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**“Just a good Frenchwoman”:** How gender roles are reinforced and questioned in Irène Némirovsky’s *Suite Française* (2004) in the context of WWII.

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## **Abstract**

There is an ongoing debate among historians and Gender Studies' scholars regarding the effect war has on gender roles. Some believe that war has in many occasions offered new opportunities to women, that they were liberated from some gender roles, while others assert that, although in wartime women have taken new roles or been liberated from traditional roles, these changes were not preserved after the war. In this dissertation I argue that although the Paris exodus and the National Socialist occupation during WWII reinforce gender roles on women in Irène Némirovsky's *Suite Française*, that situation also provides an opportunity of liberation from these, since the historical context helps them women to free from the traditional roles they have been assigned. In order to show this, I will first provide the sociohistorical context of women before and after WWII in France (the novel's setting) and Germany (from which Nazi soldiers that occupy France are from). Then I will explain Irène Némirovsky's life, literary career and the situation in which she wrote the novel. Afterwards, I will analyse the text through a feminist perspective highlighting the different instances of reinforcement and liberation of gender roles in female characters. The analysis conducted in this dissertation shows that regarding the reinforcement of gender roles, perpetuation of traditional roles resides in young male characters and that in some cases there is a double burden for women (due to gender and social class) as well as double standards with regard to men and women. On the other hand, liberation from gender roles is in some cases not definitive or a double-edged weapon. Nevertheless, in the case of some characters there is deep development, which results in independence. After the war, however, it is highly possible for women to be assigned the roles they were liberated from during the war.

**Key words:** Irène Némirovsky, French literature, literature about WWII, Nazi Occupation, gender studies.

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# 1. Introduction

When there is a war there is a modification of “the ‘ordinariness’” (Adelman and Kozol 171), a new cosmos can be created in which ordinary rules from everyday life do not apply. Joshua S. Goldstein claims that “gender shapes war and war shapes gender” (1), an idea historians and gender studies’ scholars generally agree with, but the effect war has in gender roles is still being discussed.

On the one hand, as Birgitta Bader-Zaar explains, many times war has “served as a catalyst for women’s political emancipation” (11). Nevertheless, Richard S. Fogarty points out that in other cases it has meant “continuing their usual tasks while adding those of the absent men” (73). This duality between reinforcement and liberation from gender roles during wartime is explained by Deborah Thom:

War has become a kind of social laboratory for testing theories about gender. [...] For some, this conflict [WWI] challenged the sexual division of labor, giving women new roles and calling into question their exclusion from some kinds of work and their inequality at work. In other places, war emphasized their marginality and weakness in the labor market. (46)

D’Ann Campbell provides another perspective by saying that in the case of WWII “on the home front women temporarily assumed new roles but that no permanent or radical transformation took place” (250). This is also supported by Joshua S. Goldstein when discussing the guerrilla war in “Iraq in the late 1990s” and “the Republic of Congo war in 1997”:

When they [women] have participated in combat during guerrilla wars, have done so with good results. They have added to the military strength of their units, and sometimes fought with greater skill and bravery than their male comrades. Yet whenever their forces have seized power and become regular armies, women have been excluded from combat. (83)

Taking into account the aforementioned views I argue that although the Paris exodus and the National Socialist occupation during WWII reinforce gender roles on women in Irène Némirovsky’s *Suite Française*, that situation also provides an opportunity of liberation from these, since the historical context helps them to free from the traditional roles they have been given. For that purpose, I will analyse the text through a feminist perspective taking into account different female character’s behaviour and other characters’ attitude towards them.

In order to prove my point, I will first provide with the sociohistorical context of women before, during and after WWII in France (the setting of the story) and Germany (from which Nazi occupiers are from). Afterwards, I will explain the author's life, her literary career and the situation in which she wrote *Suite Française*. Taking into account the aforementioned aspects, I will then analyse how the reinforcement of gender roles is given, taking into account the private and public sphere, Catholicism and status differences between women and men. Later on the liberation of gender roles will be analysed, taking into consideration women taking charge of the situation, how in some situations they put themselves first, the realisation of inequality, the world of work, taking part in the war and the liberation from male control. Finally, I will provide with some overall conclusions. The citation style I will be using is MLA.

## **2. Women's situation before and during the war**

As *Suite Française* was written during WWII and is set on the same period, it is important to pay attention to the sociohistorical context. For this reason, Frenchwomen's situation prior to war will be described, as well as their participation and the roles taken during the war. Besides, Germany's sociohistorical context will also be taken into account, due to the fact that the second part of the novel portrays the Nazi occupation of Bussy (a little town in the east of Paris) and therefore female characters are in contact with Nazi soldiers and their views regarding women.

### **2.1. France**

The situation of women before WWII in France was unfavourable. As explained by Sebba, women were politically invisible, did not have the right to vote and needed permission from men, either fathers or husbands, in order to have the right to work or own property (xxxiv). The parental roles of the typical French family were strictly gendered, as it was formed by a married couple in which a father would provide and a mother would stay at home with the children (Fishman 14). But it was not only children that women had to take care of, but also elderly parents, as historically women have had to take care of both children and older members of the family (Sharma et al. 7). Therefore, the burden women had to carry was considerable, as they fulfilled an essential role inside the house. Just before the war, in 1938, Frenchwomen were given

the right to work without male permission, which allowed them to step outside the private sphere they had been historically confined in. As stated by Sebba:

The laws, first forbidding then encouraging married women to work, were deeply revealing of the conflicting attitude toward women in France. The ideal of the woman as wife and mother was permanently in tension with the need for, as well as desire of, women to work. (23)

In wartime, French magazines became very important in encouraging women to look after themselves to help their country. In the 1939 September front page of *Le Jardin des Modes* it said: "For those who are at the front, you must stay how they would like to see you. Not ugly." And in an advertisement for Helena Rubinstein's make-up *Vogue* proclaimed: "These days it is the duty of everyone, especially women, to communicate to those loved ones, the optimism which results from confidence in oneself" (Sebba 31). Magazines made women feel that by dressing up and doing their hair and make-up nicely, they would help men win the war. But as the situation of France worsened magazines also changed their joyful tone and content. By December they advertised women on "what to put in the little packages to send their soldiers, how to cook the more economical rillettes, how to knit balaclavas and jumpers or, now that so many budgets were reduced, how to revive an old dress and make it look like this year's" (Sebba 31-32).

In the year 1940, between May and June, there was a colossal exodus because of the German invasion during the Battle of France, also known as the Fall of France. According to Calvet, the exodus was one of the most important ones in Europe in the 20th century, as 2/3 of the Paris population fled. One of the women trying to escape from the Germans was the well-known philosopher and political activist Simone de Beauvoir. Drake notes that she witnessed how women, in the absence of men, "had been thrust into the role of head of the household" allowing them to make financial decisions without leaving aside having to look after their children (54). Therefore, although women were still legally inferior to men, war compelled them to assume new responsibilities, which were before Frenchmen's domain (Drake 54).

