



## Containers of “Meat, Blood, and Madness” Exploitative Labor and Disposable Bodies in *Lullaby* and *Still Born*

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### Abstract

*In the capitalist world-system, the gendered dynamics of power often deny women autonomy to their own bodies, force upon them the responsibilities of care work and motherhood while criminalizing abortion to further subjugate the feminized body. The sexist state, Lola Olufemi (2021: 3) argues, discriminates against women in allocating resources, “...reinforces gendered oppression by restricting women’s freedom and ensuring that poor women have no means to live full and dignified lives.” By analyzing two novels—Leïla Slimani’s *Lullaby* (2018), translated from French by Sam Taylor, and Guadalupe Nettel’s *Still Born* (2022), translated from Spanish by Rosalind Harvey—this paper examines how neoliberal capitalism exploits women’s labor and often reduce them to being mere vessels for reproduction. The texts present the commodification and exploitation of women’s labor who inhabit the gendered and uneven world-system. Drawing on the theorization of the combined and unevenness of the modern world-system by the Warwick Research Collective (WReC), social reproduction, and feminist theories from scholars like Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Verónica Gago, Silvia Federici, Lola Olufemi among others, this paper aims to critically examine the exploitative care work, reproductive labor, and the body politic as depicted in the two texts, arguing that neoliberal capitalism turns women into disposable commodities.*

**Keywords:** Neoliberal Capitalism, Gendered Dynamics of Power, Commodification of Bodies and Labor, Gender Violence, Social Reproduction



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“Don’t kill your child. There is no child. Yes, there is. There can’t be a child without a mother. You already are a mother. I don’t want to be a mother.... But I told her, that’s not your decision. And she had the nerve to ask whose decision it was.”  
(Claudia Piñeiro 2021: 109)

The excerpt from Claudia Piñeiro’s novel *Elena Knows* (2021) indicates that somehow the decision to reproduce is not an individual decision, but a societal one in a predominantly patriarchal society, where women are expected, often forced, to give birth to and raise children. The exchange here is between a woman named Isabel and the titular character Elena’s daughter Rita, who live in a twenty first-century Buenos Aires society. Rita works at a Catholic school and believes it is immoral and sinful to have abortions and so she tries to force Isabel not to go in the clinic to abort her fetus. The text then shows how, throughout the years, Elena and Rita were happy in the knowledge that they saved a family by stopping Isabel from getting an abortion. But at a later point in the narrative Isabel confesses to Elena that her life was destroyed in the process, because she was a prisoner in an abusive marriage, her husband was in a relationship with another man, and she became pregnant through marital rape. The burden of motherhood was forced on Isabel while her body was exploited and used for reproduction. Isabel’s confession reveals how within her marriage she was reduced to being a gendered body, merely performing socially assigned roles,

I fulfilled my duties, I fed her, I took her to school, I bought her clothes, I threw her birthday parties, I even loved her like she’s good person, it’s easy to love her. But I never loved her like she was my daughter. (Piñeiro 2021: 123)

Here, *Elena Knows* steers us to the discussion that is crucial to this paper, addressing how states under neoliberal capitalism withdraw support and impose social reproduction on women while commodifying their labor.

This paper examines the various forms of labor and disposability of gendered bodies under neoliberal capitalism depicted in Leïla Slimani’s novel *Lullaby* (2018) and Guadalupe Nettel’s *Still Born* (2022). These texts register the oppressive weight of the stereotypical social expectations placed on women—like unwanted pregnancies, challenges of raising children, assumption of unpaid domestic and affective labor, and so on—in an uneven capitalist society. Slimani’s (2018) novel is set in Paris and Nettel’s narrative features an urban Mexican city, where the former is positioned in the core and the latter in the geographic periphery of the world-system. Interestingly, both texts highlight similar pressures experienced by working class women because of their peripheralized positions within the urban locations. Representations of the educated middle class women, experiencing the dual pressures of formal employment and social reproduction, are strikingly similar in *Lullaby* (Slimani 2018) and *Still Born* (Netell 2022). However, despite the parallels *across* the combined and uneven experiences, there are considerable differences between them that materialize in the narratives. Through the portrayals of the uncomfortable madam/maid dynamic, both texts signal that the “rising integration of women in the labour force has also meant a greater disparity between women of different classes, races and nationalities” (Young 2001: 318). Thus, examining these two texts, this article attempts to explore how neoliberal capitalism—

primarily dependent on women's unwaged domestic labor and low-paid waged labor—produces an uneven and unequal world-system. I posit that this is because modernity relies upon such labor, and this *is* the condition of modernity writ large for women in the world-system.

The research question that guides this paper is, how does neoliberal capitalism produce conditions in which women are reduced to being vessels for reproduction and commodities to be exploited. To critically examine the exploitative reproductive labor and the body politic depicted in the two selected texts, this research primarily draws on the theorization of the unevenness of the modern world-system by the Warwick Research Collective (WReC) along with social reproduction and feminist theories from various scholars. The Warwick Research Collective framework, the WReC hereafter, suggests that the capitalist world-system is grounded on a hierarchical separation—between cores, peripheries, and (semi-) peripheries—and that the literature produced in such zones mediate between the tensions arising from the uneven lived experiences. In *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*, the WReC (2015: 49) propose that world-literature registers “a single but radically uneven world-system; a singular modernity, combined and uneven; and a literature that variously registers this combined unevenness in both its form and its content to reveal itself as, properly speaking, world-literature.” However, as this special issue contends, there is a gap in the WReC's engagement with women's contribution to the fields of writing. In the WReC's work there is also a lack of attention to how women's bodies and their labor—waged, unwaged, affective, and so on—has been exploited by the capitalist world-system. Therefore, by critically examining various modalities of women's work within the gendered capitalist world-system, as depicted in the two selected novels, this paper aims to contribute to the conversations in feminist theory in general and the WReC in particular.

As literature produced in the multi-scalar world-system—that operates through the conception of cores, peripheries, and semi-peripheries, *Lullaby* (Slimani 2018) and *Still Born* (Netell 2022) both register the combined unevenness found within. The investigation of different socio-cultural and economic issues depicted in the two novels reveal how women's unwaged labor, “particularly that of the hidden abode of social reproduction, continues to play a large and continuing role alongside that of wage labour within this world-economy” (Deckard and Shapiro 2019: 8). The intention behind writing this paper then is to contribute to the scholarship dedicated to rescuing women “from the periphery of world-systems thought” (Dunaway 2002: 127).

### **Women's Work Under Neoliberal Capitalism**

The examination of texts in this paper employs a world-literary reading practice that is attentive to what Sharae Deckard and Stephen Shapiro (2019: 6) call “the aesthetic mediation of combined and uneven development and to the hierarchical differentiation of the world-system between cores, semi peripheries, and peripheries.” This paper recognizes that the core - periphery - semi-periphery can be understood primarily as “relational zones that operate on multiple scales, rather than strictly national spheres” (Deckard and Shapiro 2019: 33), that peripheries exist even within core, and

even each “spatial level (whether the household, city, region, nation, or macro-area) contains its own internal core-periphery differences” (Deckard and Shapiro 2019: 33). This understanding of the core - periphery - semi-periphery can help locate the exploitative gendered dynamics of labor produced across the capitalist world-system.

