

Duras and “I”: Characterization of Feminist “I” in Marguerite Duras’s Autobiography: *The Lover*

DURAS ET « JE » : CARACTERISATION DU « JE » FEMINISTE DANS L’AUTOBIOGRAPHIE DE MARGUERITE DURAS : *L’AMANT*

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Abstract: Marguerite Duras, a famous French novelist, playwright and film director in the twenties century lets us audience appreciate more of her literary and aesthetic values through the novel *The Lover*. This essay, based on the detailed analysis of the text *The lover*, explores the autobiographical features of writing and feminist representation in the novel. Duras handles expertly her autobiographical narration, the relationship between fabrication and reality or the novel and her own life experience. More importantly, Duras, though she never acclaims herself a feminist, creates a very powerful feminist role, “I”. Those features of feminist writing are presented obviously through non-linear or chorological narrative structure, language of stream of unconscious, ungrammatical syntax, libidinal description, lesbian love and dominating role of woman. The novel can undoubtedly be considered as a proclamation of feminists.

Key words: Duras, Autobiography, Feminist

Résumé: Marguerite Duras, romancière française réputée, dramaturge et metteur en scène du 20e siècle, nous permet d’apprécier ses valeurs littéraires et esthétiques à travers son roman *L’Amant*. L’article présent, basé sur des analyses détaillées du texte de *L’Amant*, étudie les caractéristiques autobiographiques de l’écriture et la représentation féministe dans ce roman. Duras traite habilement sa narration autobiographique, la relation entre la création et la réalité, celle entre le roman et sa propre expérience. Le plus important, c’est que Duras a créé un rôle féministe tout puissant « Je », bien qu’elle ne se soit jamais proclamée féministe. Ces traits de l’écriture féministe sont présentés évidemment à travers la structure de narration non-linéaire ou chorologique, le langage du courant de conscience, la syntaxe non-grammaticale, la description libidineuse, le lesbianisme et le rôle dominant de la femme. Le roman peut être incontestablement considéré comme une proclamation des féministes.

Mots-Clés: Duras, autobiographie, féministe

Marguerite Duras, a French novelist, scenarist, playwright, and film director has drawn the attention of the world in the twenties century. Her novels have ever been considered readable and understood only by intellectuals till the novel *The Lover* was published and made into a film. The film made a great commercial success. And through the novel it becomes easier for us to access to her literary works. The novel, *The lover*, is considered one of Marguerite Duras’s autobiographies which arouse the interest of the people of the world to know about her life as a female writer. At the same the time we appreciate the novel for its literary and aesthetic values. So in this essay I would try to explore the autobiographical writing and feminist representation in her novel, *The Lover*.

As a world-famous female writer, her life easily becomes our readers’ attention especially when her works revealed some of her life experiences. Marguerite Duras was born in April 1914, in Sigon, a part of Indochina where the story in the novel takes places. She is the youngest of the three children. She has two brothers both of whom appear as characters in the story. Both of her parents were teachers. The family went to the colonies between 1900 and 1903. It is against this period that the novel is set. Later her father was forced for health reasons to return to France, where he died of amoebic dysentery. Duras’s mother was left with Marguerite herself, aged 4, and her two brothers, 9 and 7 at the time, having to survive in hard circumstances. At the age of 18 Marguerite left Indochina for France, where she began studying for a degree in mathematics

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which also becomes a detail in the novel. She soon abandoned to concentrate on political sciences and then law. Subsequently she worked for the French Colonial Office as a researcher and archivist. She married the writer, Robert Antelme in 1939. Two years later she published her first novel. In December 1942, the younger of Duras's two brothers died in Indochina. About the younger brother and his death, Duras talks a lot in the novel. In 1946, Duras divorced. She began publishing a series of journalistic pieces during 1950s. Many of them are interview, character sketches, vignettes, anecdotes or book review. Gradually Duras began to establish herself as a writer, and by the end of the 1950s she had published eight novels and had her first play produced. In 1970s, Duras began to add much autobiographical content to her writing. By the mid-1980s, Duras was found writing (semi-)autobiographies. (Hill 1993) *The Lover* is one of them, which has the most important influence on our reader.

In the novel, *The Lover* Duras portrays a teenage schoolgirl, "I" as a narrator who lives in nineteen-twenties French Colonial Vietnam with her impoverished family: her widowed mother and her two brothers. One day the narrator is getting away to her boarding school. On the boat over the Mekong River to Saigon she met a wealthy and handsome Chinese businessman in his thirties. When he suggests that he give her lift to the boarding house in his car, she accepts it without hesitation. They are obviously drawn to each other. The girl knows her love with a Chinese man is an affair that will never be accepted by both families. So she doesn't want commitment, but a chance to experience her sexuality, as well as show her dysfunctional family her independence. Tired of his arranged marriage, he naturally falls in love with the French girl that is so young and unique. They encounter time and again in his "bachelor's room" though they know it's only a matter of time before it must end. Finally the girl left for France. Many years later she got his phone call that he came to France with his wife.

