



Representation of Women in *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*

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Abstract

This analysis of Marguerite Duras's "Un barrage contre le Pacifique" focuses on the representation of women in the novel. The female body is depicted through various images, such as that of a slave or a docile, resigned woman. The narrative and discursive devices used in the story highlight the richness of Duras's text in presenting multiple conceptions and images of the marginalized female.

Keywords: Marguerite Duras; Un barrage contre le Pacifique; male gaze; marginalization; colonialism. Note: All cited texts from novels and books in this work are translated from French to English.

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INTRODUCTION

The artistic richness of Marguerite Duras's text is defined by various genres, themes, and styles. Common themes include family relationships, gender conflicts, and the status of women in society. Given that most of Duras's protagonists are women, it is reasonable to speculate on how the author explores stereotypes about women. Internal sensations, emotions, sexual impulses, natural character strength, and socio-cultural factors often challenge a woman's identity. In Duras's "Un barrage contre le Pacifique," carnal desire is a prominent theme, with Duras asserting that "Woman is desire." [1] In her interviews with Xavière Gauthier, she explains that "the outside world invades all my women, traverses, and pierces everywhere by desire." [2] She adds, "It is here in this little field of flesh that everything has happened and that everything will happen." [3]

Since childhood, Duras has felt drawn to prostitutes, their knowledge of physical love, the sheer number of their lovers, and the raw, almost sacred act of selling one's body to passing strangers. Moreover, prostitutes are often romanticized as providers of love and seen as martyrs or saints.

In this paper, the authors seek to understand why Duras, defying the morality of her time, infuses her characters with desire that challenges their bodies. What stereotypes is the novelist attempting to deconstruct in her narrative? Does she represent the body and soul, or just the body? The authors also examine the causes of the negative portrayal of female figures in Duras's works. The treatment of the female body as an object has prompted extensive feminist discourse, not only as an area of study and inquiry but also as a central theme of feminist movements. The dehumanization of the female body and the instrumentalization of her labor result in their reification, commodification, and objectification. The object and subject are positioned in opposition, highlighting the question of existence versus non-existence.

Duras was preoccupied by the subject of prostitution since childhood. Significantly, Duras considered prostitution not in its everyday sense but through its Latin etymology, meaning "to expose to the eyes." Thus, rewriting the figure of the prostitute involves exposing oneself to the gaze of others, much like writing—both acts inherently revealing and introspective.

The woman is anchored by the idea of offering herself to escape poverty, embarking on a quest where others are mere steps towards self-discovery. She seeks truth, the absolute, and the meaning of life and death.

The portrayal of women as objects has been a cornerstone of European literature for centuries. Paul Hoffman argued that women are mechanical objects, with femininity being a mechanical way of being. [4]

Adultery is a pivotal theme in many literary works. Rougemont stated, "Without adultery, what would our literature be?" and added, "Half of human misfortune can be summed up in the word adultery." [5]

The cultural and sexual emancipation of the late 1950s prompted Duras to explore the theme of prostitution further.

THE WORLD OF PROSTITUTION

The body and its representation are defining characteristics of the 20th century. As a woman of her time, Duras makes her protagonists' bodies the core of her narratives. This article explores the commodification of women in Duras's novel "Un barrage contre le Pacifique."

In the novel, the female body is viewed as a commodity, with appropriation through sexual harassment and prostitution for the collective benefit of others. Michel David observes that "Marguerite Duras writes... her texts in reference to a 'prostitutionality' that runs through both her heroines and her entire body of work (which itself 'sells' well)." [7] Consequently, writing has become a form of prostitution. Monfourny notes that "putting yourself in the book and selling it exhibits more immodesty than a prostitute revealing herself." [8]

In "Un barrage contre le Pacifique," the colonial town of Ram centers around a hotel run by Madame Marthe, an old colonial prostitute, and her daughter. Madame Marthe saved money to secure her daughter from following in her footsteps by buying the shares that allowed her to manage the hotel.

