

The Female Fertility Cycle in
Cross-Cultural Perspective:
Representations of Menstruation,
Childbirth, and the Menopause in
Contemporary Women's Writing
in French

PhD in French Studies

Department of Modern Languages and European Studies

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March 2018

Declaration: I confirm that this is my own work and the use of all material from other sources has been properly and fully acknowledged.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the representation of the female fertility cycle in contemporary Algerian, Mauritian, and French women's writing. It focuses on menstruation, childbirth, and the menopause. This study frames its analysis of contemporary women's writing by looking back to the pioneering work of the second-wave feminists. Second-wave feminist texts were the first to break the silence on key aspects of female experience which had thus far been largely overlooked or even considered too taboo to mention. Over forty years since the publication of Annie Leclerc's *Parole de femme*, this thesis seeks to determine the extent to which more recent representations reveal a different perspective from second-wave feminist texts. Second-wave feminist works have been criticised for applying their 'universal' theories to all women, regardless of their ethnicity, class, or sexuality. In response to this criticism, this thesis asks as one of its central research questions whether women's writing in French still represents female bodily experience as 'universal'. Or, reflecting criticism of such universalising views, this thesis evaluates whether contemporary women's writing exposes differences between women's experiences that were overlooked in second-wave feminist texts. The cross-cultural and interdisciplinary approach is informed not only by critics of the second-wave feminist movement but also by sociological and anthropological studies which consider how women's bodily experiences are shaped by cultural context.

Contemporary authors whose novels are explored in this thesis include Maïssa Bey, Leïla Marouane, Ananda Devi, Shenaz Patel, Virginie Despentes,

and Marie Darrieussecq. This study reveals that each literary culture frames its representation of the female fertility cycle in its own distinct cultural context. Overall, this thesis argues that contemporary women's writing has continued the challenge against normative perceptions of the body that was originally launched by the second-wave feminists, whilst also illustrating that female bodily experience is diverse.

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Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to say an enormous thank you to my parents who have encouraged me across the entirety of my PhD. I could not have completed my thesis without your unwavering support. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

I owe a debt of gratitude to my supervisors Prof Julia Waters and Dr Siobhan Shilton for their dedication and reassurance. I wish to thank my colleagues who have supported me in my professional development. I would like to extend my thanks to Prof Susan Harrow and Dr Marjorie Gehrhardt in particular. I also would like to say thank you to Helen and Nicky at the Graduate School who have been a smiling and encouraging presence throughout my PhD.

Of course, this entire PhD would not have been possible without the scholarship awarded to me by the South West and Wales Doctoral Training Partnership of the AHRC. Thank you for your support of my project.

Next, I would like to thank my friends who have kept up my spirits for all of these years. Thank you to my Derby friends, my fellow PhD students at the Reading Graduate School and from across the SWWDTP, FISHJAMZ, the Banterre gang, my Greek friends, my fellow Chelsea fans, and many others. You are too many to name but I would like to give a special mention to some of my oldest and dearest friends: Emma (fig1), Nikki, Harriet, Emma (Poppet), Zena, Sophie P, Pav, and Leopold. I would also like to extend my thanks to Antonia and Polly. Our Whatsapp conversations during our organisation of “Imagining

the Body in France and the Francophone World” gave me much needed motivation.

A final thank you goes to the undergraduate students on my course “Introduction to Francophone Literature of the Maghreb”. It has been a pleasure to share my doctoral research with you and see your growing enthusiasm for the subject.

I would like to conclude these acknowledgments with an extract from a poem written by my favourite poet, Constantine Cavafy. In my opinion, his poem “Ιθάκη” most wonderfully captures a person’s journey from the beginning to end of a PhD

“Σα βγεις στον πηγαιμό για την Ιθάκη,
να εύχεται νάναι μακρύς ο δρόμος,
γεμάτος περιπέτειες, γεμάτος γνώσεις
[...]
Κι αν πτωχική την βρεις, η Ιθάκη δεν σε γέλασε.
Έτσι σοφός που έγινες, με τόση πείρα,
ήδη θα το κατάλαβες η Ιθάκη τι σημαίνουν.”¹

This thesis is dedicated to my father and mother.

¹ ‘As you set out for Ithaka / hope the voyage is a long one/ full of adventure, full of discovery
[...] And if you find her poor, Ithaka won’t have fooled you. / Wise as you will have become,
so full of experience,/ you will have understood by then what these Ithakas mean’.
Translation taken from C.P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems* (1992), Translated by Edmund Keeley
and Philip Sherrard.

Introduction

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

The female fertility cycle has long been the subject of feminist writing and remains today a central concern of women's literature in French.² The second-wave French feminist movement, which was at its peak in the 1970s, was unprecedented in its exploration of aspects of female bodily experience which previous writers considered too taboo to discuss. Writers such as Annie Leclerc, Julia Kristeva, Marie Cardinal, and Christine Delphy broke this silence by drawing attention to experiences such as menstruation, childbirth, and the menopause, which had, so far, been largely overlooked. Within French studies, these are the theorists to whom scholars often turn first when analysing the portrayal of female bodily experience within francophone culture.³ Forty years have now passed since many of these influential works were first published, and therefore the time has come to revisit the ideas articulated by the second-

² In the context of this thesis, the female fertility cycle refers to menstruation, childbirth, and the menopause.

³ Throughout this thesis 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 postcolonialist Patrick Corcoran defines as an uncomplicated 'linguistic term [...] generally understood as a mere synonym for "French speaking"' (2007, p. 6). As Corcoran explains in great detail, the term 'Francophone' is highly problematic because it has 'been invested with a range of additional ideological and political meanings' (Corcoran: 2007, p. 7). The term has two distinct definitions. If we consider it in terms of literature, it is either used with imperialist undertones to refer to France as the centre upon which other literatures in French are constructed, or as a way of contrasting French-language literature produced in France with that produced outside France, often implying that the latter is inferior to the former. This thesis will not reflect either of these ideologies and will treat the three literatures with equal importance. For further discussion of these definitions see also Charles Forsdick and David Murphy's introduction to *Francophone Postcolonial Studies: A Critical Introduction* (2003).

wave feminists to see whether they are still pertinent within a contemporary and diverse French-speaking world. Indeed, certain scholars have criticised this corpus for being universalising, essentialist, elitist, and ignorant of how differences between women - such as ethnicity, social context, and class - may impact their female bodily experience. This begs the question of how the female body is depicted in contemporary women's writing in French.⁴ To what extent do more recent representations of the female fertility cycle echo the approaches of the second-wave feminists or reveal alternative perspectives? To answer these questions, this thesis will draw on novels in French which have been published since 1990 and will chronologically follow a woman's cycle of fertility by focusing on respective representations of menstruation, childbirth, and the menopause. This chronological order will highlight how women's bodily experiences evolve over their lifetime. Three francophone literary cultures will be examined, namely women's writing from Algeria, France, and Mauritius, to reflect the scope of women's writing in French today which explores female bodily experience across a variety of fictionalised cultural contexts.⁵ Novels from France, Algeria, and Mauritius have been selected because they represent divergent political, social, religious, and cultural climates. By considering these three literary cultures, this thesis will determine whether women's writing published since 1990 echoes the criticism which has been targeted at the second-wave feminists (such as by

⁴ In this thesis, the term 'contemporary' will be used to refer to any novels published by women writers since 1990. This label will distinguish writers who have started to publish since 1990 from the second-wave feminists,

⁵ In the context of this thesis, '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).

highlighting the influence of social context on female bodily experience) or if these novels mirror the purportedly 'universal' approach of second-wave feminist texts in their revealing similarities which traverse cultural boundaries.

The novels which will be explored in this thesis were published between 1990 and 2015. This time period is sufficiently removed from the era of second-wave feminism for this thesis to reflect on the legacy of Annie Leclerc, Julia Kristeva, and Marie Cardinal and reconsider their approaches to the female body. This twenty five year period has been selected because 1990 is often considered within French studies scholarship as marking the emergence of a new generation of writers who were distinct from the second-wave feminists. In an edited volume entitled *Aventures et expériences littéraires: écritures de femmes en France au début du vingt-et-unième siècle* (2014), Amaleena Damlé refers to the emergence of a new generation of writers in the 1990s all of whom were indebted to the French feminists of the 1970s. Damlé describes women writers of the 1990s as 'une génération qui a hérité d'une certaine tradition littéraire féministe qui a aussi [...] profité des « gains du féminisme »' (2014, p. 6). In her *Contemporary French Women's Writing: Women's Visions, Women's Voices, Women's Lives* (2004), Shirley Jordan argues that women writers of the 1990s, such as Marie Darrieussecq and Virginie Despentes, were often seen as a 'subset' (2004, p. 16) of an emerging new generation of writers and, as such, were often grouped together to set them apart from their male counterparts.⁶ Jordan outlines that

⁶ See also Gill Rye and Michael Worton's introduction to *Women's Writing in Contemporary France: New Writers, New Literatures in the 1990s* (2002).

contemporary women's writing published during the 1990s was characterised by 'a youthful vision and idiom and preparedness to shock' (2004, p. 16).

As these examples have illustrated, the new generation of women writers in the 1990s is often characterised in academic scholarship as being indebted to the second-wave feminists, but also as taking a new and distinct direction in their works. The novels of many eminent contemporary women writers from France, who can be considered part of this generation, will be analysed in this thesis. These writers include Virginie Despentes, Marie Darrieussecq, Agnès Desarthe, Hélène Villovitch, and Camille Laurens, who all started to publish novels in the 1990s. Although the majority of French authors whose work will be explored in this thesis started to publish in the 1990s, this study will also examine the novels of authors such as Michèle Sarde, who published her first novel in 1975, as well as Laurence Tardieu and Catherine Millet, who only started to publish in the twenty-first century.

To date, scholars have predominantly analysed the influence of second-wave feminists on women writers from France who set their novels in a European French context. In this thesis, however, I will apply the concept of a 'new generation of women writers' to authors who were not born in France and who set their stories in non-European francophone contexts. The cross-cultural approach of my thesis has also been informed by the concept of a 'new generation'. During the 1990s, the French literary scene witnessed the emergence of authors such as Ananda Devi, Shenaz Patel,⁷ Maïssa Bey, Leïla

⁷ Shenaz Patel started to publish short stories in the 1990s, such as 'À l'encre d'un nom' in *Au tour des Femmes* (1995). She published her first novel, *Le Portrait Chamarel*, in 2002.

Marouane, Nina Bouraoui, and Malika Mokeddem, who write in French about post-colonial contexts beyond France's European borders.⁸ These critically acclaimed authors primarily publish their work in France through publishing houses such as Gallimard, Grasset, and Aube. Their novels are therefore published alongside those of European French authors. For this reason, novels in French by authors from outside Europe must also be considered in order effectively to analyse the extent to which contemporary women's writing today reflects, or provides a contrast to, second-wave feminist approaches. For the vast majority of the novels that will be examined in this cross-cultural study, the fictionalised setting they represent does, indeed, match their author's country of origin. However, the selection of novels for analysis is not entirely based on the nationality or country of residence of the writers.⁹ The selection of novels has been based on the countries that are represented in the texts. The rationale for such parameters is that the following chapters, through comparing representations of female bodily experience across a variety of distinct cultural contexts, will seek to determine whether contemporary women's writing mirrors, or indirectly problematises, the purportedly 'universal' approach of the second-wave feminists. For this reason, this thesis

⁸ As outlined by Forsdick and Murphy, recent work in the field of postcolonial studies has employed the distinct terms 'post-colonial' and 'postcolonial' to refer to former colonies such as Algeria and Mauritius. 'Post-colonial' refers to 'that which comes chronologically after colonialism' and 'postcolonial' refers to 'a contemporary assessment of the culture and history of empire from the moment of conquest' (Forsdick and Murphy: 2003, p. 5). This thesis will make the same distinction between the terms 'post-colonial' and 'postcolonial'. However, I have primarily selected Algerian and Mauritian literature because they represent French-speaking regions outside France.

⁹ Although the vast majority of the selected novels do largely represent the country which corresponds to the birthplace of the author, there are two exceptions. The first is *La Voyeuse interdite* which is set in Algeria and written by the *beur* writer Nina Bouraoui who was born in France to Algerian parents. The second exception is *Indian Tango* which is set in India and written by the Mauritian author Ananda Devi. *Indian Tango* has been selected as it is the only example of a francophone novel written by a Mauritian author which depicts menopausal experience.

will distinguish between the three selected literary cultures as follows: women's writing from France, Algerian women's writing, and Mauritian women's writing.

0.2 Methodology and research questions

There are two central questions which are driving this thesis. The first question is: To what extent do representations of the female fertility cycle in contemporary women's writing in French reveal different perspectives from those of second-wave feminist theories about the body? The second central research question, which is less broad in its scope, is informed by authors who criticised the second-wave feminist movement for ignoring the differences which exist between women. The second question is: Does contemporary women's writing from different francophone cultures portray women's experiences of their fertility cycle as universal, or, reflecting criticism of the universalising views of the second-wave feminists, does it reveal differences that were overlooked in second-wave feminist texts?

In order to answer the first question, I shall compare and contrast the approaches taken to the female body in second-wave feminist texts and in contemporary women's writing in French. The next part of this introduction will, as a basis for the analysis in the main body of the thesis, provide a general overview of how the body is theorised in second-wave feminism. The following three chapters, which each focus on one particular aspect of female bodily experience, namely menstruation, childbirth, and the menopause, will present the main tendencies of second-wave feminist works in relation to the specific

bodily experience under scrutiny. Within these chapters, the analysis will also refer to pertinent academic scholarship which explores the main tendencies of contemporary women's writing or examines specific novels. In order to answer the second question, I shall consider how the female body is represented in a variety of different cultural, social, and political contexts, corresponding to three distinct geographical settings. In each chapter, the analysis will be informed by sociological and anthropological literature that is pertinent to the specific female bodily experience which is under examination. My approach will be informed by sociological and anthropological studies which compare and contrast women's experiences across different socio-cultural contexts. Where available, this thesis will also incorporate anthropological and sociological literature which is specific to the cultural context in which the novels are set.

The following sections will provide an overview of the main theories, critical texts, and research which will inform this study, as well as signal the gaps which this thesis aims to fill. Section 0.3 will examine how second-wave feminist works address, challenge, and provide, alternatives to societal attitudes towards the female body. Section 0.4 will then highlight the main tendencies of scholarship which criticises the second-wave feminist movement. Section 0.5 will review trends within existing research on contemporary women's writing in French, showing how my own study both builds on these findings and takes new approaches to representations of the female body. As I shall argue, the originality of my approach lies not only in its bringing together three literary cultures which are generally studied separately, but also in its examination of three aspects of female bodily

experience which are rarely the focus of academic scholarship on contemporary women's writing in French. Furthermore, this thesis provides a thorough consideration of the relationship between second-wave feminism and more contemporary women's writing: a relationship that is usually discussed only briefly in introductions to edited volumes or monographs. Section 0.6 will also briefly consider the topical nature of this thesis in regard to the recent global media attention on women's experiences of menstruation and the menopause.

0.3 The representation of female bodily experience in second-wave feminist works

The second-wave feminist movement was sparked by the events of May 1968.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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

¹⁰ For a more detailed account of this link between May 68 and second-wave feminists, see Ursula Tidd's book *Simone de Beauvoir* (2004). Tidd starts her analysis by stating: "The 'big bang' for second-wave feminism came with the May 68 'événements'" (2004, p. 74).

¹¹ In the context of second-wave feminism, patriarchy refers to 'a social system characterized by male domination over women' (Hartmann: 1997, p. 100). This term, however, takes on a new meaning in a different cultural setting such as in Algeria, wherein patriarchal values are inflected by Islam and Algeria's colonial past. According to Peter R. 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, p. xii).

Leclerc, Marie Cardinal, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, Christine Delphy, and Monica 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 Annie 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). 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. The majority of these authors posit language as the cause of, but also potentially as the solution to, female oppression. They often argue that language, because it privileges male experience at the expense of female experience, is phallogocentric in nature.^{12 13} Leclerc, Cardinal and Cixous (who coined the term '*écriture féminine*' in her essay 'Le Rire de la Méduse') encourage women to celebrate their bodies and find a more positive language with which to describe them.¹⁴ Since my study

¹² 'Phallogocentric' is a term used by Irigaray, Cixous, and Kristeva, who all refer to the 'phallogocentrisme' in language. Although they themselves do not offer a straightforward definition of this term, Elizabeth Grosz provides the following clear definition: '[p]hallogocentrism functions to reduce or categorize femininity so that it is conceived as a simulacrum, mirror-image or imperfect double of masculinity' (1986, p. 68). The related term 'phallogocentrism' is also often to be found within second-wave feminist texts. Second-wave feminists borrowed from Jacques Derrida 'his critique of phallogocentrism – the way in which male speech dominates writing. Especially the writing done by women' (Agger: 1992, p. 126)

¹³ This binary division between male and female is, of course, problematic, since it ignores those people who are gender non-conforming such as transgender and non-binary individuals. Contemporary novels which explore childbirth, menstruation, and menopause very rarely do so in the context of gender non-conforming individuals. The only expectation may be Nina Bouraoui's *La Voyeuse interdite* in which Fikria bandages her breasts. Some critics have argued that this is an attempt to appear more masculine. In *The Narrative Mediterranean: beyond France and the Maghreb* Claudia Esposito argues that *La Voyeuse interdite* 'call[s] into question binary divisions of gender' (2013: p. 67). More work into the representation of transgender and non-binary individuals in francophone culture is of vital importance.

¹⁴ Cixous introduces *écriture féminine* as follows: '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

focuses on the representation of three specific aspects of female bodily experience, the theoretical framework will be based only on second-wave feminist works which consider menstruation, childbirth, and/or the menopause, rather than on those which provide more general theorisations about the body as a whole. Key works on these topics are Leclerc's *Parole de femme* and Kristeva's *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, both of which explore menstruation and childbirth, and Cardinal's *Autrement dit* in which she discusses, in conversation with Leclerc, both menstrual and menopausal experience.¹⁵ Despite their evident centrality to second-wave feminist thought in general, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous do not in fact examine these particular bodily experiences, and thus their works will not form part of my study's specific conceptual framework.

In *Parole de femme*, Annie Leclerc argues that many languages, French included, are patriarchal in nature, and therefore position female bodily experience in a negative space. According to Leclerc, the engrained patriarchal concepts in language silence many aspects of female bodily experience and, in turn, this silence leads to women feeling ashamed. Leclerc's solution to combatting this 'parole de l'homme', which denigrates the female body, is to

violemment qu'elles l'ont été de leurs corps' (1975, p. 39). This thesis will not use the term '*écriture féminine*' (which is often used by scholars to refer to the second-wave feminist group) because I believe that its application to this entire group is problematic. Kristeva, for example, rejects this label because she believes that it is essentialist: '[u]niversaliste dans sa démarche, ce courant du féminisme *globalise* les problèmes des femmes de différents milieux, âges, civilisations ou simplement de différentes structures psychiques, sous l'étiquette de la Femme Universelle' (1981, p. 8). She also criticises the movement for being 'une réitération du romantisme plus ou moins euphorique ou déprimé' (1981, p. 12).

¹⁵ The chapter on menstruation will also consider Delphy's approach to menstrual experience in 'Proto-féminisme et anti-féminisme' (1976).

create a new language, a 'parole de femme', which instead celebrates the female body.¹⁶ Leclerc outlines these intentions in her introduction:

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 (7-8).

Leclerc writes here, and throughout *Parole de femme*, 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 practises such a 'parole de femme' herself by depicting and celebrating female experiences such as menstruation, childbirth, and pregnancy. She takes each of these aspects in turn and structures her work based on a woman's cycle of fertility. She explains how each experience has been corrupted by patriarchal discourse and coins a more positive language to describe it. For example, she writes that patriarchal discourse has turned

¹⁶ Leclerc uses the phrase 'parole de l'homme' on many occasions in *Parole de femme*. She employs this term in an idiomatic manner to highlight that language, because it has been invented by men, reflects a male perspective which silences and devalues female experiences. See, for example, pages 7, 13 and 161.

childbirth into 'la fête la plus maudite' (1974, p. 86) and replaces this with a positive image of childbirth as 'le somptueux paroxysme de la fête' (1974, p. 49).

Leclerc calls on other women to coin their own 'parole de femme'. She reproaches them for suffering in silence and accepting the negative patriarchal discourse that devalues their bodies:

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, pp. 50-51).

Evidently, Leclerc believes that, at the time of writing *Parole de femme*, other women were yet to find a suitable form of expression so that they could contest negative patriarchal perceptions of the female body, and they had not yet created a more positive language with which to describe their bodies. The question, then, is whether twenty or more years later francophone authors have, in their literary texts, chosen to create 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 implores female authors to dispel (that is, a discourse which silences the female body or positions it as shameful). Although *Parole de femme* is a pioneering work which represents female bodily experience in much more detail and with more focus than many other works of second-wave feminism, it has been largely overlooked in academic scholarship. Since *Parole de femme* will occupy a central place in the theoretical framework with which the novels will be analysed, this thesis will seek to redress this imbalance.

Despite her focus on the cycle of female fertility, Leclerc does not completely engage with the final stage, the menopause, until her conversations with Marie Cardinal, in *Autrement dit*. This work features conversations between the pair, interwoven with chapters written entirely by Cardinal herself. Since she also breaks the silence and challenges the negative patriarchal language that surrounds female bodily experience, and implores other women to do the same, Cardinal's approach is quite similar to that of Leclerc's in *Parole de femme*. In similarity with Leclerc, Cardinal advocates the creation of a feminine language which more accurately conveys female experience, but in contrast to Leclerc, Cardinal places less emphasis on the idea of finding positive terms to describe the female body. Cardinal echoes Leclerc's approach to the female body by addressing all women together as a homogenous group:

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, p. 90).

Here, Cardinal underlines the importance for women of speaking about taboo topics in order that they become normalised. She breaks the silence on topics such as miscarriage, menstruation, and the menopause, not only in *Autrement dit* but also in many of her literary works.¹⁷ For Cardinal, the most effective way in which women can shatter patriarchal discourse is to speak openly about their bodies:

Parler. Il faut parler. Fort, vite, n'importe comment. Il faut vaguer, oser le vague, respirer à la limite de nos poumons, germer multiples, indéfinies, flotter, errer, indéfinir nos vastes corps (1977, p. 219).

Responding to Cardinal's injunction in *Autrement dit*, this thesis will determine whether contemporary women writers have broken the silence that Cardinal believes surrounds female bodily experience. This thesis will, where pertinent, compare the use of language employed by Cardinal with that used in

¹⁷ See for example *Les mots pour le dire* (1976) in which Cardinal writes extensively about her own experiences of menstruation.

contemporary women's writing. It will ask whether contemporary representations of the female body echo the language used by Cardinal which expresses the richness inherent in such experiences.

The final second-wave feminist text which has significantly informed the theoretical framework of this thesis is Julia Kristeva's *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*. Kristeva resembles Cardinal and Leclerc in her outlining of a general theory which she applies to all women. Through her theory of abjection, Kristeva examines why female bodily experience is viewed by society with horror and repulsion. Kristeva bases her argument on readings of the Biblical book Leviticus, which characterises female bodily experiences such as menstruation and childbirth as impure and those who come into contact with them as polluted.¹⁸ For Kristeva, the changing boundaries of the female body, as well as bodily fluids such as menstrual blood and those which are emitted during childbirth, 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, p. 12). She elucidates that a person's subjectivity depends upon their being able to

¹⁸ For a more detailed analysis of impurity and pollution in the Bible, see Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966) - a text that also inspired Kristeva. In this work, Douglas outlines: 'Ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose a system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created' (1966, p. 4).

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, p. 10).

Another key aspect of Kristeva's theory of abjection which will inform the theoretical framework of this thesis is the connection she establishes 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' (1980, p. 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 human world. Thus, since they elicit an abject response, female bodily experiences such as menstruation and childbirth are a reminder of the animalistic nature of human beings.

The above exploration of Kristeva's theories has illustrated that, since she neither explicitly challenges patriarchal discourse nor provides a more positive alternative, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* lies in stark contrast to *Parole de femme* and *Autrement dit*. This thesis will engage with Kristeva's conceptualisation of the female body in two key ways. By comparing representations of female bodily experience in contemporary women's writing to Kristeva's *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, I shall ascertain whether these more contemporary texts still reflect a traditional image of the female body as inspiring horror or repulsion, or if they, whether indirectly or intentionally, reject this idea. In addition, the following chapters will identify whether contemporary women's writing, when representing menstruation, childbirth, and the menopause, makes the same connection as does Kristeva between the female body and animality.

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 as well as anthropological and sociological studies.¹⁹ Although some studies which build their argument around Kristeva's theory are cross-cultural in scope, most 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. Scholars have not only applied her theory of abjection to the female bodily experiences Kristeva herself investigates in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, but many have broadened her theory to examine aspects of female biology such as the menopause.²⁰ My own approach will be informed by this new tendency to analyse menopausal experience through the framework of abjection. The final chapter of this thesis will determine the extent to which the novels evoke ideas of abjection and horror in their representations of the menopause.

Jane Ussher's illuminating psychological study *Managing the Monstrous Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive Body* (2006) is the most pertinent to this thesis because she investigates menstruation, childbirth, and the menopause. 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. Ussher supports her argument by taking examples from the media,

¹⁹ See for example 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. For references to Kristeva's theory within criticism of contemporary women's novels in French see, for example, Gill Rye's analysis of Ndiaye's œuvre in *Narrative of Mothering: Women's Writing in Contemporary France* (2009) and Michèle A Schaal's analysis of Desportes oeuvre in *Cherchez la femme: Women and Values in the Francophone World* (2011).

²⁰ For contemporary applications of Kristeva's theory to the menopause, see Wendy Rogers (1997) 'Sources of Abjection in Western responses to the menopause' in *Reinterpreting the Menopause: Cultural and Philosophical Issues*, eds. Paul Komesaroff et al, London: Routledge, pp. 225-238.

popular culture, medicine and law in a variety of cultural contexts. Ussher offers the following explanation as to 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 (2006, p. 5).

Ussher's work is also pertinent to this thesis because it is cross-cultural in scope: she expands on Kristeva's Judeo-Christian approach, which argues that taboos within western culture originated from the Bible, to compare cultural attitudes towards the female body 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, p. 8).

She cites the Jewish laws of *niddah* and the Islam tradition of *hijab* as examples of religious practices that are designed to limit the powers of abjection.²¹ She compares the regulation of the female body through religious rituals in non-secular societies with the medicalisation of the female body in secular societies. For example, on the subject of menstruation she states:

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, p. 19).

The cross-cultural analysis in this thesis will be informed by Ussher’s approach, proposing an alternative perspective to the purportedly ‘universal’ approach of the second-wave feminists. This thesis will seek to determine the extent to which contemporary women’s writing in French represents female bodily experience as being inflected by religion or science in the cultures depicted. It will thus explore whether Ussher’s assertion that there exists a

²¹ Ussher writes: ‘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’ (2006, p. 9).

dichotomy of experience between religious and non-religious societies is borne out in recent women's writing in French from different contexts.

0.4 *Criticism of second-wave feminist texts*

As well as inspiring many subsequent anthropological, feminist, and/or theoretical works, second-wave feminist texts have also attracted significant negative criticism for the manner in which they approach female experience. Rather than considering their specific approaches to menstruation, childbirth, and the menopause, critics of the second-wave feminists tend to challenge their broader views on female experience. These critics focus on a particular tendency that they uncover in second-wave feminist work, which is the treatment of women's experiences as if they were undifferentiated. The various criticisms that will be addressed in this section are central to the second main research question of this thesis. The analysis below will inform the methodology and theoretical framework of this thesis.

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*.²² 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 other second-wave feminists of presenting a heteronormative view of female bodily experience which completely excludes a lesbian perspective. In

²² This radical feminist journal was founded in 1977 by Simone de Beauvoir

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' (1980, p. 49). For Wittig, the texts of her contemporaries cannot be representative of all women because they silence lesbians altogether: 'la pensée straight ne peut pas concevoir une culture, une société où l'hétérosexualité n'ordonnerait pas [...] toutes les relations humaines' (1980, p. 49). Evidently then, Wittig is demonstrating that the ignorance of lesbian experience is a fundamental omission in the texts of writers such as Leclerc, Kristeva and Cardinal. This thesis will take heed of Wittig's criticism by identifying how far, in contemporary women's novels in French, sexuality is a factor that is represented as influencing female bodily experience.

In contrast to Wittig, who targets the second-wave feminist movement as a whole, Delphy targets an individual: Annie Leclerc. Although Delphy praises Leclerc for attempting to shatter the myths that devalue female bodily experience, she is frustrated by her idealism. Delphy believes that Leclerc's idealism masks the material differences that exist between women, depending upon their socio-economic status. In *L'Ennemi Principal*, for example, 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, p. 232). In 'Protoféminisme et anti-féminisme', Delphy focuses on Leclerc's theories about the female body, and argues that Leclerc does not recognise the

influence of material constraints and social structures on women's lived experience, exclaiming that Leclerc's idealism has led her 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, p. 1473).

For 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 which 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, p. 1481).

To provide an example of the deficiencies in Leclerc's argument, Delphy scrutinizes her theories about the taboo nature of menstruation from a cross-cultural perspective. Delphy explains: '[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, p. 1483). 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. Here, Delphy also problematises Leclerc's 'universal' approach by

demonstrating that menstrual experience is shaped by both socio-economic factors and cultural context.

Criticism of the second-wave feminists for their lack of consideration about the material, cultural, and social differences which exist between women has also been launched from within different contexts, such as by scholars within the fields of postcolonial or queer studies. In *Textual/Sexual Politics: Feminist Literary theory*, Toril Moi questions whether feminist literary theory by authors such as Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva can have political implications. Moi states that a major flaw in their work is the 'absence of any material factors preventing women from writing' (1985, p. 123). Here, she is alluding to the privileged position of these writers who formulate their theories based on their middle-class experiences, and yet present them as applicable to all women. Moi takes examples from the work of Cixous in order to demonstrate that the theories of the second-wave feminists are utopian, and therefore cannot be applied to women in the real world:

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, p. 123).

