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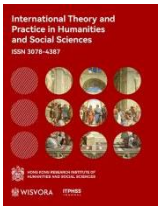

The Sea Wall – A Post-colonial Perspective Analysis

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Abstract

The Sea Wall (A Barragem Contra o Oceano Pacífico) is among Duras' earliest realist works, as it is not merely a fictional narrative but an autobiographical novel. Set in a French colony in Indochina in the early 20th century, the novel portrays the experiences of an ordinary French family who emigrated to the colony. Existing scholarship on the novel largely falls into two categories: one focusing on narrative techniques and creative strategies, and the other adopting a cultural studies framework, with attention to feminist and psychological dimensions. This paper, however, seeks to reinterpret the novel through a post-colonial lens, emphasizing Duras' hybrid cultural identity and its influence on her work. By analyzing Duras' life story and the historical period in which she lived, this study explores how her characters inhabit a "third space"—a conceptual site shaped by the intersection of colonial and indigenous identities.

1.Introduction

Characters born in Indochina, vivid memories of happiness and freedom, lives deeply marked by poverty, and the kindness of the colonial people—these four elements form the foundation of Duras' literary creation (WeiWei, 2005, p. 5). Moreover, Duras has a special connection with Indochina, which gave rise to a unique “Indochinese complex.” Many of her works are set in the French colony of Indochina, among which The Sea Wall (A Barragem Contra o Oceano Pacífico) stands out as one of her finest achievements.

Currently, existing studies on this work are divided into two primary categories: one focuses on the investigation of narrative techniques, creative methods, and so on. For instance, Márcia Barcellos Alves and Maria Cristina Poli (2017) highlight the feminine perspective embodied in Duras' novel, analyzing her writing style, discourse, and narrative structure. On the other hand, Beatriz D'Angelo Braz (2017) argues that Duras critiques French imperialism in the early 20th century through the development of the novel’s characters and plotlines.

The other category broadens the investigation into cultural studies, exploring themes such as

feminism, psychology, and others. For instance, in From The Sea Wall to The Lover: Prostitution and Exotic Parody, Pascale Bécel presents Duras' anti-colonial stance, yet argues that it is inevitably intertwined with colonialist attitudes in her work. Similarly, in The Language of Empire and the Case of Indochina: Masculine Discourse in the Shaping and Subverting of Colonial Gender Hierarchies, Ashley E. Patadia, through a lens of colonial and gender identity, reflects on Duras' ambivalent position within the colonial hierarchy. Julia Waters (2006), adopting a slightly different approach from Patadia, begins her analysis with Duras' life, examining historical developments and class identity within a post-colonial framework. She ultimately concludes that Duras remains conflicted about her past identity.

The book L'Amant from a Post-colonial Perspective by Professor Zhou from EJU (2007) and Wei Wei's study of L'Amant and The Sea Wall (A Barragem Contra o Oceano Pacífico) from a Post-colonial Perspective (2005) represent the only comparative analyses conducted by Chinese scholars within a post-colonial framework concerning Duras' works. Additionally, there are very few post-colonial interpretations of The Sea Wall in the Lusophone world. Overall, post-colonial analyses of Duras' oeuvre tend to be comprehensive in scope, with limited focus on individual texts.

A writer never makes a clean break with childhood. He learns everything from it" (Laure Adler, 2000). For Marguerite Duras (1914-1996), a French author who was born and spent eighteen years in Indochina (now Vietnam), the region remained an indelible memory, and her childhood experiences significantly shaped her thematic choices, character archetypes, and more. As a poor Westerner raised in the East, Duras writes from dual perspectives: that of the colonized and the colonizer; of being displaced from the colonial center and of occupying a position within the dominant colonial discourse (QuanQun Yan, 2005, p. 51). Therefore, this study will analyze The Sea Wall (A Barragem Contra o Oceano Pacífico) from a post-colonial perspective, relating it to the author's childhood experiences and her identity position.

