

**PLACE AND IDENTITY IN TWO AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOVELS
SET IN VIETNAM: *MÉTISSE BLANCHE* BY KIM LEFÈVRE AND
L'AMANT BY MARGUERITE DURAS.**

If the nineteenth century was a century of imperialism and colonialism, the vantage point that the end of this century affords us must mark the Twentieth Century as the era of decolonisation. Bhabha characterises the end of the Twentieth Century as a time of flux:

(...) in the *fin de siècle*, we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross over to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion.¹

One of the most potent examples of our post-colonial times is the former French colony of Vietnam. This paper will examine two autobiographical novels set in Vietnam, *L'Amant* (1984) by Marguerite Duras and *Métisse blanche* (1989) by Kim Lefèvre. The themes of place and identity, in these as in many autobiographical novels, are of paramount importance. In my study of these texts I shall first take a broadly sociological approach, looking at the geographical, historical place of Vietnam during the periods described by both novels. I shall also explore the personality of the narrator, as it is defined within its social setting. The narrator of Duras' work will be examined as a *petite blanche*, and the narrator of Lefèvre's novel as a *métisse blanche/jaune*. This sociological approach is often favoured in the reading of Francophone novels, as if the only merit of such works were their anthropological value.

My second approach will focus upon the use of narrative form and style. I will concentrate on the function of place in memory, the creation of a psychological place that transcends time and geography. This is linked to how identity both creates and is created by the psychological landscape of place. I shall explore the notion of legendary space, and of a language that transcends language, moving into the realms of legendary symbolism. This concentration upon form and style is a common point of critical departure for the reading of Duras' works. By applying both approaches to both novels in parallel, I will demonstrate their complementarity.

The timescale occupied by *L'Amant* can be identified as 1929-1931. This was a particularly interesting time in French's rule of Vietnam, with the Yen Bay mutiny of 1930, and the *exposition coloniale* celebrating French colonial rule in 1931. However, the historical and political events of this period are never highlighted in the novel.

1. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 1.

Similarly markers of colonial rule such as colonial architecture and expatriate clubs, restaurants, and activities are rarely described. This places the focus sharply upon the attitudes of French colonials rather than their lifestyles, except for a brief description of the inactivity of expatriate women in Vietnam:

Elles ne font rien, elles se gardent seulement (...) Elles attendent. Elles s'habillent pour rien. Elles se regardent.²

The expatriate French women of Vietnam must live according to strictly delineated rules. They cannot enjoy their time in the colonies or engage in any sort of activity that may involve passion or excitement. Theirs is the culture of *ennui*, so beloved of the colonial writers of the earlier part of this century. Women who break these rules through activity or passion are excluded from this close-knit society. The narrator's mother does so through her refusal to accept the exploitation of her financial naivety by the colonial *cadastres*, responding to the 'bad mothering' of a system that exploits its own by making the most of her daughter's sexual attractiveness. The narrator is aware of her mother's conflicting desires for propriety and acceptance by the expatriates on the one hand, and vengeance upon a society that has been her ruin on the other. The narrator chooses to transgress the rules pertaining to expatriate women, choosing *jouissance* over the staid and passive lives of her peers.³ She is a white female who does not adhere to the moral code of white females. Expatriate men find her attractive because of this difference; in the narrator's mother's words, 'tu leur plais aussi à cause de ce que tu es toi'.⁴ The attitude of expatriate men is reminiscent of the reaction of the directrice who allows the French narrator free run of the *métisse*-dominated boarding house, not condoning her actions, but willing to turn a blind eye. As the child is marginalised by these figures of authority, the portrayal of colonial society is conducted from the borderlines, rather than the centre.

