

# The Pariah in Contemporary Society: A Black Sheep or a Prodigal Child?

Marcienne Martin, PhD  
Chercheuse associée — Laboratoire ORACLE  
Université de l'île de la Réunion [France]

Villa Juvénal, 2 rue Mathieu Laurens  
34000, Montpellier, France

## ABSTRACT

About the book written by Marcienne Martin, *The Pariah in Contemporary Society: A Black Sheep or a Prodigal Child?*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017, 145 p.

Be the ugly duckling in a family, the head of a Turk in a group, or the pariah in a society, amounts to living in marked and implicit difference, in indifference, even in cruelty.

The research which this book is dedicated to articulates the concept of the “pariah,” and it is through the various filters presented above that we will proceed to its analysis. Besides these, we will try to study the notion of the “pariah” using the different strata that make up human society, such as wonderful tales and literature. We will also present the perception of lexicologists and psychologists, because behind the word there is the object, which is apprehended differently by the human psyche because it is included in value systems varying from one sociocultural group to another. Even though the project is ambitious, it cannot cover this notion entirely because a large number of questions emerge from it. This amounts to opening a Pandora's Box dedicated to this status constructed by human beings, which is based on the diachronic stratum of the lexicology and the symbolic, but also the very nature of living.

**Keywords:** Pariah, Sociology, Lexicology, Group, Individual.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

If we consider all objects of the world (the paradigm of the living being or that of the inanimate object), each object occupies, within the biotope called “Earth,” a well-defined space that is its own: two objects cannot occupy the same space. However, the available resources for the supply of energy that will allow the living world to remain as it is, ensuring the perpetuation of its species, are limited, be it in space or time. These contingencies induce operating modes of living dedicated to ensuring the survival of the group.

Moreover, the human being group system is built on the basis of various societal symbolic, genealogical and anthroponymic, national, linguistic and cultural, religious or atheist, and political aspects. The anthropogenesis refers, among others, to the anthroponomy that will integrate the individual into a first type of belonging. Thus, if the geneticists have been able to decode different genomes, including that of the hominid, its transcript takes shape from a societal and symbolic point of view through anthroponomy.

## 2. THE TERM “PARIAH”: WHAT LEXICOLOGISTS ARE SAYING

Knowing an object of the world uses different cognitive procedures, such as the relation between the lexico-semantic substratum of the questioning subject, the correlation between perceived differences, and an experience previously had and one in progress. As a means of identification for the living world, the unnamed becomes a lexical unit integrating language. It is then “re-known” as part of the lexico-semantic experience and personal history of the observer. Difference and identity are the two concepts that govern the world. Language is used for their transcription through different classificatory systems. Being part of a group means sharing its values and attributes. The first belonging is of the phylogenetic order. Being born as a human being, it is also belonging to the family of mammals of the order Primates, in the living species of *Hominidae*. More specifically, it is being part of such genealogical lineages, whether they are origin or adoption. As for the social inclusion mode of this type of belonging, it varies from one culture to another, which refers to how the group is structured and therefore, more generally, to the organising phenomenon from a given set of objects. Organisation is a way of managing and structuring a set of objects in order to give them a common basis which forms the substructure of belonging.

Lexicological consultation indicates that the lexeme “pariah” comes from the Tamil etymological term *Parayan* meaning “player of drums” (Rey, 2006: 2575). According to Rey (2006), there had been a lexical confusion with another term, *puliyar*, which has the meaning of “people belonging to the lowest caste.” Furthermore, the individual having the role of player of the drum, as part of the accompaniment of the dead, is part of the impure caste, also known as “caste of the untouchables.” In order to illustrate we will quote Douglas, who has studied the notion of “dirty” in the different spaces of society in general. An example are the Brahmans Havik applying requirements relating to the field of hygiene—requirements that, if infringed, would end with various sanctions. So: “[A Havik] who works in his garden with his untouchable servant may be seriously defiled if he comes to touch a rope or bamboo at the same time with the servant. What defiles them is the simultaneous contact with the bamboo or rope.”

The pariah therefore possesses a status and has a particular role in the social group. Metaphorical references are there to demonstrate it, as can be seen in Table 1 below (as the French metaphors are sometimes different to English metaphors, they appear in French with their translations into English).