Moi argues that the work of Cixous and Irigaray lacks reference to a 'recognisable social structure' (1980, p. 126). She is therefore criticising Cixous

and Irigaray for not clearly situating their arguments within a specific social context. 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.

Moi's criticism of the second-wave feminists for assuming that their theories are representative of all women, which is also echoed by many other contemporary scholars, becomes explicit when she exclaims that they 'take for granted an audience as Parisian as they are', and that their work 'smacks of elitism' (1980, p. 96). She illustrates, here, that their theories are based on their own experiences as privileged middle-class and urban European women, and thus they cannot possibly apply to women from a lower socio-economic background. Moi proclaims that: '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, p. 125). She levels a similar criticism 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' (1980, pp. 147-8). We can find a similar critique of the second-wave feminist movement in Peta Bowden 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' (2014, p. 57). Their reference to celebration is particularly relevant to Leclerc's *Parole de femme* which proposes that negative patriarchal discourse

and ideology can be shattered through the use of a more positive feminine language.²³

Issues of class and social context are not the only differences between women that scholars criticise second-wave feminists for having elided. Ethnicity is also considered by some scholars as a factor which 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. Hence, 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*, which explores issues of language, subjectivity and feminism, Chris Weedon argues that the second-wave feminists 'render questions of race invisible' (1987, p. 155). Weedon also suggests that patriarchy is not 'a fixed structure' (1987, p. 155), thereby illustrating that patriarchal oppression can take many forms and its nature is dependent on social context. She suggests 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, p. 155).

In her chapter 'The Race for Theory' (1989) black feminist Barbara Christian argues that theories that are produced in the Western world by white

²³ For further criticisms of the second-wave feminists, see the article 'Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy' in which Felman castigates Irigaray for not reflecting on how her position in society relates to that of other women. Felman asks: '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, p. 3). See also Abigail Bray's criticism of Cixous' essentialism in *Hélène Cixous: Writing in Sexual Difference* (2004). Bray writes that 'the spectre of biological essentialism [...] has played a central role in the debates around her work' (2004, p. 28).

women have little or no relevance to the lives of most women, let alone black women.²⁴ Christian believes 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, p. 233). Christian argues that because they do not take into account the influence of race and class on female bodily experience, the second-wave feminists have a 'tendency towards monolithism' (1989, p. 233).

Christian and Weedon therefore echo the argument of Delphy, Bowden, Mummery, and Moi, that the second-wave feminists ignore the existence of differences between women which can define their experiences. Weedon and Christian add the dimension of ethnicity to this argument. 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' (1989, p. 233). Christian affirms, 'I and many of my sisters do not see the world as being so simple' (1989, p. 234). Christian therefore demonstrates that women's experiences are diverse, and to speak of them as a homogenous group ignores the complex nature of their identities and the fact that their experiences are defined by their ethnicity and class.

²⁴ For the purposes of this thesis, 'The West', because of its peoples' belief in a shared history and culture, refers to nations which are geographically in the West of Europe (or North America). The West sets itself in opposition to 'third world' countries, many of which are former colonies of Western nations. According to political scientist, James Gow, who attempts to define 'the West', 'Roman Catholic and later Protestant Christianity is generally seen as being a core element' (2005, p. 8) of 'Western' identity alongside a 'focus on individualism, rather than collectivism' (2005, p. 10). However, it must be underlined that 'the West' is a construct which we must problematise. Edward Said undertakes such a problematisation in *Orientalism*: '[n]either the term Orient nor the concept of the West has any ontological stability; each is made up of human effort, partly affirmative, partly identification with the Other' (2003, p. xxix)

In April 1980, the African-American author Audre Lorde delivered a speech in which she criticises the second-wave feminists for their refusal to recognise differences of age, ethnicity, class and sexuality. Lorde 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 white and heterosexual privileged 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, p. 96).

Lorde's intersectional approach demonstrates that a wide variety of factors influence women's experiences.²⁵ Lorde illustrates 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. Lorde asserts that the arguments of the second-wave feminists are based on their white Eurocentric perspective, and therefore they silence the struggles of black women. Lorde argues: 'white women ignore their built-in privilege of

²⁵ See also Patricia Hill Collins who, in the chapter 'Defining Black Feminist Thought' which features in *The Second-wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, criticises the white feminist movement for ignoring class and race. She also suggests some other factors which may influence women's experiences: 'In spite of the differences created by historical era, age, social class, sexual orientation, or ethnicity, the legacy of struggle against racism and sexism is a common thread binding African-American women' (1997, p. 244).

whiteness and define *woman* in terms of their own experience alone, then women of colour become “other” (2017, p. 98). Lorde once more emphasises the importance of considering the diversity of women’s experiences by stating: ‘Refusing to recognise difference makes it impossible to see the different problems and pitfalls facing us as women’ (99).

Another writer who criticises the second-wave feminist group is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who problematises the work of the second-wave feminists from a postcolonial perspective. In her essay ‘French feminism in an international frame’, Spivak not only criticises the second-wave feminists for being ‘class and race privileged literary women’ (1981, p. 158), but she also asserts that their work reflects ‘the inbuilt colonialism of First world feminism towards the Third’ (1981, p. 184). For this reason, Spivak 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’ (1981, p. 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 in this study because they fictionalise two former colonies of France with their own unique political landscapes. To paraphrase Spivak, this thesis does not seek to ‘deliberately apply’ the theories of the second-wave feminists to contemporary Algerian and Mauritian novels. Instead, I will be exploring how contemporary women’s writing has evolved in its approaches to female bodily experience since this subject was initially tackled by the second wave feminists.

Although it does not specifically target the metropolitan French feminists who theorised bodily experience in the 1970s, Chandra Talpade Mohanty's article 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses' (1984) is a useful point of reference for this thesis. This work is now considered as the 'defining essay on transnational feminism' (Kalbfleish: 2011, p. 290) and discusses the disjunction between the experience of women writing from a western perspective and of those outside this frame of reference. Mohanty reproaches feminists who base their arguments on sexual difference, a criticism which has often been launched at the second-wave feminists, by arguing that:

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 [...] "Third World Difference" – that stable, ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most if not all the women in these countries (1984, p. 335).²⁶

Mohanty here illustrates that patriarchal modes of oppression are very much dependent on cultural context. She argues that, in this way:

²⁶ For a criticism of sexual difference, see for example Jean Curthoy's *Feminist Amnesia: The Wake of Women's Liberation* (2003)

Western feminisms appropriate and “colonize” the fundamental complexities and conflicts which characterize the lives of women of different classes, religions, cultures, races and castes in these countries (1984, p. 335).

Again, we find in Mohanty’s work an emphatic reiteration of the idea that ‘woman’ is not a homogenous category, and also find the identification of further factors which influence women’s experience which were not mentioned in the aforementioned critical works, namely religion and caste. Thus, from a transnational perspective, Mohanty rejects arguments such as those made by the second-wave feminists, which totalise women’s experience. Mohanty insists that women are not an ‘already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location’ (1984, p. 336). This comment, when applied to second-wave feminist texts, implies that their theories are reductive because they do not consider how class or ethnicity may imprint on female bodily experience. In addition, Mohanty also highlights here the danger of representing the specific as the universal because this approach narrowly defines woman as a fixed entity. Hence, these theories do not acknowledge that patriarchal oppression and discourse may be influenced by a variety of culturally specific factors. Since they do not account for the multitude of societal, cultural, or other factors that influence women’s experience of key biological events, the theories of the second-wave feminists exclude the experiences of women who live outside a privileged white European French culture.

This review has underlined the importance of looking at the female body from a cross-cultural perspective in order fully to comprehend how women's writing has developed since second-wave feminism. It is evident that critics 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. They illustrate that, because they treat women as a homogenous group, the second-wave feminists ignore how the differences between women may inflect their experiences. The works reviewed in this section reveal various factors – ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, religion, colonial history - which may influence female bodily experience. This review of works has been key to developing the methodology of this thesis. The cross-cultural and intersectional nature of this thesis echoes Lorde's intersectional approach and Mohanty's transnational feminism. In line with the criticisms of second-wave feminism voiced by Delphy, Moi, and others, this thesis will explore whether, and how, contemporary women's writing in French represents purportedly 'universal' female experience as being influenced by different social and cultural contexts. The three main chapters will ascertain whether the differences between women, such as those which are posited by the critics who have been considered in this section, are manifest in contemporary representations of menstruation, childbirth, and the menopause. I shall analyse how these factors inflect the portrayal of female bodily experience in the selected novels. This thesis will also examine any other factors which are depicted as defining women's experiences of menstruation, childbirth and the menopause. In addition, this thesis will build on Mummery's and Bowden's argument by comparing the language employed

in *Parole de femme* with that in contemporary women's writing. This thesis will ask whether the selected novels similarly celebrate female bodily experience, or demonstrate that within specific contexts such a celebration may not be possible or appropriate.

0.5 *Current scholarship within the field of women's writing in French*

Despite burgeoning interest in francophone women's writing in recent years, surprisingly few studies have examined the relationship between second-wave feminist scholarship and contemporary women's novels in French. Women's writing from Algeria is particularly lacking from these debates. There exist even fewer works which problematise the pertinence of second-wave feminist theories about female bodily experience as a tool for analysing more contemporary representations of the female body. In the majority of instances in which second-wave feminism and contemporary novels are considered within the same text, this comparison usually takes place in the introduction to an edited volume in order to set the scene for the subsequent chapters which focus on women's writing since 1990. However, these chapters usually analyse the contemporary novels without referring back to the second-wave feminist movement, and do not seek to determine how these more contemporary representations may echo, or contrast, approaches to the female body in the 1970s and early 1980s. For example, in the edited volume *Women's Writing in Twenty-First-Century France* (2013), Damlé and Rye introduce the subsequent chapters by broadly comparing contemporary literature to second-wave feminism:

In the 1970s and 1980s, authors such as Cixous, Chantal Chawaf, Annie Leclerc and Marie Redonnet sought to celebrate the rhythms and plenitude of the female body in writing. Yet, 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' (Rye and Damlé: 2013, p. 10).

Here, Damlé and Rye outline that novels published since 1990 explore the female body in new and more traumatic contexts, and reject the call of their forebears to celebrate the female body.²⁷ I shall consider this observation by questioning whether depictions of menstruation, childbirth, and the menopause are also set within such traumatic contexts, and whether these contexts inflect the way in which these biological experiences are portrayed. The only one of these experiences which is touched on in *Women's Writing in Twenty-First-Century France* is childbirth, a topic which is examined in the context of infanticide in Nathalie Edwards' chapter on the works of Véronique Olmi and Laurence Tardieu. This lacuna is, in fact, representative of a general

²⁷ See also *Experiment and Experience: Women's Writing in France 2000-2010* (2013) in which Rye and Damlé write: 'Building on, and yet developing in quite difference directions, the notion of 'writing the body' of feminist writers of the 1970s and 1980s, [...] the 1990s saw a whole spectrum of factors – including violence, humour, coercion and distance – incorporated into the representation of women's bodies and desires' (2013, p. 2).

lack of critical works that examine the representation of menstruation, childbirth, and the menopause in women's writing in French.

Although the subsequent chapters in *Women's Writing in Twenty-First-Century France* do examine traumatic concepts, such as infanticide and anorexia, and topics which are also explored by the second-wave feminists such as animality and childbirth, the vast majority of chapters are not in keeping with the introduction since they do not refer back to second-wave feminist theories. The only exception is Ashwiny O Kistnareddy's chapter, which explores hybridity and animality in Devi's novels *Moi L'Interdite* and *Le Sari Vert*. Kistnareddy alludes to Kristeva's theory of the abject by citing Kristeva in a footnote when arguing that the women who are human and animal hybrids in Devi's oeuvre 'inspire fear in people because such a body is unknowable' (2013, p. 130). As explained earlier on in this introduction, Kristeva also associates the animal with the abject. Kistnareddy, however, does not explore this idea in any detail when examining the representation of animality in Devi's oeuvre, and therefore does not problematise the relevance of Kristeva's theory in a Mauritian literary space.

References to Kristeva's theory of abjection are not uncommon in contemporary scholarship which examines the representation of the female body in women's writing. However, in parallel with Kistnareddy's approach, Kristeva's theory is often applied without analysis of its relevance within either a more contemporary context or a different cultural context. For example, in *Postcolonial Representations: Women, Literature, Identity* (1995), Françoise Lionnet investigates the mother-daughter relationship in Devi's

novel *Rue la poudrière* through the framework of Kristeva's theory of abjection. Lionnet asserts:

Marie [...] represents the "abject" in Julia Kristeva's sense of the word. The phenomenon attraction/repulsion that is central to Paule's relationship to Marie is a classic case of the opposition between a *je* and an object that it perceives as internal to itself and thus threatening to its identity as subject (1995, p. 66)

Although the article explores the urban environment of the text and how Devi's approach is inflected by a 'Hindu sensitivity' (1995, p. 52), Lionnet does not problematise the application of Kristeva's western feminist theory to a Mauritian cultural context. In the edited volume *Aventures et expériences littéraires*, we can find another reference to Kristeva's theory of abjection without consideration of how this might be nuanced within a different cultural context. In her exploration of ageing in Detambel's *Le Syndrome de Diogène* (2008), Cécilia Gil writes:

Le sujet, qui refuse toute assimilation (avec la vieillesse, motif de l'abjection) et « l'expulse », conçoit pourtant sa présence de façon anticipée, une abjection à venir déjà ressentie. Les gants du soignant qui protègent du dégoût protègent donc d'une forme de l'abjection (2014, p. 202).

Gil does not question how this discourse of abjection is nuanced by the contemporary context of the novel and contemporary attitudes within the medical profession.²⁸

There do exist, however, a handful of insightful studies which successfully problematise the application of second-wave feminist theories to novels which are set in a more contemporary context or in a different cultural space. These largely emerge in scholarship which examines the novels of Ananda Devi. In *Écritures mauriciennes au féminin: penser l'atérité*, Alison Rice demonstrates that Kristeva's theories of motherhood differ from the representations of motherhood in a Mauritian context. During her analysis of novels by Devi and Nathacha Appanah she argues that Kristeva's theories are based in 'western imagination and society' (2011, p. 95) and therefore are not applicable to a Mauritian cultural context. Another example is Julia Waters' article "'Ton continent est noir": Rethinking Feminist Metaphors in Ananda Devi's *Pagli*' (2004) in which she analyses Devi's representation of female bodily experience.²⁹ Waters argues that there are similarities in the approach to the female body across Cixous' work and Devi's portrayal of the female body

²⁸ See for example *Tactical Silence in the Novels of Malika Mokeddem* (2010) in which Jane Evans examines the representation of silence in Mokeddem's novel *Le Siècle des sauterelles* by using Kristeva's theory of the semiotic as a framework. See also Ricarda Bienbeck's analysis in *Zwischen traditioneller Repräsentation und ästhetischer Distanzierung: das Werk der Algerierin Maïssa Bey* (2012). Bienbeck applies Kristeva's theories about the semiotic into the post-colonial context of Bey's novels *Bleu blanc vert* and *Cette fille-là* without questioning the very different cultural and temporal contexts which Kristeva and Bey are representing.

²⁹ See also Karen Lindo's analysis of *Pagli* in 'Interrogating the Place of *Lajja*' in *The Female Face of Shame*. Lindo analyses how the representation of Daya's body both resonates with Kristeva's theory of abjection but also discerns an alternative perspective on the abject: 'Devi contests the figure of the abject not only in the depictions of the characters *Pagli*, *Mitsy*, and *Zil* but also in which the notion of procreation is reformulated through the theme of rebirth in the novel' (2013, p. 223).

in *Pagli*, as well as explaining how the echoes of Cixous' ideas within *Pagli* are nuanced by its fictionalised Mauritian setting. Waters supports her argument with reference to Spivak's criticism of the second-wave feminists for ignoring 'ethnicity, language, class [and] religion' (2004, p. 46), and teases out these differences within *Pagli*. Waters' conclusion clearly demonstrates this problematisation:

Daya comes from a profoundly different world from that of the privileged, western, feminist academics that Spivak criticises, and so shifts the grounds for debates on the nature of "woman". Devi's novel invites a reading that precludes the unmodified application of either of the two prevalent approaches to non-western texts, identified by Spivak: that is, to read them either, homogenisingly, as representative of marginality or from within a western theoretical frame and according to western criteria (2004, p. 54).

Here, Waters echoes Spivak by warning against the unmodified application of second-wave feminist texts to non-Western cultural contexts since this homogenising approach not only ignores differences between women which pertain to their ethnicity, language, class, and religion, but also marginalises and silences non-western women. This thesis avoids such marginalisation and silencing by treating the three literary cultures with equal attention and not defining the Algerian and Mauritian literary cultures as minor literatures which respond to a European French centre. Through analysing a variety of

female bodily experiences across three distinct cultural contexts, this thesis will build on Rice's and Waters' arguments by examining whether more contemporary novels reflect, nuance, or refute the approaches of the second-wave feminists to the female body.

The articles and chapters which have been mentioned so far in this section all share one common aspect: they all examine one specific literary culture. In fact, cross-cultural comparative studies are very rare within scholarship that explores women's writing in French. Part of the originality of this thesis lies in its comparative analysis of three literary cultures and their representations of the female body in particular. Even though these three literatures all represent female bodily experience, there exists very little, if any, research that considers the three together. When these literatures do appear within the same publication, they appear in separate chapters or articles, rather than being compared within the same article or chapter. For example, *Women's Writing in Contemporary France: New Writers, New Literatures in the 1990s* treats works by French authors, such as Christine Angot and Marie Darrieussecq, separately from Algerian authors such as Leïla Sebbar.³⁰ 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. However, there is no cross-cultural comparison between their respective textual representations of the female body. This thesis will aim to

³⁰ See also Rocca, Anna and Kenneth Reeds' edited volume *Women Taking Risks in Contemporary Autobiographical Narratives* (2013), in which the works of Ernaux and Mokeddem are discussed in different chapters.

fill this gap by comparing a variety of novels from three distinct cultural contexts.

The few examples of cross-cultural comparison that do exist most commonly compare French literature with Algerian literature, such as in Margot Miller's article 'Writing Home: Malika Mokeddem and Hélène Grimaud, Witnesses on the Journey in Search of Home', which appears in a book entitled *Gender and Displacement: 'Home' in Contemporary Francophone Women's Autobiography* (2008). In this chapter, Miller compares Mokeddem's *N'Zid* with Grimaud's *Leçons Particulières*, and identifies common themes, including the therapeutic nature of the sea as well as the metaphor of a physical journey as a voyage of self-discovery. However, there is no discussion of the cultural differences between Algeria and France and how these are reflected in the novels, a common gap to be found in numerous examples of the critical literature.³¹ Mauritian literature is the most underrepresented of the three literary cultures which have been selected for this thesis. Therefore, there are even fewer critical works that compare Mauritian literature to other Francophone literatures. When these novels are compared, it is usually with literature from the French Caribbean. A notable example is Njeri Githire's *Cannibal Writes: Eating Others in Caribbean and Indian Ocean Women's Writings* (2014), which examines cannibalism as a motif in novels from Mauritius and Haiti. Comparative analyses of literature from Algeria and

³¹ See also Beth Gale's chapter 'Multiple Identities as Adolescent Coping Mechanism in Annie Ernaux's *Les Armoires Vides* and Assia Djebar's *L'Amour, la fantasia*' (2009) in *Francophone Women Coming of Age: Memoirs of Childhood and Adolescence from France, Africa, Quebec and the Caribbean* (2009). Gale treats these novels separately and does not relate the protagonists' struggles with their own identity in relation to the society in which they live.

Mauritius are non-existent, even though these are both nations in Africa that were once under French colonial rule. Nonetheless, their cultures are very different. Mauritius is an officially secular island-nation with a diverse, non-indigenous, multi-ethnic population, with ancestral origins mainly in France, Africa, India and China. The largest ethnic group are Hindu Indo-Mauritians, whose ancestors were brought to the island as indentured labourers under British colonial rule (1810-1968). Prior to that, Mauritius had been a French colony and Franco-Mauritians continue to constitute a small but elite minority. Algeria, on the other hand, is an Islamic country which, since the early days of independence until the early twenty-first century, has witnessed a rise of Islamism. There is a shared French colonial history between Algeria and Mauritius. Yet, they have very different post-colonial cultural, religious, political, and social compositions. These similarities and differences translate into their two distinct literatures being ideal for a cross-cultural comparative thesis which questions whether contemporary authors resonate with, or provide a contrast to, the universalism of the second-wave feminists.

0.5.1 Current scholarship which explores the representation of menstruation in contemporary women's writing in French

My approach is original both in its cross-cultural comparison of three different francophone areas and in its focus on three different forms of female bodily experience which pertain to the stages in a woman's fertility cycle. Each of these particular aspects of female bodily experience requires further research. There exist only a handful of critical works that approach the representation

of menstrual experience in women's writing in French.³² This topic remains only a secondary concern within articles which focus on other themes.³³ Nonetheless, these works do provide an insightful perspective on menstrual experience upon which this thesis can fruitfully build. 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, Harrington briefly examines a scene in *La Voyeuse interdite*. In this scene, Fikria, the central character, is beaten by her father because he notices that her sheets are stained with her menstrual blood. Harrington selects this episode to support her argument that Fikria is positioned by the text as an outsider who reveals and criticises 'the dangers and limitations of a society bound by a rigid set of rules' (2013, p. 80). Harrington writes that this scene 'suggests that Bouraoui wants to provoke utter disbelief in her reader that a father could treat his daughter so harshly due to circumstances out of her control – her natural development into a woman' (2013, p. 87).

We can find another example in Jordan's analysis of *Baise-moi* and *Truismes* by Marie Darrieussecq in *Contemporary French Women's Writing: Women's Visions, Women's Voices, Women's Lives*. Jordan's analysis of excess

³² We can also find scholarship that analyses novels which represent menstrual blood, but gloss over the subject. For example, in Eileen Lohka's analysis of *Ève de ses décombres*, she analyses the violence of the scene in which the teacher is caught with Eve's menstrual blood on his face but does not directly refer to this blood. Lohka writes, 'l'offrande de son corps-escalade devient sa manière à elle de prouver qu'elle contrôle sa vie. Sa décision déclenche une spirale de violence. Le professeur, surpris dans l'acte et atteint dans son honneur, tue Savita, l'amie – ou le "döppelganger" – d'Ève qui a eu le malheur de le voir par une porte mal fermée' (2011, p. 23).

³³ See also works such as Françoise Simonet-Tenant's chapter in *L'intimité* in which she provides a general overview by listing novels and autobiographical texts in which menstruation appears, but she does not provide a detailed analysis of these representations. Simonet-Tenant focuses primarily on texts published between the 1960s and 1990s. She mentions novels such as Millet's *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M*, Annie Ernaux's *Ce qu'ils dissent ou rien* (1977) and Violette Leduc's *La Bâtarde* (1964).

and the abject in *Baise-moi* is the most detailed exploration of the representation of menstrual blood in women's writing in French to date. Her approach is very much in line with that of this thesis, since Jordan outlines Kristeva's theory of the abject before arguing that the novel challenges the idea that menstrual blood is abject. Jordan notes that *Baise-moi*:

exposes an uncomfortable truth about received bodily perceptions: namely that we live in a society that is not only inured to the graphic representation of bloody murder, but embraces it as an enjoyable form of entertainment whilst remaining repelled by (intrinsically harmless) blood of the menstrual variety (2004, p. 136).

By comparing the representation of menstruation across a variety of novels and three distinct literary cultures, this thesis will build on the aforementioned critical works by Harrington and Jordan, which each consider only one literary culture.

0.5.2 Current scholarship which explores the representation of childbirth in contemporary women's writing in French

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. In her article 'Registering

Trauma: The Body in Childbirth in Contemporary Women's Writing' (2006), Rye explores the representation of childbirth in Christine Angot's *Interview* (1995), Desportes' 'A terme' (1999), and Camille Laurens' *Philippe* (1995).³⁴ Rye states that bodily experiences are 'inflected, or more fundamentally constructed, by the ideological discourses that traverse them' and that these novels inscribe 'the birthing body into problematic social contexts – respectively, incest, infanticide and infant mortality' (2006, p. 92). Rye thus argues that these fictional representations of childbirth are influenced by social context. Another example can be found in Valerie Worth-Stylianou's article, 'Birthing Tales and Collective Memory in French Fiction' (2017). Worth-Stylianou reflects one of the aims of this thesis by arguing that Darrieussecq's story 'Encore là' demonstrates that each woman experiences childbirth differently. She writes, 'the narrator's glimpse of individual tales surfacing from a homogenized universal past is indicative of a variety of experiences that resists any single dominant discourse of motherhood' (2017, p. 60). Studies which compare representations of childbirth across different literary cultures are lacking. This thesis will build on Rye and Worth-Stylianou's findings and fill in the gaps within current scholarship by questioning the role played by context in representations of childbirth in a European French as well as an Algerian and Mauritian setting.

³⁴ In *Narratives of Mothering: Women's Writing in Contemporary France* (2009) Gill Rye also examines the representation of childbirth in Leïla Marouane's *Le Châtiment des hypocrites* (2001). In fact, of all the novels which represent childbirth within Algerian women's writing, this is the only novel which has received significant critical attention for its depiction of its protagonist's traumatic experience of childbirth. See, for example, Siobhan McIlvanney's comprehensive exploration of this topic in her chapter of *Rebelles et Criminelles chez les écrivaines d'expression française* (2013).

The theme of childbirth is usually elided or glossed over within studies which explore contemporary women's writing from Algeria or France. For example, in her article, 'Histoire de l'Algérie, destins de femmes: l'écriture du nomadisme dans *Les Hommes qui marchent*', Armelle Crouzières-Ingenthron explores in detail the role of women in the Algerian society portrayed in Mokeddem's novel. Crouzières-Ingenthron, however, only very briefly considers Mokeddem's representation of childbirth. Instead, she focuses on women's roles as story tellers and as upholders of tradition alongside the legacy of the Algerian war of independence. In a paragraph wherein Crouzières-Ingenthron examines the portrayal of motherhood in the novel, she argues that Yamina experiences having children as self-affirming: 'Bien qu'elle ne soit réduite qu'à une partie de son corps, Yamina EST son ventre' (2000, p. 150). This novel and its contextualisation of childbirth within an Algerian frame of reference will be examined in more detail in Chapter Two. An example from Mauritian literature in which childbirth is a central theme is Devi's *Soupir* in which the labours of two protagonists are described in significant detail. This work has received a significant amount of critical attention, and yet the theme of childbirth is largely ignored in favour of analysing the magical realist elements of the text, its representation of poverty and marginalisation, or its portrayal of the Creole population of Rodrigues. For example, in the article 'Les personnages marginalisés dans les romans d'Ananda Devi' (2011), Katarzyna Wiśniewska writes the following about *Soupir*:

[Devi] présente non seulement la stigmatisation sociale mais aussi les implications que celle-ci entraîne. Car la stigmatisation peut

condamner les hommes à vivre à l'écart, mais elle peut aussi les conduire jusqu'à la mort. Il n'est pas difficile d'apercevoir que les premières à marginaliser sont les femmes (2011, pp. 318-9).

In her exploration of the marginalisation of the female characters in *Soupir*, Wiśniewska does not consider how their experiences of childbirth may be shaped by this marginal position. Hence, there is a gap which can be filled by exploring whether these contextual factors which have been analysed within academic scholarship inflect the depiction of childbirth in *Soupir*.³⁵

0.5.3 Current scholarship which explores the representation of the menopause in contemporary women's writing in French

Of the three topics that will be examined in this study, the menopause is the most overlooked within contemporary scholarship on women's writing in French. Even though, over the last three years, ageing is a topic which has increased in popularity for scholars within the field of contemporary women's writing in French, these studies very rarely pay attention to the menopause.³⁶ We can argue that the main reason for this gap is the lack of francophone novels which mention the menopause. Of the four novels which will be explored in the final chapter of this thesis, two have already received a relatively significant amount of critical attention, namely Bey's *Bleu blanc vert*

³⁵ See also Eileen Lohka's article 'De la terre à la terre, du berceau à la tombe : L'île d'Ananda Devi' (2008) in which, despite the reference to birth in this title, she analyses *Soupir* without considering its representation of childbirth. Instead, she looks at the island of Soupir as metaphorically giving birth to its inhabitants.

³⁶ See for example *As Time Goes By: Portraits of age* (2014) which features chapters that explore the representation of ageing in French novels such as Annie Ernaux's *Une femme* and Balzac's *Le Père Goriot*. The menopause is only mentioned in a footnote.

and Devi's *Indian Tango*. Nonetheless, these studies do not discuss their representations of the menopause. For example, in her article, '*Bleu blanc vert* de Maïssa Bey: Regards Croisés sur trois décennies d'indépendance algérienne' (2009), Anna Soler examines a passage in Bey's novel in which the menopause is given as an example of a matter which causes women anxiety. Soler focuses on the fears that pertain to virginity, marriage, and contraception. She does not, however, acknowledge the inclusion of the menopause in this extract of *Bleu blanc vert*.³⁷ Since the menopause is one of the central themes of *Indian Tango*, it is particularly surprising that its representation of the menopause has been overlooked by scholars who have published research on this novel. The narrative describes the protagonists' menopausal symptoms, her family's attitudes to the menopause, and her lesbian affair which shapes her perception of her menopausal body. In her article 'Devenir-autre: female corporeality and nomadic transformation in Ananda Devi's writing' (2011), Amaleena Damlé's analysis of this lesbian relationship mentions in passing that the protagonist, Subhadra, is menopausal. She points out the transformative power of this relationship without considering how this affair inflects her menopausal experience: 'their relationship is described by Devi through metaphors of dance and music to evoke both its sensuality and transformative effects' (2011, p. 168).