The identity of Lefèvre's narrator presents the period that she covers in *Métisse blanche* as the basis of her *métisse* personality.⁵ She begins the text with her birth just before the advent of the Second World War. The preface gives the date of her departure as being in the Autumn of 1960.⁶ This period encompasses the Japanese occupation of Vietnam and the struggle for, and achievement of, independence from an increasingly beleaguered French rule. Her understanding of political events is often

2. Marguerite Duras, *L'Amant* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1984), p. 27.

3. The term *jouissance* has been subjected to a number of interesting definitions, from Derrida to Kristeva. It will be discussed in terms of the existence of a 'langue du corps' in these texts. At this stage, it can be read as meaning sexual pleasure.

4. *L'Amant*, p. 114.

5. This view is expressed in *Retour à la saison des pluies* (Marseille: Éditions de l'aube, 1995), the sequel to the novel under discussion.

6. The role of the preface - the 'metatext' - is to underline the sociological, rather than literary, importance of this text as a testament to the treatment of 'métis' in colonised and post-colonisation Vietnam.

mediated both by the restriction of her access to information at the time, and by her identity as neither fully French nor fully Vietnamese. When the narrator briefly describes the circumstances of the Japanese occupation, she focuses upon the cruelty inflicted upon the Vietnamese in a sympathetic way, but moves to the use of the impersonal 'on' when describing Vietnamese popular opinion of the Japanese treatment of the French, adopting a non-partisan approach.⁷ The narrator is consistently thwarted in her attempts to fit in with either her Westernised or more traditionally Vietnamese counterparts. Her omission of details concerning the Japanese occupation may have been a means of highlighting the relationship between France and Vietnam, refusing to complicate it by other power struggles.

The narrator often encounters expatriate communities in her perceived role as a *métisse* who is capable of being Westernised. However, when she is presented as the daughter of an Annamite mother, rather than as the child of an absent French father and therefore the responsibility of the French state, she is kept in her place as a *métisse jaune*. This occurs during her mother's stint as a cook in the *Institut océanographique de Na Trang*. The French employer initially plays language games with the narrator, but stops abruptly when the mother asks him, in a mixture of pidgin French and Vietnamese, to help provide her eldest daughter with a proper education. After this the employer resurrects the boundaries of class and race. As in the orphanage, the narrator is only acceptable as a poor and humble *métisse*, well aware of her station in life; she should have no pretensions to equality with whites. Both narrators are only acceptable to the French colonialists when they are poor, humble and self-effacing.

In the orphanage the narrator must express herself solely in French and eat only French food, forfeiting her Vietnamese identity. Her stake in Vietnam is diminished as she is given less and less access to interaction with its culture, history and current affairs. In the convent, although she is allowed to continue to express herself in Vietnamese privately, and eat Vietnamese cuisine,⁸ she is expected by her peers to suppress her Vietnamese cultural identity, and embrace all things French in its place. The narrator experiences the same response as the narrator of *L'Amant*; what figures of authority may tolerate, her peers will censure. She finds it difficult to be accepted beyond a purely superficial level.

When the narrator was a very young child, she wished she could inhabit a realm where *métissage* was the norm, not the exception.⁹ An interesting hierarchy based on degrees of conformity to the French culture develops in the *métis* societies depicted in the novel. The *métis blanc* world of her Eurasian Aunt Odile, and Great Aunt Ba Tu lacks in sympathetic solidarity for a *métisse jaune*. Her silent watchfulness, a quality in Vietnamese women, is criticised by her Westernised aunts. She is also ostracised by mainstream Vietnamese society for her lack of conformity to the norm, as is her

7. Kim Lefèvre, *Métisse blanche* (Paris: Éditions Bernard Barrault, 1989), p. 63.

8. *Métisse blanche*, p. 316.

9. *Métisse blanche*, p. 41.

mother. It is only when she leaves the site of this division, the colonial and post-colonial societies of Vietnam, that she can find the freedom to be accepted according to her merits.