“Black beast” French language ( <i>Bête noire</i> )	To be the person, the thing we hate above all
“Scapegoat” French language ( <i>Bouc émissaire</i> )	Belongs to apotropaic <sup>1</sup> bestiary inherited from Judaism via Christianity
“Mangy ewe” French language ( <i>Brebis galeuse</i> )	Person regarded as bad and who, for this reason, we take aside
“To be the plastron of” French language ( <i>être le plastron de</i> )	Person, object which is taunted with pleasant attacks
“Light maintenance man” French language ( <i>Lampiste</i> )	Subordinate employee on which falls the responsibility of faults attributable to their superiors
“Black sheep” French language ( <i>Mouton noir</i> )	A person who, in a family or group, is perceived as different, marginal, and held more or less aside <sup>2</sup>
“Whipping boy” French language ( <i>Souffre-douleur</i> )	Person exposed to jokes, abuse, and the contempt of others
“Turk's head” French language ( <i>Tête de Turc</i> )	Person who is the target of attacks and taunts
Source: The non-indexed definitions in footnotes are from the Treasure of French Language Computerised (TLFi), <a href="http://atilf.atilf.fr">http://atilf.atilf.fr</a>	

Let us analyse each of these locutions. The “black beast” refers to an object feared or hated, that is to say excluded from the speaker's universe, even if they must deal with it. Accounting can be the black beast of a person, but a person can also be considered as such. In this case, there is rejection, less by contempt or disrepute than by hatred or fear. The study of each of the lexical units, the combination of which is the origin of that metaphor, shows that the term “beast” is a hypernym designating a being belonging to the animal kingdom, but whose hominid is excluded; as to the adjectival value “black,” it refers to something whose characteristic is the absence of colour or absence of light, which gives to the signifier of the locution the following values: an animal considered in its generic sense, but without specificity. That, of course, refers to the notion of a pariah, of excluded, non-existent people.

Regarding the metaphor “scapegoat” in the general introduction to the study “Scapegoat, Turk's head and Whipping Boy” (“Boucs émissaires, têtes de Turc et souffre-douleur”), Chauvaud et al. mention that: “In Jewish tradition, the high priest, before entering, once a year, the tabernacle, chose a billy goat on which he laid one hand, confessed his sins and that of

<sup>1</sup> Adjective (Greek *apotropaios*, which diverts the ills). It refers to an object, a formula, to divert evil influences to someone else. The definition is available at <http://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/apotropa%C3%AFque>.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/mouton/53006/locution>.

the people, and then asked God to divert on the horned beast the punishment deserved by the human community”. (2012: 7)

We find the status and role given to a pariah in Boris Vian's work, where an individual has to carry the sins of the inhabitants of a village and is given the status and role of pariah: “‘I get the barge,’ said the man. ‘And they pay me out in shame and in gold’” (1953: 57).

The “mangy ewe” uses two occurrences whose first refers to superorder ungulate mammals belonging to the order Artiodactyla (with an equal number of toes per foot), and the family of *Bovidae* (ovine), in the class of females. From a metaphorical point of view, the comparison of a person with this animal refers to the meaning of “docile people, impressionable, being easily led, fooled or dispossessed” (TLFi). This connection between docility, naivety and submission finds its full expression in the metaphor of being a “sheep of Panurge,” which applies to someone who is “easily influenced, letting themselves be led by others thoughtlessly,” from an expression in Rabelais' work: “Suddenly I do not know how the thing happened so fast, I had no time to consider it. Panurge, without saying another thing, threw at sea his sheep shouting and bleating. All the other sheep, shouting and bleating with the same intonation, began to throw themselves into the sea and jump in after him, in single file.” (1941: 137)

As to scabies, it corresponds to a highly contagious skin disorder. Weakness of character reinforced by illness embodies the metaphor of a pariah.

“To be the plastron of” is a locution with its source in “a piece of armour that covers and protects the chest”; symbolically, it means that the person designated a “plastron of” will receive blows through language.