A rare work which explores the representation of the menopause in women's writing is Susan Ireland and Patrice J. Proulx's insightful chapter 'Redefining the Self: Explorations of ageing in Michele Sarde's *Constance et la*

³⁷ This passage will be explored further in the menopause chapter of this thesis.

cinquantaïne' (2016). Although, in line with the spike in interest in ageing within current scholarship, Ireland and Proulx primarily focus on the portrayal of ageing in the text, they also look at how the protagonists of *Constance et la cinquantaïne* negotiate their menopausal symptoms. Within their analysis they discuss the representation of Hormone Replacement Therapy, as well as the psychological and corporeal effects of the menopause which are experienced by the characters. For example, they argue that 'the corporeal changes [the menopause] brings are linked to the notions of loss and fragmentation, which serve as a metaphor for psychological disintegration and the need to create new identities' (2016, p. 114). By analysing in depth four novels which portray menopausal experience, this thesis aims to build on the work of Ireland and Proulx and so fill a gap in the academic literature on women's writing in French, through considering the representation both of symptoms of the menopause and of societal and individual attitudes towards it.

This review has highlighted that there are gaps within the field of contemporary women's writing scholarship. One of the most significant gaps is the lack of cross-cultural comparative research that evaluates the similarities or convergences that may exist between how different literary cultures portray the female body. This thesis seeks to fill in many of these gaps through its cross-cultural approach and its focus on three female bodily experiences which have largely been neglected within literary analysis of women's writing from Algeria, France, and Mauritius. This review has demonstrated that current scholarship treats menstruation and childbirth as a secondary concern. I shall redress this balance by offering a detailed and focussed analysis of these two aspects of a woman's fertility cycle. This study

will build on the small number of works which briefly begin to consider the relationship between second-wave feminism and contemporary women's writing. I shall develop this comparison not only by considering how contemporary women's writing from France has evolved since second-wave feminism, but also by considering how two other francophone literary cultures reflect, or provide a contrast to, second-wave feminist approaches to the body. This thesis is also original in its problematisation of the pertinence of second-wave feminist theories about menstruation, childbirth, and the menopause, to cultural, social, and temporal contexts that differ from those in which Leclerc, Cardinal, and Kristeva were writing.

0.6 Media coverage of menstruation and the menopause

The analysis of representations of menstruation in the next chapter of this thesis is not only filling a gap in scholarship on women's writing in French, it also fits into the popular zeitgeist of today.³⁸ 2015, in particular, witnessed a surge in coverage of women trying to break the taboos around menstruation, with much of the momentum being 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 a shrine unless a machine is invented to discern whether they are menstruating. Soon, 'Happy to Bleed' became #HappytoBleed on Twitter,

³⁸ For a detailed account of the recent interest in the media and on social media in challenging the taboos that surround menstrual experience see Victoria Newton's *Everyday Discourses of Menstruation: Cultural and Social Perspectives* (2016)

a banner under which women shared their experiences of menstruation.³⁹ In 2015, French artist Marianne Rosenstiehl also exhibited a series of photographs that depict menstruating women and show their menstrual blood. 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.⁴⁰ Popular American TV shows such as *Orange is the New Black* and *Broad City* have also aired episodes which feature conversations about menstruation and images of menstrual blood.⁴¹ Even though menstruation is a topic which has been present in francophone literature for decades, it has largely been ignored by literary scholarship, and therefore this thesis, alongside these aforementioned artistic representations and social media campaigns, seeks to break the general silence around this major female bodily experience.

The menopause is also an increasingly prevalent topic in printed media, television, radio, and social media. This thesis is, in part, inspired by this peak of interest in the subject. In France, a variety of radio shows and television programmes have (paradoxically) explored why, for many women, the menopause remains a taboo topic and something about which women feel ashamed. For example, in March 2015, France Inter aired a phone-in radio

³⁹ Others who protested in 2015 against societal attitudes towards menstruation include Canadian based artist Rupri Kaur who uploaded to Instagram a photograph of herself lying in bed with a menstrual blood stain on her pyjamas, and then publically contested Instagram's removal of this photograph. US-based musician Kiran Ghandi challenged normative perceptions of menstruation by running the London marathon visibly menstruating onto her leggings.

⁴⁰ Such as the website <https://passionmenstrues.com/> which is run by Jack Parker (a pseudonym).

⁴¹ See series 4 episode 5 of *Orange Is the New Black* (2016), in which the inmates at Lichfield prison experience a tampon shortage. See also the final episode of series 3 of *Broad City* (2016) in which one of the protagonists wears blood soaked jeans in order to deter staff from discovering the drugs she is smuggling through airport security.

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 who is 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' (2013), 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'. 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 quinquia*, and during an interview on TF1's programme 'Sept à huit'. In both cases, Davant focuses on the sexual desire of menopausal women. For example, during 'Sept à huit' the interviewer acknowledges that she has discussed openly taboo topics such as the menopause, to which she responds, 'c'est pas tabou, ça concerne tout le monde'. We can, therefore, observe that, with the notable exception of *Constance et la cinquantaine*, French literature has not yet reflected this contemporary trend of women who are seeking to break the silence and to challenge the stereotypes that surround the menopause.

0.7 Chapter Synopsis

Chapters One, Two and Three are organised to reflect the chronology of the cycle of a woman's fertility. They will follow a woman's fertile life from menstruation - which marks the beginning of her fertility and therefore potential to become pregnant - through to childbirth - which marks the beginning of motherhood - and then on to the menopause - which signifies the permanent end of a woman's ability to procreate. Chapters One, Two, and Three will begin by establishing how the particular female bodily experience upon which it is focussing is characterised within second-wave feminist works. Each chapter will then turn to both culturally specific and cross-cultural anthropological and sociological literature, before analysing each literary culture in turn. All chapters will answer the two main research questions of this thesis. In each chapter, I shall assess the extent to which depictions of a particular aspect of the female fertility cycle in contemporary women's writing reveal a different perspective from second-wave feminist theories about the body. I shall also determine whether the novels in question portray female bodily experience as universal, or, reflecting criticism of the universalising views of the second-wave feminists, whether they reveal differences that were overlooked in second-wave feminist texts.

Chapter One will explore representations of menstruation in contemporary women's writing. I shall evaluate the extent to which these literary portrayals echo, or provide a contrast to, Leclerc, Cardinal and Kristeva's theories about menstrual experience. Chapter One will focus on certain aspects of menstrual experience and consider how these are contextualised within the novels. These aspects include a girl's first menses,

the role played by parents in this key moment of puberty, and the taboo nature of menstruation in the societies represented in certain novels. This chapter shows that, in contemporary women's writing in French, menstrual experience is shaped by cultural context. The section on Algerian literature will consider the role played by Islamic and patriarchal traditions, the section on Mauritian literature will investigate the influence of Hinduism and interracial tension, and the final section will analyse how literature from France questions the medicalisation of the body and the stigma that surrounds menstrual blood.

Chapter Two will investigate depictions of childbirth in contemporary women's writing and assess the extent to which they mirror, or diverge from, Leclerc, Cardinal and Kristeva's approaches to childbirth. It will analyse how women's experiences of childbirth are inflected by societal expectations about motherhood, as well as examining the traumatic and violent contexts into which many of these novels inscribe childbirth. Chapter Two will also explore representations of related experiences including caesareans, contraception, miscarriage, and abortion. The section on Algerian literature will consider Islamic law, the norm of giving birth to multiple children as well as the damage it causes to the body, the preference for sons over daughters, and living standards in the early years of Algerian independence. My analysis of Mauritian literature will explore how women's experiences of childbirth are inflected by the poverty of the Creole population, the class divide between Hindus and Creoles, as well as the tourist exploitation of Mauritius. The section on women's writing from France will focus on the medicalisation of childbirth as well as analysing depictions of infanticide and infant mortality.

Chapter Three will analyse the depiction of the menopause in contemporary women's writing in French. In contrast to the variety of francophone novels which portray menstruation and childbirth, the menopause is comparatively absent from this body of literature. I shall assess the extent to which the four selected novels reflect or provide contrasting perspectives to those expressed by Beauvoir, Leclerc, and Cardinal in their theories about the menopause. This chapter will investigate in each literary culture representations of the ageing body alongside the link that emerges between fertility and sexual desire. The chapter will also examine aspects that are particular to each literary culture. The section on Algerian literature will consider Islamic law and experiences of motherhood. The analysis of Mauritian literature will focus on Hindu practices, motherhood, and sexuality. In the section on women's writing from France, I shall focus on the medicalisation of the menopause, the media, and sexuality.

These chapters on three aspects of the female fertility cycle will provide a comprehensive picture of how contemporary women's writing from a range of different, French-speaking contexts has evolved since the silence around female bodily experience was first broken by prominent feminists during the mid-twentieth century. Since second-wave feminist texts have been criticised for their purportedly 'universal' approach and idealism, it is time to revisit these pioneering works through the framework of more contemporary attitudes towards the female body. The following chapters will fill in a crucial gap in the field of women's writing in French by analysing literary representations of menstruation, childbirth, and the menopause, which have been largely overlooked by current scholarship.

The cross-cultural comparative approach and the bringing together of three interconnected female bodily experiences are also innovative aspects of this thesis. I argue that each literary culture has its own specific approaches to the female fertility cycle that inflect the cultural context which they portray. Algerian literature generally considers how Islamic and patriarchal traditions, practises, and beliefs influence women's experiences. Mauritian literature also explores the impact of religion on the female body, but in respect to Hindu doctrine. This literature often frames the female fertility cycle in a culture in which tensions exist between the poverty-stricken Creole population and the more wealthy Indo-Mauritian Hindu population. Women's writing from France tends to examine how women's experiences are shaped by medical discourse and practices. 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 that reflect the diversity and richness of francophone culture today.

Chapter One: Menstruation

1.1 Introduction

'[J]e ne suis femme qu'à la condition d'avoir mes règles' (1977, p. 41) declares Annie Leclerc in conversation with Marie Cardinal. This statement emphasises that menstruation is positioned within second-wave feminist writing as an integral constituent of female identity, and signals that menstruation marks a girl's entry into womanhood. Menstruation also marks the beginning of fertility, and therefore the possibility of childbirth, a topic which will be the focus of the next chapter. In the selected novels from Algeria, France, and Mauritius, the theme of menstruation intertwines with other aspects of female experience, including fertility and puberty. Since a girl's first menstrual bleed marks an entrance into adulthood, this chapter will also consider whether representations of menstruation also raise questions about the place of women in society.

This chapter will determine whether, or how, the novels portray menstrual experience as being inflected by dominant attitudes towards womanhood and fertility within the cultural context they fictionalise. I will examine how contemporary female-authored novels in French, which have been published since 1990, represent menstrual experience. The three main sections will identify the common tendencies and divergences that emerge across the representations of menstruation within women's writing from Algeria, Mauritius and France. The analysis will determine whether, and how, any similarities or culturally-influenced differences emerge. The first aim of this chapter is to evaluate the extent to which contemporary representations

of menstruation, some of which were published more than thirty years after *Parole de femme*, demonstrate an evolution in approach to that of the second-wave feminists. I will ascertain if there are any common tendencies between the novels and second-wave feminist works, and, if so, I will question whether the selected novels nuance these common aspects by their temporal or cultural setting. Any new approaches to menstrual experience will also be identified, analysed, and contextualised. The second principal aim of this chapter is to assess whether the selected contemporary novels, as individual texts but also as a collection, illustrate that menstrual experience is influenced by factors - such as ethnicity and class - that critics have accused the second-wave feminists of eliding. I shall also consider the extent to which these novels resonate with second-wave feminist approaches by revealing a commonality of experience which traverses cultural boundaries.

This chapter is structured in seven parts. Section 1.2 will investigate how the second-wave feminists approach menstruation. This basis will then inform the rest of the chapter in which the analysis will seek to determine the extent to which representations of menstruation in women's literature in French since 1990 reflect, or provide a contrast to, their theories. Section 1.3 will distinguish the key tendencies of anthropological and sociological studies that examine menstrual experience. These studies will help draw out any cultural specificities or universal cross-cultural approaches to menstruation which may be present in the selected novels. The main body of the chapter will devote one section to each literary culture and explore a number of pertinent novels. The section on Algerian women's writing will examine menstrual experience in Nina Bouraoui's *La Voyeuse interdite* (1991), Leïla Marouane's

La Jeune fille et la mère (2005), and Maïssa Bey's *Bleu blanc vert* (2006). The Mauritian section will primarily focus on Ananda Devi's two novels *Pagli* (2001) and *L'Arbre fouet*, and Shenaz Patel's *Paradis Blues* (2014). The final section will explore Virginie Despentes' *Baise-moi* (1993) and 'Des poils sur moi' (1999) alongside two memoirs: Nathalie Schweighoffer's *J'avais douze ans...* (2002) and Catherine Millet's *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M* (2001).

1.2 The representation of menstruation in the works of Julia Kristeva, Annie Leclerc, Marie Cardinal, and Christine Delphy

We can find analysis of dominant attitudes towards menstruation in the works of Julia Kristeva, Annie Leclerc, Marie Cardinal, and Christine Delphy, all of whom give this subject significant attention. In Leclerc's *Parole de femme*, 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, p. 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, p. 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, p. 62)). *Parole de femme* thus reveals the impossible position in which women find themselves, and demonstrates that the image of womanhood that women are supposed to portray is very different from the realities of having a woman's body. Leclerc is 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.

Leclerc exemplifies her argument that menstruation is surrounded by silence and experienced by women as shameful by providing examples from France. She illustrates how the taboo nature of menstruation is perpetuated by the discourse used in advertisements for sanitary products. 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, p. 62). Once again we have a discourse of denial, silence, and taboo. Leclerc argues that these adverts cause women to feel ashamed and humiliated by their menstrual blood: 'ce sang leur apparaît sous forme d'humiliation gratuite, injustifiée, injustifiable' (1974, p. 64).

Leclerc's rhetorical question 'savez-vous bien ce qu'il me faut braver pour parler de ce sang ?' (1974, p. 62) emphasises the sheer extent to which menstruation is surrounded by taboo, and portrays Leclerc as a pioneer who is bravely breaking this silence. Thus she is also laying the groundwork for women in the future to tackle this subject in an overt manner. In *Autrement Dit*, Leclerc highlights the difficulty of writing about a subject that her society conceives as taboo. She states that menstruation is 'le sujet le plus difficile à aborder quand on veut parler de sa féminité, le plus refusé, le plus refoulé' (1977, p. 37). Cardinal, with whom she is in conversation, 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, p. 37). By underlining the taboo nature of the topic they are approaching, both Cardinal and Leclerc demonstrate the revolutionary nature of their act of writing about menstruation.

In response to the negative patriarchal discourses and imposed silence that Leclerc observes within Western culture, she encourages women to change their approach to their menses. Rather than feeling ashamed, she urges them to articulate their menstrual experiences in a more positive language. She laments, thus far, their lack of commitment to fighting negative patriarchal stereotypes about menstruation:

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, p. 62).

By criticising women for treating their menstrual blood as if it were something trivial and a nuisance that they simply have to tolerate, she is suggesting that they should, instead, view menstrual blood as something extraordinary and worthy of celebration. Leclerc, herself, practises this anti-phallogocentric stance which she asks her readers to adopt when she proclaims: '[v]oir et sentir le sang tendre et chaud qui coule de soi, qui coule de source, une fois par mois, est heureux' (1974, p. 48). Therefore, through her positive and open approach that celebrates, rather than denigrates, menstrual experience, Leclerc seeks to shatter the silence that surrounds menstruation.

Pouvoirs de l'horreur also reveals that, in Western culture, menstrual blood inspires horror and repulsion. Kristeva's theory of abjection, which was presented in detail in the introduction to this thesis, argues that humans are repulsed by bodily liquids because they blur the boundaries between the inside and the outside of the body, thereby threatening the stability of the subject. Menstruation is one of the bodily liquids which Kristeva analyses within this framework. In *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* (1980), Kristeva turns to the Bible to offer an explanation as to why menstruation is taboo and a fear towards it has become deeply ingrained in the Judeo-Christian psyche. Her theories about the contemporary society in which she lives are therefore based on a Judeo-Christian framework. She demonstrates that in the Bible menstrual

blood is characterised as something impure that inspires horror and disgust.

Kristeva states that in Leviticus

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) (1980, p. 119).

Kristeva's choice of the word 'abomination' underpins her argument that the Bible characterises menstrual blood as repulsive and positions menstrual blood as something which provokes horror. This intense and heightened word also depicts menstrual blood as something immoral or monstrous.

Kristeva's approach to menstruation is shaped by her theory that abjection constitutes a human rejection of female sexuality because it is a reminder of our animality. She illustrates that our 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' (1980, p. 20). She 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, which represented violence and sex, and the human world. According to Kristeva, menstruation acts as 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’ (1980, p. 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.

Kristeva’s theory of abjection has ever since remained prevalent in academic scholarship on the subject of menstruation.⁴² Its enduring presence suggests that some scholars consider that societal attitudes towards menstruation have not considerably changed since Kristeva wrote *Pouvoirs de l’horreur*. In studies in French, Kristeva’s theory of abjection is primarily a tool for analysing the representation of menstruation in literature. For example, in her article ‘Le Cannibalisme maternel: l’abjection chez Jeanne Hyvrard et Kristeva’, Monique Saigal applies Kristeva’s theory of abjection to her analysis of the mother’s ‘répulsion du sang menstruel’ and ‘obsession de pureté’ (1993, p. 417). We can also find a reference to Kristeva’s theory in Colette Trout’s analysis of Marie Darrieussecq’s *Truismes* in which the central character’s menstrual blood is described as a ‘raz de marée’ (45). Trout analyses the protagonist’s menstruating body as follows: ‘son corps replet, renvoie au côté abject du corps féminin avec ses menstrues’ (2016, p. 13). In Anglophone scholarship, menstrual experience is viewed through the lens of Kristeva’s

⁴² Besides examples given here see also Lydie Moudileno’s *Parades postcoloniales: la fabrication des identités dans le roman congolais* (2006), J. Brook Bouson’s *Embodied Shame: Uncovering Female Shame in Contemporary Women’s Writings* (2010), and Charlotte Baker’s *Expressions of the Body: Representations in African Text and Image* (2009).

theory of abjection, both when examining its representation in literature and in explaining why it is still taboo in contemporary western society. For example, in *Feminist Perspectives on the Body*, Barbara Brook we can see the influence of Kristeva's theory in her discussion of the sanitary product industry which she claims is 'organised around the idea of containing danger and embarrassment' (1999, p. 51).

Since the publication of *Parole de femme* and *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, critics have considered whether the theories articulated in these texts can, in fact, be applied to all women irrespective of the cultural or social context in which they live. In her article 'Proto-féminisme et anti-féminisme', Delphy criticises Leclerc for her idealism and her monolithic approach to female experience. Delphy comments that Leclerc does not achieve her objective of: 'la reconquête par les femmes d'une image positive de leur être biologique' (1976, p. 1481) because she ignores the fact that women's menstrual experiences are influenced by their material conditions. Delphy highlights that only when material conditions improve, will women experience menstruation more positively. She posits that menstruating is 'un événement matériellement, *objectivement* désagréable : rendu tel par la société' (1976, p. 1483). She clarifies this by explaining that the public space is only set up for 'une population sans règles' (1976, p. 1483). She points to concrete factors, such as a lack of facilities for disposing of tampons and sanitary pads, that put menstruating women into 'une situation sinon dramatique, au moins extrêmement embarrassante' (1976, p. 1483). Delphy demonstrates the limitations of Leclerc's argument by revealing 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' (1976, p. 1484). According to Delphy, the two are intrinsically linked. She provides the following example of 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, p. 1484). Hence, Delphy not only theorises that social factors shape menstrual experience, she also argues that within a society in which there exists a culture of concealment, it is impossible for women no longer to experience menstruation as shameful.

Delphy also critiques Leclerc for approaching menstruation as if it were experienced universally by all women. In this way, Delphy's work resonates with feminist and postcolonial scholars who criticise the second-wave feminist movement for ignoring differences between women. Delphy emphasises the importance of evaluating a woman's experience of menstruation in the context of the society in which she lives: '[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, p. 1483). Such an assertion emphasises the importance of situating menstrual experience within a specific cultural context and underscores the value of a cross-cultural approach.

Jane Ussher's *Managing the Monstrous Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive Body* (2006) also considers menstruation through a cross-cultural perspective. Ussher's work is one of the most detailed studies of menstruation and abjection that has been produced since *Pouvoirs de*

l'horreur. This study explores how popular culture, law, and science, shape our understanding of the female body. Ussher argues that: 'the bleeding womb stand[s] as a site of pollution and a source of dread' (2006, p. 1) and, since society considers 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' (2006, p. 21). Ussher broadens the scope of Kristeva's Western Judeo-Christian focus by analysing the impact of religion on menstrual experience: '[i]n 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"' (Ussher: 2006, p. 8) She cites Jewish laws of *niddah*, the Islamic *hijab*, and the apotheosis of the Virgin Mary, as examples of religious practices that are designed to limit the powers of abjection. Ussher is demonstrating that although the rituals and religious doctrine may differ, the notion that menstruation is abject and therefore menstruating bodies must be regulated traverses cultural boundaries. Therefore, according to Ussher, the taboo nature of menstruation manifests itself in varying religious practices and dogmas. Such dogmas also act to reproduce these views of menstrual blood as abject and taboo.

By separating non-secular and secular societies, Ussher establishes a dichotomy between them. She theorises that varying religious practices and doctrines result in the same belief that the menstruating body must be regulated. She takes this idea further by arguing that, in secular societies, science and hygiene are the driving forces behind this control. She 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, p. 19). Ussher is therefore implying that in non-secular societies, menstrual experience is neither shaped by medical discourse nor a related emphasis on hygiene.

The above findings from second-wave feminist texts, and those which criticise them, will inform the framework of this chapter. This section has demonstrated how Leclerc's and Kristeva's broader theories about the female body inform their particular approach to menstruation. In light of Leclerc's argument that menstruation is a taboo subject and her creation of a '*parole de femme*', I shall assess whether, between fifteen and thirty years later, contemporary women's writing has found a positive and explicit form of expression to characterise menstrual experience. Kristeva's theory of abjection will also be central to the framework of this chapter. I shall evaluate whether Kristeva's positioning of menstrual blood as repulsive, as something which must be hidden, and as a reminder of animality, are approaches which are shared, or perhaps nuanced, by contemporary authors. This chapter will reflect the approaches of Delphy and Ussher who have examined the relevance of Leclerc and Kristeva's theories in different cultural and social settings. I shall assess whether menstruation is presented as a 'universal' or culturally-informed experience across contemporary women's writing in French from different geographical and cultural contexts. I shall also evaluate whether other factors, such as social context, shape fictional representations of menstrual experience. In addition, this chapter will reflect on Ussher's argument that menstrual experience differs between secular and non-secular societies. Ussher also raises the question of hygiene, but only within non-

secular societies. I shall respond to Ussher's work by exploring whether the same dichotomy between religion and science emerges within women's writing from Algeria, Mauritius, and France. I shall also ask whether a discourse of hygiene is present within the novels, and, if so, whether this is limited to a secular context.

1.3 Anthropological and sociological research on menstruation

Since the publication of Delphy's article, a handful of academic works have problematized the idea that menstruation is a 'universal' experience. Two notable examples are *The Psychological Development of Girls and Women: Rethinking Change in Time* (2014), in which psychologist Sheila Greene rejects psychoanalytic methodologies that present female identity as fixed, and 'Menstrual Symptoms and Menstrual Beliefs: National and Cross-National Patterns' (1987), in which feminist Karen Paige Erikson challenges the negative assumptions about menstruation which are promulgated by the medical profession.

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, p. 101). This focus on material conditions resonates strongly with Delphy's positioning of menstruation as a material concern. Greene also argues 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' (Greene: 2014, p. 101). Greene's emphasis on the differences between individual women mirrors the arguments of feminists such as Chris Weedon and Audre Lorde discussed in this study's introduction, who are critical of the 'universal' approach of the second-wave feminist movement and who illustrate that ethnicity and class play a significant role in women's lives.⁴³ In addition to pointing to the role played by socio-economic factors, Greene also 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, p. 84).

In a study about premenstrual syndrome (PMS), Erickson 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, p. 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, p. 187). Erickson's exhortation is particularly pertinent to this

⁴³ See Lorde, Audre (2017) *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*, London: Silver Press, and Weedon, Chris (1987) *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist theory*, Oxford: Blackwell.

thesis which compares three distinct cultural contexts and considers their similarities and differences.

Alongside the aforementioned studies which problematise the notion that menstruation is a universal experience, there also exists a handful of sociological and anthropological works that situate menstrual experience within specific cultural, religious, and geographical contexts. These studies will help to unpack any cultural factors that the novels represent as influencing menstrual experience. There is a striking imbalance in sociological and anthropological sources between the three cultural contexts that this thesis explores. Studies on menstruation in Mauritius seem non-existent, and there appear to exist very few studies on menstruation in France. However, menstruation is a frequent topic of exploration within sociological and anthropological studies conducted in North Africa. The main difference between studies from France and Algeria are that the former examine how material conditions influence menstrual experience, and the latter focus on the role played by cultural and religious factors. One could argue that this dichotomy betrays an essentialist and neo-colonialist attitude towards non-European peoples by considering them as 'other'. However, the studies of menstrual experience in North Africa are written by authors of North African heritage who have been influenced by the cultural and religious factors which they analyse. By publishing in French, North African scholars are also aiming to acquire a readership which would most likely not fully comprehend the cultural context in which the studies have been conducted. Virgine Venel's sociological study, for example, echoes Delphy's approach to menstrual experience by examining material conditions. She bases her findings on

interviews with a cross-section of women living in Eastern France. We can, therefore, see that the scope of this study is limited. She argues that her findings reveal that, 'le sentiment de souillure n'a pas perduré car l'introduction de nouvelles protections hygiéniques (serviettes jetables puis tampons) les a libérées de cette perception' (Venel: 2004, p. 225). Here, Venel concludes that women in France no longer feel unclean because of the sanitary items that are available to them.

Studies emanating from the Maghreb, of which there are many more than from France, tend to examine the impact of Islamic beliefs on commonly held conceptions of menstruation in North Africa.⁴⁴ 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 been a contentious subject in the Arab world since the very beginning of Islam. She 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, p. 187). More recently, Soumaya Naamane Guessous has researched women's attitudes towards menstruation in the Maghreb by interviewing 360 women (120 of whom were young adults) living in both urban and rural areas. Guessous questions these women about their 'rapports avec leurs corps et les pratiques qui en découlent' (2000, p. 17).

⁴⁴ Works that explore menstruation in a North African context include Guessous' *Printemps et automne sexuels: Puberté, ménopause, andropause au Maroc*, Fatima Mernissi's *The Veil and the Male Elite*, Khalida Messaoudi's *Une algérienne debout: entretiens avec Elisabeth Schemla* and Badra Moutasem-Mimouni's *Naissances et abandons en Algérie*

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' (Gessous: 2000, p. 22). The emphasis here on 'l'individu-femme' suggests that, in a North African context, women may feel very isolated during their menstrual bleed. One could infer from Gessous' 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, the 'taboo', and sex. Guessous reveals that menstruation is a topic about which women in the Maghreb generally do not speak. For Gessous, 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, p. 14). Sociological research demonstrates that this silence exists because, within the cultural context in which they live, menstruation is associated with sex.⁴⁵ For this reason, studies illustrate that North African girls receive little, if any, education about menstruation. Badra Moutassem-Mimouni clearly encapsulates this cultural

⁴⁵ See also Isabelle Charpentier's article about the taboos that surround virginity in Algeria: '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' (Charpentier: 2012, p. 299).

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, p. 31).⁴⁶

The findings of this section have shaped the aims of this chapter. This chapter emulates the cross-cultural approaches of Erickson and Greene's work by considering how menstruation is experienced in three distinct cultural contexts. I shall take Greene and Erickson's theories into account by assessing whether the selected novels portray a commonality of menstrual experience, or demonstrate that it is influenced by factors such as cultural or individual differences. In light of the differences in approach between studies conducted in France, which focus on the material specificity of menstrual experience, and those undertaken in North Africa, which examine menstruation through the framework of culture and religion, the following analysis will question whether the same dichotomy emerges in contemporary women's writing in French.

1.4 The representation of menstruation in Algerian women's writing

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. In fact, 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

⁴⁶ See also Khalida Messaoudi, who also links menstruation, sex, and the taboo. She explains that a girl's first menses marks the moment when she is warned against engaging in non-marital sex: '[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, p. 49).

Boudjedra and Driss Chraïbi, which also approach this subject.⁴⁷ 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 women writers, even if it remains so for the fictional women whom they depict.⁴⁸ The vast majority of 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.⁴⁹ The three novels on which this section will concentrate are no exception. *La Voyeuse interdite* (1991) by Nina Bouraoui, *La Jeune Fille et la mère* (2005) by Leïla Marouane, and *Bleu blanc vert* (2006) by Maïssa 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. Bey's *Bleu blanc vert* and Marouane's *La Jeune Fille et la mère* will be analysed together because of their many similarities. Both novels depict protagonists who have not been educated about menstruation prior to their first ever

⁴⁷ Boudjedra's novels that represent menstruation include *La Répudiation* (1969) in which menstrual blood and sacrifice are associated during the narrator's dream about his mother's 'menstrues démentielles' (14) overflowing beside a sacrificed rabbit. See also *La Pluie* (1987), in which he compares writing to menstruation, *Le Journal d'une femme insomniaque* (1989) in which the female narrator considers menstruation as symbolic of the female condition, and *Hôtel Saint-Georges* (2011) in which menstruation is represented as natural and purifying. Driss Chraïbi parodies the Islamic prohibition of sex during menstruation in *Le passé simple* (1954).

⁴⁸ Other Algerian novels which represent menstruation that will not be discussed in this chapter include Marouane's *Ravisser* (1998) and *La Fille de la Casbah* (1996), Bey's *Cette Fille-là* (2001) and Leïla Hamoutène's *Sang et jasmin* (2000).

⁴⁹ A notable exception is Marouane's *La Fille de la Casbah*, which is set during *la décennie noire*. In this novel, Algerian police attempt to enforce the Islamic tradition of fasting during Ramadan by interrogating women in restaurants as to whether or not they are menstruating.

menstrual bleed. They both also explore how the protagonists respond to finding blood in their underwear, and how their mothers react to this news. This section will question the extent to which the aforementioned novels echo or provide a contrast to the approach to menstruation within second wave feminist texts. The following analysis will determine whether the representations of menstruation in Algerian literature implicitly problematise the idea that menstruation is a 'universal' experience.