Contrastingly, Suzanne's mother, the novel's heroine, attempts to offer her daughter to a wealthy land dealer, pushing her into a forced marriage. Essentially, she sells her daughter's body for financial gain, in stark opposition to Madame Marthe's protective instincts.

Despite their socioeconomic conditions, both Madame Marthe and Suzanne's mother reflect the complex interplay of gender, power, and exploitation, central themes in Duras's exploration of womanhood and colonialism. The narrative explores not only the commodification of the female body but also the societal forces at play in this exploitation.

Every woman on the plains, as long as she was young enough to be desired by her husband, had a child every year. In the dry season, when the work in the rice fields slackened, the men thought more about love and the women were naturally taken at that time of year. [...] This went on regularly, in a vegetable rhythm, as if with a long, deep breath, each year each woman's belly swelled with a child, rejected it, and then took another breath with another. (BCP, p. 93)

The birth of peasants' children is not celebrated in the same way as that of French women. The indigenous people are portrayed as animals who reproduce without thinking and do not understand the importance of educating themselves.

Suzanne is further caught between two social worlds: she is neither fully integrated into the colonial society, because of her poverty, nor a member of the indigenous group because of her racial identity. She, therefore, personifies a wide range of contradictions, which prevent her from having a stable identity. Because of this fluid identity, she can assume various family roles with her lover.[12]

Both Suzanne and the Chinese man are associated with colonial power: she because she is white, and he because his father is rich thanks to the 'compartments' built for the natives but rented out at a high price. However, the two lovers seem to have a complicated power exchange [13]

The Chinese man, who possesses such wealth, must be powerful. However, he is also Chinese and therefore considered 'inferior'. Suzanne has little power because she is a girl, poor and young, but because she is white, she is considered 'superior'. From another point of view, the Chinese man's wealth may indicate that he is colonising (i.e. exploiting) the young woman, while Suzanne's family feels that they are colonising the rich man.

Female sexuality is seen through the prism of Mr Jo's male power. It is he who dominates, and the woman has to be obedient. An upper-middle-class woman who grows up in a society of 'big settlers' has to follow moral dictates and wait until marriage before expressing herself sexually. Mr Jo anticipates that a woman from the small settler class will behave completely differently. Consequently, not only for him but for colonial society as a whole, female sexuality is linked to questions of social class. In all cases, virginity is precious and becomes a commodity to be bartered, as in the case of Suzanne.

In fact, the young Chinese man is trying to conquer the body of Suzanne, who represents the colonial system, to assert a certain rehabilitation of his usurped land and homeland. He could have seduced the other white girls, but his attempt would fail because they were beautiful and rich; they do not need to sell their bodies. In contrast, Suzanne evokes the image of a weak, fragile female territory that is easy to manipulate and invade because she wants monetary compensation for exposing her body. This invasion of the body takes a concrete form when Mr Jo begs Suzanne to open the bathroom door so that he can contemplate her naked body. Suzanne's body represents the unexplored territory behind the door, and once she has opened the door and allows Mr Jo to gaze into this intimate space, her body is colonised and transformed into an object of economic transaction. As Brigitte Cassirame points out, this opening of the door represents a serious violation of the sacred nature of the body, exposing it to the Other:

The door is the first metaphorical sign. The narrator uses it as a symbolic element and as a reminder of the title: *Un barrage contre M. Jo et contre le monde*. For Suzanne, opening this door is tantamount to making herself visible to the world, to allowing herself to be ravished by the stranger... the bathroom door opens onto 'that other thing' embodied by Mr Jo, the male stranger, the other sex [14]

When Suzanne's body becomes the space of invasion onto which the Chinese man's desires are projected, Suzanne is transformed into a concession market and begins to see her body as an entity ready to be usurped: 'No man in the world had ever seen the woman who stood there behind that door. It wasn't meant to be hidden, but to be seen and to make its way through the world, the world to which this one, this Mr Jo, belonged'. [1] Thus, the roles of the coloniser and the colonised are reversed. The Chinese man is trying to monopolise and exploit the female territory, which probably symbolises his homeland. He wants to conquer the white woman to demonstrate his male superiority and ability to adapt to new environments. This colonial domination is symbolic. When men believe themselves to be superior to women, they treat love as if it were just another extension of their dominance over the female body. The possession of white women is an exercise of authority.

