epoch as one during which women started to fear that their freedom and rights were being restricted. Indeed, the friend's fears are contextualised in the narrative with reference to fears experienced by many other Algerian women. Immediately after describing the friend's concern that she will be abandoned, Lilas enumerates the fears that she observes daily amongst her friends and patients. These fears include: 'La terreur d'être abandonné. La terreur de perdre sa virginité. La terreur de ne pas satisfaire les désires multiples de l'homme' (129). The first and the third 'terreur' in this list, as we have already seen, are reasons why the friend refuses to admit she is menopausal. An anaphora on 'la terreur' underscores the increasing climate of fear that Lilas observes. By juxtaposing the story of the menopausal friend with this list, the novel provides a contrast to Sadiqi's statement that 'the menopause […] is considered as a phase in the life of women which does not deserve to be mentioned' (2003, 82). Indeed, because it exemplifies the lack of voice many women have in Bey's fictionalised Algeria, the friend's menopausal experience is revelatory. By illustrating that the friend's anxieties about being rejected by her husband are shared by women of various ages, the novel demonstrates the significance and representative nature of her story.

We can, if we consider the Family Code and its representation in *Bleu blanc vert* more closely, again see the impact of politics and sociocultural context on menopausal experience. In 1984, women's fears were concretised with the enforcement of the Family Code which,

18 The Family Code was based on *Sharia* law. Nasser-Eddine Ghozali explains how the Family Code was designed to appease the Islamists: 'Le mouvement qui porte l'arabisation parvient le 22 mai 1984 à faire adopter par l'Assemblée nationale un code de la famille qui, par son contenu traditionaliste, relève l'alliance des « barbe-FLN » et du courant islamiste' (2001, 282).

19 Meredeth Turshen in her sociological study of the *décennie noire* gives the following examples of the violence with which women had to contend during this period: 'A 1994 *fatwa* legalized the killing of girls and women not wearing the *hijab* […] another *fatwa* legalised kidnapping and temporary marriage' (2002, 897–98).

as Nasser-Eddine Ghozali writes in *Où va l'Algérie?* (2001), reduced women to 'un statut de mineure' (2001, 37). The implementation of the Family Code is particularly relevant to the example of the friend since, as Zahia Smail Salhi indicates, the Family Code 'institutionalised polygamy and made it the right of men to take up to four wives (Article 8)' (2003, 30). Salhi also refers to repudiation: 'While a man needs only to desire a divorce to get one, it is made a most difficult, if not impossible, thing to be obtained by women' (2003, 30). In a subsequent chapter of *Bleu blanc vert*, the reader is provided with a glimpse of the future that may await the friend. This glimpse provides a rationalisation for the friend's anxiety that pertains to the law in Algeria. Ali, who works in the legal profession, witnesses the case of a woman who is repudiated by her husband. The woman is powerless to stop her husband from repudiating her because of Article 52 of the Family Code. Consequently, she has no choice but to live on the street with her children alongside many other 'mères répudiées qui dorment avec leur enfants sous les arcades du boulevard du front de mer' (209). Ali underscores the powerlessness of the woman and the futility of her case through the repetition: 'un procès qu'elle n'a pas gagné, qu'elle ne pouvait pas gagner' (209). If we compare the repudiated woman in court to the menopausal friend, we can observe that the menopausal friend's anxiety about being deserted by her husband relates to the specific legal, religious, and social context in which she lives. Bey's representation of the menopause therefore resonates with sociological and anthropological literatures, and in particular with Dedieu's argument that '[l]e vécu psychologique de la ménopause est indissociable au contexte socioculturel' (2011, 121). The friend's story plays a key role in the narrative progression of the novel because it adds to the image Bey is building of an epoch in which women witness their rights and freedoms slowly decline.

Not only does *Bleu blanc vert* emphasise the role of sociocultural and political context on menopausal experience, the comparison Lilas makes between her own mother and the friend is indicative of the role played by individual circumstances in defining a woman's experience of the menopause. Although, as we have already seen, Lilas portrays her mother's hot flushes as draining, her representation of her mother's menopausal body provides a distinct contrast both to these symptoms and to the representation of the fearful friend. Lilas describes her mother's body in a lyrical style that emphasises her vitality: 'je sais simplement qu'elle a un corps remarquablement conservé, qu'elle regorge de vie, d'amour, de tendresse' (129). If we consider Dedieu's argument

that '[l]e vécu subjectif de la ménopause varie certes selon les femmes et leur histoire personnelle' (2011, 121) we can understand why the representations of the menopausal mother and friend are so contrasting. Lilas' father was a 'martyr de la Révolution' (25). Thus, her mother does not share the same concerns with her friend about being rejected by her husband. As a widow, she already manages to provide for herself and her family. In an earlier chapter of the novel, Lilas' mother encapsulates the advantages of her position telling Lilas: 'sans homme, on est plus libre de rire. De parler' (55). The menopause is, therefore, a much less traumatic change for the mother than for the friend since she can discuss the menopause much more openly and does not fear abandonment.

Indeed, if we compare the mother to other characters in Algerian women's writing we can again see the impact of personal history on the representation of the menopausal body. The word 'remarquablement' implies that the mother is an exception, and that she is not representative of other menopausal women in Algeria. Lilas' mother, who has given birth three times, has not experienced the same bodily damage as the mothers who featured in the previous section of this chapter. For example, we can compare the body of Lilas' mother to the flabby and wrinkled body of the protagonist in 'En ce dernier matin' who has given birth ten times. In contrast to Lilas' mother's body which is 'remarquablement conservé' (129), the body of the protagonist in 'En ce dernier matin' is a 'vision rebutante' (28). The former body is one full of life and the other is an image of decay. We can therefore observe that *Bleu blanc vert* links menopausal experience to the societal expectation for women to have many children.

This celebration of the menopausal body in Algerian women's writing also provides a contrast to Leclerc's and Cardinal's approach to the menopause. The imagery of water overflowing evoked by the word 'regorger' in Lilas' description emphasises the mother's youthfulness and vitality. This depiction of the mother as full of life provides an alternative perspective on the menopause to that expressed in second-wave feminist texts and sociological and anthropological studies. The mother's body which is overflowing with love and life offers a completely contrasting viewpoint to Cardinal's characterisation of the menopause as a 'la fin du désir' (1977, 43) and the perception observed by Sadiqi in the Maghreb that the menopause signifies 'the beginning of the end' (2003, 82). The mother's body does not signify the end of life but the embodiment of it. This representation of the mother's body also contrasts with stereotypes that originate from the medical profession, for instance, the menopausal

woman as dry (Charlap, 2014). By means of these comparisons we can understand the unconventional nature of this positive depiction of a menopausal body. It is, of course, important to point out the role of perspective since the representation of the menopausal body is through the eyes of a loving daughter. The mother's mindset, into which the reader is not given any insight, may differ. Nonetheless, the innovative and perhaps subversive nature of this characterisation of the menopausal woman cannot be denied. The positive representation of the menopausal mother in *Bleu blanc vert* lies in stark contrast with sociological, anthropological, and much second-wave feminist thought.

In *Hizya,* published nine years later, Bey revisits the menopause through the perspective of a daughter, named Hizya, who looks upon her mother's body with admiration. As Siobhán McIlvanney has underlined, Bey's novel is intersectional in scope because it reflects 'the commonality of Algerian women's bodily experiences, even if the bodies portrayed in *Hizya* are striated in highly individualized ways, marked by class, age, sexuality, religious affiliation, and so forth' (2020, 71). *Hizya* is not only set apart from second-wave feminism and sociological studies in its intersectionality but also in its positive attitude towards the menopause. The reader is again presented with a positive vision of the menopausal body that, we could argue, diverges even further than *Bleu blanc vert* from the negative depictions of menopausal experience that we can find in second-wave feminist texts. Hizya introduces her mother to the reader by describing her character and appearance. In this passage, Hizya emphasises the beauty of her mother's menopausal body: 'depuis qu'elle approche de la ménopause (un mot qu'il ne faut surtout pas prononcer devant elle), elle a pris de l'ampleur. Elle s'épanouit. Tout en elle n'est plus que rondeurs, renflements, vallons et collines' (27). The mother's weight gain is positioned as a positive symptom of the menopause. The imagery of her mother blossoming and being compared with nature creates a vision of fertility. This image of the menopausal body as fertile and sensual lies at the complete opposite end of the spectrum to the picture of the menopause presented in studies on menopausal experience in the Maghreb. A body which is characterised as blossoming and is evocative of a fertile landscape completely contrasts with Naamane-Guessous' observation that, in North Africa, menopausal bodies are stereotypically perceived as 'fanés' (2000, 8). *Hizya* presents us with images of fertility and flourishing that diametrically oppose the imagery of withering away which is in anthropological studies of the Maghreb. *Hizya* therefore

poses a challenge to the societal perceptions of the menopausal body as withered, useless, old, or as lacking in sensuality. Similarly, *Hizya* discerns an alternative perspective on the menopause to that found in *Le Dexuième sexe* in which Beauvoir frames the menopausal body with a lexical field of decay and violence by using terminology such as 'mutilation' 'horreur du vieillissent' and 'dangereuse brutalité' (1949, 399–400). Comparing *Hizya* with second-wave feminist scholarship and anthropological studies on the menopause has, therefore, revealed the extent to which *Hizya* goes against the grain of the majority of existing scholarship.

Conclusion

As Chapter 3 has demonstrated, Algerian women's writing nuances its representation of the female fertility cycle by situating it within a specific temporal, cultural, political, economic, and social context. Often these factors overlap and represent a network of issues which can oppress women. In this way, Algerian women's writing most definitely takes an intersectional approach to the female body. These factors are often intertwined with patriarchal discourses, norms, and expectations. The patriarchal tradition of marrying young girls at puberty and a religious expectation that women remain virginal until marriage are two key factors which influence menstrual experience. Other cultural factors which influence female bodily experience include the expectation for women to become mothers, the glorification of giving birth to a son, and the consideration of one's child as a contribution to the community. In the novels which explore female bodily experience during the *décennie noire,* we see that women are silenced and disciplined by a patriarchal enforcement of a radical form of Islam. The Family Code, which restricts women's power over their own bodies, is a reification of some of these fundamentalist ideas. In addition, Algerian literature shows that individual history and circumstances are important factors in shaping female bodily experience. Hence, Algerian literature most definitely lies in stark contrast to the monolithic and universalising approach of the second-wave feminists. By juxtaposing Algerian literature and second-wave feminist texts, we can see that the latter represents a white privileged and idealised Eurocentric view of the body. In addition, echoing literature from France, Algerian literature inserts the female body into traumatic, taboo, and transgressive contexts. Although some

of the themes are the same, such as incest, abortion, and abuse, they are framed in Algerian literature within an Islamic patriarchal context.

Despite the stark differences with which the female body is contextualised in Algerian literature as compared with second-wave feminism, there are some resonances between these two literatures. Kristeva's theory of the abject is a useful lens through which to analyse the representation of menstruation in Algerian literature, even if this theory must be nuanced in order to capture the specific cultural and religious setting of Algeria. The most striking similarity, nevertheless, is a subversive spirit which is apparent in many Algerian novels by female authors. This is certainly the case of the menopausal characters in *Hizya* and *Bleu blanc vert* who are portrayed with an imagery which lies in stark opposition to the menopausal woman constructed by sociological and anthropological studies. Again, although this is highly contextualised within an Algerian space, contemporary women's writing from Algeria echoes the second-wave feminist aim of challenging societal discourses which position motherhood as woman's primary purpose. Finally, by covering subjects such as menstruation and the menopause which, according to sociological studies, are considered taboo within Algerian society, Algerian women writers break the silence around these topics and find the words to articulate these experiences from a feminist perspective.

CHAPTER FOUR

Multiculturalism and the legacy of colonialism

The female fertility cycle in Mauritian women's writing

Introduction

In Chapter 4, we move across the African continent to the Indian Ocean wherein we find the island of Mauritius. Mauritius represents a sociocultural context which differs significantly from Algeria. Though Algeria and Mauritius share a history of colonialism, their contemporary political, cultural, social, and linguistic landscapes vary significantly. In contrast to the heterogenous society of Algeria, Mauritius is a multilinguistic and multicultural nation in which we can find people with ancestry from India, China, mainland Africa, and Europe. In a Mauritian context, people who are black and of African descent are referred to as 'Creole', and therefore this book will use this term to refer to characters of colour. According to Thomas Eriksen's anthropological study of Mauritius, 'ethnicity is the most important criterion for ordering the social world' (1998, 122). Hence, when taking an intersectional approach to the body it is important to bear in mind how bodily experiences are influenced not only by the woman's ethnicity but also by her relationships with people from various ethnic backgrounds. The same is true of religion in Mauritius wherein Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam are practised. Chapter 4 builds on the previous arguments of *From Menstruation to the Menopause* by considering the extent to which Mauritian literature contrasts the monolithic approach of the second-wave feminists. It provides another non-European context though which the privileged white European perspective of the second-wave feminists can be problematised.

Chapter 4 focuses on the works of two prominent authors in Mauritius who place the female body at the very centre of their writing. The first is the Indo-Mauritian author Ananda Devi who was born in Trois Boutiques in Mauritius in 1957. Devi has written more than 20 novels, most of which were published by Gallimard. By their drawing on Mauritian Creole and Hindi expressions, Devi's novels pay testament to her multilingualism. She creates characters from both the Indo-Mauritian and Creole communities. However, she reflects significantly on her own ancestral heritage through her primarily exploring the bodily experiences of Indo-Mauritian Hindus. Shenaz Patel, whose novels are also multilingual and multicultural in scope, was born in 1966 in Beau Bassin-Rose Hill in Mauritius. Since the early twenty-first century she has published a variety of fiction including novels, graphic novels, short stories, and plays. Her heritage is mostly from South Asia, but she also has ancestral connections to Africa and East Asia, thereby embodying the multi-ethnic nature of Mauritian society. Chapter 4 therefore considers how Patel and Devi frame the female body within the multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multilingual context of Mauritius.

Impurity, superstition and ritual: Menstruation in Mauritian women's writing

In parallel to literature from Algeria, authors from Mauritius, whatever their gender, do not shy away from the topic of menstruation. This interest stretches back to the mid-twentieth century. The prolific and established author Marie-Thérèse Humbert, for example, writes in *À l'autre bout de moi* (1979) about menstruation in the context of an interpersonal relationship between two sisters. Nadège discovers that her underwear has a bloodstain on it and announces to Anne: 'C'est gênant. Si on n'a pas de coton, je vais être tout ensanglantée demain matin' (185). Anne, who has not yet reached menarche, is shocked at the prospect of menstruating and states: 'ça doit être horrible de vivre sa vie entière dans un continuel épanchement de sang!' (186). There also exists a smattering of male authors who write about menstruation in a Mauritian context. In Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio's *Le Chercheur d'or* (1985), a girl explains menstruation to her brother. In Loys Masson's *Les Noces de la vanille* (1962) a young girl tells her mother that she woke up to find menstrual blood. Her mother responds by declaring that she has reached menarche at a young age. In Alain Gordon-Gentil's *Le*

Voyage de Delcourt (2001), Delcourt is emotionally moved by his lover's menstrual blood.

In women's writing from Mauritius published since 1990, we can find a handful of novels that represent menstrual experience. The first novel which is explored in this section is *Paradis Blues* (2014) by Shenaz Patel. The text is in the form of a monologue performed by a Creole woman named Mylène.[1] Mylène has been interned in a mental asylum on the accusation that she cut off her dead mother's tongue. For Mylène, her mother's death empowers her to tell her own story. This story includes her memories of her first menses and her mother's superstitious attitude towards menstruation. Ananda Devi has written four novels that feature menstrual experience: *Rue la Poudrière* (1988), *L'Arbre fouet* (1997), *Pagli* (2001) and *Ève de ses décombres* (2006). *L'Arbre fouet* and *Pagli* both play with the idea that menstrual blood is impure. *L'Arbre fouet* depicts a ritual designed to celebrate the fact that Aeena (the novel's protagonist) has menstruated for the first time. This ritual is, however, interrupted by her cruel father who uses it as an opportunity to express his hatred towards his daughter. In *Pagli*, Devi tells the story of Daya who is forced to marry the cousin who raped her and whose strict in-laws, the *mofines,* try to control her behaviour. *Pagli* portrays Daya's first menses and subsequently weaves blood-related imagery and metaphors through the narrative. In *Ève de ses Décombres,* the impoverished protagonist, Ève, trades sexual favours for lessons from her schoolteacher. During one sexual encounter, his face becomes covered in her menstrual blood.

In *Paradis Blues* menstruation is primarily framed by ritual and superstition, thus illustrating that its representation of female bodily experience is nuanced by Creole traditions and beliefs. During her monologue, Mylène recounts her early menstrual experiences, which include her first menstrual bleed at the age of ten, a ritual celebration to mark this moment, and her mother's superstitions about menstrual blood. In order to shed light on how the novel frames these menstrual experiences, we shall first examine Patel's epilogue in which she elucidates the purpose and context of Mylène's monologue. Patel characterises the community in which Mylène lives as patriarchal and oppressive in nature:

1 The novel is adapted from a theatrical production based on the life of actress Miselaine Duval. Patel was approached by Algerian director Ahmed Madani to write a monologue for Duval to perform. It was first staged at the Centre Charles Baudelaire in Rosehill, Mauritius, in 2007 and subsequently in 2009 at the Festival des Francophonies in Limoges.

> les femmes, plus que tout autre être humain, sont, ici et ailleurs, souvent soumises à un poids qui les étouffe. Poids des traditions, des conventions. Poids de l'incompréhension d'un territoire intime qui sans doute effraie. Poids des superstitions qui fixent les interdits en usant de la peur. Poids d'un travail souvent subalterne, aliénant. Poids d'une subordination imposée par les hommes, certes. Mais aussi, beaucoup, par les femmes elles-mêmes. (60)

The anaphora on 'poids' emphasises that, within the fictionalised Mauritian context which Patel is portraying, the above factors (such as superstitions and patriarchal subjugation) permeate all aspects of a woman's life. Mylène's monologue serves as a resistance to these oppressive forces and the silence with which women are expected to accept these constraints.

In the epilogue, Patel reveals Mylène's wish to break the silence and challenge the normative beliefs of her community. She describes Mylène as 'un être humain qui cherche à s'affranchir' (60) and emphasises the transgressive power of her words: 'les mots, la parole, la parole prise pour se défaire de la gangue du silence ou des discours établis' (60). This approach mirrors that of the second-wave feminists who also sought to break the silence of an oppressive patriarchal discourse, albeit in a completely different cultural context wherein the term 'patriarchy' has a different significance. In Patel's text, 'patriarchy' is a concept which is applied to an impoverished Creole community in which women have little freedom and have few opportunities to escape except by marrying a white European man. Mylène's community collectively feels the weight of the slavery suffered by their ancestors. This legacy is evoked by the term 's'affranchir' because of its connotations of liberation and independence. In their article 'Literary Routes: Migration, Islands, and the Creative Economy', Françoise Lionnet and Emmanuel B. Jean-François argue that this legacy permeates *Paradis Blues*: 'Throughout the text, Patel's imagery and creative rhythm evoke the abject and lasting legacies of slavery' (2016, 1234). Lionnet and Jean-François focus on the Creole language, Mylène's relationship with her mother, and how the Creole population is silenced by its colonial past. *Paradis Blues* positions Mylène as a symbol of the colonial struggles of the island.[2] Lionnet and Jean-François do not, however,

2 In their analysis of the epilogue, Lionnet and Jean-François write: 'Patel stresses what we would like to call here the *islandness* of the main character as she reflects on the limits of *la langue* when it attempts to capture the singular

discuss how these factors inflect the novel's representation of the female body. Since female bodily experiences (such as miscarriage, pregnancy, childbirth, and sexual violence) dominate the narrative, this gap in their article merits attention.

