

# The Presentation of The Female Character in Picard's *Les Visitandines*: An Existentialist Feminism Reading

Ahmad Bahjat Albtoush<sup>a</sup>, <sup>a</sup>Assistant Professor of French literature at Mutah University, Department of European languages,

Feminism has been repeatedly studied in several kinds of books including literary works. This study applied and studies Simon de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism as expounded in *The Second Sex* (1953) to examine the presentation of female characters in Picard's *Les Visitandines* (1793). The study adopted the qualitative approach that went along with the philosophical premises of the study that is constructivism. To achieve the aims of the study and answer the study questions, the study adopted the thematic analysis approach. The application of this thematic analysis referred to the suitability of adopting this method with the nature of the topic. Results: after collecting the data from the selected text and applying the thematic analysis method to analyse them, the study exposed many points and findings. Major findings revealed that the female characters suffered from weakness and hesitation, which contrasts against what de Beauvoir explained in her book, confirming the real dilemma of existentialist feminism she talked about. What made the researcher sure of the real contribution of this study in the field of knowledge is that the world today lives in the same circumstances shown in the selected play; women in some areas still suffer from male dominancy and economic dependency.

**Key words:** *Feminism, Existentialist Feminism, Thematic analysis, Picard, Simon de Beauvoir.*

## Introduction

A woman is historically seen as a dependent creature who lives in the shadow of men such as her husband, father, brother, or son, therefore, she found herself connected to her ancient role as 'the angel within the house'. This old-fashioned image of the woman's role within the



thought of society disservices the rights of women. The discrimination and inequalities between men and women are the core of feminism, which promotes and adopts equality between genders so that nobody is superior to the opposite. Thus, we are able to say that feminism represents the necessity to manoeuvre toward liberation and rights for women (Srisermbhok, 2003).

Feminism is a movement influenced by the ideas hypothesised, promoted and advanced by thinkers and authors like Alice Walker, Michele Wallace, Simone de Beauvoir and others. It is a current movement concentrating on the opposition against male domination. It proposes strategies for change and aims to comprehend women's domination keeping in mind race, gender, class and sexual preference. For example, De Beauvoir (1953) comments that women have been considered minor in relation to men from early times. She said that this inferiority resulted not from the feminine feature but from social principles under the power of men.

Going back in time to the story of creation, Allah created man and woman and differentiated them by body and function. The few differences between them are found to guarantee the relationship and serve the aim of existence, survival. Man-woman relationships exist from the days of Adam and Eve and progresses with the dawn of civilisation. The misunderstanding of this relationship leads to what can be called, 'woman' slavery' under the name of the marriage institution. The woman has been secured by the father before marriage, and then by the husband when married. So, this kind of protection provided by father and husband has been translated wrongly through ages to be translated as the right of man to be the only one who has the ability to decide the future of woman regarding education, and economic chances.

Historically, there are many phases of feminism. First, the first wave feminism during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, till the First World War in the United States of America, Canada and the United Kingdom. The first wave concerns the issues of women suffrage. It is raised against the idea of looking toward women as fragile, poignant, instinctive, illogical and suitable. It fights to change the traditional idea of women as wives and mothers only. Another issue the first wave discusses is the control of men over women's salaries. Moreover, it discusses the right of women to apply for divorce. After that, the second wave of feminism raises against racial discrimination in the United States of America during 1960s. It tries to remove patriarchy by overlooking the existing common norms and institutions. Its essential suggestion is that women should be equal to men in all aspects. Then, the third wave feminism sustains the previous issues and concentrates on concepts such as sexism, racism, social class inequality and homophobia. During this period of the third wave, we can say that women achieved most of their demands mentioned in the previous waves and is open to new concepts. Liberal, Marxist, socialist, radical, psychoanalytic, existential and post- modern feminism name its new forms.



