

# The Poetics of Feminine Desire in Duras's *The Lover*

Dr Ehsan Azari Stanizai

*S'vére savoir sans moi ce que J'enseigne.*  
J. Lacan: "Homage to Duras"

## Abstract

What does *écriture féminine* mean? Marguerite Duras answers this question straight: The writing of my desire—a stormy existence-in-hiding somewhere in the unconscious—communicates through my body. As a free woman, I resort to the fantasy that stirs my desire: that I am the sole subject. I refuse to be the object of the other desire. Excesses of my desire trespasses against the law and ephemerally plunge me into the *jouissance* of bodily drives. In her novel, *The Lover*, Duras offers her repertoire of writing about feminine desire. This essay investigates feminine writing as a teleological narrative of feminine desire. I will first enquire why and in what way we conceive of her project of feminine writing as the writing of feminine desire. Afterwards, I will scrutinize the way the novel opens up the gateway of the unconscious, whereby the feminine body writes itself by enjoying itself in her own way. I argue that the extremity of her sensual imagination, Duras ferries within the territory of feminine desire, the frontiers of which have been envisioned by the feminist theoretical discourse. In light of Lacan's theory of gender differences, I will demonstrate the double detour of feminine desire and its vast libidinal economy. I will finally observe how the theory of writing in the latest teaching of Lacan is coextensive and overlaps with the theories of *écriture féminine*.

Keywords: *écriture féminine*, *feminine desire*, *feminine jouissance*, *the unconscious*, *cinematographical narrative*, *writing*, *the written*, *signifier*, *non-signifiable*, *aporia*, etc.

---

Marguerite Duras, the French novelist, playwright, and filmmaker, is a towering figure of the late twentieth-century French feminist literature whom Cixous rightly glorified as the *grand dame of écriture féminine*. Her text constructs a visual and imaginary staging that integrally mirrors the hypertrophy of unconscious fantasies, desires, and bodily pleasures. Due to its analogous structure to the unconscious, Marguerite Duras' fiction offers an inventory of a multilayered structure of feminine desire. The significance of Duras' writing has to be sought in her sustained engagement with the formalization of feminine desire in a writing mode that goes beyond the preordained tradition of the phallogocentric exposition of femininity. With the publication of *The Lover (L'Amant)*, a 132-page novel (in English translation) in 1984, Duras entered the World literary centre-stage of feminine writing in all its densities. The prospect *The Lover* offers not only allows us to identify the residues of feminine desire but also may well bear upon how we draw psychoanalytic parallels to her text. This essay deals with the novel's dominant trend of writing about feminine desire. By playing with her unconscious, I will show how the author reveals a typical way of the feminine *jouissance*. To realize this Durasian trend, I wish to argue that *The Lover* offers a rhizomatic desire that traverses multiple bodies. And I will also suggest that Duras revolutionizes the mainstream theoretical discourses concerning feminine desire. I inspect how the play of feminine desire and *jouissance* structures the novel by acting out an unconscious fantasy. Accordingly, I argue Lacan's theory of writing, especially after engaging with Joyce in the 1970s, is coextensive with the French feminist theories concerning feminine writing. I also wish to examine a transposition of Lacanian interests into the field of feminine writing that is best

exemplified by Duras' fiction. Tracing the sensual odyssey in the novel, I intend to show how Duras outspreads the scope of feminine desire beyond the frontiers set by the French feminist theoreticians.

The first thing that strikes us in reading the inaugural paragraphs of *The Lover* is the conflation of the first-person, *I*, the third-person, *She*, the fractured narratives, a non-chronological sense of time, and a playful setting. Similarly, Duras challenges the canonical decree of story-telling—*Do not tell, show!*—even when recounting the madness of her mother. This method helps Duras create an innovative narrative style that inspires a visual field for the imagination of the readers. In her golden days, Duras (the protagonist/narrator) returns to her memories of the distant past and digs out a treasured memory fragment from her teen years about her mad love affair with a rich Chinese man. The memory of this romance has been embedded as an indelible image in her unconscious, which is going to erupt endlessly across the short paragraphs of the novel. In the meantime, this event is the central theme around which the entire novel rotates.

I often think of the image only I can see now, and of which I've never spoken.  
It's always there, in the same silence, amazing. It's the only image of myself I like, the only one in which I recognize myself, in which I delight. (TL: 7)

According to Lacan, preverbal cognition and memory build-up are grounded by images. Duras emphasizes that the memory traces always sustain themselves as images, not words, phrases or sentences. The primary pictogram, "a ferry crossing the Mekong River," (TL: 8) is that clear image that is tied up to a vast unconscious pool of eroticism, paranoia, and solitude with no centre or frontier. The images of the ferry, the bridge, and the river are material traces of the moment of the foremost transformation in the protagonist's life, who cherishes them as the delight of her undying amorous experiences and libidinal investment.

The novel demonstrates a relentless craving to present everything to be seen, which points to Duras's interest in her usual cinematographic narrative that calls for triggering the readers' gaze.