Regarding the world of work, an area that was acceptable for women to work in was entertainment, which went through little change in occupied France after 1940. One of the most famous actresses of the time was Corinne Luchaire, emblematic for other Frenchwomen because her work did not require a professional qualification and was both liberating as well as financially rewarding (Sabba 24). But the world of

entertainment was not for every woman, as it consisted of constantly being admired by first Frenchmen and then Germans. In fact, the cultural life in Paris was buzzing after the fall of France with German leadership (Riding).

In the occupied territory, administered by the German army, the French were imposed food rationing. Because of war there was shortage of food and ration books (classified by age and food needs) were used, alongside with payment, in order to obtain food (Ferre). Many times women had to wait long hours in order to get something to eat and provide their family, but other times they “couldn’t use up all their rationing coupons in a month because they simply couldn’t find the food to buy with the coupons” (Bertelsen). To this problem Frenchwomen found two solutions. The first one was the black market. As explained by Rioux, the black market was a busy business with high prices (they increased 270%), in fact, 75% of a family’s income was spent on food (90). Participating in the black market was not only expensive, but also dangerous. Anyone who participated in food selling or buying “in any manner other than the official” faced stiff fines or worse punishments (Bertelsen). The second solution some women found to food shortage was playing with their femininity. As there were times when Germans offered “the only source of food”, several Frenchwomen used sex in order “to get what they wanted or needed” (Sebba xxx). Women who got closer to Nazi soldiers<sup>1</sup> did not only do so because of need, as a matter of fact, some women, explains Mah, had a romantic relationship with the Germans, others were raped, and French prostitutes did their job just like they did it with Frenchmen. As a result of intercourse between German soldiers and Frenchwomen, Boyle claims that in 1942 over 200,000 children were born.

With the arrival of the Nazi troops and their anti-Semitic politics, Jewish women became especially vulnerable in both the occupied and the free territory. Before the war, Hyman notes, Jewish women were very active in the cultural fields of the country, such as the opera singer Lucienne Breval or the actress Marthe Brandes. Many Jewish women were immigrants who had come from Eastern Europe after World War I or the Russian Revolution (“Nazi Occupation”), as it was the case of the Ukrainian Jewish writer Irène Némirovsky, who lived in France and wrote in French. By the beginning of the war Hyman claims that there were around 300,000 Jews in France. These, because

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<sup>1</sup> One of the many famous Frenchwomen who had an affair with a German was Coco Chanel. According to Hess, Chanel stayed in the Hotel Ritz with her lover, the German officer Hans Günter von Dincklage, during the occupation (139).



of the German occupation, were subjected to the September 1941 Nazi policy of having to wear the yellow Star of David if they were “six years of age or older” in order to be identified as Jewish (Bos). Jews not only suffered the aforementioned racist law, but were also sent to concentration camps. Hayman indicates that of the 77,000 Jews that were deported only 43% were women. This, she explains, was because “they were able to be hidden more easily than men” and had “more ties with non-Jews in the larger society.” In addition, Poznanski highlights the work of Jewish women in the resistance, transporting weapons or helping children and adults escape in despite of being persecuted.

But they were not only Jewish women who joined the resistance; other Frenchwomen found in the resistance, just like Jewish women, “a new meaning and fulfilment” (Sebba xxxiii). According to Andrieu, 12% of the resisters were women (74) who combined household chores with their work in the resistance. As Sabba explains: “women were actively using weapons in the resistance, hosting evaders on the run, delivering false identity papers, at the same time as they were performing all the old familiar tasks of cooking, shopping and caring for their homes” (xxxiv). Therefore, resistance did not liberate women from traditional roles inside the house, but helped them step outside the private sphere. Cooke and Shepherd also remark that some roles women undertook in the resistance were “an extension of their domestic lives”, such as, “providing a room for a resistance meeting, supplying *maquisards* with food and clothing, acting as a ‘letterbox’ where messages could be left, and bestowing food and shelter to downed Allied airmen, STO<sup>2</sup> evaders and Jews” (85). But there were few women engaging in combat or occupying leadership positions (Cooke and Shepherd 85).

On the other hand, in the Free Zone, which was not occupied by Germany, but administered by the French Government of Philippe Pétain, Pascal remarks that “the Republic’s *liberté, égalité, fraternité* was replaced with Pétain’s *travail, famille, patrie* (work, family, fatherland).” His government was, according to Sheffield, “authoritarian and collaborated with the Germans”, following “the Nazi manifestos and their glorification of German motherhood.” The need for women to have children resided in the population decline coming from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Sangster 180-181). Laws “forbidding the employment of women in the public sector” and making abortion

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<sup>2</sup> *Service du travail obligatoire* (Compulsory Work Service).

“not only criminal but punishable by death penalty” (Sangster 181, 182) were Pétain’s policies, glorifying a family in which “the woman occupied her place by virtue of being a mother” (Sebba xxix). In addition, apart from the focus on motherhood, the Vichy regime, before any demand from the Nazis, participated in “anti-Semitic policies”, removing “Jews from civil service” and “seizing Jewish property” (Boissoneault). According to Bell, thousands of Jews were sent to extermination camps.

After the liberation of France in 1944 thousands of women “who consorted with Germans met harsh reprisals” (Vinen 174). Any woman who was accused of *collaboration horizontale*, that is, “having sexual relations with occupying Nazi troops”, was forced to parade in public with their heads shaved and an swastika drawn in their forehead (Moore). Lucey claims that between 1944 to 1945 200,000 women went through this torture, while only “35 to 50 men suffered a similar fate” having also been accused of collaboration. Apart from this, many women were also mistreated by the Americans. In fact, “hundreds of cases of rape” were reported in Normandy after the landing of the American GI’s in June 1944 (Faur). Finally, in 1944 women were given the right to vote, gaining a bit of the public sphere, but the work they did during the war was not recognised. As Lehrer notes, “of 1038 resisters who were named ‘Compagnons de la Libération’ by de Gaulle, between 1940 and 1946, only six – of whom four were awarded the honour posthumously – were women.” It is important to make the work and suffering of Frenchwomen visible, because as Mah notes “recognizing these women now is an important step in acknowledging the long history of gender inequality”.

## **2. 2. Germany**

Before the rise of National Socialism, in the Weimar Republic, German women enjoyed “equal opportunities in education and civil service jobs as well as equal pay in the professions” (Land). In addition, “in the first elections of the Weimar Republic in January 1919” German women voted for the first time (Breuer 7) and according to Land, during this period “there were 35 female members of the Reichstag, a far greater number of women than the US or UK had in their corresponding houses of government.” Apart from this, the growth of industry enabled women to have paid jobs outside the home, and the invention of both the telephone and the typewriter created job opportunities for German women (Stephenson 7). Therefore, during this period women

achieved more rights, making them closer to men politically. But this does not mean that work inside the home was shared between men and women, on the contrary. German women were still subjected to the idea that a married woman should be a “full-time housewife and mother” (Stephenson 9). Therefore, women suffered a double burden, working both inside and outside the home (Nolan 550). In addition, Koonz notes that although in practical terms women were equal to men, they only had access to “a few areas of public policy”, which were, “education, health, culture, religion and welfare” (31). Due to this, women joined feminist groups that either “wanted identical rights for men and women” or worked “to expand their influence over areas of the public life they felt appropriate to their sex” (Koonz 31-32).

