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When the Whites become the “Other”: A Study of Marguerite Duras’ Classic *The Lover* (1984)

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Abstract:

Post-colonialism has often been considered as a theory that addresses basically the problems of the colonized nations. However, in the recent scenario, the focus has been shifted from the colonized to the colonizers. Postcolonial trauma refers to the traumatic experiences that both the natives and the colonizers face in a postcolonial setting. Until recent times, the focus was primarily on the sufferings and traumatic experiences of the natives. But it has been observed that sometimes the colonizers too are equally affected both physically and psychologically like the natives. Marguerite Duras (1914-1996) was a French author who lived with her parents in French Indo-China and wrote about her experiences in Saigon (South Vietnam) and other parts of French Indo-China. Her major works include her classic *The Lover* (1984), *The North China Lover* (1991), *The Seawall* (1950), *Wartime Notebooks* (began writing in 1943), etc. *The Wartime Notebooks* is a collection of autobiographical entries by Duras which talks about her experiences in French Indo-China and it provides as a source for most of her novels. Duras is known for writing ‘auto-fiction’, a genre introduced by Serge Doubrovsky which refers to the works where fiction is intermingled with reality. Duras intertwined historical events with fiction in her works and her classic *The Lover* deals with her experiences in a colony, the personal and historical trauma that she endured during her stay in the colony. It shows how imperialism inflicted damage on both the whites and the non-whites. The paper aims at showing how the whites became puppets under the institution of imperialism and suffered inevitably. The paper will deal with this aspect of colonialism which has been ignored so far.

Keywords: post colonialism, whites, trauma, autofiction, Margaret Duras.

Post-colonialism has often been considered as a theory that addresses basically the problems of the colonized nations. However, in the recent scenario, the focus has been shifted from the colonized to the colonizers. Postcolonial trauma refers to the traumatic experiences that both the natives and the colonizers face in a postcolonial setting. Until recent times, the focus was primarily on the sufferings and traumatic experiences of the natives. But it has been observed that sometimes the colonizers too are equally affected both physically and psychologically like the natives. In the colonial state, the colonizers are always in a superior position and they enjoy all kinds of benefits during their stay in the colonized nation. However, it was found that not all colonizers or their families leave the colonized country after colonization. There were few families who stayed back and continued to live in the once colonized nation. The oppression of these people begins here. The natives who have developed a hatred for the colonizers over the years start having a revengeful attitude towards these white settlers. This is seen even in the case of India where many white writers wrote about their experiences in the colonial state. One such writer is Margaret Rumer Godden. Rumer Godden (1907-1998) was a British writer who wrote most of her works that reflected her personal experiences in colonial India. Rumer Godden’s father Arthur Leigh Godden worked in one of the big shipping companies based in Calcutta. Rumer Godden lived most of her days shifting from one state to another in colonial India. It is during her stay in India that she experienced certain things that left a great impact on her life. These experiences were perhaps one of the reasons why she became a writer.

The colonizers are always under the pressure of living in a superior condition compared to the natives of the colony. The whites had to maintain a high status in the social circle which consists of rich aristocratic Indian families. Since they were part of the ruling class, they had to maintain their prestige and set standards. However, as stated earlier, the people from the ruling class had to face many discrepancies during their stay in the colonized nations. Rumer Godden in one of her works wrote about her dreadful experience in Kashmir where one of the servants tried to poison her and her children by mixing glass powder in their food. There were also certain instances that show how at times the natives looked down upon the whites. Anne Chisholm, a biographer, and critic wrote Rumer Godden’s biography where she draws instances from Godden’s life where Godden was portrayed as the victim of colonialism. There was once such an incident from her childhood which showed the great gulf of difference between the whites and

the natives. Rumer Godden once picked up a small clay drinking vessel that she found outside their gardener's hut. When the gardener Govind found it in her hand, he smashed it on the ground considering it to be polluted by Rumer's touch as she was a "white". This incident made Godden feel threatened and inferior among the natives of Kashmir.

There is another form of disparity that existed among the children who had a Eurasian background. For instance, as stated by the biographer in Godden's biography, "The children of mixed-race marriages at any level never had an easy time. The many thousands of Eurasian in Calcutta- who usually had European fathers and Indian mothers- often with modest positions in the railways or the police, were looked down on by Indians as much as by the British." (Chisholm 49). As stated by Chisholm in the biography, once Godden became infuriated by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's statement that the British have left India of "poverty-stricken wrecks." (Chisholm 141). Godden, being already disturbed by what she was facing in India because of her white racial background gave her remark on this statement by Nehru, "Not a challenge or critic or anything like that, but by a reporterage (sic) of all and every sort of work that is being done every day, on all days, by English men and women in every part and corner of India a great part of which is government, inspired". (Chisholm 141). Rumer Godden was skeptical of the universally accepted attitude that the whites were always the ones who exploited the natives of the colonized nation. Through her works, she tried to bring to light the gruesome experiences that the whites faced in the colonized nations due to the history of colonization. Edward Said in his seminal text *Orientalism* (1978) talks about the representation of the East or the Orient by the West. He debates over the exaggerated image of the East as the "other" as projected by the West. The Orient as stated by Said were presented as the primitive and irrational, while the West as the "norm". This paper aims at challenging this notion and considering the whites as the "other" who gets oppressed by the natives in the postcolonial state. Marguerite Duras (1914-1996), a French author and screenwriter was born in Cochinchina (now Vietnam). French colonizers came to Indochina with the aim of extending trade relations but eventually, they started sending missionaries with the aim of converting them to Christianity. In the year 1858, French troops landed in Vietnam and they set up their colony. In 1864 they captured Cochinchina and in 1887 whole Vietnam got captured. Duras' parents came with the French colonizers and they started living in the colony working as school teachers. However, her father fell ill and he returned to his native place France where he died. Duras' mother had a