Following this primary concern of the novel, what is immediately striking is Dura's second most emphasis on her writing style. In the second paragraph, the author articulates her writing style, which is perceived as the blazing moment of feminine desire in literature. With such boldness of performance in writing, Duras masters tend to be free from conscious determination. In other words, Duras shows the flare-up of feminine desire as auto-writing, which flows forcibly from the depths of the unconscious like *qi*—the stream of life-force in Chinese metaphysics. Duras makes this understandable when she speaks about her attitude to writing, "I have never written when I thought I was writing, I have never loved when I thought I loved, I have never done anything but wait before the closed door," (Duras cited in Cohen, 1993, 101).

From the very outset, *The Lover* foregrounds a close intimacy between writing and feminine desire. The nucleus of this relation is how Duras structures her writing, which comes forth from silence and ends up in a 'void', evoking the site of enduring loss and the lack that constitutes the basic splitting of the self. Duras carefully builds up a network of associations between the internal vacuum in the subject that the signifier imposes by the constitution of an insatiable desire. She suggests that if writing fails to lodge this chaotic emptiness or sustains within itself barriers such as moral concerns, the writing will be reduced to an advertisement. Such obstructions force writing to hide somewhere to be read. This is the first impression that the novel gives about the enigmas of writing feminine desire. In this way, Duras endeavours to change the focus of the novelistic parody of life into the unmasking life that stays outside the ego. This is part of Duras' art of saying the unsayable and what Cixous terms as "impossible desire-without-words" (Cixous, 2005, 250)

The story of my life does not exist. It does not exist. There's never any center to it. No path, no line. There are great spaces... Writing, for those people, was still something moral.

Nowadays, it often seems writing is nothing at all. Sometimes I realize that if writing isn't, all things, all contraries confounded, a quest for vanity and void, it's nothing. That if it's not, each time, all things confounded into one through some inexpressible essence, then writing is nothing but an advertisement. But usually I have no opinion, I can see that all options are open now, that there seem to be no more barriers, that writing seems at a loss for somewhere to hide, to be written, to be read. (*TL*: 11-12)

In Lacan account, the unconscious is structured by the chain of the signifiers where desire is animated by the imaginary scenography of fantasy that parades these signifiers/images. In *Seminar V: Formations of the Unconscious*, Lacan argues that unconscious fantasy is 'dominated' and 'structured' by the playful organization of the signifiers, where articulating the conscious image of the author plays a marginal role.

It's impossible to distinguish, in any valid way, unconscious fantasies from this formal creation that is the play of imagination, if we do not see that unconscious fantasy is already dominated and structured by the state of the signifier. (Lacan, 2017, 236)

To comprehend Duras' undertaking, we must consider the theory of writing and writing as theory—a discourse that was increased in post-war France. Lacan's theories of gender differences and writing have greatly influenced feminist writing. In his later works, Lacan repeatedly attempts to articulate theories of feminine sexuality, feminine desire, feminine *jouissance*, and the theory of writing as an interrelated phenomenon. In *Seminar XX*, for example, he develops a theory that defines writing as a collection of traces that the effect of language leaves behind, as he states, "Writing is thus a trace in which an effect of language can be read (*se lit*). That is what happens when you scribble something," (Lacan, 1999, 121).

What is the effect of language? The language brings the lack as its irreducible interior indicator regarding erasure and "break-in being," (Ibid, 120). The loss of (the primordial object) is located in the site of the Other in the symbolic order. These breakages in discourse or being are already written up in the unconscious, "that solitude, like a break in knowledge, not only can be written but it is that which is written par excellence, for it is that which leaves a trace of a break-in being," (Ibid). Something which is written (*écrit*) is the unconscious knot that cannot be written for. As hinted, they are already written and always force their way into the texture of the writing. This is a non-stoppable effect of language in writing. The written as Lacan reminds us, is simply the return of the repressed signifier, like the insistence of the symptom. What is written also repeats itself in the fantasy.

I will venture, therefore, to say something that takes the plunge. My idea of the written—to situate it, to start from there, which may be debated afterward—well, let's say it, colon, is the return of the repressed. (Lacan, 2018, 16)

The structure of the written writing is symptomatic of a living immediacy whereby language comes into play with writing. The written is also "the condition of *jouissance*," (Lacan, 1999, 131). Lacan reaffirms his position on the written by drawing upon Aristotelian logic of *necessary*, *impossible* and *contingency*. In his view, the written is *necessary* for it (doesn't stop being written); it is also *impossible* for it (doesn't stop being written) and is *contingent* for it is (to stop not being written).

The writing of Joyce, Philipp Sollers, Artaud, and Lacan are portrayed with a rich profusion of the written—non-signifiable aporias, such as ellipsis, wordplay, anagram, neologism, opaque expressions, and so on. By contrast, the written in Duras writing persists as a repressed image/signifier, like the image of the ferry as a harbinger of the primordial memory traces.