2.Duras' Life and The Sea Wall

The Sea Wall (A Barragem Contra o Oceano Pacífico) is a long, early autobiographical work by the French author Marguerite Duras. It tells the story of a common working-class French family in the 20th century in the Indochina region, a French colony: the mother settles in Indochina with her two children (Suzanne and Joseph) and purchases arable land that is eroded year after year by the tides, due to her failure to bribe the colonial authorities. As noted in the text itself,(…) desperately ignorant of the blood-sucking proclivities of colonialism. The arable concessions were not generally granted except for twice their value, of which half the sum went into the pockets of the agents in charge of distributing the land developments.（*Marguerite Duras, 1950，P.19*）

Later, the dam they had labored over and constructed twice was destroyed by the tide, and the land was swallowed by the sea. The mother ultimately succumbed to poverty, experiencing significant physical and mental deterioration.The Sea Wall (A Barragem Contra o Oceano Pacífico), one of Duras' earliest realist masterpieces, is also a true reflection of the author's childhood in many aspects of the novel.

The book is situated within the narrative of Indochina under French colonization in the 20th century, a period during which Indochina was not only subjected to various forms of economic, political, and military colonial control but also shrouded in a colonial haze that permeated its cultural, intellectual, and linguistic dimensions.

The living conditions of the French in the affluent area were undoubtedly enviable. The

struggles and misfortunes faced by the mother in the narrative are merely a small representation of the working-class experience in the colony. However, the social status and treatment of the mother's family, being French, were already considerably superior to that of the ordinary people in the region, as described in the book:According to her, they had lived well, in spite of the burden of their children. (Marguerite Duras, 1950, P.18).The mother was exceedingly strict regarding the French language spelling for both of her children.She stuck to the question of his mistakes in spelling. (Marguerite Duras, 1950, P.257)The mother's ability to become angry with her children and reprimand them for their mistakes is, in fact, a reflection of her self-identification as French.

She seeks to maintain her purity in relation to the West through a high degree of control over her discursive rights; thus, she vehemently rejects hybridity in order to preserve her identity as a Westerner. According to Foucault's theory of discursive power, language serves as a medium of power, and discursive power is one form of expressing cultural hegemony (Wang YueChuan, 1999, p. 40). The mother's pursuit of linguistic purity (such as spelling) constitutes a assertion of discursive power and an identification with France, which possessed cultural hegemony. The siblings in the novel, on the other hand, already exhibit behavior characteristic of second-generation colonizers. Their cultural education and common linguistic habits have gradually become infused with hybridity over time.

In the context of cultural pluralism, the mother in The Sea Wall (A Barragem Contra o Oceano Pacífico), as a first-generation colonizer, compels her children to learn French and refuses to associate with the native inhabitants of the colony. This behavior represents her identification with her own Western identity, functioning as a type of "colonizer." The native peoples who grew up in Indochina, conversely, embody the colonized. According to Homi Bhabha's post-colonial theory, there exists, in fact, an ambiguous "third space" within the interplay of colonized and colonizer cultures. This hybrid third space disrupts the purity of the two original cultures and creates a new combination of characteristics in terms of race and culture. The dominance of the colonizer is susceptible to subversion and replacement through the intertwining of this third space (Liu XueYun, 2015, p. 8). In this case, as second-generation colonizers, the children, led by Suzanne, are imbued with hybridity in their identity. This theory certainly provides a valid framework for analyzing groups like Suzanne, who experience cultural identification issues.

Underneath the narrative of The Sea Wall, Duras subtly portrays the psychological and socio-cultural effects of colonialism, where identity and belonging are constantly at odds with survival and assimilation. The mother's insistence on maintaining French linguistic purity and cultural values, despite her family's dire circumstances, reveals her internalized view of Western superiority and a deep-seated resistance to blending with the local culture. Her refusal to relinquish these values, even as they alienate her from the reality of her surroundings, illustrates a form of colonial disillusionment and psychological entrapment. The land she purchases, persistently reclaimed by the ocean, serves as a symbol of her futile resistance against both natural and colonial forces, underscoring the impossibility of achieving stability in an environment fundamentally shaped by exploitation and inequality.

3.Suzanne and the Third Space

Since the 1980s, post-colonial theory has gained prominence, becoming a powerful tool for a group of intellectuals to reflect upon and critique Western cultural hegemony and Eurocentrism. In this context, some scholars began to explore the cultural relationship between Eastern and Western colonialities, which ultimately led to the development of post-colonial theory.