The different forms of modernity produced under late neoliberal capitalism are essentially gendered and undervalue women’s contribution towards its creation and sustenance. Both *Lullaby* (Slimani 2018) and *Still Born* (Netell 2022) are set in the “current moment of ‘late’ neoliberalism” and effectively reflect the “nested, rather than linear and sequential, quality of the roughly post-1970s period” (Deckard and Shapiro 2019: 6). Which is why it is important to recognize the way social reproduction has undergone major shifts over the years—through the creation of the ideology of “separate spheres” under the nineteenth century liberal capitalism, to the proliferation of a more modern model of “the family wage” during the state-managed capitalism of the post-war era, and finally arriving to the most recent regime of financialized neoliberal capitalism that has idealized the “two-earner family.” The current phase of neoliberal capitalism promotes “state and corporate disinvestment from social welfare, while recruiting women into the paid workforce—externalizing care work onto families and communities” (Fraser 2006: 112) while it diminishes their capacity to perform the work. This statement reflects the condition of both the educated middle class and the working-class women depicted in the selected novels as they face the challenges of waged work and social reproduction, albeit in different ways.

In modern capitalist cultures, social reproduction is “gendered, often racialized, and poorly remunerated” (Bezanson and Luxton 2006: 6) when valued by the market. Because under neoliberal capitalism care work and associated costs for children, the elderly, or the sick are not underwritten by the state and are generally “left to the private market to provide for a price and/or to the unpaid labor of family” (Bezanson and Luxton 2006: 3). The various unpaid work that women perform is naturalized in society and are perpetuated through the social conception that, a woman’s or mother’s affection can only be demonstrated by their assumption of unconditional and un-waged responsibilities of maintenance and nourishment for the family. In “Wages Against Housework” Silvia Federici (1975: 74) highlights this exploitative ideology of love that degrades women’s worth in society by declaring that “They say it is love. We say it is unwaged work.” Through the employment of this ideology of love, capital denies wages for housework and ensures that its work is done at the expense of women who are conditioned not to struggle against the exploitation.

### **Commodifying Women’s Labor**

The texts selected in this paper highlight the oppressive ideologies and expectations placed on women by the capitalist society, as the female figures in the novels are burdened with motherhood and are often forced to rely on women from working class backgrounds to assume those burdens on their behalf. Under neoliberal capitalism, exploitation of female bodies and their labor is naturalized and women are arguably treated as vessels to reproduce the future generation of

workers, often without adequate social or financial support. Set in twenty-first century Paris, *Lullaby* (Slimani 2018) depicts women belonging to different social classes burdened with childcare and affective labor. Similarly, *Still Born* (Netell 2022) exposes the unevenness existing in the modern Mexican society where childcare responsibilities are imposed on women.

Leïla Slimani (2018) in her narrative presents Myriam Massé, a law school graduate, who became pregnant in her final year of studies, married the child's father Paul, but managed to complete her studies afterwards. But when two of their children were born within 18 months of each other, Myriam becomes overwhelmed with the burden of motherhood and feels trapped within the confines of her marriage. The narrative makes the realities of alienated labor within the domestic sphere visible through the depictions of Myriam's experiences:

Myriam became gloomy.... Mila's tantrums dove her mad. Adam's first burblings left her indifferent. With each passing day, she felt more and more desperate to go out for a walk on her own. Sometimes she wanted to scream like a lunatic in the street. They're eating me alive, she would think. (Slimani 2018: 7)

Myriam's post-partum anxieties and frustrations contrast her initially playing into an idealistic wife/mother role—bound by the hearth and serving the patriarchal nuclear family—while her husband Paul, who works in the music industry, cherishes playing the breadwinner role, “His wife seemed to be blooming; a natural mother. This cocooned existence, far from the world and other people, protected them from everything” (Slimani 2018: 6). It is clear here that after giving birth to their child, Paul sees Myriam more as a mother to his children than his partner.

While Slimani's narrative highlights the educated middle class women's struggles in a Parisian society, Guadalupe Nettel's *Still Born* (2022) depicts the battles of motherhood in the twenty-first century Mexico City, where women are often subjected to patriarchal violence and are treated as disposable objects. The narrative primarily revolves around the experiences of a few women including Alina, who is an educated woman struggling to balance between managing the household and her career. Alina and her friend Laura, who is the narrator of the novel, initially resist motherhood, believing it would put restrictions on their careers and individual lifestyles. But when Alina and her husband Aurelio decide to try for children, they are unable to conceive and embark on fertility treatments.

The novel unsparingly depicts Alina's fertility journey, traumatic childbirth, and her struggles to care for the baby Inés, who is diagnosed with a rare genetic disorder and requires constant care. Like Myriam's, the early months of Alina's pregnancy seem to be full of joy and anticipation, which heavily contrasts her post-birth condition when she struggles to cope with the overwhelming changes and challenges of motherhood and longed for an escape from it. Initially, Alina and her husband Aurelio agreed on an arrangement where “he would go to bring home the money while she would look after Inés and make sure the house didn't fall apart” (Netell 2022: 122), which their friend Laura sees as a “typical patriarchal arrangement” which could potentially make Alina a “domestic slave” (Netell 2022: 122). The narrative reveals that Aurelio was also affected as an artist in these conditions, “Where before he had the luxury of only taking on commissions relating to his career as an artist, now he was obliged to accept anything for the money” (Netell 2022: 122)



to sustain his single income family. However, as time passed a feeling of suffocation engulfed Alina, being stuck inside the house, endlessly caring for her special needs child:

Alina’s maternity leave came to an end and she had to return to the gallery. Twelve weeks at home taking care of a newborn baby can feel endless, and even more so in their particular circumstances. It was important for her mental health that she take up all her activities again. (Netell 2022: 131)

In this connection, the narrator in *Still Born* (Netell 2022), Laura, asserts that children can be a hindrance to female self-expression and independence because of the uneven gender dynamics,

society is designed so that it’s us, and not men, who take on the responsibility of caring for children, and this so often means forfeiting your career, your solo pursuits, your erotic side and sometimes your relationship with your partner, too, (P. 18)

and in so doing problematizes the imposition of childcare on women in the neoliberal capitalist moment. Laura’s assertions signal to the oppressive expectations of social reproduction that affects women’s wellbeing, sexual expressions, and even their experiences of motherhood.

The novels depict how Myriam and Alina’s pregnancies are often glorified, which arguably solidifies the belief that a woman’s primary function is social reproduction. This paper acknowledges that Myriam’s husband Paul and Alina’s partner Aurelio contribute to the household income by taking up waged employments alongside their wives to sustain their families; however, the narratives reveal that the major portion of the domestic work is still reserved for women. Both *Lullaby* (Slimani 2018) and *Still Born* (Netell 2022) highlight how patriarchal societies often challenge women to either choose motherhood or their professional careers. The women in both novels are aware that only waged labor performed in the public domain is considered formal employment by capitalism, while the domestic work firmly remains outside of it. In *Lullaby* (Slimani 2018), Myriam is commended by her employer when she takes up more cases than her male coworkers, eventually devoting a substantial amount of time to her career, often neglecting herself, “She never says no. She does not refuse any of the dossiers that Pascal hands to her, she never complains about working late” (Slimani 2018: 29). The narrative reveals that to ensure the continuation of this adulation, Myriam needs to sacrifice her family life and her own well-being to some extent, feeling guilty for not being with her children. However, Paul does long hours of work, but does not seem to be much affected by the guilts that gnaw at Myriam.