Although the Japanese occupation of Vietnam is mentioned in both novels, it is the Chinese presence in Vietnam that unbalances the polarised vision of French Indochina. Both narrators have connections with the closely-knit Chinese community of Vietnam, although neither is granted full rights of entry. The narrator of *L'Amant* has a relationship with a Chinese man, whereas the stepfather of the narrator of *Métisse blanche* is Chinese. The narrator of *L'Amant* is denied access to Chinese society by her lover's family because of her race; she cannot get beyond the diaphanous barrier that separates them from her. In his bachelor flat she is separated from the Chinese street crowds by 'persiennes à claire-voie'.¹⁰ The narrator of *Métisse blanche* is rejected by her stepfather because of her mixed race, her gender, and the stigma attached to her as proof of his wife's sexual past. The inclusion of the Chinese community, an entrepreneurial class/race that bypasses the power struggle between the Vietnamese and the French, is both an accurate reflection of the circumstances of the narrators'/authors' childhoods, and a rejection of the strict categorisations that resulted from their societies' obsession with categorisation and separation, rather than inclusion.

So far I have concentrated upon the content of the two novels, without dwelling upon the presentation of the content, or the narrative form employed. I will now move on to consider the texts in their capacity as autobiographical novels.

Duras enjoyed a renaissance of popularity following the publication of *L'Amant*. Alette Armel attributes this to a popular misunderstanding of the text as a salacious account of her youth, written with an eye to uncomplicated revelation, rather than experimentation with form. It was also deemed to be a break with the narrative style that Duras had employed prior to its publication.¹¹ However, the content of *L'Amant* sheds light upon works that had already been written by Duras. *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique*, which Duras published in 1958 as a 'roman', exemplifies Duras' experimentation with the malleable boundaries that (in her case) ineffectually separate fact and fiction.¹² Marie-Thérèse Ligot calls *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* '(...) le premier texte où apparaissent nettement les lieux de l'origine et où la figure de la mère est centrale'. She continues that this autobiographical content has only been fully perceived retrospectively due to Duras' later texts, '(...) surtout *L'Amant* en 1984 et *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* en 1991'.¹³

10. *L'Amant*, p. 53.

11. Alette Armel, *Marguerite Duras et l'autobiographie* (Mayenne: Le Castor Astral, 1990).

12. The title page of the 1958 Gallimard edition runs as following: *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique, roman*.

13. Marie-Thérèse Ligot, *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1992), p. 14.

Susan Cohen pinpoints the ritual aspect of Duras' fiction, in terms of the 'atmosphere' of her novels.¹⁴ In her view, Duras creates a legendary space that bypasses the binary divisions of private versus public, or fact versus fiction, by 'ritualizing the particular whilst generalizing it'.¹⁵ The very *raison d'être* of ritual is its repetitious nature. Duras' texts operate in the realms of legends and ritual through their open references to each other, and the repetition of different characters and motifs, such as 'la Folle', 'La Dame' and the motifs of the sea, poverty, sexuality and a wealth of other themes. Leslie Hill underlines the importance of considering Duras' (often contradictory) outpourings - in his example, her interviews - as part of her overall corpus:

(...) Duras' critical and political remarks need to be read not as constituting a theoretical discourse existing apart from her creative writing, but, more modestly, and perhaps more interestingly, as a wayward yet integral part of that writing.¹⁶

Duras is not overly concerned with consistency. She is, however, consistent in her commitment to experimentation with narrative form and the reiteration and development of themes and characters in her various works. My point is that *L'Amant* can and should be understood as part of Duras' corpus of texts. It can function as a microcosm of the themes of the artistic possibilities of repetition; of the relationship between fact and fiction, both personal and historical; of sexuality and identity; and of the encounter between the private and the public spheres of life.