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. 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).⁵⁰ One 'traditional' 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. Jane Hiddleston's analysis of Islamic fundamentalism in Algeria forms part of her approach to the

⁵⁰ 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 mustaches) is synonymous with hard-line Islamic fundamentalism [...] Fikria's father's adoption of stringent religiosity coincides with her own launch into pubescent femininity' (2003, p. 128)

representation of politics in Assia Djébar's oeuvre. Hiddleston's observations can help us to understand how, in *La Voyeuse interdite*, menstrual experience is influenced by the interweaving of politics and religion:

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 contradistinction 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, p. 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 positions her sequestration as 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 ses hommes, il fallut prendre une décision. Ferme et définitive. Dès la puberté, les femmes 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 which 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 socio-political 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, p. 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 socio-political 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 their first menses the father forbids Zohr and Fikria 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 argue, therefore, that Fikria's story is an allegory of the diminishing freedoms and rights of women during the period to which Salhi's statement testifies.

An examination of the socio-political context of the above extract from *La Voyeuse interdite* has revealed a stark contrast between Bouraoui's novel

and the 'universal' approach of the second-wave feminists. 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), a term she repeats across the narrative.⁵¹ 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.

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 the entirety of the female body as impure.⁵² As illustrated in the introduction to this chapter, in Islam, menstrual blood is equated with impurity. The idea of the female body as impure emerges recurrently in the narrative.⁵³ For example, 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

⁵¹ See also 'je suis une femelle au sexe pourri' (31), 'pénétraient l'entrecuisse de la femelle' (41) and 'la femelle amoureuse' (103).

⁵² One must make clear, here, that the father's attitude is a perversion of his faith because Islam 'does not in any way perceive the whole body as "polluted"' (Mernissi: 1991, p. 187).

⁵³ See also the following description of the pubescent body: '[d]eux longues années au cours desquelles mon corps n'a pas arrêté de suinter de l'impureté' (31).

segregated from others echoes Kristeva's link between the animal and the abject. Kristeva theorises: '[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' (1980, p. 20). Thus, Kristeva's and Bouraoui's texts both use a lexical field of animality alongside one of impurity, and, in this way, portray the female body as something which society deems as a threat.

The representation of the menstruating body is, however, nuanced in *La Voyeuse interdite* by an increasingly volatile socio-political 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 the female body. Instead, she appropriates these terms from her father in order to inspire anger in the female compatriots to whom she address her discourse. In her exploration of nomadism in Bouraoui's oeuvre, Katharine N. Harrington sheds light on Fikria's role as a 'spokesperson for those who cannot speak' (2013, p. 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, p. 80). Thus, by using such emotive and brutal language, Fikria is using her privileged position as an outsider who has an excellent insight into the injustices of the society in which she lives 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 this discourse.

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. We can argue that Fikria has, to some extent, internalised her father's disgust toward the menstruating body through her horror at the sight of her own menstrual blood. 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.⁵⁴ 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

⁵⁴ 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).

slashing her insides. Here, the novel is playing with the horror genre by creating a scene comparable to Stephen King's *Carrie* 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 effect.⁵⁵ 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 the household. 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. His characterisation of women as metaphorical stains ('flétrissures') alongside his employment of the word 'fornication' suggest that he perceives women,

⁵⁵ See Stephen King's novel *Carrie* (1974) and the adapted film version directed by Brian de Palma (1976), in which Carrie has her first menstrual bleed in a shower at school and is terrified because she does not understand why she is bleeding. She is mocked by her classmates who witness this event.

because of their impurity and sexuality, as a danger to society. His response to the threat of the menstruating body is one of violence which he enacts by beating Fikria whilst he verbally abuses her. 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 who examines female bodily experience in an Islamic context, 'the woman is *fitna*, the epitome of the uncontrollable, a living representative of the dangers of sexuality and its rampant disruptive potential' (2003, p. 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.⁵⁶ 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 *umma*. 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, p. 8). Fikria's monstrous body is

⁵⁶ The importance of preserving virginity until marriage is a common trope within francophone Algerian women's writing. The next chapter of this thesis will explore this further when analysing *La Jeune fille et la mère*.

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 socio-political 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, p. 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. Bouraoui's approach to menstruation therefore contrasts with that of the second-wave feminists who do not reflect on how familial relationships and socio-political context may inflect menstrual experience.

In *La Jeune Fille et la mère* and *Bleu blanc vert* we can also find representations of menstrual experience which are profoundly shaped both by the parent-child relationship and the broader context in which the novels are set. Both texts 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 and the restrictions her mother imposes on her, such as 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' (54). 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.

In *La Jeune Fille et la mère* Djamila's trauma as a result of not understanding why she is bleeding appears even more profound than Lilas'. *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. 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 farfetched conclusion that she is bleeding because she is being punished by evil spirits.

One can argue that the mothers' decisions 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 conducting research in the Maghreb. Naamane Gessous, for example, states: '[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, p. 14). These novels make the same link as Gessous between a girl's experience of her first menstrual bleed as traumatic and her not having received prior education about menstruation. By considering Gessous' 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 Cardinal's argument that 'des tabous très lourds' (1977, p. 37) impact women's experiences of menstruation. However, the authors of these works 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. Djamila's 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). In her chapter, 'Fighting For Independence: Leïla Marouane's *La Jeune Fille et la mère* and Maïssa Bey's *Cette fille-là*', Siobhan McIlvanney examines the figure of Bouzoul during her analysis of Djamila's resistance and 'frustration to governing ideologies' (2013, p. 69).⁵⁷ She 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, p. 71).

⁵⁷ McIlvanney, Siobhan (2013) 'Fighting For Independence: Leïla Marouane's *La Jeune Fille et la mère* and Maïssa Bey's *Cette fille-là*' in *Experiment and Experience: Women's Writing in France 2000-2010*, eds Gill Rye and Amaleena Damlé, Oxford: Peter Lang

Although McIlvanney provides an excellent analysis of the figure of Bouzoul as validating Djamila's desire for sexual freedom, she overlooks the menstruation scene in which Bouzoul is a spectre who is haunting Djamila. 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.

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. The mother started to threaten Djamila from a very young age by listing the consequences she would face if

she lost her virginity. 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.⁵⁸ A long time before Djamila began puberty, the mother started frequently to inspect Djamila's hymen which implies that she does not trust Djamila to remain virginal until marriage.⁵⁹ This 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 not only be inflected by attitudes towards

⁵⁸ 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).

⁵⁹ 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).

menstruation within a specific cultural context but also by expectations that surround female sexuality.

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.⁶⁰ Lilas narrates in free indirect discourse,

[i]l 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. The notion that menstruation is taboo is reinforced by her refusal to discuss the subject in front of Lilas' brothers. Again, we can find resonances here with Cardinal's

⁶⁰ 'Elle 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).

observation that menstruation is subject to 'des tabous très lourds (1977, p. 37) since the mother refers to menstruation only through euphemism and does not explain to Lilas why she is menstruating. 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 chapter. Therefore, Mimouni's observation that '[l]es jeunes filles ne sont pas préparées, tout ce qui touche au sexe est tabou' (2001, p. 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.

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. The mother defines Lilas' first menstrual bleed as an entrance into womanhood, but 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.

In *La Jeune Fille et la mère*, Djamila's mother takes matters to the extreme by forbidding Djamila from talking about menstruation to anyone at all so that her father does not find out she has begun puberty. Against the mother's wishes, the father desires to marry off Djamila as soon as she enters puberty.⁶¹ He asks the 'marieuses' to find a husband for Djamila. The meeting between Djamila, her mother, and the 'marieuses' is recounted in a scene in which Djamila has a flashback to her first menstrual bleed.⁶² 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

⁶¹ 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).

⁶² One of the 'marieuses' states to the mother: 'C'est son père qui le veut' (91).

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 from those outlined in second-wave feminist literature. These reasons pertain to the familial and sociocultural context which frame Djamila's first menses. In this instance, menstruation is not taboo because society responds to menstrual blood with 'répulsion' or 'dégoût' (Leclerc: 1974, p. 62). Instead, Djamila must remain silent in order to protect herself from a cultural norm of marrying girls off at the age of puberty. In this way, *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

problematization 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).⁶³ 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. The silence they are keeping is therefore not one of submission but one of powerful resistance against a common enemy. This representation of silence as resistance provides a stark contrast to the second-wave feminists' conceptualisation of silence as something oppressive and which should be broken.

It is within this silence that the mother hopes that Djamila can empower herself. The mother's 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.⁶⁴ The mother's

⁶³ 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).

⁶⁴ 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).

belief that education will give Djamila freedom, and in particular the freedom 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. The mother's utter horror is manifest in the language she uses when she finds Djamila'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 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.⁶⁵ 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 which 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 the 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

⁶⁵ The father's treatment of Djamila as inferior begins at her birth when he is furious that she is not a boy. 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).

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.⁶⁶ 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. In contrast to Djamilia, Lilas is able to alleviate her anxiety about why she is bleeding by consulting her brother's medical textbook. Lilas states: 'quand j'ai eu mes règles, je suis allée voir dans un dictionnaire médical. En cachette, bien sûr' (58). The novel highlights the transgressive and radical nature of Lilas' act of reading by underlining that Lilas educates herself about menstruation in secret. 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 a norm, and an Algerian fictionalised space in

⁶⁶ "La seule chose qui compte, dit ma mère, ce sont les études. Elle veut qu'on aille jusqu'au bout." (56)

which literacy is quite a new tool with which women are starting to resist the silence that surrounds menstrual experience.

1.5 *The representation of 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.⁶⁷ In women's writing from Mauritius published since 1990, we can find a handful of novels that represent menstrual experience. The first novel which will be explored in this section is *Paradis Blues* (2014) by Shenaz Patel. The text is in the form of a monologue⁶⁸ performed by a Creole⁶⁹ woman named Mylène, who has been interned in a mental asylum on the accusation that she cut off her dead mother's tongue.⁷⁰ 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 which feature menstrual experience: *Rue la Poudrière* (1988), *L'Arbre fouet* (1997), *Pagli* (2001) and *Ève de ses décombres* (2006).

⁶⁷ Marie-Therese Humbert's *À l'autre bout de moi* (1979) is a rare example of a Mauritian novel written before 1990 that refers to menstruation. In one scene Nadège discovers that her underwear has a bloodstain on it and announces to her sister: 'C'est gênant. Si on n'a pas de coton, je vais être tout ensanglantée demain matin' (185). Anne is shocked by the prospect of herself menstruating and thinks, '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, including Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio, author of *Le Chercheur d'or* (1985) in which a girl explains menstruation to her brother, and Loys Masson author of *Les Noces de la vanille* (1962). See also *Le Voyage de Delcourt* (2001) by Alain Gordon-Gentil in which Delcourt is emotionally moved by his lover's menstrual blood.

⁶⁸ 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.

⁶⁹ In a Mauritian context, 'Creole' means black and of African descent.

⁷⁰ She hears voices at the mental asylum discuss the accusations which resulted in her being imprisoned: 'arracher la langue de sa mère. Sur son canapé mortuaire. Certaines personnes ne respectent rien' (51).

This section will focus primarily on *L'Arbre fouet* and *Pagli* which play with the idea that menstrual blood is impure, but will also briefly consider *Ève de ses décombres*. *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. This section will explore how these novels echo or provide a contrast to the ways in which the second-wave feminists approached menstruation. The following analysis will determine the extent to which the representations of menstruation in Patel's and Devi's texts portray menstrual experience as being inflected by the fictional cultural contexts they create.

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, I 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:

les femmes [...] 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 by describing Mylène as 'une femme qui cherche à s'affranchir' (60) and emphasising 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. The legacy of slavery also weighs heavily on Mylène's community. 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 the text: ‘Throughout the text, Patel’s imagery and creative rhythm evoke the abject and lasting legacies of slavery’ (2016, p. 1234). Their article focuses on the Creole language, Mylène’s relationship with her mother, and how the Creole population is silenced by its colonial past. It positions Mylène as a symbol of the colonial struggles of the island.⁷¹ Lionnet and Jean-François do not, however, 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.⁷²

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

⁷¹ 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 nuances of the time/space of creolized archipelagos, with their legacy of conquest by successive imperial powers’ (2016, p. 1234)

⁷² The representation of miscarriage and childbirth will be explored in the next chapter of this thesis.

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, p. 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 specifically female body within the contemporary cultural context Mylène criticises. This is a trauma which stems from the present day rather than being inherited through her ancestors. The combination of the panicked tone and her 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. 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, p. 84).

The phrase 'cette chose' is reminiscent of the mother's reference in *Bleu blanc vert* to menstruation as 'des choses' which, as argued above, 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 not present her mother as challenging the horror she felt

as a ten-year-old girl. 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, 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 Mauritian woman as sensual. Her menstrual bleeding demonstrates that she is a corporeal being and not an idealised 'primitive' figure from a painting by Gauguin.⁷³ *Paradis blues*, by creating the multidimensional and fleshy figure of Mylène, therefore challenges discourses of primitivism and exoticisation. 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 and de-exoticise the Mauritian woman.

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). The fact that the list is rendered in Mauritian Creole ties the superstitions to the Creole population and suggests a shared mythology. This list includes her mother's command that Mylène never leaves the house at night because she may be

⁷³ Gauguin was known for his exoticisation and primitivism in his paintings of women in Tahiti. See Child, Elizabeth (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, pp. 50-70

followed by a 'lougarou' or 'Bolfam sounga' (44), 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).⁷⁴ 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 sequestration in Algerian women's writing, since both methods serve, in the words of Ussher, to 'manage the monstrous feminine' (2006, p. 8).

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. 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 fiction, such as in Stephen King's *Carrie* (1974), and the short story 'Wolf Alice' by Angela Carter (1979),⁷⁵ and in anthropological studies of pre-modern as well as contemporary societies.⁷⁶ Indeed, *La Jeune Fille et la mère* also plays

⁷⁴ Translated in *Paradis blues* as 'Quand on a ses règles, on ne doit pas aller au cimetière' (45).

⁷⁵ See Angela Carter's collection of short stories *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), London: Random House.

⁷⁶ In *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation* (1988) Delaney et al 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, p. 7).

into this cross-cultural interest in the supernatural, whilst simultaneously framing Djamila's first menses within the context of an Islamic superstitious belief that *djinns* prey on young women.

Yet another link between menstruation and the supernatural can be found in Devi's *Ève de ses décombres*. The teacher offers lessons in exchange for sex from the protagonist, Ève, who is from a poor socio-economic background. He 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).⁷⁷ 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. 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*' (34) 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*' (35).

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, the protagonist of the novel, recounts:

Mes parents ont accompli leur devoir envers moi. En me naissant,
en me grandissant et en me perdant [...] Le sort de leur fille ne leur
importait que lorsque le premier saignement avait lieu. Les étapes

⁷⁷ All citations from *Ève de ses décombres* are in italics in the original.

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, which positions this moment as merely a stage which leads to the ultimate aim: marriage. The reader learns that, from a young age, she 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 her 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). Hence, 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: '[i]l 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, p. 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 she will endure at the hands of her husband's family, whom she calls the *mofines*, once she moves to Terre Rouge. 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). This passage parallels the red colour of menstrual blood and 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.⁷⁸

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

⁷⁸ This miscarriage is experienced by Daya's friend, Mitsy, and will be explored in the next chapter of this thesis.

associated with the red of the soil and hence with Daya's muddying of society's rigid order' (2004, p. 49). Indeed, Daya's blood becomes a symbol of her resistance to the norms of motherhood 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*.⁷⁹ 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.⁸⁰ This phrase 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 refusing to procreate with her husband and engaging in an affair with Zil. This affair is not only transgressive because it is adulterous but also because Zil is not an Indo-Mauritian Hindu and 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,

⁷⁹ The next chapter of this thesis will explore the representation of childbirth in *Pagli* in greater depth.

⁸⁰ 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).

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 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 'habillés de blanc' (42) when they punish her for having an affair with Zil. In Hindu culture, white is the colour of mourning. Hence, the association between the *mofines* and the colour white emphasises that they are the root cause of Daya's 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 of 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 varying 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, p. 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.

In Devi's *L'Arbre fouet*, Hindu ideas of purity and impurity are once again explored to literary effect. 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. The novel 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.⁸¹ 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 insult 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 her 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 the menstrual blood trickling down her leg to the audience. 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). These two novels, which explore menstruation in two distinct cultural contexts, both resonate with Kristeva's argument in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* that

⁸¹ 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, p. 111)

bodily substances, such as menstrual blood, are perceived as abject because they are a reminder of the animality of human beings.

Once again, however, 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. Hence, 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 to 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.

Another key parallel between these two novels is the objective of the protagonist-narrators to demonstrate that the behaviour of their fathers is indicative of a wider manipulation of religious ideology in order to subjugate 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, rather than commenting on a particular historical or political moment, 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. In her article 'Island Hinduism: religion and modernity in Francophone Indian Ocean literature' (2015), Srilata Ravi suggests that, in order to examine 'universal' aspects of human experience, Devi's oeuvre combines Hinduism and patriarchy:

[Devi's] novels conflate Hindu culture and religion with the violence of superstition, patriarchy, and communalism. Hindu masculinity [...] is constructed as an oppressive force that victimizes both Hindu women and Creoles [...] The exclusion and suffering of dishonoured Hindu women and marginalised Creole women in a Hindu-dominated patriarchal society come to represent despair as a universal condition (2015, p. 94).

In light of Ravi's analysis, one could contend that *L'Arbre fouet* uses the figures of the patriarchal father and the suffering daughter as archetypes of oppressor and victim, or of patriarchy and the oppressed women. Within this paradigm, Devi's approach would resonate with that of the second-wave feminists because menstruation would represent a female bodily experience from which women suffer because of negative patriarchal perceptions of this blood. However, Ravi's analysis does not reflect on the highly nuanced nature of the representation of menstruation in *L'Arbre fouet*. The father's public humiliation of Aeena during her celebratory ceremony is more complex than a mere conflation of Hinduism and patriarchy. His declaration that Aeena is impure is very much shaped by his feelings towards her of personal distrust

and loathing. He uses his authority as a Hindu priest to subjugate Aeena and justify his misogynistic behaviour to the female audience. Hence, Ravi's claim that Devi's novels are a form of universalism ignores the way in which Devi nuances the father-daughter relationship in *L'Arbre Fouet*.

This section has demonstrated that the only tendency which Mauritian women's writing appears to share with second-wave feminism is articulated through the characters in *Pagli* and *Paradis blues* who defy the normative expectations of the society in which they live and, in Daya's case, celebrate the sexuality of the female body. It is not, however, societal norms about menstruation which Daya and Mylène oppose. Instead, they use examples from their own menstrual experience in order to challenge their inferior position in their community and mistreatment by their families. On the whole, the Mauritian novels which have been analysed in this section reveal a very different perspective on menstruation from that of the second-wave feminists. In contrast to second-wave feminism and Algerian women's writing, menstruation is not represented as being a taboo subject within the societies represented by novels in this section. Yet, in *Paradis blues*, even though there is a ritual to celebrate a girl's entrance into puberty, there is still a silence around Mylène's first menstrual bleed because, as in *La Jeune Fille et la mère* and *Bleu blanc vert*, she has not been prepared for this moment. All three novels represent menstrual experience as being inflected by cultural context and familial relationships. By setting their narratives of menstruation in a space in which there exist racial tensions (such as between the Indo-Mauritian Hindus and the Creole population in *Pagli*) or in a space in which the disaffected Creole population is battling with the legacy of colonialism and

slavery (namely in *Paradis blues*), the Mauritian novels analysed in this section resonate strongly with Audre Lorde's and Barbara Christian's arguments that ethnicity plays a defining role in a woman's experience. This engagement with issues of ethnicity provides the starkest contrast with second-wave feminist work which has been criticised for homogenising female experience.

Another key divergence in approach is the exploration of how menstrual experience can be shaped by religion or superstition. Since both literary cultures examine how the religious doctrine that menstrual blood is impure can be distorted by hyper-patriarchal figures in order to subjugate women, we find a cross-cultural similarity between the representation of Islam in Algerian women's writing and the representation of Hinduism in Mauritian women's writing. A further cross-cultural similarity between Algerian and Mauritian women's writing is the creative connection made between menstruation and the supernatural. This plays into a discourse of the menstruating woman as dangerous and magical. The next section will explore whether women's writing from France reflects any of the tendencies apparent in second-wave feminists or whether, like Algerian and Mauritian women's writing, it also illustrates how menstrual experience is shaped by factors such as sociocultural context and familial relationships.

1.6 *The representation of menstruation in Women's Writing from France*

During the 1970s and 1980s, there was an explosion of representations of menstrual experience in female-authored literary works which mirrored the

contemporaneous interest in the subject by the second-wave feminists.⁸² Although this interest peaked in women's writing during the 1970 and 1980s, there exists a handful of fictional works published since 1990 which explore the subject. This section will focus on two works by Virginie Despentes, namely her novel *Baise-moi* (1993) and her short story 'Des poils sur moi' (1999).⁸³ In *Baise-Moi*, a prostitute, Nadine, and a porn actress, Manu, go on a murderous rampage. At the centre is an episode during which Manu observes her menstrual blood trickle onto the floor of a hotel bathroom and smears it all over her body. In 'Des poils sur moi', in which a woman becomes a werewolf when she menstruates, we once again find a text that pairs menstruation with the supernatural. The new genre of *autofiction*, which blurs the boundaries between autobiography and fiction, and which emerged in the 1990s, has provided a fruitful new platform through which menstrual experience can be explored.⁸⁴ Two novels which will be explored in this section, Nathalie Schweighoffer's *J'avais douze ans...* (1990) and Catherine Millet's *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M* (2001), can be considered as belonging to this new genre. In Schweighoffer's text, Nathalie recounts her first menstrual bleed which, at age twelve, she experiences as a moment of happiness. Soon after this moment, 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

⁸² See for example Marie Cardinal's *Les Mots pour le dire* (1975), Cardinal's and Leclerc's *Autrement dit* (1977) and Annie Ernaux's *Les Armoires vides* (1975) and *La femme gelée* (1981). See also Marie Redonnet's *Rose Mélie Rose* (1987) and Jeanne Hyvrard's *Les doigts du figuier* (1977), *La Meurtritude* (1977) and *Rose Mélie Rose* (1987).

⁸³ Other novels include Catherine Cusset's *Jouir* (1997) and *New York, journal d'un Cycle* (2009), as well as Marie Darrieussecq's *Truismes* (1996).

⁸⁴ Marion Sadoux provides the following definition: 'autofiction is now often used to refer to texts which [...] hover somewhere between autobiography and fiction, although the definition of the term remains critically problematic' (2002, p. 174).

continues to sexually abuse her for a further five years until Nathalie finds the courage to denounce him on television. In Millet's work, an episode that depicts her first menses, her lack of knowledge about her sexual anatomy, and a visit to a doctor who informs her about menstrual hygiene, is positioned at the centre of a narrative in which Catherine enumerates her multiple sexual experiences. The following analysis will question the extent to which these novels echo, or provide a contrast to, the way in which second-wave feminist texts approach menstruation. This section will also determine whether these novels share the tendency of the second-wave feminists to treat female bodily experience as homogenous, or if their representations of menstruation reflect differences that exist between women.

J'avais douze ans... is the only text analysed in this entire chapter in which the protagonist's mother educates her daughter about menstruation and prepares her for her first menstrual bleed. The mother's choice to teach her daughter about menstruation at the dinner table in front of the family, including Nathalie's father, suggests that she wants to demonstrate to her daughter that menstruation 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 is also distinct from the mothers we have so far encountered in Algerian and Mauritian women's writing because 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, p. 48). In parallel, Nathalie's mother emphasises that the appearance of menstrual blood is something about which Nathalie should be happy. Hence, Nathalie's mother, of all the characters that have so far been explored in my cross-cultural analysis, most resembles Leclerc's approach to menstruation. 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, p. 62). For the mother, menstruation is not something about which Nathalie should be silent, but is something which she encourages her to discuss openly and to celebrate.

In contrast to the Mauritian and Algerian novels in which a girl's first menstrual bleed is negatively shaped by a lack of communication between mother and daughter, 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 Nathalie's experience of 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' (34-5). 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 proclaiming this message to all highlights that she is not ashamed and that the first menses is an event that is too significant to be ignored. Therefore, Nathalie's first menstrual bleed illustrates, once again, that the mother-daughter relationship is a defining influence on the first menses. In parallel to the novels of Patel, Marouane, and Bey, Schweighoffer's work exemplifies the importance of teaching girls about menstruation. However, Schweighoffer's text takes the opposite approach to the Algerian and Mauritian novels. *J'avais douze ans....* presents the positive effect of speaking about menstruation whilst the other novels focus on the negative impact of not preparing a girl for her first menstrual bleed.

Nonetheless, Nathalie's happiness that she has become a woman is short lived. In fact, the primary function of this scene appears to be to underscore the deep trauma and shame engendered when Nathalie's father then abuses her, rather than to celebrate womanhood. Since the episode is narrated in analepsis, it recaptures a happiness she has now lost through bathos. 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: 'le 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 be likely to 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 always still at risk of being dominated by men who can reverse the mother's celebration of womanhood.

Nathalie's situation therefore parallels those of Mylène, Djamila, and Fikria, whose lives are defined by their being abused by male family members. The representation of menstruation in all of these novels serves to highlight the vulnerability of their female protagonists. In Schweighoffer's novel, however, this vulnerability is emphasised through a contrast with the positive image of womanhood which the mother fosters in Nathalie's mind, and the sexual abuse that begins as soon as she has her first menstrual bleed. By comparing the message of this text to Leclerc's theory, we can observe, as did

Delphy, the idealism with which Leclerc approaches the female body and the limitations of employing a 'parole de femme'.

In contrast to *J'avais douze ans...*, Millet's *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M* portrays a character who has received no prior education about menstruation and is at first unsure from where her menstrual blood is flowing. Rather than responding to this menstrual blood with the feelings of trauma which are experienced by the characters in Bey's, Marouane's, and Patel's novels, the overarching tone of Catherine's first menses is one of detachment:

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 (131).

Catherine appears emotionally distant when she realises that she has menstruated for the first time. Catherine's 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 the emotive responses of her family which range from distress to amusement.

Catherine's first menses is situated in a narrative which primarily focuses on her active and experimental sex life. The tone of this episode

mirrors Catherine's pervasive sense of detachment from her body, which is strongly felt throughout the multitude of sex scenes in the novel. Catherine most clearly demonstrates her sense of detachment by explaining: '[p]lus je détaille mon corps et mes actes, plus je me détache de moi-même' (186). Critics of Millet's text have tended to analyse Catherine's detachment through an examination of her sexual life, and so have largely ignored the menstruation scene. In her article about the representation of sexuality in popular culture, Loumira 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, p. 40).⁸⁵ Despite occurring chronologically before any of the sex scenes she narrates, this episode is placed at the very centre of the work. This highly symbolic position suggests that her first menses is a defining moment which has brought about a separation between her mind and body. It is therefore a key scene which builds an image of Catherine's disconnection from her body and should not be overlooked when examining the representation of detachment in Millet's work.

Amaleena Damlé and Gill Rye also focus on Millet's representation of sexuality and draw attention 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,

⁸⁵ See also Shirely Jordan's article 'Close up and Impersonal: Sexual/Textual Bodies in Contemporary Women's Writing in French' (2006) in which she argues that Millet's text de-eroticises the female body and analyses the flat tone with which Catherine describes her sexual encounters.

affirmative spaces of female desire evoked by Cixous and others' (Damlé and Rye: 2013, p. 11). By focussing on the overtly sexual moments in the novel, they 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 effective point of comparison between Millet's text and second-wave feminist theories. We can find, in the portrayal of Catherine's first menses, strong resonance with a second-wave feminist criticism of French society. This episode resonates with Leclerc's theory 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. Leclerc refers to women as 'tampaxisée' and argues that they 'ne sentent rien quand viennent leurs règles' (1974, p. 62).

Although this shared image of the detached menstruating woman is common to Millet and Leclerc, we can also argue, for a different reason to the one given by Damlé and Rye, that *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M* lies in stark contrast to the approach to the female body in second-wave feminism. 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 their bodies. Cixous believes that women's writing should dispel a sense of detachment from the female body. She urged women: 'ton corps est à toi - prends le' (1974, p. 39). Hence, Catherine's disconnection from her body and the lack of positive language about menstruation reveals the distance that exists between Millet's work and the aims of Leclerc, Cardinal, and Cixous. Catherine does not 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. Catherine aligns herself with a masculine perspective on the female body 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 French women's writing and, indirectly, a rejection of the works of the second-wave feminists.

In Catherine's description of her first menses this sense of detachment is coupled with an emphasis on the medical aspects of menstruation which include a reference to a doctor and her confusion between 'la voie par laquelle s'écoulait l'urine et celle par où venait les règles' (131). Thus, instead of considering this moment as significant because it marks an entrance into womanhood, Catherine conceptualises menstruation in purely biological terms. This biological focus lies in stark contrast to many of the novels explored so far in this chapter which primarily consider the first menses as an entrance into womanhood. We see that Catherine's only information about menstruation is gleaned from her father's joke and, subsequently, from the doctor. Her mother's response to call the doctor, rather than personally explaining menstruation to Catherine, would suggest to Catherine that menstruation is a medical matter rather than a significant milestone in life, to be celebrated or commiserated. This explains why the tone of this episode is very flat and distant, and is key to interpreting the detachment portrayed throughout the work.

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 so that he can explain menstruation to 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 »' (131). The tone of the phrase 'avec tact' appears sarcastic when juxtaposed with the doctor's exaggerated gesture of smelling his finger. Although it cannot be denied that the behaviour of the doctor, which appears predatory and perverse, constitutes an abuse of his position of power, we can argue that his action of smelling Catherine's menstrual blood may constitute an exaggerated response to a preoccupation with menstrual hygiene within the society in which he lives. 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 privileging of hygienic concerns over any other information suggests that the French society in which Catherine lives primarily views menstruation as a matter of hygiene.

