

Power over "the other" : racial exploitation and injustice



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" I already know a thing or two. I know it's not clothes that make women beautiful or otherwise, nor beauty care, nor expensive creams, nor the distinction or costliness of their finery. I know the problem lies elsewhere. I don't know where. I only know it isn't where women think.... You didn't have to attract desire. Either it was in the women who aroused it or it didn't exist. Either it was there at first glance or else it had never been. It was instant knowledge of sexual relationship or it was nothing. That too I knew before I experienced it" (Duras, 19-20).

Marguerite Duras gives the reader this prophecy on attraction in her novel, *The Lover*, words which she, as we soon find, uses to explain her involvement with a man twelve years her senior. She, at the tender age of fifteen, claims to know more about beauty and attraction than women twice her age. She is aware of her body, on the brink of maturity, and what it does to men. She, short of many of the resources listed above, has learned to become creative and uses her body as her only tool for attraction and lust. She, at fifteen, is more sexually aware than most people her age. Her body means power. She is power. It is her power she will use to survive, even if it means what we would call using her body and the man she sleeps with.

Marguerite's lover is nameless. He is identified only by the color of his skin and his country. She knows his name, but she chooses to keep it from us so that we see what she sees, color, the body, the emotion. No name, no other relationship to him than the relationship she has. She is leaving his name out to distance herself so that we are distanced. We see his money, his limousine, the meals, the clothing. We do not know him. We only see what he's good for. " The elegant man has got out of the limousine and is smoking
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an English cigarette. He looks at the girl in the man's fedora and the gold shoes. He slowly comes to her. He's obviously nervous.... His hand is trembling. There's a difference of race, he's not white, he has to get the better of it, that's why he's trembling" (Duras, 32). The image is of a young girl dressed in a man's hat. The Chinese man trembles when he approaches her. He is always trembling when he interacts with her. He is aware of his skin, she is aware he's not white, not her. He offers her a cigarette which she refuses to take from him. The figure of the girl dressed as a man and the trembling Chinese lasts all the way through the book. They, from the very beginning, have swapped genders. She, from the very beginning, has the power to refuse him or take from him. And, most importantly, he is defined by what she is not. He is lack. He is not white. He is not painted completely. He is aware of his deficiency. He wears elegant clothing, rides in a fancy car, and smokes European cigarettes; tries to cover his shortcomings with his money and status. She is poor and white, he is rich and not. She is not even in her own country, but she has established a dominance he cannot take from her: " The image starts long before he's come up to the white child by the rails, it starts when he got out of the black car, when he began to approach her, and when she knew, knew he was afraid. From the first moment, she knows more or less, knows he's at her mercy" (35).

Along with racial power, before long, Marguerite attains sexual power over the Chinese. She tells him to use her for what he wants. She puts herself in a risky position, sacrificing her body, one of her main sources of power, and could lose everything. But this way he is not taking it from her, she is willingly giving it away, and she still has the control because she is the

coordinator. The Chinese quickly becomes too involved and dependent upon her because of his desire, love, and her accessibility. " He says he's lonely, horribly lonely because of this love he feels for her. She says she's lonely too. She doesn't say why. He says, You've come here with me as you might have gone anywhere with anyone.... She tells him she doesn't want him to talk, what she wants is for him to do as he usually does with the women he brings into his flat. She begs him to do that" (Duras, 37-38). Duras begs for sex the way a man would. The Chinese's body becomes the object, not hers, even though he sees it in that light. The Chinese always gives her the sex she wants. She has the power to say no and she has the power take it from him when she wants. On her command, she lets him have his way with her, turning their relationship into an unattached carnal lust, at least on her end. But he is carried away by his emotions and his mercy. " The body. The body is thin, lacking in strength, in muscle, he may have been ill, may be convalescent, he's hairless, nothing masculine about him but his sex, he's weak, probably a helpless prey to insult, vulnerable. She doesn't look him in the face. Doesn't look at him at all. She touches him.... He moans, weeps. In dreadful love" (38). His body lacks strength and a physical power over her. He is thin, hairless, like a prepubescent boy or child. He is weak, vulnerable to her like prey. She avoids eye contact and focuses on his body, touching him, making him weep, emoting the way a girl would. She: stoic, emotionless, distant.

