

Discuss the role of shame in the construction of identity in l'amant by marguerit...

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The autobiographical novel, « L'amant » by Marguerite Duras tells the story of the love affair between the young Marguerite Duras and the son and the son of a wealthy Chinese man. The story deals with the culture differences and defiance of society and of tradition and culture.

Marguerite Duras was born in Indochina, a region which was part of the French colonial empire in Southeast Asia. She grew up with two brothers, her mother was a headmistress and her father died while she was still very young. Her mother struggled to bring up her children, they were raised in poverty. The majority of the book revolves around the affair she has with a Chinese man and the life that her mother lived and the effect her mother had on her family and her search for her identity. Duras shows how her mother's life affected her children's lives. She felt so much hatred for the fact that poverty had made her mother suffer and had turned her mad. Her mother was unable to play the role of the protector. « A cause de ce qu'on a fait a notre mere si aimable, si confiante, nous haïssons la vie, nous nous haïssons.

She allowed her children, especially her daughter to be exposed to society at a young age. In the novel, she is 15 years of age and is already aware of many things. « Ce visage de l'alcool m'est venu avant l'alcool. L'alcool est venu le confirmer.

.. j'avais a quinze ans le visage de la jouissance et je ne connaissais pas la jouissance... » The definition of Identity is " the set of behavioural or personal characteristics by which an individual is recognizable as a member of a group", and the definition of shame is " an emotion that is drawn from a sense of guilt embarrassment and disgrace.

To feel ashamed is to feel unworthy. The feeling of shame is very present in « L'amant », Duras grew up in poverty, the pain that she felt because of her circumstances, forced the feeling hatred and a presence shame towards society, her mother and herself define her identity. There is also an absence as well as a presence of shame in the novel. Duras is very much shameless in her actions and her attitude towards the life that she chose to live.

She chooses to rebel against colonial traditions and gives into her desires and feels no reason to apologise for her lifestyle. Her actions are justified by her constant unhappiness. « Je lui dis que dans mon enfance le malheur de ma mere a occupe le lieu du reve. » She felt no sense of belonging in her family which is why the relationship between her and her mother and brothers is so tarnished. They are all damaged in their own ways and the only thing that brings them together is the mutual feeling of shame and suffering. Identity and shame go hand in hand when it comes to the construction of the main character of the novel. The inability to recognise herself as a member of any group or the society she lives in is apparent. She lives a very autonomous and alienated life.

Her love affair with the Chinese man breaks her away from the people around her. She is breaking traditions rules and defying the norms of society which makes her outcast. The shame she feels, does not derive from her relationship with the Chinese, but from the financial and unstable situation in her family. Her family live in poverty and Duras identifies herself through this poverty and through her pain. Tous les trois enfants de cette personne de bonne foi, notre mere, que la societe a assassinee » Her mother is a victim of

colonial society. Her husband dies and she is left to support her children which she struggles to do. The mother tried so hard to bring her children out of poverty and tried to plan good lives for them but never succeeded. Her despair and madness obviously had an effect on Duras as a child growing up in poverty.

She was ashamed of her lifestyle just as her mother was, even though she always pretended that her situation was fine. Duras' mother tried to keep up appearances and always tried to portray her children in a good light. She boasted about her educated daughter even though everyone was aware of her daughter's affair. She seemed to be in denial about the situation as it was easier than admitting that she was ashamed of her daughter's « metissage » with a Chinese man. « La mere parle, parle. Elle parle de la prostitution eclatante et elle rit, du scandale... cette peau de blanche...avec la grande racaille milliardaire chinoise, diamant au doigt comme une jeune banquiere et elle pleure.

It appears that the predominant feeling of shame towards the affair with the Chinese man derives from the simple fact that he is Chinese. It is the mixture of two different races that raises the issue. In the novel, Duras, talks about the times when her lover begs for his father's approval and the father rejects this idea. « Le pere lui avait repete qu'il preferait le voir mort. » It defies tradition and moral norms of a colonial society, a society where races are not meant to mix. This being the very thing that Duras chooses to do. Women in the 20th century were subject to the patriarchal relations and most of them never questioned their fate or tried to defy the rules of their society.

However, the young girl does not dwell on the stereotypical role of the helpless or insignificant woman that this society had created.

“ According to Duras... women deny their silence, accept male standards and emulate men...

What Duras wants is for women to emerge from their silence not by rejecting it but by acknowledging it as their strength... “ I suggest that the French girl’s sexual autonomy from a system of colonial patriarchy that maintains white women’s subordination to white men depends upon her libidinal attraction to her Chinese love, and therefore upon the hybridization of her racial and her cultural identity. ” She finds comfort in her lover as he takes the role of a father as well as a lover.« Il la prend comme il prendrait son enfant. Il prendrait son enfant de meme.

» He bathes her, and takes care of her and he loves her despite her flaws and despite the fact she told him she did not love him back. Le visage contre le sien il prend ses pleurs, il l’écrase contre lui, fou du desir de ses larmes de sa colere. » He offers the stability that she does not receive from her family. This is the reason why she feels no shame about her affair, it is not just about defying tradition but about the identity she tries to form for herself through this racial « metissage » One could definitely argue that there is a slight sense of jealousy from the mother. She is jealous of the fact that her daughter is her own person and is not fazed by the opinions that people have about her.

She does not pretend to be who she is not like her mother does. The family pictures that her mother forces them to take in order to show off to people. Her mother tries to portray her daughter as an innocent child but contradicts herself by insulting her. « ...cette peau de blanche... avec la grande racaille milliardaire chinoise » However, she does not stop discourage her daughter for acting the way she does. « La mere permet a son enfant de sortir dans cette tenu d'enfant prostituee... la mere ne l'empechera pas de le faire quand elle de l'argent » This shows the mother's inability to play the role of a teacher to her child.

She is unable to teach her child about the values of life, this is probably because she does not understand them herself. « Je lui ai repondu que ce que je voulais avant, toute autre chose c'etait ecrire, rien d'autre que ca rien. » Writing, for Marguerite Duras, was a very powerful tool which helped in the search for her identity; she filtered her shame and pain through her writing. She also managed to create the history of her life in her writing. « L'histoire de ma vie n'existe pas. Ca n'existe pas. Il n'y a jamais de centre. » People often find it hard to express themselves through writing.

This novel shows how Duras expressed her pain and found solace through writing. It shows the struggle she went through to define herself as a person and especially as a woman living in a patriarchal and colonial society. Writing is not easy for many because it forces people to express the emotions that they would rather hide. It can often be a painful and emotion process.

It is very interesting to see how Duras used her writing to identify herself. « L'amant » is a novel that raises topics of interracial relations, the search for

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an identity and hardships of life in a different country. The notion of shame, identity and writing all come together in the novel. These are all the things that formed the story of L'amant.

L'amant shows how Duras turned to writing in search for an identity that had been non-existent or hard to find because of the shame that she was surrounded by. She was unable to talk about her the shame or the pain she felt as it was not allowed in her family. As a result she turned to her lover and turned to writing, from which she was able to recognise herself and form her identity.