L'Amant must be considered as a *roman autobiographique* rather than a 'straight' autobiography because of the author's refusal to employ a linear, chronological narrative that could give the impression of a coherent and faithful reconstruction of the past. Duras decides that the narrator was wearing gold lamé shoes because it seems appropriate to the central image.¹⁷ The symbolism of the image is more important than empirical accuracy. This shifts the text into the realms of legend, where the symbolic importance of characters, situations, or events outweighs their importance as accurate representations of fact. 'Real' time and 'real' events are bypassed. An interesting parallel can be made between Duras' rather cavalier attitude towards factual accuracy and her manipulation of chronological time within the text, intercutting the 1929-31 period with references to the Second World War. The Second World War comes to represent the older brother's persecution of the narrator's weaker brother Paolo. It is absorbed into the symbolic landscape of the novel, giving credence to the impression that the novel inhabits a psychological 'place' that transcends geography and time.

14. Susan D. Cohen, *Women and Discourse in the Fiction of Marguerite Duras* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), p. 177.

15. *Women and Discourse*, p. 178.

16. Leslie Hill, *Marguerite Duras: Apocalyptic Desires* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 39.

17. *L'Amant*, pp. 18-19.

Lefèvre, unlike Duras, was not a well-known figure prior to the publication of *Métisse blanche*. This explains the need for the lengthy preface. Lefèvre's existence as an author must be preceded by an acknowledgment of her existence outside the text. She has translated contemporary Vietnamese literature in to French,¹⁸ and contributed a chapter to an idiosyncratic account of Saigon from 1925-1945.¹⁹ It is interesting that the translations and the historical account of relations between Vietnamese women and French men during the colonial era post-date the publication of *Métisse blanche* (1989). Lefèvre never intended to return to the Vietnam that rejected her as a *métisse* as a child until after having written this novel. Indeed, she had - deliberately or unconsciously - severed links with her homeland, avoiding the Indochinese XIII arrondissement of Paris, losing touch with her family in Vietnam.

Lefèvre identifies three personal motives for writing *Métisse blanche*. Firstly, she speaks of paying 'hommage à une femme vietnamienne, ma mère, une femme tout à la fois pitoyable et admirable, afin que son destin ne tombe pas dans l'oubli'.²⁰ Secondly, it is presented as a means of 'exorcising' the past. Thirdly - and in her view most importantly - it is a means of giving voice to 'toutes les Eurasiennes que j'avais connues, de toutes celles qui, comme moi, avaient été méprisées et rejetées aussi bien par les Français au Viet-nam que par les Vietnamiens, qui vivent aujourd'hui quelque part et dont on n'a jamais entendu les voix'.²¹

Lefèvre's wish to speak on behalf of the silenced mass of *métisses* corresponds to Cixous' reading of female-authored texts as being essentially empowering, filling a gap in the male dominated discourses that have preceded them. When Lefèvre uses words like 'hommage' in relation to her mother, however, the language moves from a preoccupation that characterises many post-colonial texts, that of representing a suppressed group, to a language that is resonant of older traditions specific to the Vietnamese culture, ancestor worship and respect for elders. The language register thus shifts from an emphasis upon the pseudo-political worth of a specifically female-authored text, to a language that connects with the uncharted, unchartable territory of spirituality; indeed, the use of the verb 'exorciser' in terms of the past, although a common expression in French, gives credence to this claim. The shift takes place once the mother is mentioned. The description of the mother inhabits a space that is not so much pre-linguistic as extra-linguistic, operating outside the economy of linear logic that is embodied in the very syntactical structure of language.²²

18. Nguyen Huy Thiep's *Le Coeur du Tigre* (Paris: Éditions de l'aube, 1993) and Duong Thu Huong's powerful work *Histoire d'amour racontée avant l'aube* (Paris: Éditions de l'aube, 1991) are two examples.

19. Kim Lefèvre, 'Èves jaunes et colons blancs', in *Saigon 1925 - 1945: De la 'Belle Colonie' à l'éclosion révolutionnaire ou à la fin des dieux blancs*, ed. by Philippe Franchini (Paris: Éditions Autrement, 1992), pp. 111-120.

20. *Retour à la saison des pluies*, p. 16.

21. *Retour à la saison des pluies*, p. 16.