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 articulated as unhygienic rather than impure. A cross-cultural comparison between the novels reveals that, whatever the religious, societal, or medical discourse which provides the justification, menstruation is still represented as something that must be kept hidden.

Underlying similarities between the responses to menstruation in Millet's text and in novels such as *Pagli* and *La Voyeuse interdite* can be further examined in light of Ussher's theory that the treatment of menstruation as an abject substance that must remain concealed is a phenomenon which traverses cultural boundaries. Ussher relates religious practices, such as the Islamic practice of *hijab* and sequestering, to a secular regulation of menarche through an obsession with hygiene. She argues that Western society constructs menstruation as 'a medicalised event, with hygiene and education about management of the changing body, of primary concern' (Ussher: 2006, p. 19). We can see evidence of this through the mother's decision to give the doctor the responsibility of explaining menstruation to Catherine. Ussher continues, '[e]ach 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, p. 19). 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 since they all 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 a similarly 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, a divide between religion and impurity on the one hand and secularism and hygiene on the other, must be problematized. My cross-cultural analysis has demonstrated that a societal emphasis on hygiene in order to maintain the concealment of menstruation is not specific to secular cultures. Hence, we can criticise Ussher for her somewhat essentialist viewpoint. In Algerian novels in particular, discourses of impurity and hygiene go hand in hand. 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, p. 91).

One can see literary representations of this anxiety in both *La Voyeuse interdite* and *Bleu blanc vert*.⁸⁶ When Lilas' mother announces that Lilas is a woman, she

⁸⁶ We can find a specific link between Islam and an anxiety about hygiene in Marouane's *La fille de la Casbah* in which 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

immediately gives her a sanitary towel 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.⁸⁷ The texts of Bey, Bouraoui and Millet similarly alert readers to the continuing dominance of a discourse of hygiene and to how it negatively influences menstrual experience. Here, we can find a significant similarity between the texts of these contemporary writers and those of Leclerc, Delphy, and Kristeva, because all of these works reveal the existence of a discourse which can profoundly impact women's experiences of menstruation.

droite. De l'autre main, je me savonnai puis me rinçai, allant du vagin à l'anus puis de l'anus au vagin, comme 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).

⁸⁷ See Havelock Ellis's *A study of British Genius* (1904) in which he describes women as 'periodically wounded' (1904, p. 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).

Virginie Despentes' novel *Baise-moi* not only provides the most graphic description of menstrual blood discussed in this chapter of the thesis, but it is also the only novel which alludes specifically to second-wave feminist work. Menstruation is represented in a chapter at the very centre of *Baise-moi* which has largely been overlooked by scholars who instead focus on Despentes' representation of rape, prostitution, and violence.⁸⁸ 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, Kristeva compares it to 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, p. 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 staining of surfaces, suggests that *Baise-moi* will go beyond the scope of Kristeva's work, which articulates the theory of the abject without contesting negative societal perceptions of menstrual blood. 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

⁸⁸ An exception is Shirely Jordan's analysis of *Baise-moi* in *Contemporary French Women's Writing: Women's Visions, Women's Voices, Women's Lives* (2004)

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). Manu's characterisation of her 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. This act is also represented as a challenge to patriarchy in particular. In response to Nadine's sarcastic question about whether Manu's 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. The fact that there has been little change in attitudes between the mother's generation and Manu's generation (as represented by her boyfriends) demonstrates the need for women 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 object therefore becoming the sublime. The following sentence emphasises the blood's artistic merit and beauty: '[l]es taches rouges sombre 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. Manu's 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, p. 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 of menstruation as 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). The 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. Manu's 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, p. 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 and 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' (153-4). 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.⁸⁹ 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 graphical 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). Certainly, there is no attempt in this novel to normalise menstrual experience because the choice of a marginal character who menstruates (Manu's marginality arising from her job as a porn star and in her criminal acts of murder) reinforces links between menstruation and the taboo. 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. Her terminology here parallels that of the fathers in *La Voyeuse interdite* and *L'Arbre fouet* who employ a discourse of animality to justify their spiritual superiority over their daughters. This link between the female body and the animal world is also reminiscent of Kristeva's *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*. Manu's employment of such animalistic language alongside her

⁸⁹ Indeed, as Jordan argues, the juxtaposition of Manu menstruating and pretending to shoot does certainly compel the reader 'to interrogate the culturally determined nature of our responses to different categories of blood' (2004, p. 134).

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 to menstruation as well as appropriating a traditionally more masculine discourse and attitude to violence. As the chapter focusing exclusively on Manu's menses is positioned in the very centre of *Baise-moi* and 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 Desportes' 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. Her transformation into a werewolf parodies the idea that menstruation is a curse. The necessity of her hiding herself away during her menses because she is 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 wolf 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 word 'purulente' mocks societal associations between menstruation and pollution or impurity. Once again, as in *Paradis blues*, *Ève de ses décombres* and *La Jeune*

fille et la mère, we find an association between menstruation and the supernatural. 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. The link with the supernatural as well as the idea that menstruation is a curse are, therefore, two concepts which traverse cultural boundaries. We can, perhaps, 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 ridiculous nature of perceptions of menstruation as dangerous, polluting, and horrifying.

1.7 Conclusion

This chapter has revealed that contemporary women's writing from Algeria, Mauritius, and France continues to break the silence around the topic of menstruation that was first broken by the second-wave feminists. Each literature highlights that, within the societies they portray, menstrual experience is often surrounded by silence or shame. Authors expose how this silence impacts on a woman's menstrual experience by creating characters who, for example, respond with fear when they do not understand why they are bleeding or rebel against the status quo by vociferously celebrating their menstrual blood. However, the reasons for this silence differ within each culture because, as I have argued in this chapter, representations of menstruation in contemporary women's writing are nuanced by the cultural context in which the novels are set. For example, each literary culture explores 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, Hinduism and Créole superstitions both position menstruating women as impure. Women's writing from France, however, considers the role of medical discourse. 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 this divide between religion and secularism, an obsession with hygiene is common to both the Islamic society presented in Algerian women's writing and the secular French society presented in women's writing from France. My findings therefore problematise Ussher's binary opposition between secular societies that control the female body through discourses of hygiene and non-secular societies which discipline the female body through religious doctrine.

Kristeva's theory of abjection also has resonance across the three literature cultures which have been analysed in this chapter. In each literary culture the menstruating body is portrayed as inspiring horror or repulsion. The link between menstruation and the animal world also traverses cultural divides. However, unlike in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, depictions of the menstruating female body as abject or animalistic are nuanced by the cultural context in which the novels are set. This chapter has demonstrated the importance of problematising the significance of Kristeva's theories in a different cultural or temporal context from the one in which she wrote

Pouvoirs de l'horreur. In Algerian literature, the menstrual blood of adolescent girls does indeed inspire horror and repulsion both in the girl herself and in her family. However, in contrast to Kristeva's theory of abjection, the primary source of this horror is not the menstrual blood itself but its symbolic nature. 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. In the case of Bouraoui's and Marouane's novels, 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 of societal attitudes towards menstruation. 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 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. 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. 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 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 inequality.

The mother figure is also a key figure in narratives of menstruation. Each literature highlights the importance of educating girls about menstruation before they enter puberty. The majority of these works expose the negative impact of not educating young women about menstruation. 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. 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. In each literature, we can find novels that demonstrate that the silence that surrounds menstrual experience on a wider societal level is mirrored by a mother's inability, or refusal, to discuss menstruation with her daughter. A consideration of the relationship between parent and child is strikingly absent from second-wave feminist texts.

This chapter has therefore illustrated that some of the central ideas about menstruation which were expressed by the second-wave feminists also emerge in contemporary women's writing. We find novels across all three literary cultures that frame menstrual experience with a discourse of abjection and others which, whether the authors are aware of *Parole de femme* or not, answer Leclerc's call to challenge negative perceptions of menstruation and celebrate menstrual experience. However, the most significant difference

between second-wave feminism and contemporary women's writing is the consideration of how menstrual experience is shaped by factors such as cultural context, education, politics, race, religion, and the medicalisation of the female body. Contemporary women's writing therefore addresses many of the differences which were identified by the critics of the second wave-feminists. The differing cultural contexts between each literature play a significant role in how the authors frame their portrayals of menstruation. In Algerian narratives of menstruation, women's experiences are nuanced by patriarchal Islamic culture, which is sometimes perpetuated by female as well as male characters. In Mauritian literature, menstruation is framed by the tensions that exist in a multicultural society in which Hindus have a higher socio-economic status than Creoles. The depiction of menstruation in Patel's works also challenges the stereotypical image of Mauritius as an island paradise. Narratives of menstruation from France examine the medication of the female body and broader societal expectations that menstruation is neither visible nor discussed. There is also a tendency to shock the reader into changing their perceptions of the menstruating body. Chapter Two will consider the next stage in a woman's cycle of fertility: childbirth. It will build on the findings of this chapter by considering whether contemporary women's writing echoes, or provides a contrast to, second-wave feminist approaches to childbirth. I shall ask whether, in women's writing from Algeria, France, and Mauritius, depictions of childbirth are also shaped by factors such as those which have emerged during my analysis of menstrual experience.

Chapter Two: Childbirth

2.1 Introduction

With reference to second-wave feminist theories, Chapter Two will examine how childbirth (another uniquely female phenomenon which was explored by the second-wave feminists) is contextualised within the respective literary settings of Algeria, Mauritius, and France. I shall determine both the extent to which novels published from 1990 onwards demonstrate an evolution in the way in which francophone women writers portray childbirth, as well as determining whether these writers position childbirth as a ‘universal’ phenomenon. Chapter Two will build on the findings of Chapter One by determining whether the same tendencies that characterise contemporary menstrual narratives also emerge within contemporary narratives of childbirth. I shall ask whether, in Algerian women’s writing, childbirth is primarily shaped by Islamic beliefs and patriarchal traditions. I shall evaluate whether, in narratives of childbirth from Mauritius, women’s experiences and attitudes towards childbirth are framed by religion, superstition, or race. My analysis will question whether medical discourse has the most significant impact on childbirth in women’s writing from France. The analysis in Chapter Two will also assess whether other influencing factors emerge in each literature culture that are not present in narratives of menstruation and how these shape a woman’s experience of childbirth.

We can find analysis of dominant attitudes towards childbirth, alongside personal accounts, in the work of Julia Kristeva, Annie Leclerc, and Marie Cardinal. As illustrated in the previous chapter, the significance of

menstruation extends beyond the act of bleeding, and is determined by factors such as a woman's capacity to have children, readiness for marriage, religious doctrine, or even a rejection of motherhood. Similarly, this chapter will not solely focus on the physical act of childbirth itself; it will consider how the novels frame childbirth within the context of motherhood. Since childbirth results in a woman becoming a mother, the selected novels may intertwine discourses of motherhood and childbirth. Motherhood is a central concern in many second-wave feminist texts which 'challenge its position at the core of womanhood' (Rodgers: 2016, p. 46). One must therefore bear in mind that the approaches to childbirth of Kristeva, Leclerc, and Cardinal, may be informed by discourses of motherhood which were prevalent in French society during the 1970s. In parallel, the depictions of childbirth in contemporary women's writing may also reflect attitudes towards motherhood which are specific to the temporal and cultural context which is being represented. This chapter will therefore ask the following question: To what extent do representations of childbirth within contemporary women's writing reflect, or provide a contrast to, attitudes towards motherhood that were apparent within second-wave feminist literature?

Chapter Two is structured in seven parts. Section 2.2 will examine how Leclerc, Cardinal, and Kristeva depict childbirth in order that the subsequent literary analysis can identify the extent to which more contemporary representations of childbirth reflect, or provide a contrast to, the perspectives articulated in second-wave texts. Next, so as to address criticism targeted at the second-wave feminists for ignoring the differences that exist between women, section 2.3 will set out the key findings of sociological and

anthropological research that investigates women's experiences of childbirth. In the main body of the chapter, each literary culture will be taken in turn in order to draw out any factors which the novels portray as inflecting childbirth. The section on Algerian women's writing will explore Maïssa Bey's *Bleu blanc vert* and short story 'En ce dernier matin' from the collection *Sous le jasmin la nuit* (2012) which both frame childbirth within a societal valorisation of women as the mother of sons. It will also analyse two texts by Malika Mokeddem, namely *Les Hommes qui marchent* (1990), which includes two characters who give birth to many children, and *Je dois tout à ton oubli* (1990), which tells the story of a childbirth that is a product of incest. In the Mauritian section, we will return to Shenaz Patel's *Paradis blues*, in which Mylène's mother has three caesareans and Mylène feels pressurised to become a mother. This section will also revisit Devi's *Pagli*, in which Daya refuses to become a mother, and introduce a new novel by Devi, *Soupir* (2002), which portrays two childbirths within an impoverished community in Rodrigues. The section on women's writing from France reflects the great variety of literary works about childbirth which have been written in France since 1990. It will investigate the short story collection *Naissances* (2005) which presents a variety of viewpoints on childbirth from writers such as Marie Darrieussecq and Hélène Villovitch. This section will then examine three novels, namely Camille Laurens' *Philippe* (1995), Mazarine Pingeot's *La Cimetière des poupées* (2007), and Laurence Tardieu's *Le Jugement de Léa* (2004), all of which inscribe childbirth within traumatic contexts. All three sections will reflect on any attitudes towards motherhood which influence how the novels represent childbirth. Chapter One primarily focussed on the experiences of

adolescent girls and characters who rejected motherhood; whereas Chapter Two explores the experiences of women who are about to, or who have already entered, motherhood.

2.2 The representation of childbirth in the works of Julia Kristeva, Annie Leclerc, and Marie Cardinal

Kristeva's theory of the abject was addressed in the previous chapter with a specific focus on how, in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* (1980), she theorises human responses to menstrual blood. Kristeva examines human responses to childbirth by using the same framework of abjection. According to Kristeva, both bodily liquids and a change in the boundaries of the body engender an abject response because they blur the boundaries between the inside and the outside, thereby threatening the stability of the subject. Both of these corporeal factors are present during labour, for example the emission of blood or the loss of the mucus plug, and thus Kristeva is able to apply her theory of abjection to childbirth so as to demonstrate why some humans react with horror when witnessing this bodily experience. In addition, the risk of death during childbirth also renders it abject since it is a reminder of our mortality.

Kristeva's link between abjection and animality is also pertinent to childbirth. Kristeva illustrates that our subjectivity can only be preserved if we maintain the distinction between human and 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' (1980, p. 20). She explains that this desire of humans to distinguish themselves from animals originated in so-called 'primitive' societies that

endeavoured to establish a boundary between the threatening animal world, which represented violence and sex, and the human world. Kristeva implies that childbirth is a violent corporeal experience that 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, p. 120).

Kristeva turns to the Bible to find further explanations as to why humans respond to childbirth as abjection. According to Kristeva, Leviticus characterises childbirth as impure because of the bodily liquids which are emitted: '[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, p. 119). Kristeva argues that the Bible paints childbirth as abject by insisting on 'une séparation entre le féminin et le masculin comme fondement de l'organisation « propre »' (1980, p. 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.

Within the same texts in which they analysed menstrual experience, namely *Parole de femme* (1974) and *Autrement Dit* (1977), Leclerc and Cardinal also explore attitudes towards childbirth which they believe to be dominant in the Western world. They believe that patriarchal discourse has deprived women of an authentic and fulfilling experience of giving birth. Once they outline the existence of a patriarchal discourse about childbirth that they aim to dispel, they present an alternative feminine language and approach. Cardinal's and Leclerc's feminist approach to childbirth is, in part, inspired by

their own positive experiences of giving birth. They imply that their own positive attitudes towards childbirth are not the norm. They call for other women to follow in their footsteps by reimagining childbirth in a positive, and more feminist, manner which more truly reflects the joyful aspects of their lived experiences 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 fluid state. 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' (1977, p. 81). This description echoes Kristeva's theory of abjection because Cardinal outlines that the only words which exist to describe childbirth position it as taboo and unclean.⁹⁰ In addition, Cardinal's long enumeration of the bodily substances that are emitted during labour also emphasises the abject nature of childbirth. Cardinal explains that, because of the patriarchal nature of the language at their disposal, women are left with two alternatives: either to not speak about childbirth, or only to refer to it in a vague, unnuanced, and trivial manner. She explains, '[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, p. 109). To combat this silence and the lack of pertinent vocabulary to befit such a momentous occasion, Cardinal uses the following alternative language: '[ç]a doit être quelque chose de découvrir en quelques secondes l'air, la pondération, l'épaisseur, l'espace, les flammes de la

⁹⁰ See also French feminist Mariella Rigni's *Ecoute ma différence* in which she writes, '[l]es mots de la naissance sont tous sales, laids, dégoûtants' (1978, p. 114).

lumière, la stridence des bruits, le froid, l'insécurité de la nudité' (1977, p. 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 abjection.

In *Parole de femme*, Leclerc theorises that many women do not share her experience of childbirth as a joyful event because they are imbued by negative societal stereotypes about childbirth which undermine women's efforts. She believes that the society in which she lives devalorises childbirth. This devalorisation 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, p. 93).

Leclerc, therefore, links women's negative experiences of childbirth to an ingrained sexism in society. This sexism has deprived women of positive images of childbirth to which they can refer and by which they can be inspired.

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 borbier de souffrances abjectes' (1974, p. 107). Leclerc emphasises that, in comparison with all other aspects of female bodily experience, women's perception of childbirth is 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, p. 86). She asserts that, because patriarchal discourse positions it as a sacrifice for the benefit of men, childbirth is perceived as torture: '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, p. 86). By analysing an image of childbirth as painful and abject, Leclerc suggests that this event has been corrupted by patriarchal norms. It is, therefore, not an inherently tortuous experience and, for this reason, does not need to be experienced as agonising and disempowering. It is also important to underline that Leclerc's frame of reference is Christian, and she employs Christian imagery to explain the societal attitudes she believes to be dominant in a Western context. Since Leclerc's ideas about childbirth are shaped by the dominant religion within the society in which she lives, her theories may not apply to cultural contexts which do not share France's Christian tradition. Leclerc is, therefore, excluding religious differences which may exist between women. As seen in the introduction to this thesis, Chandra Mohanty accuses Western feminists of ignoring the role religion can play in defining female experience.

One of Leclerc's key approaches to childbirth is to blame the medical profession for perpetuating negative patriarchal discourse. This accusation forms part of a wave of feminist protest in the 1970s against the interference of the medical profession in childbirth.⁹¹ This can, in France, be attributed to the fact that many of the women who had contributed to the revolution of May

⁹¹ This topic was not solely the concern of authors from France. See for example *Dalla parte delle bambine* by Elena Gianini-Belotti (1973) and Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1976).

1968 were becoming mothers.⁹² 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, p. 93).

Her belief that women's agency has been taken away from them by the medical profession comes through strongly in this passage. Leclerc demonstrates that the medical profession denigrates childbirth by arguing that the hospital staff equate childbirth with a simple tooth extraction. In this way, she 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, therefore prevents women from experiencing childbirth in a way which celebrates the power of the female body.⁹³ We can infer from her capitalisation of 'MÊME' that Leclerc believes women are even made to feel guilty for using

⁹² 'les filles en révolte deviennent mères. Elles avaient refusé *la maternité institution*, elles vivent intensément la *maternité-expérience*, sans renoncer au militantisme' (Knibiehler: 1997, p. 189).

⁹³ Other feminists in the 1970s argued that the medical profession treats childbirth as if it is an illness. Righini, for example, directly addresses the medical profession in *Ecoute ma différence*: 'Tu as dénaturé le sens de la maternité pour en faire une maladie [...] Ce « mal nécessaire » dont je suis affligée, tu t'es empressé de le médicaliser à outrance pour mieux le neutraliser, l'aseptiser, le guérir' (1978, pp. 114-5)

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 childbirth.

For Leclerc, it is possible for women to alter their perceptions of childbirth, which have been negatively influenced by its medicalisation and patriarchal discourse in general, by their finding an authentic female voice with which to describe it. Leclerc believes that by creating a 'parole de femme', which is a language that 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' (1974, pp. 48-9). Here, she is emphasising the sensuality of childbirth, and positioning childbirth as the most intense female bodily experience. She elevates childbirth by portraying her body in labour using elevated language: 'plus vaste que la mer', and 'je suis devenue immense, tentaculaire' (1974, p. 94). For Leclerc, childbirth is the ultimate celebration of the female body and its strength.

The above findings from second-wave feminist texts will inform the methodology and framework of this chapter. This section has demonstrated how Leclerc's, Cardinal's and Kristeva's broader theories about the female

body inform their particular approach to childbirth. I shall assess whether Kristeva's language of violence, disorder, abjection, and animality are also present in contemporary women's narratives of childbirth. If so, I shall ask whether any such connotations are nuanced by the cultural context in which the narrative is set. In light of Cardinal's approach to childbirth in *Autrement Dit*, this chapter will determine whether more contemporary literature also explores the sensorial aspects of childbirth. If so, this chapter will examine how these corporeal sensations are depicted and nuanced within the fictionalised cultural and temporal context of the novels. In response to the Christian imagery Leclerc uses to describe childbirth in *Parole de femme* and Mohanty's criticism of second-wave feminists for ignoring the role religion plays in defining women's experiences, this chapter will determine whether the selected novels represent religion as a factor which shapes experiences of, and attitudes towards, childbirth. This chapter will also evaluate whether any of the selected novels consider the role played by modern medicine in shaping women's experiences of childbirth. If so, this chapter will determine whether these novels echo Leclerc's negative perception of the medicalisation of childbirth, or offer an alternative viewpoint.

2.3 Anthropological and sociological research on childbirth

Anthropological and sociological studies on childbirth echo the approach of the critics of the second wave feminist movement because they highlight that women's experiences are shaped by social and cultural context. 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 Brigitte Jordan's edited

volume *Birth in Four Cultures: A Cross-cultural investigation of Childbirth in Yucatan, Holland, Sweden, and the United States* she problematises the idea that childbirth is 'more or less universal, meaning virtually identical in all cultural contexts' (1992, p. 1). The collection of studies within this volume demonstrate that 'birth is everywhere socially marked and shaped' (Jordan: 1992, p. 1) by pointing to specific cultural beliefs that influence aspects of childbearing such as the position the woman adopts during labour, and the role of the midwife.⁹⁴ Often, however, specific examples of the nature of cultural and social differences that influence childbirth are lacking, and studies take a broader approach. 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, p. 61).⁹⁵ Langendorff is therefore arguing that childbirth can be shaped by broader cultural beliefs about a woman's role and purpose in society.

In Mary Lefkarites' article 'The Sociocultural Implications of Modernizing Childbirth Among Greek Women on the Island of Rhodes' (1992), she argues that cultural beliefs about womanhood may be informed by religious beliefs and traditions. In addition, Lefkarites introduces her article on childbirth on

⁹⁴ For example, in Sheila Cominsky's chapter on midwifery, she compares countries such as India, where 'birth is highly secretive: the house is shut, and the women is not supposed to cry out' and the United States where it is common practice to move the mother 'to a delivery room separate from the one in which she was in labour' (2003, p. 77).

⁹⁵ See also Shelly Romalis' *Childbirth: Alternatives to Medical Control* in which she states that childbirth 'is never simply a physiological act but rather a performance defined by and enacted within a socio-cultural context' (1981, p. 6).

the Greek Island of Rhodes by illustrating that a woman's experience and perception of giving birth is not solely shaped by cultural discourses that pertain specifically to childbirth. A woman's experience and ideas about childbirth can also be 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 community. Lefkarites states:

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. (1992, p. 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.

There exists only a handful of anthropological or sociological writings that specifically examine women's experiences of childbirth in France, Algeria, or Mauritius. A key focus of studies about childbirth in France is on its medicalisation and the negative impact this can have on women, therefore illustrating that this has remained a central theme in scholarship on childbirth since the 1970s. In *Sociologie de l'accouchement* Béatrice Jacques presents a series of case studies and interviews with doctors, midwives, and women who

have given birth. 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, p. 133). The interviews reveal the existence of a 'culte de la souffrance' (2007, p. 142) and the predominance of the same discourse of sacrifice that Leclerc observes in *Parole de femme*: '[l]a douleur comme sacrifice, propre au discours judéo-chrétien, est particulièrement dominante' (Jacques: 2007, p. 142). In addition, Jacques discovers the dominance of a 'vocabulaire guerrier' (2007, p. 150) and 'le[s] référence[s] à la mort' (2007, p. 133) in the women's narratives of birth. The predominance of death in the narratives of mothers from France is also observed by Nele Ryckelynck in *Temps et rites de passage: Naissance, enfance, culture et religion* (2011) which brings together the work of anthropologists examining childbirth in various cultural contexts, including North Africa and Réunion. Ryckelynck notes that in France: 'les mères continuent à dire combien l'angoisse de la mort reste présente, pour elle et pour le bébé' (2011, p. 124).

We can, in the same collection, find Karim Hanouti's chapter on the Muslim communities of the Maghreb. He bases his findings on ethnographic and psychological studies which have been undertaken in both Berber and Arab communities. In contrast to studies from France, he does not mention the medicalisation of childbirth, despite the fact that most women in the Maghreb give birth within a hospital environment.⁹⁶ His approach is representative of that taken in anthropological literature about childbirth in North Africa: he

⁹⁶ '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' (Cheurfi: 2007, p. 31).

does not explore women's experiences of the act of birth itself, but focusses on cultural, societal, and religious expectations for women to become mothers. Hanouti also 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, p. 139). Hanouti exemplifies the preference for boys in Algerian Muslim culture 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' (2011, p. 141). Other studies which discuss this preference for sons over daughters describe the tradition of women's celebration of the birth of sons (and not daughters) with 'youyou' sounds.⁹⁷

It is difficult to find any anthropological research about childbirth which has been conducted in Mauritius. Again, research on women's experiences of the actual act of childbirth is lacking and, instead, we find an investigation into a cultural norm which prefers male over female offspring. In *Beyond Inequalities: Women in Mauritius*, a sociological study commissioned by the Southern African Research and Documentation centre, this bias is apparent: 'patriarchal society prefers the male child. A popular Créole saying known to every Mauritian is '*garçon premier lot, tifi deuxième lot*' (Johnson et

⁹⁷ The 'youyou' is a celebratory ululation which is traditionally performed by women in North Africa. See for example *Une naissance au Maghreb: essai d'anthropologie psychanalytique* in which Najib Djaziri writes, 'Si l'enfant est de sexe mâle, ils [les anges] remontent au ciel en poussant des *youyou* en signe de joie' (2006, p. 37). See also Najib Djaziri's study of childbirth entitled *Une naissance au Maghreb: essai d'anthropologie psychanalytique* in which he demonstrates that the preferences for sons over daughters has persisted into the modern age. He states: 'Ce 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, p. 36).

al: 1997, p. 40). The study also comments 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' (Johnson et al: 1997, p. 51). This study therefore demonstrates that, even within the same country, there may be significant differences between women's experiences of childbirth.

The above findings reveal that anthropological and sociological studies on the subject of childbirth, whether they consider one or a variety of cultural contexts, tend to argue that women's experiences of childbirth are shaped by their surrounding environment. These studies reveal that women's perceptions and experiences of childbirth are not only shaped by societal attitudes towards childbirth, but also by broader cultural beliefs such as about the role of women or the family. The analysis below will respond to these findings by assessing whether contemporary women's writing characterises childbirth as an experience which is influenced not only by dominant societal attitudes towards childbirth itself, but also by broader expectations for women, men, and families. My review of sociological and anthropological literature has also exposed a dichotomy between sociological and anthropological literature that investigates childbirth in France, and respective studies which explore childbirth in Algeria or Mauritius. The studies from France focus on the medicalisation of childbirth and the pain of labour, whilst those which discuss childbirth in Mauritius or Algeria overlook the act itself and focus instead on the sex of the baby. This chapter will identify whether this same dichotomy emerges in women's writing. It will ask: Is the act of childbirth also ignored in Algerian and Mauritian women's writing in favour of discourses about motherhood and the gender of the child? In

addition, I shall evaluate whether the portrayals of childbirth in the novels mirror the discourse of death which anthropologists have observed in the manner in which women in France describe their experiences of birth.

2.4 The representation of childbirth in Algerian women's writing

In Algerian women's writing, 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 Maïssa Bey's *Bleu blanc vert* (2006), in which Lilas has a daughter with her husband.⁹⁸ We can also find characters who give birth many times, these including the unnamed protagonist of Maïssa Bey's 'En ce dernier matin' and characters Yamina and Mounia in Malika Mokeddem's *Les Hommes qui marchent*. In *Bleu blanc vert* contraception and abortion are presented as alternatives to childbirth. The theme of abortion can also be found in 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.⁹⁹ The focus of this section will be on childbirth: abortion, miscarriage, and contraception will only be referenced where they shed light on the significance of childbirth in Algerian fiction. I shall seek to determine whether the depictions of childbirth in Algerian women's

⁹⁸ We can also find characters who reject motherhood completely. This is common in the works of Malika Mokeddem, including Leïla in *Les Hommes qui marchent* and Malika in her autobiographical work, *Mes hommes* (2005).

⁹⁹ See also abortion in Bey's *Au commencement était la mer* (1996). In Mokeddem's *Mes hommes*, 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. Abortion is a prevalent topic in Algerian literature which has been largely ignored by literary critics and merits greater attention. The scope of this study does not permit the topic the attention it deserves.

writing reflect, or provide a contrast to, the theories articulated by the second-wave feminists, and whether their representations problematise the idea that childbirth is a 'universal' experience.

The most striking tendency in Algerian women's writing which sets it apart from second-wave feminist works is the lack of representations of the act of childbirth itself. Although childbirth is a topic which is frequently mentioned, it is primarily situated within a shared societal 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 a fictionalised 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, p. 55).¹⁰⁰ We can observe, therefore, that *Bleu blanc vert* echoes sociological

¹⁰⁰ We can observe this same pressure in another novel by Bey, *Cette Fille-là*, which is set in an asylum. Narrator and resident, Malika, records the stories of the other inhabitants. She illustrates, by telling the story of M'barka who is ostracised from her village for being unable to produce children, that infertility is seen as a curse. Malika states: '[I]es femmes stériles sont

studies by emphasising that bearing children is considered within the Algerian family unit as a woman's main purpose.