In its old sense, the light maintenance man is a “labourer who makes and sells lamps (reservoir).” In its metaphorical referral to being a pariah, it means a person carrying the faults of their superiors. The meaning of this term is close to that of the “scapegoat.”

In the locution “black sheep” we find the lexical units already used in the expressions “black beast” and “mangy ewe.”

“Suffer pain” (a French metaphor, “souffre-douleur”) is an expression composed of the following lexical units “suffer” and “pain,” whose meanings amplify each other. Thus, the lexical unit “suffer,” derived from the verb “to suffer,” refers to “a feeling of pain and suffering”; as to the term “pain,” it belongs to the “domain of physical life” and refers to “a more or less intense pain produced by an injury, a burn, a lesion or any other cause.”

As emphasised by Chauvaud et al., the term “Turk's head” first designated a festive measuring instrument intended to gauge someone's strength at a carnival, “a decorated dynamometer of a turbaned head, that of a Turk,” and which implicitly refers to the expression “strong as a Turk.” By analogy, several people hitting the same physical target refer, on the psychological level, “to any individual who is the target of repeated attacks and mockery” (2012: 3).

What is interesting in this lexical analysis is seeing which hypernyms these locutions were constructed around. An analysis of this is presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Presentation of the term “pariah” in the framework of hypernyms	
“Black beast”	Beast: being of the animal kingdom Black: colourless, without light
“Scapegoat”	Billy goat: Family Bovidae Emissary: Agent with a secret mission
“Mangy ewe”	Ewe: Ovine family Scabies: Skin illness
“To be the plastron of”	Piece of armour
“Light maintenance man”	Worker
“Black sheep”	Sheep: Ovine family Black: colourless, without light
“Suffer pain” (French metaphor: <i>souffre-douleur</i> )	Suffers: unpleasant sensation or even unbearable Pain: unpleasant sensation or even unbearable
“Turk’s head”	Head: top part of human body Turkish: Turkish nationality
Source: The non-indexed definitions in footnotes are from: <a href="http://atilf.atilf.fr">http://atilf.atilf.fr</a>	

All of these metaphors emphasise the animal in its generic sense (beast) or as belonging to the family of *Bovidae* (caprine and ovine), the colour black, disease and pain, the lowest social classes, a secret (Emissary), a plastron (to protect itself), and a Turk’s head (to vent its frustration). As we can see, the lexicon has been caught in the classes of hypernyms, which immediately exclude the subject of the quality of the original person—quality that is specific to them and no one else. Language is a particularly rich way to allow the individual to express their deep thoughts and the forms that closely resemble the disguises used by certain plants or insects so as not to reveal the profound nature of their being.

## 2. A SURVEY OF SOCIAL SUBJECTS WHO EXPERIENCED PARIAH STATUS

The family-type constellation of the human type takes its source in the genome of *homo sapiens*, with a procedure that refers to the animal world in general. Family history is transmitted from generation to generation, as well as connecting the genetic program (genotype) and the organism (phenotype), and carried by the various family lineages underlying them. In order to better understand the functioning of the pariah status in a family or peer group, testimonials were heard from various witnesses having experienced the pariah experience in their family and/or various membership groups. The five interviewees are distributed as follows: two women and three men whose ages, roles, and social statuses differ from one to the other. Daniel B. is considered a pariah in her status as a ward of the state. Isabelle A. is a seller of luxury goods and with a disability. Karine G. is a secretary. Luc M. is retired and spent part of his professional career in public service. Serge L. is retired and was a filmmaker, actor, dramatist, and journalist.

If we look again at all the answers, we find that two respondents have been abandoned by their family of origin: Daniel B. and Karine G., two others differentiated themselves indirectly or directly from their original group by an original personality,

while Luc M. has integrated the status of pariah on the instances of a perverse personage.

The analysis of the schemas (see Figs. 1 and 2 below) refers to the non-recognition of the subject because they do not belong to the genealogical lineages integrated into the social body.

Fig. 1. Construction of the pariah status of Daniel B.