22. Ann Rosalind Jones' reading of Cixous and Kristeva, as outlined in her article 'Inscribing femininity: French theories of the feminine', in *Making a difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. by Gayle Green and Coppelia Kahn (London & New York: Methuen, 1985), pp. 80-112, proved a useful point of departure in this interpretation of the texts.

Duras' depiction of her family's position could be read as being politically motivated, giving voice to the oppressed in the same way as Lefèvre. However, Marie-Thérèse Ligot, whilst detecting a political motive behind the writing of *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique*, points out that although Duras admits that she was 'declarative' in *Un Barrage*, she wishes to be so no longer.²³ The narrator attributes her ability to write about her family to the fading of her memories of them. She has forgotten 'le parfum de la peau', 'la voix', 'le rire' and 'les cris'.²⁴ Her 'écriture courante' stems from her inability to remember her family accurately. However, the writing is current, still flowing; it is not finite, closed, or limiting. The fact that the subjects of the novel were intimately involved with the narrator/protagonist means that they are not pinned to one definition but responsive to her moods and memories at the time of writing.

The 'image absolue' at the centre of *Métisse blanche* further explores the existence of a pre- or extra- linguistic 'language' of the body. The child cannot understand that at the end of a journey her nurse intends to abandon her. She only registers the comfort of the warmth of the nurse's back, and the gentle caress of the rain. The enduring memory is one of comfort. It has not been reinterpreted in hindsight, as the narrator has come to understand the nurse's intentions. This language of bodies, that operates outside of, or even before, the language of the spoken and written word, can also be detected in the scene in which the women grieve for their burning village. The women sway backwards and forwards, in a '(...)cérémonie hallucinante', evoking the glorious past of their village in voices that are '(...) sur un ton mi-chanté, mi-incantatoire'.²⁵ Lefèvre is later reminded of this scene when reading Euripides' *Les Troyennes*.²⁶ Grief has a language that transcends place and time.

Lefèvre also plays upon the sense of tragedy in the novel through her description of her mother's life. She was a concubine - a social demotion for the daughter of a wealthy landowner - to a French officer who deserts her. Her attractiveness has not made her life easier or more happy. Significantly, Lefèvre makes several references to Kieu, the tragic heroine of Nguyễn Du's classic of Vietnamese literature, *Kim-Van-Kieu*. This legend of female suffering infuses the narrator's writing in a way that transcends logic and objectivity. Duras employs a timeless language when describing sexual pleasure, shifting between reported and direct speech without any of the conventional indicators, not tidying up the use of language in cases of reported speech ('elle dit qu'elle veut le faire elle'), filling in details after making ambiguous references to those details ('elle le fait. Elle le déshabille'), generally hinting at a world beyond language by highlighting the limitations of languages.²⁷ This is the language of *jouissance*. Whereas the extra-linguistic discourse is bound up with the idea of the mother in *Métisse blanche*, in this text it signals the narrator's difference from the mother. The mother has never experienced orgasm, as the child and her brothers come

23. Marguerite Duras et Xavière Gauthier, *Les Parleuses* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1974), p. 184.

24. *L'Amant*, p. 38.

25. *Métisse blanche*, p. 132.

26. *Métisse blanche*, p. 133.

27. *L'Amant*, p. 49.

to realise.²⁸ The language of sensuality is a language that is not open to the mother. The narrator is rebelling against a society that suppresses young women's sexuality by giving her libidinous desires free rein. The mother has warped the moral code of colonial society by authorising her daughter's love affair as long as her motive is mercenary.