It was in 1933 when Adolf Hitler was named chancellor, transforming, as Graham Land explains, the situation of women completely:

Any notions of feminism or equality were quashed by the strictly patriarchal standards of the Third Reich. From the very start, the Nazis went about creating an organised society, where gender roles were rigidly defined and options limited. This is not to say that women were not valued in Nazi Germany, but their main expressed purpose was to make more Aryans.

National Socialists followed a racial policy, stating that the Aryan race (to which “most ethnic Germans as well as ‘Nordic’ people like the Dutch and Scandinavians belonged”) was superior to any other race, and was threatened by “‘inferior’ races like Slavs and, particularly, Jews” (Stephenson 12).

Family and traditional values were very important for Hitler. Accordingly, “the ideal Nazi man was a fighter”, while the ideal Nazi woman was a mother (Bridenthal and Koonz 447). The leader of the National Socialists stated that women were not inferior to men, “it was simply, he said, that women and men had unalterably different natures which determined their differing and complementary functions” (Stephenson 16). The life of an ideal Aryan woman should have revolved around *Kinder, Küche, Kirche*, that is, children, kitchen and the church. The first two were especially important for Hitler, as in the speeches to the Nazi Party Women’s Organisation in 1935 and 1936 he “proclaimed that a mother of five, six, or seven children who were all healthy and well raised accomplished more than a female lawyer” (Lower 22). It was due to this, Glaser points out, that in the Nazi ideology the German woman was a “mechanical womb” and the man a “heroic patriarch”, that towered “over the family” (177). Women

had to give up control over their bodies, and put them in the service of the state; as Lower indicates, “victories were measured not by births but by the number of healthy Aryan babies” (23)<sup>3</sup>. But not every woman was good enough for the task of having children. Jews, gypsies or handicapped women were seen as inferior (Evans 161) and, as they were “worthless” for the German country, prevented from reproducing (Stephenson 16).

Although in Nazi Germany the husband represented “strength” and “domination of the world”, while the wife was weak, subordinate, and belonged to the home (Gupta 40), Aryan women did take part in the public sphere. Kater explains that although German women were excluded from the leading positions within the Nazi party (NSDAP), they did fulfil an important role in it (206). In fact, many times German women whose father, husband or brother was in the party, would work for the party (some of them without joining) sewing, cooking or as a nurse (Stephenson 17). On the other hand, other women participated in “the Nazi women’s organizations and in other institutions of the Nazi state, like the Labour Service and the National Socialist People’s Welfare organization” (Stephenson 19). On a speech in 1934 Hitler highlighted the importance of Aryan women in the National Socialist country, making them feel part of it by saying:

Every child she [the Aryan woman] brings into the world is a battle, a battle she wages for the existence of her people. [...] For the National Socialist Community of the *Volk* was established on a firm basis precisely because millions of women became our most loyal, fanatical fellow-combatants. (Lower 22)

Although Aryan women’s role was applauded, the one of Jewish women was not. The propaganda paid a crucial role in this. Narayanaswami points out that there were two types of portrayal of the Jews: “Jews were either portrayed as seedy, degenerate, ugly, masses associated with vermin, or they were portrayed as greedy, fat, and unpleasant elements who sided with the enemy” (3). Lower also adds that Jews were portrayed as lecherous especially for women, and because of this, German women, vulnerable in the eyes of the National Socialists, had to be protected (27). Apart from this, the fact that Jewish women played an important role in the feminist movement in Germany, in favour of the emancipation of women, was later on used as an argument by Hitler to “emancipate women from women’s emancipation” (Lower 24).

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<sup>3</sup> On Hitler’s mother’s birthday (August 12) women were awarded with a gold medal if they had seven children, a silver one if they had six, and a bronze one if they had five children.

As a result of their racist ideology, Nazis started to eliminate people who they considered to be inferior right from the very start of the Third Reich in 1933. According to Landau this process started with the boycott of Jewish businesses (January 30). Afterwards Jews were fired from hospitals, schools (both teachers and students) and other businesses (April 7) and later on the public book-burning of Berlin and other German cities happened (May 10), where books of Jewish writers and other works that were considered “degenerate” were destroyed. Later on, Jews were banned from many professional occupations, such as, being accountants or dentists (1937), and in *Kristallnacht* (The Night of Broken Glass) Jews were attacked and lynched by the SA and civilians (1938). Subsequently, Jews were also forced to wear the yellow badge (the Star of David) in order to be identified as Jews and later, mass deportations of Jews to concentration camps began, killing thousands of people in the process (1941-1945) (Landau 317-326). As a result of the Holocaust, according to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 6 million Jews died.

Because of the terrible situation they had to be in while being confined in concentration camps, Buggeln notes that many women got really close, banding together “to form small groups, usually called ‘camp families,’ which consisted of four to ten individuals” (116). And it was socialisation between women and the networks they created that helped them survive (Ringelheim 752). In fact, overall women survived better to the camps, Wachsmann remarks that “proportionally, about as many men died in Ravensbrück in a single month as women did in two years” (229).

But women were not only victims of the Holocaust. Young Aryan women also worked in the camps, participating in the Nazi crimes (Bergen 199). Aryan women in their twenties<sup>4</sup> assisted in medical experiments, worked as guards or administered “lethal injections” (Lower 15). Those who were guards, Bergen states, worked generally with female prisoners and occupied almost the same positions as men in the lower levels (199).

When the war ended and the Allies occupied Germany, many German women were victims of sexual assault. It is difficult to know exactly how many women were raped by the Allies, Grossmann notes, as the numbers vary widely from “20, 000 to 100, 000, to almost one million” (46). Although many times it is thought that it was only Soviet soldiers who committed sexual assault, Matthews remarks that American,

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<sup>4</sup> The average age of women working in concentration camps was 26 (Lower 15).

Canadian, British and French soldiers were guilty of the same crime. Many German women were raped more than once and victims' age went from seven to sixty-nine according to Wiegrefe.

### **3. The case of Irène Némirovsky: Biographical notes**

Irène Némirovsky was born in Kiev in 1903, in a rich Jewish family. She was the daughter of one of the wealthiest bankers of Russia. Although she had a good relationship with her father, Marti notes that her mother did not play any maternal role. Anissimov explains:

Irène was not a happy child. Her mother [...] saw the birth of her daughter as the first sign of her declining youth and beauty. She felt a kind of aversion to Irène, for whom she never showed the least sign of love, and would spend hours in front of the mirror pampering this idea that her looks would fade, or away from home in search of extramarital affairs. (396)

Due to this rejection from her mother, Némirovsky was raised and educated by nurses and teachers, and would later on express her feelings towards her mother in the autobiographical novel *David Golder*, where the main character is a wealthy banker who hates his wife and adores his daughter (Marti).