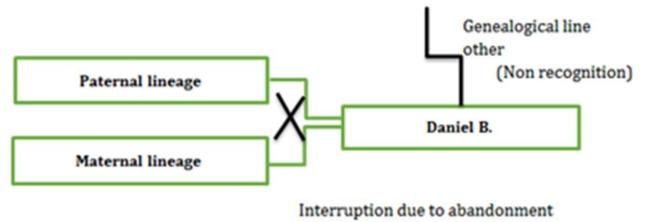
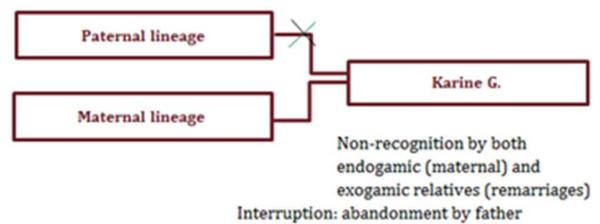


Fig. 2. The construction of the pariah status of Karine G.



Figs. 3 and 4 below refer to the non-recognition of the social subject as a member of the group from which they originated. They are distinguished from the structuring values of their group of belonging either because the ascending member, here the mother, has already been rejected for this reason (Isabelle A.), or because they take an orientation in contradiction to the group's expectations (Serge L.).

Fig. 3. The construction of the pariah status of Isabelle A.

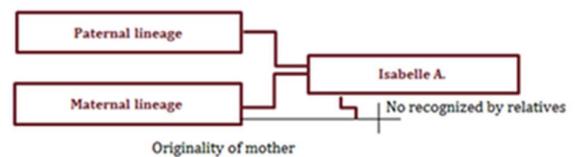


Fig. 4. The construction of the pariah status of Serge L.

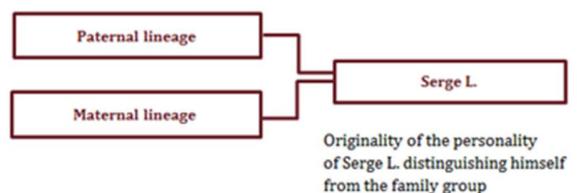
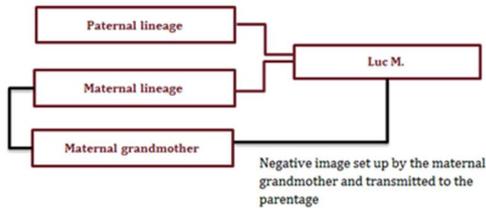


Fig. 5 refers to the establishment of pariah status by a member of the family structure, whose personality seems to be articulated around the perversity, as mentioned by Luc M.

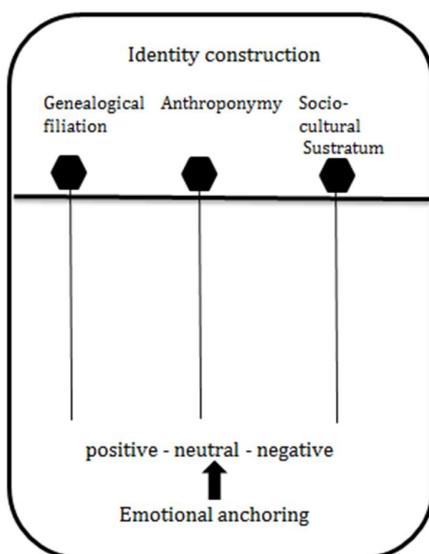
Fig. 5. The construction of the pariah status of Luc M.



To return to the five interviews concerning the status of pariahs with the participants in this questionnaire, we have put in place a scheme synthesizing the potential identity construction of a subject X from invariants and random factors (see Fig. 6 below). The invariants are genealogical chaining, anthroponymy, and the socio-cultural substratum, and it is on the basis of the real and symbolic construction of these that the anchoring of identity will take place. As for the latter, it will depend on factors such as the perception of the experience of a single mother through the mirror that will return to her the gaze of such a group/individual belonging to a certain socio-cultural substratum given the resemblance with such a member of the family, being well-perceived or poorly perceived, the acceptance or not of a new member not belonging to the reference genealogical lineage, etc.

