Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov • Vol. 2 (51) - 2009
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies

MARGUERITE DURAS: OUT OF EDEN OR THE BETRAYAL OF INDOCHINA

Monica HÂRŞAN[1]

Abstract: *This paper analyses the problems concerning Marguerite Duras's uprooting and frustration complex, generated by her neither French nor Indochinese full nationality. This feeling, which is rather discrete in her novels, becomes very explicit in her interviews, autobiographical writings or in the books that other cultural personalities dedicated to her.*

Key words: *violence, betrayal, sensuality, uprooting, memory, oblivion.*

1. The Woman from Nowhere

"Je ne suis née nulle part" ["I was born nowhere"] (Duras, 1987, 70) – here's a rather shocking assertion which perfectly summarizes Marguerite Duras's relation to the world and to the literary creation. It reflects, in fact, the ambiguous status of an author placed – ever since she was born – at the confluence of two different cultures (that of Indochina – the colony, and that of France – the metropolis); she was always tormented by the frustrating feeling that she had never *really* belonged to either of them. "Enfant maigre et jaune"["A slim yellow child"] Duras, 1981, 277) , "jeune fille d'Indochine" ["young girl of Indochina"] (Duras, 1984, 120), "créole" ["creole"] (Lamy and Roy, 1981, 50) – these are the words she uses to describe herself (in a half ironical, half sad way) as a genuine product of an Oriental country, as a daughter of the great Mekong river, despite the French origin of her parents. Deep in her heart, Duras was constantly torn apart between a tumultuous passionate love for her native land – a country she deserted, but she always longed for – and an irrepressible ambition to become a writer in the metropolis, where she never really felt at home. The most impressive part of the author's work is a literary reflection of an autobiographical universe: her childhood; but this image is not mirrored, it is decomposed and re-created at another level, through a highly subjective perspective. Within this somehow magical space and time of her childhood – resembling the mythical *illo tempore et centrum mundi* – time itself seems to be suspended and all the important events happen under the sign of a double predestination: the blessing *and* the curse of Indochina.

2. Memory and Oblivion

Song of the memory, distress of pain and suffering, voluptuousness and abandon to desire, unmasked sexual pleasure, animal joy of living, indignation face to inequity, quiet resignation: everything altogether is poetic material for Marguerite Duras. Her writing follows the movements of the stream of consciousness, carried away by the random flux of her memory, never controlling her emotions, never censoring her images, never wanting to set order in

[1] Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, *Transilvania* University of Braşov.

BDD-A20247 © 2009 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:58:32 UTC)

her sometimes profuse and chaotic writing (this is one of the reasons why she is considered a part of the French *Nouveau Roman*). Obviously, in her case, writing and living are the two faces of the same adventure called life. "Il n'y a pas de temps où je n'écris pas, j'écris tout le temps, même quand je dors" ["There's no moment when I don't write, I write all the time, even when I sleep"] – Duras confesses (Martin & Coucherelle, 16). From her point of view, an artist should both live *and* write with the same exaltation, with the same indifference towards conventions, pushing himself up to the edge, exasperating the world by shouting out his revolt, his passion, his sensuality, in order to better emphasize a violence which simultaneously liberates and keeps the writing alive. "La violence est une chose que l'on reconnaît. Ce n'est pas une chose qu'on ait à apprendre, c'est une chose (…) dont on a toujours, tout le long de sa vie, la vocation profonde (…) je pense que ce n'est pas étranger au fait que j'écris." ["Violence is something one can recognise. It is not something you have to learn, it is something for which you have a deep vocation all the time, during your whole life; (…) and I think it has something to do with the fact that I write"]. (Martin & Coucherelle, 17). This is the *credo* of a woman who experienced almost everything and who seized life with both hands, never paying too much attention to what she had to gain or loose. It is her impetuous unleashed nature that governs both her life and her writing. Duras's indestructible attachment to Indochina was at the origin of an apparently paradoxical decision: neither to remember, nor to forget anything.