Certainly, the term 'abject' is one which resonates with Mylène's flashback to her first menses. This analepsis evokes her fear and horror at the sight of her skirt becoming soaked with menstrual blood:

> J'ai dix ans et je sens cette chose me couler entre les cuisses. L'instant d'après, ma jupe est toute rouge. Rouge comme l'enfer. Je cours voir maman. Maman ! Maman ! Elle lève les bras au ciel. Elle me dit ma pauvre fille. L'instant d'après, on me met une robe propre avec deux grandes poches, et tous ceux qui viennent à la maison me glissent un billet dans les poches. (30)

Mylène's alarm is conveyed in her repeated calls to her mother. Her fear is emphasised through the staccato rhythm of the short sentences which incorporate words with no more than two syllables. The 'creative rhythm' (Lionnet and Jean-François, 2016, 1234) of this passage does not evoke slavery, as argued by Lionnet and Jean-François, but reveals a different form of trauma. This trauma pertains to the silence that surrounds the female body within the contemporary cultural context Mylène criticises. The combination of the panicked tone and her euphemistic reference to her menstrual blood as 'cette chose' suggest that Mylène does not understand why she is bleeding. It is evident that her mother has not prepared her for this moment, nor does she appear to offer any explanation once she sees Mylène's blood-soaked skirt. Thus, we see once again the pertinence of Greene's observation that a woman's menstrual experience is shaped by her interpersonal relationship with her mother (2014, 84).

The phrase 'cette chose' is reminiscent of the mother's reference in *Bleu blanc vert* to menstruation as 'des choses' which, as argued in Chapter 3, illustrates that menstruation is perceived as a taboo subject within the cultural context of Bey's novel. Again, in *Paradis blues*, we can argue that this euphemistic term denotes that in Mylène's Creole community, menstruation is surrounded by 'la gangue du silence' (60). Even though the mother organises a celebration in which neighbours put money into the pockets of Mylène's ceremonial white dress, Mylène does

nuances of the time/space of creolized archipelagos, with their legacy of conquest by successive imperial powers' (2016, 1234).

not present her mother as challenging the horror she felt as a ten-year-old girl. There is no evidence that she comforts her daughter or offers her an explanation as to why she is bleeding. Mylène presents this ritual as a mere matter of convention and describes it without any positive emotion. Her repetition of 'l'instant d'après' (30) portrays this ceremony as a moment which is as overwhelming and as confusing to her as the blood which suddenly drenches her skirt. The ritual is overshadowed by the fact that the mother did not prepare Mylène for her first menses and utters nothing more than 'ma pauvre fille' (30) when she realises Mylène has menstruated. By revealing the traumatic nature of this experience, Mylène highlights the importance of breaking the silence around this topic. Her monologue constitutes a step in shattering this silence.

Not only does this passage denounce the silence that surrounds Mylène's first menstrual bleed, it also reveals an alternative perspective to the stereotype of Mauritius as a paradise island. Mylène's description of her menstrual blood as '[r]ouge comme l'enfer' (30) lies in stark contrast to the blue paradise evoked in the title of the novel. The plural 'blues', which connotes depression, already suggests that the text will contradict this image of a paradise island. Mylène's menstrual blood is symbolic of the suffering that the ten-year-old Mylène is about to experience because she is a woman and will therefore live under the '[p]oids d'une subordination imposée par les hommes' (60). This suffering includes poverty, exploitation, and domestic violence. This depiction of menstruation echoes Patel's epilogue in which she implies that *Paradis blues* seeks to challenge the exoticisation of the island and its women: 'L'île. Source de tant de mythes, porteuse de tant de clichés. Peut-être un tableau, oui, par exemple un Gauguin, allongeant ses femmes sereinement lascives et nonchalamment épanouies […] Et l'îlienne de se demander : est-ce ainsi ? Suis-je cela ?' (58) Mylène is the 'îlienne' who, through the language she uses to represent her traumatic experience of her first menstrual bleed, deconstructs these clichés and disrupts the exoticised image of the sensual Mauritian woman. Her menstrual bleeding demonstrates that she is a corporeal being and not an idealised 'primitive' and 'exotic' figure from a painting by Gauguin.[3] *Paradis blues*, by creating

3 Gauguin was known for his exoticisation and primitivism in his paintings of women in Tahiti. See Elizabeth Child (2001) 'The Colonial Lens: Gauguin, Primitivism, and Photography in the Fin de Siècle' in Lynda Jessup (ed.) *Antimodernism and Artistic Experience: Policing the Boundaries of Modernity*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 50–70.

the multidimensional and fleshy figure of Mylène, therefore challenges discourses of primitivism and exoticisation and, in turn, sets free the Mauritian woman from the colonial past. As postcolonial studies have indicated, the exoticisation of the postcolonial subject 'draws from the hidden colonialist assumptions about the primitive and nostalgic beauty of life outside the metropole, the mastery of knowledge of unconquered frontiers, and the superiority of Western Civilization' (Boerboom, 2015). Thus, by rejecting this idea of the Mauritian woman as a nostalgic beauty, Mylène is resisting neo-colonialist discourses which seek to exoticise her and assert their superiority over her. Patel's portrayal of menstrual blood as a substance that inspires horror resonates with Kristeva's approach to menstruation in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*. Mylène's emphasis on her childhood horror at the sight of her menstrual blood is nuanced, however, by her intent to expose the grim reality of her life on the island, de-exoticise the Mauritian woman and help to free her from the colonial past.

In a latter part of her monologue, Mylène once again looks back to her menstrual experience during her formative years. She reflects on her mother's many superstitions which she presents in a list in the Mauritian Creole language (44). The form of the list, in which each superstition starts on a new line, highlights the extent to which these many superstitions restricted Mylène's childhood. The list resonates with the phrase in the epilogue: 'Poids des superstitions qui fixent les interdits en usant de la peur' (60). As the list is rendered in Mauritian Creole, the text links these superstitions to the Creole population and suggests a shared mythology. For instance, this list includes her mother's command that Mylène never leaves the house at night because she may be followed by a 'lougarou' or 'Bolfam sounga' (44),[4] and her order that Mylène throws water over her shoulder three times after visiting the cemetery. We find, in the same list, reference to a taboo to which menstruating women are expected to adhere: 'Kan gayn period, pa al simitier' (45).[5] The matter of fact way in which the mother conveys this instruction presents it as an unquestionable cultural practice. The exclusion of menstruating women from a cemetery suggests that they are forbidden from this sacred place because they are perceived as having a polluting power. This regulation of the behaviour of menstruating women resonates with the practices of

4 Translated in *Paradis blues* as 'loup-garou' and 'la sorcière sounga' (45).

5 Translated in *Paradis blues* as 'Quand on a ses règles, on ne doit pas aller au cimetière' (45).

sequestration in Algerian women's writing, since both methods serve, in the words of Ussher, to 'manage the monstrous feminine' (2006, 8).

In *Paradis blues,* the monstrous is evoked through the juxtaposition of the menstruating woman, death, witchcraft, and werewolves. The association made in *Paradis blues* between the menstruating vagina and the supernatural is not a concept which is specific to the cultural context of the novel. It is a trope we can observe both in other fictional works and as well as in sociological studies of pre-modern as well as contemporary societies. In the introduction to the sociological work *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation* (1988), Janice Delaney, Mary Jane Lupton and Emily Toth observe: '[i]n many societies, the menstruating woman is believed to emit a *mana,* or threatening supernatural power. The taboos of menstruation are practices that help others to avoid her and her deadly influence' (1988, 7). Stephen King's *Carrie* (1974) and Angela Carter's short story 'Wolf Alice' which feature in her collection *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), are both fictional examples which explore the relationship between menstruation and the supernatural. Indeed, as we have already observed, Marouane's *La Jeune Fille et la mère* and Despentes' 'Des poils sur moi' also play into this cross-cultural interest in the supernatural and feed into a shared mythology of the menstruating woman as dangerous. However, similarly to in *Paradis Blues,* this link is framed in Marouane's *La Jeune Fille et la mère* within a specific cultural context. Djamila's first menses is framed within the context of an Algerian and Islamic superstitious belief that *djinns* prey on young women, whereas Mylène's mother's warnings against witches and werewolves are portrayed as emanating from the mythology of the Creole community.

Yet another link between menstruation and the supernatural can be found in Devi's *Ève de ses décombres* in a passage which is narrated in the second person. The novel is largely narrated in the first person by its principal characters, Ève and Saad. However, there is the occasional chapter which is narrated in the second person in a pensive tone which suggests that these characters are trying to process their lives from a more objective standpoint. In a passage narrated by Ève in the second person, the teacher offers her lessons in exchange for sex. Ève is from a lower socioeconomic background and therefore cannot afford to pay for the lessons. The teacher is described as a vampire because his face is covered in her menstrual blood: '*Te surplombant, peut-être ressemblait-il à un vampire. Peut-être ressemblait-il au membre d'une secte diabolique, buveuse de sang*' (134, italics in original). Her menstrual

blood transforms the teacher into a supernatural being who, by sexually exploiting her, is depriving her of a childhood and figuratively draining away her life force. Ève is portrayed as a victim of her socioeconomic background because, in order to receive the education that she requires to escape poverty, she must give up her bodily autonomy. The use of the second person and the depiction of the teacher as a supernatural being puts a distance between Ève and the sexual exploitation she is suffering. It suggests that she has dissociated herself from her body as a coping mechanism. When the teacher notices that Savita, Ève's best friend and lover, has caught him with '*la bouche rougie de sang intime d'une femme*' (134, italics in original) his shame propels him to murder Savita. The narrator foresees this death: '*Elle est morte au moment où elle a vu une fleur rouge éclore sur sa bouche*' (135, italics in original). Once more, we see a menstruating body which is framed within a circle of shame and violence. The supernatural reference, combined with the imagery of blood, adds an element of the macabre and monstrous to the passage, thereby emphasising the horror which Ève must navigate on a daily basis.

Analogous to *Paradis blues*, Devi's novel, *Pagli,* portrays the first menstrual bleed as a moment which is symbolic of the life of suffering that awaits the protagonist, Daya. She recounts:

> Mes parents ont accompli leur devoir envers moi. En me naissant, en me grandissant et en me perdant […] Le sort de la fille ne leur importait que lorsque le premier saignement avait lieu. Les étapes étaient bien marquées, prévues d'avance. Ils n'ont pas vu le trou dans mon regard [...] Ils ne pouvaient pas reconnaître le moment précis du cataclysme. (28)

Daya characterises her first menstrual bleed as a moment of loss because it marks the very moment her parents put plans in place for her to marry and therefore leave home. Hence, her parents respond to Daya's first menstrual bleed in a practical, as opposed to an emotional, manner. This moment is therefore positioned as merely a step which leads to the ultimate aim: marriage. The reader learns that, from a young age, Daya has been promised to her cousin in Terre Rouge, a village which derives its name from the red colour of its soil. Declaring that he cannot wait until they are officially married, the cousin rapes Daya at the age of thirteen and justifies this by referring to it as 'un mariage avant l'heure' (52). For Daya, this moment marks a brutal end to her adolescence which we can see in the phrase: 'ma puberté achevée de force' (55). Thus, the 'cataclysme' (28) to which she refers above is her rape and arranged

marriage to her rapist. Although we can find a common thread here with Marouane's and Bouraoui's novels through the practice of marrying girls at the age of puberty, there is an added sense of foreboding to this passage because of the identity of the husband. Daya's future marriage therefore casts a dark shadow over her first menses, and the loss the passage foresees is not only of her parents, but also her innocence.

Within the same paragraph in which she describes her parents' reaction to her first menstrual bleed, Daya also recounts her conversation with an old woman in her village. This tattooed figure plays the role of a soothsayer because she predicts Daya's future: 'il y a encore beaucoup de douleurs qui t'attendent' (29). Here, the tattooed woman links the pain of menstruation with the life of pain that she predicts Daya will endure. This association is reinforced when Daya ponders to herself, 'je me demandais à quoi cela servait d'être née femme si votre destin s'écrivait en lettres de sang' (29). By rhetorically questioning the purpose of the female sex, Daya conveys her feeling that being a woman is futile, and she regards menstruation as a symbol of this senselessness. Her rhetorical question is reminiscent of Leclerc's phrase, 'je ne suis femme qu'à la condition d'avoir mes règles' (1977, 41) because Daya is presenting menstrual blood as a defining aspect of femininity. However, there is an ominous tone to Daya's question because this blood also represents the violence that awaits her. This violence not only takes the form of rape, but also the abuse which she will endure in Terre Rouge at the hands of her husband's family, whom she calls the *mofines*. Daya explains, 'Cela m'a semblé normal, finalement, lorsque je me suis mariée, d'arriver en ce lieu qui avait la couleur de mon destin' (29). Here, the red colour of menstrual blood mirrors the red colour of the soil in Terre Rouge. This connection foreshadows her rape by a man who originates from Terre Rouge and the traumatic bodily experiences, such as miscarriage and domestic violence, which she will endure and witness once she arrives in Terre Rouge.[6]

As Julia Waters argues in her article on the feminist metaphors in *Pagli*, the imagery of Daya's menstrual blood is not solely symbolic of her suffering, it also reveals Daya's subversive intent: 'Female blood becomes closely associated with the red of the soil and hence with Daya's muddying of society's rigid order' (2004, 49). Indeed, Daya's menstrual blood becomes a symbol of her resistance to the norms of motherhood

6 This miscarriage is experienced by Daya's friend, Mitsy, and is explored in the next section.

and domesticity which form part of the 'rigid order' by which her husband and the *mofines* expect her to abide. Once married to her husband, Daya refuses to have his children and therefore directly disobeys the *mofines*. The *mofines* violently express their expectations of Daya during a scene in which they drag Daya from her bed and beat her as a method of punishment for her adulterous affair with a Creole fisherman named Zil. They command her: 'tu dois avoir des enfants' (44), to which Daya defiantly responds: '[j]e n'en aurai pas' (44). Daya describes the *mofines* as 'les soldats de la pureté' (41) who enforce Hindu ideas about purity to the extreme.[7] According to Nancy Bonvillain, who examines various cultural and religious attitudes towards menstruation in *Women and Men: Cultural Constructs of Gender* (2006), '[i]mportant concerns in Hinduism are issues of purity and the danger of pollution' (307). Purity and pollution are two key aspects of the Hindu faith on which *Pagli* plays: the *mofines* are a symbol of purity who lie in diametric opposition to Daya who is symbolic of pollution. Hence, as menstrual blood 'is considered to be one of the most polluting substances' (Bonvillain, 2006, 308) in Hindu doctrine, the references to Daya's menstrual blood contribute to her imagery as an impure, marginalised, and rebellious member of the community. The phrase 'les soldats de la pureté' (41) illustrates that the *mofines* believe it is their responsibility to ensure that women such as Daya follow their ascribed path of motherhood and stay faithful to their husbands. Daya, however, deviates from this path by engaging in an affair with Zil and refusing to procreate with her husband. This affair is not only transgressive because it is adulterous, but also because Zil is Creole rather than an Indo-Mauritian Hindu. Their relationship is therefore perceived by the *mofines* as impure.

In a later scene, Daya once again vocalises her dissent towards the *mofines*. This scene further illustrates that Daya's menstrual blood is framed in the novel as a subversive symbol. When her husband locks her in her room, she articulates her contempt for him in an audacious tone: 'Tu as peur du noir, maintenant? […] Et le noir dans mon ventre, tu l'as bien vu? Et le noir dans ma tête? Et le noir de mon sang menstruel?' (66). The repeated rhetorical questions do not allow him space to respond, thereby emphasising that she is able to maintain some power over her husband through her refusal to become a mother. The blackness of

7 For example, after Daya invites a beggar woman in the house, the *mofines* insist on purifying the areas she has touched. Daya states: 'À la fin, il ne restait plus aucune pollution' (25).

her menstrual blood (as opposed to the red colour one would expect) symbolises her challenge to, and refusal to abide by, the restrictive norms and expectations of Terre Rouge. The black colour is also emblematic of her vengeance against her husband for raping her. She enacts this vengeance by refusing him any sexual intimacy as evidenced by her continuing to menstruate. Her black menstrual blood, black womb, black mind, and affair with a black man, represent a complete rejection of the *mofines*' expectations that she become a mother and end her adulterous affair. The blackness of her body lies in diametric opposition to the images of whiteness which are often connected with the *mofines* in the novel, such as their being 'habillées de blanc' (42) when they punish her for having an affair with Zil. In Hindu culture, white is both the colour of purity and mourning (Firth, 2005). The imagery of Daya's impurity is therefore juxtaposed with the imagery of the *mofines* 'purity' through the contrast between black and white. Their wearing white symbolically illustrates that the *mofines* are the root cause of Daya's sorrow and suffering. By evoking Zil in her repetition of the word 'noir', Daya celebrates female sexual desire and her discovery of sexual satisfaction outside the normative Indo-Mauritian Hindu space inhabited by the *mofines*. These rhetorical questions, which centre on the colour black, therefore celebrate menstruation and adulterous sexual pleasure in contrast to the societal norms of motherhood, racial purity, and domesticity.

Daya's celebration of menstruation and spirit of defiance are reminiscent of Leclerc's tone in the passages in *Parole de femme* in which she challenges the shame and silence that surrounds menstrual experience. The reasons for Leclerc's and Daya's celebration and defiance of societal norms differ, however, due to their opposing personal circumstances and the distinct sociocultural contexts in which they live. In order to defy the taboo status of menstrual blood in the society in which she lives, Leclerc celebrates the sensorial aspects of menstruating and subversively describes the sight of this blood as pleasing. She writes, '[v]oir et sentir le sang tendre et chaud qui coule de soi, qui coule de source, une fois par mois, est heureux' (1974, 48). Daya, who asks her husband if he fears her menstrual blood, celebrates the fact that she menstruates in order to demonstrate that she has the ultimate power over her own reproduction and sexuality. Daya's celebration of menstrual blood is therefore differently nuanced from Leclerc's because Daya is not challenging the silence that surrounds menstruation per se. Instead, she describes her menstrual blood in order to demonstrate her resistance to

the norms of marriage and motherhood expected in Terre Rouge, and to celebrate her subversive sexual desire for a Creole man, as opposed to an Indo-Mauritian Hindu man. Therefore, Daya and Mylène both draw on their own menstrual experiences in order to challenge and resist their inferior position in their communities.