Marguerite would have nothing to do with the Chinese if it weren't for money. That fact that he is not white is a compromise she is willing to make. He is compromising his body and his money for his love for the white girl. To

her, it's an even trade, although her family is a little harder to convince. They have no problem using him as a meal ticket, however. They gorge themselves on food and do not look at him. They let him pay. " My brothers will never say a word to him, it's as if he were invisible to them, as if for them he weren't solid enough to be perceived, seen or heard. This is because he adores me, but 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, that he could take any sort of treatment from me and still go on loving me. This is because he's a Chinese, because he's not a white man.... We all treat my love as he [her elder brother] does. I myself never speak to him in their presence. When my family is there I'm never supposed to address a single word to him" (Duras, 51). Marguerite is aware her family's exploitation of the Chinese mirrors her own, that's not her focus. Her focus in this passage is her awareness that the Chinese man will do anything to win her family's affection, trying to buy their approval. And it doesn't work. And it will never work because of his race. But he will put up with their rudeness because he is dependent upon Marguerite and will bear any treatment of him because he has no other option. He is trapped into taking her family out to dinner. Paying for everyone. He is trapped into enduring their uncultured, ravenous behavior and lack of appreciation. He is willingly submissive, and understandably sensitive about this treatment. He realizes he will never win them over. But he still goes through with it because his love for Marguerite forces him to do so. " In my elder brother's presence he ceases to be my lover.... he's no longer anything to me. He becomes a burned-out shell.... an unmentionable outrage, a cause of shame who ought to be kept out of sight.... [I am] exasperated at having to put up with this indignity just for the <https://assignbuster.com/power-over-the-other-racial-exploitation-and-injustice/>

sake of eating well, in an expensive restaurant, which ought to be something quite normal" (52-53). Marguerite feels guilty for taking advantage of the Chinese's generosity. She is angry her family ignores him. Mostly, she is angry with her brother. Her power is handed over to him. When they are all together, he calls all the shots. He knows just as well he can use the Chinese man for his own needs. Her mother compromises her daughter for the sake of money as well. She lets her run around dressed like a prostitute and more or less acquiesces to her affair because she knows why her daughter is sleeping with him. It's the same reason why she lets her go. He is of use to them. He will try to please them. He will submit to them. He can give them what they don't have and they will still turn out looking better in the end.

The Lover isn't the only text that addresses power over "the other." Like The Lover, Shakespeare's play, "The Tempest," has a pronounced motif of use and exploitation of "the other" with a backdrop of dominance over the natives in a foreign land. Nearly every scene in the play portrays a relationship between a figure that possesses power and a figure that is subject to that power. The most significant master-servant relationship is between Prospero and Ariel, and Prospero and Caliban. Exiled on a desert island, Prospero uses Caliban, the island's only native, like his slave.

Although Caliban inhabited the island long before Prospero came, he is at Prospero's mercy because he is aware of Prospero's magical powers and his superior intelligence. Prospero, of course, is also aware of his dominance over Caliban, and exploits him for his own convenience and gain. "This island's mine by Sycorax my mother,/Which thou tak'st from me. When thou cam'st first/Thou strok'st me and made much of me; wouldst give me/Water

with berries in't; and teach me how/To name the bigger light, and how the less,/That burn by day and night. And then I loved thee/...and here you sty me/In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me/The rest o' th' island" (1. 2. 331-344). Caliban feels repossessed or cast out from his only home, and with good reason. He didn't invite Prospero to live there, Prospero invaded his space and seized it from him, betrayed and enslaved Caliban, and expects him to be grateful and subservient. "Thou most lying slave, Whom stripes may move, not kindness. I have used thee/(Filth as thou art) with humane care, and lodged thee/In mine own cell..." (1. 2. 345-348). Prospero always tells a story with an emphasis on his good deeds and everyone else's bad deeds, especially when speaking of his brother, Ariel and Caliban. Prospero's control over Caliban rests on his ability to master him through words. There is no say as to whether Caliban is another race, but his mother was a witch and his father the Devil, his identity, therefore, is dark and uncertain. Either way, Caliban assumes the role of "the other." Prospero is not threatened by him because when they met Caliban could not even speak, and he feels Caliban is forever indebted to him for teaching him language.