## Theoretical Framework

In her book *The Second Sex* (1953), which is an excellent contribution to existentialist feminism, de Beauvoir believes in motivating women to achieve and realise their own freedom by shaping themselves. The key purpose of existentialist feminism isn't to see a woman's experiences as part of a collective, but as individual experience. She maintains the idea that every woman needs to realise her 'authentic self' and choose her own intention, giving no thought to any external forces like the culture and paternal society that try and place women to an already conventional role. So, the theoretical framework of this study situates women as the 'Other.' Being Opposed, and Abstract Equality are major ideas of de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism as delineated within the *Second Sex* (1953), which are used to analyse female characters as depicted in Picard's play.

Indeed, de Beauvoir says that women are typically seen as the "other" of men. Because every gender desires the opposite to outline him/herself as a free subject, de Beauvoir says that this traditional relationship isn't clearly outlined in actual societies (de Beauvoir 1953). Consequently, she motivates women to vary this bossy relationship and live their life as free individuals. She continuously invites women to outline themselves as subjects by taking a lively role and playacting the duties that are essential and required to appreciate their freedom, rather than being dominated by men: "In her eyes, man embodies the opposite, as she does for man; except for her this differen[ce] seems within the essential mode, and she grasps herself because the inessential opposite him" (de Beauvoir 396).

What is more, since she is targeting the self-other distinction within the relationship between man and girl, the woman is often outlined to the person as inessential, whereas man is essential. She is 'inessential' as a result of how she historically has been considered addicted to the person, not as what she is in herself. She is, de Beauvoir writes: "the incidental, the inessential as against the essential. He's the subject; he is the absolute – she is that the other" (. 4). So, de Beauvoir argues that the feminine is reworked into another, weaker than the man. However, if it's reduced to the present inferior position, why then does it not revolt and why does it not impact women's sovereignty? Each subject is instantly willing to be the main target, the inessential; it's not the opposite who determines the One by distinguishing himself as the other.

As a result, she confirmed that when women accept this position as oppressed or other, it is partly because she in the family is equal to the man. As wife, she enjoys the identical privileges in the family as the man, or when she is young, she is object for courtship where she properly can also have the upper hand. Women seem to be clothed in the same social dignity as men in the womb of the household in the eyes of children and youth. Thus, in marriage he values the woman and the family, desiring and caring, the resistance and the



freedom of the preferred individual. But this equality as mother, mistress, or spouse is no longer an actual equality, and de Beauvoir calls it 'abstract equality,' opposed to the proper or existing inequality. The abstract equality is associated to home or family, the place the woman enjoys some respect as mother and wife, whereas the 'existing inequality' is associated to the society as a whole, where sexual discrimination nevertheless exists. Now, one may argue that this kind of repression is quite advisable to ladies and that they may additionally be pursuing it themselves, possibly being happier staying at home taking care of house and family, than being on the work-market. Women are condemned to a life in stagnation where they are also robbed of their human freedom, de Beauvoir argues.

Regarding the thinking of marriage, de Beauvoir (1953) sees that it is the main social phase that puts women in the nation of immanence. In such a case, she says that marriage is no greater than transferring a product from the first owner to the 2nd one or from the vendor to the buyer. Then, after marriage, the girl has to comply with her husband in the entirety which includes his non secular beliefs, and ultimately, she will become the other, "she is annexed to her husband's universe; she offers him her person" (de Beauvoir 506). In contrast, marriage for men represents a step from a number of steps in their lives. It is a selection for men; however, it is a responsibility for women. This additionally represents the rejection of what is called the Eternal Feminine that is primarily based on the thought that if ladies observe the social beliefs of their position, they are feminine, and if they smash away from such beliefs, they are excluded from femininity. De Beauvoir affirms that there is nothing named 'Eternal Masculine,' as it says it is not. In other terms, she suggests that humans can abandon their frequent dream, search for their very existence and focus on their subjective way of appreciation the reality that they are a female. This thought reveals that women are forced into a universe of men where the female can't be independent.