Hindu ideas of purity and impurity are once again explored to literary effect in Devi's *L'Arbre fouet*. In contrast to *Pagli,* which frames menstrual blood within the paradigm of purity and impurity in order to demonstrate Daya's opposition to the societal norms of Terre Rouge, *L'Arbre fouet* directly links menstruation and impurity. *L'Arbre fouet* portrays a ritual in which Aeena is dressed in a red sari, which is traditionally worn by Hindu brides, and is surrounded by local women.[8] The existence of such a celebration suggests female members of the community believe that a girl's first menses is a rite of passage which holds a positive significance. Aeena's father, however, considers Aeena's first menses as a sign of her impurity and he enters this female-only space in order to degrade his daughter. Aeena describes the scene: 'Sari rouge. Prières de mon père mon père qui célèbre à haute voix mon état d'impure' (94). The verb 'célèbre' highlights how the father subverts the original meaning of the ceremony by turning it from a celebration of womanhood to an assertion of male superiority and a castigation of the female body. His response can be understood within the context of their father–daughter relationship. This relationship is defined by his abusive treatment of Aeena which results from his fear that she will kill him because her horoscope suggests that, in a previous life, she murdered her father. His desire to humiliate her becomes even clearer in his demanding Aeena to pull up her sari in order to show to the audience that menstrual blood is trickling down her leg. He exclaims, '[e]lle n'est pas une femme, elle est une chienne […] A présent, que tout le monde vienne assister à sa honte!' (94). The association made here between menstruation and animality through the word 'chienne' mirrors Fikria's use of language in *La Voyeuse interdite* in which she evokes her father's misogyny by referring to women as 'femelles' (22) and 'animaux cloîtrés' (12). It is also reminiscent of *Baise-Moi* in which Manu refers to herself as bleeding 'comme une chienne' (153). These three novels, which

8 This ritual bears a strong resemblance to a Hindu ritual which is particularly popular in South India during which the first menses is 'marked by family rejoicing. Often a girl will put on a red sari to mark the occasion. She will now experience the ritual seclusion of the menstrual period' (Smith, 2003, 111).

explore menstruation in three distinct cultural contexts, resonate with Kristeva's argument in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* that bodily substances, such as menstrual blood, are perceived as abject because they are a reminder of the animality of human beings. Thus, this comparison between menstruating women and animals traverses cultural boundaries and remains a discourse through which menstruating women continue to be shamed and silenced.

Once again, as we have seen in *La Voyeuse interdite*, this link between menstrual blood and the animal world is nuanced by the intersection of religion and misogyny in a violent and abusive hyper-patriarchal father figure. Aeena's father is a Hindu priest who warps the doctrine of his faith as part of his ongoing desire to suppress Aeena. The father's loud denunciation of Aeena's 'état d'impur' (94) is a reference to the Hindu belief that menstruation is impure. He manipulates this doctrine in order justify his punishment of his daughter. Through the father's references to his daughter's menstrual blood as 'sa honte' (94), *L'Arbre fouet* also parallels *La Voyeuse interdite*'s linking of impurity and shame. If we look to cross-cultural anthropological literature, we can see that an 'underlying theme of danger to men of contamination from women' (Bonvillain, 2006) is expressed in Hindu and Islamic doctrine. We can see that these two respective hyper-patriarchal figures in *La Voyeuse interdite* and *L'Arbre fouet* view the female body as a threat and therefore enforce strict discipline on their daughters. Thus, these ideas of the female body as dangerous and polluting also traverse cultural boundaries. Although these religions differ in their teachings, they can both be manipulated by patriarchal figures to justify a patriarchal perspective which seeks to keep menstruating bodies at bay.

Indeed, both Aeena and Fikria demonstrate that the behaviour of their fathers is indicative of a wider manipulation of religious ideology in order to denigrate others. Whereas in *La Voyeuse interdite* the father's behaviour is situated within the rise of Islamic fundamentalists who manipulate Islam in order to subjugate women, we can see that Aeena's reference to religion is much less specific. Immediately before she recounts the ceremony, Aeena sets the scene by explaining '[n]ous avons toujours, dans cette île, été trop préoccupés de la religion. Et cela colore tout' (93). Even though Aeena's story is anchored within a distinctive religious and cultural setting, in contrast to *La Voyeuse Interdite,* which focuses on the rise of Islamism in Algeria in the 1970s, Devi's novel does not frame the experience of its protagonist within a specific temporal or political context. Instead, Devi creates, in

L'Arbre fouet, a fictionalised atemporal version of Mauritius in which a patriarch exaggerates the Hindu beliefs which are followed by the Indo-Mauritian Hindu community. Srilata Ravi argues that Devi's novels treat female bodily experience as universally oppressive by 'conflat[ing] Hindu culture and religion with the violence of superstition, patriarchy, and communalism' (2015, 94). Indeed, we could argue that the lack of temporality in *L'Arbre fouet* illustrates that the Hindu religion has always oppressed the women in the Indo-Mauritian community of Devi's fictional world. Certainly, Devi's novel suggests that the many generations of Hindu Indo-Mauritian women who preceded Aeena also had to face being punished in the name of religion. However, this conflation is not on the part of Devi, nor of the female characters in the book, it is the patriarchal figure of Aeena's father who uses religion to justify his punishment of Aeena. Indeed, although the crowd of men and women are described as consenting to the father's actions during the ritual, they are also characterised as 'choqués, vaguement gênés de l'attitude bizarre de mon père' (94). Their shock at actions they perceive as bizarre, highlights the specificity of the father's behaviour. It is therefore him, rather than the community in *L'Arbre Fouet,* who conflates religion and patriarchy. The others recognise the cruelty of his actions within a religious space but do not see them as perpetuating normative religious beliefs. Hence, Devi's work alludes to the danger of patriarchal figures using religion to oppress women, rather than a lack of distinction between religion and patriarchy.

Exploitation, expectation, and failure: Childbirth in Mauritian women's writing

Across Mauritian women's writing, we can find a variety of social, economic, and religious contexts in which authors set their characters' experiences of childbirth. Ananda Devi's work pays testament to the multicultural nature of Mauritian society by exploring childbirth in imagined Creole as well as in Indo-Mauritian Hindu communities. As we have already seen, Daya, the Indo-Mauritian protagonist of *Pagli*, rejects the expectations of her cruel in-laws to have children. She dreams, instead, of having a baby with her Creole lover, Zil. In *Soupir,* Devi presents a polyphonic narrative in which childbirth is represented against the backdrop of a community in Rodrigues which suffers from poverty and exploitation by tourists. Aged eleven, Pitié is raped by a

Western tourist and gives birth to their baby. Childbirth is also a theme in Shenaz Patel's *Paradis blues,* in which Mylène's mother experiences multiple caesareans and Mylène has a miscarriage.

In parallel with Algerian women's writing, representations of the act of giving birth are few in Mauritian women's writing. This lack of consideration of women's experiences of labour is reflected in sociological research about women in Mauritius. Instead, in parallel with sociological studies about Algeria, we find an investigation into a cultural norm which prefers male over female offspring. This bias is apparent in *Beyond Inequalities: Women in Mauritius,* a sociological study commissioned by the Southern African Research and Documentation Centre: 'patriarchal society prefers the male child. A popular Créole saying known to every Mauritian is "*garcon premier lot, tifi deuxieme lot*"' (Johnson et al., 1997, 40). The authors also comment on childbirth in the Mauritian island of Rodrigues: 'Rodrigues has an alarming problem of its own: the *fille-mère*, unmarried girls giving birth to children' (51). This study therefore demonstrates that, even within the same country, there may be significant differences between women's experiences of childbirth and motherhood.

In Mauritian women's writing as a whole we can find many characters who are pressured into having children by their family or community. For example, Nathacha Appanah's *Blue Bay Palace* evokes this pressure by describing a couple who flee their village: 'Couple supposé stérile, ils avaient fui leur village […] lassés des regards noirs et des jacasseries quotidiennes' (15). We can see here that the couple's sterility leads to their being criticised by their community to the extent that they are unable to stay. This community otherises and punishes them for their not being able to fulfil societal expectations to reproduce. Similarly, in the fictional Creole and Indo-Mauritian spaces created by Devi and Patel, giving birth to children is also expected of the female characters and positioned as their main contribution to the community. Reflecting the sociological literature, it is the male offspring who are most highly prized within the fictionalised society of the novels. The analysis of *Pagli* in the previous section revealed that Daya's black menstrual blood is symbolic of her refusal to comply with the demands of her Indo-Mauritian Hindu female in-laws that she conceive a baby with her husband. Daya's description of the *mofines* paints these women as having only one purpose: '[l]eur ventre est un horizon de fertilité et de continuité. Elles sont là pour produire et créer la descendance héroïque qu'elles ont reçu l'ordre de perpétuer. Petits hommes pressés de grandir'

(41). Daya illustrates that, because they obediently follow a patriarchal command to produce male heirs, they are model Hindu wives. For this reason they, too, are part of a hyper-patriarchal Hindu group which oppresses women, such as Daya, who challenge their rigid rules. In this context, we can infer that the word 'héroïque' is sarcastic and an articulation of Daya's disdain for these women who order her: 'tu dois avoir des enfants' (44). For Daya, then, any childbirth that takes place within this hyper-patriarchal space maintains its power structures by producing more men. Daya underscores this belief by stating that she does not even consider the *mofines* to be women: 'elles ne sont pas des femmes du tout' (41).

The *mofine's* internalisation and perpetuation of patriarchal attitudes is framed within the tensions that exist between different cultural groups in Mauritius. In turn, Daya's attitude towards childbirth is also shaped by this strained multicultural and patriarchal social context. It is not childbirth itself that Daya rejects, but the *mofines*' normative paradigm of perpetuating a 'pure' Indo-Mauritian bloodline, especially with a cousin who raped her before they married. Her interracial relationship with her Creole lover, Zil, demonstrates her defiance of the *mofines*' attempts to control her reproductive body and the power of her mind to reimagine childbirth outside their vision of purity. Daya illustrates the horror of the *mofines,* who she calls 'les soldats de la pureté' (41), at her interracial relationship: '[e]lles m'ont montré leur agonie, alors que deux corps « étrangers » s'accouplaient' (42). Ravi observes that in Devi's Mauritian literary space, 'mixing diffusion and borrowing do not take place. African Creoles and mixed-race Créole populations are represented as […] victims of Hindu hegemony' (2015, 92). Indeed, Daya can be characterised as such a victim. However, Ravi's chapter does not consider how Devi's characters fiercely resist this. In Daya's case, she both refuses to abide by the rules of the *mofines* and disrupts these rules within the realm of her powerful imagination. Although she cannot physically break free from the *mofine's* rules, she is able to empower herself mentally through a subversive use of her imagination.

Outside this rigid patriarchal framework in which interracial relationships are forbidden, Daya envisions childbirth as a celebration of her love for Zil and a subversion of the racial purity the *mofines* strive to preserve. In a chapter addressed to Zil, Daya invents an alternate reality in which their child would represent 'le miracle issu de nos corps accolés et de nos sources mêlées' (93). She imagines, '[j]'aurais accouché d'un enfant aux yeux de poème et aux lèvres chanteuses. […] Elle aurait grandi

sans peur, le rire libre et le corps fertile, et dans son amour il n'y aurait pas eu de honte' (91). In these extracts, Daya lyrically rejoices in the power of the female body to give birth to a child borne from a loving relationship. As such, she is revolting against the *mofines'* restrictions on her sexuality and their demands for her to produce a racially pure Indo-Mauritian baby. She celebrates her fertility, and that of her imagined daughter, in the context of a loving interracial family that defies all boundaries imposed from outside, and which feels no shame in its mixed heritage. By comparing childbirth in a patriarchal space in which racial purity is enforced and an imagined space which embraces diversity, *Pagli*'s nuanced representation of childbirth refutes the idea that childbirth is a universal experience. Although Daya's positive conceptualisation of childbirth does seem to respond to Leclerc's calls for all women to create a 'parole de femme' so they can experience childbirth as 'un éclatant bonheur' (1974, 107), this is not a discourse she can use to improve her lived reality. Daya can only perceive childbirth as a positive expression of the female body once it is removed from a violent and restrictive patriarchal space and transported into the realm of her imagination. A comparison between *Pagli* and *Parole de femme* highlights the idealistic nature of Leclerc's solution to patriarchal oppression. Leclerc's idea that childbirth can become a happy experience if women simply reimagine it in a more positive language is not compatible with the fictional Hindu community of *Pagli* for which childbirth signifies the perpetuation of patriarchy and an ideology of racial purity.

Mylène's monologue in *Paradis blues* also exposes and challenges a hegemonic system which narrowly defines a woman's purpose as being to produce children. It is another Mauritian novel which explores non-motherhood in a literary world where motherhood is expected and those who do not become mothers are marginalised. Both Daya and Mylène share a similar fate for refusing to abide by the rules of their community: whilst Daya is locked in a hen house, Mylène is interned in an asylum. Mylène's protest is framed within a narrative which, in the epilogue of *Paradis blues,* Patel describes as shattering 'la gangue du silence ou des discours établis' (59). Similarly to *Pagli,* the novel presents a character who does not meet her community's expectations for her to have a child. Unlike Daya, this is not through choice, but due to fertility issues. Mylène believes that childbirth is something which is imposed on women, an opinion which is apparent when she looks around the table at her very large family: 'ça ne pouvait qu'être ça. Puisque tous le faisaient. Puisque tous le souhaitaient aux autres. L'imposaient aux

autres. Ce devait être ainsi. Même si ça faisait peur. Même si ça faisait mal' (34). Here, Mylène criticises a dominant discourse which reduces women to the social function of giving birth to children. For her, this pressure to have children causes both fear and psychological harm. She indicates the extent to which this discourse is dominant through her vague reference to 'tous', which may refer to her family, the inhabitants of her village, or even Mauritian society in general. Her repeated use of 'ça' underscores the fact that those who perpetuate the normative belief that a woman's purpose is to produce children neither provide any definitive reasons for this norm nor do they seek to question it. Indeed, as she outlines earlier in her monologue, women in her community have learned to accept their fate silently. She explains that 'elles enveloppent leur voix' (11) and states, '[l]angue. Langue. Tu dois savoir la tenir. Ta Langue' (27).

This culture of silence is also evoked in Mylène's representation of her miscarriage. Her trauma and difficulty in recounting her miscarriage are represented on the page in short sentences:

> j'ai mis ma robe de grossesse. J'étais enceinte […] Tout le village devait le savoir. Le voir. Je me suis postée sur le pas de la porte. / Les gens passaient, me regardaient, souriaient /- Ahhhh, on a réussi ! /J'étais fière…/ Tellement. / Je ne l'ai pas portée longtemps. / La robe. (36)

Her statement 'on a réussi' and choice to show off her pregnant body to the villagers illustrates that a woman's ability to produce children is prized by her community. The use of the impersonal third person 'on' suggests that her pregnancy is considered by the community as their success and thus her pregnant body belongs to them. The smiling faces of the villagers and pride Mylène felt when pregnant are juxtaposed with the silence of her miscarriage that is briefly described in the text as her no longer wearing a 'robe de grossesse' (36). Her miscarriage is silenced through its lack of explicit representation, which may suggest that in the literary Mauritian world Patel creates, miscarriage is a taboo subject. The silence that surrounds her miscarriage manifests itself in the physical gaps on the page which are created by the very short sentences that are separated by a line break. These gaps are suggestive of her empty womb and feelings of grief towards this loss. Her self-imposed silence emphasises the contrast between her pride at being pregnant and her implied shame at losing the baby.

In a monologue in which Mylène breaks the silence on many aspects of her life, such as her abusive marriage and difficult relationship with

her mother, it is noteworthy that her miscarriage remains shrouded in secrecy. The reason for why this subject is taboo is left open to interpretation. We can argue that, since it is framed within a fictional space in which a woman's primary purpose is considered to be giving birth to children, Mylène feels too ashamed to refer directly to her miscarriage because it represents a failure to meet these expectations. Indeed, now that she has not become a mother, Mylène's struggle to understand her purpose as a woman is evident in the rhetorical questions she poses after her miscarriage: 'Que reste-t-il après cela? Que m'est-il resté?/ L'essentiel./ Ma chair' (36–37). Here, her miscarriage is depicted as stripping away Mylène's identity as a woman and reducing her to a piece of flesh. Patel's representation of miscarriage in *Paradis Blues* builds on one of her earlier works, *Sensitive* (2003), which also has a Creole protagonist. It is narrated by a young girl, named Fi, who is sexually abused by her stepfather. We also witness the lives of other members of her community, such as Nadège, who suffer exploitation at home and at work. Patel reveals that miscarriage is a taboo subject through only implicitly, rather than explicitly, describing Nadège's miscarriage. The reader must infer from various clues that Nadège has miscarried. Firstly, Fi notices a change in Nadège's disposition when she visits her: 'Mais il n'y avait plus la douceur et la tendresse que j'avais l'habitude de voir sur son visage. À la place, une grimace. Une grimace terrible, affreuse, tellement que je n'étais même plus sûre si c'était bien notre Nadège' (116). Again, as we saw in *Paradis Bleus,* we can see here that a miscarriage leads to a character's loss of identity. Shortly after, once Fi's mother arrives, Nadège starts to bleed on the floor. Even her blood is described euphemistically: 'Elle laissait une traîne rouge derrière elle' (116). When asking her mother about why Nadège is bleeding, Fi's mother refuses to explain it. Finally, Fi later discovers the cot Nadège purchased in a tip at a factory. The cot is full of stones. Thus, the novel emphasises the taboo nature of miscarriage by leaving the reader to make the connection between Nadège's blood and the discarded cot and therefore realise that she has miscarried. The discarded cot represents Nadège's lack of hope for a future child and stones can be seen as symbolic of the weight of her community which expects her to become a mother. The factory setting in which the discarded cot resides juxtaposes the exploitation in the workplace, such as through long working hours and low pay, with societal pressure on women to become mothers. In so doing, *Sensitive* suggests that women's bodies are also exploited because women are only valued on their capacity to reproduce.

If we examine the silence that surrounds the miscarriages in *Paradis blues* and *Sensitive*, alongside other Mauritian works such as *Pagli* and Lindsey Collen's anglophone novel *Getting Rid of It* (1996), it is evident that Patel's narratives reflect a pattern in Mauritian women's writing to portray the abrupt end to a character's pregnancy with ambiguity. We can argue that this reflects a cultural, political, and temporal specificity. Before the abortion laws in Mauritius were relaxed in 2012, abortion was 'strictly illegal and only performed by lay-practitioners under unsafe conditions. The law [did] not permit abortion on any grounds, even in cases of rape, incest or threats to the health of the foetus or mother' (Johnson et al., 1997, 50). There is, therefore, a risk that if a woman is caught miscarrying it could be misconceived as an abortion (Ramtohul, 2016). *Getting Rid of It* clearly illustrates this risk in the character, Jumila. After experiencing a miscarriage, Jumila is anxious about being falsely prosecuted for having an illegal abortion. She carries the foetus around in a bag. Alongside her friends, upon whom she calls for help, Jumila waits for the opportune moment to dispose of the foetus. When Jumila reveals the contents of the bag to her friend Goldilox Soo, she warns Jamila 'you'll get sick. You'll get admitted to hospital. And you'll get a court case, and a jail sentence. There's ten years in it' (13).