In these circumstances, to re-enter the workforce and gain access to their personal time and spaces, both Alina and Myriam need to rely on a waged version of care labor. Both women thus explore the possibility of employing other women to care for their children while they resume work outside of the domestic setting. At this point it is necessary to consider how both texts, produced in the regime of financialized capitalism, register the commodification of women’s labor. The financialized form of capitalism increasingly exploits and commodifies women’s bodies and their labor, but the ideological imaginary of this regime is, as Nancy Fraser (2006) notes:

liberal-individualist and gender-egalitarian—women are considered the equals of men in every sphere, deserving of equal opportunities to realize their talents, including—perhaps especially—in the sphere of production. Reproduction, by contrast, appears as a backward residue, an obstacle to advancement that must be sloughed off, one way or another, *en route* to liberation. (P. 114)

In this moment, neoliberal capitalism reduces real wages and raises the number of hours of paid work per household to support the family, “prompting a desperate scramble to transfer care work to others” (Fraser 2006: 114). During the production and reproduction of global capital a multiplicity of the “blue-collar” workers—including maids, cleaners, and child-care workers—become “invisible in the narrative of hypermobile capital” (Young 2001: 315). The overvaluation of specialized work in the corporate sector devalues the work of low-skilled workers which include poor women and migrants (Young 2001: 315). In this connection Brigitte Young (2001) uncovers how innovatively globalization differentiates and exploits women’s work:

The flexibilization of the labour market has produced greater equality between educated middle class women and men while creating greater inequality among women. High value is placed on the integration of professional women into the formal economy while the ‘paid’ reproductive work of women in the informal economy (the household) continues to be undervalued; women’s “paid” work outside the home is not equal to women’s “paid” work inside it. (P. 315)

It is likely that while the middle class women enter the formal economy, the paid care and domestic tasks will be carried by women inhabiting the peripheries of capitalist societies and are at most precarious conditions. Thus, Myriam and Alina find freedom from household work by employing nannies for the children, at the expense of low-waged women from working-class backgrounds.

### **Intensive Mothering and the Exploitation of Labor**

Capital repeatedly reinforces the assumption that housework is an unavoidable and fulfilling part of women’s lives, “a natural attribute rather than be recognized as a social contract” (Federici 1975: 4) because it has always been capital’s scheme that this work was “destined to be unwaged” which is why struggling against this unpaid work may make women be perceived as “nagging bitches, not workers in struggle” (Federici 1975: 4). Which is why, despite their increased contribution to the public setting, women remain the primary agents for social reproduction, since labor such as tending to the house, caring for children and the elderly etc. are generally forced upon women. In this connection, Emma Liggins (2014) writes that:

The decline of domestic service, the shifting of class barriers, and the growing trend for smaller families all impacted on the dilemma of bringing up children and managing the housework at a time when more and more mothers, whether by choice or necessity, undertook paid work. (P. 2)

Thus, women in the twenty-first century neoliberal society, grapple with the problem of how to pursue their careers while also taking care of the household without societal support. Although

traditionally neoliberal market values are used in reference to capitalist endeavors, these have now been extended into various social and non-economic policy domains, such as social reproduction for example.

In the neoliberal capitalist culture, the dilemma of balancing between work and life and striving to be the best in everything often result in many women succumbing to the ideology of intensive mothering. These women are conditioned to consider the proper method of childrearing as one which is “child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive” (Hays 1996: 8). The ideology of intensive mothering pushes mothers to invest a tremendous amount of time, money, and energy on their children, whether they are staying at home or are working outside of it. Moreover, “working women are expected to balance the harsh world of work while simultaneously providing a haven for her family at home” (Taylor 2011: 898), which also reinforces the “separate spheres” ideology and prevailing gender inequalities in society. The ideologies around mothering and “the rise of competitive caring in an increasingly neoliberalized world” (Cox 2011: 3), then, promote the assumptions and expectations that it is naturally women and not men or society at large—whether they are grandmothers, nannies, or child minders—who should carry out the childcare if mothers are employed elsewhere. The pressures of intensive and competitive mothering, rather than parenting as a whole, often make women lean towards at-home privatized care, and not accessing communal care even if it is available. Rosie Cox’s (2011) observations are relevant here that:

Childcare is not just about keeping children safe, fed and watered, but it is also about *social* reproduction. Increasingly, for middle class families, this entails ensuring children’s advantages in what is perceived to be a competitive environment. Opting for individualized care, rather than a form of communal care, becomes part of parenting strategies which are about passing on cultural capital and preparing children to succeed. (P. 3)

This means that in neoliberal capitalist societies, mothers in middle and upper-middle class families often strive to provide the best care for their children, to give them a competitive edge in their future advancement. Cameron Lynne Macdonald (2010: 4) demonstrates how “class advantage is played out within and through the employment of privatized in-home childcare and practices of ‘competitive mothering’ that enable employers, and their children, to get ahead at the expense of childcarers, and their children.” Thus, the only way professional women can bring balance between their personal and professional lives is by delegating childcare and housework to care workers, by consuming labor of impoverished women.

The pressures of motherhood and formal employment presented in *Lullaby* (Slimani 2018) and *Still Born* (Netell 2022), speak to the truth that Aimee Dinnin Huff and June Cotte (2013) observe in “Complexities of Consumption: The Case of Childcare” that after maternal leave ends, mothers are required to find suitable childcare before returning to work and so the time comes for parental decision making about their child’s care which is informed by the

context, made up of both the family characteristics (e.g., values, beliefs), and the community characteristics, which include the quality and quantity of the childcare



supply, the characteristics of the parents' employment and social networks, and consumer education in the community. (Huff and Cotte 2013: 73–74)

Here the parents, who are serving the neoliberal economy as human assets, consume the labor of less privileged women by employing them as domestic workers and nannies. This is applicable for middle and upper-class women, while mothers “with fewer resources at their disposal may have to adapt and cope with negative consequences differently” (Huff and Cotte 2013: 22). This consumption of care work by working parents originates from the neoliberal governments' promotion of “heteronormative family structure through childcare as a privatized, individual concern” (Dhillon and Francke 2016: 4) where the state relies on social reproduction without having to offer any support to the families.

Through the creation of the private nuclear family, the capitalist state subjugates women even further by taking away the collective forms of living and care:

One crucial form of living is that the production of human beings is the most labor-intensive work on earth, and to a large extent it is work that is irreducible to mechanisation. We cannot mechanise childcare or the care of the ill, or the psychological work necessary to reintegrate our physical and emotional balance. (Federici 2020: 189)

The responsibilities of caring for family members thus fall on women in the capitalist world-system, often forcing them to navigate how to cope with the rising costs of living and childcare with single income. Women, then, are forced to perform alienated labor as they are isolated both from industrial production and from extended family and community units, given the nuclear family's needs to adjust in a smaller accommodation in the cityscape with limited income.

The assumption of reproductive roles, however, does not inevitably have to fall on women isolated within the domestic setting, because for many centuries social reproduction has been a collective process, and “only with the advent of capitalism that reproduction has been completely privatized, a process that is now carried to a degree that it destroys our lives” Federici notes (2020: 189). Moreover, women bound to the household subsequently find that control over their physical and reproductive health is mediated more by patriarchal standards than their own. Consequently, they are robbed of their creative capacity by capital, as it “cuts off the expression of her sexual, psychological and emotional autonomy” (Dalla Costa 1972: 31), thus women are barred from having control of their own bodies “which has been transformed into a function for reproducing labor power” (Dalla Costa 1972: 31).