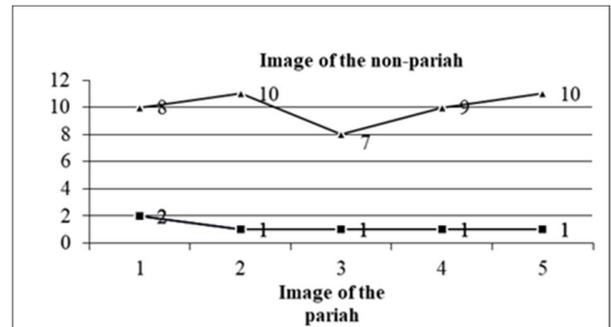
If invariants such as genealogical filiation, anthroponymy, or socio-cultural substrate participate in the construction of identity, the emotional colour that will be given to them will become part of the image returned to the newcomer by the group of belonging. This image will vary from positive to negative in passing through neutrality or indifference, as we can see in Fig. 6 below.

Fig. 6. Identity construction and emotional anchoring



The image returned by the family group, or its representation (adoptive family) for Daniel B., Isabelle A., Karine G., Luc M., and Serge L., is close to the non-existence of the social subject, since on a scale of 1 to 10 this image was evaluated as 1 by four interviewees and 2 by Daniel B. (see Fig. 7 below).

Fig. 7. Between pariah and non-pariah: an evaluation of self-image



Through the various testimonies gathered we find that the articulation around which the image of the pariah has been structured has its roots in the emotional experience of each of the respondents. Thus, Serge L. says he has always been sure of himself, which translates into a non-pariah image evaluated at 10 out of 10, while Isabelle A., growing during her lifetime, realized that her way of being totally corresponded to her, and so the non-pariah score is judged to be 10 out of 10. For Daniel B., if the judgement that his entourage had of him left him feeling indifferent, this resonates with the rating of 2 out of 10 for the status of a pariah, and 8 out of 10 for that of a non-pariah. Luc M. assesses his non-pariah status at 9 out of 10. As for Karine G., who has a degraded image of herself because of the pariah status imposed on her, the evaluation of her image of a non-pariah is 7 out of 10.

The evaluation of the status of the pariah with a score close to zero (1 and 2)—that is to say non-existent—shows the construction of a self-image based on devaluation, since question 5 was articulated around the value given to one's own image as a pariah and a non-pariah (see Table 3 below).

Table 3. Evaluation of the image between the pariah and non-pariah status		
Interviewees	Status of pariah	Status of non-pariah
Daniel B.	2	8
Isabelle A.	1	10
Karine G.	1	7
Luc M.	1	9
Serge L.	1	10

In this case, the singularity of the group organization (biological and adoptive family, close and distant kinship) lies in the fact that, although it is composed of a set of units aggregated around a common base—the genealogical lineage—as well as values that refer to membership as the anthroponymy, which reinforces its anchoring, it happens that one or more units composing the group are rejected because they do not fulfil the integration criteria. These conditions refer, first and foremost, to a group unit erasing any individual peculiarity. This is tantamount to inscribing the disruptive unit with a negative representation of

what it really is, and thus proceeding to a freezing of its image which will be transmitted and integrated by the whole community of belonging.

Physical and verbal violence is the basis for the solidification of pariah status in the group. Within the framework of this particular status, the frozen representation of an image constructed under the sign of rejection refers to the myth of Medusa or *Sleeping Beauty* [*La Belle au bois dormant*]. Concerning Medusa, one of the three Gorgons, guardian of the gates of hell, Guirand and Schmidt mention: "Medusa availed herself of the peculiar terror which she inspired in mortals, with her hair formed of serpents, her immense teeth, and the convulsions which clenched her face, and her gaze, petrifying all those who were exposed to her attack" (1996: 758).

Expressions such as "being frozen in terror" refer to a blockage of the reactions of the author, operated at a given time, and in relation to a particularly shocking or traumatic event.

In *Sleeping Beauty*, it is the kiss of the prince who awakes the princess from the sleeping state; this was already programmed in the cradle.