### **Research Problem**

In literature, feminists struggled in their books to change this belief that depicts women as a man's property. They also tried to demonstrate the equality between man and woman. Among these books are literary texts such as novels, poems and even plays. Many authors directed this issue in their writings including Picard. Picard's play was chosen because of the researcher's ambition to confirm that male writers' works are valuable and interesting and that the gender issue is not solely within the realm of women writers. The chosen play looks into the representation of women in the western world during the nineteenth century. Simply put, this thesis checks if Picard is among the male writers who depict ladies negatively by failing to give them the appropriate acknowledgement, and failing to address their realities; or if he is among the male writers who portray ladies positively by giving them the strength to outline themselves as subjects.



This problem of exploring the work of Picard as a male creator is considerable due to the history of feminism, and its examination of as feminist or antifeminist. Solving this problem is large because of its contribution in celebrating the distinctive views of male writers and feminism in nineteenth century in France. So, this research investigates the chosen play through Picard from a feminist perspective. The scope of discussing Picard's work will be elevated because this study enriches the literature on his works. Moreover, the study is significant as a contribution to the feminist idea at large. This contribution is advisable as it emphasises the importance of realising that women's liberty and existentialism is inseparable from the social issues that must be highlighted by means of intellectuals of any society.

### **Research Question and Objective**

This research will focus on the following questions:

1. How does Picard depict the female characters in selected play?

The study aims to:

1. Investigate Picard's presentation of female protagonists in the selected play.

### **Method**

Regarding the methodology, this study adopted Thematic Analysis. Thematic analysis is a method for thoroughly recognising, ordering, and exposing insight into themes across a text. By concentrating on themes across a text, thematic analysis gives the researcher the chance to make sense of collective themes and experiences. Recognising distinctive and eccentric themes and experiences established only within a particular data item is not the aim of thematic analysis. Thus, thematic analysis is a means of recognising the collective themes in a topic. However, not everything can be considered the focus of the thematic analysis. The meanings that can be considered themes in this approach need to be related and relevant to a specific topic the research question wants to investigate and discover. Thus, it helps the researcher in qualitative research, and in finding the answers of the research question.

There are two essential reasons behind employing thematic analysis; it is accessible, and it is flexible. For the researchers who are still without strong experience in qualitative research, thematic analysis offers an easier way of doing research and avoiding any possibility of falling in over complexity. In other words, it exposes a way into qualitative research that teaches the procedure of coding and analysing qualitative data methodically without any need to be interrelated with any other perspective. For example, in qualitative research, the relationship is interrelated such as the necessity of being familiar with the theoretical perspective on language once the researcher decided to apply a discourse analysis approach.

However, thematic analysis is just a method of data analysis and not only an approach to conduct qualitative research. This can be considered a strength point; i.e. accessibility and flexibility.

This study analyses the selected play in light of existentialist feminism as inspected by de Beauvoir in her book, *The Second Sex* (1953). This study uses the thematic analysis approach to use secondary information to produce accurate, valid and secure findings. The work utilises the structured study tool for the evaluation of qualitative data. In the chosen play, the method stresses the description and appreciation of topics. The analysis of these topics in information are strongly related to the research goals and priorities. Furthermore, the thematic analysis approach is also conducted in the research because it clearly defines the link between the texts and the theory adopted in the research: Feminism. The researcher found that Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for a thematic analysis is most suitable.

**Table 1:** Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for a thematic analysis

Step	Phase
1	Becoming familiar with the data
2	Generating initial codes
3	Searching for themes
4	Reviewing themes
5	Defining themes
6	Writing-up

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), there are six-phases in the approach to thematic analysis. It is an approach to thematic analysis, and it is important to learn how to do it. Those who have strong experience in thematic analysis will have strong control on the data they inferred during familiarisation. They are able to code data rapidly, easily, confidently, and at a more conceptual level build up themes. In addition to that, the professional writing is a matter for experienced analysts. Thus, Braun and Clarke want to stress the importance of experience in the process of analysing texts in the thematic analysis method. They stress the efforts the researcher pays to draw thematic maps when looking for themes and distinguish between main themes, subthemes, and the interconnections between them.