Ariel creates an immediate and powerful contrast between Prospero's two servants. Where Caliban is uncultured, bitter and brutish, described as a "[h]ag-seed" (1. 2. 368), a "poisonous" (1. 2. 322) and "most lying slave" (1. 2. 347) and as "earth" (1. 2. 317), Ariel is delicate, refined and gracious. He is characterized as a spirit of air, while Caliban is a creature of earth. Though the two are both Prospero's servants, Ariel serves Prospero somewhat willingly, in return for freeing him from the tree, while Caliban resists serving

him at all costs. Even though when Prospero arrived upon the island, he freed Ariel and enslaved Caliban, it was probably because he knew Ariel could be of more use to him because of his powers. Given that Prospero is a European, his exploitive treatment of Ariel, and especially of Caliban, could represent the disruptive effect of European colonization on native societies. Prospero's colonization has left Caliban, the original ruler of the island, subject to enslavement and hatred on account of his dark and—in the eyes of Prospero—rough appearance because he is not European. Not even mannerly, obedient servants like Ariel can avoid Prospero's imprisonment—at least until Ariel is of no further use. Like *The Lover*, the foreigner who ends up in foreign land turns the tables on the native, making them the outcast, "The Other," unacceptable, savage, deficient.

In Jean Rhys' novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette and her mother are strangers in a strange land. They are often the subjects of violence and animosity because they are Creoles living in a predominantly black society. Antoinette's mother, Annette, falls victim to stares and whispers, and has no confidants. "Standing by the bamboos she had a clear view to the sea, but anyone passing could stare at her. They stared, sometimes they laughed.... A frown came between her black eyebrows, deep.... I hated this frown and once I touched her forehead trying to smooth it. But she pushed me away... as if she had decided once and for all that I was useless to her" (Rhys, 11). It is this isolation and feelings of inadequacy that turn Annette into a distant, brooding person. Although they are living on what seems to be enemy territory, Antoinette and her mother stay, despite threats upon their lives and the murder of their son and brother. Very soon, however, Annette's

treatment gets the better of her. Whether or not she has actually gone mad is up for debate. She is closely connected to the wild, exotic garden next to their house. The smell and view are both intoxicating and sickening to Antoinette when she is younger, and she never wants to go near it. This image of the wild garden and Annette's depressed, lobotomized state do suggest a sort of underlying madness or fever. Either she was too much to handle or the country was too much for her to handle. Whatever way, Annette was quickly eliminated, brought on by early harsh treatments and social outcast for being too different. This, however, is only the beginning of the power struggle over "the other." When the unnamed man, like The Lover's unnamed "other," narrates the second part of the novel, he and Antoinette are already married. He is from England, a second son and therefore not eligible for inheritance, and so is married off like a daughter to Antoinette, a heiress, to ensure a secure financial future. Also a stranger in a strange land, the man is dependent upon Antoinette because their way of living is so abnormal to him. Even Antoinette is abnormal to him. She has that sort of exotic, maddening disposition to him that he learns her mother shared as well. "I watched her critically. She wore a tricorne hat which became her. At least it shadowed her eyes which are too large and can be disconcerting. She never blinks at all it seems to me. Long, sad, dark alien eyes. Creole of pure English decent she may be, but they are not English or European either" (Rhys, 39). Antoinette is strange to him, and she almost scares him in a way. Her mannerisms are foreign, and she has a mystical energy he cannot place because it is unlike anything he's ever known.