The Némirovskys lead a luxury life in St. Petersburg and would travel every summer to “the Crimean coast, Biarritz, Saint-Jean-de-Luz or the French Riviera” (Anissimov 396). Marti remarks that due to this the writer learnt Basque and was able to practice the French she had studied with her French teacher<sup>5</sup>. And it was after this last one's death when Némirovsky started writing, at the age of fourteen (Anissimov 396).

In 1917, due to the Russian Revolution and the fact that “the Bolsheviks had put a price in Léon's [Irène's father's] head”, the Némirovskys had to leave their country (Anissimov 397). Flitterman-Lewis explains that the family fled to Finland, then to Sweden and finally settled down in France. In Paris Némirovsky graduated with a distinction in literature at the Sorbonne (1926) and after that started selling her stories (written in French) to magazines. According to Flitterman-Lewis she became one of the most “talented and celebrated authors of her day” and was welcomed to the most distinguished right wing literary circles of Paris. Although she was educated in French,

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<sup>5</sup> Némirovsky also knew apart from the aforementioned languages and her mother tongue (which was Russian) Polish, English, Finnish and a little Yiddish (Anissimov 395).

wrote in the same language and had been living in France from a very young age, Zaldua remarks that the Russian writer was never given the French nationality.

While leading a glamorous life in France, Irène Némirovsky met Michel Epstein, a Russian businessman who had immigrated to France and that would in 1926 become her husband. The couple had two children: Denise and Elisabeth. Anissimov remarks that by the time the second child was born, in 1937, Némirovsky had published nine novels and one of them, *David Golder*, had been turned into a film (398).

With the anti-Semitic sentiment spreading through Europe, in 1939 Némirovsky decided that she and her family would convert to Catholicism. Rubin states that “some notes in her journal suggest that her conversion may have been more than a mere survival strategy” (32). The truth is that there has been a lot of discussion regarding the possibility of Némirovsky being anti-Semitic, as some critics have suggested, due to her autobiographical novel *David Golder*. Cohen explains that “the novel, tagged as both a ‘masterpiece’ and anti-Semitic, aroused fierce sentiments from people on the left and right, from Jews and non-Jews in France”. But when she was asked about it by a Zionist newspaper reporter she stated: “I’m accused of anti-Semitism? Come now, that’s absurd! For I’m Jewish myself and say so to anyone prepared to listen!” (Cohen). Apart from this, the fact that there is no mention to Jews in her best known novel *Suite Française* surprised many people, taking into account the Holocaust and the Jewish origin of Némirovsky. Rubin points out that there could be different explanations for this. It might be that, as she converted to Catholicism, she no longer felt identified as a Jew and therefore did not want to add any Jewish character (32). Or it might be that she decided not to include any Jewish characters because Jews had not yet been persecuted in France when “Storm in June” –the first part of the novel- takes place (June 1940) and in “Dolce” –the second part- Némirovsky depicts a little village that did not necessarily have to have any Jewish inhabitants (33). Although Rubin discusses these two possibilities, she strongly believes that the author did not include Jewish characters in *Suite Française* due to the fact that Némirovsky felt that representing “Jews ‘together with’ the French” was impossible because “Jews would never feel – or be – fully accepted by the French” (33).

When WWII broke out in September 1939 Némirovsky and her husband left their children with the mother of their nanny in Issy-l’Evêque while they stayed in Paris (Anissimov 399). In June 1940 the couple decided to leave the French capital and joined their children, being the only family in the town wearing the yellow star (Bondarchuk).

During this period Némirovsky was forbidden to publish and due to this, Zaldua explains, many of her stories were published anonymously. It was also at this time that she started writing what later on would be her masterpiece, *Suite Française*. Thanks to her notes it is possible to know that the author planned a five part novel, but was able to only write the first two: “Storm in June”, set in the Paris exodus, and “Dolce”, portraying the life during the German occupation (Némirovsky 347-363).

She never finished the novel because she ended up being a victim of the Holocaust. Némirovsky was arrested on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1942 and was first taken to the Pithiviers transit camp and later on to Auschwitz-Birkenau, San Francisco explains. There she died of typhus on 17<sup>th</sup> August 1942 (she was 39). Her husband also ended up dying in a gas chamber in Auschwitz-Birkenau a few months later, after unsuccessfully trying to know where his wife had been taken (Bondarchuk). Although gendarmes went for Némirovsky’s daughters, Bondarchuk explains that they were not able to find them, as they had fled with their nanny and a suitcase filled with family photos and the manuscript of *Suite Française*.

Némirovsky’s literary work was forgotten after her death and it was not until her daughter Denise Epstein decided to publish her mother’s work six decades later that the author went through a revival. The unfinished *Suite Française* was translated to many languages, becoming a best-seller, and other works of the author were also republished.

#### **4. The role of women in Irène Némirovsky’s *Suite Française***

Having lived the start of WWII as a woman, in the novel *Suite Française* Némirovsky portrays a large variety of female characters, which allows an analysis of women from different backgrounds during the Paris exodus and the Nazi occupation. These two historical events have a great impact with regard to gender roles women in the novel are assigned. In some cases due to war traditional roles are reinforced, but in others war offers liberation.

Regarding the female characters that will be analysed in this section, in the first part of the novel, called “Storm in June” and set during the Paris exodus, there are Madame Péricand (mother of a wealthy family), the nanny of the Péricands (from the working class), Jeanne Michaud (mother and worker from the lower middle-class), Florence (mistress of the well-known writer Corte), Arlette Corail (dancer and mistress of the bank director Corbin) and Cécile and Madeleine Sabarie (farmers that belong to



the working class). In “Dolce”, set during the Nazi occupation of Bussy, the main character is Lucile Angellier (living with her mother-in-law and whose husband is a prisoner of the war) although Madame Angellier (Lucile’s wealthy mother-in-law), The Viscountess of Bussy (wife of the mayor), Madame Montmort (from a wealthy family) and Cécile and Madeleine Sabarie will also be considered.

#### **4.1. Reinforcement of gender roles**

The female characters of the novel live in a patriarchal society where there is inequality between genders. As a consequence of the war that breaks out in Europe, the situation female characters are in gets worse in some cases, reinforcing gender roles assigned to them. In order to show this, the private and public sphere, religion and status difference between women and men will be analysed.

##### ***4.1.1. Private sphere***

Traditionally women have been relegated to the private sphere while men have dominated the public sphere. This dichotomy between “public man” and “private woman” is also seen in *Suite Française* and reinforced by the war. For this analysis, the home, marriage, sexual relationships and motherhood will be analysed.

##### **4.1.1.1 Home**

Right from the very beginning of the novel, in “Storm in June”, the situation of the Péricand family is described from Charlotte’s (the mother’s) point of view:

Neither her husband nor her eldest son was at home: her husband was dining with friends, her son was not in Paris. Charlotte Péricand, who ruled the family’s daily life with an iron hand (whether it was managing the household, her children’s education or her husband’s career), was not in the habit of seeking anyone’s opinion. (Némirovsky 6)

In this passage it is seen that the male members of the family are outside socialising, in the public sphere, while Charlotte is inside the home, in the private sphere. In addition, it can also be appreciated that Madame Péricand, as a woman, mother and wife is in charge of the household duties, her children’s upbringing and helps her husband’s career, directing the private sphere.