In the novel we've found some details are quite similar to Duras's own life experience, but we can't say the narrator "I" or the schoolgirl is Duras herself. Even the novel is considered as an autobiography, the narrator "I" and Duras are somewhat different. Liz Stanley proposes that auto/biography claims to be realistic, premised on the preferentiality of the "I" or the subject of biographical research, both are by nature "artful enterprises which select, shape, and produce a very unnatural product." That the autobiographical selves are "deeply and irresolvably fractured" is augmented by the unrecoverable nature of the past, that there is no direct and unproblematic access to the past self or a succession of these selves. As memory is limited, fictive devices are necessary in reproducing and representing accounts of past lives, and all selves invoked in auto/biographies

indeed become non-referential.² So Duras's autobiography is blurring the border between the real and the fictitious, the actual and the imaginary. Duras says in the novel:

"The story of my life doesn't exist. Does not exist. There's never any center to it. No path, no line. There are great spaces where you pretend there used to be someone, but it's not true, there was no one." (8)

"I've never written, though I thought I wrote, never loved, though I thought I loved, never done anything but wait outside the closed door." (25)

On the other hand, if we look into the text itself, the factual elements are revealed clearly. "The crucial ambiguity of the image lies in the hat. How I came by it I've forgotten." "I'm using make-up already. I don't know where I got that perhaps Helene Lagonelle stole it for me from her mother, I forget." Actually the words "I forgot" indicate that author is recollecting something that has happened. It's a true story to some extent.

As a female writer, Duras created a lot of female characters in her works. Some critics think Duras's position as a feminist is ambiguous because she was not consistently active in the French feminist movement nor were her representations of women consistently progressive. But, Sharon A. Willis maintains that Duras's "interest for and influence upon overtly feminist literary, critical, and theoretical enterprises is powerful." In the novel, Duras creates a new "self" in the novel who could represent a feminist to speak and act. Next I'll explore the feminist writing of the novel.

The novel's narrative structure is against the traditional autobiography which is usually in linear or chorological narration. Duras in her novel mentions the same time, place, event throughout the book time and again, here and there:

"So, I'm fifteen and a half.

It's on a ferry crossing the Mekong River.

The image lasts all the way across.

I'm fifteen and a half, (5)

I'm fifteen and a half. Crossing the river. Going back to Saigon I feel I'm going on a journey ... (9)

...

Fifteen and a half. The news spreads fast in Sadec...." (88)

Obviously these are examples of stream of unconscious. It's like what Virginia Woolf does in her novel, *A room of one's room*. Cixous argues feminine texts are texts that "work on the difference", strive in the direction of difference, and struggle to undermine the dominant phallogocentric logic, split open the closure of the binary opposition and revel in the pleasures of open-ended textuality." (Hoi 1998) Traditional and

² From Amy TY Lai's essay: Self and Other: Narrativity in Xinran's *The Good Women of China* and *Sky Burial*.

especially male autobiographies usually re-order and make sense of past events with a "single, teleological, and unified point of view or vision". Duras writes in a sort of stream of unconscious and nowhere does she attempt to give the impression that meaning can be obtained in the book's linear, chronological and progressive order, since this is a traditional male way of deleting and editing (Fiamengo 1994, 232).

Feminine writing is libidinal object or act. In the novel, sexual scenes between the young girl "I" and the Chinese man are highlighted in detail. The Chinese man is strongly attracted to the French girl's young body and the girl also enjoys the pleasure of sexuality and takes an active role. She "draws him to her and starts to undress him. With her eyes shut. Slowly. He makes as if to help her. She tells him to keep still. Let me do it. She says she wants to do it. And she does. Undresses him." She even can't express herself in words, "At first, pain. And then the pain is possessed in its turn, changed, slowly drawn away, borne toward pleasure, clasped to it. The sea, formless, simply, beyond compare." Duras subverts the traditional view of women in her heavy emphasis on female sexuality and on the erotic. She let female's voice be heard through their body. The girl expresses strong desire to write, through which she become stronger and powerful.

