

**THE NOVELS OF MARGUERITE DURAS AND THEIR
CINEMATOGRAPHIC VERSION: TOWARDS A FEMININE
PERSPECTIVE**

GITANJALI SINGH

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES & SOC. SCI.

GALGOTIAS UNIVERSITY

NOIDA (U.P.)INDIA.

Abstract

One of the most versatile writers of French literature, Marguerite Duras has written a great many novels and has also mentored her fair share of successful French movies. She was born in 1914 in Indochina, a fact which plays a key role in her writings. She is passionate about the emotion of love especially the one without any hope or which brings death and destruction. This morbid attraction towards the hopeless love could be explained by her personal experiences and impressions. Her novels also explore the female sexuality and eroticism. Some critics have deemed her work as erotic and don't see it as serious literature. However some critics believe that there is more to her novels than what meets the eyes as she presents elegantly the crisis of human emotions experienced during and after the two world wars. The characters in her novels are sinful and they lack moral values. They easily give into temptation and don't shy away from crossing the thin and often blurred line of morality. These are the general themes of some of her famous novels and movies such as "Moderato Cantabile," "Le Marin de Gibraltar," "L'Amant" etc. Her style of narration is also very unique where the whole action would take place in a brief moment. For example, the story of the film "Hiroshima mon amour" takes place in just a night.

This paper proposes to present an analytical study of the themes of her works present in the print and as well as the cinematic version. In addition, the paper would also explore the underlying feminism present in her works.

Key Words: Feminism- literature- film – transgression- women's writing,impossible love

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Marguerite Duras one of the contemporary writers of the 20 the century, is a writer in her own right who doesn't belong to any literary movement in particular. She was born in French Indochina, modern Vietnam during the age of Imperialism. Her colonial upbringing provides inspirations for most of her works. In order to better understand the choices of her themes and inspirations, it is important to understand the personality of Marguerite Duras.

As mentioned earlier, that she was born in French Indochina, her parents were school teachers. She lost her father at a very early age, leaving her and her brothers to be raised by their widowed mother. She didn't have a happy childhood being maltreated at the hands of her elder brother and alcoholic mother. At the age of 17 she moved to France for higher education and never looked back.

Duras has written some 15 novels and many of them have been adapted into movies. Most of her novels are set in the background of east or Far East showing the influence of the childhood she spent in Indochina (Un Barrage Contre Le Pacifique, Le Vice-Consul, L'amant). However, later in her career most of her work had France and Europe in general for the décor. This diverse choice of places showed that maybe the world wasn't enough to quench Duras' thirst for versatility.

Among the films which she has scripted, Hiroshima Mon Amour directed by Alain Resnais remains the most critically acclaimed movie of hers. Her other notable movies are "India Song" and "Les enfants". Some of her novels are semi-autobiographical like in her novel "Un barrage contre le Pacifique" Duras remembers her mother and her childhood in Indochina. There is also a reoccurrence of themes and characters in her works.

For example the play "India Song" which Duras wrote on the request of a director of National Theater of London had the same characters from "Vice-Consul" and so did "La femme du Gange", however, Duras explains that all her novels are original work and not replicas. She justifies her choice of using the same characters by placing them in different scenarios; hence we obtain different reactions and encounter new emotions which were not present in the novel from which she loaned the characters. Thus, Duras brews a different story with different ingredient some same but altogether the end result is different. Even the medium of expression differs, as was seen in the case of "Le Vice-consul" and "India Song", the former being a novel and the latter being a play respectively.

Cinema and cinematography influence Duras a lot more than some would have believed. The events in the novels unfold like series of scenes which reels off in a succession on the silver screen, the dialogue delivery in her novels also drift apart from the conventional ways. The characters in her novels while making a conversation don't converse with anyone in particular. In fact their statements are not even directed towards the readers, it is like they are in a trance where they would let out their deepest and darkest thoughts. These monologues would also resemble a cry. A cry of horror let out in front of the unknown. These statements would be short and precise but never the less deep and thought provoking. However, it's not the dialogues which puzzle readers; it is the prolonged moments of silence and the unsaid which baffle the readers more. The sheer brilliance with which Duras expresses a lot without even uttering a single word is the proof that words have lost importance over the course of time. Insignificance and uselessness are the feelings which her characters experience over and over again, be it love, life or humanity, the fate they meet is always the same. A love which was never meant to be, hopelessness of life, death, injustice, suffering and loneliness are the situations in which the characters of Duras' novels mostly end up and the situation seems unchangeable and never ending. It is like that they are stuck in time unable to move forward. Their pain is unimaginable and the silent cry is sorrowful and miserable.