strong influence on her as she considered her mother to be an epitome of strength and courage who never gave up even in their worst days. Duras’ mother stayed back in Indochina with her three children living in almost constant poverty. Her mother had been teaching in Indochina since 1903 and being the widow of a civil servant, she acquired a concession from the colonial administration in the form of rice fields in Upper Cambodia. It is during this stage we see how they faced extreme hardships even though they belonged to the privileged section of the society. Her mother took monetary help even from a Hindu moneylender in return for a bond on her salary. All these episodes from Duras’ life are written in her collection *Wartime Notebooks*. The *Wartime Notebooks* is a collection of autobiographical entries by Duras which talks about her experiences in French Indo-China and it provides as a source for most of her novels. Duras is known for writing ‘auto-fiction’, a genre introduced by Serge Doubrovsky which refers to the works where fiction is intermingled with reality. Duras intertwined historical events with fiction in her works and her classic *The Lover* (1984) deals with her experiences in a colony, the personal and historical trauma that she endured during her stay in the colony. It shows how although being whites, they faced many hardships in the colony. Her creative works can be considered as a result of her personal and historical trauma. When we talk about trauma, it refers to certain catastrophic events or experiences such as war, treachery, rape, etc that affect the mind of the characters. *The Lover* by Marguerite Duras talks about her relationship with a Chinese man during her stay in Indochina. Duras herself is the narrator of the text, as it is one of the features of ‘autofiction’ where the protagonist and the narrator are the same person. The novel begins with a description of their personal lives, their living condition, and their status as whites in a colony. As stated in *The Wartime Notebooks*, Duras’ mother did a wrong investment in the rice field in Upper Cambodia which led her to borrow money and pay heavy interests to the moneylenders making their life more miserable. However, they had to maintain an image in society as being privileged enough because they were whites. Duras states this in her autofiction *The Lover*, “We were white children, we were ashamed, we sold our furniture but we weren’t hungry, we had a houseboy and we ate. Sometimes, admittedly, we ate garbage, storks, baby crocodiles, but the garbage was cooked and served by a houseboy, and sometimes we refused it, too, we indulged in the luxury of declining to eat”. (Duras 7)

When we talk about the colonizers, we always imagine them as the ones who live in good houses, enjoying all the privileges which the natives of the colonies are not entitled to. But here

the situation is different. Duras talks about those truths of colonialism that were never discussed or were less talked about. A colonizer living in a deplorable state in a colony, such an image never really crosses our mind. *The Wartime Notebooks* and *The Lover* gives us a gruesome image of the deplorable state of the colonizers and therefore we see that the protagonist such as the mother or Duras herself or the girl in *The Lover* suffer from trauma. This trauma may be personal as well as historical. However, different people react differently to the events which act as the reason for the trauma. When we talk about the mother in *The Lover*, we see that she suffers from a series of traumas. The first possible trauma that she might have been encountered was when her husband died and she was left all alone in a foreign land with three children. Her struggle starts from that moment and so does her trauma. She tried to establish a relationship with the dead after her husband died. She believed that she could connect with her dead husband. She also went through epileptic fits that left her in a kind of lethargic coma. The constant pressure of improving their living condition made her struggle every day and in the process, she was losing her mental stability. She was also very conscious and worried about her children's well being. When the girl in the story first started to meet her Chinese lover, it was her mother who noticed changes in her daughter's behavior. She noticed that her daughter has started behaving different and there was an air of strangeness around her. She was always conscious of maintaining her daughter's purity so that she could marry her well off and in that process, she always kept a suspicious eye on her daughter. She was afraid that her daughter might never get married if she does not remain pure till then and in that process, she ends up having attacks. The girl says, "My mother has attacks during which she falls on me, locks me up in my room, punches me, slaps me, undresses me, comes up to me and smells my body, my underwear, says she can smell the Chinese's scent, goes even further, looks for suspect stains on my underwear..." (43) She was always conscious of not letting her daughter lose her purity to that Chinese man because he was a native and that would demean their status as whites. However, later she decides to use her daughter in order to extract benefits from her rich Chinese lover. This is evident in the following words of the author: "The only thing left is this girl, she's growing up, perhaps one day she will find out how to bring in some money. That's why, though she doesn't know it, that's why the mother lets the girl go out dressed like a child prostitute. (19) She was always conscious of the fact that they would lose their status in the society if somebody finds out that her daughter was seeing a native. Hence, she instructed her daughter to do whatever she

wants to extract benefit from the Chinese, except sleeping with him. She was disturbed with the rumours that were spreading all over the town about her daughter and hence at times she suffered from trauma. She always carried the colonial superiority though it was clear that the Chinese man Leo though native, had a very superior status in the society as he was financially superior to them. This is evident when “Leo would take her family to expensive places in his car for dinner. They never paid money and her mother used to say that Leo was lucky enough that he could go out with a white girl”. (127)