"I can see it in the eyes, all there already in the eyes. I want to write. I've already told my mother: That's what to ----write". (21)

Besides the love between the girl and Chinese man, the writer also portrays the relationship between women, the girl and her friend, a French girl. She is overwhelmed by the beauty for Helene Lagonelle's body. She loves her "sublime, naked" body. She wants to touch "her breast". She says, "I'm worn out with desire for Helene Lagonelle." The narrator's strong desire for another young girl is obviously a lesbian desire. Duras's portrayal of lesbian relationship actually has a special purpose of feminist ideology since "lesbian textuality more generally as any narrative space which disrupts the binary structures of patriarchal heterosexuality." (Gunther 156) The binary structure of man and female has then been deconstructed. Besides the lesbian feeling of the narrator, which is considered as social prohibition, we also find that her desire for her younger brother which somewhat reminds us of incest. There is a sharp contrast between her sincere love for her younger brother and deep hatred for her elder brother. When the younger brother died, she is so painful: "...my younger brother's body was mine as well, I had to die. And I am dead. My younger brother gathered me to him, drew me to him, and I am dead." (105) Lesbian feeling and incestuous experience are both prohibited and thus presented as unconventional and nontraditional voice of feminist.

Another detail concerning feminism is the portrayal of the madness of mother. When narrator's mother found her daughter has an affair with a Chinese man,

she "attacks" her, "[s]he's going to throw her out, she wishes she'd die, no one will have anything to do with her, she's disgraced, worse than a bitch."(58) Mother's madness is obvious since "I see my mother is clearly mad. I see that Do and my brother have always had access to that madness. But that I, no, I've never seen it before. Never seen my mother in the state of being mad." (30) Duras again subverts the image of a traditional mother who is usually gentle, considerate and care for her daughter. It testifies to Moi's argument that the female textual strategy consists in 'assaulting and revising, deconstructing and reconstructing those images of women inherited from male literature, especially...the paradigmatic polarities of angel and monster' And this is where the eponymous madwoman makes her entree into their argument...." (Moi 1998)

The most important point about the feminist "I" in the novel is the dominating role of "I" among all the characters. The narrator protrudes her superiority as a woman by suppressing men who usually have dominating role in patriarchal society. The narrator never mentions her father. She loves her younger brother just because of his fragility. In narrator's eyes, her brother dares not to speak a word after being insulted by the old brother. She disappointedly saw, "Between his lashes, the beginning of tears." (80) The brother has other weaknesses for which he may be looked down upon. "He was uneducated, he never managed to learn anything. He couldn't speak, could scarcely read, scarcely write, sometimes you'd think he couldn't even suffer. He was someone who didn't understand and was afraid." (106) Even the lover is "inferior" to her because the beardless Chinese man is passive in sexuality, "weak" in body, and sensible in emotion ("He moans, he cries.").

The characterization of feminist "I" is revealed through the narrator's rebellion against the patriarchal society when she is fifteen and a half years old girl, as well as when she is an old, "ugly" woman. At the beginning of the novel, Duras lets readers see her through the gaze of a male admirer. Her face in no longer has the transparent beauty of a youthful photograph but is ravaged by the irreducible suffering of age and living.

"One day, I was already old, in the entrance of a public place a man came up to me. He introduced himself, "I've known you for years. Everyone say you were beautiful when you were young, but I want to tell you I think you're more beautiful now than then. Rather than your face as a young man, I prefer your face as it is now. Ravaged." (1) Duras once again subverts "male gaze", the way man looks at a woman who should be beautiful in appearance. Duras explains what woman's beauty really is.

"I could get it wrong, could think I'm beautiful like women who really are beautiful, like women who are looked at, just because people really do look at me a lot, I know it's not a question of beauty, though, but of

something else, I know it's not clothes that make women beautiful or otherwise, not beauty care, nor expensive creams, not the distinction or costliness of their finery. ..." (18) The image of feminist "I" has therefore been reinforced.

At last, if we look more carefully at the language of the novel, we also find the syntax is typical. "Has ceased to be a harsh, inescapable imposition of nature. Has become, on the contrary, a provoking choice of nature, a choice of the mind." (12-3) "Female but it will come. My mother asks, When? Answer: When she makes up her mind to it, Madame." (22) Instead of using long, well-structured sentences Duras employs short, fluid, flowing, and even "ungrammatical" ones. On the one hand, she is following her sense of unconscious of writing; on the other hand, she is also adopting a feminist writing since long, well-structured sentences

suggest masculine control and rigidity. Duras's own words can prove it more powerfully.

"I think 'feminine literature' is an organic, translated writing... translated from blackness, from darkness. [...] The writing of women is really translated from the unknown, like a new way of communicating rather than an already formed language. But to achieve that, we have to turn away from plagiarism."

Marguerite Duras in *The Lover*, through the characterization of feminist "I", reveals us readers a unique story of a girl who dares to break constraints and conventions from family and society and becomes true to herself. Though the story borrows some facts of Duras's life experience, the character "I" has been reshaped and reconstructed, therefore, becomes stronger and more powerful.

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