Lilas continues her criticism of a culture in which interfering in a woman's reproductive choices is the norm, by illustrating that the pressure to bear children extends beyond close interpersonal relationships. She demonstrates that the wider community is also concerned by a woman's capacity to give birth:

Mais tous se sentent concernés. Les parents, les voisins, et même les collègues. La vie de chacun est l'affaire de tous. 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).

Her statement that her fertility should only be of concern to her and Ali is therefore also an indirect criticism of her community in Algiers for their interference. 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

maudites' (163). The response of the villagers illustrates that, in her community, childbirth is a matter that goes beyond that of a woman's immediate family.

pays et à la *umma*' (2011, p. 142). Hence, by reading these texts in parallel, we can observe that *Bleu blanc vert* situates 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 also are 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 their defining a woman's worth based on her ability to have children (and boys in particular). Lilas portrays her choice to delay motherhood as being in conflict with her society's expectations and core values, which she believes to impede the aspirations of women (166). Lilas underscores the burden of these pressures by explaining that for many women, such as her patients, the societal expectation for married women to become mothers instils a profound fear in them. She 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, or even within their community.¹⁰¹ Lilas' criticism of patriarchal norms which are associated with childbirth takes a completely

¹⁰¹ This archetype of the 'reine-mère' is prevalent in Algerian women's writing, and we can see examples of it in novels such as Mokeddem's *Les Hommes qui marchent* in which grandmother Zohra arranges the marriages in her family and is approached for advice by members of her community. See also Marouane's *La Jeune Fille et la mère* in which respected elderly grandmothers are given the task of finding suitors for the young women in the village.

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.¹⁰² 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 childbearing abilities above her contribution to the working world. Here, we find an echo with the second-wave feminists who, as Julia Rodgers succinctly articulates, challenged 'its position at the core of womanhood' (Rodgers: 2016, p. 46). Cultural perceptions of the act of giving birth are absent from *Bleu blanc vert*. Only the product of the birth, i.e. the sex of the child, is contextualised within the novel's fictionalised Algerian setting. Lilas believes that the society in which she lives only encourages women to achieve one ambition: becoming a 'mère de fils' (129). This ambition is based on a patriarchal valorisation of male offspring which is also promulgated by the female members of the community.

The theme of becoming a mother to sons is frequently explored in Algerian women's writing and is often depicted as a defining factor during a woman's years of fertility. 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 also contemplates her damaged body and her hatred for her husband. The glory and status she gains from giving birth to sons, rather than daughters, points to the existence of the same

¹⁰² The Algerian society described in *Mes hommes* also defines women based on their capacity to have children and the protagonist similarly 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' (13). The protagonist of *Mes hommes* chooses never to have children.

normative discourse to which Lilas alludes in *Bleu blanc vert*, namely the valorisation of women as the producers of men. The elderly protagonist in 'En ce dernier matin' reflects, in indirect speech, on the 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. The repeated presence of visitors suggests that they celebrate childbirth as a valuable contribution to the community. This representation of childbirth as something glorious might initially appear to reflect the feminist approach taken by Leclerc and Cardinal which celebrates the act of giving birth itself. However, Bey's short story 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'.¹⁰³ The glory the protagonist experiences when giving birth to sons, rather than constituting a re-appropriation of the act of giving birth from a female perspective, confirms traditional patriarchal expectations for women to produce men. It is, therefore, not her efforts or endurance during labour that her community valorises, but the product of this labour: the male child.

¹⁰³ See also *Les Hommes qui marchent*. Leïla, the protagonist of the novel, 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 traditionally celebrates the birth of sons in Algerian communities. Leïla's narrative, in which the word 'non' is emphasised by the subsequent full stop, implies that the women firmly rejected this unconventional act: 'Non. On ne s'égosillait pas en youyous pour la naissance d'une fille' (72).

‘En ce dernier matin’ also reflects a recurring theme in Algerian women’s writing, which is to consider how giving birth many times impacts on a woman’s body.¹⁰⁴ The prestige which others bestow upon the elderly protagonist is contrasted with the shame she feels towards her body. From the age of thirty 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 adds 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

¹⁰⁴ See, for example *Mes hommes* in which during Malika’s childhood, she befriends a doctor who allows her to observe patients in a hospital. She watches women giving birth and cursing with pain. She humoursly 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 *Ravisser* (1998) and *Le Châtiment des hypocrites* (2001).

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. Mokeddem's *Les Hommes qui marchent* tells the story of three generations of women who were all born during French colonialism. The character 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 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.¹⁰⁵ 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

¹⁰⁵ Repudiation is a recurrent theme across many Algerian novels, including Leïla Marouane's *Ravisser* 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.

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, p. 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 new-born 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 nation-wide 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 candidates à la boursoufflure' (252), 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 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 fomenteur des coups d'Etat¹⁰⁶... 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).¹⁰⁷

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.

¹⁰⁶ This 'coup d'état' likely refers to the military putsch which took place 1961

¹⁰⁷ 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).

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 (Ouada-Bedidi and Vallin: 2012, p. 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 beautiful babies in twelve years'.¹⁰⁸ 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. Leïla's use of hyperbole to describe their power to repopulate Algeria creates a dichotomy between life and death. This dichotomy contrasts Yamina's and Mounia's wombs that bring life into the

¹⁰⁸ See Nathalie Edward's *Voicing Voluntary Childlessness: Narratives of Non-Mothering in French* (2016) for a history of France's pronatalist policies.

world with a patriarchal society which used to precipitate death. 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. The main character of the novel, Selma, looks back to the late 1960s and remembers glancing into the kitchen and seeing her mother help her aunt Zahia to kill her baby which was a product of Zahia's relationship with her brother-in-law. The women, who had already tried to abort the baby by drinking '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, p. 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, p. 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, p. 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).

Selma positions infanticide as a widespread problem which 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 socio-economic context in which women give birth. Mokeddem's novel 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 contre la politique de natalité prônée par les autorités' (126). Lilas' citation of 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 »' (Ouada-Bedidi and Vallin: 2012, p. 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 Mitassem-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, pp. 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 (125-6).

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 rapprochés qu'on finit par ne pas 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.¹⁰⁹ 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 chapter on

¹⁰⁹ 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 compromettante' (84) because they cannot understand the instructions.

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, p. 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 able readily 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, 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 du plaisir !' (128).

Lilas, then, represents women's taking of the pill in Algeria as a powerful political and feminist act.¹¹⁰ 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

¹¹⁰ 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 commencement 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.

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 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 which valorises contraception as providing women with the power to gain control over their own bodies and destiny.

Chapter One demonstrated that, in Algerian women's writing, women's menstrual experience is mainly influenced by the Islamic and patriarchal cultural context in which they live. Women's experiences of childbirth and attitudes towards motherhood are also principally framed within this Islamic and cultural context. For example, I have argued that, in Algerian women's writing, discourses of childbirth are dominated by the societal norm for women to have multiple children and a traditional patriarchal valorisation of a woman as a 'mère de fils'. This section has built on the findings of the first chapter by revealing that, in Algerian women's writing, temporality plays a determining role in shaping women's bodily experiences. *Bleu blanc vert*, *Je dois tout à ton oubli*, and *Les Hommes qui marchent* all anchor their exploration of childbirth and motherhood in the early years of Algerian independence. Determining factors include crowded living conditions and the pro-natalist policy of government. A key parallel between second-wave feminist works and Algerian women's writing, which was not evident in depictions of menstruation, has also emerged during my analysis. Algerian

Women's writing echoes the approach of Leclerc and Cardinal to create alternative discourses to patriarchal models of childbirth. The nature of these discourses, however, is not to celebrate the act of childbirth but to challenge normative ideas of a woman's role in Algerian society. In the next section, I shall build on the findings of Chapter One by assessing whether Mauritian women's writing also presents childbirth as an experience which is inflected by interracial tension, Hindu doctrine, or superstition. I shall also evaluate whether any attitudes towards, or experiences of, childbirth are common to both Algerian and Mauritian literature.

2.5 The representation of childbirth in Mauritian women's writing

We can, across Mauritian women's writing, 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 Créole as well as in Indo-Mauritian Hindu communities. *Pagli* tells the story of Daya, an Indo-Mauritian character, who 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 his baby. Childbirth is also a theme in Shenaz Patel's *Paradis blues*, which is a monologue by Mylène who tells her life story whilst she is incarcerated in a mental asylum. 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. Another key similarity between the two literatures is the greater emphasis on discourses of motherhood and reproduction than on childbirth itself. However, these discourses of motherhood and reproduction shed light on dominant attitudes towards childbirth within the fictionalised Mauritian cultural context of the novels.

The main similarity between Algerian and Mauritian literature is the tendency to depict characters who are under pressure from family members and their community to have children as soon as they are married.¹¹¹ In the fictional Créole and Indo-Mauritian spaces created by Devi and Patel, giving birth to children is considered as a woman's main purpose and she is expected to achieve this. Once again, in parallel to Algerian literature, it is the male offspring who are most highly prized within the fictionalised society of the novels. In the previous chapter of this thesis, the analysis of *Pagli* 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 (the *mofines*) that she have 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 réussir' (41). Daya illustrates that, because they obediently follow a patriarchal command to produce male heirs, they are model Hindu wives.¹¹² For this reason, they, too,

¹¹¹ See also Nathaha Appanah's *Blue Bay Palace* which evokes this pressure by describing a couple who flee their village because they believed they were infertile: 'Couple supposé stérile, ils avaient fui leur village [...] lassés des regards noirs et des jacasseries quotidiennes' (15).

¹¹² Devi also explores, in *Le Sari Vert*, the concept of the model Hindu wife and the expectations for her childbearing body. The misogynistic grandfather of a household, the self-proclaimed

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).

One of the main differences between Algerian and Mauritian women's writing is the multicultural nature of the society portrayed in Mauritian literature. In Devi's fictionalised Mauritius, the conflict that exists between these cultures shapes interpersonal relationships and communication. In *Pagli*, this conflict inflects Daya's relationship with the *mofines* and her attitude towards childbirth. 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 inter-racial relationship with her Créole 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 discourse of purity. Daya illustrates the horror of the *mofines*, who she calls 'les soldats de la pureté' (41), at her inter-racial relationship: '[e]lles m'ont montré leur agonie, alors que deux corps « étrangers » s'accouplaient' (42). Srilata Ravi observes that in Devi's

'Dokteur Dieu', has a very rigid definition of how a Hindu wife should behave. The text infers that he believes that a woman should be silent during childbirth because he criticises his wife for sweating and vocalising her pain when in labour: 'Elle se souvient de chacune de mes gifles, ça oui, mais pas de la tête de l'enfant lui déchirant le vagin. Les deux jours les deux nuits de gémissements, de hurlements, de suée' (106).

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, p. 92). Indeed, Daya can be characterised as such a victim. Ravi's chapter, however, does not consider Daya's fierce resistance to this hegemony; Daya both refuses to abide by the rules of the *mofines* and disrupts these rules within the realm of her powerful imagination.

Outside this rigid patriarchal framework in which inter-racial 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 alternative 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. She is thereby 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 inter-racial family which 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. Leclerc calls for all women to create a 'parole de femme' so they can experience childbirth in a more positive light as 'un éclatant bonheur'

(1974, p. 107). In contrast, 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 the two texts highlights the idealistic nature of Leclerc's 'parole de femme'. 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 Shenaz Patel's *Paradis blues* also exposes and challenges a hegemonic system which 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.¹¹³ 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' (69). 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. When looking around the table at her very large family, she states: '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

¹¹³ Both Daya and Mylène are imprisoned (the former in a hen house and the latter in an asylum).

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. Tu dois savoir la tenir. Ta Langue' (27).

This culture of silence is also exposed 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 smiling faces of the villagers and pride Mylène felt when pregnant are juxtaposed with the silence of her miscarriage. The miscarriage is implied through her no longer wearing a 'robe de grossesse' (36). Mylène's

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 sadness towards this loss. Her self-imposed silence contrasts her pride at being pregnant with 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 reasons for why this subject is taboo are 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-il après cela? Que m'est-il resté?/ L'essentiel./ Ma chair' (36-7). Here, her miscarriage is depicted as stripping away Mylène's identity as a woman and reducing her to a piece of flesh.

If we examine the silence that surrounds the miscarriages in Patel's *Paradis blues* and her earlier novel, *Sensitive* (2003), 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 an abrupt end of a character's pregnancy with ambiguity.¹¹⁴ 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, p. 50). There is, therefore, a risk that if a woman is caught miscarrying it could be misconceived as an abortion.¹¹⁵ *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 whether Daya's friend Mitsy is bleeding because she has miscarried or because 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

¹¹⁴ Patel, in *Sensitive* (2003), also represents miscarriage as a subject which is surrounded by silence. Fi, the Creole protagonist and narrator, finds her friend, Nadège, bleeding on the floor. When asking her mother about why Nadège is bleeding, Fi's mother refuses to explain it. Fi later sees the cot Nadège purchased in a tip. The novel infers the taboo status of miscarriage in the community it depicts by leaving it to the reader to infer, from the novel's juxtaposition of the bleeding and discarded cot, that Nadège has miscarried.

¹¹⁵ See Ramtohol, Ramona, 'Gender and Insecurity in Mauritius' in Raymond Izarali et al (eds) *Security, Education and Development in Contemporary Africa* (2016) pp. 105-118

enfant qui s'en va' (96) and asks her not to call a doctor. If we read *Pagli* alongside *Getting Rid of it*, we can argue that Devi also represents a character who could be subject to prosecution if her miscarriage is mistaken for an abortion. The critical literature on the novel appears unanimous that Mitsy has aborted the baby.¹¹⁶ 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, p. 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, her bleeding may be referred to as a 'crime'. As *Getting Rid of It* makes clear, a miscarriage (since it is very difficult to distinguish between the blood caused by an abortion and a miscarriage) could lead to Mitsy being arrested. This ambiguity highlights the importance of considering cultural 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 suffering is embodied in the style with which Mylène's mother articulates her

¹¹⁶ See also analysis of the novel in *The Female Face of Shame* (2013) by Erica Johnson and in Veronique Bragard's *Transoceanic Dialogues: Coolitude in Caribbean and Indian Ocean literatures* (2008).

experiences of childbirth.¹¹⁷ 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).¹¹⁸ 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 socio-economic 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 Créole, 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

¹¹⁷ This backdrop of poverty and exploitation also 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.

¹¹⁸ 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).

critical literature which analyses the role of Creole in Mauritian cultural production, scholars argue that it represents the struggles of an isolated, exploited, and silenced class. Roshni Mooneram 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, p. 194). Valérie Magdelaine-Adrianjafitrimo argues that, by incorporating the Créole language, 'la littérature mauricienne accepte de donner voix à la muette, de la faire affleurer de plus en plus ouvertement' (2004, p. 160) and that this language also translates 'l'éclatement des cloisonnements sociaux' (2004, p. 162). With reference to Mooneram and Adrianjafitrimo's work, we can argue that through the use of Créole, *Paradis blues* inscribes the mother's experiences into both contemporary issues of ethnicity and a historical exploitation of the Creole population in Mauritius. 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. Creole 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 and, in *Parole de femme*, one woman will perceive in a positive light 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 poverty. 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.¹¹⁹ However, the representations of tourist exploitation and childbirth are ignored, despite their profound impact on the body and story of Pitié.

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.¹²⁰ Pitié is described as 'famélique et ruinée' (131) when, soon after she gives birth, she

¹¹⁹ See for example Ahwiny 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)

¹²⁰ 'Une vieille l'avait trouvé un jour dans une benne à ordures sur la plage' (28).

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 is again connoted with death in the denouement of *Soupir*, when she is reunited with Royal Palm at a party. She tells her teenaged 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, p. 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.

Pitié's body is portrayed as suffering under the impact of the globalisation of Rodrigues by her having to repeatedly give birth to, and subsequently bury, 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. Pitié's phrase, '*les choses grouillantes grandissent et doivent être expulsées et enterrées*' (135), is recorded in free indirect speech. 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, he 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. Srilata Ravi's analysis of Devi's oeuvre as a whole is particularly pertinent to unlocking 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, p. 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, p. 120). The maternal bodily substances that Pitié pictures being expelled 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 re-imagining 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 counters the positive and universalising approach of the second-wave feminists.

Pitié's final rhetorical question associates childbirth with her first menses, which underscores the horror of her giving birth at such a young age. Menstrual blood is another bodily fluid which Kristeva deems abject. One could argue that the link made between childbirth with menstrual blood, excrement, violence, and death, is a deliberate nod to Kristeva's theory of abjection. The novel resonates with, but also 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 and 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.

This section has illustrated that there are key similarities between Algerian and Mauritian narratives of childbirth. In both literatures, childbirth is usually framed within a patriarchal cultural context in which a woman's main purpose is to become a mother. In parallel to second-wave feminist texts, both Algerian and Mauritian literature characterise patriarchy as a force which negatively shapes women's attitudes and experiences of childbirth. In contrast to second-wave feminism, however, both of these literatures consider how patriarchy functions within a specific cultural context. Algerian literature investigates perceptions and experiences of childbirth in an Islamic and patriarchal space. Mauritian literature explores this idea of 'patriarchy' within a specifically Mauritian religious and/or cultural context. In this Mauritian

setting, 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. In similarity with Algerian literature, both *Soupir* and *Paradis Blues* portray socio-economic 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. We also find in both Algerian and Mauritian narratives of birth an exploration of how politics impacts women's bodily experiences. The former investigates the pro-natalist policies of the government and the latter the illegality of abortion. In both *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.

My analysis of the representation of childbirth in Mauritian women's writing has also exposed the idealism of Leclerc's approach. 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. For example, imagining childbirth in a more positive light would not change Pitié's traumatic experience of giving birth at such a young age to the child of a rapist. The above analysis has also 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. The next section will investigate representations of childbirth in women's writing from France since 1990. I shall evaluate the extent to which these contemporary depictions of childbirth demonstrate an evolution in approach since the second-wave feminists first examined this topic. I shall also assess whether there are any aspects of women's experiences of childbirth that are particular to a European French cultural context, and if any are universal to all three literary cultures.

2.6 *The representation of childbirth in women's writing from France*

Since 1990 the topic of childbirth has become increasingly prevalent in women's writing from France.¹²¹ The collection *Naissances* (2005), which includes short narratives of childbirth and pregnancy by eight female authors, pays testament to this surge in interest.¹²² Surprisingly, very little has been written about these short stories, despite their being 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

¹²¹ Other examples of novels which represent childbirth but will not be analysed in this chapter include Marie Darrieusscq's *Le bébé* (2005), Christine Angot's *Interview* (1995), and *Léonore toujours* (1997).

¹²² According to Valerie Worth-Stylianou in her chapter 'Birthing Tales and Collective memory in Recent French Fiction' in *Motherhood in Literature and Culture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Europe*: 'despite the intersection of eight independent fictional approaches to the theme of birth, *Naissances* is neglected by most literary critics' (2017, p. 58).

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. In Darrieussecq's story, the narrator's caesarean is performed under general anaesthetic and she misses the moment her baby emerges. Desarthe's and Villovitch's stories examine the clichéd way in which childbirth is represented on French television.

Camille Laurens's novel *Philippe* (1995) will be the focus of this section because of its resonances with second-wave feminism but also its representativeness of trends in women's writing from France since the 1990s. In the novel, the narrator criticises a doctor for the death of her son only a few hours after he was born.¹²³ *Philippe* is an example of 'autofiction' since it is inspired by real life events and is narrated by an autofictional 'je' that represents Laurens. This critique of the medical profession and the reflection on her own experiences of childbirth is similar to Leclerc's approach in *Parole de femme*. This section will address this parallel by comparing the reasons why they critique the medical profession as well as assessing whether *Philippe* provides a representation of childbirth which is more nuanced by its temporal and cultural context. *Philippe* typifies a trend in women's writing post 1990 that sets it apart from second-wave feminist works. Since the 1990s, European French authors have increasingly explored childbirth within traumatic, previously taboo, and violent contexts. A particularly popular transgressive

¹²³ See also the representation of infant mortality in Darrieussecq's *Tom est mort* (2009)

social context in which authors inscribe childbirth is infanticide. Works include Mazarine Pingeot's *La Cimetière des poupées* (2007), in which the imprisoned protagonist explains, in a letter to her husband, why she committed infanticide, and 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.¹²⁴ The reader does not find out whether she committed the act or not. *Le Jugement de Léa* and *Philippe* form part of a growing tendency of women in European 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.¹²⁵ The former is the testimony of a fictional character, whereas the latter is an example of 'autofiction' based on Laurens' real life experience of infant mortality. This section will examine the varying approaches taken by authors since 1990 and determine the extent to which they echo, or provide a contrast to, the theories of the second-wave feminists.

One significant development in women's narratives of birth since 1990 is to challenge the representation of childbirth on French television. This is a new target for critique by female European French writers. Yet, their approach echoes that of second-wave feminism to patriarchal discourse in general or to the medical profession, since they challenge how childbirth is portrayed on French television and subsequently imagine childbirth in a more positive light

¹²⁴ See also 'A terme' in Despentès' short story collection *Mordre au travers* (1999) in which the protagonist murders her baby, chops it up, and posts it to her boyfriend. Other novels which represent infanticide include Darrieussecq's *White* (2003), Suzanne Jacob's *L'Obéissance* (1991) and Sophie Marinopoulos' *La Vie ordinaire d'une mère meurtrière* (2008).

¹²⁵ See also a justification for infanticide in Véronique Olmi's *Bord de mer* (2001) and Schweighoffer's *J'avais douze ans* in which Nathalie recounts her father's sexual abuse.

that better reflects women's lived experiences. In the short story collection, *Naissances*, Agnès Desarthe and Hélène Villovitch expose the clichéd nature of the discourses they encounter on television and reveal their inaccurate reflection of women's subjective experiences of childbirth. In Villovitch's short story 'Mon Lapin', which recounts childbirth from the perspective of a first-person narrator, she exposes the ridiculous and unrepresentative nature of the depictions of childbirth in French téléfilms. For her, these 'téléfilms idiots' (35) overdramatise childbirth and falsely depict it as torture. The narrator states that during labour she did certainly not pronounce clichés such as 'c'est pas possible, mon Dieu' (35), or 'je n'ai jamais souffert autant de ma vie' (35) and 'arrêtez tout, je ne veux pas du bébé' (35-6). These phrases echo Leclerc's theory that childbirth is commonly misconceived as 'l'image même de la douleur' (1974, p. 86). Villovitch's text and *Parole de femme* both denounce this image. 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 personal experience reveals the overly dramatic and unrepresentative nature of childbirth on television.

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 it 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. The story commences by depicting a mother and her children watching a soap. The narrator, who is one of the children, 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). The white aprons of the servants impart a clinical tone to the scene. The screaming, sweating, and frantic movements of the woman in labour characterise her as helpless and frightened. The children even mistake what they are witnessing for a death scene. They ask, 'Maman, qu'est-ce qu'elle a la dame? Elle va mourir?' (56). The passage culminates with the narrator looking at her siblings and thinking: '[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 others 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, p. 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 d'une marathonnienne' (70). She states: 'Tu es une force immense' (70) and '[t]u vois 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, in this text, 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 Villovitch's story. Darrieussecq employs such imagery and language when dramatising the narrator's experience of having a caesarean. The sense of disempowerment which permeates the narrative is akin to that experienced by the mother in *Paradis blues* after her many caesareans. 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 that the narrator feels herself losing control of her body through her neither comprehending what the doctors are about to perform nor her being able to identify the substance being inserted into the drip. The fact that her husband is made to leave the room adds to the protagonists' 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). The horror of this scene is evoked on the level of language and imagery. 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, added to the

blinding whiteness of the room, 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 [...] On ne dit pas *accouchement* quand il y a césarienne. On n'*accouche* que par *voie basse*' (13, italics in original). The dehumanising aspect of caesareans is evoked both in her referring to the baby as a 'créature' and through her use of meat metaphors. 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. The abject imagery of 'la béance' and 'le ventre ouvert' adds an extra element of horror to the scene. 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. The 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'.¹²⁶ It is not childbirth itself that is abject, as in Kristeva's *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, but the artificial tearing 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 hyperbolic 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: 'ça ne m'appartient pas, ce moment-là, que les toubibs et les infirmières recueillent, eux, ce cri dont ils n'avaient que faire' (13). She depicts the medical staff as callous through their stealing this moment from her and yet being completely disinterested by 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 a new approach to medicalisation of the body which is not mentioned in second-wave feminist texts. Although 'Encore là' portrays

¹²⁶ In her short story 'Abandonnés' which also features in *Naissances*, Laurens also portrays her caesarean as depriving her of the experience of a 'natural' childbirth: 'je n'ai aucune expérience de la naissance' (99).

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 suggests the narrator's resilience and recovery from the disconcerting and disempowering experience of the caesarean.

In *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 a 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.¹²⁷ The narrator outlines that she is writing her testimony in order to build a case against the doctor: '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 also connoted with the taboo nature of infant mortality. 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, p. 101). Rye adds that the novel articulates 'what is otherwise virtually unsayable' (2006, p. 104). The

¹²⁷ 'Dr Delinette, dont le nom apparaissait *in extenso* dans la première version de *Philippe*, a intenté un procès à l'encontre de l'auteur et de la maison d'édition P.O.L. condamnés tous deux à remplacer le nom du médecin par une abbréviation' (Ibrahim-Lamrous: 2005, p. 201)

autofictional form is therefore a way in which Laurens can, through an imaginary narrator, find words for this taboo subject and articulate her anger. The strength that the writing process gives her is embodied in her statement, '[é]crire m'arme' (79), at the conclusion of the novel. Writing also 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 incompetence, 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. The narrator underscores the mass panic that surrounded her childbirth in a short sentence: '[l]'affolement est évident et général' (52), before she rapidly recounts her labour. The immediacy of the present tense coupled with a lengthy and largely asyndetic sentence impart 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' (52-3). 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 neither result 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 new-born.

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 which points out the failures of Dr. L, the midwife's notes, extracts from the autopsy, and an encyclopaedia entry on childbirth. The narrator quotes from the specialist's report: 'Entre 7h40 et 8h15, le diagnostic d'infection foëto-maternelle est clairement possible. La sage-femme l'a fait, le Dr L. ne l'a pas fait. Il a fait une faute grave en méconnaissant cette situation' (46). 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 to this autofictional text. The juxtaposition of the scientific discourses with her own voice underscores that her blaming the doctor for the death of her baby is a rational decision based on evidence.

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, p. 93). *Philippe* reflects Leclerc's approach through the representation of Dr. L's lack of compassion and his 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 reimagining childbirth with a 'parole de femme' that celebrates rather than denigrates it. However, the 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 the students so that future doctors can provide a better 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 and desire for radical change. Her reference to 'les « polars »' sets up a binary image of doctors as criminals and woman 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 humaine' 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, since 1990, for female authors in France to explore childbirth within violent, transgressive, and traumatic contexts. In addition, 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 the mother who kills, or who is suspected of killing, her child. Both narrators are fictional characters. Pingeot's novel is, however, inspired by the real life triple infanticide committed by Véronique Courjault who confessed to these crimes in 2006.¹²⁸ 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

¹²⁸ For a detailed analysis of the Courjault affair see Marder, Elissa (2012) *The Mother in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Psychoanalysis, Photography, Deconstruction*, NY: Fordham University Press

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 of which her husband's negligence had stripped her. The parallel between these two European French novels, and Mokeddem's *Je dois tout à ton oubli* is that a desire for self-preservation leads all three mothers to commit infanticide. However, this shared image of infanticide as self-preservation is nuanced by the different cultural contexts and personal histories of the characters. In the Algerian novel, this infanticide is a product of poverty, adultery, and a perception of the sexual encounter between the in-laws as incest. In the two novels from France, the interpersonal relationship between the mother and the baby's father is the key influencing factor.

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 borbier de souffrances abjectes' because of 'la répression fasciste de l'homme' (1974, p. 86 and p. 107). It is not patriarchal discourse which produces the abject depiction of childbirth in Pinget 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' (58-9). 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 touille' (85). This emphasis on death imparts a foreboding tone to the passage. The anaphora on 'je perds' in the sentence 'je perds mon corps, je perds mon sang, je perds mon eau' (85) portrays childbirth as unrelentingly weakening and damaging not only to her body but also her sense of self. 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 the

reader to empathise with her. This long asyndetic sentence heightens the traumatic nature of her childbirth through its fast pace which delineates her rapidly losing control of her body. This rapid rhythm conveys the asphyxiating nature of her contractions on a stylistic level. The passage fragments her body by reducing it 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. The portrayal of childbirth in this text as abject, although reminiscent of Kristeva's approach to childbirth in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, 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). The milky quality of the bodily liquids in *Le Cimetière des poupées* echoes, whether intentionally or not, Kristeva's reference to the skin on milk in order to explain abjection. The reverberation of Kristeva's theory in Pinget's novel, 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 Pinget's novels serves to de-romanticise childbirth by representing its physical impact on the female body. Indeed, Tardieu and Pinget are not alone in this approach. Desportes' approach to childbirth, for example, parallels her approach to menstruation. As we observed in the previous chapter of this thesis, Desportes describes the materiality and smell of menstrual blood in her works. Desportes represents childbirth 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 en 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.

Parallels can be drawn between these acts of infanticide in French women's writing and the rejection of motherhood expressed in Mauritian and Algerian female authored fiction. Pinget's, Desportes', and Tardieu's novels are a more 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 the narrators in Pinget's, Desportes', and Tardieu's novels 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 *La 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, un mécanisme qui me rassurait en me certifiant que j'étais normale [...]'. Que je ne sois plus normale est un châtement 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, pp. 118-9).