On the other hand, in “Dolce” Madame Angellier and Lucile can also be seen mostly at home while war and chaos is happening on the outside. Their house is described as a beautiful building, although some aspects of it allow an association with imprisonment:

The house was the most beautiful for miles. [...] The windows that gave on to the street (those of the most elegant rooms) were carefully sealed, their shutters closed and protected against burglars by iron bars; the small window of the pantry (where they hid prohibited food in an array of different jars) lay behind thick railings whose high spikes in the shape of a fleur-de-lis impaled any cat who wandered by. The front door, painted blue, had the kind of lock you find on prisons and an enormous key that creaked dolefully in the silence. (Némirovsky 209)

In this case the dichotomy between the house being beautiful but at the same time the fact that the building can be associated with a prison could be interpreted as how both Angellier women are expected to live inside the home, without participating in the public sphere, trapped in a beautiful cage.

#### **4.1.1.2 Marriage**

Regarding marriage, the novel portrays a double standard. Gabriel Corte, an unmarried and well-known writer, is compared to the English poet Lord Byron: “Just like Byron, Corte used to say, he was a man of frugal habits” (Némirovsky 62). At the same time, when the Péricand family meet two unmarried women they are described as spinsters: “A house inhabited by two elderly spinsters which was opposite the church” (Némirovsky 70). Therefore, the perception of singlehood is seen in a different way regarding gender. Being unmarried makes men desirable and being compared to Byron, sexually experienced, but in the case of women singlehood is not seen as positive, but rather makes women undesirable.

In addition, in “Dolce” it is seen that both French and German share similar views concerning the role women should have in marriage. When Madame Angellier is thinking about Gaston (her son) and Lucile (her daughter-in-law) she concludes: “It was his [Gaston’s] wife’s duty, her role, to look after him, to amuse him” (Némirovsky 291). In the same way Bonnet, the German lieutenant who is billeted to the Labarie household, tells Madeleine:

‘Man is made to be a warrior, just as woman is made to please the warrior,’  
Bonnet replied, and he smiled because he found it comical to quote Nietzsche to

this pretty French farm girl. ‘Your husband must think the same way, if he’s young.’ (Némirovsky 219)

This means that the fact that women have to please men is shared; it does not matter if a woman is French or German, because she will be expected in both countries to please her husband because of her gender. In addition, in the case of the Germans, women are expected a higher subjection due to the Nazi ideology, which reinforces the role women are assigned of having to please their husband.

#### **4.1.1.3. Sexual relationships**

Apart from this, in the novel there is no sexual freedom for women. In the next passage we see how Cécile Labarie tells off her foster sister Madeleine because she has been talking to Jean-Marie (the Michaud’s son and a French soldier): “‘Hussy! And you want to be a nun...’” (Némirovsky 187). Cécile does not approve of Madeleine flirting with a Frenchman and even calls her “hussy”. But the disapproval other women have to suffer is worse when they sleep with German soldiers. When Lucile goes to the dressmaker she finds out that she is having an affair with a German soldier, which she does not approve of: “‘How can you?’ murmured Lucile” (Némirovsky 259). In another occasion Lucile again judges women who sleep with German soldiers and considers them “the lowest type of woman”:

Now, she thought how much she would miss this light jingling of spurs, the kiss on the hand, the admiration these soldiers showed her almost in spite of themselves, soldiers who were without family, without female companionship (except for the lowest type of woman). (Némirovsky 342)

During the occupation women are doubly judged if they sleep with Nazi soldiers due to the fact that they have had sexual relationships with a man they are not married to, plus the man being a German, that is, the enemy.

#### **4.1.1.4 Motherhood**

Concerning motherhood, it is constantly mentioned the importance of women having children. In the case of Madame Péricand it is said that she has put her life at risk because it is her duty as a woman to have many children:

The youngest Péricand child was only two, and between Father Philippe and the baby, there were three other children, not counting the ones Madame Péricand discreetly referred to as the ‘three accidents’: babies she had carried almost to

term before losing them, so that three times their mother had been on the verge of death. (Némirovsky 7)

Besides, with Madame Angellier's perspective we are able to see that a marriage is not successful if the wife does not have any children: "the marriage was, therefore, not the most successful; she hadn't had any children, after all" (Némirovsky 198). Related to this, an especial emphasis is made on the role of women as caretakers. In the case of the nanny of the Péricands, she has to take care of both her and the Péricand's children. She has a double burden because she is a woman and belongs to a lower social class:

She continued muttering as she started running the bath and warmed the children's pyjamas: 'Misery and misfortune.' To her, those words embodied not only the political situation but, more particularly, her own life: working on the farm in her youth, her widowhood, her unpleasant daughters-in-law, living in other people's houses since she was sixteen. (Némirovsky 10)

During WWII the role of caretakers and mothers that is given to women becomes a burden almost impossible to bear, as they have to take care of their children as well as face the war they are living:

But at all the train stations the gates were already closed and guarded by soldiers. The crowds were hanging on to them, shaking them, then swarming chaotically back down the neighbouring streets. Women in tears were running with their children in their arms. The last taxis were stopped: they were offered two thousand, three thousand francs to leave Paris. (Némirovsky 29)

#### ***4.1.2. Public sphere: the world of work***

In the public sphere, some women take part in the world of work. But these are not women from rich families; on the contrary, they are women whose family cannot get by with the husband's salary. This is the case of Jeanne Michaud, who has to work in order for her family to live: "Her husband's salary had never been enough to pay their bills and their only son had been called up. Thanks to this secretarial job, they just about managed" (Némirovsky 25).

Historically the world of work has always been male dominant and it is portrayed this way also in *Suite Française*, where Corbin, one of the directors of the bank Jeanne works for, makes sure to make women feel uncomfortable in the workplace: "Whether beautiful or ugly, young or old, he treated all his female

employees in the same aggressive, rude and mean-spirited manner.” (Némirovsky 26). In this case there is double oppression due to the fact that female workers are mistreated by Corbin because they are his employees and they are women.