3. A Mother to Die for (or to Put to Death)

What Marguerite Duras does not like to remember is the cruelty of inter-human relationships, the prison of the family ties, and especially, the strong love-hate feeling she had for her mother. Duras's mother was probably neither better, nor worse than any other mother in Vietnam or Cambodia. Her mother was a devoted and obstinate woman, who imposed her hopeless dream (and the sacrifice attached to it) to the whole family. A young helpless widow, left alone with her little children, after the premature death of her husband, she had to struggle for her family's survival; with her lifelong savings, she bought a plot of land in Cambodia, which was often submerged by the tide of the Pacific; despite everyone's advice, she wouldn't give up her material and sentimental investment. She built a sea wall which exhausted the last family reserves and was washed away, in no time, by the rage of the ocean. As she persisted in resuming this useless enterprise several times, ruining the family budget and everyone's hopes for a better future, she attracted upon herself the hatred of her children and eventually became insane. This episode of Duras's life is described in the novel entitled *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* [translated in English as *The Sea Wall*]. The dramatic figure of the mother haunts Duras's universe like a spectre. Going back to the mother-daughter relationship, there is yet another aspect that deepens the precipice between the two of them: the way they perceive the problem of pleasure and sexuality. The mother tried to force her children fit inside a puritan, old-fashioned pattern of life and demeanour, which was far too restrictive from the daughter's standpoint. Education did not work in the case of the tee-nager (a literary *alter ego* of Marguerite Duras) who rebelled, from the very beginning of her adolescence, against any form of restriction. It was not the threats or the "sermons" of the mother that determined the girl's rebellion and emancipation, but her personal example. Marguerite Duras

BDD-A20247 © 2009 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:58:32 UTC)

characterises the mother-daughter relationship by the following formula: "une mère vierge, une fille née femme" ["a virgin mother, a woman-born daughter"] (Bisiaux, Jajolet, 163). In the novel entitled *L'Amant* [*The Lover*"], the girl asserts that one of her mother's problems was that she had never experienced pleasure: "La mère n'a jamais connu la jouissance" [The mother never knew pleasure"] (Duras, 1984, 50). Unlike her, the young girl is ready for love from her early youth: "J'avais, à quinze ans, le visage de la jouissance ["At the age of fifteen, I already had the face of pleasure"] (Duras, 1984, 50). Despite the conflicting situations, the daughter never stopped loving this unfortunate creature that happened to be her mother. She felt a desperate tenderness for her, for her will to struggle, for her devotion to the family, for her sacrifice, for the purity of her generous heart.

4. The Parting from Indochina and the Betrayal of the "Natural Solidarity"

This ambivalent feeling the author has for her mother is very much similar to the one she nourishes for her country. She describes the incredible sensations inspired to her by the beauty of this far-away land, dominated by the luxuriance of nature, by the grandeur of the scenery, by the majestic flow of the Mekong river, by the deep emotion of the vast forests; but within this tremendous beauty (just like in some of Albert Camus's works), one can feel the sadness of an agonizing society, the touch of too much pain and suffering.

The image of this world is that of a place where everything goes together: extreme richness and extreme poverty, prison-like family relationships, the freedom of savage life, the difficulty of surviving, the precarious life, the threat of imminent death, the precocity of sensual love, the almost unbearable heat, the song of the birds, the leprosy, the fear, the floods etc.