## Findings

Analysis of female representations in Picard's play uses de Beauvoir's (1953) book and adopts Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach. So, after finishing the first step of doing a thematic analysis for the play, the researcher felt that he is familiar with it because of the intensive readings he made. Accordingly, many codes and themes were generated about the topic of the study that is about existentialist feminism in the female character of the



play. These generated codes and themes will be used to address answers for the research question.

### **Theme One: Weakness**

First, we can see the setting of the play as it is portraying a countryside with rainy weather at night. And this can be understood to expose critical themes such as feminism. At the very beginning, Sister Agnes shows Josephine that she was afraid of the storm that broke that night. Therefore, the two sisters begin to claim the goodness of God to appease this horrible storm. Little by little, the storm subsides. Accordingly, we can say that the way the writer exposed this atmosphere indicates that female characters are generally weak and affected by any circumstance such as storms. What makes this possible is the following scene, where Agnes tells Josephine that she had a dream of marriage and love that surprised her heart. She was amazed and afraid of something, especially when she thinks that this dream is a sin for her, as a nun. Josephine replies that she cannot pass judgment on this dream and recommends that she consult their director. Once again, the storm redoubled and increased its fear again, reflecting that this dream was probably a sin. Faced with this instability, all the sisters declare their fear of this lightning and continue to pray to their divine saviour to spare their convent. So, they decide to close all the windows and go to Madame l'Abbesse. Here, we have a clear indication that female characters are presented as weak creatures who are not able to understand life around them and are condemned by fear when they close the windows as they are afraid of everything outside.

### **Theme Two: Hesitation**

Throughout the play, it's noticed that all the events in the play, especially in the second act, refer to the hesitation of a female character towards love and declaring what she really feels. This is why she is placed in a position where she had to hide her emotions. First, it is clear and evident that she hopes to live a normal life with someone who loves her and whom she cares for. This idea of respecting the idea of traditional love that ends in an organised way through marriage can be inferred from what Agnes tells Josephine of her dream of marriage and love that surprised her heart. On the other hand, she thinks that this dream is a sin, especially for a nun. Josephine replies that she cannot pass judgment on this dream and recommends that she consult their director. So, we can conclude that she suffers from hesitation that prevents her from telling her truthful emotions.

Another confirmed example is the scene when she is singing from her room about her forgotten love. Indeed, there are many indicative tests on the love of the sister Euphemia and her declarations full of confessions, hesitation, guilt and fear especially when thinking of her state as a nun. The verses she is singing were all about a love that set her on fire, putting her



in a position that prevents her from declaring her love as well as forgetting it. Actually, I found myself amazed by what invites her to be a nun, noting that there are many other options such as waiting for her lover in the village that are not as radical as being a sister in the church. A single answer can be inferred from the part of the play representing the departure of Mr. Belfort from the convent. Her hope to keep thinking about her behaviour with her love during the absence of her lover suggests that it was the absence of Belfort that pushed her to become a nun in this convent.

### **Conclusion**

The study adopted Simon de Beauvoir existentialist feminism point of view as described in her book *The Second Sex* (1953), which examines women as other or as an object. To test this theory, the researcher adopted the thematic analysis approach to explain the themes that depicted the female characters in the novel and found that two major themes are weakness and hesitation. The two themes confirm the view of de Beauvoir of French society, which is that it looks at women as objects or as other. On the other hand, the only thing that differs from the time of writing the play and the time when de Beauvoir wrote her book is the concept of marriage. It is clear that marriage in the nineteenth century was demanded by women of that time as they looked at it as a needed action to confirm their femininity whereas de Beauvoir looks at it as a deficit that weakens and reduces the independence of women, leaving them to always be living in the shadow of men as an object or as other.



## REFERENCES

Beauvoir, S.D. (1953). *The second sex*. Great Britain: Jonathan Cape. Print

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). *Using thematic analysis in psychology*. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.

Srisermbhok, A. (2003). *Literary criticism: Approaches to feminist literature*. Bangkok: Santisiri Press.