In *Pagli,* a similar ambiguity surrounds why Daya's friend Mitsy is bleeding. It is unclear whether Mitsy, who is a sex worker, has miscarried naturally or if she has had an abortion. Daya finds Mitsy 'dans une flaque de sang, épuisée de violence' (95) and promises to keep the loss of Mitsy's baby a secret. Mitsy tells Daya, '[c]e n'est qu'un enfant qui s'en va' (96) and asks her not to call a doctor. The critical literature on the novel appears unanimous that Mitsy has aborted the baby. For example, Ritu Tyagi writes: '[a]fter she aborts a child that she had conceived with a client, she is shunned by the entire community' (2013, 61). If we consider, however, the cultural and political context in which *Pagli* is set, we can argue that Mitsy's bleeding is much more ambiguous. A simple reading of Daya's characterisation of Mitsy as 'une femme qui assume son crime' (97) would suggest that she has illegally aborted the baby. Yet, as *Getting Rid of It* makes clear, a miscarriage can be mistaken for an illegal abortion since they both result in bleeding. Thus, the novel could be referring to Misty's bleeding as 'crime' even if it is was due to a miscarriage. The word 'crime' could also refer to her work as a prostitute. This ambiguity highlights the importance of considering cultural, economic, and political context when examining women's experiences of birth.

The politicisation of the childbearing female body in Mauritian women's writing is not solely limited to engaging with the criminalisation of abortion. We can also find novels that inflect their representations of childbirth by creating a literary Mauritian space in which the Creole population suffers from poverty and exploitation. In *Paradis blues,* this backdrop of poverty and exploitation inflects the life of Mylène who is forced to leave school at a young age in order to work for a low income in a factory. She believes that her only escape is to marry a European man and move away from the island. Exploitation and poverty are embodied in the style with which Mylène's mother articulates her experiences of childbirth. Mylène recounts that every morning her mother used to declare to her children: 'monn fer trwa sezarienn, inn koup mo vant, si zot ti konn lamizer ki mo fin koné, pitié segner, depi laz douz an, mo travay kot Blan, apré kot mwa, kot mwa ousi plis ki enn servant' (41).[9] By comparing her three caesareans to serving her family and white employers, we can deduce that she categorises her experience of childbirth as one of the many ways in which she has suffered due to her poor socioeconomic background. Through framing her three caesareans in the context of her servitude to her white employers from the age of twelve, she connotes her experiences of childbirth with the same imagery of exploitation and acquiescence. Indeed, her phrase 'inn koup mo vant' (41), because it depicts her as a passive victim upon whom violence is inflicted, illustrates her loss of subjectivity and a sense of disempowerment. The tensions in this multi-ethnic context are thereby teased out in this representation of childbirth since it is inflected by the power relations between the disaffected Creole population and the privileged white population.

Although the passage is translated in the next paragraph into French for the benefit of the readers, its inclusion in Creole, the lingua franca of contemporary Mauritius, suggests that it is the only language through which the mother's experience can be authentically conveyed. In a narrative that is almost entirely in French, the Creole adds an element of orality to the text. In critical literature which analyses the role of Creole in Mauritian cultural production, scholars argue that it represents the struggles of an isolated, exploited, and

9 This passage is translated into French in *Paradis blues* as: 'J'ai fait trois césariennes, on m'a coupé le ventre, si vous saviez la misère que j'ai connu, pitié Seigneur, depuis l'âge de douze ans, je travaille chez les Blancs, et chez moi, chez moi aussi, pire qu'une servante' (41).

silenced class. Roshni Mooneeram explains that to write in Creole is a 'fundamental step in the political struggle against the class system since Creole is identified with the exploited proletariat' (2000, 194). Valérie Magdelaine-Andrianjafitrimo argues that, by incorporating the Creole language, 'la littérature mauricienne accepte de donner voix à la muette, de la faire affleurer de plus en plus ouvertement' (2004, 160) and that this language also translates 'l'éclatement des cloisonnements sociaux' (2004, 162). With reference to Mooneeram and Andrianjafitrimo's works, we can argue that through the use of Creole, *Paradis blues* inscribes the mother's experiences into both contemporary issues of ethnicity and a historical exploitation of the Creole population in Mauritius. In this way, Patel also gives voice to a silenced Creole character. Since they are rendered in the Creole language, the mother's caesareans become symbolic of a disempowered group which has been exploited and upon whom violence has been inflicted. The Creole language becomes a privileged space in which the silenced mother can authentically speak her experiences of childbirth and criticise her inferior place in society. *Paradis blues* therefore provides a contrast to the second-wave feminists' approach to childbirth as an event which women experience in a universal manner. It certainly reveals the idealism of the key thesis in *Parole de femme* that women will experience childbirth in a positive manner if they start to describe it in a celebratory language. *Paradis blues* frames its representation of childbirth within broader discourses of ethnicity and language that are very specific to the tensions which exist in its multi-ethnic Mauritian literary space. Patel's text illustrates that the characters' experiences of childbirth are inflected by the violence, conflict, and poverty that shape their daily lives. This disempowering image of childbirth in *Paradis blues* reflects the impoverishment and disaffection of the Creole population.

Devi's novel, *Soupir*, set on the island of Rodrigues, similarly represents childbirth as being inflected by a character's social class and economic status. As with many of Devi's novels, the literary world she devises is permeated with violence and despair. *Soupir* is a polyphonic text which explores childbirth in the context of a small Creole community which moves to the vacant village of Soupir in order to grow cannabis. Secondary criticism on *Soupir* focuses on the magical realist elements of the novel, the characters' loss of identity through their forgetting the slavery of their ancestors, and on their collective madness which comes most strongly to the fore in the scene in which Noëlla, a disabled

child who is the product of rape, is herself raped by a group of men.[10] However, the representations of tourist exploitation and childbirth are ignored, despite their profound impact on the body and story of Pitié. Pitié, whose first pregnancy occurs as a teenager, is a fictional representation of the *fille-mère* described in *Beyond Inequalities: Women in Mauritius* (Johnson et al., 1997, 51). The book therefore fictionalises an experience which is increasingly common to young women in Rodrigues where the rate of teenage pregnancy continues to rise (Bhoodoo, 2013). Thus, through creating a character who is sexually exploited and pregnant at a young age, *Soupir* gives voice to a significant and real social issue in Rodrigues.

Pitié is raped by a white Western tourist who comes to Rodrigues 'à l'improviste de son grand pays froid' (131) and she subsequently gives birth to their child. She names the child 'Royal Palm' after the inscription on a towel the tourist leaves behind after raping her. Pitié's mother takes Royal Palm away from Pitié and dumps him into 'une benne à ordures' (192). Unbeknownst to Pitié, Royal Palm is rescued from the bin and adopted. Pitié is described as 'famélique et ruinée' (131) when, soon after she gives birth, she appears at a brothel to ask for work. This depiction suggests that a combination of her abject poverty and her abused body led her to seek work at the brothel. Once there, the tourist finds her again and continues to impregnate her over a number of years. One evening, she recounts the story of Royal Palm's birth to Corinne who runs the brothel:

> Elle parlera sans s'arrêter d'une petite voix hachurée et rayée, parfaitement monotone, et elle racontera sa vie à partir de sa mort, à onze ans. Sa mère, son ventre, la souffrance inconnue de l'accouchement qu'elle dit comme si elle avait expulsé une chose : cet enfant qui a grandi en elle n'a jamais pour elle été vivant. (134)

The shaky voice with which Pitié describes her experience emphasises her vulnerability and intimates that the birth of Royal Palm is a traumatic memory which she struggles to articulate. This passage inverts the normative association between giving birth and life because her childbirth marks the moment of Pitié's death and the birth of a child who she never considered as 'vivant' (134). Pitié's birth narrative

10 See for example Ashwiny Kistnareddy's *Locating Hybridity: Creole, Identities and Body Politics in the Novels of Ananda Devi* (2015) and Ritu Tyagi's *Ananda Devi: Feminism, Narration and Polyphony* (2013).

is again connoted with death in the denouement of *Soupir* when she is reunited with Royal Palm at a party. She tells her teenage son the story of his birth. She refers to this birth as a 'naissance-mort' (192). Since the representation of Pitié's childbirth is permeated with references to death, it is discordant with Leclerc's statement that 'accoucher c'est vivre aussi intensément qu'il est possible de vivre' (1974, 48). For the sexually abused and impoverished Pitié, her childbirth is the opposite of life-affirming; it is a metaphorical death because it marks the end of her innocence alongside the beginning of her life of prostitution and multiple childbirths. There is no space here for Leclerc's idealism.

Pitié's body is portrayed as suffering as a result of the globalisation of Rodrigues because she repeatedly gives birth to, and subsequently buries, the babies fathered by the tourist who comes to Rodrigues to find a new lease of life. Pitié describes to Corinne her multiple pregnancies and childbirths as follows: 'les choses grouillantes grandissent et doivent être expulsées et enterrées' (135). Through these two alliterations her many childbirths are represented as a routine of suffering to which she has become accustomed. The reference to her babies as 'choses' emphasises her sense of detachment from them during her pregnancy, childbirth, and subsequent murder of them. Her tone is both detached and macabre. Pitié's explanation as to why the tourist comes to see her provides further clarity as to why the narrative strongly links childbirth and death. Pitié outlines that the tourist feels a renewed sense of life from his inflicting pain upon her: 'il se voit vivre, naître, porter, créer, il voit une souffrance qui lui permet de vivre, et s'il me frappe encore et encore, c'est pour mieux se délivrer de ses cris' (194). Here, the tourist is depicted as finding his own rebirth in witnessing Pitié's metaphorical death. One could argue that his constant impregnation of her is a metaphor for the exploitation of Rodrigues by tourists. The tourists harm the inhabitants of Rodrigues because they treat the island as a place of exotic escapism. Ravi's analysis of Devi's oeuvre as a whole is particularly pertinent to unpacking how Pitié's experience of childbirth is inflected by the globalisation of Rodrigues. According to Ravi, Devi's 'Mauritius is plagued by the ills of economic globalization and is peopled by "social monsters" […], poverty stricken, sexually abused and financially exploited outcasts' (2015, 92). In *Soupir,* the effects of the economic globalisation of Mauritius are inscribed on Pitié's body through her being frequently raped by a tourist, her poverty that leaves her with no choice but to become a prostitute, and her having to suffer multiple childbirths because of the tourist's desire for escapism.

The story that Pitié tells Royal Palm about his birth resonates with Kristeva's theory of abjection in a nuanced manner that mirrors the violence and exploitation of the fictional world in which Pitié lives. She is a victim of such violence by her being repeatedly raped. This sexual abuse comes across in her description of giving birth to Royal Palm. Pitié, whose mother never explained childbirth to her, outlines the anxiety she felt about giving birth before she had experienced it:

> Tu sais ce que c'est pour un enfant de vivre avec cette chose dans son ventre et de ne pas savoir quand et comment elle sortira ? Me déchirera-t-elle le ventre de long en large, me laissant mourir dans une mare de sang ? glissera-t-elle d'entre mes fesses comme les autres petits vers, si familiers maintenant, que je voyais dans mes selles ? coulera-t-elle d'entre mes cuisses comme au premier sang qui était sorti il y avait quelques semaines, et où j'avais cru mourir déjà ? (192)

Her feelings of anxiety during her pregnancy emerge in these rhetorical questions which follow in quick succession. The many question marks emphasise Pitié's confusion and engender feelings of sympathy in the reader who can sense the visceral fear of a girl who is giving birth at such a young age and does not understand what is happening to her body. Her anxiety reaches a crescendo in the last question which ends on her fear of death. She draws out the abject qualities of childbirth by imagining herself tearing, bleeding, and producing a worm similar to those found in her stools. The image of her body tearing represents childbirth as an act of violence and destruction. It thus reflects the violent way in which Royal Palm was conceived. Variations of the term 'expulsé' (134 and 125) also highlight the violent aspects of childbirth. Pitié's depiction of childbirth is abject since it blurs the boundaries of the inside and the outside of her body by referring both to human waste products and imagining herself bleeding from her stomach. It provokes a reaction of horror and repulsion in the reader through her representation of a leaking, torn, and blood-soaked body. According to Kristeva, '[l]'évocation du corps maternel et de l'accouchement induit l'image de la naissance comme acte d'expulsion violente par laquelle le corps naissant s'arrache aux substances de l'intérieur maternelle' (1980, 120). The maternal bodily substances that Pitié pictures being expulsed are blood and excrement which are juxtaposed with her tearing stomach. Pitié's visceral description, which portrays childbirth as violent and bloody, is evocative of the act of rape and is perhaps a reimagining of Royal Palm's violent conception. In contrast to Kristeva, this abject and violent

depiction of childbirth is not reflective of negative patriarchal attitudes towards the act of childbirth itself. Instead, it emulates the horror of Pitié's rape and is, perhaps, a metaphor for the wider exploitation of the Creole population of Rodrigues. This highly nuanced representation of childbirth in the context of a young girl who has been raped therefore problematises the positive and universalising approach of the second-wave feminists.

Pitié's final rhetorical question juxtaposes childbirth with her first menses which underscores the horror of her giving birth at such a young age. One could argue that the link made between childbirth with menstrual blood, excrement, violence, and death, is a deliberate nod to Kristeva since she lists all of these as sources of abjection. However, Pitié's childbirth is abject because of the circumstances under which Pitié is giving birth, rather than this abject description expressing a societal aversion to the female body's effluvia. *Soupir* nuances the idea of abjection in the fictional Rodrigues it constructs and uses it to dramatic effect. In this abject portrayal of childbirth, Pitié's innocence, fear, and confusion emerge. The violence of her rape lingers beneath the surface. Pitié's childbirth is key to unlocking the nature of the literary space that Devi creates, because the various depictions of her multiple births bring to the fore the destitution, violence, and exploitation of the population of Rodrigues. The above analysis has once again revealed the importance of problematising the relevance of Kristeva's theory to a non-European cultural context. Even though the violent language that permeates Pitié's story of giving birth echoes Kristeva's use of language in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur,* this abjection is nuanced both on a personal and social level. The birth of Royal Palm reflects not only the exploitation of the Creole inhabitants of Rodrigues, but also recalls Pitié's own trauma of being raped.

Infertility, ritual and sexuality: The menopause in Mauritian women's writing

Since the vast majority of novels from Mauritius feature young protagonists, there are very few novels from Mauritius which represent the menopause. If novels include menopausal and postmenopausal women, they are almost always minor characters. If we refer back to *Pagli,* for example, an elderly fortune teller warns Daya of the pain which awaits her. Some of the *mofines* are also likely to be of menopausal age, but,

as they are represented as a monolithic oppressive entity, we do not learn about their individual experiences. If voices are given to characters who are menopausal or older, they do not speak about the menopause. Within women's writing from Mauritius, Ananda Devi's *Indian Tango* is a rare example of a novel which directly approaches the topic. It follows the life of the fifty-two-year-old Subhadra who is starting to experience menopausal symptoms such as night sweats and hot flushes. Subhadra is part of the Hindu community and lives with her husband and mother-in-law, who she refers to as Mataji.[11] Mataji tries to pressurise Subhadra to join her on a Hindu pilgrimage to Kashi alongside other menopausal and postmenopausal women.[12] In this way, *Indian Tango* mirrors other novels by Devi which probe Hindu attitudes towards the female body. *Indian Tango* is unique because not only does it directly refer to the menopause, but it also presents, through free indirect speech, Subhadra's perspective on the menopause. In fact, the menopause is one of the key themes of the novel. In contrast to the other novels by Mauritian authors which have been analysed across this book, *Indian Tango* is set in India. It does, however, feature a character who is a female Mauritian author and who narrates parts of Subhadra's story. The Mauritian writer chances upon Subhadra in a sitar shop and they engage in an adulterous lesbian affair. This unnamed Mauritian author also acts as the narrator of the story. Chapters alternate between Subhadra's point of view, which is narrated in the third person, and a first-person narrative by the Mauritian author who reflects on her interaction with a woman named Bimala. The two narratives (Subhadra's and the author's) seem independent until the latter stages of the novel when the reader realises that Bimala and Subhadra are one and the same. As Ritu Tyagi explains in her analysis of the plurality of voices in the novel: 'While the two stories in *Indian Tango* develop independently, their content is revelatory' (2013, 113). It is thus important to consider how these two stories intertwine and build a picture of the menopausal woman.

Before analysing the extent to which Subhadra's menopausal experience is influenced by the religious and sociocultural space in which she lives, it is

11 Mataji is a polite term in Hindi meaning 'respected mother'.

12 Kashi is, indeed, a real place of pilgrimage for Hindus (See Christopher Justice (1997) *Dying the Good Death: The Pilgrimage to Die in India's Holy City*, Albany, SUNY Press) but the novel's portrayal of a specific pilgrimage aimed at menopausal women appears to be entirely fictional. As often is the case in Devi's works, religious and cultural traditions are exaggerated for literary effect.

important to turn to consider the Indian context. Indeed, in an interview, Devi offers an explanation as to why she set the novel in India rather in Mauritius: 'Mauritius has become more liberal, with fewer taboos, so I chose to set the novel in Delhi, in India, especially with older generations somewhat set in their ways' (2009). Thus, we can see here that Devi chose India in order to explore the idea of the taboo. Indeed, it is fitting that she explores menopausal experience in depth within this setting as the menopause has been largely overlooked in Mauritian women's writing. Thus, with her choice of placing a menopausal protagonist in India as a space where many taboos exist, we can infer that Devi wishes to show menopausal experience is both shaped by societal taboos and is considered as taboo itself. We can also shed light on the Indian sociocultural and religious context by examining relevant sociological studies. In Saïda Douki Dedieu's cross-cultural study of the menopause, she states that women in certain cultures embrace the menopause more readily than in others because it brings with it 'l'accession à un statut social privilégié' (2011, 122). For Dedieu, India is a space in which the menopausal woman ascends to a higher status. She argues that the practice of pilgrimage in India has a positive influence on menopausal experience. She writes, 'en Inde, la femme ménopausée peut participer aux cérémonies religieuses dont elle était au préalable exclu, à la suite de la disparition des règles, donc du sang impur' (2011, 123). Thus, women's social position shifts from being marginalised to being incorporated within important cultural rituals. In this way, Dedieu's study portrays the menopause as a positive time which affords women greater power and freedom.