The environment itself also has the same effect on him that she has. Used to England, where foliage is only found in the countryside, and it is overcast, raining, or cold ninety percent of the time, her land is much too alive and wild for him to handle. " Everything is too much.... Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near. And the woman is a stranger. Her pleading expression annoys me. I have not bought her, she has bought me, or so she thinks.... The girl is thought to be beautiful, she is beautiful. And yet... (Rhys, 41). Immediately after arriving, Antoinette's husband is in bed with fever for two weeks, falling victim to this environment right away. Where he is powerless against his family, his wife, and where he lives. " I was tired of these people. I disliked their laughter and their tears, their flattery and envy, conceit and deceit. And I hated the place. I hated the mountains and the hills, the river and the rain. I hated the sunsets of whatever colour, I hated its beauty and its magic and the secret I would never know. I hated its indifference and the cruelty which was part of its loveliness. Above all I hated her. For she belonged to the magic and the loveliness. She had left me thirsty and all my life would be thirst and longing for what I had lost before I found it" (103). He hates the country, the people living in it, and his wife might as well be from another planet she is so alien to him. He feels like the butt of every joke. He feels cheated by his family. He feels like Antoinette is in the way of what he wants.

Desperate to remedy his feeling like a piece of property, his alienation and inadequacy, he must claim power over Antoinette if he ever wants to feel normal again. " Very soon she'll join all the others who know the secret and will not tell it. Or cannot.... Yes, they've got to be watched.... She's one of

them. I too can wait-for the day when she is only a memory to be avoided, locked away, and like all memories a legend. Or a lie..." (103). Unlike in *The Lover* and "The Tempest", the social outcast retaliates against the injustice placed upon him. Unwilling to compromise, Antoinette's husband gets rid of her all together because she is such a threat to his manhood and his happiness. He leaves no room for a peace treaty because he listens to the rumors that she may be mad and will never change. For him, there is no other option and no other possibility he is willing to take or believe. Bringing her to England will switch their roles completely. He will live in an environment that is familiar to him while she may be too colorful to adapt, forcing her to assume the role of "the other" and bringing the power back to him. The real tragedy in this is Antoinette chooses to follow him and chooses madness. She compromises her happiness because she believes his suffering is greater than what she will endure.

Wide Sargasso Sea depicts the authoritative superior as a victim in the end, and as having no realization of their power until it is pointed out to them, unlike Duras and Prospero, who are aware of the injustice. As far as the geographical context that *The Lover* and "The Tempest" share, it is also important to note the different direction *Wide Sargasso Sea* takes. When in Jamaica, Antoinette is no more a native of the land than her husband is, and they each have experienced the uncomfortable situation of being the outcast. Nevertheless, Antoinette, having lived there longer, is visibly more at peace with the place than her husband will ever be, and unlike in the previously examined texts, her husband is not able to turn the tables on her

and overpower her. It is on enemy territory—England—when she is able to be manipulated and overpowered.

Despite this, Annette, the Chinese man, Ariel and Caliban all experience interchangeable feelings of alterity because of their race. The Chinese man, Ariel and Caliban are all exploited for their delicate nature—or, in Caliban's case, substandard intelligence—because of society's backwards views on inter-racial relationships and their attitude toward unique people on a whole. Annette is ruined because she is abused and threatened, laughed and stared at. Antoinette's husband is sold like furniture into an alien society he cannot adjust to and is subject to feelings of insufficiency and impotency. And finally, Antoinette maybe pays the highest cost. In England, she cannot survive. It lacks a vitality she thrives on. Her lost state, her husband believes, is a symptom of the madness passed down in her bloodstream, so he locks her away in an attic and pretends she doesn't exist. So raises the literary figure of the madwoman in the attic. Society's formidable "other." She may change gender. She may change skin color. But her bearing is still the same. She represents ignorance, arrogance, and fear. And she will remain in that attic until society makes an effort toward understanding, sympathy, and unity.