This paper has so far examined how neoliberal capitalism compromises women's lived experiences, whether by creating an exploitative work environment or by forcing them to sacrifice their autonomy. Since childcare at home is directly shaped by capital and market relationships, this affects women in different ways, some in obvious ways like wages and working conditions of care workers and some in less visible ways like what it actually means to provide necessary care (Cox 2011). The discussion here emphasizes how the middle and upper-middle class women pursue their professional careers by outsourcing social reproduction and care work to women from less privileged backgrounds, which “further splits female subjecthood, deepening the bifurcation

between the worthy capital-enhancing feminist few and the disavowed female rest” (Rottenberg 2018: 7). As Rottenberg (2018) observes,

most often, women of colour, poor and immigrant women serve as the unacknowledged care workers who enable professional women to strive towards “balance” in their lives, neoliberal feminism helps to (re)produce and legitimize the exploitation of these ‘other’ female subjects while simultaneously disarticulating the very vocabulary with which to address the glaring inequalities that these women experience in their daily lives. (P. 7)

Thus, neoliberal feminism further facilitates, entrenches, and expands the market rationality where a small number of feminist subjects strive to be engaged in wage labor while the larger portion of women are exploited and reduced to being disposable. Within the neoliberal economy, care work undertaken by poor women arguably intensifies different forms of racialized and class-based labor exploitation which mostly remains hidden and ignored by the patriarchal society and by the aspirational women. Thus, as Cox (2011: 6) observes, the “competitive mothering projects of middle class childcare employers produce advantage for their own children (and themselves) at the cost of other children, including those of the workers they employ.”

Perhaps as a solution to the issue of working mothers and overworked nannies, both Slimani (2018) and Nettel’s (2022) narratives refer to communal and state sanctioned childcare as an available means to raise children. However, following the ideology of “intensive motherhood,” the women in the novels are either not interested in availing the option of communal childcare or are not provided with it by the government. In *Lullaby* (Slimani 2018), as a person produced by the neoliberal capitalist culture that promotes a nuclear family structure, Myriam is unable to handle her mother-in-law Sylvie’s interference in raising her child, and feels she has lost control in her own household, “she would smile as she listened to her mother-in-law’s advice; she would say nothing when she saw her rummaging inside the fridge, criticising the food she found there” (Slimani 2018: 7). At one point, when Myriam complains about not seeing her children too much due to work pressure, Sylvie launches an attack on her, “It was her fault, Sylvie said, if her children had become unbearable, tyrannical, capricious. Her fault and also the fault of Louise, that phoney nanny, that fake mother on whom Myriam depended, out of complacency, out of cowardice” (Slimani 2018: 114). Interestingly, the narrative reveals Sylvie’s own parenting was not very dissimilar, “Sylvie reproached her for devoting too much time to her job, despite the fact that she herself had worked all the way through Paul’s childhood and always boasted about her independence” (Slimani 2018: 113). Their relationship as mother-in-law and daughter-in-law plays out a stereotypical family dynamic where the older generation do not approve of the newer one even though they had gone through similar experiences in an increasingly capitalist culture. Perhaps due to this generational gap and the judgmental attitude, Myriam does not feel comfortable asking for Sylvie’s help in raising her children and is more concerned about protecting her nuclear family.

Similarly, the characters in *Still Born* (Netell 2022) consider the ways childcare can be availed in a modern Mexico, but the solutions often elude the professional women, and they feel the

pressure to either leave waged work or care for their children at home, unwaged. The novel refers to how women have always supported other women, creating a community of care and naturalizing substitution in motherhood which worked as relief or liberation from the constraints of care, “we’ve always looked after other women’s children, and there are always other women who help us take care of our own. Naturally connections are going to be made between children and these substitute mothers” (Netell 2022: 180). The narrative also mentions collective childcare available in different parts of the world, that provides sensible solution for women:

in Denmark, the state provides collective residences to house anyone who needs it. In these co-operative social housing units live a mixture of single mothers, adults who have fallen out with their parents, and orphaned children. Everyone gets a room of their own and access to shared spaces. Eventually these people end up forming a clan that is just as united, or more so, than the families they have come from. (Netell 2022: 181)

However, Alina and her friends do not seem to be relying on their family members for childcare. The only relative she had close by was in Guanajuato, which was quite far from Alina’s house in Mexico City, removing the option for her to even consider relying on her family. This leaves only the option of employing a nanny to care for her child.

Ever since its inception, neoliberal capitalism has promoted the nuclear family unit, because the collective form of childcare acts as a subversion to the transactional order and therefore undesirable to capital. The decline in the extended family and collective communities also speaks to the failure of the state, as it is unable to provide suitable and accessible childcare opportunities for families. Hence, as per the demands of the commodified consumer society, working mothers who want to provide the “best care” for their children are less inclined to avail these types of collective or familial care. This might also be the case that possibly mothers do not see the nanny, positioned in the lowest rank within the family structure, as a force that would upset the family dynamics in the way the above alternatives might do. Which is why, in both *Lullaby* (Slimani 2018) and *Still Born* (Netell 2022), nannies play a crucial role in providing the mothers opportunities to work outside of the domestic setting and re-enter the public sphere.

### **The Uneven Nature of Social Reproduction**

Both *Lullaby* (Slimani 2018) and *Still Born* (Netell 2022) draw out the myriads of ways working-class women deal with the pressures of social reproduction, care work, and lack of rights to their own bodies under neoliberal capitalism across the modern world-system. By examining the texts, this paper complicates the subjective and exploitative modernity brought about by neoliberal capitalism and the consequent oppression that women experience. One of the crucial aspects of this special issue is that it relies on different literary registrations to visibilize and resist forms of unevenness and oppression that are imposed on women and the marginalized sections of society. As stated in the previous section, Myriam and Alina could only be reintegrated as professional women in the formal economy if they delegate child-care to other women. So, while this paper

visibilizes the pressures of both public and private responsibilities imposed on Myriam and Alina, it also critically examines the socio-economic marginalization of their care workers/nannies like Louise and Marlene. The texts highlight the extremity of alienated labor, in the way the mothers are producing and reproducing in isolation, since their struggles are not quantifiable, they are deliberately unacknowledged and ignored. Similarly, the care work that the women/nannies provide are also performed within the domestic setting, out of the public eye which makes it conveniently invisible. Both sets of women depicted in the novels—mothers and nannies—are products of the “combined and uneven development” (WReC 2015: 6) in the world-system, therefore, the examination of different modalities of labor performed by these women visibilizes the exploitative and gendered labor conditions.

The depiction of Myriam and Alina’s pregnancy and fertility journeys heavily contrasts that of Louise and Marlene’s, signaling the uneven lived experiences of these women belonging to different socio-economic classes. While Myriam and Alina can employ nannies to care for their children and thus find a way to step out of the private sphere and work in the public one, Louise and Marlene are left with little social or financial opportunities to lead fulfilling lives. In *Lullaby* (Slimani 2018), Myriam’s wellbeing suffers as she simultaneously feels suffocated by childcare and also feels guilty when she has to leave her children at home, Louise’s struggles of motherhood and care work has even a harsher reality behind it. While Myriam desired and cherished her children, Louise did not want to become a mother in the first place:

Stéphanie could be dead. Louise thinks about sometimes. She could have prevented her from ever living. No one would have known. No one would have blamed her. If Louise had eliminated her, society would perhaps even have been grateful to her today. She would have proved herself clear-headed, a good citizen. (Slimani 2018: 91)

These thoughts formulate in Louise’s mind, a mother who believes that her life would have been different if she had an abortion when she had the chance. Echoing Isabel’s experience of an unwanted pregnancy in *Elena Knows* (Piñeiro 2021), Louise refers to her journey to motherhood not as a blessing but as a curse, “The day of the operation, Louise overslept and missed the appointment. Stéphanie took over her life, digging inside her, stretching her, tearing apart her youth. She grew like a mushroom on a damp piece of wood” (Slimani 2018: 94).