Where does all this turmoil come from? The world where Duras grew up was built on two basic elements: violence and sensuality. Indochina has always been a violent area; and Duras has grown up (until the age seventeen, when she left for France) in Vietnam and Cambodia, where both the climate (unbearable humid heat, hot blasting sun) and the socio-historical circumstances (frequent wars, diseases and poverty) imposed a harsh and almost merciless conduct to the human beings. The climate and the people are very much alike. In a word, a hard struggle for surviving shaped a prototype of non-empathic creature, who leads his/her life based on animal instincts. The only refuge and compensation for all that misery was love: savage, unleashed, passionate love. Another explanation can be found in the personality of the writer herself: just like the Mekong river – which quietly flows through her native land, but sometimes floods the riverbanks, ruining people's long-life labour and destinies – Marguerite Duras was apparently a calm and quiet person, except for the moments of unexpected crises, which revealed her true nature: an impetuous, rebel, violent and extremely sensual one. In those distant areas of the globe, where climate is harsh and indigence is everywhere, human behaviour is shaped in a strange way. It was only predictable that such a free and rebel person as Marguerite Duras could not stay for a long-time in Indochina, without causing "troubles in Paradise". She always nourished the hope of becoming a writer, and, obviously, that was not the fate reserved for a Vietnamese or Cambodian girl. Whatever she might have tried, that society would have never accepted her in that hypostasis.The only way of escaping her grey destiny was to leave Indochina and go to the metropolis, to Paris – the capital of all refinements, pleasures and

BDD-A20247 © 2009 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:58:32 UTC)

hopes, in order to join people of her own kind. And that was precisely what she did. At the age of seventeen, she turns her back on the past, on her happy childhood, on her unhappy mother, family, community and country, to settle down in Paris. And this was the beginning of a new era for her, the age of Marguerite Duras as a successful writer, who charmed and delighted France (and the rest of the World) through her sincere, wild, direct, violent, passionate writing. And yet, she never lost the feeling of belonging to that far-away savage land, from which she extracts her power of seduction, as well as her amazing energy and vitality. Marguerite Duras's destiny and literary work vitally depended on her departure and on the "betrayal" of Indochina. And she was ready to pay the price for that infidelity. Although she was rewarded for her bravery act, she always felt unaccomplished, frustrated, alienated in her adoption country. And she always longed for Indochina: "C'est ça que je découvre maintenant, c'est que c'était faux, cette appartenance à la race française, pardon, à la nationalité française (…). On était plus des Vietnamiens, vous voyez, que des Français" ["This is what I've just discovered now: it was a false idea, that of my belonging to the French race, sorry, to the French nationality (…). We were rather Vietnamese than French, you see."] (Duras & Porte, 1977, 60). At a closer look, we can notice hat Duras's voluntary uprooting and imposed exile looks more like a social determination than a simple need of freedom. Her relationship with the Indochinese society can be interpreted through the theory of an American anthropologist, Edward Banfield, who, in his work entitled *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*, postulates the idea of a "hierarchy of loyalties" that governs the traditional societies. The family, the clan, the community are closely bound together through the principle of a so-called "natural solidarity", which sometimes – in a subterraneous way – has the tendency of replacing the law system or any other kind of institution which should govern a civilised nation. That is why Marguerite Duras could not have accomplished her personality and her spiritual emancipation in such a society, where her role would have been restricted to a precise area: marriage, maternity, housework. Nothing like a literary career. Maybe she could have made a good housewife. But certainly it would have been a great loss for literature.

References

1. Banfield, Edward. *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society.* Chicago: Free Press, 1958.
2. Bisiaux, Marcel and Christine Jajolet. *À ma mère.* Paris: Éd. Pierre Horay, 1988.
3. Duras, Marguerite. *Un barrage contre le Pacifique.* Paris: Gallimard, 1950.
4. Duras, Marguerite and Michèle Porte. *Les lieux de Marguerite Duras.* Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1977.
5. Duras, Marguerite. *Outside.* Paris: Albin Michel, 1981.
6. Duras, Marguerite. *L'Amant.* Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1984.
7. Duras, Marguerite. *La Vie matérielle. Paris:* POL, 1987.
8. Lamy, Suzanne and André Roy. *Marguerite Duras à Montréal.* Québec: Éditions Spirale, 1981.
9. Martin, Patricia and Gérard. Coucherelle. *L'Arc* no. 98 (entretiens radiophoniues). Paris: France Inter, the 20th of June, 1991.

BDD-A20247 © 2009 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:58:32 UTC)