Due to war, female characters such as Hortense Gaillard are in a difficult situation to be employed, not having worked in a long time (because they gave up their paid job when they married) and judged for their physical appearance by men like Charlie Langelet:

Seeing Charlie hesitate, she [Charlie’s maid] added, ‘She [Hortense]’s a very nice person who used to be a chambermaid for the Countess Barral du Jeu. She got married and didn’t want to work any more, but her husband is a prisoner of war and she needs to earn a living. Monsieur could just see her and then decide!’ ‘All right, bring her in,’ said Langelet, putting the statuette on a table. The woman made a good impression on him. [...] She was a big woman. Mentally, Charlie reproached her for this— he liked his maids to be thin and a bit austere— but she looked about thirty-five or forty, the perfect age for a servant, when they’ve stopped working too quickly but are still fit and strong enough to provide good service. (Némirovsky 174)

#### ***4.1.3. Between the private and public sphere: Catholicism***

During the whole novel there is a connection made between being a good Frenchwoman and being a good Catholic, as we see in the next passage:

‘You are a true Catholic.’ Odette sighed humbly.  
‘Just a good Frenchwoman,’ Madame Péricand replied drily, turning her back. (Némirovsky 140)

This means that being a good Catholic implies being a good Frenchwoman. For this reason the Viscountess of Bussy is bewildered when a teacher in Bussy is not religious but is respectable from her point of view because she fulfills the roles assigned to her gender (except from being a Catholic):

She [the teacher] was a woman who did not attend Mass and who had buried her husband in a civil ceremony; according to her pupils she hadn’t even been baptised, which seemed not so much scandalous as unbelievable, like saying someone had been born with the tail of a fish. As this person’s conduct was irreproachable, the Viscountess hated her all the more: ‘because,’ she explained to the Viscount, ‘if she drank or had lovers, you could understand her lack of religion, but just imagine, Amaury, the confusion that can be caused in people’s

minds when they see virtue practised by people who are not religious.’ (Némirovsky 226)

As it has been seen so far, women are under pressure to follow the values of the church. On the contrary, their male counterparts are not required to do the same, which is a double standard:

She therefore concerned herself with religious issues: she tried to find out whether all the children had been baptised, whether they took Communion twice a year, whether the women went to Mass (she let the men get away with it; it was just too difficult). (Némirovsky 258)

Madame Montmort shows in this quote that men are exempt from having to attend mass, but women are not.

In addition, when the war breaks being a good woman and a good Catholic is also linked to the idea that while the husband is at the front or is a POW<sup>6</sup>, the wife has to do everything she can in order to fulfil her role as a wife: the pressure women are put in is bigger, because their husbands are prisoners. As we see in the next passage it is very important for Frenchwomen to have their husband’s approval:

Every one of these large, heavy women had someone they loved in one of those camps; they were working for him; they were saving for him; they were putting money aside for his return, so he could say, ‘You really took care of everything; you’re a good wife.’ (Némirovsky 228)

Apart from that, women have the pressure of the church of having to be good wives in the absence of their husbands or the male members of their families, and are condemned if they have any contact with the Nazi soldiers:

‘They’re women with German soldiers.’  
‘How revolting!’ the Viscountess exclaimed. She made a gesture of horror and disgust. ‘I’d really like to know who those shameless girls are. I’d make sure the priest knew their names.’ (Némirovsky 249)

In this case it is shown that during war women do not only have to follow the patriarchal roles assigned to them, but also the values of the church (which supports the patriarchal society).

#### ***4.1.4. Status differences between women and men***

In a patriarchal society women are put in an inferior position due to their gender. In order to show how female characters are put in a second position throughout the novel,

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<sup>6</sup> Prisoner of war

the portrayal of women as obedient, weak and unknowledgeable will be analysed, along with their participation in the home front and suffering in the hands of men.

#### **4.1.4.1. Inferiority: obedient, weak and unknowledgeable**

Right from the very beginning women are portrayed as inferior to men. This is clearly seen in the relationship between Gabriel Corte (the well-known writer) and Florence (his mistress). To start with, the man in the relationship is given a surname, while we only know the first name of the woman. Besides, this inequality is also seen in their relationship: “She gazed at him, almost kneeling before him on a suede pouffe, in that attitude of adoration that pleased him so much (though he couldn’t have imagined any other)” (Némirovsky 16).

Furthermore, women are also compared to animals, showing the superiority men feel towards women. In Corte’s words: “A woman should look like a heifer: sweet, trusting and generous, with a body as white as cream. You know, like those old actresses whose skin has been softened by massage, make-up and powder” (Némirovsky 16). In another passage later on in the novel Florence is treated like an animal: “Gabriel hissed at her as you would to a dog” (Némirovsky 43).

Apart from being inferior, women are also portrayed as weak. In the next quote Madame Péricand tells her son to stop crying after a bombing: “Bernard, stop crying! You’re behaving like a girl!” (Némirovsky 103). With this it is understood that although Bernard is eight he is taught that he should not cry, as it is something women do, not men.

In dangerous times as it is WWII, women need to be protected (because they are considered weak) and to protect their children (because it is considered that they have to look after them). This is seen in the next quote of Jeanne Michaud: “Deep inside, she felt a strange intermingling of her need to protect as a mother and her need to be protected as a woman” (Némirovsky 167).

Apart from that, women are given the role of being unknowledgeable or not as intelligent as men. In the next quote it is seen that Madame Péricand does not understand what is really happening at the beginning of the war and truly believes that she needs a male figure to tell her what to think:

Madame Péricand finally decided that only a male mind could explain with clarity such strange, serious events. [...] She needed a voice of authority to tell her what to believe. Once pointed in the right direction, there would be no

stopping her. Even if given absolute proof she was mistaken, she would reply with a cold, condescending smile, “My father said so... My husband is very well-informed.” (Némirovsky 6)

Jeanne Michaud also shares Madame Péricand’s behaviour of needing a male figure to help her understand the situation France is living: “What’s happening? I don’t understand. You’re a man, you should understand” (Némirovsky 167). They have both been taught that because of their gender they know less than men, that their opinion does not count as much as men’s, and in such a complicated event that is a war, they are told that they know nothing.

This role assigned to women is also shown in Hubert’s (Madame Péricand’s son) reaction when he is not allowed by his mother to join the war due to the fact that he is too young: “Women were inferior creatures; they didn’t know the meaning of heroism, glory, faith, the spirit of sacrifice. All they did was to bring everything they touched down to their level” (Némirovsky 73). In this quote it is seen that Hubert is mimicking the behaviour he has seen towards women, which will perpetuate gender roles.

#### **4.1.4.2. On the home front**

Because of gender roles men were called to sacrifice themselves at the front, while women had to persist “on the home front” (Fauteaux 31). As it has been mentioned before, women are assigned the private sphere, which does not allow them participate in the war. In the beginning of the novel Monsieur Péricand tells his wife that she has to run away, but that he will stay in Paris, taking care of the museum he works for:

“In a few days, maybe even tomorrow, the Germans will be on our doorstep. I’ve heard the High Command has decided to fight outside Paris, in Paris, beyond Paris. No one knows it yet, thank goodness, because after tomorrow there will be a stampede on the roads and at the train stations. You must leave for your mother’s house in Burgundy as early as possible tomorrow morning, Charlotte. As for me,” Monsieur Péricand said rather proudly, “I will share the fate of the treasures entrusted to my care.” (Némirovsky 12)

In this case we see that due to the fact that Madame Péricand is a woman, and women are considered fragile and not fit for war, she has to run away while her husband plays the heroic part staying in Paris, where Germans will later on arrive.