It was very apparent that the whole family started using the girl to get benefits from Leo. During those meetings, they never bothered to have a conversation with him on the table. All that mattered was the money Leo was spending on them by taking them to expensive places which they could not afford. They asked the girl to demand expensive things from Leo but not to love him in return because he was a native and hence they considered him inferior to them. They considered it a disgrace to maintain any relationship with the natives. The trauma that the girl faced is that though being a white girl, she spent her childhood and adolescence in a very deplorable condition as compared to the rich girls. Firstly, she had to hide the fact from her friends that her mother is a teacher because teaching positions in native schools were considered demeaning because they were so poorly paid. Her life was quite different from other white girls. She used to take the bus instead of a private car in order to go to school. This is another reason why she was attracted to Leo because he had a luxurious car. She used to take pride and lingered around the car to show her classmates which would raise her standard among the daughters of the Indochinese officials. Though she was satisfied with everything but the fact that he was an Annamese made her suffer terribly. Her Lycee classmates dropped her permanently from their friend circle when they got to know about Leo. Though she liked Leo she knew that she did not have any possible future with him because he was a native. Her elder brother used to call her with words like “slut” since she was maintaining relationships with a native.

The girl also developed self-disgust for herself and hence she considered herself to be inferior wherever she went. She said, “I had one English teacher who took such a dislike to me that he actually felt ill at the sight of me, he could not stand to look at me anymore... At the boarding school, I made a monitor sick through my mere presence in the study hall and dormitory.” (112) All these instances show how the girl suffered mentally both at home and in public places. She was ashamed of her mother’s profession and her lover Leo because she could

not meet the standard of the “white” which is expected by society. The fact that someone better may like her was not acceptable to her. She believed that Leo liked her only because of his inferior origin. For instance, another guy who liked her was described in the following way: “That creature was a calamity. I couldn’t bear seeing him because he embodies the species to which I belonged – and from which I wanted to escape: the poor and the despised.” (113) As stated earlier, the girl liked Leo only because he had a luxurious car and could take her out to expensive places. She also believed that Leo loved her only because she was a white girl. She was ashamed of her lover other than these things. This is evident by the words she used to describe her lover. She described Leo’s appearance with something which is perfectly laughable and ridiculous. Although she was a white girl and should have had a privileged position, but due to their family condition she could not maintain a luxurious lifestyle like other white girls. No French girl would walk alone in the streets, but it was not the case with her. She says: “As for me, in the shade of the tall tamarind trees, I walked along and as I walked, it became even clearer that where I belonged was not where I was. People noticed me, looked back at me, smiled, surprised, sorry for me”. (145)

This shows how in the postcolonial state the whites too suffered mentally and physically which led to trauma as in the case of the mother and the protagonist in *The Lover*. The protagonist in the novel suffered from double marginalization. She felt as an outcast among other white girls in the colony who had a higher status than her. Again, she was treated as other by the natives. It is evident when Leo’s father refused to accept Leo and her relationship. It shows how at times the whites are also looked down upon. This idea can be seen as being projected well in Rudyard Kipling’s poem ‘The White Man’s Burden’. Kipling in his poem talks about the white men who are sent to uncivilized places to impose civilized behaviours among the natives. According to Kipling, it takes a lot of patience for the white men to settle in those countries, stay with the natives and fight diseases along with them. The imperialist duty made the white men toil hard in those lands for the empire, yet they received spite and hatred by the non-whites. The natives developed a revengeful attitude towards them because of the history of colonization. George Orwell’s essay ‘Shooting an Elephant’ discusses how imperialism inflicts damage on both the colonizers and the colonized. The white man becomes a puppet in the hands of the institution of imperialism. Orwell focuses on the dilemma and internal sufferings a British official faces in the land of the colonized. Orwell projects this through the incident of shooting

the elephant. The natives of Burma laughed and mocked him for he was representing the empire. Orwell had to kill the elephant that was rampaging through the streets creating havoc. Though he had no intention of killing the elephant, the sight of the crowd mocking at him forced him to kill that magnificent animal to restore “white men’s pride”. This shows how the white man suffered each day from being laughed at and humiliated by the natives who always had a vengeful attitude towards the former. The paper tried to prove that colonialism was harmful not only for the natives of the colonized nation but also for the white settlers who worked for the empire. Marguerite Duras’ *The Lover*, Orwell’s ‘Shooting an Elephant’, Kipling’s ‘The White Man’s Burden’ etc projected the whites as the “other” challenging the universally accepted idea that in colonialism the non-whites are the ones who are always exploited by the whites.

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