The mother wants to protect her daughter from Mr Jo and advises her not to devalue her modesty and chastity too much. Suzanne wants the diamond which Jo offers her, so she takes it and immediately hides it. However, the mother wants to know if Suzanne has had sexual relations with Mr Jo because that would give her the legal right to keep and sell the diamond. Ultimately, she does not want Suzanne to be with Mr Jo, because her body becomes less saleable once she has been deflowered. Without her body, there is nothing left to sell to save the family's financial situation. Even if she loves her daughter, the reader will never know what she thinks of her, and her behaviour shows more than anything else a desire to dominate her daughter and use her as a financial resource. In colonial times, Indochina was known as 'the most beautiful pearl in the Empire' [15] and Suzanne's mother wanted her daughter to have the same value as that pearl. Still, unfortunately, the land on the plain will not be arable, and her daughter's territory will not benefit.

Commodification Of The Female Body

The woman-object relationship plays a central role in *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*. Sixteen-year-old Suzanne is forced to sacrifice her body to help her family out of poverty. Her mother and brother force her to marry a rich young man named Mr Jo. The ruined family wants to sell the young girl's body to escape their debt. This theme of the commodification of the female body is evident on several occasions in the story. The first instance is the forced marriage to Mr Jo:

His mother told him that she was waiting for him to propose. Mr Jo did not refuse her mother's pressing invitation. He kept her on her toes with promises and, above all, with various gifts (...) The first important thing he gave her, a month after their meeting, was a phonograph. (BCP, p. 46)

The phonograph is not a gift of pure and sincere love but an object to possess her body as a sex object. The reduction of women to the status of passive, silent, mostly unclothed objects reflects the collective appropriation of women by men.

Every time Mr Jo meets Suzanne, he gives her presents. He buys her a dress, compact, nail varnish, lipstick, soap and beauty products. We must not forget that Suzanne has natural beauty, but by giving her these products, the aim is to embellish her and make her the object of carnal desire rather than pure and romantic love. However, these gifts are small and do not make Suzanne happy. These minimal offerings only lower Suzanne's social position: 'The packages Mr. Jo brought Suzanne were rather small and fit in her pocket or hand' (BCP, p. 52).

The value of Suzanne increases when she is given the phonograph. However, the detailed description of the gift emphasises the woman's body as 'bait', reducing her to the status of an animal. Inside the phonograph is a small drawing that reflects the idea of two lovers: 'There was a small copper plate on which a small fox terrier was represented sitting in front of a pavilion' (BCP, p. 58).

This scene reveals how Mr Jo stalks Suzanne like a predator. The scene also echoes the novel's end, when Suzanne stands outside her house watching for hunters' cars to seduce them and lure them away to earn money, reflecting a wild woman who wanders in the wilderness and is pursued by hunters who want to capture her.

The phonograph also shows women's position in society. In return for this gift, Mr Jo asks to see Suzanne naked when she goes to the bathroom for a bath. He orders her to undress and promises to give her 'His Master's Voice' (BCP, p. 50).

This expression, which shows the master-slave relationship, is repeated several times in the novel: 'Tomorrow you'll have your magnificent 'Voix De Son Maître'. My dear little Suzanne, open a second and you'll have your phono' (BCP, p. 50).

This shows that Suzanne's naked body exists only to fulfil the master's desire, who orders her to submit to his lovemaking. She is seen as the instrument he offers her. As Lötsh points out: 'The gaze of others transforms an active presence into a passive object because it is robbed of the power to look'[16] She is acutely aware of being observed by others. 'I'm already used to being watched. White women are watched in the colonies' (BCP, p. 25–26).