Apart from this, later on in the novel, René, a young man who wants to join the French soldiers but is not old enough, tells his aunt: “‘Let go of me, Auntie, this is not a matter for women,’ he replied, [...] and his lovely face flushed with pleasure: he was



proud of what he'd said" (Némirovsky 72). In this case, just like before with the character of Hubert, René is mimicking what he has learned from the patriarchal society he lives in, that is, that war is not for women, it is for men.

#### **4.1.4.3. Suffering in the hands of men**

As a consequence of the patriarchal society male characters of *Suite Française* believe that women in their life are inferior, and therefore have to please them. Because of this, emotional and physical abuse some women have to suffer from men is during war period more severe.

In the case of Lucile, Gaston (her husband) has not only had an extramarital affair with another woman, but also a child as a result. That was before the war, but during the occupation the suffering in the hands of men goes on for her, as she is sexually assaulted by Bruno (the Nazi lieutenant billeted at the Angellier's):

In the shade of a cherry tree heavy with fruit, near the little fountain where the frogs croaked, he tried to take her. He pulled her into his arms with a violence he couldn't control, tearing at her clothes, crushing her breasts.

'No, never!' she cried out. 'Never!' Never would she be his. She was afraid of him. (Némirovsky 327)

Therefore, Lucile has to suffer humiliation because of Gaston, and later on be sexually assaulted by Bruno.

On the other hand, Madeleine Labarie is also mistreated by her husband. They have not had sexual relations in a long time and the fact that a German soldier who is interested in his wife is living with them makes him jealous:

"All I know is whenever I come near you it's always 'Wait. Not now. Not tonight, the baby's worn me out.' Who are you waiting for?" he roared suddenly. "Who are you saving yourself for? Well? Well?"

"Let go of me!" she cried as he grabbed hold of her. "Let go of me! You're hurting me."

He pushed her away so violently that she hit her head on the low door frame. They looked at each other for a moment in silence. He picked up a rake and angrily stabbed at the hay.

"You're wrong," Madeleine said finally, then whispered tenderly, "Benoît . . . Poor dear Benoît... You're wrong to think such things. Come on, I'm your wife; if I seem cold, sometimes, it's because the baby wears me out. That's all." (Némirovsky 235)

In this passage we see that although she is the one who has been emotionally (making her feel guilty because she does not want to have sex with him) and physically abused by her husband, Madeleine has to justify herself for not wanting to sleep with Benoît, just because he feels threatened by the German.

To conclude the analysis of the reinforcement of gender roles it could be said that for women motherhood becomes a burden and they are judged severely if they sleep with the enemy. Regarding the public sphere, female characters have more difficulties when applying for a job. Apart from this, during wartime women also have more pressure to be the perfect catholic wife and are considered unknowledgeable and weak. Finally, it is not even considered for women to join the army and women's suffering in the hands of men is more severe during the war than prior.

## **4.2. Liberation from gender roles**

As it has already been analysed, the war period reinforced gender roles in female characters of *Suite Française*, but at the same time it also liberated women from some roles. In order to show this, instances in which women take charge, put themselves first, realise inequality, participate in the public sphere as well as at war will be taken into account. Finally, liberation from male control will be also considered.

### ***4.2.1. In charge of the situation***

As it has been mentioned, the absence of men offered women a scene where they were able as well as had to take charge. This is the case of Madame Angellier, who after the departure of her son Gaston directs the Angellier household with an iron hand. She does not let Lucile, her daughter-in-law, do anything she considers inappropriate, which is mostly that she talks to the German lieutenant Bruno.

Apart from Madame Angellier, Madame Péricand also takes charge of the family (her children, father-in-law and cat) during the exodus of Paris. For the first time she is the one making decisions, taking control, but this only happens, as she admits in the next quote, due to the fact that her husband is not present: ““Hubert, just listen to me! In the absence of your father I am in charge”” (Némirovsky 72).

Therefore, it is true that the war period allows these two female characters to take control, transforming the passive role they had before the war to an active one, going from subjects to rulers. Nevertheless, this cannot be considered a total liberation,

as both Madame Péricand and Madame Angellier would have to retake an inferior position if their husbands or sons came back. The war provides female characters a period without male control, but does not erase patriarchal society.

#### ***4.2.2. Putting themselves first***

Throughout the novel it is seen many times how women put men before themselves. For instance, in a part of the novel where Madame Péricand is wondering about war she concludes that “their [women’s] pain was more physical than the men’s, simpler as well and more open. [...] ‘it’s the poor men who are suffering...’” (Némirovsky 71). In this case Charlotte puts men’s pain over the pain and suffering women are feeling.

But Florence, when she and Corte are running away from Paris, shows a different behaviour never seen in her until that point. She always listens to Corte and pleases him, but when packing, that changes: “For a second Florence hesitated between her make-up case and the manuscripts, chose the make-up and closed the suitcase” (Némirovsky 19). Although it is a simple act, the fact that Florence is choosing her belongings over her lover’s means that she is finally, after being treated poorly by Corte, choosing herself, putting herself first<sup>7</sup>.

#### ***4.2.3. Realisation of inequality***

It is difficult to decide whether female characters are aware that they are treated in a specific way, have to do or are not allowed to do some things simply because of their gender. But it is true that there are many passages in the novel in which female characters do find a difference between them and their male counterparts or are able to spot an inequality, to realise that there is a difference.

After an air-raid Jeanne Michaud sees how a woman has died as a consequence of the attack, and she starts wondering: “In all her life that woman had probably never said anything but ordinary things, like ‘The leeks are getting bigger’ or ‘Who’s the dirty pig who got my floor all muddy?’” (Némirovsky 53). Jeanne concludes that the life of the unknown woman she is looking at has revolved around the home, the private sphere, because she is a woman she must have been assigned traditional gender roles.

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<sup>7</sup> Florence’s act could also be interpreted as her choosing beauty and shallowness (the make-up) instead of knowledge (Corte’s manuscripts). Interpreted this way the quote would be considered to reinforce gender roles.

Moreover, Arlette Corail realises that the war has been started by men, because they are the ones in charge, women have nothing to do with the start of the war (because they are not allowed to participate in politics) and have to suffer the consequences of men's deeds:

Please let us get back to a normal way of life, whatever it might be; these wars, revolutions, great historical upheavals might be exciting to men, but to women... Women felt nothing but boredom. She was positive that every woman would agree with her: they were tired of crying, bored to death by all these noble words and noble feelings! As for men... it was hard to know, difficult to say... In some ways those simple souls were incomprehensible, whereas for at least fifty years women had been concerned only with the commonplace, the ordinary... (Némirovsky 93)

In the aforementioned quote it is also important to highlight that Arlette calls men "those simple souls" and "incomprehensible", subverting the roles given to women of unknowledgeable and impossible to understand. Plus, the fact that she mentions that women have been assigned the private sphere shows that she is aware that because she is a woman the patriarchal society expects her to belong to the home.

Besides, another female character, Madeleine Labarie, when looking at her newborn baby comments: "I'm glad it's a boy, men don't have it so bad" (Némirovsky 213). This means that she is aware that because she is a woman her life is more difficult than if she were male.