Post-colonialism is represented by Edward Said, Gayatri C. Spivak, and Homi Bhabha. They argue that there exists a strong sense of national superiority entrenched in Western thought and culture, which is consistently regarded as the dominant culture in the world. Non-Western cultural traditions of the Third World or the East have been marginalized and serve the role of the "Other" in relation to the West (Wilfred, 1992, p. 212). Post-colonialists focus on the ethnic 'Other,' advocating for a new perspective on the historical realities of Western colonialism and its consequences. This involves rethinking and rewriting colonial cultures, dismantling the centrality and authority of Western culture, establishing a cultural self-identification, and presenting a third identity to highlight the allure and value of Third World cultures and their significant place in the multicultural landscape of the world.

As a Frenchwoman with a pronounced "Indochinese complex," Duras' specific cultural identity renders her "alienated from the West, yet superior to the East, possessing a sense of Western superiority" (QuanQun Yan, 2005, p. 53). The hybridity of cultural identities places Duras, who navigates the chasm between East and West, in a state of psychological drift, often unable to find a sense of belonging, whether she confronts the East or the West. Post-colonialism serves as a viable framework for interpreting this vacillating identity.

As a Frenchwoman who grew up in colonial Indochina, Duras has always occupied a culturally marginal position. On one hand, she possesses a sense of identity as a French person and insists on writing in French, aspiring to integrate into the Western world. However, she did not share the same social status as the superior French residents of the colony. On the other hand, due to her poverty, she was compelled to associate with a "Chinese man" whom she did not like, although such behavior already challenges the notion of a "pure" Western identity.

This mixed cultural identity allows Duras to flexibly employ a dual perspective in her works, representing both the colonizer and the colonized. In many of Duras' writings, there exists a strong Orientalist humor, yet simultaneously a sense of longing for travel, powerlessness, and solitude (Wei Wei, 2005, p. 7). This aligns with Homi Bhabha's theory of cultural identity hybridity. Duras' life experiences compelled her to embrace a dual cultural identification. Therefore, in addition to her original Western culture, an Eastern culture that she acquired and experienced also influenced her. Nonetheless, Duras remained confused and disoriented when confronted with purely Eastern and Western cultures.

In The Sea Wall (A Barragem Contra o Oceano Pacífico), a clearly autobiographical novel, the characters share Duras' bicultural identity. This particular cultural identity enables this family of ordinary French immigrants to navigate their existence between two major groups—the immigrants and the colonized. Duras illustrates this hybrid cultural identity through Suzanne's family in The Sea Wall: Suzanne's family consists of common French colonists in the colony, belonging to a lower class compared to the colonial French rulers in Indochina; like the colonized, they are governed without any privileges. Conversely, they also represent the dominant class of colonizers in relation to Africans and Asians. The dual identity of both the colonizer and the colonized places them in an awkward position, as they are unable to integrate with the French colonizers or to be truly recognized by the local inhabitants.

Hybridization differs from purely marginal or dominant cultures; it is a cultural phenomenon characterized by mutual influence, a process of inclusion and hybridization of these two cultures through conflicting exchanges aimed at dismantling absolutism and dualism in Western discourse. To a certain extent, the cultural image of Suzanne’s family deconstructs traditional dualism. In a post-colonial cultural context, this "hybrid" identity, caught between being French and being Asian or African, colonizer and colonized, represents a fundamental rebellion against Eurocentric discourses. This marginal identity cannot be defined at a simple material level. In The Sea Wall,

the identification of Suzanne and her family with their colonial identity is articulated through the control of her Oriental lover, Monsieur Jo. In the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, the colonizer maintains dominance by pillaging the goods and resources of the colonized. In the dynamic between Suzanne and her Oriental lover, Monsieur Jo, Suzanne's family similarly exploits Monsieur Jo's possessions.