Every time Mr Jo wants to see Suzanne, he promises her a present in return: first, a car, and then, a diamond ring. The ring is worth twenty thousand francs, which is enough to save her family from poverty. Suzanne says, 'It's the most expensive one I'd like' (BCP, p. 32). She is a materialist and opts for a commercial transaction that will bring her a substantial profit. A woman's body thus can fulfil a dual function: it is a commodity of desire and has commercial benefits.

Suzanne's brother orders her to sleep with all men (BCP, p. 108) except Mr Jo. This idea accentuates the commodification of her body because this sexual encounter has a material value. In another scene, a merchant from Calcutta offers thirty thousand francs to marry Suzanne. The mother compares the offer with the ring: 'He (the merchant) offered me thirty thousand francs. What's thirty thousand francs? The ring alone was worth twenty thousand' (BCP, p. 171).

Another man, Jean Agosti, in the novel reinforces the idea that women are mere commodities. He offers to buy Suzanne by giving an extra thousand francs on the price of the diamond ring. The mother is reassured; she sleeps with the money, leaving her daughter as a commodity to be used by one man and then another: 'In her hand, resting on her chest, was always the bundle of thousand-franc notes that Agosti had given her' (BCP, p. 257).

In another anecdote from the novel about the commercialisation of human beings, a little native girl, unable to bring up her young daughter, decides to sell her. All the peasants in the village direct her to the white woman who could accept the parcel. The narrator says: 'The last one she took care of was a one-year-old girl she had bought from a woman who was passing by on the track (...) there's a white woman there who's interested in children' (BCP, p. 257).

This incident makes us think of surrogate mothers these days. However, Suzanne's mother is nothing short of a human trafficker. She indeed wanted to raise this child, but perhaps to sell her for money when she grows up, as is the case with her own daughter.

Another scene shows the persecution of women. The mother beats her daughter because she does not submit to her orders: 'She struck again, as if driven by an urge that would not let her go. Suzanne was at her feet, half-naked in her torn dress, crying. When she tried to get up, her mother knocked her down with her foot' (BCP, p. 100). Joseph goes on to say that 'the children had to be beaten, especially the girls' (BCP, p. 101).

Moreover, when Joseph and Suzanne hum the song *Ramona*, it describes their sad, closed-in state, like birds imprisoned in a cage. They project a depressed, inward-looking image that reflects their bleak existences: 'When Joseph played it, everything became clearer, truer; the mother, who didn't like the record, seemed older, and they could hear their youth banging at their temples like a trapped bird. Sometimes when mother didn't shout too much and they could get back from the bath without too much hurry, Joseph would whistle' (BCP, pp. 85–88).

Suzanne is represented as a prostitute, an object, an animal and a broken image, as this description of her marginal position indicates: 'sitting on the edge of her bed, in her torn dress' (BCP, p. 106).

There is no mother-daughter relationship but a master-slave relationship between Suzanne and her mother. Suzanne is afraid of her mother, more specifically of her mother's authority. The mother shows Suzanne no mercy, and she is constantly humiliated by her words and slaps. The mother's relationship with her daughter resembles a long and intolerable rebuke that manifests itself in various ways but which she seems unable to control because the morality of the women, and the mother in particular, has been trampled underfoot by misfortune. Suzanne agrees to be beaten to shame her mother and, perhaps, to achieve a degree of reconciliation with her. In reality, this kind of attention is the only form of maternal love she receives from her mother. Suzanne's punishment by the mother represents not only a rejection of her daughter but also a form of self-punishment on the part of the mother, who transposes her own sense of failure onto her daughter.

In the novel, the mother is unjust and a tyrant. Suzanne has come to accept this oppression, which is beyond her mother's control. To resist her mother's blows, which hit her like waves, she withdraws into herself. She tries to protect herself from the world as if she were protecting herself from a storm. When the mother stops hitting her and turns into a monster with a 'face dazed by effort', her fear is rekindled.