Finally, the character of Lucile, when talking about her husband Gaston with her mother-in-law, Madame Angellier, says: "I got married because I was a little goose, because Papa said, 'He's a good man. He'll make you happy'" (Némirovsky 243). Lucile is aware that the only reason why she got married was because she had to obey her father and the fact that she compares herself to an animal, a goose, shows that she realises that she was just something that changed hands, not even human, but an animal.

#### ***4.2.4. The world of work: stepping outside the private sphere***

As it happened during the war in real life France, in *Suite Française* many women are also obliged to take over the roles their husband's had, that is, providing for the family (Fauteaux 32). This was a great opportunity for women, as many did not have the chance to work and be paid for it, but due to war this changes: "For the past few months she had replaced her husband at the factory" (Némirovsky 67).

Although stepping outside the private sphere and immersing in the world of work was a great opportunity, it did not mean the liberation of women from the traditional role of having to stay at home. The truth is that their duties in the home did not come to an end; they had to work inside and outside the home in times of war, which exhausted them:

And the Bérards from La Montagne [...] since her husband was taken prisoner, the poor woman has gone mad from exhaustion and all her problems. The only people left to keep the farm going are her grandfather and a little thirteen-year-old girl. And as for the Cléments... the mother has died from overwork. (Némirovsky 247)

Therefore, getting into the world of work is liberating from the role assigned to women of having to belong only to the private sphere, without taking part in the public sphere. But at the same time, getting a paid job does not liberate them from the household chores, and they end up having a double burden. It is due to this reason that in this case there is not a total liberation, as women have to work inside and outside the home.

#### ***4.2.5. Taking part in the war***

Regarding war, Lucile is the female character who is the most involved in the war. Due to a letter she receives from the Michaud family (Némirovsky 263), we know that during their exodus from Paris she helps the couple, taking them in.

Besides, she is the one who faces the Germans. She takes advantage from her relationship with Bruno, because as Madeleine tells Lucile: “I’ve heard... forgive me, Madame Lucile, I’ve heard he’s in love with you and that you can do whatever you like” (Némirovsky 309). Thanks to her relationship with the German lieutenant she gives back the Perrin ladies their belongings from their occupied home, and for this she is admired: “An old woman who couldn’t even look at a German uniform without being terrified nevertheless came up to Lucile and whispered, ‘That’s it... Well done! At least you’re not afraid of them...’” (Némirovsky 277).

Moreover, Lucile also uses her relationship with Bruno in order to try to get Bonnet, the German lieutenant billeted at the Labarie’s, to leave Madeleine alone (Némirovsky 254). Finally, she also asks Bruno for a travel pass so that she can flee from Bussy with Benoît after this last one kills Bonnet: “Could you recommend me to someone at Headquarters who could get me a travel pass and petrol coupon as a matter

of urgency? I have to drive to Paris...” (Némirovsky 341). Therefore, it is true that Lucile does not go to the front, but she does participate in the war, helping people in the exodus and making use of her relationship with the German lieutenant.

#### ***4.2.6. Liberation from male control***

Due to the war there are a few female characters that end up without the male partner they were with at the beginning of the struggle. This means that these characters will no longer have to fulfill the assigned roles of a wife or lover of a man, which leads to a liberation from those roles.

In the case of Arlette Corail, she ends up leaving her lover Corbin, the Michaud’s boss, behind and flees on her own:

“She remembered his drooping, corpse-like jaw; she’d wanted to give him a chin strap to hold it closed. Pathetic! Leaving him in Tours amid the terrible confusion and chaos, she’d taken the car, managed to find some petrol and left.” (Némirovsky 91)

Arlette is not married to Corbin (she is his mistress) and therefore does not have to fulfill the role of a wife, but she did have to be in an inferior position when having him as a partner because of her gender. Due to war she is no longer with Corbin and is consequently liberated from the inferior role she is assigned when being with him.

Madeleine Labarie is also liberated from the roles assigned to a wife, as Benoît runs away. She was unhappy with him because she loved another man (Némirovsky 235-236) and although she will have to fulfill the role of a mother, because she has a child, she no longer has to fulfill the role of a wife.

Finally, Lucile is also liberated from male control because of war. Firstly, her husband is a POW, which means that during the exodus and the occupation she does not have to fulfill the role of a wife, neither the role of a mother because she does not have any children. Nevertheless, when she starts having her relationship with Bruno she again is assigned the gender roles she has to fulfill as a woman in a couple. But she ends up realising that although she does have feelings for the German lieutenant she prefers to be free:

Let them go where they want; as for me, I’ll do as I please. I want to be free. I’m not asking for superficial freedom, the freedom to travel, to leave this house (even though that would be unimaginably blissful). I’d rather feel free inside—

to choose my own path, never to waver, not to follow the swarm. (Némirovsky 303)

Among the characters of *Suite Française* Lucile is the one who changes the most, and she realises this: “She had disappeared; all that was left of Lucile Angellier was a lifeless ghost, a woman who wandered aimlessly through the rooms” (Némirovsky 304). With this quote it can be interpreted that Lucile has left behind the woman she was before. This last idea is reinforced when later on Lucile asserts her independence as a woman: “‘A room, a house of my very own,’ thought Lucile, ‘a perfect room, almost bare, a beautiful lamp...’” (Némirovsky 304). This is a clear reference to Virginia Woolf’s essay *A Room of One’s Own* and with this it is seen that the war has had an impact on Lucile; that she no longer wants to be dependent of a man, but independent.

To conclude with the analysis of the liberation from gender roles, it could be said that some female characters take control, out themselves before men, realise inequality, confront the enemy and liberate from male control. It is also important to highlight that in some cases the freedom women get from gender roles cannot be considered to be total, as those roles will probably have to be assumed again when the war ends. At the same time, in the case of Lucile it can be concluded that she has developed the most with regard to gender awareness.

## **5. Conclusion**

After carrying out an analysis regarding gender roles I conclude that female characters in *Suite Française* do in fact suffer reinforcement of gender roles as well as liberation from these.

Regarding reinforcement, in the case of singlehood, having sexual relationships and religion double standards have been spotted. Besides, it has been seen that perpetuation of gender roles is given because of the the mimicking of younger male characters (Hurbert and René). In addition, the character of the Péricand’s nanny could be analysed through intersectional feminism due to the fact that she suffers from a double standard because she is female and belongs to the working class. Apart from that, it is important to highlight that the reinforcement of roles happens in some cases

because there is no sorority between women (i.e.: when Cécile judges Madeleine for flirting).

With regard to liberation from gender roles, in some cases there is not a total liberation, as when the war ends those female characters will have to fulfill the role they had before the war. On the other hand, it has been concluded that stepping outside the private sphere and immersing in the world of work can be a double-edged weapon. Besides, it has also been seen that the biggest liberation from gender roles is given in Lucile, because during war she goes through a deep character development regarding gender awareness.

Finally, following Campbell and Goldstein's thesis (presented at Section 1), after the war it seems to be quite probable that women frequently are assigned again the same roles they were liberated from during war. The only exception in *Suite Française* is Lucile, who achieves independence through gender awareness.



## Appendix

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