

# Exploring Interracial Relationships: Marguerite Duras' Portrayal of Love Between White Women and Asian Men in The Lover Trilogy

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**Abstract.** In "The Lover Trilogy," Margaret Duras' autobiographical novels, the discrimination of white people against colored races, the struggle of women in a patriarchal society, and the subtleties of class differences can all be found in the story of a couple of lovers. However, there is no absolute imbalance of power, since a poor white woman is still allowed to "look down" on a rich Asian man. Based on the text of "The Lover Trilogy," the dual perspectives of post-colonialism and feminist theories, and references to corresponding historical backgrounds and the author's personal life, this paper analyzes the subtle dislocation and balance of social power in both societies through the love affair between a white woman and an Asian man in Duras' novels. Being rebellious and losing her father at an early age, the white girl is thereby attracted to a Chinese male from a rich family who is much older than her. Although the Chinese lover enjoys advantages in terms of age, social status, and gender, as a white person living in the colony, the young girl has a superior social status. However, this misplaced "balance" cannot contribute to the completion of the love between the white woman and the Asian man. Instead, both the great opposition from society and family and their subliminal values assimilated by society have put the interracial love in an awkward situation that eventually ended with regrets.

**Keywords:** Margaret Duras; White Woman and Asian Man; Lover; Post-colonialism; Feminism.

## 1. Introduction

*The Sea Wall* (French: *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*), *The Lover* (French: *L'Amant*), and *The North Chinese Lover* (French: *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*) by French writer Marguerite Duras are known as "The Lover Trilogy". In it, the author repeatedly recounts an exotic love affair that took place in the colony of Indochina in her teenage years in 1950, 1984, and 1991 respectively. In different periods of writing, Duras differentiated the images of the same lover. Particularly in the 1984 novel, *The Lover*, Duras declares the image to be a "narration" and a "fragment of memory". The hero of *The Lover* is a cowardly rich Chinese man, whereas the heroine is a poor white girl much younger than him. In the novel, the discrimination of white people against colored races, the struggle of women in a patriarchal society, the disgraceful love affair between a minor and an adult, and the subtleties of class differences can all be seen on a couple of lovers.

Currently, academic research on *The Lover* and The Lover Trilogy mainly interprets the work from the perspective of post-colonialism. Though some scholars have also paid attention to the feminism embedded in the novel, as well as Duras' feminist views, they usually discuss from a single theoretical perspective, ignoring the combination of both. Distinct from the "white man and Asian woman" or "white man and black woman" narratives commonly used in traditional Hollywood works, Duras' special writing of the "white woman and Asian man" romance reveals that neither has full advantages in a sexual relationship. In patriarchal societies, "he" has dominant power over "her", while in colonial societies, "she" can "afford" to look down on "him". Therefore, this paper aims to base itself on the text, combine colonialism and feminism theories, discuss the historical background, and analyze the dislocation and balance of social power in both societies according to the love affair between a white woman and an Asian man in Duras' novels.

## 2. Occurrence of Love Affair between a White Woman and an Asian Man

### 2.1. Image of Lover

In 1984, French writer Marguerite Duras published her autobiographical novel *The Lover*, which became a sensation when it won the Goncourt Prize, the highest award in French literature [1]. In the novel, seventy-year-old Duras fondly recalls an interracial romance that took place during her teenage years in the French colony of Vietnam. The young love was ignorant yet unforgettable, but due to huge variations in their identities and races, they had to end up separated in the end. The Chinese lover does not possess the masculine virtues of bravery and robustness that are often found in heroes in traditional romance novels. On the contrary, his image is feminine, timid, and dispirited. Nevertheless, it is this seemingly ordinary interracial lover who holds the nearly desperate love of the white girl.

This is not the first time Duras has written about this real-life lover. As early as in her 1950 book *The Sea Wall*, the lover appeared as a rich white man, Mr. Jo. When Duras got the news of the death of the prototype in her later years, she then wrote *The North Chinese Lover* [2]. In the three narratives, at different times, the images of the lovers change at different latitudes. However, they do share certain fixed traits. The lover is a wealthy and cowardly fop, as well as a timid but elegant man. He is a well-educated man who studied in France and speaks French, an older lover who is generous enough to spend money on the heroine, and a powerless son who gives in to the marriage pact made by his father. In the three narratives, similarly, the lover is the relatively passive one in the relationship, and it seems that instead, it is the young white girl, who is considerably weaker in terms of age and wealth, who takes the lead in the relationship. Besides, the ultimate choice of marriage is in the hands of his father, who controls his financial resources rather than his own. However, how can such a man who doesn't conform to the patriarchal aesthetic of mainstream society manage to win the love of a white teenage girl in a relationship that begins with a money and sex deal?