From Lacan's discourse on writing in *Seminar XX*, the writing has the function of inscribing being, as in a Kantian sense, "the phenomenon has always been called—that beyond which there is the thing, the noumenon," (Lacan, 1999, 45). Barthes spells out this new kind of writing in rather simple terms, "writing according to new theory tends to fill the place of what I called then style," (Barthes, 1998, 263)

The autobiographical *The Lover* seems solidly feminine since it catalogues the author's experiences. The setting of the novel's main events is Sadec, an area close to Saigon, part of former French Indochina, where the author was born and brought up. Duras steadily tells the story of her dysfunctional family: a hysteric mother and two brothers. The elder brother was by all counts a déclassé, sadistic, and criminal with whom the protagonist sustained an unconscious incestuous fixation. Her younger brother was too feeble, naïve, and innocent. The paranoid sister, who was afraid of death at night, shows jealousy vis-à-vis her mother over her preference for her elder brother, defined by the narrator as the object of the mother's love. Parts of her troubled relationship with her mother seem to be contingent on a hidden mother-daughter contention. The protagonist, a teenage French girl, is locked up in a passionate love affair with a 27-year-old Chinese opulent man. The family lived in utter poverty. Sometimes, they were forced to eat garbage and storks and cook baby crocodiles. Her mother epiphanically knows about the death of her sick husband, who lived in France several nights before the arrival of a telegram about the news of his actual death. She saw his apparition on a terrible night when the death of her husband haunted her.

...she finally gives up her careless to-ing and fro-ing, that I see the madness clearly for the first time. I see my mother is clearly mad. (*TL*: 34)

There he is, standing by the table in the big octagonal drawing-room.  
Looking at her. I remember a shriek, a call. She woke us up, told us what had happened, how he was dressed. (*Ibid*, 36)

The protagonist's narcissistic adoration of her body-image prompts a chain of thought like the image of the ferry. She is wearing high-heel shoes, but what makes her extraordinary is her wearing of a man's hat, "the crucial ambiguity of the image," (*TL*: 16). She loves the flat-brimmed hat so much for it is a sign that "makes her whole," (*Ibid*). In a parody of the Lacanian perspective, Duras links the protagonist with the emblematic hat to make her look 'whole' in the symbolic order by a masculine symbol. On the home front, Duras also reveals the narrator's deprivileged and despised status as a sign of the familial patriarchy. She is subjected to harsh treatment by her mother in comparison with her brothers.

The first meeting with the 'elegant' Chinese financier was simple and easy, for she obediently allowed him to drive her in his black limousine to boarding school. Nevertheless, when she gets in the car, her mind is invaded by a fog of edginess: "A barely discernible distress suddenly seizes her, a weariness, the light over the river dims, but only slightly. Everywhere, too, there's very slight deafness, or fog," (*TL*: 37-38). Still, her stubbornness in each of her sexual encounters with the Chinese man simply expresses the force of her full-blown unconscious fantasy which returns throughout the novel.

That's how I came to be here with you...I weep. He lays his head on me and weeps to see me weep...we couldn't possibly have any future in common, so we'd never speak of the future ...it's taken for granted I don't love him, that I'm with him for the money, that I can't love him, it's impossible. (*TL*: 49-55)

Duras goes far in this direction and is attentive to chronicle tense, compelling, and unspoken intersubjective exchanges in her character attitudes. The girl gracefully reads the minds of her interlocutors and manipulates moments in conversation that she traces out in her lover thinking. She concludes these minimalist indicators to turn things to her advantage. Her brothers would not speak to the protagonist's Chinese lover, but all gorged when he invited the family for dinners at exorbitant restaurants.

because of his ignorance she suddenly knows: she was attracted to him already on the ferry (*TL*: 41).

I look at him. He looks back, apologizes, proudly. I'm a Chinese. We smile at each other. I ask him if it's usual to be sad, as we are (*TL*:48). Not only do we not talk to one another. When you're being looked at you can't look. To look is to feel curious, to be interested, to lower yourself. No one you look at is worth it. Looking is always demeaning. (*TL*: 59)

The family lived in a colony where the colonizer seemed to look more desperate and wretched than the colonized natives. No one ever sent letters back home when a family member was away. Only one letter was sent to the sister by her younger brother in ten years when he was on travel. No celebration or a Christmas tree was ever seen in their house. The protagonist's mother had bouts of violent rage of madness. Every day they dreamt of destroying one another. Her elder brother would look passively to all the brutalities that she was going through.

My elder brother will always be a murderer. My younger brother will die because of him. As for me, I left, tore myself away. Until she died my elder brother had her to himself...My mother has attacks during which she falls on me, locks me up in my room, punches me, slaps me, undress me, comes up to me and smells my body, my underwear, says she can smell the Chinese's scent. (*TL*: 61-62)

By showing a complicated mother-daughter relationship in the novel, Duras transcribes the unconscious structure of feminine desire, for, as was hinted above, it is captivated in a double-bind of the Other and the being the object of desire for the other. The protagonist portrays her mother as her potential contending partner. However, after her mother's death, she occupies her place. In the middle of the novel, the protagonist's mother dies, and Kristeva reads this as a crucial juncture in the mother-daughter relationship. By this death, the daughter wants to occupy her mother's position and her madness in the novel. Clearly, the hatred of the mother, the mother as the phallus, and her fear of the mother and her ultimate absence in the novel all echo the protagonist's unconscious fantasy. Continue reading with **Sydney Lacan Study and Reading Network**