It is essential to acknowledge here that the loss of reproductive autonomy affects women’s rights to abortion. Abortion being socially forbidden and labelled as an immoral act by religious institutions in twentieth century capitalist society reduces women’s agency further. The role of a mother is often naturalized and reified in capitalist cultures and by different state controlled religious institutions to ensure women’s submission to social customs of giving birth and raising the next generation. Taking away women’s rights to safe abortion—regardless of the case of rape or by consensual sexual relationships—is a dominant form of gender violence rife in many patriarchal capitalist cultures.

In the twentieth-century, different feminist groups have rallied to ensure safe and legal rights to abortion as:

The right to bodily autonomy is important not only because of what it means for the individual, but because women having greater control over their own reproduction has the potential to transform how work is distributed in and outside of the home. (Olufemi 2021: 4)

Having reproductive rights can also ensure that women's work is not devalued either in the public or in the private setting. However, reproductive justice advocates recognized that:

rights can be revoked as easily as they can be granted and focusing solely on the “right” to have an abortion obscured the many other determining factors around childbirth, child-rearing and family. It absolved the state of its responsibilities to create the support mechanisms for raising families. (Olufemi 2021: 6)

Ironically, even having the choice and autonomy in deciding whether to have children can complicate women's rights as citizens, since the state would not take responsibility of raising the families. As discussed earlier, the twinned oppression of capitalist culture—in creation of the nuclear family and obligatory social reproduction—is perpetuated in the state's reluctance to support women from marginalized backgrounds. The sexist state, Lola Olufemi (2021: 3) argues, discriminates against women in allocating resources, and “reinforces gendered oppression by restricting women's freedom and ensuring that poor women have no means to live full and dignified lives.” Gendered oppression deprives economically vulnerable or deprived women of fulfilling their individual human potential and one of the ways to oppress women is to both stifle them sexually and to commodify and over-sexualize their bodies.

Although Paris is known as a city of opportunities, famous for its vibrant art and cultural scene, *Lullaby* (Slimani 2018) reveals that the city is also not free from depravity as it is overridden by poverty, forms of exploitative labor, and the intense unevenness of wealth and power. In the mother-nanny dynamic, there is a class-based divide between the employers and the employees, which is solidified due to the disparity of wealth. Myriam employs Louise as a nanny for her children when she goes back to work. Due to the lack of suitable working opportunities, Louise chose to run a crèche at her home, providing childcare for working mothers, which helped her sustain her family. Her husband was an abusive man who did not provide either for her or their daughter Stéphanie.

In this connection, it can be mentioned that in twenty-first century France, neoliberal strategies have restructured the welfare state policies, by encouraging market-based solutions and withdrawing of state care provision (Misra, Woodring, and Merz 2006). In France, the crèche system has for a long time provided high-quality child-care for parents, however, increased marketization policies prompted wealthier families to hire private caregivers instead and “As higher-income families opt out, their higher fees are gone, and the political backing for the crèche system is weakened” (Misra et. al. 2006: 325). This state restructuring has widened the gap in society, as it promoted “a new form of inequality, between well-off working mothers who can afford to hire domestic help and the women they employ as childminders” (Jenson and Sineau 1995: 260). Although, the French government anticipated to stimulate employment through



privatization of care, not many French-born citizens were inclined to take up low-waged care work, thus, women from working-class backgrounds and immigrant women fill a significant portion of the care worker positions (DeVault 1991).

Louise is one such worker who takes up privatized care work for professional middle class women. In the precarious economic climate in France, the reduced income from her crèche made Louise consider taking up private employment in other people’s houses. The turbulent life experiences have brought Louise to a state of extreme poverty and forces her to remain in the socio-economic peripheries of a twenty-first century Paris. She has always known a life of destitution and neglect, as she spent her childhood without familial affection, her married life with an abusive partner, and her matured years spent in serving wealthy families as a nanny. Moreover, her lack of attachment to her own child contributes to Louise becoming overly attached to her employers’ children. In a flashback, Louise is shown with Stéphanie as she is being expelled from her school and while Louise pleads to the administration to give her daughter another chance, she wants them to consider her abilities as a carer:

how well she took care of her children; how she punished them when they didn’t listen. How she didn’t allow them to watch television while doing their homework. She said she had strong principles and a great deal of experience in the education of children. ...this was a trial, and she was the one being judged. Her, the bad mother. (Slimani 2018: 161)

And when the school asks her how many children she had, she unwittingly tells them that she was talking about the children she looks after, not her own. This shows how care work takes away Louise’s ability to mother her own child with whom she had failed to connect throughout her life.

The abuse Louise was subjected to throughout her life, is in turn inflicted on Stéphanie, essentially revealing the cycle of unevenness experienced by women from impoverished backgrounds. A troubled person herself, Louise is unable to raise a child who is able to develop fully and assert their individuality in the world. The care work Louise takes up eventually consumes her, so Stéphanie is only afforded the fragments of mothering available to her. It is clear here that the material reality of her care work has blurred the boundaries between the child she Louise gave birth to and the ones she cares for.

From a young age, Stéphanie has been conditioned to perform unpaid domestic labor and provide care alongside her mother,

At eight years old, Stéphanie knew how to change a nappy and prepare a baby’s bottle.... She gave them baths, holding them firmly by the shoulder. The screams and cries of babies, their laughter and their tears were the soundtrack to her memories as an only child. (Slimani 2018: 41)

At the time she was supposed to gain education at school, Stéphanie had to help in her mother’s crèche while her father refused to financially support the family. Like Louise, Stéphanie was brought up in a troubled household, having to perform unwaged work, and not receiving any substantial amount of love and affection from either parent. Perhaps that is why Stéphanie was

unable to fit in the school that Louise's employer enrolled her into, "one with a much better reputation than the school in Bobigny she was due to attend. The woman had wanted to do a good deed for poor Louise, who worked so hard and was so deserving" (Slimani 2018: 160). Perhaps, the privileged position of the employer and lack of understanding of Louise for her daughter's needs resulted in Stéphanie's expulsion from the institution. It is also significant to note that while Louise ensures the children under her care shine, her lack of care for Stéphanie contributes to her daughter's invisibilization:

Stéphanie had disappeared. All her life, she had felt like an embarrassment.... When she spoke, she expressed herself poorly. She laughed and she offended people, no matter how innocent her laughter. She had ended up developing a gift for invisibility, and logically, without fanfare, without warning, as if that had been her manifest destiny all along, she had disappeared. (Slimani 2018: 77)

This shows how the socio-economic inequality and the oppressive burden of the low-paid domestic work that Louise is forced to do, continues to thwart Stéphanie's chances of creating a better life, as they both failed to break free from the shackles of neoliberal capitalism. The depictions of social realities of Louise and Stéphanie then reflect the uneven life experiences women in the social peripheries are subjected to.