In the context of a group structure where acceptance is the norm, self-construction in love and exchange allows for the enlightenment or awakening of the personality, even if it has undergone the test of malevolent perceptions generated by a group having rejected them.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

A gregarious structure, individuation, and same and different represent a set of mirrors that is constantly updated. We find this in the context of the metaphor of "birds of a feather flock together" or "opposites attract." This game can be translated into very wide possibilities. Thus, the group structure, in which everyone belongs to the group before being an individual, finds its acme within dictatorial organizations in which every individual is bound to have a given behaviour, and where thought is no longer creative but conditioned. Articulated around the "same" and the "different," the living world participates in strange phenomena: architect genes, stem cells, and varied species whose specificity is, however, derived from common trunks. Each unit forming the said universe is declined, simultaneously, into a similar object and a completely different object.

As part of the survey of five people who experienced pariah status within their family group, we found that identity anchoring is articulated around invariants such as family lineage, anthroponymy, sex, sociocultural substratum, culture, language, and beliefs. Concerning the random factors that may trigger the establishment of the status of pariah to such a member of a family group or other, they refer to the values of belonging to the group. These last are defined by organizational structures such as totalitarian regimes (political or religious) based on the integration of individuals as a unit of the whole, which must respect the dogmatic rules laid down; here, the human being no longer has an existence as such. These same rules may be in resonance with the genealogical lineage where, in certain groups, a child born without the lineages of origin, through the father and mother, is approved by the whole community, or rejected *ipso facto* (as a bastard, adulterine, or as illegitimate, for instance). Monarchies have long rejected

marriage with commoners. The selfish gene obliges! On this subject, the research of biologist Richard Dawkins opens a new exploratory area in this field.

The identity construction is also articulated around the emotional field, which exists between two major poles: love and hate. In the case of the pariah, the emotion felt is rejection, or indifference; that is to say, emotional values outside the constructive affective field. Fusional or unconditional love and absolute rejection echo the phenomena of attraction and repulsion. In the interviews described in this book, some testimonies show that, depending on the configuration of the environment, the status of pariah can lead to a freezing of the personality and thus block the adult in the realization of their life projects (as for Karine G.). Others may have created some distance from their experience based on misunderstanding and fear, and activated emotions such as contempt for the instigators of their pariah status. From contempt to rejection, Gide expressed this with the statement: "Families, I hate you!"

The reification of the social subject is the status attributed to the pariah, referring to an appointment using generalist terms such as "black sheep," which is a way of integrating them—to disappear them—into the group of which they must not belong. Inscribing such a person into an identity constructed from depreciating metaphors is tantamount to including them in the very essence of this meaning.

The instances that make up the living world, such as identity and difference through genealogical chaining, attraction, and repulsion, transcribed and activated in the emotional field of the human through language and the affective sphere, or the power of one entity over another, would not entail, within the framework of a very specific configuration, the telescoping of some of them, which would then lead to considering someone as having no specificity peculiar to them, and thus being able to use it as an outlet, and failing that to inscribe it in the universe of the unnamed, or even of the unnameable.

### 4. REFERENCES

- [1] F. Chauvaud, J-C Gardes, C. Moncelet, & S. Vernois, (dir.), **Boucs émissaires, têtes de Turcs et souffre-douleur**, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2012.
- [2] R. Dawkins, **Le Gène égoïste**, Paris: Odile Jacob, 2003.
- [3] M. Douglas, **De la souillure, Essai sur les notions de pollution et de tabou**, Paris: Éditions La Découverte & Syros, 2001.
- [4] A. Gide, **Les nourritures terrestres**, Paris: Édition du groupe, « Ebooks libres et gratuits », 1897.
- [5] F. Guirand, & J. Schmidt, **Mythes mythologie, histoire et dictionnaire**, Paris: Larousse, 1996.
- [6] M. Martin, **The Pariah in Contemporary Society: A Black Sheep or a Prodigal Child?**, Great Britain: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017.
- [7] C. Perrault, **Contes de ma mère l'Oye**, La Bibliothèque électronique du Québec: Collection À tous les vents, Volume 61, version 1.02, [1697], 1968.
- [8] F. Rabelais, **Gargantua et Pantagruel**, Paris: Bibliothèque Larousse, Volume 2, 1941.
- [9] A. Rey, dir., **Dictionnaire historique de la langue française**, Paris: Le Robert, en 3 tomes, 2006.
- [10] Vian, B., **L'arrache-cœur**, 1953. <http://www.ebooksgratuits.com>