### 2.2. Occurrence of Love Affair

According to Duras' own statement in "The Lover Trilogy" and her biography, the reader is able to reconstruct a pretty tough childhood. Born in the French colony of Indochina and losing her father at an early age, Duras and her family suffered financially from her mother's misguided investments. In such a single-parent family, the widowed mother spent all her love on the eldest son but ignored the younger siblings, who deserved the same attention. Excessive favoritism from the mother also contributed to the brutality of the eldest son, which was total torture for Duras and her beloved "little brother". Without love from a father, her disappointment with her mother gradually turns into resentment. Accordingly, the Electra Complex grew inside her, and she was desperate to be compensated by the outside world [3]. At this point, the interracial lover, who was twelve years older, showed up. On the one hand, his rich family and charm of an older man gave Duras a vicarious experience of fatherly love. On the other hand, her mother and elder brother were contemptuous and hostile toward the Chinese man for his racial identity [4]. Duras considered her relationship with this Chinese man of lower social status as a rebellion against the white supremacy in the family. Nonetheless, the Chinese lover's timid and tender traits were similar to those of Duras' beloved little brother. For Duras, her protective love for her little brother has always been the driving force for her to challenge his elder brother. In *The Lover*, it seemed that the heroine disliked the cowardice of her lover, which was actually shared by the lover and little brother. However, it was exactly such cowardice that brought out as much empathy and compassion for her lover as she had for her brother.

The interracial romance was immoral, for not only it began with a deal of money and sex, but also there was a huge age difference between them. Once appealed, the lover might even go to jail. Such unethical factors in the relationship encouraged the white girl's love instead. She was a disobedient girl who actively challenged public morality and ethics, who engaged in homosexual affairs with female classmates, who was incestuously attached to her own brother, and who walked straight to her Chinese lover's car in the midst of sidelong glances from students and faculty members. She was not

afraid of her violent elder brother, who represents the patriarchy, but desperately wished to murder him. Simultaneously, she emphasized her dominance sexually and her ruthlessness emotionally in her relationship with the Chinese lover but would shed no tears before he went away.

All behaviors revealed the rebellious and unique personality of the teenager Duras and her resistance against the patriarchal order. The Chinese man, who did not conform to the masculine aesthetics of the patriarchal society, exactly matched her material and spiritual demands. It is also the particularities of the Chinese lover's race, wealth, age, and personality, as well as the immorality of this special love for the white woman and Asian man, that make this encounter in her youth remain glowing in her late years.

### 3. From "Mr. Jo" to "Chinese Lover"

*The Sea Wall*, published in 1950, is the first book of "The Lover Trilogy" [5], in which the lover, Mr. Jo, is portrayed as a white male. Mr. Jo offers money and expensive gifts as payment for prostitution in exchange for a sexual relationship with a young girl named Susan. Mr. Jo is portrayed as exceedingly weak and incompetent, and his relationship with Susan revolves primarily around money and sex.

So why does Duras "whiten" her interracial lover and demean him with a negative description?

First and foremost, historical factors are supposed to be taken into consideration. As a matter of fact, in the 1950s, racial notions and discrimination against colored people were prevalent in France. Moreover, females in sex relationships were subordinate to males in the society of patriarchal tradition. If a white male writer glorifies an interracial female, as what Victor Hugo did with Esmeralda, it will be perceived as an act of innocence, empathy, humanism and sympathy. By contrast, if a white woman admires and adores an interracial man, it could be regarded as a willingness to be nasty, disgraceful, and scandalous. Thus, in this period, Duras did not dare and was reluctant to confess that the partner of her affair was an interracial man.

Another factor that should be reckoned with is Duras' personal experience. *Marguerite Duras* is the biography that attempts to reconstruct Duras' real experience, in which Duras' mother confessed that the real story was not as romantic as portrayed in *The Lover*. Indeed, the vain teenager Duras was a gold digger who conspired with her negligent mother to sell herself to the lover. Duras was so ashamed of what she had done that she vented subconscious despise on the lover, portraying Mr. Jo as a much more negative image. Concurrently, as a white woman raised in a colonial society, the superiority within colonialism also shaped Duras, subliminally rendering her racial discrimination when she created Mr. Jo as well. In Duras' writing, he is a terribly unattractive man of below-average height, with a monkey-like appearance, narrow shoulders, and short arms. He is described as ridiculous, dull, filthy, and sexually unappealing [6]. To Westerners, the interracial has always been a dumb, lifeless, unconfident race incapable of breeding and prospecting for the future [7]. Despite the fact that Mr. Jo is a white male, the character implies a stereotyped image of an interracial race, indicating the unconscious racial discrimination of the writer.