The images at the centre of the two novels fulfil what Lejeune defines the goal of the autobiographical novel to be : the achievement of 'l'image du réel'.²⁹ It is well documented that Duras considered calling *L'Amant* 'l'image absolue'. The central image is that of the teenage girl crossing the Mékong, wearing a man's panama hat, a worn silk dress pulled in at the waist by a belt borrowed from one of her brothers. This encapsulates both the narrator's claustrophobic relationship with her family, along with her poverty - she is even wearing their cast-off clothes - as well as her symbolic movement away from the family home of Sadec. The image that begins and ends Lefèvre's text is not one that represents a conscious decision on the part of the narrator to change her lot in life. The 'nuit d'exode' image is also characterised by movement, but it is not a transition from one way of life to another; it represents the unsettled nature of the narrator's childhood due in great part to the rejection that she endured because of her mixed parentage. This image is, however, one of contentment, and can be interpreted on a number of levels. Although it is a representation of abandonment, the narrator riding on the back of an old servant who regards her as a burden, the nurse unconsciously provides the narrator with comfort through the warmth of her body. The soft Tonkin rain also provides relief. This embodies the narrator's attitude to Vietnam; although it rejected her at almost every turn, she still regards it as a place where she feels comfortable and safe almost despite herself. The narrator also learns to find solace in her restless existence, relishing its transience. 'L'image du réel', is a symbolic image which constitutes a microcosm of the narrator's experience, more accurate than the quest for 'vraisemblance' through a less metaphorical, more chronological approach. The accuracy of these images in empirical terms is not as important as their symbolic power.

Lejeune defines the autobiographical work as a 'récit rétrospectif en prose qu'une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence'.³⁰ The tenses used in both texts, the use of anachronistic flash-forwards - Duras' references to the Second World War, Lefèvre's account of her meeting with her long-lost uncle in 1954, at a point in the narrative dealing with 1945 - show that the story of a personality will be characterised by mental links made by the author/narrator that do not correspond to chronological time.

An autobiographical text does not, and often cannot, mimic the structure of a biography, beginning with birth, punctuated by formative events, ending in death.

28. 'Ils ne parleront jamais de la mère ensemble, de cette connaissance qu'ils ont et qui les sépare d'elle, de cette connaissance décisive, dernière, celle de l'enfance de la mère. La mère n'a pas connu la jouissance.' *L'Amant*, p. 50.

29. *Le Pacte autobiographique*, p. 36.

30. *Le Pacte autobiographique*, p. 14.

Duras' profession that she has attained sufficient distance from her family to write about them, and Lefèvre's desire to pay 'hommage' to her mother, to 'exorcise(r)' the past, although appearing to locate these protagonists in the past, do not restrict these protagonists to the 'perfect' tense. These figures are being summoned into the realms of 'écriture courante' through the act of writing, the timeless realm of the legendary. The distinction between past and present is further blurred by the fact that both authors also rework their accounts of their childhood in the light of readings of their previous works. Lefèvre finds herself promising to go back to Vietnam when being interviewed on television about *Métisse blanche*, a journey that inspires the sequel text, *Retour à la saison des pluies*.³¹ Duras rewrote *L'Amant* as *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* following one reader's interpretation of the novel as a film. The act of writing an autobiography, and the reception of that autobiography, influence the lives of the authors, engendering new autobiographical acts.

I began with the authors' interpretation of societies they have encountered, and I have ended with their reaction to readings of their works by their audience. The texts are not closed off to the place of reading, any more than they are not informed by the intra-diegetic place. A purely sociological reading of these texts would be crippling; however, to discount the importance of place in these texts would be equally limiting. A perception of the setting of Duras' novel enhances our appreciation of its stylistic and structural attributes; the converse is true for Lefèvre. The content of the novels express the limitations of the desire to categorise and define. There is a quality of movement common to both texts, the transgression of boundaries, that is embodied in both central images. The setting of both novels, a former colony at the time of writing which has undergone a multitude of social and political changes, is significant in its own right. The reader is aware of the vague outline of the history of this place, and this informs the interpretation of the text. Vietnam has come to symbolise the hybrid identity of the post-colonial century, where cultural identity is no longer polarised but operates on a sliding scale.

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31. *Retour à la saison des pluies*, pp. 16-17.

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