Contemporary women writers have therefore followed in the footsteps of the second-wave feminists by continuing to challenge the central position which women are expected to accord to motherhood. However, this protest has transformed into a disruption of normative ideas of motherhood through violence, destruction, and the taboo. Hence, the desire to disrupt patriarchal norms has remained, but, in certain European French texts, the subversion has become permeated with violence. The violence of childbirth is not only apparent on a thematic level, but is also recurrent throughout these narratives by means of abject imagery, irregular rhythm, and stylistic devices such as anaphora.

2.7 Conclusion

To conclude, there is one key similarity between second-wave feminism and the majority of contemporary women's novels explored in this chapter: the desire to challenge normative perceptions of women. Second-wave feminist theoretical texts and depictions of childbirth in women's writing from Algeria,

Mauritius, and France, challenge normative perceptions of childbirth as well as the societal expectation that women consider motherhood as their primary purpose. Some female characters express their dissent on a verbal level, such as Daya in *Pagli*, and others through violence, such as the infanticidal protagonist of *La Cimetière des poupées*. The idea of 'patriarchy', which is central to second-wave feminist thinking, is still prominent within Algerian and Mauritian women's writing. Nevertheless, in contrast to second-wave feminist works, the concept of patriarchy is nuanced by the respective Algerian and Mauritian contexts in which the narratives of childbirth 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. In the Mauritian novels, childbirth is framed within a patriarchal Hindu culture in which women are expected to perpetuate a pure Indo-Mauritian bloodline. 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. 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.

This chapter has revealed two key differences between representations of childbirth in contemporary women's writing and the theorisation of childbirth in second-wave feminist texts. The first is the consideration in contemporary women's writing of cultural and temporal context. As a collection, 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 socio-cultural context and how this impacts women's attitudes towards, and experience of, childbirth. Once again, in parallel to representations of menstruation, childbirth is primarily framed in Algerian literature by an Islamic patriarchal culture which tries to control the female body. In this chapter of the thesis, temporality was introduced as a factor which inflects women's bodily experience. For example, *Je dois tout à ton oubli* and *Les Hommes qui marchent* 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. Mauritian representations of childbirth reflect those of menstruation by framing their characters' experiences within in a cultural context in which tension and inequality exist between the affluent Hindu population and the disaffected Creole population. In women's writing from France, the role of the medical profession, which was considered in Millet's *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M*, is much more prominent in narratives of childbirth. 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. Criticism of the medical profession in contemporary women's writing has also explored some new avenues not considered by Leclerc, such as Darrieussecq's depiction of a caesarean as a traumatic experience or Laurens' accusations of neglect.

The second significant difference between second-wave feminist texts and contemporary women's writing which has emerged in this chapter pertains to the traumatic and violent contexts in which many of the characters give birth. By comparing these particular depictions of childbirth to *Parole de femme*, we can argue that Leclerc's approach to childbirth is idealistic in nature. In *Soupir*, for example, violence and trauma permeate Pitié's childbirth because the baby is a product of rape. In *Phillipe*, the atmosphere of violence and trauma that surrounds Camille's labour foreshadows the stillbirth.

Chapter Three will examine the final stage in a woman's years of fertility: the menopause. It will build on the findings of Chapter One and Chapter Two which argued that, in contemporary women's writing, representations of menstruation and childbirth are influenced by the cultural context in which the novels are set. Chapter Three will also explore the second-wave feminists' specific approaches to the menopause and consider whether these have resonance with the depiction of the menopause in contemporary women's writing in French. I shall assess whether the same tendencies which characterise each literature's distinctive approach to menstruation and childbirth are also manifest in depictions of the menopause. Chapter Three will evaluate whether, in Algerian women's writing, the menopause is inflected by Islamic patriarchal values. It will assess whether Mauritian women's writing illustrates that women's experiences of, and attitudes towards, the menopause

are influenced by Hindu doctrine or the inequalities that exist between Indo-Mauritian Hindus or Creoles. Chapter Three will also determine whether contemporary women's writing from France positions menopausal experience as a moment in a woman's life which is primarily shaped by medical discourse and practices. An understanding of societal perceptions of motherhood has been key to unlocking how childbirth is portrayed in contemporary women's writing in French. The menopause marks the end of a woman's fertility and therefore the possibility of having children. Chapter Three will reflect on how the change in status from fertile to infertile woman influences the representation of the menopausal woman in women's writing from Algeria, Mauritius, and France.

Chapter Three: The Menopause

3.1 Introduction

The menopause marks the end of fertility and, therefore, childbirth. As argued in the previous chapter, a societal consideration of a woman's main purpose as a mother is a concept that is exposed and challenged in literature from Algeria, Mauritius, and France. As a menopausal woman can no longer have children, I will assess how this change in status is perceived within the cultural context in which the menopausal characters live. This chapter will also examine how these perceptions impact the characters' experiences of the menopause. The menopause is not solely characterised by a loss of fertility, it is also associated with a variety of symptoms including hot flushes, night sweats, and depression.¹²⁹ The following analysis will, therefore, focus on how contemporary women's novels represent these corporeal and psychological aspects of menopausal experience.¹³⁰ The menopause, an event that usually happens in a woman's late forties or fifties, also marks a woman's entrance into the latter stages of her life. Hence, in the selected novels, the writers' approaches to menopausal experience may intertwine and overlap with concerns about ageing. This chapter will, therefore, determine if or how discourses of ageing within the specific cultural contexts of the selected novels

¹²⁹ The medical profession still disagrees about the exact symptoms of the menopause.

¹³⁰ This chapter will not consider perimenopause as separate from the menopause since it is difficult to determine where the perimenopause ends and menopause begins. Perimenopause marks the early stages of the menopause when menstruation starts to become less frequent and the term 'menopause' refers to when menstruation has definitely stopped. According to the World Health Organisation, 'The term peri-menopause describes the period immediately before the menopause – from the time when the clinical and hormonal features of approaching menopause commence till the end of the first year after menopause' (WHO in Steiner and Young: 2007, p. 414)

influence the characters' menopausal experience. In parallel with the previous two chapters of this thesis, I will assess the extent to which representations of the menopause in contemporary women's writing in French reveal that the female body is influenced by cultural context. This chapter will also reflect on the specific theories of the second-wave feminists about the menopause and consider the extent to which contemporary women's writing echoes, or provides a contrast to, second-wave feminist works.

This chapter is structured in seven parts. The following section (3.2) will identify the main approaches to the menopause in second-wave feminism by outlining how menopausal experience is depicted in the works of Simone de Beauvoir, Annie Leclerc, and Marie Cardinal. Although Simone de Beauvoir was not part of the same generation as the second-wave feminists, scholars such as Fredrika Scarth argue that she can be considered as a mother figure to them. The enormous impact her work had on the way in which the second-wave feminists, such as Leclerc and Cixous, theorised the female body cannot be denied. According to Scarth in her study of the female body in Beauvoir's oeuvre,

[*Le Deuxième Sexe*] is a founding text of second wave feminism [...]

The text and its author acquired an iconic status in second wave feminism. It is not surprising, then, that a common feminist response to Beauvoir is the sense that we are all her daughters, that she is the "mother of us all" (2004, p. ix).

Hence, because of the profound influence of Beauvoir on second-wave feminist thought, Beauvoir's conceptualisation of the menopause in *Le Deuxième sexe* (1949) will form part of the theoretical framework of this chapter.

Section 3.3 will evaluate the main tendencies of sociological and anthropological literature which either explores the menopause through a cross-cultural perspective or examines the specificity of menopausal experience in either France, Algeria, or Mauritius. The subsequent sections will each be dedicated to one literary culture. Owing to the paucity of novels in French which tackle the subject of the menopause, there are far fewer novels analysed in this chapter than in the previous two. The silence on the menopause in contemporary women's writing as compared with that of childbirth and menstruation is striking. This imbalance begs the question of why contemporary women writers privilege the fertile female body and rarely engage with the menopausal body. This silence will be addressed during this chapter. The section on women's writing from Algeria will investigate the representation of the menopause in two novels by Maïssa Bey: *Bleu blanc vert* (2006) and *Hizya* (2015). Both of these novels depict the menopause through the perspective of a young protagonist who witnesses her mother experiencing menopausal symptoms. The views of the menopausal women are presented through free indirect speech. Ananda Devi's *Indian Tango* (2007), in which the main character is a menopausal woman, will be the focal point in the section on Mauritian women's writing. *Indian Tango* alternates between a third person narration of Subhadra's life in India and a first-person perspective from the Mauritian author who falls in love with her. The section on women's writing from France will explore Michèle Sarde's *Constance et la*

cinquantaïne (2003), in which five protagonists discuss their experiences of the menopause. *Constance et la cinquantaïne* gives the reader access to their internal monologues as well as the emails they send to each other.

3.2 The representation of the menopause in the works of Simone de Beauvoir, Marie Cardinal, Annie Leclerc, and Julia Kristeva

In *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949), in which Beauvoir considers many aspects of female experience including menstruation, marriage, and motherhood, she dedicates a chapter entitled 'De la maturité à la vieillesse' to menopausal experience and ageing. We can see from this title that Beauvoir considers the menopause as a sign of old age. Indeed, her analysis weaves together discourses of menopause and ageing. This approach suggests that she perceives societal attitudes towards menopausal women as primarily based on the menopause as marker of old age. 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' (1949, p. 400). The 'mutilation' to which Beauvoir refers is the menopause. Beauvoir thus exposes her society's perception of menopausal women as ageing. Besides this depressing imagery of ageing Beauvoir also positions the menopause as a liberation, and thus her approach is ambivalent.

She starts her discussion of menopausal experience by examining the negative and traumatic aspects of reaching this stage in life. For Beauvoir, the menopause is, rather than a process, an abrupt and violent corporeal transformation. 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, p. 399).

This passage represents the menopause using a violent tone. Her use of the word 'crises' portrays the menopause as a sudden 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. This idea of the menopause as an irreversible attack is again echoed in her reference to the menopause as 'la définitive mutilation' (1949, p. 400). By characterising the menopausal woman as being 'dépouillée de sa féminité' 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' (1949, p. 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. She can no longer justify her existence to herself or to others. Therefore, since the menopause marks the end of a woman's fertility it also signifies the end of her purpose and happiness. 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 is thus bleakly painting the menopause as a moment of loss.

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, emphasised. She illustrates that the menopause can also be experienced as a moment of liberation for women and a chance for rebirth. For Beauvoir, the menopausal woman can also use her newfound lack of purpose in society to her advantage. The menopause provides women with the opportunity to reject the role society expects women to play: '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, pp. 408-9). In contrast to the imagery of hopelessness Beauvoir depicts a few pages before when analysing menopausal experience through the framework of

fertility, she argues that 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 (1949, p. 408).

This imagery of a woman at the age of the menopause breaking free from her chains is an empowering one. Beauvoir creates an impression of the menopause as giving a woman a new lease of life. The menopausal woman can 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' (1949, p. 403).

Cardinal and Leclerc do not share Beauvoir's ambivalence and, instead, only outline the negative aspects of menopausal experience. In *Parole de femme*, despite her extensive analysis of female bodily experience which explores both menstruation and childbirth in significant detail, Leclerc ignores the menopause completely. In *Autrement Dit*, however, Leclerc and Cardinal briefly discuss the menopause in conversation. A key contrast between their

approach to the menopause and their treatment of childbirth and menstruation is that they 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 and the implications of no longer menstruating. Leclerc outlines her belief 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, p. 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, p. 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' (Cardinal: 1977, p. 43). A discourse of shame strongly emerges here. For Cardinal, experiencing sexual desire during the menopause is considered by European 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.

Although Julia Kristeva does not mention the menopause in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, subsequent scholars, such as Jane Ussher and Wendy Rogers, use her theory of abjection as a framework with which to analyse how the menopause is perceived in the society and culture of the West. They both refer to Kristeva's theory in order to explain not only why there are very few representations of menopausal women in western cultural production but also why the menopause has become a medicalised phenomenon. In her chapter of *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, p. 233). She subsequently argues 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.¹³¹ Rogers states, '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, p. 235). Rogers, here, is theorising that practices such as HRT exist in order to manipulate the menopausal body into an image which complies with societal

¹³¹ For the history of HRT see Seaman, Barbara (2005) 'The history of Hormone Replacement Therapy: a timeline' in Daniel Lee Kleinman et al (eds) *Controversies in Science and Technology: From Maize to Menopause*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

expectations for women. Rogers also takes a cross-cultural approach by contrasting religious and secular societies. She asserts that in 'secular western societies medicine fulfils many of the functions of religion' (1997, p. 235). Rogers here 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.

We can observe that, for Leclerc, Cardinal, and Beauvoir, the menopause is a moment of loss when a woman is no longer part of the sexual order. This chapter will assess whether this sense of loss also emerges in contemporary women's writing in French from Algeria, France, and Mauritius. In contrast to Leclerc and Cardinal, Beauvoir is ambivalent in her approach: Beauvoir portrays the menopause both as a moment of loss and death as well as a moment of liberation and rebirth. I shall evaluate whether the novels also approach the menopause in such an ambivalent manner by highlighting both its positive and negative aspects. This review has also 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 chapter will assess whether contemporary novels still focus on infertility and portray the menopause as the end of a woman's sexual desirability.

3.3 Sociological and anthropological research on the menopause

In stark contrast to the lack of contemporary novels in French and second-wave feminist texts which feature the menopause, we can find a variety of anthropological and sociological literature that investigates menopausal

experience across the globe. Many anthropologists and sociologists adopt a cross-cultural approach to the menopause by drawing conclusions about menopausal experience from a variety of cultural contexts. 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 N. 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, p. 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.

Another example of an anthropological study which emphasises the influence of cultural context on menopausal experience is Gabriella Berger's *Menopause and Culture* (1999). In this study, Berger 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, pp. 38-9). Berger’s findings 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’s argument also supports the findings of this thesis so far, since she demonstrates that female bodily experience is influenced by the cultural and social context in which she lives.

Les Femmes et la discrimination: dépression, religion, société (2011)

by Saïda Douki Dedieu, is another study which demonstrates that menopausal experience is influenced by cultural context.¹³² Dedieu reflects on studies conducted in countries such as Japan, Ireland, and India. She argues that both socio-cultural context and individual psychological factors define a woman’s menopausal experience. Firstly, she 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, p. 121). She then examines broader sociological and cultural factors: ‘Le vécu psychologique de la ménopause est indissociable au contexte socioculturel’ (2011, p. 121). 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’ (2011, p. 122). For Dedieu, the practice of pilgrimage in India is a pertinent example of the influence cultural practice has on menopausal experience. She writes, ‘en Inde, la femme ménopausée

¹³² See also Raymond Massé’s study of menopausal women in Quebec. He argues, ‘La ménopause serait influencée par les conceptions culturelles du rôle social de la femme, en particulier au milieu et à la fin de sa vie reproductive, par les conséquences de la ménopause et les politiques nationales à l’égard du vieillissement’ (2005, p. 76).

peut participer aux cérémonies religieuses dont elle était au préalable exclu, à la suite de la disparition des règles, donc du sang impur' (2011, p. 123). Through this comparison between the burden of menstruation and the relief of the menopause, Dedieu sheds a positive light on menopausal experience.

Alongside cross-cultural anthropological and sociological scholarship, we can also find studies which analyse menopausal experience in North Africa and France respectively. Although it is difficult to find studies of menopausal experience in Mauritius, it is possible to find such studies in India. India is the setting of the novel *Indian Tango*. Therefore, sociological and anthropological studies which examine the menopause in an Indian context will inform my analysis of the extent to which *Indian Tango* portrays menopausal experience as being influenced by cultural context. Besides the mention of pilgrimage in Dedieu's cross-cultural study of the menopause, we can find reference to women's experience of the menopause in scholarship such as *The Unheard Scream: Reproductive Health and Women's Lives in India* (2004). Lyla Bavadam's article 'The Silent Transition: Indian Women and Menopause', which is based on her interviews with a cross-section of women in India, reflects a tendency in studies on the menopausal woman in India to contrast the experience of women in India and those in the West. Bavadam comments on the meaning women ascribe to the word 'menopause' in India:

in 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, p. 127).

Bavadam's exploration of the connection between infertility and sexual desire echoes the second-wave feminist approach to the menopause. 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, p. 128).

Sexuality is also a key theme in studies that examine menopausal experience in North Africa and metropolitan France respectively. In *Printemps et automne sexuels : puberté, ménopause, andropause au Maroc* (2000), which is based on interviews conducted with a cross-section of women in the Maghreb, Soraya Naamane Guessous introduces the topic of women's menopausal experiences in Morocco, by making some general observations about the menopause in North Africa. She 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 doit plus prétendre au plaisir, puisque sa sensualité est morte' (2000, p. 12). The image that 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 no longer perceived to be sexually desirable or to experience sexual desire. 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, p. 82).

Both Sadiqi and 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, p. 82). She therefore attributes the lack of dialogue in North Africa to a cultural disinterest in the menopause. 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' (2000, p. 10). In contrast to Sadiqi, 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 (Guessous: 2000, p. 8).

Here we return to the societal perception of the menopausal body as being old and therefore sexually undesirable. Guessous therefore suggests that in North Africa the menopause is considered as the beginning of old age and the infertile

ageing body is treated as if it were asexual. 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.

Anthropological and sociological literature about France similarly paints a bleak picture of menopausal experience. Studies centred on menopausal experience in metropolitan France associate the menopause and 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 infertility and sexual desire as are apparent in second-wave feminist texts. Françoise Héritier, for example, whose methodology involves consulting case studies and interviews with menopausal women and gynaecologists, links 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, pp. 102-3). 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, p. 103). In parallel with studies from the Maghreb, we can also find a tendency in studies conducted in France to argue that the menopause is a 'taboo' subject. For example, Estelle Casellas argues, 'la ménopause est tabou, méconnue, empreinte de connotations péjoratives déterminants' (Casellas: 1993, p. 31).¹³³

¹³³ Other works which assert that the menopause is taboo include Delanoë, Daniel (2007) *Sexe, Croyances et Ménopause*, Paris: Hachette Littératures.

One of the key tendencies which sets studies on the menopause from France apart from those conducted in North Africa is the focus on the medicalisation of the menopause. As we have already seen in the work of Ussher and Rogers, the medicalisation of the menopause is a preoccupation of contemporary western anthropologists and sociologists who examine menopausal experience. According to Cécile Charlap, who has 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' (Charlap: 2014, p. 60). Charlap is therefore arguing 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 'défiance' and 'dégénérescence' (2014, p. 57) by highlighting certain aspects of the menopause including dryness of the skin and the atrophy of tissues. This vocabulary of deficiency is internalised by menopausal women.

The sociological and anthropological studies that have been reviewed in this section emphasise that menopausal experience is influenced by cultural and social context. I shall assess whether contemporary women's writing in French also reveals this same contextualisation. The studies reviewed above contend that, in North Africa, the menopause is a taboo subject, and menopausal women are perceived as old, useless, undesirable, and without sexual desire. In response to these findings about societal perceptions of the menopause in the Maghreb, I shall assess whether these notions are also explored in Algerian women's writing. In response to studies that examine

menopausal experience in France, this chapter will evaluate whether the novels also illustrate that women's experience of the menopause are influenced by medical practices and discourses. I shall determine whether a language of deficiency is also apparent in contemporary women's writing from France. As a response to sociological research on menopausal experience in India, I shall consider whether the same discourse of liberation is expressed in Devi's *Indian Tango*. This review has also exposed a key similarity in studies that investigate menopausal experience in North Africa, France, and India respectively. The association between the infertility of the menopausal woman and her lack of sexual attractiveness is common to each of these cultures. As I illustrated in the previous section, this connection is also made by the second-wave feminists. In light of these findings, I shall evaluate whether this same link is manifest in contemporary women's writing in French.

3.4 *The representation of the menopause in Algerian women's writing*

Gessous' 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* (2006) 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*, a novel which has already been analysed in this thesis for its representation of menstruation and childbirth, 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* is set in a time contemporaneous to its publication date. It is narrated by the twenty-three-year-old Hizya who, despite holding a degree in translation, works in a hair salon because there are few job prospects in Algeria.

Bleu blanc vert situates Lilas' description of the menopausal experience of her mother and the friend within a chapter in which Lilas tells the stories of some of her female patients. In this same chapter Lilas mentions unwanted pregnancies, contraception, and abortion. The menopause is therefore 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 primarily a medical issue is evident in her focus on the symptoms (the hot flushes) and their effect on her mother (breathlessness and exhaustion).¹³⁴ 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.

¹³⁴ Hot flushes are also mentioned in Bey's novel *Hizya* in which Hizya compares her mother's habit of raiding Hizya's bedroom to her hot flushes: 'Ce ne sont en réalité rien d'autre que des accès de méfiance. Aussi imprévisibles que ses bouffées de chaleur' (44).

When portraying the menopausal friend, *Bleu blanc vert* starts 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' (2003, p. 82) that are outlined by Sadiqi in her study of North Africa. 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 Gessous about menopausal women in the Maghreb: 'se sentant désormais inutiles, vieilles, elles démissionnent de leur rôle d'épouse, fuyant leurs devoirs conjugaux' (2000, p. 12).

On the one hand, 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' (Gessous: 2000, p. 12) and as no longer being able to fulfil their wifely duties or sexually satisfy their husband. On the other hand, 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. As cited in the introduction, 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, p. 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.

Although *Bleu blanc vert* shares one of the key tendencies of second-wave feminism, the friend's anxiety about losing her husband is nuanced by the specific cultural context in which she lives, and is treated by Lilas as representative of the experiences of other women in Algeria. 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). Lilas turns the friend's individual experience into a representative one by changing from the singular 'mari' to the plural 'maris'. 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' (2003, p. 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 which tie together the themes of childbirth and menopause. The previous chapter of this thesis referred to the work of sociologist Mounira Charrad who underlines the fragility of marriage within an Algerian context (2001, p. 38) and analysed *Les Hommes qui marchent* in which Yamina is warned by her mother that she may be repudiated if she continues to give birth to daughters.

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 1984,¹³⁵ until the *décennie noire*

¹³⁵ 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, p. 282).

during which violence against women escalated.¹³⁶ The friend's anxiety is situated in the middle section which describes the build-up to the Family Code. Lilas characterises this epoch as one during which women started to fear that their freedom and rights were being restricted. Lilas juxtaposes the friend's fears with those experienced by many other women. Immediately after describing the friend's concern that she will be abandoned, Lilas enumerates five 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 are, as we have already seen, reasons why the friend refuses to admit she is menopausal. The 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, p. 82). Indeed, because it exemplifies the lack of voice many women have in the Algeria Bey represents, 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 in the fictionalised Algeria Bey represents.

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

¹³⁶ Meredith 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, p. 897-8).

context on menopausal experience. In 1984, women's fears were concretised with the enforcement of the Family Code which, as Nasser-Eddine Ghazali writes in *Où va l'Algérie?* (2001), reduced women to 'a un statut de mineure' (2001, p. 37). The implementation of the Family Code is particularly relevant to the example of the friend since, as Zahia Smail Salhi indicates in her article 'Algerian Women, Citizenship, and the "Family Code"', the Family Code 'institutionalised polygamy and made it the right of men to take up to four wives (Article 8)' (Salhi: 2003, p. 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, p. 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, and, because of Article 52 of the Family Code, she is powerless to stop him. 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. The representation of the menopause in *Bleu blanc vert* 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, p. 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, p. 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 chapter of this thesis. 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 expectation was explored in the previous chapter of this thesis and thus we can see that it is pertinent both to representations of childbirth and the menopause in Algerian women's writing.

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, p. 43) and the perception observed by Sadiqi in the Maghreb that the menopause signifies 'the beginning of the end' (2003, p. 82). The mother's body does not signify the end of life but the embodiment of it. The representation of the mother's body also contrasts with stereotypes of the menopausal woman as dry that, as demonstrated by Charlap, originate from the medical profession. 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 Lilas who is 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, since these texts emphasise the negative aspects of menopausal experience.

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. 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 the menopausal experience that we can find in second-wave feminist texts and anthropological or sociological studies. 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 prise 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 in the mind of the reader. 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 Gessous' observation that, in North Africa, menopausal bodies are stereotypically perceived as 'fanés' (2000, p. 8), which gives the impression of a woman who is withering away. On the one hand, we are presented with imagery of fertility and flourishing in *Hizya* and on the other we find imagery of fading away in sociological and anthropological studies. *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 second-wave feminist texts such as *Le Deuxième sexe* in which Beauvoir frames the menopausal body with a lexical field of decay and violence by using terminology such as 'mutilation' 'horreur du vieillissement' and 'dangereuse brutalité' (1949, pp. 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.

This section has illustrated that Bey both nuances menopausal experience within the specific temporal, cultural, political, and social setting of the Algeria she represents, and also discerns an alternative perspective to the image of the menopausal body from that which is presented in second-wave feminist texts. In *Bleu blanc vert* the friend's anxieties are portrayed as being strongly linked to the fragility of marriage within an Algerian Islamic context and the climate of decreasing freedoms and rights which characterise the epoch in which she lives. Her story is, therefore, strongly anchored within Algerian history. Hence, in parallel with the depiction of menstruation and childbirth, Algerian literature primarily frames menopausal experience by considering how it is influenced by an Islamic and patriarchal setting. Alongside nuancing menopausal experience within broader questions of the impact of politics, society, and the law on the female body, *Bleu blanc vert* also exposes the significant role played by personal history in defining menopausal experience. We can therefore see that Bey's oeuvre refutes the idea that menopausal experience is 'universal' in nature. *Hizya* and *Bleu blanc vert* also create, through the positive depictions of the bodies of the two mothers, an impression of the menopause which is completely contrasting to the images which are presented in both second-wave feminist and anthropological texts.

3.5 *The representation of the menopause in Mauritian women's writing*

There are very few novels from Mauritius which represent the menopause. In parallel with Algerian women's writing, the vast majority of novels from

Mauritius feature protagonists who are young. In Mauritian women's writing menopausal and postmenopausal women are almost always minor characters.¹³⁷ If voices are given to characters who are menopausal or older, they do not speak about the menopause. Within women's writing from Mauritius, the only novel which directly approaches the topic is Ananda Devi's *Indian Tango* which 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.¹³⁸ Mataji tries to pressurise her to join her on a Hindu pilgrimage to Kashi alongside other menopausal and postmenopausal women.¹³⁹ 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 thesis, *Indian Tango* is set in India.¹⁴⁰ It does, however, feature a character who is a female Mauritian author. The Mauritian writer chances

¹³⁷ See for example *Pagli* which was analysed in the previous two chapters of this thesis. An elderly woman plays the role of a fortune-teller by warning Daya: 'Il y a beaucoup de douleurs qui t'attendent' (28) and the *mofines*, some of whom are likely to be of menopausal age, are treated as a monolithic entity which oppresses her.

¹³⁸ Mataji is a polite term in Hindi meaning 'respected mother'.

¹³⁹ Kashi is, indeed, a real place of pilgrimage for Hindus (See Justice, Christopher (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.

¹⁴⁰ In an interview, Devi explained her reasoning for this as follows: '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'. [Ananda Devi in conversation with Thomas C. Spear. From the « Literary Talks Series » of the FIAF. Recorded at the French Institute / Alliance Française (FIAF) of New York. 18 March 2009. 82 minutes.]

upon Subhadra in a sitar shop and they engage in an adulterous affair. This unnamed Mauritian author also acts as the narrator of the story.

Indian Tango frames Subhadra's story from the perspective of the Mauritian author with whom she has a lesbian affair. The 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, p. 113). The Mauritian author is, in the following passage, reflecting on her writing the story of Subhadra:

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' 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'. 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. This would explain why they have not written about this subject. As already outlined in the introduction to this section, *Indian Tango* is rare in its tackling of the menopause. Thus, this metatextual comment by the fictional Mauritian author resonates strongly with the silence on this subject across women’s writing in French. This passage, 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 and Mataji 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 irreparable' (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 this 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 herself has now started on a path of decay because she is experiencing menopausal symptoms. The phrase 'chemin de décrépitude' resonates with Beauvoir's description of the menopause as 'la définitive mutilation' (1949, p. 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 an 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). This phrase 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 the end result of death with phrases such as 'l'horreur du vieillissement' (Beauvoir: 1949, p. 400).

The references to death continue throughout the novel such as in the recurring motif of the funeral pyre. For example, 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, p. 408), Subhadra illustrates that the menopause is a time which marks the completion of wifely duties: 'On a fini les tâches principaux 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. Similarly to Beauvoir who argues that menopausal women are considered to have completed all tasks expected of them, Subhadra believes that the menopause is considered in her community as a metaphorical death since the woman has no specific role to play.

The narrative further develops Subhadra's perceptions of menopause as a sign of ageing that ultimately leads to a woman's death in the following visceral description which underscores the cruelty of the passage of time and the slow but 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 un vue d'œil, ces plis malencontreux, ces trous de mémoire, ces yeux filmés de cataracte (à laver dans le Gange ?), ce ventre, cette barbe, cette 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. The horror of ageing, inspired by Subhadra's 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'. The passage of time is portrayed as a slow but unstoppable and vicious force that acts upon the female body. In another passage, after experiencing nightsweats, 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, p. 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 is one of degradation (dégrade, affaissement, dévore). The imagery created of decay and rot constitutes a foreshadowing of death. 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, p. 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 the film over the eyes is also one of abjection. It is also 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. We can, therefore, see even in the short passage cited above that the novel 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 is a discourse which we have already seen in Algerian women's writing. This connection is less explicit in *Indian Tango* than in *Bleu blanc vert* and the tone is humorous rather than anxious when Subhadra reveals that she feels invisible and worthless. She sits out 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, chaires, abat-jour, vieux vélo d'enfant' (42)) that have also been rejected is symbolic of her feelings of futility. She thinks to herself: 'La seule qui soit dérégulée (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 'dérégulée' as a pun, which is made clear by her following it humorously with '(c'est le cas de le dire)' (122). The word 'dérégulée' is a play on the word 'règles' and evokes the idea that Subhadra no longer menstruates. Thus, as 'dérégulée' also means to 'malfunction', 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. As the reader becomes more and more aware as the narrative progresses, 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 'dérégulée', 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 on 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, p. 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 féminité' (1949, p. 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 the novels share these two tendencies, 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, p. 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). Subharda 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' (122-3). 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 which frames pilgrimage as a reward and a sign that women have attained 'un statut social privilégié' (2011, p. 122). For Subhadra, this pilgrimage is certainly not a privilege but 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 [...] les péchés' (73). So far, this chapter has 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 personal 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?’ (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 lead her to a sitar shop where she met a 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 is one which we also observed in *Hizya* and *Bleu blanc vert*. It is not made clear, however, whether the lexical field of life is a deliberate challenge to the way in which the menopause is conceptualised in Bey’s fictionalised Algerian society. Nevertheless, whether it is implicit, explicit, or inadvertent, we can argue that Algerian and Mauritian women’s writing challenges the way in which menopausal women are perceived. This subversion is strikingly absent from the work of Cardinal and

Leclerc who, in stark contrast to their approaches to menstruation and childbirth, neither challenge negative stereotypes about menopausal women nor find a way to celebrate menopausal experience.