Suzanne bears a striking resemblance to the natives. Her brother also shares this viewpoint: 'The girl looks very much like the natives'.^[17] Duras also claims that her own life was very similar to that of the Indochinese people she met ^[18] As a child, Duras lived in the primeval forest of Indochina, which served as a metaphor for the world of childhood. As there were dangerous snakes, insects and tigers, children were not allowed to enter this wild area. Settlers and native children did not fear this jungle, where they felt perfectly at home. Duras claimed to have hunted crocodiles when she was 12. In the novel, during their mother's siesta, Suzanne and Joseph would head for the jungle. This is why Suzanne wanted to marry a hunter like her brother and kept an eye out for hunters' carriages. In the novel, the children of the plains

are often described in a way that supports all the savage stereotypes. They are called 'orphans' whose parents do not care for them. They are compared to wild animals, like little monkeys in the trees eating green mangoes, which causes them to contract cholera and die. They are also frequently depicted in the company of buffalo and stray dogs.

The most powerful image in the novel is that of childbearing as a natural, annual event: 'Rain, fruit and flood were all represented by these children. They came every year, with a regular tide or, if you prefer, by harvest or bloom, she said' (BCP, p. 93). All the children of the plain are reduced to the status of anonymous characters, who are only a part of the earth and no more important than the rain. The children have been dehumanised, their faces erased. They are of no importance to the adult world. This image of children dying in the mud and surviving on buffalo is repeated many times throughout the novel, becoming a formal refrain that serves as a constant reminder of the suffering and hunger experienced by the children of the plain. If they had stopped dying, the plain would have been submerged, they would not have been able to be fed, they would have been fed to the dogs, or perhaps they would have been exposed to the outskirts of the forest. This miserable image of these young natives is parallel to that of little Suzanne. The mother abandons her children and offers them no protection. She runs towards wealth and domination, but does not realise that she is leaving a great capital behind her, the love of her children.

The Self-Effacing Woman

The story in the novel aims to devalue women by focusing on the fragmentation of the female body. Suzanne is never described in full but by fragments of her face or body. Even her clothes cut her body into fragments: 'She was barefoot, like Joseph and his mother, wearing black trousers that reached below the knee and a blue sleeveless blouse' (BCP, pp. 7–8).

The cutting of clothes around the shoulders and knees only accentuates the idea of the fragmentation of the female body. The body of the mother is defined similarly: '(She) wore a large straw hat that came up to her eyebrows. Her garnet-red dress, made from a native loincloth, was wide and sleeveless and worn away at the breasts' (BCP, p. 7).

Even Suzanne's lover only focuses on certain body parts: 'He was looking at Suzanne's legs, which showed through her silk dress. You're still naked under your dress, (...), and I never have the right to anything' (BCP, pp. 71–72).

The intense gaze of the lover pierces the clothing, making it more transparent, and takes an inventory of the body. Suzanne is stripped of her clothing and deprived of her chastity. The lover focuses his gaze on the lower part of her body to evoke the baseness of the female body. These glances resemble a fetish for body parts.

In contrast, Suzanne's gaze on the young man is designed to erase him: 'All the while I continued to look at him without seeing him, as if he were transparent' (BCP, p. 72). She eliminates him completely by looking at him because she hates him, while he has fragmented her by looking at her because he cannot possess her. Mr Jo says: 'If we got married, I'd lock you up' (BCP, p. 72). Suzanne is also attacked by the ferocious looks of her mother.