While Louise did not want motherhood, in *Still Born* (Netell 2022), Alina's nanny Marlene is experiencing the other extreme of social reproduction in the sense that despite her wish to become a mother she is not afforded the financial privilege to access medical services, "She's desperate to, but she can't... She's got some sort of defect in her womb" (Netell 2022: 179). Unlike Alina, Marlene does not have the financial means to avail "assisted-reproduction techniques" (Netell 2022: 27) and is reduced to being a carer for working mothers. Marlene's condition speaks to the unevenness existing in the capitalist world-system where the unequal distribution of wealth is reflected in the lack of access to healthcare, education, and employment opportunities for women of working-class backgrounds.

Marlene is a woman who is passionate about working in early education and dreamed of training as a teaching guide in Montessori schools, where students are provided with hands-on learning and self-directed activity. But Marlene's lack of financial solvency barred her from fulfilling her ambition of earning a degree, and thus to climb the social ladder. The unequal distribution of wealth in Mexico forces women like Marlene to settle for less than what they aim to achieve. For Marlene, the child she cares for ends up becoming a significant part of her life, "Inés has become my world. I can't imagine what my life would be like without her in it" (Netell 2022: 199) which reveals how women like her fail to create meaningful lives for themselves outside of their work. For Marlene, the alienation of labor is not possible as her emotional connection with the children is at once part of her work, and a claim to the family function that she is playing.

Both *Lullaby* (Slimani 2018) and *Still Born* (Netell 2022) depict how the nannies cope with the pressures of their marginalized socio-economic positions, the feeling of being needed, and the burden of childcare that comes with it. Not having the means to either have children of their own

or to spend enough time with them creates a void within the women, that of love and connection, which they constantly attempt to fill by caring for others’ children. Both the texts complicate the issue of childcare by posing questions such as when the biological mothers hand over their children to the nannies, do they become substitute mothers or just “doormat, a slave content to clean up the shit and puke of little brats” (Slimani 2018: 83)?

### Care work and Global Migration

Women like Louise and Marlene who take up childcare as a profession, are often prompted by poverty. The narrator in *Lullaby* (Slimani 2018) reveals the desperation in the group of nannies that congregate in the parks of Paris, looking after other women’s children to sustain themselves and their families:

They all have shameful secrets. They hide awful memories of bent knees, humiliations, lies. Memories of barely audible voices on the other end of the line, conversations cut off, of people who die and are never seen again, of money needed day after day for a sick child who no longer recognises you and who has forgotten the sound of your voice. (P. 179)

Most of the nannies in the narrative are depicted as poor, women of color, fleeing from domestic abuse, previously human trafficked, or are migrant workers who need to provide for their families back home. The long hours of care work and constant demand of affective labor often push the women to their limits, but they are helpless and unable to change their condition and are forced to survive on the bare minimum that they earn through care work. Louise and many other care workers who gather for strolls with their employers’ children in parks, all have chosen this job because of their marginalized status in Parisian society. Perhaps as a French Moroccan writer, Slimani was aware of the tribulations of transnational migrant women in the western world, which is why *Lullaby* (Slimani 2018) highlights the oppressive socio-economic and reproductive burdens that are put on migrant women.

Slimani’s (2018) Paris presents the “nannies and their army of children”—the old ones,

who see teenagers in the streets who they used to look after when they were little and persuade themselves that the teenager recognised them, that he would have said hello if he wasn’t so shy. There are the new ones, who work for a few months and then vanish without saying goodbye, leaving trails of rumours and suspicions behind them. (P. 179)

The nannies serving the people living in Paris are ones who leave their own countries, homes, and families, and become a part of the migrant population. As Louise observes, “around the slide and the sandpit she hears snatches of Baoulé, Dyula, Arabic and Hindi, sweet nothings whispered in Filipino or Russian” (Slimani 2018: 178). These women are excluded from the core Parisian community and inhabit the social peripheries, alienated and invizibilized. Even though it is not sustainable, the only form of community the nannies are afforded to is their own, “as the months passed, the nannies—sitting on those benches for hours on end—gradually got to know one

another, almost despite themselves, as if they were co-workers sharing an open-air office” (Slimani 2018: 178). The narrative shows how these women create a bond outside of any formal organization, each struggling with their worries about the families they work for and the families they leave behind.

Here, both texts convey a sense of the “irreducibly conflictual terrain of interrelations that is the modern world-system” (WReC 2015: 48) which is radically uneven in their depiction of power struggles between not only the employer-employee, and men-women, but also the core-periphery. The heteronormative patriarchal ideologies, fostered by neoliberal capitalism, frequently play out in the uneven dynamics of privatized childcare, which are performed by female nannies hidden inside the house.

Although care work is often carried out in the domestic setting, “class, class, race/ ethnicity, and nationality also are implicated” (Misra et al. 2006: 318) in shaping it and “care work is also distributed in an international system where poor immigrant women workers provide care work for more affluent families” (Misra et al. 2006: 318). Thus, when women increasingly take up public paid employment, a care gap is produced, where it is typically racialized, often rural women from poor regions who take on the reproductive and caring labour previously performed by more privileged women. Women often make up of half of all migration flows in countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka (Misra et. al. 2006: 318) but to do this, “the migrants must transfer their own familial and community responsibilities to other, still poorer caregivers, who must in turn do the same—and on and on, in ever longer ‘global care chains’” (Fraser 2016: 114). So, instead of filling the care gap with state funding, the regime merely displaces it from “richer to poorer families, from the Global North to the Global South” (Fraser 2016: 114).

To examine these dynamics of power between nations and care work, it is necessary to discuss the global care chain, that can offer a better understanding of the interconnections between migration, motherhood, and care work in the neoliberal society. Global care chains, a term coined by Arlie Russell Hochschild (2015), refers to the interconnections between people’s personal lives and global politics while also elucidating the “structures and processes that reflect and perpetuate the unequal distribution of resources globally” (Yeates 2004: 373). Nicola Yeates (2004) observes in this connection that:

global care chains reflect a basic inequality of access to material resources arising from unequal development globally but they also reinforce global inequalities by redistributing care resources, particularly emotional care labor, from those in poorer countries for consumption by those in richer ones. Thus, the emotional labor involved in caring for children of parents further down the chain is displaced onto children of parents living further up it. (P. 373)

Kate Houlden in *Commodifying Care: Migrant Literature and Materialist Feminism* (2024 forthcoming) emphasizes that this transaction between the global North and the global South speaks to the neo-extractivist strategies of the former. As Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild (2003: 4) also observe in this connection that although “in an earlier phase of imperialism, northern countries extracted natural resources,” they now seek to extract “something

harder to measure and quantify, something that can look very much like love.” The extraction of emotional labor, along with the low-paid domestic work, constitutes what Houlden (2023: 8) calls a “new commodity frontier.” In *Capitalism in the Web of Life* Jason Moore (2015) defines commodity frontier as:

bundles of uncapitalized work/energy that can be mobilized, with minimal capital outlays, in service to rising labour productivity in the commodity sphere. Such frontiers can be found on the outer geographical boundaries of the system, as in the early modern sugar/slave complex, or they can be found within the heartlands of commodification, as in the proletarianization of women across the long twentieth century. (P. 144)

Moore’s theorization is valuable in understanding how the reservoirs of relatively “cheap”—food, raw materials, and labor-power gets exploited by the capitalist world-economy (Niblett 2020)<sup>1</sup>. In this context then it can be argued that the new commodity frontier aids the mobilization of “cheap” labor from poorer countries to the richer ones, creates a global care chain, and contributes further to the proletarianization of women “across the length and breadth of the global economy” (Niblett 2020: 3).