Duras once claimed that *The Sea Wall* is a novel, whereas *The Lover* is a "narration" and an autobiographical "fragment of memory." [8] More than two decades had passed, and when the aged writer looked back at this youthful experience again, the progress of society and the growth of age finally enabled her to confront her sentiments. In the meantime, the left-wing culture flourished with the development of society and economy.

"May 68", a student movement in May of 1968, broke out in Paris, France, where students, inspired by the spirit of the Guevara Revolution in Cuba and the Cultural Revolution in China, revolted against the right-wing regime of the French government. Duras was personally involved in the protests. It was at this moment that Mao Zedong, the Chinese male leader, emerged as a spiritual leader for the left-wing young people in France. Asian males then made the leap from an image of decadence and loss in the colonial discourse to that of a leader worshipped by marching students. It was also the

same time that global human rights took off, with communities of colored people coming into the public and advocating openly for their own rights, especially in immigrant countries. Racial suppression was comparatively less severe than in the 1950s when *The Sea Wall* was published. Thus, advancement in ideas and thoughts also provided Duras the guts to unveil the interracial identity of her lover. Duras, in her later years, was able to get rid of her concerns eventually in 1984 and re-created *The Lover* with the recollection of and attachment to the goodness of her adolescence. At last, Duras confessed that her lover was a Chinese man. After several decades, she realized that the interracial man she had despised as a teenager was actually quite adorable. When it became no longer shameful to confess her love, this unusual affection took on a melancholic feeling as if it was unattainable.

Readers may notice that even if Duras practiced "body writing" and advocated sexual liberation, in the opening chapter of *The Lover*, she sublimated this sexual relationship involving a deal of money and sex into an unwavering spiritual affection by presenting an affectionate confession by the lover to the aging heroine after several years. In the novel, Duras also avoids his original intention of exchanging sex for money but rather creates a more romantic love at first sight for the hero and heroine. Emphasizing spiritual love affairs intended to interpret gender relations with a more sexually equal stance, as well as a refutation against the patriarchal society, in which measurements for females were oriented by appearance and sexual value.

After seven years, informed of the death of her Chinese lover, Duras once again retold the affair. This time, the identity of the interracial lover was directly stated in the title of *The North Chinese Lover*. With overwhelming nostalgia and late-life memory processing, the Chinese lover underwent another transformation. Unlike the lover in previous novels, this one became more powerful and confident, even daring to resist the provocation from her elder brother, a white male. In the text, the young girl explicitly expressed her admiration and adoration for her Chinese lover, while the embarrassment about dealing with money and sex was replaced by deeper and more sincere emotions. Throughout the text, however, Duras maintained her identity as a superior race and looked down on her Asian lover of lower status. As it was mentioned in the novel, Chinese people were not colonized. They roamed around just as they did in America. They could not get caught, let alone surrender [9]. To the colonizers, the interracial were expected to be colonized and indoctrinated by white people [10]. Raised in a colony and heavily influenced by the colonial culture, Duras was no exception. However, it can be witnessed that in Duras's later years, her love for this interracial lover not only did not diminish with time but became increasingly entrenched as a result of aging, leaving a glowing image in her memory in later years.

#### 4. Conclusion

In 1992, with the release of the film adapted from *The Lover*, more audiences became familiar with the story of Duras and her Chinese lover. It thereby underwent heated discussions about whether or not the feeling of the white girl for her Chinese lover was love. Admittedly, the definition of love may differ among individuals. There is no denying that the love affair between a young white girl and her Chinese lover on the banks of the Mekong River remained engraved in the hearts of the couple as they aged, even if the relationship started without innocent motives. Within their temporary company, the cowardly Chinese lover obtained attachment and tenderness from the white girl, and in return, the initiative and demands of the young girl vitalized the life of the man who had long been a victim of the authority of his father. In *The Lover*, the hero begged his stubborn father for the sake of their love, which served as his motivation against patriarchal authority, yet failing to be financially independent still led to a doomed tragedy. Likewise, the white girl came to her Chinese lover with the intention of money. She was touched by his generosity and elegance, as well as his love for her; however, as the young girl could never control her own destiny, it was barely possible for her to recognize the ignorant love deep within.

A young girl in poverty would be vulnerable to an adult male of wealth, while the whites would be superior to the Asians. Such unbalanced backgrounds enabled both to reach a sort of dislocated equality instead. It was exactly the wealth that the older Chinese lover benefited from his father that attracted the young girl. It was precisely the superiority idea of the colonizers that encouraged the white girl in love with the interracial man. It was also indeed the racial isolation and patriarchal oppression that separated the couple. A tragedy usually follows from the interaction of multiple factors, and perhaps the external opposition has been internalized into themselves as well. For instance, Duras, who has been heavily influenced by colonial racial ideas, would never marry an Asian man, nor would a Chinese lover in a patriarchal society disobey his father by marrying a white teenage girl who would trade her body for material possessions.

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