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 female 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 un 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.

This section has illustrated that the approach to the menopause in *Indian Tango* is complex and nuanced. The novel reflects some of the main tendencies of second-wave feminism and at the same time creates two characters, Subhadra and the Mauritian author, who defy and challenge these. We therefore find an ambivalence in *Indian Tango* which is also apparent in Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe*. On the one hand the novel both represents a horror for the ageing process that begins at the menopause and proliferates images of the decaying menopausal body. This menopausal body is portrayed as being subject to societal control through the pilgrimage to Kashi which, through Subhadra's perspective at least, is designed to purge menopausal women of any remaining sexual desire they may have. In parallel to the representation of the Family Code in *Bleu blanc vert*, we can find evidence of a method of regulating the menopausal body that is framed within a different cultural context. Both *Indian Tango* and *Bleu blanc vert* create a society in which menopausal women are not considered through a lens of sexual desire.

In *Bleu blanc vert* the menopausal friend worries that her husband will no longer find her sexually desirable because she is menopausal, and in *Indian Tango* Subhadra considers the pilgrimage to be a societal method of ensuring that menopausal women no longer feel sexual desire. We can argue that these depictions of menopause and sexual desire as mutually exclusive pertains to the fact that these women are no longer fertile. Indeed, both *Bleu blanc vert* and *Indian Tango* portray characters who imply that their infertility renders them worthless. On the other hand, the novel challenges this perception of the menopausal body through Subhadra's refusal to embark on the pilgrimage, her turning a societal discourse about the menopause from one of death into one of life, and in her sexual awakening.

So far, this chapter has illustrated that some of the key tendencies of second-wave feminism are apparent in contemporary novels from Algerian and Mauritian authors, but these are generally reflected in a nuanced manner which highlights that menopausal experience is inflected by sociocultural context, religious beliefs, and (in the case of *Bleu blanc vert*) political developments. Once again, as was demonstrated in my analysis of menstruation and childbirth, this chapter has argued that the body is significantly shaped in both Algerian and Mauritian literature by religious beliefs. I have also argued that these two literatures forge a link between menopause and life, which is a new tendency not to be found in second-wave feminism. The next section will examine the representation of the menopause in women's writing from France and consider whether the same tendencies emerge in this literature as those which have so far been identified in Algerian and Mauritian women's writing.

3.6 *The representation of the menopause in women's writing from France*

This chapter has so far explored three novels which are part of two distinct literary cultures in which representations of the menopause are rare. One might expect that in France, authors may have followed in the footsteps of the second-wave feminists by building on their work on the menopause. However, this is not the case. We see in women's writing from France the same silence that we have already observed in women's writing from Algeria and Mauritius. Michèle Sarde's *Constance et la cinquantaine* is unique in its taking the menopause as a central theme. The novel follows the lives of a group of men and women 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 1968 and took part in feminist protests until the mid-1970s, and the novel examines how they negotiate their feminist philosophies during the menopause. Soledad has returned to her homeland of Chile whilst Constance and Julia live in the US. The novel begins with Soledad's fiftieth birthday party during which the characters discuss the menopause and their ageing bodies. Upon her return Soledad finds a note from her husband that solely announces that he has left. Throughout the rest of the novel 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) and in their interior monologues. The novel alternates between third person narrative incorporating free indirect speech, and email correspondence in the first-person. The novel touches on issues such as Hormone Replacement Therapy, cancer, and the pressure exerted by the

media for women to look young. The novel is also highly intertextual and includes references to the works of feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Germaine Greer and Erica Jong. This section will determine whether the tendencies that have been identified so far in the other novels, such as representing the menopause as being inflected by sociocultural context or framing the menopause with a lexical field of life and perseverance, are also apparent in *Constance et la cinquantaine*. This section will also determine the extent to which the representation of the menopause in Sarde's novel resonates with, or refutes, the approaches of Beauvoir, Leclerc and Cardinal.

In *Constance et la cinquantaine* there are multiple depictions of the menopausal body and some of these resonate with the imagery in *Indian Tango*. *Constance et la cinquantaine* also depicts menopausal bodies as decaying and decomposing. However, in contrast to *Indian Tango*, the tone is certainly not humorous. In an email exchange in which the Félines discuss their menopausal symptoms and HRT, Caroline writes a long and detailed description of the menopausal body. She 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 in order to argue her case for plastic surgery. 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'abiment, 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 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. Caroline also emphasises the flabbiness and bloated state of the body through her use of 'flasque', 'gonflé' and 's'épaissir'. Caroline also plays, in her employment of the verb 's'assèchent', into stereotypes of menopausal women as dry. The imagery is one of a body that has, through its shrinking and bloating, rapidly changing boundaries. This is combined with Caroline's tone of horror and repulsion. Caroline's description is, through its focus on the ambiguous and changing boundaries of the menopausal body, reminiscent of Kristeva's theory of abjection. Again, as in *Indian Tango*, the reader is presented with a body which 'ne respecte pas les limites' (1980, p. 12). The way in which this description is framed, however, provides a contrast with *Indian Tango* because Caroline is portraying the menopausal body as decaying in order to support her argument for plastic surgery. Caroline is thus drawing on these abject images in order to persuade the others that surgical intervention is necessary so that the body does not decompose completely. We therefore see an image of the menopausal

body that reflects Caroline's personal repulsion which she heightens for dramatic effect.

Alongside this lexical field of deterioration, we can also find the recurring motif of the biological clock which illustrates that the Félines are reflecting on the fact that the menopause marks the end of their fertile years. Alice, for whom pregnancy is 'le seul état qui lui ait jamais apporté la félicité' (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 déréglaît elle aussi' (46). The wordplay between 'règles' and 'déréglaît' echoes the pun in *Indian Tango*. However, the tones of the passages are very different. 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. In *Indian Tango* the tone is ironic since, as Subhadra's affair with the Mauritian author demonstrates, she experiences a new lease of life after the menopause.

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 commit suicide 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 therefore that she will never become 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). Constance's imagery of decay and dryness echoes that in Caroline's depiction of the menopausal body. Constance's lost 'ventre' represents her lost fertility. 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'. The reader can infer from this that Constance's desire to commit suicide is based both on her feelings of non-belonging and on her no longer being fertile which leads her to perceive her body as drying up and rotting. We can, therefore, see that Constance's childlessness inflects her menopausal experience since past abortions turn into regrets now motherhood is no longer possible. The depression she feels because she is menopausal reflects Dedieu's argument that '[l]e vécu subjectif de la ménopause varie certes selon les femmes et leur histoire personnelle' (2011, p. 121) since her memories of abortion return to haunt her. 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, p. 399). The novel, 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, the novel differentiates between Alice and Constance by illustrating how their individual experiences, both of which are linked to motherhood, shape their perceptions of the menopause.

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, and 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. Caroline subsequently 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, p. 103). This consideration of the psychological impact on the menopausal woman of losing her fertility is a theme which traverses women's writing from France, Algeria, and Mauritius. A strong sense of a societal inequality between men and women emerges in both the Algerian and

French texts. In *Bleu blanc vert* this inequality is positioned as emanating from a societal inequality which is codified in Islamic marriage laws and the Family Code, whereas *Constance et la cinquantaine* echoes the universalist approach of the second-wave feminists by positioning this inequality as biologically determined.

In fact, of all the novels that feature in this chapter, *Constance et la cinquantaine* demonstrates the greatest concern with female biology which is primarily manifested through the 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 to 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 have. 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 this reference by Caroline to 'nos organes les plus féminins' is a metaphor for a loss of femininity 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 menopause as a disease is even clearer in Constance's stream of consciousness. Constance approaches Caroline's cancer scare as follows: 'rien ne pouvait arriver à la plus vivante d'entre elles. Ni la ménopause, ni la déprime, ni le cancer' (32). The juxtaposition of 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). Again, the menopause is characterised in *Constance et la cinquantaine* 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, p. 400). *Constance et la cinquantaine* frames this image of a mutilated menopausal body within a contemporary medical discourse. This suggests that the medical profession has cemented and promulgated this negative perception of the menopausal body which 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 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, p. 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 he does not allow her to discuss her options. 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 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 and not a natural biological event in a woman's life. HRT is framed in this episode as a method of controlling the menopausal body. We can find a striking parallel here with the Hindu pilgrimage in *Indian Tango* since both HRT and the Hindu pilgrimage to Kashi are presented as non-optional rituals designed to treat a 'maladie'. In *Constance et la cinquantaine* the illness is a lack of hormones and in *Indian*

Tango Subhadra uses the word 'maladie' to refer to the sexual desire of menopausal women which Subhadra 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 Roger's observations that 'by defining them as diseased, as deficient, society has a ritual with which to control and intimidate [menopausal women]' (1997, p. 235) and in 'secular western societies medicine fulfils many of the functions of religion' (1997, p. 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, a Hindu pilgrimage designed to encourage women to no longer feel sexual attraction, or Islamic laws about marriage which put the menopausal woman at risk of being abandoned. 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 nature of the methods of control and their desired effects are contrasting.

The extent to which the characters in *Constance et la cinquantaine* have been influenced by a medical discourse, which positions the menopause as a disease which must be treated, 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

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. The implication is that she takes HRT in order to preserve her youthful appearance. Caroline's response to Julia more explicitly links HRT to youthfulness.¹⁴¹ 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, despite the fact that she recently experienced a cancer scare, designates 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.

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

Les magazines féminins et les médias avaient beau vous seriner
avec des histoires de femmes de cinquante ans et plus qui en

¹⁴¹ The novel exaggerates this particular effect of HRT. However, HRT has been proven to enhance the appearance of skin. See Lees, Mark (2013) *Skin Care: Beyond the Basics*, New York: Cengage Learning.

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 décomposition (44).

The comparison here between the women in the media who never lose their youthful appearance with the reality that Alice portrays of menopausal women whose bodies begin to decay, 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 to Julia and Caroline's reliance on, or addiction to, HRT we can observe that the novel presents the media as a factor which 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 chapter has both determined that the Félines have a very negative attitude towards the menopause, and 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 that they select 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* 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 chapter has so far linked to the influence of 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 ideas about this period of a woman's life. As is evident in the introduction of this chapter of the thesis, 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 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).

Constance's use of the word 'bouffée' which evokes her hot flushes (bouffées de chaleur) connects her unhappy experience of the menopause with Beauvoir's approach to the subject. 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 shatters as well as negates this ideology. Constance 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 which, as *Constance et la cinquantaine* illustrates, they have internalised 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 in the culture in which they live. For this reason, the Félines are not able to apply their feminist ideas to a productive protest against the inequality they see between menopausal women and men of the same age.

Soledad illustrates the Féline's loss of fighting spirit by comparing 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. 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.

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 'infector' 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. We can see how Constance's approach echoes Kristeva's theory through reading Rogers' sociological findings on the menopause for which she uses Kristeva's theory as a framework. As already discussed in the introduction to this chapter, 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, p. 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. This conclusive rejection of societal expectations parallels Subhadra's refusal to undertake the pilgrimage to Kashi and to no longer feel sexual desire. Thus, we can see in two distinct literary cultures an approach to the menopause which outlines the existence of a societal desire to regulate the menopausal body and the possibility for menopausal women to reject and evade this regulation.

Another key parallel between *Indian Tango* and *Constance et la cinquantaine* is their exploration of the menopausal body outside a heteronormative framework. The novel's exploration of lesbian sexual desire may perhaps be a nod to Beauvoir's theory in *Le Deuxieme 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, p. 403). Indeed, before the menopause Julia has a husband who she leaves for Deborah. *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 relationship with Deborah in Sarde’s novel. She 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. 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.

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, pp.

117-8). 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 '[l]a ménopause met les femmes hors du désir' (2009, pp. 102-3) 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, p. 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.

The polyphonic nature of the novel refutes the purportedly 'universal' approach of the second-wave feminists because with each character's voice the reader can witness how menopausal experience can be nuanced by a variety of personal factors. For example, Julia's menopausal experience is shaped by her sexuality, and Constance's menopausal experience is inflected by her personal history which includes her regret of having abortions and therefore losing the opportunities to have children before the menopause. We can therefore observe that, although some of the key tendencies of second-wave feminism are apparent in *Constance et la cinquantaine*, the novel not only nuances these within a temporal and sociocultural context, but also problematises their legacy by revealing that they have not provided a positive example which menopausal women can follow.

3.7 Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter has revealed that contemporary women's writing continues to explore many of the issues about the menopause which were originally raised in second-wave feminist texts. Of all the bodily experiences analysed in this thesis, 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 each literary culture, thereby suggesting 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 divorce 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.

Another tendency of second-wave feminism which has emerged during the literary analysis of this chapter is the association between the menopause and ageing. 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*, this discourse of death and decay seems to emerge from the Félines' genuine horror and repulsion towards the menopausal body which is often reminiscent of Kristeva's theory of abjection. Their obsession with ageing is also influenced by their interaction with the media and the medical profession. A parallel can be drawn here with my findings in Chapter Two. The unrealistic images of menopausal women in magazines and the unrepresentative depictions of childbirth on television are not a true reflections of women's actual lived experiences. Therefore women's expectations about childbirth and the menopause are based on a distortion or reality, and thus do not match their experiences once they give birth for the first time or begin the menopause.

The most striking contrast between the representation of menopausal experience in second-wave feminism and in the novels explored in this chapter is that in each literary culture, 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* is certainly not lacking in contemporary women's writing. 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.

Although there are some discourses or perceptions of the menopause that traverse cultural boundaries, contemporary women's writing reveals that a woman's experience of the menopause is defined by how the menopause is perceived in the cultural context in which she lives. 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. The findings of this chapter therefore mirror those of the previous

two chapters since the same broad characteristics that define each literary cultural context also inflect each literature's approach to the menopause.

Conclusion

This thesis has investigated the extent to which representations of menstruation, childbirth, and the menopause in a large selection of contemporary women's writing from Algeria, Mauritius, and France demonstrate an evolution in approach since the second-wave feminists first addressed these topics in the 1970s. The novels examined in this thesis were published between 1990 and 2015 by authors who can be considered as the subsequent generation to the second-wave feminists. This time period was ideal for evaluating how a new generation of authors have taken these debates about the female fertility cycle, and indeed continue to take them, in new directions which reflect contemporary attitudes towards the female body. Contemporary authors included Maïssa Bey, Leïla Marouane, Ananda Devi, Shenaz Patel, Virginie Despentes, and Marie Darrieussecq. This thesis illustrated that Annie Leclerc's *Parole de femme* (1974), Marie Cardinal's *Autrement Dit* (1977), and Julia Kristeva's *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: essai sur l'abjection* (1980) were the most instrumental in breaking the silence that surrounds the female body. Of these three texts, *Parole de femme* (1974) offers the most emphatic rejection of negative patriarchal attitudes towards the female body. It also provides the most ardent celebration of the female body. This thesis has emphasised the value of Leclerc's work which has been largely overlooked by contemporary feminist scholars.

By comparing second-wave feminist texts and contemporary novels by women, this thesis 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 societal norms that was first instigated by the second-wave feminists. For example, some authors continue to challenge the silence 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.

Nevertheless, in stark contrast to second-wave feminist texts, these novels cannot be criticised for taking a 'universal' approach to the female body. 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 experiences. Therefore, in stark contrast to second-wave feminist works, the counter-discourses that we can find in these literatures are rarely a reaction against a general idea of 'patriarchy', but to specific cultural, social, or religious beliefs about the female body. This thesis 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, the Mauritian texts illustrate how Hindu doctrine or a woman's ethnicity can influence female bodily experience, and the novels set in France primarily focus on the medicalisation of the body.

Chapter One argued that certain contemporary authors have continued to expose and question normative perceptions about menstruation. Algerian women's writing breaks the silence that surrounds menstruation in Algeria, which, according to sociological and anthropological studies has continued to

shape women's experiences of menstruation until the present day. Algerian novels illustrate that mothers do not educate daughters about menstruation because, in the Algerian Islamic society they portray, menstruation is strongly associated with sex, and any matters that pertain to sex are taboo. By creating characters who are frightened at the sight of menstrual blood in their underwear, these novels highlight the importance of educating young women about their bodies so that they do not experience their first menses as a traumatic moment. Women's writing from France also reveals that there still exists a stigma around menstrual blood. Millet's *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M* suggests that this stigma is linked to a medical discourse that positions menstrual blood as unhygienic. Despentès' *Baise-moi* contests negative social attitudes by celebrating the beauty of menstrual blood as well as questioning why images of blood are acceptable when they are a result of violence or heroism, and yet harmless menstrual blood must remain hidden from view. Mauritian literature reveals that a belief in the impurity of menstrual blood is common to both the Hindu and Creole populations and restricts the freedom of women during their menstrual bleeds. There is no explicit challenge to normative perceptions of menstrual blood in Mauritian literature. However, in *Pagli*, menstrual blood becomes a symbol of resistance when Daya challenges the authority of her husband by refusing to have his children and having an illicit affair with a Creole man.

The childbirth chapter also revealed a thread which ties together second-wave feminism with all three literary cultures: their questioning of normative expectations about motherhood. 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. Mauritian literature criticises the pressure that is exerted on women to become mothers. In *Paradis blues* the weight of these expectations, which are largely articulated by her mother, has a damaging psychological impact on Mylène who is unable to carry a baby to term. She is later interned in an asylum because she takes revenge on her mother for her controlling behaviour by cutting out her mother's tongue. The central character of Devi's *Pagli* refuses to follow in the footsteps of the *mofines* by perpetuating a pure Indo-Mauritian bloodline. The most violent rejection of motherhood can be found in women's writing from France. Many of these novels inscribe motherhood into traumatic contexts that were not considered by the second-wave feminists. For example, the mothers in Laurence Tardieu's *Le Jugement de Léa* and Mazarine Pingeot's *La Cimetière des poupées* commit the taboo act of infanticide.

The most powerful subversion of normative beliefs about female bodily experience in contemporary women's writing emerges in representations of the menopause. Simone de Beauvoir started to view the menopause in a positive light in the 1940s by characterising it as a liberation. However, Leclerc and Cardinal, who were influenced by de Beauvoir, only celebrate childbirth and menstruation. Contemporary women's writing has therefore filled a gap left behind by Leclerc, Cardinal, and Kristeva, who neither emphatically criticised societal attitudes towards the menopause nor provided women with a positive alternative perceptive about the menopause. Chapter Three identified three characters who subvert their society's expectations for

menopausal women. The mother in Bey's *Hizya*, Subhadra in *Indian Tango*, and Julia in Sarde's *Constance et la cinquantaine* reject these expectations, either through their behaviour, such as by illustrating that they still experience sexual desire, or through their being described with terms that are antithetical to societal stereotypes of menopausal women, such as 'dry' or 'decaying'. Nevertheless, the reasons behind these many challenges to normative beliefs about the menopause are much more nuanced within the contemporary works than they are in second-wave feminist texts. In Devi's *Indian Tango*, for instance, Subhadra's pursuit of sexual desire during the menopause is a rebellion against a pilgrimage which Subhadra believes is designed to rid menopausal women of their sexual desires. *Indian Tango* presents this pilgrimage as a societal expectation for all Hindu women of a menopausal and postmenopausal age. Hence, in contemporary women's writing we can find a challenge to normative perceptions about menstruation, childbirth, and the menopause. It cannot be denied, however, that the menopause is still an experience which is somewhat absent from contemporary women's writing. The limited representation of the menopause in second-wave feminism is mirrored in contemporary women's writing, as evidenced in the small number of novels which were analysed in Chapter Three. As *Constance et la cinquantaine* acknowledges, there is a need for further feminist work on the menopause which would inspire and encourage menopausal women.

As well as maintaining the aim of the second-wave feminists to expose and challenge normative perceptions about the female body, a selection of novels across all three contemporary literatures also resonate with Kristeva's theory of abjection. For each corporeal theme analysed in this study, we can

find at least one representation which echoes Kristeva's imagery of the abject. Some novels, such as *La Voyeuse interdite*, *L'Arbre Fouet*, and *Constance et la cinquantaine*, reflect Kristeva's theory of the abject by exploring the changing boundaries of the body or the link between women and the animal world. Others, including *La Jeune Fille et la mère* and *Baise-moi* question why the female body is considered to inspire horror within the particular context depicted. In addition, abject imagery also appears within contemporary women's writing in a new context, which is completely absent from *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: the menopause*. 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. Of the three corporeal experiences explored in this thesis, however, it is menstruation which women's writing most commonly views through the lens of abjection. This tendency therefore echoes the predominant emphasis of second-wave feminist theorisations, in which menstruation is portrayed as the female bodily experience that inspires the most horror in society. The association in *Baise-moi* between menstrual blood and the skin on milk appears to be a direct reference to Kristeva's *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, thereby suggesting that Desportes' novel is a response to the legacy of the second-wave feminists. Desportes' narrative is the most explicit in its positioning itself in relation to second-wave feminist texts. It is unsurprising that the most direct response to second-wave feminist literature has emerged in a novel which is set within the same cultural context in which the second-wave feminists were writing. In addition, the novel addresses the subject of menstruation, which is a topic which is still, to some extent, surrounded by silence and shame today.

The most profound change between second-wave feminist writings and contemporary women's novels is the increased emphasis on a more contextual and intersectional approach to female bodily experience. In this way, women's writing has mirrored the concerns of scholars such as Audre Lorde, Toril Moi, Chris Weedon, Barbara Christian, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The most significant factor that impacts female bodily experience in contemporary women's writing is cultural context. In Algerian literature depictions of the female body frequently engage with Islamic doctrine, traditions, and practices. Algerian women's writing illustrates that women's choices are restricted by a patriarchal and Islamic culture which justifies its mistreatment of women by perverting Islamic doctrine. The Algerian novels also illustrate that the patriarchal oppression of women is often legally sanctioned by the state, such as through The Family Code of 1984. The novels expose a variety of Islamic practises and traditions that have a harmful impact on female bodily experience. These include the idea that menstrual blood is impure, the tradition of marrying girls at the age of puberty, sequestration, repudiation, and polygamy. This portrayal resonates strongly with that of Chandra Talpade Mohanty who is critical of feminist scholarship for overlooking the impact of religion on the lives of women. Algerian literature also adds to the issues which were raised by critics of the second-wave feminists by anchoring its portrayal of female bodily experience in a specific temporal context. Women's writing reveals that the changes in education, living conditions, and politics, that occurred since independence played a significant role in defining women's experiences. For example, *Je dois tout à ton oubli* relates an act of infanticide to the poor socio-economic status of many Algerians in the early years of

independence due to a nationwide degradation in living conditions which forced impoverished people to live cramped together in large groups.

In Mauritian literature, the female body is often framed within the tensions and inequalities that exist in the multicultural society of Mauritius. Through its portrayal of the female fertility cycle, Mauritian literature highlights the class divide between Indo-Mauritian Hindus and Creoles. *Pagli*, for instance, depicts a society in which interracial relationships between Hindus and Creoles are forbidden. Representations of the female body in Mauritian women's writing also expose the disaffection of the Creole class over whom hangs the legacy of slavery and colonialism. Issues of class, race, and poverty are intertwined in the portrayal of Creole characters, thereby illustrating that female bodily experience can be shaped by a complex network of issues even within the same national context. For example, the traumatic experiences of childbirth in both *Soupir* and *Paradis Blues* are inflected by the exploitation and poverty of female Créole characters. In both novels female corporeality is also used to disrupt the touristic image of Mauritius as an island paradise. In *Soupir*, for instance, Pitié's body becomes a metaphor for the touristic exploitation of Mauritius because her traumatic childbirth is a product of her being raped as a child. There is also a tendency in Mauritian literature to explore how the female body is shaped by religion or superstition. In Devi's writing Hindu doctrine is the pervading force that influences female bodily experience, whereas Patel's writing considers Créole superstition. Mauritian literature also considers the impact of wider political issues on the female body, including policies on abortion. By blurring the boundaries between miscarriage and abortion, novels such as *Pagli* and *Paradis blues*

interrogate how women are silenced by a law that criminalises abortion. Hence, depictions of the female body in Mauritius resonate strongly with the arguments put forwards by critics of the second-wave feminist movement, such as Weedon and Lorde, who underline that women's experiences are informed by their ethnicity and class, as well as Mohanty, who argued that they are shaped by religion. Mauritian literature adds to this list by also considering the role played by politics.

In women's writing from France, the most recurrent tendency is to explore how the medicalisation of the female body has negatively influenced women's attitudes towards their own bodies. The debate about medicalisation is something first considered by Leclerc when she discusses childbirth in *Parole de femme*. Therefore, contemporary women's writing has maintained this criticism of the medicalisation of the female body but applies it to a more contemporary setting. This medicalisation is exemplified in *Constance et la cinquantaine* through a criticism of Hormone Replacement Therapy. Works such as *Philippe* and 'Encore là' reveal that the hospital environment can be a cold, hostile, and terrifying place for women to give birth. *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M* blames the medical profession for promulgating the idea that menstrual blood is unhygienic.

This depiction of the medical profession in women's writing from France lies in stark contrast to how it is portrayed in women's writing in Algeria. For example, *Bleu blanc vert* shines a positive light on the empowerment brought by certain medical advances, such as the contraceptive pill. Whereas, in *Constance et la cinquantaine* advances in HRT are seen as damaging to menopausal women since the prescription of these hormones

promulgates the idea that menopausal women are deficient. Alongside criticising the medical profession, we can also find a criticism of the images of the female body that are disseminated in the media. For example, '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. Another significant tendency in women's writing from France, which increasingly frames the female body within violent, traumatic, and previously taboo contexts, is to try to shock the reader. In *Baise-moi*, for instance, we can find graphic descriptions of blood and violence.

In fact, the consideration of how women's bodily experiences can be shaped by violence and trauma is a new direction that has been taken by contemporary women's writing from France, Mauritius, and Algeria, that sets it apart from earlier second-wave feminist writings. This approach illustrates an alternative perspective to the idealism of which Leclerc was accused by critics such as Christine Delphy. It is primarily through the theme of childbirth that these new traumatic, violent and previously taboo contexts emerge. In *Philippe*, the dark shadow of her infant son's death is felt in Camille's traumatic description of her experience of giving birth. *Le Cimetière des poupées*, *Le Jugement de Léa*, and *Je dois tout à ton oubli* inscribe their depictions of childbirth into violent contexts by telling the stories of characters who commit infanticide. In *Soupir*, the violence of Pitié's rape permeates the narrative of her giving birth to her rapist's child. The young age at which Pitié becomes pregnant also plays a key role because she cannot comprehend why she is

giving birth. Sexual abuse is also a traumatic experience that is presented in novels such as *J'avais douze ans...*, *Pagli*, and *La Jeune Fille et la mère*.

Whilst the above findings have demonstrated that contemporary women's writing has significantly evolved in its approaches to the female body since this topic was first addressed by the second-wave feminists, they have also exposed a few areas within the field of contemporary women's writing which require further study. It was not, for instance, within the scope of this thesis to perform an in-depth analysis of the literary portrayals of miscarriage and abortion in contemporary women's writing in French, although these have emerged as strikingly recurrent themes. The childbirth chapter only touched on these issues by considering the ambiguous portrayal of miscarriage and abortion in Mauritian women's writing since this shed light on how female protagonists, such as Mylène in *Paradis blues*, are affected by societal perceptions of motherhood as the defining aspect of womanhood. This thesis explored how the novels use language and style to evoke the silence that surrounds miscarriage and abortion in a Mauritian context. Miscarriage and abortion are topics which have also been explored across many other novels in French which did not feature in this thesis. Examples of abortion include Bey's *Au commencement était la mer* (1996), Mokeddem's *Mes Hommes* (2005), Lorette Nobécourt's *La conversation* (1998), Louise Lambrich's *Le Journal de Hannah* (1995), and Annie Ernaux's *L'Événement* (2000). Instances of miscarriage include Marouane's *Le Châtiment des hyprocrites* (2001), Marie Darrieussecq's *Truismes* (1996), Shenaz Patel's *Sensitive* (2006), Marie NDiaye's *Rosie Carpe* (2001), and Justine Levy's *Rien de Grave* (2004). A cross-cultural study may reveal similar findings to those expounded in this thesis by

illustrating that these female bodily experiences are also influenced by factors such as cultural context and class. 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.

The chapter on the menopause opened up an avenue of exploration by considering how the characters experience ageing. Scholars within the field have recently started to investigate ageing, but have largely overlooked the specifics of menopausal experience, privileging a more general exploration of the idea of entering 'old age'.¹⁴² 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 premenopausal 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*, Amélie Nothomb's *Robert des noms propres* (2002), and Mokeddem's *Les Hommes qui marchent*. Incidents of premenopausal infertility in francophone texts include Nathacha Appanah's *Blue Bay Palace* (2004), Bey's *Cette Fille-là* and Marouane's *La Fille de la Casbah* (1996).

Another avenue of exploration which could build on the findings and methodology of this thesis would be to assess how menstruation, childbirth,

¹⁴² 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)

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 thesis by comparing the depictions of the female body in other francophone literatures, such as from Tunisia, Belgium, Vietnam, the Caribbean, or Senegal. One of the limitations of this thesis 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 socio-cultural or political context alongside interpersonal relationships. Future research could also investigate representations of the male body and how these are influenced by the factors which have been revealed in this thesis.

Above all, this thesis 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 thesis 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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