Suzanne deliberately objectifies the image of her Oriental lover, for instance, when on the cruise ship, her lover is described as...A neat, clean man. And ugly. But his car was beautiful. （Marguerite Duras, 1950 P.48) However, he is always subservient, obeying Suzanne.He told Suzanne every day of the feelings he had for her, "As for me," （Marguerite Duras, 1950 P.74)

Although the lover carefully suggests that Joseph, Suzanne's brother, may not be capable of driving, the suggestion is arrogantly dismissed by Suzanne. In contrast, Suzanne's attitude toward her lover is one of arrogance (Marguerite Duras, 1950, p. 48), positioning her in a place of dominance. Suzanne's attitude toward her lover effectively reflects her identification with the West. This identification is based on the othering of the East by the West. However, in this relationship, Suzanne's involvement with Monsieur Jo has already undermined the so-called purity of Western identity. Thus, Suzanne's cultural identity is also infused with hybridity.In contrast is the image of Suzanne's Oriental lover in the novel. He is wealthy in terms of material possessions, even richer than most of the colonizers.Monsieur Jo was the only son of a very rich speculator whose fortune was typical of those made in the Colony. (Marguerite Duras, 1950 P.49)

However, on a spiritual level, he is obedient and lacks any sense of superiority (even feeling inferior to Suzanne). Because of his wealth, he cannot integrate with the local native colonized population. Due to his own racial identity, he is also unable to gain recognition from the upper-class colonizers. This mixed identity renders him even more inferior, causing pain and entanglement. Such mental torture is undoubtedly deeper and more profound.

Suzanne's relationship with Monsieur Jo, as portrayed in *The Sea Wall*, thus emerges as a microcosmic reflection of the broader colonial tensions between East and West. Her treatment of him underscores the performative assertion of Western superiority over the East, embodying the social hierarchies that the colonizers imposed upon the colonized. Yet, her attraction to his wealth and influence represents a subtle transgression of these boundaries, highlighting her family's dependency on the resources and status he provides. By embracing the material benefits of this relationship while simultaneously demeaning Monsieur Jo, Suzanne reflects the ambivalence of her hybrid identity—an identity shaped by the privileges of a colonizer and the vulnerabilities of a marginalized class within the colony.

This hybrid identification, influenced by Duras' own complex cultural positioning, draws on Homi Bhabha's concept of "mimicry" within post-colonial theory. Mimicry, as Bhabha articulates, becomes both a tool of resistance and a destabilizing force, challenging the colonial authority by rendering its imposed identity ambiguous and incomplete. Suzanne's interaction with Monsieur Jo highlights this mimicry: she simultaneously upholds and undermines the colonial power structure. By adopting an attitude of superiority and wielding her "Frenchness" as a form of control, she reflects the colonial insistence on authority. However, her reliance on him and her attraction to his wealth subvert the Western ideal of cultural and racial "purity," revealing the fragile construct of colonial identities.

In Suzanne's dynamic with Monsieur Jo, the post-colonial "third space" emerges—a space where identities are neither fully colonizer nor colonized but fluid, intersecting, and challenging the boundaries of each. This third space does not offer Suzanne a sense of belonging; rather, it intensifies her cultural dislocation. Through the hybridized nature of Suzanne's identity, Duras

critiques the colonial paradigm that demands rigid separations between colonizer and colonized, asserting instead that these identities are deeply intertwined, complex, and laden with contradictions.

4.The "Gaze" of Hybridization

In colonial society, due to the long-standing persistence of the Western identity of the colonizers and a fear of hybridization, they identified themselves as Westerners and felt compelled to maintain their identity, emphasizing their status as individuals from a different culture, the Other. Racial differences are also rationalized for them. Westerners, whether consciously or unconsciously, regard those who differ from themselves as Others, such as the "less pure" French, Asians, and Africans. Said noted that "Every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric" (Wang YueChuan, 1999, p. 47). It is undeniable that in Duras's works, we can perceive her positioning from a humanitarian perspective, speaking on behalf of the colonized peoples, while also making strong critiques of imperialism, colonial policies, and racial discrimination. However, due to her French family background and the prevalence of colonialist views at that time, social values remained strongly racist.