When she had her glasses, she put them on and began to examine Suzanne stealthily, with great attention. Suzanne, sitting facing the door, knew that she was looking at her. She also knew what was coming and tried to avoid her gaze. (BCP, p. 79)

Another woman whose body attracts male attention is Carmen. She is happy to show off her legs and wears beautiful short dresses to attract attention:

This meant that none of the guests at the Central Hotel could ignore them completely, even if they wanted to with all their might, and that a number of them lived constantly in the company of the bewitching image of those legs. (BCP, p. 126)

Ligot confirms the same:

Carmen's legs are an object of universal, magnetic desire. They are a kind of universal, magnetic object of desire that runs through the hotel, from the dining room corridor to the terrace, from the dark to the light.[19]

Lina, Joseph's mistress, is also not described in full, but only by her body parts: 'She was calling me with her eyes, her breasts, her mouth, but I couldn't reach her' (BCP, p. 197).

It is like a woman is a fleeting, ephemeral entity with no absolute weight but only a relative existence. The male gaze focuses on parts of the female body. Suzanne is followed by the gaze of her brother, her lover, her mother and all passers-by in the town of Ram. She is marked only by her physical presence, not by her moral weight or state of mind. She remains a sexual object in the eyes of her lover, her family and even herself.

In the novel, Suzanne appears to be easy to manipulate. She does not follow her reason and has no confidence in herself. She says yes to everything that is asked of her and follows others blindly. She becomes a statue under Mr Jo's piercing gaze:

Motionless, Suzanne was still waiting to find out if she had to. The refusal had come out of her mechanically. It had been no. First no, imperiously. But M. Jo was still begging, while the no slowly reversed itself and Suzanne, inert, walled in, let herself go. (BCP, p. 50)

She refuses to let him look at her naked, but then she gives in and accepts to be contemplated naked like a beautiful statue. In another scene, she exalts the image of the doll girl. In the novel, every evening, Mr Jo would ask Suzanne to dance with him: 'Suzanne was dancing with Mr Jo as usual' (BCP, p. 65).

The couple's dance resembles that of little box puppets which begin to turn when the music starts. Mr Jo invites his doll Suzanne to keep on doing the same dance to *Ramona's* music. This repetitive dance transforms Suzanne's body into an instrument. However, she does refuse to be possessed and undergo this mechanical manipulation. She declares: 'I don't want to be in anyone's arms' (BCP, p. 71).

Another scene shows that the woman is inert and easy to handle. Carmen tries to dominate Susanna's personality. She changes Suzanne's appearance to make her more attractive and orders her to wander the streets of Ram looking for another man to buy her. Carmen's manipulation reveals that Suzanne is seen as a mere robot ready to accept any order. She walks down the street and people look at her in a strange, petty way: 'Where did she come from, this unfortunate stray on our pavements' (BCP, p. 134). She is looking for another self-image, probably another identity that she has lost.

Suzanne takes pleasure in the other white women on the streets, 'finding all the women beautiful and their summer elegance an insult to all that was not them' (BCP, p. 135). She feels like being released from prison, coming from a world of slavery to a luxurious world:

Carmen was wrong. Not everyone could walk these streets, these pavements, among these lords and kings. Not everyone had the same ability to move. They seemed to be moving towards a specific goal, in a familiar setting (...) Suzanne had no goal, no similar goal, and had never been in this theatre. (BCP, p. 136)

She discovers the world of cinema and imagines herself to be an actress: 'In the dreams of the screen, truer than life' (BCP, p. 88). She wants to live by her rules, not how other people want her to. She discovers happiness and true love through cinema. When she enters the cinema, she merges with the screen and experiences a reincarnation: 'The piano began to play. The light went out, Suzanne felt invisible and invincible and began to cry with happiness' (BCP, p. 137).

It is a kind of mise en abyme. She looks through the screen and frees herself from all constraints. Even her brother finds love in the cinema: 'She (Lina) approved of me with a smile. I could see nothing more of the film, busy as I was with her hand, which was gradually becoming hot in mine' (BCP, p. 191).

This place, where they spent most of their childhood, represents a shelter from suffering and distress. They are amid despair and heartbreak and want to rebuild their lives. The cinema is nothing more than a mirror of their souls and their love lost because of a mother who failed to guide them properly.