Despite their participation and movement to the global North, the migrant care workers are not afforded any substantial rights in the host nations. They inhabit an in-between space in societies, where they are neither sojourners, “because they settle and become incorporated in the economy and political institutions, localities, and patterns of daily life of the country in which they reside” while “maintaining connections, build institutions, conduct transactions, and influence local and national events in the country from which they emigrated” (Shiller, Basch, and Blanc 1995: 48), nor are they citizens of the host nation. Although paid employments for the migrant care workers means a way to earn a living and sustain their families back home, these women are strategically barred from assimilating in the core societies in the host nations. Their visa and employment status are stringently monitored and controlled by the state, which hinders their chances of moving to better or even different jobs if the care work is unsuitable to them. Moreover, these childcare workers and their families are disadvantaged by their work due to extended and unpredictable working hours and low wages. This applies to both live-in nannies and those who live out:

Nannies who live out may still be expected to be “flexible” about working hours and will often be expected to prioritise their employer’s need to stay at work over any demands they may have from their own home lives. The long hours in the office for employers lead to success and promotion but for those doing childcare they generally mean time away from family and friends with little thanks and rarely much additional reward. (Cox 2011: 7)

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Niblett (2020: 3) clarifies that “cheap” should not be understood “narrowly in terms of price alone, but rather with reference to the wider value-relations of capital.”



Thus, these care workers expend their time and energy on the children of the affluent women while the same is being detracted from their own families. In the case of the migrant women workers, performing domestic chores in the shadows of affluence, the socio-economic condition is largely informed by the dynamics of rich and poorer nations, where the former assumes the roles of men in traditional patriarchal families—“pampered, entitled, unable to cook, clean or find his socks” (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2015: 11) while “the poor nations, like the traditional woman, remain mired in domestic work and subservience” (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007: xiv).

In the context of the two novels then, the women from working-class backgrounds within the core, like Paris, and the migrant women arriving from the peripheries of the world-system, like Mexico, inhabit the same peripheralized spaces that is reserved for them and are not afforded any means—financial or otherwise—for upward mobility.

### **The Madam/Maid Conflict**

The earlier discussion demonstrates that the globalization of care work results in a distribution and redistribution of the provision of care in the capitalist world-system, as the disadvantaged and poor migrant women are employed to provide care in wealthier nations. The restructuring of private and public life produces two categories of women within the household—the employer, who is often a professional employed in waged work outside the home, and the maid, who is “employed in undeclared jobs in the household-oriented service industry, in cleaning, and as child caretakers, allowing more women to have professional careers” (Young 2001: 316). The mother/employer and nanny/employee relationship pattern are played out in the structure of exploitation imposed by the rich nations on the poorer ones, where the latter is always substitutable and even disposable. This structure of exploitation, in the form of waged work for professional women in the formal economy and the devaluation and low-payment of disadvantaged women in the informal one, produces what Silvia Federici (2012: 95) calls the “maids-madams” relations.

Arguably the nannies hold an insignificant position within the household, and are not regarded very highly by the family members. As discussed earlier, the professional women who employ the nannies, often do not consider them as agents of disruption to their carefully designed nuclear families. Which is why sometimes conflicts can erupt within the domestic structures unsuspectingly, if the care workers push for more autonomy and try to assert their individuality in the employer’s household.

In *Lullaby* (Slimani 2018), Louise is shown to be working in the childcare industry for a long time, so she considers herself an expert in the business and often undermines what her employer Myriam wants. Louise is meticulous in housekeeping and has a “phobia of throwing away food” and in the incident when Myriam threw a chicken that was inedible, the nanny got it out of the bin and fed the children, “Louise washed it in the sink; she cleaned it and put it there as an act of vengeance, like a baleful totem” (Slimani 2018: 146). This incident reveals an unhinged side of Louise’s character that is a result of years of abuse, neglect, and starvation but Myriam fails to recognize it and lend a hand of support to a woman who is caring for her children.

In a similar way, Marlene also begins to assert her own will within the household which creates a rift between her and her employer. After an incident revolving Inés’ bath, Alina becomes enraged with Marlene, “She didn’t like opening the door to the apartment and seeing Marlene’s grubby tote bag or worn-out old trainers under the coat rack, or finding her cooking on the kitchen. She suspected that this animosity was mutual” (Slimani 2018: 162). This feeling of mutual hostility only grew with time, “It was unlikely it made Marlene too happy, either to see Alina arrive in this commandeering territory, of which she was absolute mistress during the mornings. Both women avoided each other” (Slimani 2018: 162). The household becomes a space of conflict for both Alina and Marlene with the eruption of the maids-madams clash.

But it’s not only Louise and Marlene who experience this type of conflict at their workplace, the other nannies mentioned in *Lullaby* (Slimani 2018) are also positioned at the lowest order of the household structure and are constantly engaged in the power struggles that ensue between them and the women of the house:

The nannies laugh at their obsessions, their habits, their way of life. Wafa’s bosses are stingy: Alba’s are horribly suspicious. The mother of little Jules has a drinking problem. Most of them, the nannies complain, are manipulated by their children; they see very little of them and constantly give in to their demands. (P. 180)

In both texts, an unspoken power struggle ensues between the mothers and the nannies. The two sets of women find it impossible to reach out to one another and bridge the gap between them that was constructed by patriarchal misogyny, sustained by neoliberal capital. Women like Louise, Stéphanie, and Marlene are often strategically made invisible, forced to serve the wealthy, and are ultimately sacrificed to neoliberal capitalism. Perhaps this is why Wilma A. Dunaway (2001: 2) writes that “women are only a faint ghost in the world-system perspective.”

### Who Cares for the Carer?

While the middle and upper-middle class women employ these nannies to care for their children, the question arises who then is caring for the care workers? The labor of care workers, although waged, remains conveniently invisible to greater parts of society and to the consumers of the care work. The strategic invisibility of women’s labor and the disposability of feminized bodies and in neoliberal society is a recurring theme in both *Lullaby* (Slimani 2018) and *Still Born* (Netell 2022). Conscious of their marginalized and subservient positions in society, the migrant workers are perhaps aware that they are disposable to the families they work for or to the country that they work in. The lack of meaningful communication and exploitative working conditions then often impose a heavy burden on the mental state of these women working in the care sector, which is why the nannies congregating in the parks of Slimani’s (2018: 180) Paris “don’t talk much about themselves, only by allusion. They don’t want the tears to well in their eyes.”