The Sea Wall (A Barragem Contra o Oceano Pacífico) was written in the late 1940s, when France had not yet completed its decolonization process and was engaged in the Indochina War (1916–1954) following the end of World War II, in an effort to defend its remaining interests in the colony. It was only in 1955 that France truly ended its colonial rule in Vietnam. At that time, racist attitudes were common in French society, and Duras, living among them, was profoundly affected. For her, racial differences made sense. It was unacceptable to compare herself with the local population (Laure Adler, 2000, p. 27). Under the influence of racial perceptions, Duras regarded associating with Asians as a source of shame. Although she spoke on behalf of the colonial population, she harbored discriminatory and prejudiced views against those who were different from her in her mind. As a young woman, she became involved with Li Yuntai (a wealthy Chinese businessman) due to her family's poverty, and similar to the case of Suzanne and Monsieur Jo in the novel, this type of love is based on money.

Duras has always been adept at using the relationship between men and women as a metaphor for the connection between the East and the West. Generally, sexual discrimination is somehow linked to the weakness of the state, and the sexual subjugation of the opposite sex in a foreign country is often accompanied by the pleasure of overcoming the weak with the strong. If the dominance of the weaker country by the stronger country parallels the subjugation of women by men, then the men of the weaker country experience a psychological disadvantage in the presence of Western women; that is, the strong position of men concerning women is severely undermined. Consequently, the men of the weaker country feel compelled to prove themselves to the women of the stronger country. The exotic woman becomes a cultural sign and a cultural symbol through which they engage with foreign culture, leading them to feel complacent about being desired by the exotic woman. In The Sea Wall (A Barragem Contra o Oceano Pacífico), the relationship between Suzanne and her lover, Monsieur Jo, is, in a certain sense, a reflection of the relationship between the Metropolis and the Colony, where the Metropolis (Suzanne) seeks profit (wealth) in the colony (Monsieur Jo) and brings some benefits (love) to the colony, which, although compelled to open itself to the metropolis and to offer itself unreservedly, still harbors a slight illusion about the metropolis, deluding itself into believing that the benefits bestowed by the colonizers are granted out of genuine affection rather than mere self-interest. However, if the

colonized people, like Monsieur Jo, do not resist, the expected outcome can only be that they will be exploited by the metropolis. In this relationship, Monsieur Jo is the one being scrutinized and subjected to demands, being further rendered inferior in relation to Suzanne and remaining somewhat uncommunicative, constantly striving to please her.*This had been when he became convinced that Suzanne would never take an interest in him for his own sake. After that, he tried to stake his fortune for what it was worth.(Marguerite Duras, 1950 P.52)*

In The Sea Wall (A Barragem Contra o Oceano Pacífico), when Suzanne tells Monsieur Jo not to return, he panics. The dominant relationship between the powerful and the weak is reinforced by this cheerful yet disappointing conversation, as well as by the Western stereotype of the East, in which the East—both masculine and feminine—plays a passive and repressive cultural role, while the role of saving beings with dominant power emerges from the powerful culture of the West. In this "gaze," the gazed-upon becomes an object of scrutiny and judgment, causing Monsieur Jo, as the subordinate "Other," to lose his discursive power.

This signifies that Suzanne, in the text, establishes her own Western identity through the othering of her Oriental lover. Suzanne's relationship with Monsieur Jo serves as a metaphor for the relationship between the metropolis and the colony. However, unlike many literary works set in colonial contexts, in this relationship, Suzanne, as a woman, occupies the position of the colonizer. Monsieur Jo, on the other hand, as a man, assumes the identity of a colonized individual, and the hybridity of this relational identity is also a product of the third space.

In The Sea Wall, Duras intricately constructs the colonial dynamics of power and identity through her characterization of Suzanne and Monsieur Jo. Suzanne’s relationship with her Oriental lover encapsulates the colonial mindset wherein Western superiority is maintained through the subjugation and othering of the East. Duras uses the relationship as an allegory of colonial exploitation, where Suzanne, representing the Western metropolis, derives financial gain and a sense of power from her connection with the colonized individual, Monsieur Jo. This dynamic embodies the Western attitude toward the East—a blend of fascination, contempt, and commodification—as Suzanne sees Jo not as an equal, but rather as a means to financial stability and a symbol of her Western superiority.