Thus, in the novel, Suzanne embodies all the forms of the inert woman: flesh statue, doll, puppet, actress and robot. She is an abstract concept, an easy-to-handle machine. Her body is seen as an event or a mere backdrop for society. Duras attaches great importance to the mechanisms of the gaze cast on the protagonist, the gaze of man, of society, of one's family and, above all, of oneself. The conflict between her own gaze and the gaze of others helps the woman grow and change her state of being.

The Mother Complex

During this analysis, we looked at several images of women. The images embodied by the protagonist, Suzanne, are more or less negative. This clichéd representation of women is confirmed by the following quote: 'In Duras, there is a certain type of woman who is half-crazy, half-simple, half-witch'[20]

Where do these images come from? What metaphorical figures is this girl inspired by?

Of course, every girl imitates her mother or the women around her. Suzanne has always lived with her mother and brother. They are the only people around her that the narrator focuses on. We do not notice the presence of her schoolteacher, an aunt or anyone from her family. The only female image she perceives is that of her mother.

The mother in the novel knows no pleasure and is constantly torn between two extremes: dreams and despair, life and death, love and hate. Her daughter was nourished by her, and so 'She grew up in pain. Perhaps she could have escaped from it, escaped misfortune, achieved a happy balance [...] When her personality seems to be built, or on the way to completion, at the end of her adolescence an excess of pain penetrates her and makes her tremble'.[21]

There is no indication in the novel that the mother felt any tenderness or affection for her children. She was all alone and had to play the role of both father and mother. Consequently, she became authoritarian and harsh.

She had been through rough times, especially when she lost her car dealership. She sacrificed years of her life working in the film industry for a future of happiness for her children, but it was all gone in the wind.

One day, Suzanne reads her mother's complaint to Ram's agents. Her mother is sad about the damage, but we also see the humiliating way in which she exposes and sacrifices her body to earn the money:

It was all I had. I gave you everything I had that morning, everything, as if I were bringing you my own body as a sacrifice, as if from my sacrificed body would blossom a whole future of happiness for my children [6]

The letter reveals a mother begging for her lost money, for which no one is responsible. This image of a beggar-slave who vulgarises her body remains engraved in Suzanne's mind, as well as that of the narrator. The rage turns the mother into a monster, and her children, especially her daughter, deem her 'dangerous'; the mother is the obstacle to her children's freedom [19]

The image of her mother dissolves before her eyes, and she becomes 'in her own words a 'madwoman''[22] After repeated failures and misfortunes, the mother becomes a puppet of fate: 'It turns into a big laugh'[23]

According to Peter Král, there is a side to this that 'characterises the beings in the burlesque'[24] which will leave its mark on Suzanne in the future. All this decay transforms the mother into a negative figure: 'She is ugly, an ugliness made up of a long-standing and total neglect of her appearance'[25]

She transforms into a ferocious, mean person who hates life. She constantly compares herself to an animal: 'She compares herself to Joseph's horse, dying, saying that it's like her, that it's tired of living and would rather let itself die'.[26]

The mother does not see any point in her existence. Similarly, her daughter wants to erase her body and her image, as this passage underlines: 'Suzanne snuggled up to her (the mother) and, for hours, she too wanted to die. She longed for it' (BCP, p. 359). This experience of loss and obliteration leaves a particular mark on women. Lavandier states:

It is at the moment when the child becomes capable of forming the global representation of the person who is the source of satisfaction that the object is lost. In a way, the mother is already irretrievably lost, as soon as the child perceives her as a being separate from himself and uncontrollable

The difficulty of dissociating from the mother figure and the separation entail the danger of losing a part of one's self:

The paradox of the feminine destiny lies in the difficulty of freeing oneself from a primary maternal object, because of the necessary identification and disidentification. Separation carries the risk of losing a part of oneself [28]

In the novel, the daughter inherits the following from her mother: weaknesses in the female personality and ignorance of the body: 'Bodies become empty signs without any assignable referent, floating signs'[29]

All these overwhelmed female representations stem from the figure of the mother who no longer loves herself, which influences her daughter and all the female characters in Durassian texts.