Lyla Bavadam's research on menopausal women in India supports Dedieu's view. Based on her interviews with a cross-section of women in India, Lyla Bavadam illustrates that women in India largely perceive the menopause as a moment of liberation. She underscores the positive approach of menopausal women in India by contrasting it with more negative Western perceptions of the menopause. Bavadam argues the following about their differing attitudes towards the word 'menopause':

> [I]n the West, the word is associated with loss of beauty and youth, and the pain of this loss, it appears that in contrast in [India], these negative connotations are not so widespread. Words like 'freedom' and 'liberation' were commonly used by a large cross-section of women in different parts of the country to describe their experiences of the menopause. (2004, 127)

However, resonating with Beauvoir's approach in *Le Deuxieme Sexe,* Bavadam also highlights the ambivalent nature of women's menopausal

experiences. Bavadam too explores the connection between infertility and sexual desire. Her findings reveal that most men in India form a link 'between sexual attractiveness and fertility' and that this link is 'internalized by most women in the form of the deeply held social belief that a woman is a woman only if she bears a child' (2004, 128). Bavadam here argues that, despite achieving a higher social status, menopausal women in India feel less sexually desirable because they have internalised a patriarchal valorisation of fertility. In addition, if we look at the title of Bavadam's chapter, '"The Silent Transition": Indian Women and Menopause', we can see that, despite the social privileges the menopause brings, this topic is still surrounded by silence. Thus, we can infer that one of the taboos to which Devi alludes in her interview is the menopause itself.

Indeed, we can argue that *Indian Tango* offers a metatextual perspective on why there exists so few works, perhaps within Mauritian literature or in women's writing more widely, which represent menopausal experience. The Mauritian author is, in the following passage, reflecting on her writing of Subhadra's story:

> Comment raconter l'histoire d'un dessèchement ? Quoi de plus banal, de plus abject que l'écrivain qui se raconte en prétendant croire que le lecteur n'a qu'une envie, celle de suspendre quelques heures de sa vie pour en suivre une autre dans laquelle se passe rien d'autre que le mortel silence du tarissement? (51)

This passage is, to use Tyagi's term, 'revelatory' (2013, 113) because it shows the difficulty faced by the writer to create a narrative around menopausal experience that a reader would enjoy. Here, the author plays on stereotypes of the menopause by using two synonyms of the verb 'to dry up', namely, 'dessèchement' and 'tarissement' (51). We can argue that the reference to this topic as dry, 'banal' and 'abject', framed through the use of rhetorical questions, is a metatextual remark which suggests how the Mauritian author believes other writers view the menopause and thus why they have not written about it. This metatextual comment by the fictional Mauritian author resonates strongly with the silence on this subject across women's writing in French. This passage in *Indian Tango*, however, is not one which simply reinforces stereotypes. The use of rhetorical questions encourages the reader to problematise the stereotypes of menopausal women as banal, abject, and dry, and encourages them to read further to discover how Subhadra's life does not fit these pejorative stereotypes. With the knowledge that Subhadra

engages in an exciting lesbian affair, we can understand the irony and humour of this passage alongside the intent of the fictional Mauritian author to produce a story which challenges societal perceptions of menopausal women.

Although, as will become clearer later in this analysis, Subhadra does reject certain stereotypes about the menopause, her inner monologue sometimes resonates with Beauvoir's imagery of the menopausal body as deteriorating. It first dawns on Subhadra that she is menopausal when she tells Mataji that she has a temperature. Mataji, her mother-in-law, responds: 'des chauds et froids, les pieds qui transpirent et puent, les vertiges, tout ça, c'est la ménopause. C'est ton âge' (49–50). We can see here that Mataji, who is postmenopausal, considers the menopause as a sign of ageing which leaves the woman no longer in control of her body. Through the imagery of sweat and odour, Mataji describes the menopause in a manner that reflects the fictional Mauritian author's use of the term 'abject'. Key to interpreting Mataji's statement which she utters 'avec satisfaction' (50) is her interpersonal relationship with Subhadra. Subhadra's loathing towards Mataji is expressed in phrases such as 'Mataji, déchet irréparable' (42) and the comment: 'même l'odeur qu'elle dégage est momifiée' (43).

We can see that Mataji feels a similar animosity towards Subhadra through her emphatically stating that Subhadra is menopausal in front of Jugdish (Subhadra's husband) with the intention of painting her as repulsive. Subhadra observes the cruel glint in Mataji's eyes and thinks in return 'elle n'est plus seule sur son chemin de décrépitude' (50). Subhadra here expresses the idea that she has now started on the path of decay, which Mataji has already taken, because she is experiencing menopausal symptoms. The phrase 'chemin de décrépitude' resonates with Beauvoir's description of the menopause as 'la définitive mutilation' (1949, 400). Subhadra's negative conception of the menopause is likely to be based on her revulsion towards the fact that she is starting to resemble the ageing Mataji. We can observe, therefore, a similar approach to menopause and the ageing body as that found in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, but it is nuanced by the spiteful nature of Mataji's and Subhadra's interpersonal relationship.

Subhadra's menopausal state is confirmed once she escapes from Mataji into the kitchen. In this scene, links emerge between the menopause and death. The novel builds on this connection as the narrative develops. Upon realising that 'elle n'a pas encore vécu' (50), Subhadra has a hot flush. This cause and effect highlights the personal

nature of menopausal experience by portraying a personal fear as triggering a hot flush. The hot flush is represented as follows: 'la chaleur de la cuisinière rejoint celle qui commence au niveau de sa poitrine, puis s'étale lentement. Chaud, chaud, chaud' (50). The repetition of 'chaud' underlines her sense of panic as her body reveals she has entered the menopause. By worrying that she has not yet lived, Subhadra is represented as viewing the menopause as a reminder that she will die. Indeed, her inner voice refers to the menopause as 'le délitement annonciateur de la mort de la femme avant sa mort' (50). Here, Subhadra creates an image of a deteriorating menopausal body that prefigures death. This is a more overt reference to the menopause as a sign of death than can be found in second-wave feminist texts. Instead, Beauvoir, Leclerc, and Cardinal frame the menopause within a discourse of ageing which implicitly suggests death as the end result. For example, Beauvoir describes 'l'horreur du vieillissement' (Beauvoir, 1949, 400).

The references to death continue throughout the novel such as in the recurring motif of the funeral pyre. Subhadra illustrates that, in the fictionalised Indian landscape of *Indian Tango*, menopausal women are expected to accept their insignificance until they die: 'Accepter de n'être plus rien qu'un bout de chiffon dans le noir, qui s'embrasera dans la seule dernière luminosité accordé au corps: celle du bûcher' (67). Indeed, we find an echo with this passage in Subhadra's reference to 'la mort de la femme' because this can also connote the death of the wife. In a manner which is reminiscent of Beauvoir's theory that the menopausal woman is '[d]échargée de ses devoirs' (1949, 408), Subhadra illustrates that the menopause is a time which marks the completion of wifely duties: 'On a fini ses tâches principales de la vie' (66). This is likely to refer to having children or sexually satisfying a husband. She also refers to 'devoirs accomplis' (67) and, later in the novel, positions the Hindu pilgrimage as her society's method of disposing of menopausal women since they are no longer deemed to serve any purpose: 'La société, les jugeant désormais inutiles puisque dépourvues de rôles, organise leur mise à mort' (122). The word 'société' is key here since it anchors this perception of menopausal women as no longer serving a particular purpose within a specific sociocultural context. Resonating with Beauvoir, who argues that menopausal women are considered to have completed all tasks expected of them, Subhadra believes that the menopause is perceived in her community as a metaphorical death since the woman has no specific role to play.

The following visceral description underscores the cruelty of the passage of time and the slow, yet brutal, impact of the ageing process on the female body:

> On chemine à petits pas vers la mort. C'est tout. Cela prendra plus ou moins de temps. On vieillira peut-être avec la même impression que rien ne change sauf ce corps qui se dégrade à une vue d'œil, ces plis malencontreux, ces trous de mémoire, ces yeux filmés de cataracte (à laver dans le Gange ?), ce ventre, cette barbe, cet affaissement des chairs, ces odeurs de pourriture annoncée, et le temps, peu à peu, vous dévore. (66)

The use of 'on' in Subhadra's interior monologue positions the menopause as a horror which awaits all women, thus framing this particular passage in a discourse of universal ageing which resonates with the approach of the second-wave feminists. The pronoun 'on' incorporates the reader into the text and places them within Subhadra's imagery of the decaying body and the passage of time. Subhadra's abject horror at the ageing process, inspired by her realisation that she is now menopausal, permeates this passage through the long enumeration of ailing body parts. The slowness of the ageing process is revealed in the phrases 'petits pas' and 'peu à peu'. Time is portrayed as a slow yet unstoppable and vicious force that acts upon the female body. In another passage, after experiencing night sweats, Subhadra thinks: 'Du rictus mauvais de cette biologie sans appel des femmes' (71). The imagery of the fixed grin presents the menopause as something which mocks women and combines with the phrase 'sans appel' to underline that there is no turning back from this point. These two representations of ageing echo, to some extent, Beauvoir's conception of the ageing process. Beauvoir argues that, 'les passages d'un stade à un autre sont d'une dangereuse brutalité (1949, 399). The vision in *Indian Tango* is one which certainly shares Beauvoir's perception of ageing as brutal. However, *Indian Tango* provides an alternative perspective to Beauvoir's conception of ageing as sudden through the slow image of degradation over time. This slight contrast reveals that women can envisage the ageing process differently, and this may impact on their responses to their starting the menopause. Certainly, *Indian Tango* is much more preoccupied with death than is Beauvoir's representation of ageing in *Le Deuxième Sexe*.

Death seeps into Subhadra's imagination of the ageing female body. The above lexical field, which includes the words 'dégrade', 'affaissement', 'dévore' (66), is certainly one of degradation. A foreshadowing of

death is apparent in the imagery of decay and rot. The description of the changing boundaries of the menopausal body with its wrinkles, smells, holes, and beard, alongside Subhadra's association between the menopause and death, are reminiscent of Kristeva's theory of abjection. This resonance emerges between the two texts because Kristeva defines the abject as something which reminds us of death and 'ne respecte pas les limites'. The abject is 'l'entre-deux, l'ambigu, le mixte' (1980, 12). This representation of the rotting ageing body, since it focuses on the collapsing of the skin and the erosion of time, both of which constitute the breaking down of boundaries, could certainly be considered as echoing Kristeva's theory of abjection. The imagery of 'ces yeux filmés de cataracte' (66) is also one of abjection. This is a specific reference to Mataji who refuses to have a cataract operation and instead believes that she can be healed by washing her eyes in the Ganges. Thus, we can see, even in the short passage cited above, that *Indian Tango* resonates strongly with certain aspects of second-wave feminist work. However, these are nuanced through Subhadra's conception of time and repulsion towards Mataji whose ageing body informs Subhadra's attitude towards her own menopausal body.

Another key tendency of second-wave feminist work which is evident in *Indian Tango* is the idea that menopausal women, because they are infertile, are no longer considered to have a purpose in society. Indeed, this a discourse which we have already seen in women's writing from Algeria and France. This connection is less explicit in *Indian Tango* than in *Bleu blanc vert* or *Constance et la cinquantaine*. In contrast to *Bleu blanc vert,* the tone is humorous, rather than anxious, when Subhadra reveals that she feels invisible and worthless. Subhadra sits outside amongst the rubbish on the balcony and believes that if she were to remain there her family would soon forget that she ever existed. She imagines her family allowing her to gather dust on the balcony: '[p]eu à peu, la poussière la recouvre. À l'intérieur de la maison, la vie continue. Au début, on s'étonne un peu de son absence, surtout au moment des repas. Puis, on s'organise' (122). Her sharing a space with broken objects (including 'tables, chaises, abat-jour, vieux vélo' (42)) that have also been rejected is symbolic of her feelings of futility. She thinks to herself: 'La seule qui soit déréglée (c'est le cas de le dire), c'est elle. Elle ne manque à personne. Une disparition ? À peine. À peine. Pour disparaître, encore faut-il être' (122). The link between the infertile body and being considered as no longer useful emerges here through wordplay. Subhadra uses the word 'déréglée' as a pun, which is made clear by her following

it humorously with '(c'est le cas de le dire)' (122). The word 'déréglée' is a play on the word 'règles' and evokes the idea that Subhadra no longer menstruates. Thus, as 'déréglée' also means 'malfunctioned', Subhadra is linking the cessation of menstruation with dysfunction. Subhadra, by employing this discourse of the female body as a faulty machine, is hinting that women who are infertile no longer serve any purpose to society. This would suggest that her description of menopausal women as being 'dépourvues de rôles' (122) refers to their roles of giving birth to children and mothering them.

Subhadra's repetition of 'À peine' resembles an echo, as if her body is only an echo of what it once was. Upon imaging herself turning into a forgotten 'fantôme décharné et squelettique' (122) Subhadra smiles to herself, suggesting that this invisibility is not without its advantages. The reader becomes more and more aware as the narrative progresses that this invisibility allows Subhadra to engage in a lesbian affair without arousing suspicion. An analysis of the style of the passage is key to its interpretation. Subhadra's wistful style, which calmly spills over the page in short sentences of an even rhythm, the wordplay on 'déréglée', and the rhyming of 'disparaître' and 'être' adds a light-hearted and whimsical tone to the passage. The tone and style therefore set *Indian Tango* apart from *Bleu blanc vert* and the second-wave feminist texts because Subhadra considers the advantages of being invisible and conveys with irony the idea that menopausal women no longer have a purpose.

Where we can find a clear divergence from the purported 'universal' approach of the second-wave feminists is through the representation in *Indian Tango* of a Hindu pilgrimage to Kashi and the reasons given for why menopausal women are expected to take part. Whilst *Bleu blanc vert* illustrates that the menopausal body is subject to being controlled by Islamic doctrine by exploring the impact of the Family Code of 1984, in *Indian Tango* the method of controlling the menopausal body takes the form of a Hindu pilgrimage. Mataji, as a pious matriarchal figure, repeatedly urges the menopausal Subhadra to accompany her: 'pourquoi pas maintenant? Qu'est-ce qui t'en empêche ?' (90). According to Subhadra's internal monologue the pilgrimage is designed to compel women to renounce their sexual desires. Subhadra expresses this idea in the statement that during the pilgrimage these women must wash away 'la mince couche de vie et de désir qui se colle encore à leur peau, telle une maladie ou une moisissure' (74). Describing any thoughts of desire as a 'maladie' implies that the Hindu community in which Subhadra lives considers sexual desire after the menopause as an illness

or, in other terms, as something abject which must be repelled. The implication is that the sexual desire of the menopausal woman will be eradicated through the purifying ritual of the pilgrimage. The idea that menopausal women should not feel sexual desire after the menopause resonates with Cardinal's observation that the menopause signals 'la fin du désir' (1977, 43). *Indian Tango* is once again reminiscent of the second-wave feminist approach to the menopause, and more specifically Beauvoir's statement that the menopausal woman is 'dépouillée de sa feminité' (1949, 399), through its positioning of the pilgrimage as marking the end of femininity. For Subhadra, '[c]e pèlerinage […], c'est le début de la fin de sa féminité' (74). Although *Indian Tango* shares these two tendencies with second-wave feminist texts, namely the portrayal of menopause as marking the end of both sexual desire and femininity, these are nuanced within the specific religious and cultural context of *Indian Tango*.

The purpose of the pilgrimage, as it is portrayed through the eyes of Subhadra, is reminiscent of Kristeva's and Ussher's theories about the female body. The positioning of this ritual as something which moulds women into an image which is acceptable within Subhadra's Hindu community resonates with Ussher's argument that religious rituals 'serve to manage the monstrous feminine, muddying their malevolent intent through being positioned as unquestioned religious or cultural practices' (2006, 8). This body is not positioned in *Indian Tango* as monstrous, as Ussher formulates it, but instead in animalistic terms. This connection between the female body and the animal kingdom is also one which Kristeva makes in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*. Subhadra pictures the pilgrims as farm animals being loaded onto a lorry and driven to their deaths: 'La société […] leur tranche la gorge en un rituel bien défini, sous une pancarte explicite : Abattage de femmes ménopausées' (122). The imagery here is one of an abattoir for menopausal women. Indeed, this resonates with a previous passage in which Subhadra envisages herself on the pilgrimage as 'une vache cheminant vers l'abattoir, les yeux trop doux, la bouche duveteuse et les narines dociles' (74). Subhadra also describes the menopausal pilgrims as silent and projecting an air of complicity: 'elles ne disent rien, ne se plaignent pas […] leur seule vertu étant ce silence qui fout la paix à la société et aux hommes' (122–23). Through this imagery of women as docile animals, Subhadra portrays menopausal women as having the same value to her community as animals that produce neither milk nor offspring. Subhadra is thereby commenting, yet again, that her society

treats menopausal women as worthless because they can no longer bear children. Her characterisation of the pilgrims as docile animals illustrates that they have lived their lives in silence and are, outwardly at least, appearing to be complicit.

The representation of the Hindu pilgrimage and menopausal women in *Indian Tango* lies in stark contrast to Dedieu's sociological study of Indian culture which frames pilgrimage as a reward for menopausal women and a sign that they have attained 'un statut social privilégié' (2011, 122). For Subhadra, this pilgrimage is certainly not a privilege. Instead, she envisions it as a punishment. Indeed, she highlights the laborious elements of the pilgrimage including 'les longues marches sur les routes surchauffées dans le seul but de racheter, non les péchés qu'elles ont commis, mais ceux qu'elles auraient pu commettre si elles s'étaient laissées, ne fût-ce qu'un seul instant, aller' (73–74). So far, we have focused on the gloomy impression of the menopause which is created in *Indian Tango*. Indeed, the novel builds up this depressing picture of the menopause through a proliferation of images of death and decaying bodies. However, if we consider Subhadra's subversive attitude and actions which are revealed to the reader as the novel progresses, we can argue that this negative imagery serves the purpose of juxtaposing the Hindu community's expectations for menopausal women with Subhadra's own experiences as a menopausal woman.

In contrast to the friend in *Bleu blanc vert*, whose silence is a product of her fear that her menopausal state will come to light and she will consequently be abandoned by her husband, Subhadra characterises the image of silence that menopausal women in her society project as a façade. Subhadra believes that this silence masks the intent of these menopausal women to subvert and reject societal expectations and perceptions. Subhadra senses an inward rebellion in the women who are being figuratively lined up for the slaughter: 'au fond d'elles-mêmes, quelque chose continue. De vivre, de battre et de grandir. Une vie après la mort. Dans la mort. Être réincarnée en sitar, si longtemps après? Pourquoi Pas ?' (123). Here, Subhadra stresses that even though society considers menopausal women to be dead in a metaphorical sense, these women are still very much alive. By referring to the menopause as 'Une vie après la mort' (142) Subhadra characterises the menopause as a reincarnation. She reiterates this idea by imagining herself as a sitar which symbolises her renewed interest in music that led her to a sitar shop where she met the woman who would become her lover. This imagery of life and music lies in diametrical opposition to the perception of the menopause as a

form of death which is promulgated in the culture in which Subhadra lives. This association between the menopause and life lies in stark contrast to Leclerc's and Cardinal's feminist theories. Whereas Leclerc and Cardinal do not challenge societal stereotypes, Subhadra playfully subverts her society's discourses about the menopause by framing it in diametrically opposite language.