However, the silence and the cry in Duras' work seem to have the power to express more than a well scripted dialogue or conversation. The cry let out by these characters is hopeless and in vain.

Among the many themes elaborated by Duras, the Mother is one theme which is the reminiscences of her own mother. The role of mother in her stories is always that of a villain which is very contradictory to the very concept of mother. The reason behind this misrepresentation of mother in Duras' novels is gripping and linked to her own mother. Some might call it a form of catharsis which Duras applies in order to get over her unhappy childhood. Deprived of the nurture and safety a mother provides to a kid Duras was forced to lead a life of solitude. The indifferent attitude of Duras' mother towards her own daughter initiated her into writing. The unshakeable resolve, with which she wrote novels, shows that she found solace in writing. Her first successful novel "Un barrage contre le pacifique"(1950) is an auto-biographical work detailing the atrocities of Duras' mother who remains unmoved and indifferent at large. However, Duras feelings towards her mother are mixed. She admires her mother at the same time for raising three kids in a foreign land all by herself in poor conditions.

In the play "India Song" the Vice-consul states that the piece of music "India Song" reminds him of his mother. He personifies the song and says that the song is his mother.

The emotion of love and Duras' experience with it is as ambivalent as the motherly affection. In short, there is attraction and repulsion for it at the same time. Marguerite Duras was a strong, independent and promiscuous woman, thus had many lovers. Hence this shows that she never gave up on love and the repulsion comes from the end her relationships meet which is always bad and leave her torn. In her famous novel "L' Amant" we see how the young girl and her much older lover a Chinese businessman continue their affair well aware that it

would never be accepted and it is doomed, since it's a taboo. Even though, the star crossed lovers never give up on love which borders on temptation and lust. Similarly the heroine Anne-Marie Stretter in *India Song* continues with her promiscuous ways in search of love and thus, keeps changing lovers. Surprisingly, Anne-Mari always took lovers younger than her in an attempt to make for lost time as she was married at a very young age. These young lovers are also intrigued by her beauty and enigmatic personality turning her into a myth or a legend in the eyes of others. So these women in their vain pursuits look for an ideal man but always in the wrong places. It is like they want the relationship to end badly and to never work. On the other hand, the portrayal of men in her stories is not of an ideal hero. They are fickle minded and shift. They also crave for love but their actions take them far away from it. They want to kill the very desire from which the emotion of love stems and hence their *raison d'être*. Love and death go hand in hand in Duras' stories.

Similarly in the movie "*Hiroshima Mon Amour*" the love between the two leads is impossible, it can never bloom. The grim and ghastly scenes of death and destruction caused by the atomic bombings in Hiroshima again reel in the notion of death in love. The two leads are well aware that they can never be together amidst such nightmarish and macabre ongoing events. So, these are the themes which are present in almost each and every literary creation of Duras'- fleeting love, desire, death, malice etc.

Marguerite Duras illustrates her style of writing as one where the subconscious takes control and paints the stories spontaneously on the canvas of imagination. Her style is unique and unparalleled. There is not much action taking place in her novels but sensations. There is no plot, action or character development in Duras' fiction. The Characters have no individuality or personality, they are like the mouthpieces for the author and through them the writer would elaborate the psychological states, they would be dwelling into. This way, the French actress and the Japanese architect in the movie "*Hiroshima Mon Amour*" are unable to love and connect because of the ongoing destruction and war. Man's inhumanity to man here represented by the atomic bombing of Hiroshima by U.S.A is overwhelming for these characters. Another striking technique used by Duras is the way she handles the time duration of the story. The story would always revolve in the present with constant interventions in the form of flashbacks. However, the time seems to be eternal and never ending. As in the movie "*Hiroshima Mon Amour*" the whole film is just about a single night.