In *Lullaby* (Slimani 2018), the narrator unveils unhinged details of Louise’s past which affected her mental health condition. The fact that her struggles remained unseen and

unacknowledged perhaps contributed to her committing the horrific crime that Slimani's text opens with:

The baby is dead. It took only a few seconds. The doctor said he didn't suffer. The broken body, surrounded by toys, was put inside a grey bag, which they zipped shut. The little girl was still alive when the ambulance arrived. She'd fought like a wild animal. They found signs of a struggle, bits of skin under her soft fingernails. (P. 1)

This is the shocking depiction of the murders of Myriam's two children—Mia and Adam—who were killed by the woman entrusted to care for them. Throughout the years of working as a nanny, Louise has struggled with the burdens of being a wife, a mother, and a substitute mother while ignoring her own mental health. Louise's husband Jacques was an abusive man who, when enraged, was capable of "grabbing her by the throat and quietly threatening that he would shut her up for good" (Slimani 2018: 82). After he lost his job, he became more oppressive with Louise and apparently was "too busy to look for a job" (Slimani 2018: 83), which put more pressure on Louise to sustain the entire family. The constant demands of affective and low-paid domestic labor affected Louise's well-being, which was exacerbated when she had to close her crèche, because it stopped being profitable without government support. These socio-economic conditions arguably contributed to her killing the children:

The children's cries irritate her, she's ready to scream too.... She has no patience now for their tears, their tantrums, their hysterical excitement. Sometimes she wants to put her fingers round Adam's neck and squeeze until he faints. She shakes her head to get rid of these thoughts. She manages to stop thinking about it, but a dark and slimy tide has completely submerged her. (Slimani 2018: 192)

The narration goes on to reveal the decline in Louise's mental state shortly before she murders the children, "Her heart has grown hard. The years have covered it in a thick, cold rind and she can barely hear it beating. Nothing moves her anymore." (Slimani 2018: 193). But no one was there to ask Louise if she needed care or help, she was alone and helpless; her desperate state put the children's lives in danger.

The different forms of aggression directed towards Louise might seem like sexist violence, but it has much more to do than gender. Veronica Gago (2020) explores the different forms of violence that plague women inhabiting the peripheries of society:

the economic violence of the wage gap and the countless hours of unrecognized, unpaid domestic work, as well as the disciplining that results from a lack of economic autonomy; the violence of exploitation and its transfer into the household as masculine impotence, which implodes in situations of "domestic" violence; the violence of the defunding and looting of public services, resulting in the burden of extra community work. (P. 24)

Jacques' loss of employment removed him as a stereotypical masculine head of the family while he drowned in debt without his wife's knowledge, who was already burdened with affective labor, social reproduction, and earning a living through childcare. So, after his death, Louise loses the

house and her crèche in repayment of her husband’s debt. These circumstances reveal that the violence directed towards Louise throughout her life is not only sexist violence, but also the failure of the state under neoliberal capitalism, which proliferates by exploiting women’s labor. Perhaps this is why, every morning when Louise leaves her impoverished neighborhood to get to Myriam’s elite neighborhood, she feels like a “soldier;” “she keeps going, come what may, like a mule, like a dog with its legs broken by cruel children” (Slimani 2018: 77). But her struggles were invisible to Myriam and Paul, and Louise was seen as “a miracle worker” as Myriam describes, “She must have magical powers to have transformed this stifling, cramped apartment into a calm, light-filled place” (Slimani 2018: 22).

Like Louise, poverty has forced Marlene to take up the overwhelming burden of caring for children throughout her life. Although, her socio-economic background is not revealed in *Still Born* (Netell 2022) in detail, it is arguably poverty and the lack of government support that are responsible for Marlene’s entry into the low-waged and exploitative childcare industry. When Marlene took up care of Inés, she displayed a “greedy curiosity, very similar to that of the scientist who finds a subject interesting for their investigation” (Netell 2022: 152). And soon as she began working for Alina and Aurelio, Marlene was not called the nanny, but rather, “Inés’ best friend” (Netell 2022: 153). However, with time the pressures of childcare start taking its toll and Marlene’s interest fades as the child in her care starts growing older.

Alina’s friend warns her about Marlene, about what she had done with children from another family:

she was so excited about being with them at first, and then when they turned five and seven, her attention started to wander. She’d leave them to play on their own for hours, and didn’t intervene in their quarrels even if they were tearing each other to shreds. (Netell 2022: 179)

Perhaps the realization that the children would not need her for much longer, that she would be reduced to a mere memory, disposed of easily, makes Marlene lose interest in caring for the growing children. At one point Alina realizes that “the substitution for motherhood her nanny had happened upon: being the pretend mother of one baby after another, loving them intensely as if they were her own, and then, when they grew up, going in search of another newborn” (Netell 2022: 179). Here, the line between personal and professional easily becomes blurred for nannies like Marlene and Louise, which results in their feeling trapped in the cycle of forced love and care and unable to make any more meaningful connection with the children they care for.

But people fail to recognize the trauma that Louise and Marlene experience because of their unevenness in society, and they are destined to be disposed of by neoliberal capital once they are no longer needed. A lawyer by profession, who specialized in “cases of unpaid debt, credit-card fraud, identity theft” (Netell 2022: 29), Myriam could have addressed Louise’s financial conditions and provide support, but she initially failed to recognize the signs of trauma and distress in Louise’s behavior. When Myriam feels similar sense of alienation and weight of the everyday on her, she can lean on Louise for support. The privileges afforded to Myriam because of her socio-economic conditions are not easily available to Louise. However, when Myriam eventually offers her legal

expertise to support Louise in clearing the financial debt incurred by her dead husband, the nanny fails to ask for help:

she would like to hug Myriam, to ask for her help. She would like to say that she is alone, completely alone, and that so many things have happened, so many things that she hasn't been able to tell anyone, but she would like to tell her. (Netell 2022: 132)

But because of the existing madam/maid conflict embedded in their relationship, Louise chooses to remain socially isolated and does not feel comfortable in availing herself of the care offered to her. The precarity in Louise's life and her work conditions thus makes her feel alienated.

Interestingly, in *Still Born* (Netell 2022), Alina and Marlene's feud was set aside because of Inés's deteriorating condition. The relationship of conflict surprisingly turned to one of amicable cohabitation when Inés was in the hospital, "...Alina and the nanny went down to the cafeteria and flicked through magazines together, or chatted about any old nonsense to clear their minds" (Netell 2022: 206). Marlene even started living in the study of Alina's house to be closer to the child. However, this paper claims that the changed circumstances might be a sign of further exploitation of Marlene's labor because the parents are getting more services, perhaps without paying more, while the nanny cooks more meals, offers night-time childcare, and provides time for the parents to rest and socialize. The couple do not seem to be offering Marlene any additional facilities for the services they are receiving, making it an unequal transaction, which indicates that the exploitative work condition fostered by neoliberal capitalism is likely to continue for the nanny. The figure of the nanny thus becomes a disposable commodity for the parents and a distant, often uncomfortable memory for the children they cared for.

### Conclusion

The above discussion about unequal distribution of wealth, gender violence, exploitative domestic and care labor, and socio-economic pressures of motherhood reveals how the misogynistic ideologies are in place and repeatedly solidified within the neoliberal capitalist societies. In its quest for endless profit accumulation, neoliberal capitalism turns women into disposable commodities. Often capitalist social structures position women entangled in the maids-madams conflict, where one can only succeed if they oppress and exploit the other. *Lullaby* (Slimani 2018) and *Still Born* (Netell 2022) reveal the tyrannical burden of the stereotypical gender roles placed on women; and how society that is specifically designed for men forces women to fail either/both in their intersecting personal and professional lives. It is then significant to acknowledge that in these novels, the reason for the impenetrable gulf between both sets of mothers/employers and nannies/employees is the economic and class divide between them, where both the mother and the carer are burdened with the care work, because "care is not delegated by mothers to paid carers, but is delegated by society to mothers" (Cox 2011: 12).



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