Subhadra's rejection of her society's perceptions of, and expectations for, menopausal women is not limited to her imagination and use of language. She defies her community's expectations for menopausal women to wash away their 'mince couche de vie et de désir' (74) through her actions as well as her words. Firstly, she refuses to go on the pilgrimage, which signals her unwillingness to renounce her sexual desires and give up on life. Secondly, and the most transgressive of all Subhadra's forms of dissent, she engages in a lesbian affair with the Mauritian author. The sexual desire she feels for the Mauritian author and that which the author feels in return is highly transgressive because it defies societal expectations for women to leave the sexual order, a departure which the pilgrimage is designed to ensure. In addition, it is outside a heteronormative framework and is a secret adulterous affair. Subhadra finds from her sexual encounters with the Mauritian author a new lease of life which mirrors her belief that menopausal women in her society can forge '[u]ne vie après la mort' (142). After her sexual encounter, Subhadra looks at herself in the mirror and does not recognise herself. She sees 'une autre espèce, qui n'a pas encore de nom' (16). The notion that she does not yet know how to name her rejuvenated body shows that this newfound confidence is inexpressible in a heteronormative society that condemns sexual desire in women after the menopause.

In fact, it is only during the menopause that Subhadra starts to understand the nature of her own sexual desire: 'des mains, une bouche, des caresses, un sexe. Voilà, c'est dit. Avant cela, elle ne savait pas quelle était la voix de son corps. Ni même que son corps avait une voix' (116). The enumeration of Subhadra's body parts creates an image of her body awakening her latent sexual desires. Hence, for Subhadra, the menopause is the first time she realises that she is capable of sexual desire. This sexual awakening lies in complete contrast to the expectation in her society for the menopause to mark the end of a woman's sexual desire. Subhadra powerfully takes control of her own fate by refusing to go on a pilgrimage designed to send her to a metaphorical death and instead chooses a path of sexual desire and fulfilment.

Conclusion

Mauritian literature lies in stark contrast to second-wave feminist texts which have been criticised for their universalism and idealism. On the whole, it is evident that Mauritian women's writing takes an intersectional approach to the female body. Across this corpus, we can identify a variety of factors that shape women's experiences of menstruation, childbirth, and the menopause. These factors include religion, culture, multicultural tensions, the legacy of colonialism, politics, and more individual factors such as interpersonal relationships. Characters' bodily experiences are primarily influenced by their ethnicity and their community's beliefs which stem from either Hinduism or Christianity. Devi and Patel's characters live in a space in which their behaviour is controlled through religious doctrines that are often depicted as masking and excusing a patriarchal desire to control the female body. In this body of work, patriarchal discipline in the name of religion takes the form of violence, shaming, and silencing. We can also observe that women's bodies are regulated through superstition and ritual. However, it is in their representation of ethnicity that Mauritian novels resonate the most with Audre Lorde's and Barbara Christian's arguments. Mauritian narratives of menstruation and childbirth are often set in a space in which there exist racial tensions. Across women's writing from Mauritius we witness the prejudice between the Indo-Mauritian Hindus and the Creole population as well as the disaffected Creole population's battle with the legacy of colonialism and slavery. This engagement with issues of ethnicity provides the starkest contrast between Mauritian literature and second-wave feminist work.

Mauritian literature also mirrors the tendency in contemporary women's writing in French to frame female bodily experience within traumatic and taboo contexts. We can find narratives of menstruation and childbirth that are inflected by characters' trauma which has resulted from their being sexually abused. The female fertility cycle is also explored in the contexts of miscarriage and abortion. These experiences are even more traumatic since they take place in a setting in which abortion is criminalised. However, despite the bleak picture painted by Mauritian literature of women's rights and freedoms, there certainly lies a subversive intent. Resonating with the aim of second-wave feminism to challenge patriarchal discourse, we find in Mauritian literature a similar defiant spirit, albeit one which is highly nuanced by the fictionalised Mauritian society in which it is articulated. *India Tango* specifically

challenges societal perceptions of the menopause by portraying a menopausal woman who is not only characterised in terms which diametrically oppose pejorative patriarchal discourses but who also acts in a manner which defies patriarchal expectations. Despite not seeking to challenge societal perceptions of menstruation, Daya's menstrual blood is a symbol of her resistance to patriarchal expectations for her to give birth to an Indo-Mauritian baby. In parallel, Mylène's depiction of her menstruating body is not a challenge to societal perceptions of menstruation per se. Instead, this portrayal marks a rejection of neo-colonialist discourses which seek to exoticise, diminish, and assert control over the Mauritian Creole woman. Therefore, although we can see that the female body in Mauritian women's writing is inscribed in traumatic contexts which do not allow space for second-wave feminist idealism, this corpus certainly criticises patriarchal values, discourses, and expectations through marginalised, yet subversive, female characters.

Conclusion

Through the exploration of women's representations of the female fertility cycle, *From Menstruation to the Menopause* has traversed seven decades of women's writing in French, from Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949), until its most recent text, *Paradis Bleus* (2014). This book has mapped, over this seventy-year period, how women writers have evolved in their approaches to menstruation, childbirth, and the menopause. Since 1990, the most striking changes have been in the adoption of a more intersectional approach to the female body, as well as in the framing of the female body within more traumatic contexts. These approaches set this contemporary body of literature apart from second-wave feminist texts which have been criticised for their universalism, essentialism, and idealism. They consider how factors such as ethnicity, religion, culture, society, politics, and colonial history shape women's bodily experience. These fictional texts therefore portray women in an intersectional manner which supports the view of critics such as Audre Lorde and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak who highlight that women's experiences differ due to the influence of a network of various sources of oppression. This conclusion first takes a cross-cultural comparative view of each female bodily experience in turn before making some general observations about the shift in perspective, as well as some key similarities, between second-wave feminism and women's writing post-1990. It ends with a reflection on future avenues for research which have arisen from this study.

Menstruation: A cross-cultural perspective

Menstruation has remained a popular area of exploration in women's writing in French. This book has examined a great variety of novels

which follow in the footsteps of the second-wave feminists. They continue their line of enquiry by continuing to break the silence that exists around menstruation as well as by questioning normative societal perceptions of menstruation. Each literature highlights that, within the societies they portray, menstrual experience is often surrounded by silence or shame. Discourses of concealment are manifest across women's writing from Algeria, France, and Mauritius. Contemporary authors expose how this silence impacts on a woman's menstrual experience. For instance, they create protagonists who respond with fear when they do not understand why they are bleeding or characters who rebel against the status quo by vociferously celebrating their menstrual blood. Certain novels also challenge the taboo nature of menstruation. *Baise-Moi*, for example, questions why images of blood are acceptable when they are as a result of violence, and yet harmless menstrual blood must never be spoken about and remain hidden from view. However, the reasons for this silence differ within each culture because, as I have argued across this book, representations of menstruation in contemporary women's writing are nuanced by the cultural context in which the novels are set.

Discourses of concealment provide one aspect of cross-cultural comparison which clearly illustrates that contemporary women's writing in French takes an intersectional approach to the silence which surrounds menstruation. Women's writing from Algeria, Mauritius, and France all explore both the perception that menstrual blood contaminates public spaces and the expectation for women to conceal their menstrual blood. These 'universal' aspects are, however, produced by different phenomena that are specific to the cultures in which the novels are set. In Algerian and Mauritian women's writing, ideas of contamination and concealment are linked to a belief that menstrual blood is impure. In Algerian literature, the frame of reference is Islam. In Mauritian literature, Hindu and Creole superstitions both position menstruating women as impure. Women's writing from France, however, primarily frames menstruation as a medical issue. In *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M,* the medical profession perpetuates the belief that menstrual blood is an unhygienic substance which must be undetectable in a public space. Despite religion playing no evident role in the way in which menstrual experience is represented in *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M,* the female body is, nevertheless, depicted by Millet as being subject to external forms of discipline, namely, an attempt to enforce that menstruation is never detectable. We can draw parallels here with the cultures of concealment that are represented in francophone novels set within

Islamic and Hindu communities. Although Millet's work does not refer to any specific religious notion of menstruation as 'impure', it presents a repulsion towards menstrual blood which is based on a belief that this blood is unhygienic.

Despite this divide between religion and secularism, an obsession with hygiene is common to both the Islamic society portrayed in Algerian women's writing as well as the secular French society presented in women's writing from France. We can examine this transnational resonance in light of Ussher's cross-cultural approach to the societal regulation of menstruating women. Ussher compares religious practices, such as the Islamic practice of hijab and sequestering, to a secular obsession with hygiene. She explains: 'Each of these regulatory practices shares a common aim: containment of the monstrous feminine and protection from the threat of contamination from pollution, signified by menstrual blood' (2006, 19). In addition, Ussher asserts that Western society constructs menstruation as 'a medicalised event, with hygiene and education about management of the changing body, of primary concern' (2006, 19). Indeed, we can observe that the discourses of impurity employed by the fathers in both *L'Arbre fouet* and *La Voyeuse interdite* resemble Catherine's doctor's discourse of hygiene in *La Vie Sexuelle de Catherine M*. All of these fictional texts articulate a societal belief that women contaminate public spaces because they menstruate. The Mauritian and Algerian novels express this within an exaggerated religious frame of reference, and Millet's text articulates this in an exaggerated medical context. The father's choice to sequester Fikria and not allow her to speak is designed to limit her contamination, as is the doctor's instruction for Catherine to ensure her menstrual blood cannot be detected. However, my cross-cultural analysis has demonstrated that a societal emphasis on hygiene, which is perpetuated in order to maintain the concealment of menstruation, is not specific to secular cultures. Hygiene practices are an important influence on menstrual experience in both women's writing from France and women's literature from Algeria. Hence, by demonstrating that a discourse of menstrual hygiene traverses both secular and religious societies, my findings both problematise Ussher's analysis of menstrual hygiene as well as build on her argument that societal attitudes towards menstruation are influenced by religious and medical perspectives on the female body.

As evident in Ussher's *Managing the Monstrous Feminine*, sociological studies continue to use Kristeva's theory of abjection to interpret societal discourses of menstruation. Of the three corporeal experiences explored

in this book, it is menstruation that women's writing in French most commonly views through the lens of abjection. Thus, this theory continues to provide a useful tool with which to analyse contemporary women's writing in French both from within, and outside, France. Indeed, there are examples within literature from Algeria, France, and Mauritius, which portray the menstruating body as inspiring horror or repulsion. The link between menstruation and the animal world also traverses these cultural divides. *La Voyeuse interdite, L'Arbre Fouet*, and *Baise-moi* all explore this animalistic discourse in their representations of menstruation. However, contrary to *Pouvoirs de l'horreur,* depictions of the menstruating female body as abject or animalistic are strongly influenced by the cultural context in which the novels are set. Thus, if we are to apply Kristeva's theory to more contemporary literature or novels that portray a different national context, it is important that we nuance this theoretical framework. In Algerian literature, the primary source of horror in menstrual narratives is not the menstrual blood itself but its symbolism. This blood symbolises that the character has now become a woman in a patriarchal society in which women are treated as inferior and sometimes subject to violence. For instance, in *La Voyeuse interdite* and *La Jeune Fille et la mère*, women are strictly regulated to ensure that they do not engage in pre-marital sex because the honour of the family rests on their virginity. In Mauritian literature, the presence of a discourse of abjection is also primarily a reflection of the condition of women rather than on societal attitudes towards menstruation. Indeed, in *Pagli*, Daya's first menstrual bleed signals to her community that she can now be married. In women's writing from France, we find an approach to abjection that more closely resembles that of Kristeva: it is menstruation itself which inspires horror rather than womanhood. For example, in *Baise-Moi,* Manu's mother is repulsed by her daughter's practice of menstruating onto furniture and the doctor emphasises his repulsion at the smell of Catherine's menstrual blood. The medicalisation of the female body, which is central to Millet's narrative of menstruation, is not a factor which Kristeva incorporates into her theory of abjection. Hence, by using Kristeva's theory of abjection as a theoretical framework, this book has illustrated that discourses of horror, repulsion, abjection and animality traverse literature from Algeria, France, and Mauritius but are produced by varying social, cultural, and religious factors. This finding demonstrates the suitability of a transnational approach to literary representations of menstruation because transnational feminism seeks to unite women across the globe without eliding their differences (Mohanty,

1984; Alexander, 2006). Hence, if we take a transnational approach, we can observe that menstrual experience is stigmatised and silenced across all three literatures but the way in which characters experience this silence depends on the cultural context in which they live.

Narratives of menstruation from across these three distinct cultures are also united by their interest in the supernatural. We find an association between menstruation and the supernatural in 'Des poils sur moi', *Paradis blues, Ève de ses décombres* and *La Jeune fille et la mère*. In each of these examples, menstruating women are depicted as vulnerable to the supernatural and their blood is portrayed as a source of danger or power. Thus, the notion that menstruation is a curse also traverses cultural boundaries. Nevertheless, we can argue that these texts share a satirical approach to the taboos and negative stereotypes that still exist around a harmless monthly event within the cultural contexts they fictionalise. By playing with the idea of the supernatural, each text exposes the ridiculousness of perceiving menstruation as dangerous, polluting, and horrifying. Whilst the menstruating woman in *La Voyeuse interdite* is portrayed as monstrous through a lexical field of animality, in *Paradis blues,* the monstrous is evoked through the juxtaposition of the menstruating woman, death, witchcraft, and werewolves.

Besides demonstrating the influence of broad factors, such as culture, society, and religion, contemporary narratives of menstruation also illustrate the influence of interpersonal relationships on menstrual experience. The mother is a key figure in the considered narratives of menstruation. It is evident that in each literary culture a girl's first menstrual bleed is primarily shaped by her familial relationships and, in turn, these familial relationships are influenced by the cultural context in which the novels are set. For instance, in Algerian novels, mothers do not educate their daughters because, in the Algerian Islamic society in which they live, menstruation is strongly associated with sex. Thus, since sex is a taboo subject, menstruation is also not discussed. In each literature, we can find novels which demonstrate that the silence that surrounds menstrual experience on a broad societal level is mirrored by a mother's ability to discuss menstruation with her daughter. Each literature highlights the importance of educating girls about menstruation before they enter puberty, as the majority of these works expose the negative impact of not educating young women about menstruation. For instance, Lilas, the protagonist of *Bleu blanc vert,* and Mylène, the protagonist of *Paradis Blues,* are

frightened when they discover blood in their underwear as they do not understand why it is there. However, in *J'avais douze ans…* we can see how the mother's prior explanations about menstruation and her celebration of Nathalie's first menstrual bleed render this a positive experience. Although Schweighoffer may not have read *Parole de femme,* this text most closely answers Leclerc's call for women to celebrate menstrual experience. All three literatures also consider the role of the father in shaping adolescent menstrual experience. In *La Vie Sexuelle de Catherine M,* the father mocks Catherine by joking about nosebleeds. However, the majority of menstrual narratives which have been analysed in *From Menstruation to the Menopause* portray the father figure as abusive. In both Mauritian and Algerian literature we can find a father figure who distorts religious doctrine and employs animalistic language to assert his authority over his daughter. In *J'avais douze ans…* the first menses marks a moment of celebration, but this is short-lived as Nathalie's happiness is soon shattered when she is raped by her father. This archetype of the abusive father is therefore common to all three literatures. One can argue that this figure is recurrent because each literature positions the first menses as a loss of innocence and an entrance into a world of gender inequality. A consideration of the relationship between parent and child is strikingly absent from second-wave feminist texts.

Childbirth: A cross-cultural perspective

The idea of 'patriarchy', which is central to second-wave feminist thinking, is still prominent within Algerian and Mauritian narratives of childbirth. Both Algerian and Mauritian fictional texts characterise patriarchy as a force which negatively shapes women's attitudes and experiences of childbirth. They seek both to reveal the existence of negative patriarchal discourses as well as reject them. Nevertheless, in contrast to second-wave feminist works, the concept of patriarchy is nuanced by the respective Algerian and Mauritian contexts in which the novels are set. In Algerian literature, women are affected by the patriarchal expectation for them to become a mother to sons as well as by Islamic patriarchal laws that permit repudiation and polygamy. Algerian literature implicitly criticises normative expectations for women to give birth to many children by highlighting that women's bodies are irreversibly damaged by multiple pregnancies. *Bleu blanc vert* celebrates

contraception as an alternative and positions it as a method of female empowerment. In the Mauritian novels, childbirth is framed within a patriarchal Hindu culture in which women are expected to perpetuate a pure Indo-Mauritian bloodline. In *Pagli,* Daya resists these expectations both through verbally expressing her dissent as well as refusing to procreate with her husband.

A celebration of childbirth is another significant approach which is common to both second-wave feminism and contemporary women's writing from Algeria, France, and Mauritius. Ananda Devi's *Pagli,* Malika Mokeddem's *Les Hommes qui marchent*, and Agnès Desarthe's 'Les mois, les heures et les minutes' all celebrate the fertility and power of the childbearing woman. Nevertheless, the reasons for this celebration are strikingly different. In *Pagli*, Daya joyfully imagines bearing Zil's child outside a framework which forbids interracial relationships. Thus, her celebration of childbirth is subversive not because it challenges her society's view of women's labour but because it defies her community's expectation for her to give birth to a purely Indo-Mauritian baby. In Mokeddem's novel, Leïla celebrates her aunt's and mother's contributions to the rebuilding of Algeria and their resistance of the archaic patriarchal practice of burying girls after they were born. In Desarthe's text, childbirth is portrayed as an expression of female strength and resilience.

However, narratives of childbirth are markedly different from second-wave feminist texts in two ways. Firstly, these novels demonstrate that women's experiences of childbirth are not 'universal'. Many of the differences between women that were identified by critics of the second-wave feminist movement, such as race, class and cultural context, are present within contemporary women's writing in French. Each literature explores a distinct sociocultural context and how this impacts women's attitudes towards, and experience of, childbirth. In Algerian literature, an Islamic patriarchal culture tries to control the female body. The nature and influence of patriarchy, however, differs depending on the contemporaneous political situation. For example, *Je dois tout à ton oubli* and *Les Hommes qui marchent* investigate the pro-natalist policies of the Algerian government post-independence. Both situate their narratives during the early years of Algerian independence when women were expected to rebuild the Algerian population and faced living in cramped conditions. Thus, we can see in these novels that women's experiences of childbirth are influenced both by politics and their socioeconomic status.

In Mauritian women's writing, women's attitudes towards, and experiences of, childbirth are inflected by racial tension, marginalisation, and exploitation. In this way, Devi's and Patel's novels challenge the stereotypical image of Mauritius as an island paradise or a 'multicultural melting pot' in which ethnic groups live in harmony. Barbara Christian's and Audre Lorde's arguments that a woman's ethnicity shapes her lived experiences are therefore highly pertinent to these novels. *Soupir* and *Paradis Blues* also portray socioeconomic factors as shaping women's experiences of childbirth. In both texts, the disempowerment felt by characters as members of an impoverished and silenced Creole class is echoed in their depictions of childbirth as a traumatic event over which they have little control. Echoing Algerian women's writing, we also find in Mauritian literature an exploration of how the criminalisation of abortion affects female bodily experience. In *Pagli* and *Paradis Blues,* the ambivalent representation of miscarriage and/or abortion highlights the trauma that can be engendered by normative expectations for women and by restrictions on women's reproductive rights.