This interaction reinforces the cultural hierarchy ingrained in colonial societies, where the West’s "gaze" continually subordinates the East, stripping it of agency. Monsieur Jo, though wealthy, is trapped in a subordinate position, unable to transcend his racial and cultural identity in the eyes of Suzanne. This sense of inferiority manifests in Jo’s attempts to gain Suzanne’s affection through wealth, a metaphor for how colonial economies were structured to benefit the colonizers. His wealth does not grant him equality; instead, it serves as a resource exploited by the colonizers, echoing the material exploitation seen in colonial contexts.

In adopting a perspective that positions Suzanne as the colonizer, Duras subtly critiques the traditional power relations between genders within the framework of colonialism. The novel disrupts the typical colonial narrative by positioning a female character in the role of the powerful Westerner, while her male counterpart from the East occupies a passive role, reflecting a complex inversion of power dynamics. This unusual portrayal underscores Bhabha’s theory of hybridity within the third space, illustrating how colonial encounters generate identities that defy clear-cut categorization. Suzanne’s dominance in the relationship thus symbolizes the West’s imposition of cultural authority over the East, while Jo’s acquiescence underscores the psychological subjugation embedded within colonial discourse.

In Duras’ portrayal, then, Suzanne’s Western identity is constructed in direct opposition to the Eastern identity of Jo, embodying Said’s concept of Orientalism where the West defines itself through the process of othering. This dynamic in The Sea Wall exposes the multilayered

exploitation inherent in colonial relationships—where the colonizer's identity is asserted by suppressing the cultural and social agency of the colonized. Consequently, the novel not only addresses the economic and social dimensions of colonialism but also delves into the psychological toll it exacts on the colonized, who, like Jo, internalize their subjugated role and engage in self-deprecating attempts to appease the West. This third space, in which both characters exist, thus becomes a site of conflict and compromise, revealing the complex, hybrid identities forged in colonial societies.

5.Conclusion

For Duras, although her "childhood memories" and her fascination with the East clearly distinguish her from other French writers born and raised in France, no one can escape predetermined cultural prejudices, including Duras herself. As a woman, Duras liberated other women from a submissive inferior position; however, as a Frenchwoman, she consciously returned to the French the power of the autonomous subject. She always believed that the center of power resided in the world of the French (Wei Wei, 2005, p. 14). It is easy to identify Duras's self-identification as the West and her othering of the East, both in her own life and love and in the lives and loves of the protagonists in The Sea Wall (A Barragem Contra o Oceano Pacífico). After analyzing the identity hybridity of the author and the protagonists of the book through Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theory, we can conclude that it is very difficult for a group like the one to which the author belonged to seek a pure identity. In the constructed third space, the purity of the two original cultures is disrupted, and a new territory is forged. In this third space, both colonizers and colonized obtain cultural hybridities through their interaction and integration, constantly constructing and reconstructing their own cultural identity.

Duras' narrative encapsulates the complexities of cultural identity within a colonial context, revealing the inevitable tensions and conflicts that arise from her dual positionality. As both a woman breaking traditional norms and a Frenchwoman asserting Western superiority, Duras occupies a unique third space that reflects the nuanced entanglements of cultural and gendered power dynamics. In her writings, her portrayal of the East is both romanticized and marginalized—a paradox that underscores her internal conflict as someone deeply shaped by her childhood in Indochina, yet still embedded in Western-centric ideologies.

This third space, as postulated by Homi Bhabha, functions as a site of negotiation where identities are neither fixed nor pure. Within this fluid space, Duras and her characters engage in a constant process of identity formation that resists essentialism. For instance, the protagonists in The Sea Wall embody both resistance to and complicity with colonial structures, illustrating the fractured and hybrid nature of identity for those who, like Duras, exist between cultural worlds. Rather than achieving a definitive sense of self, these characters reveal how the interplay of colonial power structures continuously shapes, disrupts, and reforms their identities.

Thus, Duras' work not only portrays the challenges of maintaining cultural purity but also critiques the rigidity of colonial binaries. Her characters' experiences in this hybrid space represent an ongoing confrontation with predetermined cultural prejudices and reflect her own ambivalence toward both the French colonial world and the East she cannot fully embrace.

Through this lens, The Sea Wall serves as an exploration of the impossibility of pure identity within a colonial setting, where cultural interaction and integration perpetually redefine notions of self and other.

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