Duras once confided to her diary: 'I have never kissed my mother without her sending me away like an annoying little dog'.[30] The mother in the novel is metaphorically identified with the infertile plains of Indochina that swallow up thousands of starving children. Like the mother, the land of the plains is a suffocating corpse, incapable of feeding its children. The earth and the mother represent a gigantic womb that gives birth to children only to deliver them to the grave. The mother is 'a devastating monster, like the ocean that devastates the crops'[31] The mother in the novel represents a motherhood that is doomed to failure.

Conclusion

In *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, Duras opts for a lexical structure with feminine connotations. The style of the language and the choice of multiple plots accentuate the sensuality of the female body.

In the Durassian context, the female has no ideological significance or value within society. The female body is frozen by the male gaze. The woman exists only in the eyes of others. Her only possession is her body, which she uses as a playground and as an object of fascination to satisfy fixed mentalities. In the novel, the character of Suzanne represents a 'Tarzanic' personality. The children of the plain are often described as 'orphans' whose parents do not care for them. They are compared to wild animals and portrayed as connected to nature.

Suzanne is in search of her identity. She was abandoned by her father, suffered emotional betrayal from an early age, lacked maternal protection and tenderness, and always repressed her feelings.

The Durassian protagonists, who are a parody of Duras's own life, always oscillate between two extremes: two countries, two cultures, and two selves. Duras herself oscillates between being French and Vietnamese. This oscillation produces ambivalence, pain, loss, heartbreak, and emptiness. The metaphasic quest led by Duras's heroines, illustrated through language and writing meticulously adapted to this idea, enables us to observe a lack that predominates in Suzanne and pushes her towards her search for affirmation.

Moreover, as Duras creates ambivalent female characters representing several opposing ideas, it is impossible to classify Durassian women in one category or within the polarised oppositions of dualist thought.

The mother in *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* alternates between the roles of being a victim and a dominant figure: a victim of the colony's patriarchal system due to the actions of corrupt land registrars and a dominant figure as she dominates the peasants of the plain and beats her own daughter. She is like the sea, both creative and destructive.

The themes of colonisation and domination are revealed indirectly in the novel. A Chinese man is considered 'inferior' because he is Chinese. Suzanne has minimal authority because of her gender, poverty, and youth, but she is deemed 'superior' because of her race. From another point of view, the Chinese man's wealth may imply that he is colonising (i.e., exploiting) Suzanne, while her family feels that she is colonising the rich man.

Suzanne's social and family environment pushes her to become a prostitute. She rejects the role of a prostitute but does so in a passive way that prevents her from freeing herself from this dualism. Towards the end of the novel, she realises her desires and asserts her right to choose; in doing so, she defines herself despite society's efforts to portray her as a prostitute. Because of their contradictory feelings towards each other in *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, the ambivalence of the female characters dissolves the binary opposition and leads to a destabilisation of dualistic thinking.

This secondary effect of the experience of abjection, i.e., the rejection of one's own person, is reminiscent of Suzanne's experience, who is acutely aware that she has no place in colonial society. The abjection of a subject leads to a state of dispossession and wandering instead of recognising oneself, desiring, and belonging.

The geopolitical dualism that the young Suzanne has experienced leads deep down to her not belonging to either side. She is neither part of France nor Indochina, which leads to instability. This geopolitical split causes her to wander and lose her identity. The depictions of an uncultivable, inhospitable land accentuate the idea that it does not represent a nurturing environment for this unfortunate child. This precarious, uninhabitable space, where the whole family is trying to build a barrage against the Pacific Ocean, is a parody of their ill fate. To combat the sea and make the plain more arable, they have turned their lives into a living hell. They turned everything upside down and became slaves instead of masters. They have turned into the same barrage, but this time against peace, purity, tranquilly, honour, and dignity. The colonised territory is beginning to reject them systematically, like the ocean waves that have rejected their dam.

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