In women's writing from France, we can also find a consideration of mediatised images of childbirth and how these impact women's experiences of labour. 'Les mois, les heures et les minutes' and 'Mon Lapin' illustrate that television disseminates an inaccurate image of childbirth as traumatic and torturous, which does not reflect the lived experience of all mothers. Especially prominent in narratives of childbirth is the role of medicalisation. It is in the denunciation of the medical profession that we can find the most striking similarity between *Parole de femme* and contemporary women's writing from France. Nonetheless, the criticism of the medical profession which is common in contemporary women's writing from France also opens up some new avenues of exploration that are not present in *Parole de femme*. These include the examination of how women's experiences of birth can by shaped by trauma. For instance, Laurens' character gives birth to a stillborn baby as a result of the neglect of medical staff and Darrieussecq depicts her caesarean as a traumatic experience.

Indeed, contemporary women's writing in French has a tendency to include elements of trauma within narratives of childbirth as well as highlight the violence of the act of labour. This marks a second significant difference between second-wave feminist texts and contemporary women's writing. By comparing these particular depictions of childbirth to *Parole de femme,* we can argue that Leclerc's approach to childbirth is idealistic in nature. These findings thus support the

view of critics, such as Delphy, who revealed that Leclerc's approach to challenging negative patriarchal attitudes is too idealistic. By comparing Mauritian novels and *Parole de femme,* we can see that Leclerc did not consider that, for some women, it may be impossible or inappropriate to celebrate childbirth. In *Soupir,* for instance, violence and trauma permeate Pitié's childbirth because the baby is a product of rape. Imagining childbirth in a more positive light would not alleviate Pitié's traumatic experience of giving birth at such a young age to the child of a rapist. In *Paradis blues*, a sense of disempowerment permeates the description of the mother's caesareans. This disempowerment echoes that expressed in Darrieussecq's portrayal of a caesarean in 'Encore là'.

The theme of infanticide, which features in women's writing from Algeria, France, and Mauritius, also lies in stark contrast with Leclerc's idealism. A desire for self-preservation leads characters to commit infanticide across all three literatures. This represents a much more violent rejection of societal expectations for women to view motherhood as their main purpose than that which is apparent in second-wave feminism. Characters' decisions are shaped by broader sociocultural context, personal histories, or a combination of the two. In Mokeddem's *Je dois tout à ton oubli*, infanticide is a product of poverty, adultery, and a perception of the sexual encounter between the in-laws as incest. In Mazarine Pingeot's *Le Cimetière des Poupées,* Laurence Tardieu's *Le Jugement de Léa*, and Virginie Despentes' 'A Terme', the violent description of childbirth is inflected by the murderous intentions of the mothers. These mothers certainly do not conform to the normative image of the mother as nurturer. The protagonists of *Le Cimetière des Poupées* and 'A Terme' murder their babies as a vengeance against the fathers. In *Soupir,* Pitié is driven to murder her babies because of her poverty and a visual manifestation of her repeatedly being raped.

Menopause: A cross-cultural perspective

Of all the bodily experiences analysed in this book study, contemporary representations of the menopause resonate the most strongly with second-wave feminist theories. A striking similarity between contemporary women's writing in French and second-wave feminist literature is the idea that menopausal women, because they are infertile, are perceived by society as undesirable or lacking in sexual desire. This link between fertility and sexual desire is one which emerges in women's writing from

Algeria, Mauritius, and France. This finding suggests that this attitude is one with which many women across the globe must contend. However, this shared societal stigma against the menopausal woman does not translate into a universality of experience. Each novel contextualises this negative attitude in a different way and demonstrates a variety of different responses to it. In *Bleu blanc vert,* the association between infertility and a lack of sexual desirability is positioned as a threat in a society in which men can easily repudiate women or can marry multiple wives. In *Indian Tango*, this link is framed in the context of a Hindu community which sends women on a pilgrimage designed to eradicate any sexual desire they may feel. In *Constance et la cinquantaine* the representation of infertility emerges through the biological clock motif and is framed through gender inequality, the Félines' involvement in the feminist movement, and Constance's traumatic past. These contextual differences reflect the roles of sociocultural context, religion, law, and the individual psychologies of the characters.

The association between the menopause and ageing is another paradigm which resonates across second-wave feminist and contemporary women's writing in French. This tendency has emerged strongly in both *Indian Tango* and *Constance et la cinquantaine* through their linking the menopause with death and decay. Both use rhetorical techniques such as enumeration and bathos to portray the menopause as the start of a woman's decline into old age. This connection between the menopause and ageing is, however, framed differently across these two novels. In *Indian Tango*, we can argue that Subhadra's use of such a discourse is playful and ironic because, by engaging in a lesbian affair, she challenges her community's perception of the menopausal woman as figuratively dead and considers herself to be reborn. In *Constance et la cinquantaine*, the Félines' obsession with ageing is influenced by their interaction with the media and the medical profession. The discourse of death and decay which permeates the novel seems to emerge from the Félines' genuine horror and repulsion towards the menopausal body which is often reminiscent of Kristeva's theory of abjection. Both *Indian Tango* and *Constance et la cinquantaine* play with notions of the abject in their depictions of the changing boundaries of ageing menopausal bodies which degrade, wither, and droop. Thus, in contemporary women's writing, we can find examples of abject imagery in a new context since Kristeva does not apply her theory of abjection to the menopause.

Although certain discourses or perceptions of the menopause cross-cultural boundaries, these are always nuanced within the specific

cultural context in which the novels are set. In Algerian literature, the menopause is chiefly inflected by Islamic beliefs about marriage. In *Indian Tango*, menopausal experience is influenced by Hindu doctrine. In *Constance et la cinquantaine,* we see that medical discourse and media images have a significant impact on women's attitudes towards, and experiences of, the menopause. Nevertheless, we can find a striking parallel between Constance's treatment by the doctor and the Hindu pilgrimage in *Indian Tango*. Both HRT and the Hindu pilgrimage to Kashi are presented as compulsory rituals designed to treat a 'maladie'. In *Constance et la cinquantaine,* the illness is a lack of hormones. In *Indian Tango*, Subhadra uses the word 'maladie' to refer to the sexual desire of menopausal women which she believes that her society is trying to eradicate. This cross-cultural comparison between the religious society portrayed in *Indian Tango* and the secular culture of *Constance et la cinquantaine* resonates with Wendy Rogers' observations. Rogers argues: 'by defining them as diseased, as deficient, society has a ritual with which to control and intimidate [menopausal women]' (1997, 235). She adds that in 'secular western societies medicine fulfils many of the functions of religion' (Rogers, 1997, 235). This idea of the menopausal woman as deficient is evident across all three literary cultures. In each, the menopausal woman is subject to societal control and intimidation whether it takes the form of the scientific development of HRT, Islamic laws about marriage which put the menopausal woman at risk of being abandoned, or a Hindu pilgrimage designed to encourage women to no longer feel sexual attraction. Hence, the desire to control the menopausal body is apparent in each literature, but this is nuanced by the cultural context in which the characters live. For this reason, the methods of control and their desired effects are contrasting.

The most striking contrast between the representation of menopausal experience in second-wave feminism and in contemporary women's writing is that, whether it is through the use of language or a definitive action by a character, we can find an alternative perspective to that promulgated by the societies in which the texts are set. Thus, the strong challenge against negative patriarchal attitudes towards the menopause that is absent in *Autrement Dit* and *Parole de femme* is certainly not lacking in contemporary women's writing from Algeria, Mauritius, and France. In Algerian and Mauritian literature, a lexical field of life lies in stark opposition to societal discourses about the menopause. In *Hizya*, the depiction of the menopausal body as blossoming and vivacious diverges greatly from the discourse of death and failure that

is present in anthropological and sociological studies. In *Indian Tango*, Subhadra challenges both her community's conception of menopausal women as figuratively dead as well as their expectation for menopausal women to rid themselves of sexual desire. She achieves this both on a linguistic level and through action (a lesbian affair and a refusal to go on the pilgrimage). In *Constance et la cinquantaine,* Constance's revolt is targeted against the medical profession and takes the form of her calling for a 'class action' and her terminating her HRT treatment. In this novel, we even find a direct challenge to the legacy of the second-wave feminists, and an implied call for a new feminist approach to the menopause. A key parallel between *Indian Tango* and *Constance et la cinquantaine* which is central to their challenge to patriarchal discourse is their exploration of the sexual desire of menopausal women outside a heteronormative framework. *Indian Tango* demonstrates that, by engaging in a lesbian affair with a Mauritian author, Subhadra is able to gain new confidence in her body, challenge the idea that menopause is a figurative death, and reject the expectation of her society for menopausal women to rid themselves of sexual desire. We see a similar rebirth in Julia's sexual relationship with Deborah in Sarde's novel. This conclusive rejection of societal expectations parallels Subhadra's refusal to undertake the pilgrimage to Kashi and to no longer feel sexual desire. Thus, these two novels reveal the possibility for menopausal women to reject and evade a patriarchal regulation of the female body.

The female fertility cycle in a cross-cultural perspective: Final conclusions and avenues for further research

By comparing second-wave feminist texts and contemporary novels by women, this book study has demonstrated that contemporary women's writing in French still reflects a few of the issues that were first raised in second-wave feminist texts. We can see that contemporary women's writing has continued the questioning of normative societal discourses that was first instigated by the second-wave feminists. Some authors continue to challenge the silence and stigma that still surrounds menstrual experience, others celebrate female bodily experience in a language that is reminiscent of Leclerc's *Parole de femme*, and certain novels portray female bodily experience in a manner that resonates with Kristeva's theory of abjection. The debate about medicalisation, to which Leclerc contributes to in *Parole de femme* when she discusses

childbirth, has been maintained in contemporary women's writing from France. In fact, the most recurrent tendency of the selected novels from France is to explore how the medicalisation of the female body has negatively influenced women's attitudes towards their own bodies.

Nevertheless, in stark contrast to second-wave feminist texts, contemporary women's writing can neither be criticised for taking a 'universal' approach to the female body nor can it be criticised for looking at the body through an idealistic lens. The novels consider how certain differences between women such as their ethnicity, class, familial relationships, religious beliefs, and the culture in which they live, define their often traumatic experiences. *From Menstruation to the Menopause* has revealed certain key tendencies which characterise the specific cultural contexts in which the narratives are set. Overall, the Algerian novels contextualise women's experiences within an Islamic patriarchal society. These novels illustrate that the patriarchal oppression of women is often legally sanctioned by the Algerian state, such as through the Family Code of 1984. In Mauritian literature, the female body is framed within the ethnic and religious tensions that exist in the multicultural society of Mauritius. The legacy of colonialism also weighs heavily on the Creole female body. The novels set in France primarily focus on the medicalisation of the body. By juxtaposing certain contemporary novels with Leclerc's *Parole de femme*, we can see that merely reimagining the body using positive language would not help to improve the bodily experiences of characters who have been subject to sexual abuse and/or poverty. Thus, through its intersectional approach, contemporary women's writing has mirrored the concerns of scholars such as Audre Lorde, Toril Moi, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Chris Weedon, Barbara Christian, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

Whilst the findings clearly demonstrate that contemporary women writers have significantly evolved in their approaches to the female fertility cycle since this topic was first addressed by the second-wave feminists, this book has also exposed a few areas which require further study. It was not, for instance, within the scope of this book to perform an in-depth analysis of the literary portrayals of miscarriage and abortion in contemporary women's writing in French. However, these have emerged as strikingly recurrent themes across this book. Besides the novels analysed in this book, we can find examples of abortion in Louise Lambrich's *Le Journal de Hannah* (1995), Bey's *Au commencement était la mer* (1996), Lorette Nobécourt's *La conversation* (1998), Annie Ernaux's *L'Événement* (2000), and Mokeddem's *Mes Hommes* (2005).

Instances of miscarriage include Marie Darrieussecq's *Truismes* (1996), Marouane's *Le Châtiment des hyprocrites* (2001), Marie NDiaye's *Rosie Carpe* (2001), and Justine Levy's *Rien de Grave* (2004). Further cross-cultural research may once more reveal that women's experiences of miscarriage and abortion are influenced by factors such as cultural context, socioeconomic status, and interpersonal relationships. Narratives of abortion and miscarriage also raise questions of how to represent the taboo, silence, and the unspoken. Representations of abortion and miscarriage in contemporary women's writing in French certainly merit further cross-cultural analysis.

My analysis of menopausal experience has opened up an avenue of exploration by considering how the characters experience ageing. Scholars within the field of French literature have investigated ageing in significant depth but have largely overlooked the specifics of menopausal experience, privileging a more general exploration of the idea of entering 'old age'.[1] The analysis of the interpersonal relationships in *Indian Tango* and *Constance et la cinquantaine* exposed the need for differentiation between the portrayals of menopausal and postmenopausal women. There was also little space within this study to discuss pre-menopausal infertility and amenorrhea. Studies might consider how literary depictions of these two bodily experiences are inflected by discourses about femininity and motherhood. Novels which explore amenorrhea include Bouraoui's *La Voyeuse interdite* (1991), Amélie Nothomb's *Robert des noms propres* (2002), and Mokeddem's *Les Hommes qui marchent* (1990). Incidents of pre-menopausal infertility in francophone texts include Nathacha Appanah's *Blue Bay Palace* (2004), Bey's *Cette Fille-là* (2005), and Marouane's *La Fille de la Casbah* (1996).

Another avenue of exploration which could build on the findings and methodology of this book would be to assess how menstruation, childbirth, and the menopause have been rendered in other forms of francophone cultural production since 1990, such as visual arts, cinema, poetry, and theatre. Future research could also build on the cross-cultural methodological approach of this study by comparing the depictions of the female body in other francophone literatures, such as from Tunisia, Belgium, Vietnam, the Caribbean, or Senegal. This book has opened up some future avenues of research by touching on how some

1 See for example Joy Charnely's *As Time Goes By: Portraits of Age* (2014) and Amaleena Damlé's *The Becoming of the Body: Contemporary Women's Writing in French* (2014).

contemporary fictional works queer normative societal discourses, such as by representing lesbian menopausal characters who subvert societal expectations for menopausal women to no longer feel sexual desire. One of the limitations of this book has been its sole consideration of cis-gender women. It would be of great value to investigate how the bodily experience of transgender women is represented in contemporary francophone cultural production and the extent to which this is shaped by factors such as sociocultural, religious, or political context alongside interpersonal relationships. Future research could also investigate representations of the queer male bodies and how they are influenced by the factors which have been revealed in this book. In fact, there is great need to explore further how French cultural production queers normative discourses about the body. This gap has inspired a forthcoming edited volume entitled *Queer(y)ing Bodily Norms in Francophone Culture* that I am editing alongside Antonia Wimbush and Polly Galis.

Finally, if we return to the introduction, I framed the significance of this book by discussing menstrual and menopausal activism on social media. Menstrual activism, for instance, aims to empower menstruating people by challenging menstrual stigma and raising awareness of related issues such as associated medical conditions, the environmental impact of plastic menstrual products, or the importance of acknowledging the voices of transgender and non-binary menstruators. This can be contextualised within the fourth wave of feminism which seeks to empower women via the internet (Zimmerman, 2017). Indeed, both topics have started to receive more attention since 2015 in both traditional and social media. This has been common to both francophone and anglophone media. Thus far, the topic of mediatised menstruation has received significantly more attention than the menopause. It is also important to determine whether this increasing visibility of menstruation in the media, alongside mediatised menstrual activism, has had a positive impact on people's perceptions of menstruation. For this reason, I have recently started a new project for which I am analysing media representations of menstruation, interviewing activists, and conducting focus groups with teenagers in schools.

Above all, *From Menstruation to the Menopause* has established that contemporary women's writing both continues the challenge against normative perceptions of the female fertility cycle that was originally launched by second-wave feminists, and problematises the idea that there exists a universality of female experience. The contemporary novels from Algeria, Mauritius, and France that have been analysed

in this study demonstrate that the female body is caught in a complex web of different discourses, beliefs, stereotypes, and expectations. The novels contest certain attitudes towards the female fertility cycle that are promulgated within their fictional spaces either through exposing their harmful impact on women or by creating rebellious characters. By breaking the silence, challenging normative expectations, or celebrating the female body, contemporary women's writers from across the French-speaking world continue to keep alight the subversive torch that was first ignited by the second-wave feminists.

