

Representing Sex and Desire: Female Sexuality in Contemporary French Works by Virginie Despentes and Leïla Slimani



Senior Thesis: French
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Main Argument:

In this thesis, I analyze how two contemporary feminist authors, Virginie Despentes and Leila Slimani, put forward the idea of women's sexual freedom in their books. More specifically, I analyze *King Kong Theory* and *Dans le jardin de l'ogre* in conversation and also with ideas in contemporary feminism.

I try to show how these two authors gave an idea of how to theorize and write about female sexuality, how to represent detailed circumstances with unique identities, and how to normalize the conversation on femininity, to make it not "taboo" by integrating femininity into everyday language.

Chapter 1: Desportes

Virginie Despentes is a French woman, a writer, a director, a feminist. *King Kong Theory* is an essay that discusses Despentes' experiences with her sexuality and body. She analyzes these moments and the problematic ideas against women. As she talks about her deeply personal experiences with sexuality, violence, and femininity, she understands how these themes are systematic for many women.



Quote:

According to Despentes, women have always been victims of sexual violence, specifically determined by the social construction of gender expectations.

“Never alike, with our female bodies. Never safe, never the same as them. We are the sex of fear, of humiliation, the foreign sex. It is on this exclusion from our bodies that virilities are built, their famous male solidarity, it is in these moments that it is knotted. A pact based on our inferiority. Their guys laughs, among themselves, their laughter of the strongest, in number.” (23).

Chapter 2: Slimani

The book *Dans le jardin de l'ogre* is a fictional story following the life of a middle-aged parisien woman. The characteristics and life of Adèle are representative of the contemporary french feminist narrative. She experiences the conflict of integrating into the societal roles of women, such as being a mother, having a healthy marriage, and being satisfied with those identities. Adèle is also in touch with her sexuality, and her experience with her sexuality is at the center of the novel. These two identities and the so-called traditional woman and the sexual woman, contrast in society, so Adèle finds ways to seek satisfaction with other men.



Quote:

Slimani shows through Adèle's character the idea of independence and the search for sexual freedom for women in contemporary society.

“In this waiting room where she was asked to fill out papers and questionnaires, she is forced to admit that Richard is essential to her. She couldn't live without him. She would be completely helpless, forced to face life, the real, the ugly, the concrete... She never had to take care of her husband and this role disconcerts and sorrows her. Broken or healthy, Richard's body is nothing to her. It gives her no emotion”. (117).

Conclusion:

The ideas evoked in contemporary feminism, particularly in the works of Despentès and Slimani, seem to have another way of advocating and accentuating the sexual freedom of women. The validation of prostitution, the incorporation of conversations about porn, the need for unfaithfulness in marriage to find sexual desire, these are subjects which only just joined the conversation in the 60s, but were not so radically represented as they are today.

These important subjects proposed by the authors still have limits. Their writing can represent certain juxtapositions being locked in by stereotypes and sexual freedom. They play with certain ideas of sexuality and motherhood.

They make an important contribution to the evolving conversation for Feminism in France, but feminist study does not stop there, we have to normalize equality and keep coming up with ideas and work that fights for that.