Duras prefers prose and is praised for the elegance she transpires while writing it. The sentences are short; dialogues are reduced to an exchange of repetitive soliloquies. Scenes are brief and surreal. Focus is more on the interior voices or unknown voices than on the conversation taking place between the characters. These voices would be a whirlwind of memories completely taking by surprise the unguarded character and importing him/her to the memory lane.

In this part of the paper we would see how the novel *l'Amant* of Marguerite Duras differs from its cinematic version. To start with when we read the novel we feel that it doesn't follow a linear plot but a multi linear plot. However, the movie directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud is a

conventional one which has a beginning, a climax and an end. In her novel Duras follows the rule of “laissezaller” which is more complex. As a result, the story takes the course as it wishes. In the novel there are constant flash backs and time jumps, however, the same does not transpire in the movie. For example, in the novel we observe that the narrator speaks often of the future, in particular, about her son whose existence is way ahead in time than the actual plot as the story takes place in present where the narrator is only 15 year old living in Vietnam. This time-jump or reference to future we don't get to see in the movie. Similarly, the opening scene of the movie shows the back posture of Marguerite Duras seated in her office in a writing pose whereas this scene doesn't exist in the novel.

The novel is also full of paradoxes and linguistic contradictions which make the characters convoluted and hard to read. This complexity gets translated into human relations in the novel like the relation of the mother and the daughter and that of the two lovers. However, this complexity is absent in the movie. For instance the first lines of the novel are addressed to the narrator where a unknown man says to her that I like your face better now than when you were young, your disfigured face (because of age). This is an oxymoron as we do not associate the adjective disfigured with beauty. This particular scene cannot be found in the movie as the director felt it was unimportant. So, it is safe to say that Jacques Annaud's focus was more on bringing out the love affair of Duras and the Chinese businessman than the life story of Duras. Similarly the role of mother and all the hardships the young girl suffered at the hands of her mother like being beaten badly and the controversial stripping of the daughter by her mother was given to the elder brother in the film (it is important to note here that the brother maltreated too the young heroine although it was limited to beating and berating). In place of the mother stripping the daughter and making advances at her, in the movie we see the brother just glaring at the sister from behind with a gaze full of desire and disgust. So, JacuquesAnnaud changed some of the scenes in order to make it look less scandalous

The four interconnected words which play a thematic role in the novel are again absent in the movie. The words are as follows: love, death, sea and mother. These words- love and death- in French sound almost the same phonetically and so do the words sea and mother. For example Duras was scared of the sea but at the same time she was attracted to it. This sentiment of fear and attraction at the same time was similar to what she felt towards her mother. So, one cannot help but compare the mother to the sea. However all these aspects of the novel are skipped in the film or explained by a voice-over. There is no split of opinion about it when we say that these four themes are very much present in the film maybe not as interconnected as in the novel. For example, the director's choice of portraying the movie as a love story is proof enough.

Silence in the work of Duras is again something omnipresent where it exists in the form of blank pages in the novel. However, in the film this silence is represented by music. For example, in the movie the director chose to gave sound effects for instances like rain and romantic music for intimate scenes. Hence the movie is more of a mirror image of the novel than the carbon copy.

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Marguerite Duras has never identified herself as a feminist writer and when we read her novels or watch her movies we can't help but feel the same. So can she be called a feminist writer? The answer lies in the gray area as although all her works have female protagonist but never ever do they talk about the problems of the fairer sex in general. The suffering and maltreatment which the female leads undergo are rather more individualistic than related to female issues. There is no feminine undertone to be found in her works as any essential notion of gender is absent in her work. However, these are works based on women living in society who are marred by the practices of a patriarchal system or just being born as the fairer sex. As we see in *l'Amant*, the young girl being maltreated by her mother and elder brother, even though, she is not completely at fault. Thus calling Duras' works feminist might not be completely right as she has always refused to be seen as belonging to a particular group or movement. Nevertheless reading her complex work (text, drama, film), we find a feminist project and voice at the same time. Some critics have tried to associate her with the literary movement called "Nouveau Roman", however; she remains an author in her own league. Duras' novels in essence are meditations on themes of human crisis triggered by a strong emotion mostly impossible love or sinful love. Hence, Marguerite Duras is a writer apart.

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