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Index

abjection 5, 15, 16, 24, 25, 27, 31–35, 43, 49, 56, 60–63, 64, 66, 71–72, 76–79, 82–83, 90–91, 93, 101–04, 110, 115, 122, 139, 144, 145, 154, 164, 166–67, 170, 171, 173–74, 176, 183–84, 190, 192
abortion 4, 19, 51, 78, 83–84, 93, 96, 118, 125, 129, 131, 139, 161–62, 179, 188, 193, 194
activism 10–15, 19, 195
advertisements 24–26
ageing 2, 21–23, 46, 48, 80–90, 122, 130, 131, 133, 137–38, 171–74, 190, 194
Algeria 1–3, 7, 9–10, 41, 42, 44, 48–50, 95–139, 141, 142, 148, 154, 156, 174, 182–96
  Berber community 117
  décennie noire 9, 99, 134, 138
  Family Code of 1984 134–35, 138, 193
  Franco-Algerian War 123–24, 129, 134
  War of Independence *see* Franco-Algerian War
Angot, Christine 2, 67
  Interview 67
  Léonore toujours 67
anorexia 51
Appanah, Nathacha 156, 194
  Blue Bay Palace 156, 194
art 1, 11, 61–62
Australia 43
Bavadam, Lyla 169–70
Beauvoir, Simone de 19–23, 30, 36, 49, 82, 84, 86, 88–89, 91, 133, 138, 169, 171–73, 181
  Le Deuxième Sexe 19–23, 49, 82, 84, 91, 138, 169, 171–73, 181
Benabed, Aïcha 119
Berger, Gabriella 47
Bey, Maïssa 7, 16, 96, 99, 107, 109–11, 118–29, 131–36, 145, 174, 177, 185–86, 190
  Au commencement était la mer 7, 118n11, 193
  Bleu blanc vert 7, 16, 99, 105–07, 109–11, 114–17, 118–21, 123, 125, 126–29, 131–39, 145, 174, 175, 177, 185–86, 190, 191
Cette Fille-là 7, 99, 119, 120n6, 194
  'En ce dernier matin' 118, 121–22, 136
  Hizya 16, 131–32, 137–39, 191
  Sous le Jasmin la nuit 16
Bobel, Chris 11
Bonvillain, Nancy 151, 154
Boudjedra, Rachid 98
Bouraoui, Nina 2, 7, 16, 96, 99–105, 107, 111, 116, 150, 153, 194
  La Voyeuse interdite 2, 7, 16, 99–105, 107, 109, 111, 116–17, 153–54, 183, 184, 185, 194
Bowden, Peta 39
Bray, Abigail 39

Cardinal, Marie 4, 5, 6, 15, 25, 26–27, 29–31, 33, 36, 38, 49, 52, 56, 73, 76, 92–94, 107, 110, 120, 125, 136, 172, 176, 178, 191
Autrement dit 4, 15, 25–27, 29–31, 93–94, 110, 129, 191
Les Mots pour le dire 52
Carter, Angela 148
Casellas, Estelle 80
Charlap, Cécile 81, 86
Charnley, Joy 2
Charpentier, Isabelle 97–98, 128
Charrad, Mounira 123
childbirth 2, 4, 6, 11, 15–17, 19–21, 23, 26–30, 32–34, 45–46, 49, 51, 65–79, 93–94, 115, 117–31, 133, 136, 138, 145, 155–67, 177, 179, 181, 186–89, 194
caesarean 65, 70–72, 93, 156, 162–63, 188, 189
stillbirth 65–66, 72–76, 93, 188
Chraïbi, Driss 98
Christian, Barbara 3, 40, 42, 179, 193
Cixous, Hélène 4, 5, 20, 38–39, 54, 55
'Le Rire de La Méduse' 4, 5
class *see* socioeconomic context
Clézio (le), Jean-Marie Gustave 142
Collen, Lindsey 161
Getting Rid of It 161
Collette, Sidonie-Gabrielle 88
Collins, Patricia Hill 35, 126
colonialism 7, 9, 10, 17, 41–42, 95, 96, 120, 124, 141, 144, 147, 179, 181, 193
Cominsky, Sheila 45
contraception 19, 118, 126–31, 139, 187
Corcoran, Patrick 101
cosmetic surgery 87
Courjault, Véronique 76
Crenshaw, Kimberlé 35
cross-cultural perspective 2–3, 8–10, 17, 33, 41–50, 107, 133, 148, 154, 169, 181–85, 191–94
Cusset, Catherine 53
Jouir 53
Damlé, Amaleena 2, 6, 51–52, 54
Darrieussecq, Marie 2, 6, 16, 33, 52, 53, 65, 66, 67, 70–72, 188, 189, 194
'Encore là' 16, 53, 65, 67, 70–72, 93, 189
'Le bébé' 67
Tom est mort 66
Truismes 33, 53, 194
White 67
Davant, Sophie 14
Dedieu, Saïda Douki 47, 84, 135–36, 169, 177
Delaney, Janice 148
Delanoë, Daniel 80
Delphy, Christine 4, 15, 35–39, 44, 59, 189
Derrida, Jacques 5
Desarthe, Agnès 6, 16, 52, 65, 67, 68, 69, 70, 187
'Les mois, les heures et les minutes' 16, 65, 68–69, 93, 187, 188
Despentes, Virginie 3, 6, 16, 52, 53, 59–66, 78, 79, 148, 153, 182, 184–85, 189
'A terme' 66, 78, 189
Baise-Moi 16, 53, 59–64, 78, 93, 153, 182, 184
'Des poils sur moi' 53, 64–65, 66, 148, 185
'L'Ange est à ses cotés' 78
'Mordre au travers'16, 66, 78
Devi, Ananda 3, 7, 17, 142, 143, 148–59, 161–80, 185, 187, 188, 189, 190–92, 194
Ève de ses décombres 7, 17, 143, 148–49, 185
Indian Tango 7, 17, 168–80, 190–92, 194
L'Arbre fouet 17, 143, 153–55, 183, 184
Pagli 17, 143, 149–53, 155–59, 161–62, 167–68, 180
Rue la Poudrière 143
Soupir 7, 17, 155, 163–67, 188, 189
Djaziri, Najib 117–18

Djebar, Assia 100
Douglas, Mary 31

Edwards, Natalie 52, 79
écriture feminine 5–6, 39
elitism 3
empowerment 23, 27, 30, 69–70, 72, 114, 115, 126–30, 143, 157, 162–63, 187–89, 195
Erikson, Karen Paige 44–45
Erikson, Thomas 141
Ernaux, Annie 52, 193
La femme gelée 52
Les Armoires vides 52
essentialism 3, 5, 36, 38–40, 95, 181
ethnicity 6, 8, 10, 35, 39–42, 141, 158, 162–63, 179, 181, 188, 192, 193
exoticisation 17, 146–47, 165, 180
Evans, Jane 126

Fahs, Breanne 11
fatherhood 2, 44, 53, 55, 56, 57, 59, 83, 99–105, 107, 109, 111–15, 136, 143, 149, 153–55, 160, 165, 183, 186, 189
Felman, Shoshana 39
fertility 1, 6, 10, 11, 16, 19, 21–25, 29, 34, 42, 43, 46, 48, 49, 50, 52, 57, 79–85, 93, 95, 96, 117, 119, 122, 128, 131, 133, 137, 138, 158, 167, 170, 174–75, 179, 181, 187, 189–90, 193, 194, 195, 196
Forsdick, Charles 8
France 1–3, 6, 7, 9, 10, 14, 15–16, 19, 24, 31, 41, 42, 43, 44, 47–50, 51–94, 95–96, 113, 117, 182–96

Galis, Polly 195
Gandhi, Kiran 12
Gaugin, Paul 146
Gaulle, Charles de 124
George, Amika 12
Ghozali, Nasser-Eddine 134n18, 135
Gordon-Gentil, Alain 142–43
Greece 21, 46
Greene, Sheila 44, 105, 145
Greer, Germaine 82, 85, 88
Grosz, Elizabeth 5

Hamoutène, Leïla 99
Sang et jasmin 99
Hanouti, Karim 117–18
Harrington, Katherine 2, 103
Héritier, Françoise 80, 85, 92
heteronormativity 23, 91, 178, 192
Hiddleston, Jane 100
Humbert, Marie-Thérèse 142
hygiene 43–44, 56–57, 63, 110–11, 182–83
Hyvrard, Jeanne 52
Les doigts du figuier 52
La Meurtritude 52

idealism 16, 17, 36, 38, 52, 55, 59, 79, 94, 95, 139, 163, 165, 179–80, 181, 189, 193
incest 67, 118, 125–26, 189
India 7, 8, 9, 12, 45–47, 48, 141, 153n8, 168–69, 170, 172, 174, 175, 177–78, 191
infanticide 66–67, 76–79, 125–26, 189
intersectionality 3, 9, 11, 15, 17, 35–42, 44–50, 59, 105, 137, 138, 179, 181, 182, 193
Iran 43
Ireland 47
Ireland, Susan 91–92
Irigaray, Luce 4, 38, 39

Jacques, Béatrice 68
Japan 43, 47
Jean-François, Emmanuel 144–45
Jong, Erica 82, 88
Jordan, Brigitte 45
Jordan, Shirley 6, 62–63
Jurney, Florence Raymond 2

Kaur, Rupi 12
King, Steven 103, 148

Kissling, Elisabeth 48
Kistnareddy, Ashwiny 164n10
Knauss, Peter 10
Knibiehler, Yvonne 28
Kristeva, Julia 4, 5, 6, 15, 19, 20, 31–36, 38, 43, 49, 56, 60, 63–64, 71, 78, 82–83, 90–91, 93, 101–03, 115, 122, 139, 147, 154, 166–67, 174, 176, 183–84, 190, 192
  Pouvoirs de l'horreur: Essai sur l'abjection 4, 15, 20–21, 31–35, 60, 63, 64, 71, 78, 82–83, 90–91, 93, 101–03, 115, 122, 139, 147, 154, 166–67, 174, 176, 183–84, 190, 192

Lambrich, Louise 193
Langendorff, Florence 45
Laurens, Camille 16, 52, 65–66, 71–76, 93
  Philippe 16, 65–66, 72–76, 93
law 34, 123, 135, 161, 190, 191
Leclerc, Annie 4, 5, 6, 15, 16, 17, 19–21, 23–35, 36–39, 49, 54–56, 58–59, 62, 63, 65–68, 70, 72, 73, 75–76, 93–94, 95, 110, 120, 125, 129, 136, 150, 152, 158, 165, 172, 178, 186, 188, 189, 191, 192–93
  Parole de femme 4, 15, 21, 23–31, 36–37, 39, 49, 54–55, 58–59, 61, 62, 65–68, 70, 73, 75–76, 93–94, 95, 129, 152, 158, 163, 186, 188, 189, 191–93
Lefkarites, Mary 46
Leservot, Typhaine 3, 8
Levy, Justine 194
LGBTQ+ 11–14, 23, 36, 40, 91–92, 168, 171, 175, 178, 190–91, 195
Lionnet, Françoise 144–45
Lorde, Audre 3, 15, 40–42, 44, 179, 181, 188, 193
Lortholary, Isabelle 16
  Naissances 16, 65–71
Lupton, May Jane 148

Magdelaine-Andrianjafitrimo, Valérie 163
Marouane, Leïla 3, 16, 96, 99, 105–18, 120, 122n12, 123n13, 125n14, 128, 148, 150, 184, 185, 194
  La Fille de la Casbah 16, 99, 110n4, 116–17, 118, 128n15, 194
  La Jeune Fille et la mère 16, 99, 105–10, 112–17, 120, 122n12, 124n14, 148, 184, 185
  Ravisseur 99
marriage 9, 97, 98, 104, 106, 108–09, 112–14, 115, 116, 117, 119, 120, 122–23, 126–29, 133–36, 138, 144, 149–51, 153, 155–56, 159, 171, 177, 184, 190, 191
  adultery 151–52, 157, 158, 168, 171, 175, 178, 189, 190, 192
  divorce 123, 135
  polygamy 123, 133, 135
  repudiation 122–23, 133, 135
Marshall, Bill 1n1
Masson, Loys 142
Mauritius 1–3, 7, 9, 10, 41, 42, 44, 48–50, 141–80, 182–96
  Creole community 9, 16, 141, 143, 144–48, 151–53, 155–67, 179–80, 182, 193
  Indo-Mauritian community 16, 142, 151–58, 179–80
  Rodrigues 155, 156, 163–67
  May 1968 4, 19, 28, 81, 84–85, 190
McArthur, Sharon 14
McIlvanney, Siobhán 107, 137
McPherson, Karen 2
media
  social media 1, 11–15, 195
  traditional media 82, 87–89, 92, 190, 195
medicine 15, 17, 28–29, 34–35, 43–46, 49, 55–57, 65–66, 68–79, 81–83, 85–93, 116, 117, 118n11, 120, 126–29, 131, 132, 136–37, 182–84, 188, 190–91, 192, 193, 195

Mehta, Brinda 113
menopause 1–2, 4, 6, 10, 11, 12, 13–17, 19–23, 29–31, 33–35, 46–49, 79–94, 95, 130–38, 167–79, 181, 189–92, 194–95
  Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) 34–35, 82, 86–88, 90–91, 191, 192
menstruation 1–2, 4, 6, 11–17, 19–21, 23, 24–26, 30, 32, 33, 34, 35, 37, 43–45, 47, 49, 52–65, 79, 86, 93–94, 95, 96–117, 131, 142–55, 167, 175, 179–80, 181–86, 194, 195
  Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS) 45, 64
Mernissi, Fatima 96, 102n1, 104, 111, 133
Messaoudi, Khalida 98, 104
Millet, Catherine 6, 16, 52, 53–60, 93, 182, 183, 186
  La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M 16, 53–61, 62, 93, 182, 183, 184, 186
  New York, journal d'un Cycle 53
miscarriage 96, 115, 122, 125, 145, 150, 156, 159–61, 179, 188, 193–94
misogyny 99, 103, 104, 126, 153, 154
Mohanty, Chandra Talpade 15, 41–42, 184, 193
Moi, Toril 38–40, 42, 126, 193
Mokeddem, Malika 16, 96, 114n9, 118, 120–26, 128, 187, 189, 193, 194
  Je dois tout à ton oubli 16, 114n9, 118, 123, 125–26, 189
  Les Hommes qui marchent 16, 118, 120–23, 187, 194
  Mes Hommes 118, 120–21, 193
Mooneeram, Roshni 163
motherhood 2, 28, 33, 44, 49, 52, 53, 56–61, 65–80, 83, 93, 99, 105–15, 118–21, 126, 129, 132, 136–37, 138, 142, 143, 145–46, 149, 151–52, 157–63, 166, 170, 175, 184, 185–87, 189, 194
Moutassem-Mimouni, Badra 98, 104, 110, 127
Mummery, Jane 39
myth 38, 117, 146, 147, 148

Naamane-Guessous, Soumaya 96–98, 104, 106–07, 130–32, 137
Ndiaye, Marie 194
Nobécourt, Lorette 193
Nothomb, Amélie 194

Orlando, Valérie 99–100
Ouadah-Bedidi, Zahia 124

Patel, Shenaz 17, 142, 143–48, 156, 158–63, 179, 184, 185, 188, 189
  Paradis Blues 17, 143–48, 149, 156, 158–63, 180, 181, 184, 185, 188, 189
  Sensitive 160–61
patriarchy 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9–11, 13, 15, 16, 19, 20–21, 23, 24–30, 32, 37–42, 55–56, 60–61, 63, 64, 75, 76, 79, 89–91, 94, 101–02, 116, 120–21, 123–26, 128–30, 138, 139, 143–44, 154–58, 166, 167, 170, 179–80, 184, 186, 187, 189, 191, 192, 193
Perianes, Mielna 48
phallocentrism 4–5, 26, 61
Pingeot, Mazarine 16, 52, 66, 75–79, 189
  Le Cimetière des poupées 16, 66, 75–79, 189
polygamy *see* marriage
postcolonialism 7, 8, 9, 15, 41, 105, 147, 180
pregnancy 25, 34, 51, 65, 76, 83, 86, 95, 97, 118, 128–29, 131, 145, 159, 161, 164–66
privilege 4, 38–42, 47, 59, 72, 103, 113, 116, 138, 141, 162, 163, 169, 170, 177, 194
Proulx, Patrice 91–92

Quint, Chella 12

Radoilska, Lubomira 54
Ramtohul, Ramola 10
Ravi, Srilata 155, 157, 165
Redonnet, Marie 52
  Rose Mélie Rose 52
religion 3, 5, 8, 9, 12, 15, 17, 20, 35, 42, 43, 44, 46, 47, 57, 95–102, 105, 109–11, 116, 117, 123, 127–28, 133, 135, 137, 138, 139, 141–42, 151, 153–58, 168–69, 175–77, 179, 181–84, 186, 190, 191, 193, 195
  Christianity 5, 9, 15, 16, 20–21, 27, 31–33, 43, 141, 179
  Hinduism 7, 9, 12, 16, 43, 47, 141, 142, 151, 152, 153–58, 168–69, 172, 175–77, 179, 182–83, 187, 190, 191
  Islam 9, 10, 16, 43, 95–102, 104–05, 109–11, 116–17, 119, 123, 125, 127–28, 129n16, 133, 134n18, 135, 138–39, 141, 148, 154, 175, 182–83, 185, 186, 187, 191, 193
  Judaism 5, 15, 20, 43
repudiation *see* marriage
Rodgers, Julie 121
Rogers, Wendy 15, 34–35, 81, 90–91, 191
Romalis, Shelley 45
Rosenstiehl, Marianne 13
Rye, Gill 2, 51–52, 54

Sadiqi, Fatima 130, 134, 136
Salhi, Zahia Smail 101, 135
Sarde, Michèle 6, 16, 52, 80–92, 174, 190, 192
  Constance et la Cinquantaine 6, 16, 80–93, 174, 190, 191, 192, 194
Schweighoffer, Nathalie 16, 52, 53, 57–60, 93, 186
  J'avais douze ans… 16, 53, 57–60, 93, 186
Sebbar, Leïla 3
second-wave feminism 1, 3, 4–9, 11, 15, 17, 19–50, 51–52, 54–55, 64, 65, 72, 77, 78, 79, 80, 89–90, 92–94, 95, 101, 105, 112–14, 116, 118, 121, 126, 129, 133, 136–39, 141, 144, 163, 167, 172, 173, 174, 175, 176, 179–80, 181, 182, 186, 187, 188, 189, 190, 191, 192, 193, 195, 196
Second World War 124
sex work 60, 161, 165
sexism 28, 126
sexual abuse 57, 139, 145, 149–50, 152, 155–57, 160, 164–67, 179, 189, 193
sexuality 3, 6, 10, 17, 23, 30–32, 35, 36, 40–42, 54–55, 80–81, 91–92, 104–05, 107–09, 128–33, 137, 143, 152, 167, 168, 170, 175–76, 178, 189–92, 195
shame 4, 12, 14, 24, 25–26, 30, 37, 43–44, 49, 56, 57, 58–59, 61–62, 80, 89, 96–98, 102–104, 107–108, 109, 111, 117, 122, 125, 126, 149, 152, 154, 158–60, 179, 182
silence 4, 26–27, 29, 36, 39, 41, 46, 48, 57, 58, 61–62, 80, 86, 96–98, 100–17, 121, 126, 127, 130–39, 144–46, 153–54, 158–61, 163, 170, 177, 179, 182, 185, 192, 196
sociocultural context 3, 38, 42, 45–47, 92, 94, 112, 117, 132, 135, 138, 141, 148, 162, 168, 172, 176, 178, 181–82, 184, 191, 194, 195
socioeconomic context 35–38, 42, 44, 94, 137, 138, 149, 155, 162–65, 189, 193, 194
sociopolitical context 3, 41, 101, 102, 105, 116, 126–29, 135, 138, 141, 154, 161, 162, 181, 194, 195
Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty 15, 41, 181, 193
stigma 1, 12, 48, 185, 190, 195
Stroia, Adina 74

supernatural 46, 64–65, 106–107, 148–49, 185
superstition 143–44, 147–48, 179, 182

taboo 4, 11, 13–15, 20, 25–26, 302, 31–32, 34, 43, 49, 55, 62–63, 65, 67, 72, 79, 80–81, 93–94, 95, 97–98, 104, 106–12, 116–17, 128, 130, 139, 145, 147–48, 152, 159–60, 169–70, 179, 185
Tardieu, Laurence 6, 52, 66, 78–79, 189
Le Jugement de Léa 16, 66, 75, 76–78, 189
television 67–69
Toth, Emily 148
tourism 17
Touzet, Corinne 14
trauma 16, 21, 51–52, 57, 59, 65–66, 74, 76, 89, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 103, 106, 136, 139, 145, 146, 159, 164, 167, 179–80, 181, 189, 193
Trout, Colette 33
Turshen, Meredeth 9, 134n19
Tyagi, Ritu 161, 164n10, 168, 170

United States, The 28, 43, 46–47
Ussher, Jane 15, 34, 43–44, 56, 81, 105, 111, 148, 176, 183

Vallin, Jacques 124
Villovitch, Hélèna 6, 16, 52, 65, 67–68
'Mon Lapin' 16, 65, 67–68
violence 2, 9, 16, 21–22, 31–33, 51, 52, 60, 63–66, 69, 74, 76–79, 85–86, 99–101, 103–05, 134, 145, 146, 149, 150, 153, 155, 158, 162–67, 179, 182, 189
virginity 97, 98, 108–09, 128, 134, 138, 184

Waters, Julia 150
Weedon, Chris 39–40, 44, 193
Wimbush, Antonia 195
Wittig, Monique 4, 36, 38
Worth-Stylianou, Valerie 69
Worton, Michael 2, 51

Zita, Jacquelyn 46–47